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Secular Séance

Post-Victorian embodiment in contemporary South African art

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For my brave mother, Susan, who never had the opportunity to study at university.

You knew.

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¹ Borges, Jorge Luis. “Note on (toward) Bernard Shaw.” [“Nota sobre (hacia) Bernard Shaw.”] *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*. Ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby. New York: New Directions,

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For he to whom the present is the only thing that is present, knows nothing of the age in which he lives. To realise the nineteenth century, one must realise every century that has preceded it and that has contributed to its making. To know anything of oneself one must know all about others. There must be no mood with which one cannot sympathise, no dead mode of life that one cannot make alive. Is this impossible? I think not.

Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist: A Dialogue* (1890)²

Colonial subjects were perhaps the furthest removed from the centres of Victorian culture, but they were heavily invested in Victorian values as much, if not more, than the Victorians themselves... In rehearsing Victorianism and its core values, the colonized were also transforming Victorian categories; they were using the dominant forms of colonialism to express their own experiences... In this sense, Victorian subjects were perhaps the first post-Victorians... The Victorian frame of reference was indispensable in the construction of what would later come to be known as postcolonial culture.

Simon Gikandi, *The Embarrassment of Victorianism: Colonial Subjects and the Lure of Englishness* (2000)³

² Wilde 979

³ Gikandi 159, 182

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Abstract

In this thesis I explore selected bodies of work by five contemporary South African artists that resuscitate nineteenth-century aesthetic tropes in ways that productively reimagine South Africa's traumatic colonial inheritance. I investigate the aesthetic strategies and thematic concerns employed by Mary Sibande, Nicholas Hlobo, Mwenya Kabwe, Kathryn Smith and Santu Mofokeng, and argue that the common tactic of engagement is a focus on the body as the prime site of cognition and "the aesthetic as a form of embodiment, mode of being-in-the-world" (Merleau-Ponty 123). It is by means of the body that the divisive colonial fictions around race and gender were intimately inscribed and it is by means of the body, in all its performative and sensual capacities, that they are currently being symbolically undone and re-scripted. In my introduction, I develop a syncretic, interdisciplinary discourse to enable my close critical readings of these post-Victorian artworks. My question concerns the mode with which these artists have reached into the past to resurrect the nineteenth-century aesthetic trope or fragment, and what their acts of symbolic retrieval achieve in the public realm of the present. What is specific to these artists mode of "counter-archival" (Merewether 16) engagement with the colonial past? I argue that these works perform a similar function to the nineteenth-century *séance* and to African ancestral rites and dialogue, putting viewers in touch with the most haunting aspects of our shared and separate histories as South Africans and as humans. In this sense, they might be understood both as recuperations of currently repressed forms of cultural hybridity and embodied visual conversations with the unfinished identity struggles of the artists' ancestors. The excessive, uncanny or burlesque formal qualities of these works insist on the incapacity of mimetic, social documentary forms to contain the sustained ferocious absurdity of subjective experience in a "post-traumatic", "post-colonial", "post-apartheid" culture. The "post" in these terms does not denote a concession to sequential logic or linear temporality, but rather what Achille Mbembe terms an "interlocking of presents, pasts and futures" (16). This "interlocking" is made manifest by the current transmission of these works, which visually, physically embody a sense of subjectivity as temporality. If the body and the senses are the means through which we not only apprehend the world in the present, but through which the past is objectively and subjectively enshrined, then it is by means of the ossified archive of that same sensory body that the damage of the past can be released and knowledge/history re-imagined. Without erasing or denying South Africa's well-documented history of violent categorisation, the hypothetical tenor of these works instantiates an alternate culture of love, intimacy, desire and inter-connectedness that once was and still can be.

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Introduction

Aesthetic Embodiment as Public Séance

As much as and more than a thing of the past, before such a thing, the archive should call into question the coming of the future... The question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past... It is a thing of the future, the question of the future itself; the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow.

Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, 1996⁴

In this dissertation I explore selected bodies of work by five contemporary South African artists that recuperate nineteenth-century aesthetic tropes in ways that productively reimagine South Africa's troubled colonial inheritance. The artists to whose work I am responding here are Mary Sibande, Nicholas Hlobo, Kathryn Smith and Santu Mofokeng, while one chapter concerns a recent production by the theatre director, Mwenya Kabwe. I have chosen to engage with these particular bodies of work because of the artists' self-reflexively and formally overblown approach that purposefully draws attention to the illusory, subjective nature of the artwork and to the impossibility of faithful mimesis in social contexts in which the sustained extremity or violence of social experience eclipses comprehension, rendering reality largely unrepresentable except by means of a distortion of the form itself. The excessive, uncanny or burlesque nature of these artworks insists on the outlandish, "spectacular" (Debord 12)⁵ nature of reality and the incapacity of mimetic documentary forms to contain the ferocious absurdity of subjective experience in a purportedly post-

⁴ Derrida 33-34

⁵ In thesis four of his critique of the commodity fetishism of consumer culture, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Marxist theorist, filmmaker and self-proclaimed leader of the Situationist International, Guy Debord argues that: "The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images."

traumatic, post-colonial, post-apartheid⁶ culture in which historical trauma lurks like an embodied time-bomb beneath the prosaic surfaces of the everyday.

In my reading of these selected bodies of work, I reveal how each resurrects aspects of the disparate Victorian colonial archive in politically challenging and/or formally innovative ways that critically engage with the tainted legacy of Englishness in postcolonial South Africa. In each instance, elements of burlesque, parody, drag or the absurd signal a departure from dominant forms of social realist narrative, rendering these works germane to the initiating postmodern strain of my project.⁷ I begin with a quotation by Jacques Derrida, from *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, which served as a mantra-like holding thought in the production of this text, instilling a repeated insistence on the utopian future-oriented inflection of the retrospective pull. Derrida's words serve as a crucial reminder that the instinctual turning to the still-open wound of the past—in this instance, the colonial past—must never be a zombie-like trance gesture of passive social nostalgia or morbidity, but a vital instinct in service of forging more evolved and imaginative forms of identity making for the future.

I began this project by investigating the visual strategies employed by each artist in the hope of tracing common concerns and tactics of engagement across all five carefully selected bodies of work. In each chapter, I examine the expressive inflections of the contemporary text, the choice of a 19th referent text or trope, while keeping my eye on the intentions of the author's backward gaze and the socio-political context in which the text originated and was published/exhibited. In relation to each body of

⁶ I grapple with the complex temporal implications of the prefix “post” as it is employed in terms like “post-memory”, “post-colonial”, “post-modern”, and “post-apartheid” in the section of my introduction entitled “Theoretical entanglements: Postmodernism, the postcolony and beyond”.

⁷ Several other South African artists, most notably Athi-Patra Ruga, also work in a mode that might be described as a form of postcolonial burlesque. Like Smith, Sibande, Hlobo and Kabwe, Ruga also foregrounds practices of performance and embodiment. “[He] makes work that exposes and subverts the body in relation to structure, ideology and politics,” reads his artist statement. Exploring the border-zones between fashion, performance and contemporary art, his work is overblown, humorous and fiercely irreverent in tone. “Bursting with eclectic multicultural references, carnal sensuality and a dislocated undercurrent of humor, his performances, videos, costumes and photographic images create a world where cultural identity is no longer determined by geographical origins, ancestry or biological disposition, but is increasingly becoming a hybrid construct.” (“Artists: Athi-Patra Ruga.” *Whatiftheworld*. n.d. Web. 19 Jan. 2014.) Although Ruga's oeuvre has much in common with the work of my chosen artists, there is nothing obviously post-Victorian about it. He is not particularly concerned with the nineteenth century as a point of reference or symbolic source, which is why he is included here only in a referential capacity.

work, I ask the question: In what ways is this artist triggering a dialogue with the past? My interest is in the symbolic space opened up by these artworks so that they come to play a vital role in the on-going contestations of public culture⁸, asserting things that need to be publicly acknowledged, claiming public space for threatened subjectivities, or visually inscribing under-written histories. My research question concerns the mode with which the artist reaches into the past to resuscitate the nineteenth-century trope or fragment, and what this act of symbolic retrieval achieves in the public realm of the present. My use here of the present continuous, “achieves”, rather than the past tense, “achieved”, reasserts my emphasis on the potency of the necessary hold of the past on the present and future, and underlines the fact that my chosen objects of study are artworks rather than archival artefacts, which are frequently relegated to a space of officiated dormancy. Once acquired and held in public collections, these artworks do run the risk of institutionally sanctioned torpor, but owing to their ideological currency, the public/private reception of these particular artworks is still, in most instances, active and live – their meanings yet unfolding through varied modes of circulation among audiences in new locations, both within South Africa and abroad. What, I ask, is specific to this artist’s mode of “counter-archival” (Foster 2004, Hirschhorn 2000) engagement⁹ with the colonial past? What gives the artwork its unique power to open up new channels of discursivity in (but also about) a purportedly postcolonial, post-apartheid South Africa seeking fresh configurations around race, gender and difference? My thesis, which I advance over the course of the following five chapters, is that the common visual tactic employed by all five artists across these varied but intrinsically related bodies of work is one of embodiment. Common to all of these works that contend with the disembodied hovering spectre of South Africa’s nineteenth-century legacy is the centrality of the visceral, sensual, feeling, acting body.

⁸ I undertook my research as an affiliate of the Archive & Public Culture research initiative at UCT, an inter-disciplinary group established to grapple with critical questions about history, memory, identity and the public sphere in South Africa. Giving attention to “the work that the past is being made to do in the present”, the APC “actively embraces material culture, visual forms, landscapes, bodies, cultural repertoires and everyday practices, opening to the recognition of archive beyond documents, and in places seldom deemed ‘archives’.” (Hamilton, Carolyn. “Terrain.” Archive & Public Culture. University of Cape Town. Nov. 2010. Web. 21 Jan. 2014.)

⁹ I explore the notion of artists-as-archivists further in my chapters on Mary Sibande and Kathryn Smith, expanding on the term “counter-archival”.

Because of the ways in which gender and racial difference were (and in some ways still are) administrated, articulated, policed and internalised through the medium of the body and physical difference, there is something particular about the intersections and entanglements of sexuality, sensuality and politics in a South African context.

Focusing on the complex processes of racialization through which individuals or groups are construed as distinct on the basis of essentialised body differences, French anthropologist and sociologist Didier Fassin¹⁰, unsurprisingly, turns to examples from South Africa to support his argument that “the body is the site of racial experience” (420) and that bodies become racialised through intersubjective processes. The body is not only that through which we apprehend the world in the present, he argues, but also, critically for my study, *where the past is objectively and subjectively enshrined*. “The embodiment of racial memory is not a metaphor” (Fassin, 431).

As Brenna M. Munro puts it in her recent study of the ways in which queer sexualities have contributed to the literary imagining of post-apartheid South Africa, “Questions of sexuality, gender and race have long been a crucial component in South Africa’s vexed post-imperial history... Indeed, the idea of ‘race’ itself was developed through narratives about sexual differences” (xi, xiv). It is by means of the body that the divisive colonial fictions around race and gender were intimately inscribed and it is by means of the body that they are currently being undone and re-scripted.

Séance redux

I feel more and more as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry, between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like, and the longer I think about it the more it seems to me that we who are still alive are unreal in the eyes of the dead.

WG Sebald, *Austerlitz* (2001)¹¹

¹⁰ Having conducted field studies in Senegal, Ecuador, South Africa, and France, Fassin has developed a new field of research, critical moral anthropology, which explores the historical, social, and political signification of moral forms involved in everyday judgment and action as well as international humanitarianism or asylum granting.

¹¹ Sebald 261

After the death of her husband, Albert, Queen Victoria wore black for the remaining 40 years of her reign, which had a huge influence on Victorian popular culture. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, spiritualism – a belief that the spirits of the dead can communicate with the living – was widespread. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the séance, in particular, was hugely popular throughout the western world; not just a preoccupation of social outsiders and the bereaved but people across the socio-economic spectrum from all backgrounds and levels of education. Victorians of all classes would gather around a table to speak to spirits through a medium, who not only delivered messages from the dearly departed, but also demonstrated the presence of spirits in the room by levitating objects, ringing bells, or producing a substance from her body, known as ectoplasm. Séances became the subject of countless movies and old photographs. Like Victorian post-mortem photography, they are deeply tied into nineteenth-century visual culture, coupling the Victorian obsession with death, mourning and the afterlife to the centrality of images, image-making and vision in the nineteenth century.

‘Some eras and societies are more ghost-ridden than others and attitudes towards spectral appearances vary widely,’ writes Dutch cultural theorist Esther Peeren (3). In Chapter Five, I note how the highly ritualized protocols around death that were common in the Victorian era recall township/rural practices, from burial clubs to home care, in relation to death and dying in contemporary South Africa, where death is a prevalent and socially immediate reality for most. Reflecting on the recurrent theme of death and dying in Charles Dickens’s writing, John Kucich writes: “Dickens’s undisguised fascination with death reflects an entire social climate, for the Victorians invented cemeteries, mourning stores, and burial clubs” (59). This might equally apply to contemporary Soweto, or Capricorn Park on the Cape Flats. Whether it is through the medium of literature, photography, film or video, aesthetics play a key roll in mediating people’s responses and reactions to the dead – particularly in times or places that are saturated in a culture of death.

What is perhaps most striking, regarding the social life of séances from the vantage point of the 21st century, is the fairly abrupt note on which this popular

phenomenon seemed to come to an end. Historical narratives about séances inevitably conclude with accounts of debunking or reports of how the medium was shown up to be a fraud. A formal society was even established expressly for the purpose of exposing séance spiritualists as charlatans and frauds. The Society of Psychical Research, was founded in England to investigate allegedly paranormal phenomena using scientific principles, and counted among its members William Gladstone (who served as British Prime Minister for four separate terms), John Ruskin (the eminent Victorian cultural critic) and William James (American philosopher, psychologist and physician). From a feminist perspective, it is worth noting that the most sought-after séance mediums appear to have been women of immigrant or working-class roots – Madame Blavatsky, the legendary occultist, philosopher and founder of the Theosophical Society, for instance, was a peripatetic Russian émigré – while the elite scientific debunkery society seems to have been comprised solely of powerful men.

“Exposures are of frequent occurrence, many of them highly sensational in character. Slate writing, spirit pictures, table tipping, rapping, and other features of Spiritualism have been exposed time and again. The exposures mount into the hundreds,” reads a *New York Times* article dated 21 November 1909, and titled “Notable Charlatans Exposed In The Past: A Weird History That Leaves Spiritualism Undaunted”. Great emphasis seems to have been placed on successful efforts to scientifically debunk these mystics as frauds and hucksters – among these, the efforts of the great metropolitan modernist and Hungarian-American illusionist Harry Houdini. This thrust towards secularism, scientific disenchantment and an embrace of rationalism strikes me as being quintessentially Modernist and internal to the contestations that occurred within the dialectical framework of Modernism itself. Consider Pablo Picasso embracing the so-called ‘primitivism’ or tribal energies personified by African masks, and writers like Gertrude Stein consciously adopting forms of narrative that stood against logic and linearity, attempting to tap into more magical, id-driven states of consciousness. A culture-shock moment that externalized these formal contestations of Modernist form in public space occurred at the Théâtre des Champs Élysées in Paris on 29 May 1913 with the first performance of the ballet and orchestral work, *The Rite of Spring*. The music was written by the Russian

composer Igor Stravinsky for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russes company, under the choreography of Vaslav Nijinsky. When first performed, the avant-garde nature of the production caused a riot in the audience. The intensely percussive music and vigorous dance steps depicting fertility rites first drew catcalls and whistles from the crowd, which then erupted into shouts and fistfights in the aisles. The Paris police had arrived by intermission to quell the unrest, but they were only able to restore limited order, and chaos reigned for the rest of the performance. In this instance, 'avant-garde' meant Russian 'avant-garde', and the Russian 'avant-garde' was intensely tribal – a fiercely felt artistic and political rebellion against the totalizing sweep of Western modernity. The performance of the 'Rite' was rife with so-called 'primitive' rituals, and Stravinsky's score was violently rhythmic and dissonant, strongly grounded in Russian folk music. The violence of the audience response keyed into the primal energies and anxieties circulating in the modern metropole at the time, capturing something of the sense of the modernizing drive against ritual, against the tribal and the magical, which were viewed as primitive, backward, and a threat to the civilizing, class-entrenching processes of modernity. On the contrary, tendencies by avant-garde artists at the time could be seen retrospectively as an effort to enshrine and hang on to the layers of belief, irrationality and ritual that were being bled out of popular culture in the breathless race toward the new science of psychology and the social thrust toward modernization, industrialization, militarization – all in the name of and under the banner of the newly enshrined god of 'progress', civilization, secular rationality.

In many ways, the kinds of cultural contestations that were happening within Western metropolises at the turn of the 20th century echo what is happening in cities like Johannesburg and Mumbai at the beginning of the 21st with the advancement of global capitalism. Fuelled by new waves of imperial resource extraction, this accelerated thrust toward 'development' is dependent on the cultivation of aesthetic tastes and cultural tendencies that serve the growth of the brand-driven market. Mystical beliefs and communalistic practices get wiped out in the drive toward secularism and the atomization of the nuclear family – the ideal consumer model for capitalist societies. The large-scale growth of the middle classes – and the resulting demand for the production of goods in greater quantities – ushered in by the

attainment, for the first time, of political and economic power by fairly large sectors of the population echoes the social development of Western Europe in the nineteenth century. But this is in no way a measured and outward-bound chronological process that conforms to the linear myth of progress – far from it. In many instances, London, the then metropolitan centre of the British Empire, may only now be experiencing the kinds of social dynamics that have been lived through and navigated in cities of the so-called periphery in the colonial past. Nonetheless, in the postcolonial era of so-called “soft power”, British metropole-periphery relations persist beneath the surface, remaining, to an unquantifiable degree, mutually constitutive and rife with temporal inconsistencies and entangled cultural hauntings.

What I am saying is that this bleeding out of mystical and traditional belief systems, ritual practices and non-scientific rationales for community gathering within the West is not dissimilar to the wiping out of customary practices and beliefs in colonized, or so-called ‘developing’/‘Third World’ countries, as they continue to embrace the ever-expanding market and the lure of growth, growth, growth. I view the demystification and obliteration of séances from popular culture as part of a broader cultural stamping out of magical thinking that threatens the legalistic, scientific protocols of population control accompanying the growth of consumer societies. Whether or not ghosts actually appeared or not is of less interest to me than what séances say about the will to gather; the communalistic desire to come together and experience something outside of the grasp of official discourse – and to have embodied (sometimes even erotic) experiences of human/ghostly contact, intimate experiences of personal/tribal history. It is the relationship between occult rituals, paranormal phenomena and resistance politics that interests me here – the anti-authoritarian, anti-institutional direction of Victorian spiritualism and how that might be revisited in the spirit of uncovering lost narratives of resistance during the era of colonization and increased global modernity.

Peeren opens her book *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility* (2014) with a reading of Oscar Wilde’s *The Canterville Ghost* (1887), a subversive and parodic ghost story in which the living come to haunt the ghost who inhabits an English ancestral home. ‘Ghosts tend to function as unwelcome reminders

of past transgressions, causing personal or historical traumas to rise to the surface and pursuing those they hold responsible,' she writes.

This turns them into existential threats, to be greeted with a mixture of shock and fear... At the same time ghosts are the object of intense fascination: any inkling of a haunting presence is followed by an overwhelming desire to locate it, a frenzied insistence that it show itself again... The ghost is habitually, conjured, chased, and obsessively documented in an attempt to gain access to its secrets, in particular its knowledge of the realm of the dead. It is the ghost's dual association with fear and fascination that makes it so powerful, since the haunted do not just run from it, but simultaneously seek it out. Moreover, although the notion that the living will find some way to control or placate the ghost is a staple of supernatural lore, many ghost stories emphasise that conjuration and exorcism are not guaranteed to be effective: the ghost can refuse to appear, the one that appears may not be the one that was summoned and the vanquished ghost might return after all, as in the familiar horror movie plot. (Peeren 2)

Whether conscious or unconscious, it is this kind of pursuit and “conjuring” this “obsessive documentation” of the ghosts of South Africa's unresolved colonial history that is being has been undertaken by the artists under discussion here, and by other contemporary South African visual artists involved in archival practices that are expressly aimed at “causing personal or historical traumas to rise to the surface” (Peeren 2).

My title, *Secular Séance*, signals my interest in what I perceive to be a shared impulse to dialogue with the dead. Because this common impulse to honour and dialogue with our ancestors transcends politics, culture and ethnicity, because it is, at the same time, so crucial to the core of our individual and group identities, it holds the potential to be a fertile cultural space for dialogue across racial and cultural divides. Our South African ancestors were, after all, entangled with each other in complex relations of love, distance, violence, submission, desire, sadism, tenderness and complicity that have largely been written out of popular history¹². My research

¹² Contemporary popular history of the kind that gets routinely invoked by ANC politicians on SAfm radio talk shows re-inscribes difference and separation as the political foundation of a culture of broad-based reparation. In *Ethnicity Inc.* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff write about the cultural capital that is wrought from ethnic and racial separateness as part of a widespread global culture of reparation. They describe the ways in which ethnic populations are remaking themselves

concerns the contemporary cultural forms that this longing takes, and the secular institutions and circuits within which these pagan conversations are made possible. In this sense, contemporary art might be understood as the ‘medium’ of the séance (or in African terms, the sangoma or igqirha) – a vector for the transmission of social and cultural value across the “*longue durée*” (Mbembe 6)¹³, a mode of gaining admission to a realm of ideas and emotions not accessible via other routes. We may well inhabit a post-Darwinian age, but it is far from devoid of spiritual and emotional compulsion, or magical rites. As the Columbia-based postcolonial literary scholar, Gauri Viswanathan, has written, “characterisations of secularism in terms of religious decline are misleading” (467). Rather, secularism operates in public culture within a framework of heterodoxy, as “doctrinal beliefs remain in tension with residual beliefs in magic, reincarnation, and astrology, among others” (467).

The triumph of Enlightenment reason and rationalism, as depicted by Max Weber, would have entailed the end of charisma and the universalization of the secular, notes Kwame Anthony Appiah. But that is not what we are seeing in the world today. On the contrary:

Secularization hardly seems to be proceeding: religions grow in all parts of the world; more than ninety percent of North Americans still avow some sort of theism; what we call ‘fundamentalism’ is alive in the West as it is in Africa and the Middle and Far East; Jimmy Swaggart and Billy Graham have business in Louisiana and California as well as in Costa Rica and Ghana. (Appiah 344)

The disenchantment of the world – that is, the penetration of a scientific, instrumentalist vision into the order of things – has been met by a widespread contrary tendency toward belief and magic, and the world appears to be as much in need of

in the image of the corporation – while corporations coopt ethnic practices to open up new markets and regimes of consumption.

¹³ This expression “*longue durée*” was originally used by the French Annales School of historical writing to designate their approach to the study of history, which gives priority to long-term historical structures over events. The term is employed by Achille Mbembe, in *On the Postcolony*, as part of his critique of social analysis that is limited to the causal logic of the contemporary, in which he argues that, “no one asks anymore about the market and capitalism as institutions both contingent and violent. Only rarely is there recourse to the effects of the *longue durée* to explain the paths taken by different societies to account for contradictory contemporary phenomena.” This study is an attempt to understand the contradictory forces and culturally hybrid symbolism at play in the artworks under discussion by breaking out of the causal logic of the contemporary and viewing the works through a prism of historical trauma and entanglement.

enchantment as it ever was. Secularism has been a very generative topic of social theory in recent years, with Viswanathan, Talal Asad, Jose Casanova, William Connolly, Charles Taylor, Bruce Robbins and Edward Said all having theorized about secularism and secularization in their work.

“Scholars of history, anthropology, political theory, and religion have begun revisiting questions of enchantment and disenchantment, political theology, blasphemy, religious freedom, and much more,” reads the call for papers for a conference, called “Is the Post-colonial Post-secular?”, which took place at Syracuse University in New York in September 2013. “Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, in particular, has garnered wide attention, but Taylor’s narrative focuses on the disenchantment of modern Christian Europe. Before and after *A Secular Age*, scholars have probed the boundaries of the secular beyond Christian Europe, and beyond the confines of intellectual history. Some have asserted that the ideologies of secularism and colonialism are deeply intertwined. Others have asserted that post-colonial religiosity remains a symptom of colonial control of reason and affect. Still others have pointed to neo-liberalism as the shared basis of contemporary racial, religious, and post-colonial regimes” (“Is the Post-colonial Post-secular?”).

From a literary studies perspective, Amardeep Singh, examines this deep imbrication of the secular and the sacred in texts that have emerged out of colonial contexts. “The secular and the religious exist in an intimately antinomial, mutually defining opposition in many aspects of cultural life, including literature,” writes Singh in *Literary Secularism: Religion and modernity in twentieth century fiction*. “In Joyce’s *Ulysses*, for instance, Biblical allegory impinges on the secular engagement with Irish nationalism. Similarly, a kind of sacralized spirituality is central to Rabindranath Tagore’s conception of an independent Indian nation in *Gora*. The social and intellectual worlds of England, Ireland, and India are in fact closely tied together, through the shared history of colonialism, the problematic of nationalism, and the conflicted rise of individualism as a dominant mode of defining social identity” (Singh 3).

Museums often find themselves in the crossfire of “conflicting considerations and demands concerning the religious aspects of exhibitions and artefact collections,”

writes Lotten Gustafsson Reinius, curator and convenor of the project “Sacred Things in the Postsecular Society”, which ran at the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, Sweden, during 2010 and 2011. “These gain further topical relevance by virtue of the changed and often politicized role that religion has acquired in today’s globalized and postcolonial society.” Theoretical inspiration for the “Sacred Things” project came from Jürgen Habermas’s (2008) ideas of the “post-secular” in which he seeks to describe the changed social state and public spheres of European societies, once perceived to be secularized, but now struggling to navigate a new awareness of the survival and growth of religious power.

Bringing Habermas’s considerations to bear on the conflicts within museum culture, Gustafsson Reinius writes: “Part of the picture is that many of the religiously charged collections have come to the museums through Christian missionary projects. In certain contexts the struggle against ‘paganism’ was an obvious part of the acquisition context: the museum functioned as one of several alternative ways to take charge of cultural risk items and render them harmless... The museum’s attempts to establish a framework of rationalism, objectivity, and public enlightenment about other groups’ religiosity can be perceived as spiritually and politically provocative” (Gustafsson Reinius).

This tension between the inoculating secular culture of the museum and the unpredictable magical power of the objects lying dormant or circulating within its curatorial regime is echoed by Neillian MacLachlan in her dissertation *Sacred and Secular: An analysis of the repatriation of Native American items from European museums*. “Within the secular nature of museums, repatriation guidelines have turned the concept of the ‘sacred’ into a quantifying measure holding cultural significance,” she writes. “Although most museum bodies in Europe assess repatriation claims on an individual basis, they employ their own definitions of the sacred, which may be contrary to the definition of the sacred as understood by the claimant... Many mainstream Western museums, despite being hubs of culture, are of a secular nature and governed in a secular manner. Repatriation challenges this as it encourages dialogue about the perception and display of items and methods of conservation that go against normative museum practices” (MacLachlan 4 5).

Contentions around repatriation are not my focus here, but rather the urgent sense one gets from both of these projects of the ongoing, prevailing tensions within global museum culture between notions of the secular and the sacred. Established in the late 19th and early 20th century and a product of the larger flowering of religious atheism at the end of the 19th century and the vision of modernity that emerged from it, South African museums were largely modeled on the European model of the public museum as having a precise didactic purpose encapsulated in the explanatory captions accompanying the objects. Attempting to assume a level of objective control over the material objects in their collections, museums are focused on preservation and control of the manner in which they are interpreted. In Chapter Four, I explore how museum culture in South Africa was founded on colonial values and protocols and remains haunted by the whole semi-official cultural paraphernalia of the Victorian age, and the rational and rationalizing colonial project of secular enlightenment.

And yet, it is also not my intention to inflate the binary between magical objects and secular institutions. On the contrary, my aim is to draw attention to the deep historic entanglement of live and residual systems of belief and magical thinking brought into play by artworks like the ones described in the following five chapters, which are exhibited and performed in institutional contexts that are themselves a complex weave of declared, official secularism and often disavowed belief or magical thinking. Even the Victorian cultural critic Matthew Arnold, a champion of what we would describe today as the secular humanist ideal on which much contemporary public museum culture was founded, had a strong sense of the centrality of religious traditions. Although museums tend to be governed by secular institutions, like universities, and funded by government as part of an arts and culture budget, in practice they are rarefied sites where the secular and the sacred interact in unpredictable and uneven ways.

The idea of the secular is the source of much contradiction and confusion for cultural criticism and contemporary thought in the post-Enlightenment era. Religion and belief pose a difficulty for the modern academy and for cultural institutions founded on secular ideals. In *Secularisation and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation and Modernity*, Vincent Pecora analyses the religious heritage of secular thinking and

explores secularism's compromising history of continuing engagement with religious tradition. Moving beyond some of the more entrenched divides in debates over the project of modernity, he demonstrates how religion continues to haunt even the most secular critical efforts to understand our contemporary situation. "There may be ways of talking about the cultural processes at work... by investigating... the survival of desacralized religious dispositions, attitudes, strategies of response, and improvisations, that is of, secularized religious habitus, alongside or rather as an integral part of social class, in spaces intellectually dominated by the disavowal of belief... Many structures of collective life... remain supersaturated with the religion in which the group's members say they disbelieve" (Pecora 160).

By employing the trope of the séance to describe the reception, circulatory power and effects of these artworks in public culture, my intention is to accentuate these unresolved (perhaps unresolvable) tensions within the postcolonial museum circuit and in South African society more broadly. My use of the term "séance" is partly figurative and metaphorical, but also partly literal, giving credence to the live supernatural, magical potential of these artworks to mediate unsettled relations between artist and ancestor, the living and the dead.

Critiquing the professional curatorial practice in contemporary culture in a collection titled *The Postcolonial Museum: The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History*, Tarek Elhaik writes: "There seems to be a compulsive attempt in secular, liberal democratic public cultures to draw the contours of freedom and emancipation through carefully staged processes of mediations and monitored productions of stable subject positions anchored in territorialized forms: nation, region, city, continent and so on. In fact, this historical background continues to be productive today and very much informs the field of curatorial practice... The public and private use of reason ought perhaps to be counteracted by something intractable (incurable and untreatable)" (162 165). To my mind, these works are instances of that "something intractable (incurable and untreatable" for which Elhaik is calling.

My aim in setting the two words "secular" and "séance" together is to be purposefully oxymoronic, highlighting the contradictoriness of art practices that incorporate elements of ritual, superstition, belief and magic, while unfolding under

the banner of the contemporary and the conceptual in institutional settings with no declared spiritual basis, not subject to or bound by religious rule. The conjunction refers specifically to the crucial role that the visual and performing arts play in mediating partly official, partly magical/ritualistic, public/private sphere contact with ghosts and ancestors, unsettled relations and suppressed narratives dating back South Africa's troubled nineteenth-century past.

If these artworks perform a similar function to the nineteenth century séance or to African ancestral rites, putting viewers in touch with the most haunting, unresolved, painful aspects of our shared and separate histories as South Africans, they do so through the medium of the body, in all its performative, sensual and tactile capacities¹⁴.

From the Victorian Postmodern to Post-Victorian Embodiment

Before I enunciate the core conceptual forces that drive my reading of the work of these five artists, I must rewind to the inception of this conceptual adventure and track the evolution of my thinking from an initial interest in the field of the Victorian Postmodern to an applied study of how Victorian tropes and postcolonial imperatives come together in embodied contemporary forms which, I argue, have the capacity to reconfigure inherited categories of thought, interpretation and being. The initiating idea for this thesis was sparked by a watershed volume of essays edited by John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff entitled *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*¹⁵, which aims to theorise the relationship between a Victorian past and a postmodern present through explorations of late 20th century texts that revise or rehearse themes that initially sprung to life during the nineteenth century.

Over the past few decades – starting in the early 1990s and continuing up to the

¹⁴ My central argument is in keeping with Raymond Williams and other cultural Marxists who argued for the re-embodiment of the aesthetic, returning it to its definitive origins as an enlivening mode of sensory perception. Re-embodiment is viewed as reclamation of the political cogency and experiential processes of the aesthetic from its hijacked functioning within the sphere of commodity capitalism as an anaesthetic tool for the blunting of class-consciousness and revolutionary action. (Williams 129, 155-156)

¹⁵ This volume formed the basis of a course, convened by Professor Jason Camlot, that I undertook in the English Department at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada in 2001, as part of my Masters of Arts degree in Creative Writing.

present moment, spanning the century-crossing fin-de-siècle shift – there has been an extraordinary global efflorescence of texts and images that revise or rehearse nineteenth-century themes and aesthetics. From hit films by Francis Ford Coppola (*Dracula*, 1992), Jane Campion (*The Piano*, 1993 and *The Portrait of a Lady*, 1996) and Ang Lee (*Sense and Sensibility*, 1995), to bestselling novels by AS Byatt (*Possession*, 1990, *Angels & Insects*, 1992) and William Gibson and Bruce Sterling (*The Difference Engine*, 1991), fin de siècle culture seemed to be rife with appropriations from the nineteenth century. Revivals of Oscar Wilde range from Brian Gilbert’s biographical film (*Wilde*, 1997) to Oliver Parker’s comedy, starring Rupert Everett and Colin Firth (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 2002), to Will Self’s novel *Dorian* (2002), while Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* has been revisited by Canadian poet Stephanie Bolster (*White Stone: The Alice Poems*, 1998) and, more recently, by celebrated blockbuster director Tim Burton (*Alice in Wonderland*, 2010).

Rather than dwindling, the phenomenon seems to have escalated since the turn of the twenty-first century and, last year, the first major exhibition examining Victorian revivalism in its many varied and popular forms was staged at the Guildhall Gallery in London. Curated by Sonia Solicari, *Victoriana: The Art of Revival* (September–December 2013) brought together twenty-eight major contemporary artists who encapsulate the many forms and motivations behind Neo-Victorian takes on nineteenth-century style. Artists whose work was featured as part of *Victoriana: The Art of Revival* include Grayson Perry, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Paula Rego, Polly Morgan and, notably here, Yinka Shonibare¹⁶, whose work has served as inspiration to both Sibande and Kabwe¹⁷. A review by Adrian Hamilton in *The Independent* highlights the effect of the exhibition in shifting popular perceptions of the Victorian era:

Our artistic view of the Victorian era is so stuck in the sentimentality of its narrative pictures and the jewelled precision of Pre-Raphaelite painting, that it is easy to forget just what a boisterous, anxiety-ridden and populist period this was. That’s the part which fascinates modern artists... The era may be seen largely through ironic eyes, but it is no longer viewed with dismissive ones...

¹⁶ For this exhibition, Shonibare portrayed himself as Dorian Grey in a series of dark photo realisations that underscores his blackness.

¹⁷ The particular aspects of Shonibare’s influence are explored further in Chapters One and Three.

For today as for the Victorian era, old certainties have been shattered but new ones have yet to take their place. The darker side of the Victorian imagination, with its concerns for spiritualism and its fear that mechanical progress was releasing all sorts of spirits from the deep, has come to be seen less as an oddity and more as an understandable reaction to a world of mechanised warfare and dark satanic mills. (Hamilton “A riveting return...”)

Victorian revivalism has also gained cultural momentum in the terrain of global popular culture. From the popularity of the Victorian glass bell jar in interior design, to the contemporary penchant for collecting bones, stones, beetles and butterflies in the vein of nineteenth-century naturalists, the Victorian Postmodern genre is a ubiquitous feature of industrial and graphic design, fashion, cinema and urban street culture, from posters and pop-up events, to metro stop décor, informing people’s perception and experience of public and private space. The recent massive surge in the global popularity of artisanal branding (home-brewed beers, hand-crafted furniture), as an aspect of the twenty-first-century, post-recession “Maker Movement”, for example, stems back directly to the thinking of John Ruskin and William Morris, firebrands of the British Arts and Crafts movement, both of whom advocated simplicity of form and honest use of materials as part of a broader moral philosophy that militated against the faceless numbings and dumbings down of industrialisation. Yet another example of this contemporary return to Victorian aesthetics and moral philosophy is the rise of the pop-cultural phenomenon of Steampunk. As a sub-genre of science fiction and speculative fiction, Steampunk came to prominence as a literary genre in the 1980s and early 1990s, with fictional works set in an era or world where steam power is still widely used – often imaginative versions of Victorian-era Britain transformed by prominent elements of science fiction or fantasy. It has subsequently grown into a broad-ranging stylistic aesthetic that encompasses fashion, technology, interior and architectural styling and art. One of the key aspects of Steampunk is that it conjures a world that is pre-digital, pre-Apple, pre-atomisation. In opposition to the sleek seamlessness of contemporary digital and social engineering, the mechanics of the thing are laid bare and made obvious to the eye. From October 2009 to February 2010, the Museum of the History of Science in Oxford, England hosted the first major

exhibition of Steampunk art objects, curated by Art Donovan and presented by museum director Jim Bennett. From redesigned practical items to fantastical contraptions, this exhibition showcased the work of eighteen Steampunk artists from across the globe, and proved to be the most successful in the museum's history, attracting more than 70 000 visitors (Donovan).

Two key aspects of the Steampunk phenomenon are of interest in relation to my study; firstly, the idea of postmodern fiction's fascination with Victorian technology as an articulation of a politics of the future that challenges the present with the past. In its fantastical retro-futurism, Steampunk tends to be less dystopian than the cyberpunk movement, with which it shares a fan base. The objects of this study seem to be born of a similar future-spirited thrust. Each artist takes bold liberties with the facticity of the past, selecting particular images, symbolic tropes or forgotten narratives and recycling them in service of a self-styled utopian outlook. Secondly, I have drawn on the critiques that have emerged from within the Steampunk movement at the cultural intersection between the West and the non-West giving rise to debates around whether or not the style chooses to romanticize an Anglocentric empire, thereby reinscribing damaging dualistic Victorian stereotypes. Drawing on the scholarship of literary critic Edward Said, critics who have emerged from outside of a Western-dominant, Eurocentric framework have coined the term "Victorientalist" to describe a nostalgic strain within the Steampunk movement that appears to mourn the decline of the British empire. This critique helped me in the initial selection of the objects of my study, steering me away from artworks that appeared to be born of a principally nostalgic impulse, towards those that militate against twee anachronism positing challenging and imaginative new psychosocial possibilities.

But, to return from this brief detour into the terrain of pop culture to the volume at hand, the essays in the *Victorian Afterlife* collection reflect on selected rewritings either of seminal Victorian texts or figures by contemporary authors, artists, and filmmakers, from the cinematic afterlives of Dracula, Jane Austen and Lewis Carroll's Alice, to A.S. Byatt's "ghostwriting" of the Victorian realist novel. "Why exactly, has contemporary culture preferred to engage the nineteenth century – not the modern period or the eighteenth century – as its historical 'other'?" is the pressing

question at the heart of Kucich and Sadoff's volume. Although they resist a single, reductive answer, they posit—in accordance with Frederic Jameson's conceptualisation, in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, of the nineteenth century as a privileged site of the emergence of postmodernism (ix)—that:

Rewritings of Victorian culture have flourished, we believe, because the postmodern fetishizes notions of cultural emergence, and because the nineteenth century provides multiple eligible sites for theorizing such emergence. For the postmodern engagement with the nineteenth century appears to link the discourses of economics, sexuality, politics, and technology with the material objects and cultures available for transportation across historical and geographical boundaries, and thus capable of hybridization and appropriation. (xv)

They point also to the wave of major critical texts of the late 20th century that located the origins of contemporary consumerism (Baudrillard), sexual science (Foucault), gay culture (Sedgwick et al.) and gender identity (Gilbert and Gubar, Showalter, Armstrong) in the nineteenth century. "Ethnography, economics, science studies, the history of medicine, and other popular areas of scholarly inquiry have focused on the nineteenth-century materials that they view as anchoring their respective disciplinary paradigms," they write (xx).

This study departs from those Marxist theorists who focus on the roots of postmodern historiography in commodification, reading postmodernism as a mere fetishistic obsession with empty style, and from Jameson's gloomy conception of postmodern historicity as being lost in the glut of marketable images being spewed out and consumed by the system of late capitalism¹⁸. My readings of these visual texts is

¹⁸ Terry Eagleton, contends that: "Once artefacts become commodities in the marketplace, they exist for nothing and nobody in particular, and can consequently be rationalised, ideologically speaking, as existing entirely and gloriously for themselves. It is this notion of autonomy or self-referentiality which the new discourse of aesthetics is centrally concerned to elaborate." (Eagleton 1990: 9) Interestingly, an echo of Oscar Wilde's decidedly bourgeois position on 'art for art's sake' can be detected in Eagleton's argument, although Wilde's pronouncement has been turned back on itself by Eagleton's critique of the lameness of aesthetics as an autonomous sphere linked to the rise of bourgeois society in the nineteenth century. This position is in keeping with the thinking of critical theorists Pierre Bourdieu and Raymond Williams, who critique the idea of the aesthetic as an autonomous bourgeois sphere, sealed off from the economic, social and political. Indeed, the fact that the artworks under discussion here have become 'commodities in the marketplace' does not sequester them from other social and political practices, nor confine them to a self-referential autonomy of middle-class leisure, nor cancel out their political cogency within the public sphere. The circulatory paths through which these artworks travel are far more porous than is allowed for

more attuned to those cultural critics (Ian Baucom, Simon Gikandi, Jay Clayton, Laurie Langbauer, Hilary M. Schor, Kali Israel, Ronald R. Thomas and Nancy Armstrong) who “view the post-Victorian mode as politically productive, as offering effective strategies for the fashioning of political positions, values and subjectivities” (Kucich and Sadoff xxv) – most crucially, I argue, for the fashioning of *political* subjectivities. These theorists argue that the post-Victorian mode provides readers/viewers with a lens through which to reread history in socially and politically progressive ways¹⁹. As the editors of *Victorian Afterlife* put it:

This potency [the political drive of post-Victorian forms] appears most commonly in the intertextuality of postmodern historiography, in which contemporary epistemological convictions can be seen to have enabled a dialogic, rather than a positivist vision of history as text. It may also appear through instances of current mythmaking that, in the irredeemable absence of genuinely ‘historical’ ground of any kind, productively use fictions of the Victorian past as pragmatic instruments within political struggle. (xxviii)

What do they mean by the “the irredeemable absence of genuinely ‘historical’ ground of any kind”? Interpreting their meaning in a localised and situated way calls to mind the aggressive daily contestations over the truth of history in South Africa and the impossibility of fully reconciling the stridently positivist and deeply oppositional claims of two successive anti-colonial nationalist regimes. Having grown up in an apartheid culture in which a single Afrikaner Nationalist historical master-narrative was relentlessly imposed on my consciousness through the various mechanisms of the state (from the nakedly ideological and partial construction of history valorised by the official state school syllabus, to the plainly biased interpolation of daily news transmitted by the South African Broadcasting Corporation), and come of age in an immediately post-apartheid culture in which the African nationalist master-narrative is aimed at undoing, if not obliterating, the truth and validity of the previous version, I have come to question history in ways that exceed critiques of the facticity of *this*

in class-specific conceptions of the artwork’s field of aesthetic reception, rendering them less confined to a bourgeois sphere of mute, sealed, self-reflexive autonomy.

¹⁹ See Elaine Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999), Isobel Armstrong’s *The Radical Aesthetic* (2000) and Ann Cvetkovich’s *An Archive of Public Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003) for allied critiques of the anti-aesthetic position in favour of the socially transformative potential of aesthetic engagement with the social and political.

history or *that* history and point to an essential fictiveness inherent in the necessarily partial and constructed authority of the historical text itself. From this starting point, the post-Victorian mode presents not only a possible antidote to a markedly bi-polar form of immediate historical consciousness, but also, in the malleability of temporal distance, a useful pretext for mythmaking. Being further off than the suffocating complicity of the present and the ensnaring binarism of the immediate past, the nineteenth century presents artists with useful ground for the invention of productive fictions to trouble the limited social imaginaries of the present – an opportunity to shrug off the paralysis of fraught currency and embrace the fervour of origination that proliferated in the Victorian era²⁰. To what extent are the post-Victorian strains in these artworks an attempt to break out of a hegemonic pattern of thought and cultural production that perpetually re-inscribes the dethroning of one mode of nationalism and its replacement by a new (more heroic and ethically justifiable) form of nationalism? In what ways is this reach into the past an attempt to retrieve and recover discarded material – wasted history, trashed narratives – and recycle it so that it might be valuable in the making of fresh conceptions of the future? Because of the obduracy of its legacy, but also its historical remoteness, empire ironically presents postcolonial artists with an opportunity to flagrantly flout the epistemological claims and convictions of nationalist history. But the spectre of empire is fraught with its own monstrous legacy and diabolical distortions.

²⁰ The culture of inventiveness that flourished during the Victorian age was not limited to decorative bourgeois pursuits, but was paired by radical critiques of the social and political. It is a fallacy and a self-serving historical projection to imagine that the Victorian era was inherently conservative, conceptually static or even sexually prurient. Even as the gross crimes of empire were being perpetrated, it was an era of intense self-reflexivity, countercultural inquiry and radical social questioning. Part of contemporary culture's ongoing interest in the nineteenth century is in surfacing the suppressed, hidden and underwritten narratives that countered both the dominant culture of the Victorian era and current dominant cultural perceptions of that time. Although I do not dwell at length on this project of radical recuperation, I do touch on it later in this introduction in the section subtitled "Emergent re-readings of the Victorian era as a time of radicalism and fevered experimentation".

Dr. Jeekyll and Mr. Hyde²¹: Victorian doubleness and colonial modernity

In its exploration of how postmodernism understands the Victorian as its historical predecessor, Kucich and Sadoff's volume makes a key contribution to conceptualising the late-20th century wave of post-Victorian cultural production, but with the exception of Simon Gikandi's²² essay, "The Embarrassment of Victorianism: Colonial Subjects and the Lure of Englishness", the collection is mostly limited to century-crossing intertexts that emerged out of and circulated within an Anglo-American context. *Victorian Afterlife* was followed, eight years later, by *Victorian Turns, NeoVictorian Returns: Essays on Fiction and Culture*, which examines the rich and varied afterlife of Victorianism arguing that NeoVictorianism in contemporary literature and film demonstrates an ongoing and productive engagement with an age, which established the social and cultural directions of the modern world. Part One places some of the major novelists of the period, George Eliot, Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë, in a wide cultural context and reflects on the diversity of debate in the Victorian period, while Part Two focuses on the rich and varied afterlife of Victorianism. Again though the rewritings and appropriations selected by editors Penny Gay, Judith Johnston and Catherine Waters stem principally from the Anglo-American context, while treatment of colonial writings-back is largely limited to Jennifer Gribble's essay, "Portable Property: Postcolonial Appropriations of Great Expectations".

²¹ First published in 1886, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is the original title of a novella written by Robert Louis Stevenson that tells the story of a London lawyer, Gabriel John Utterson, who investigates the disarming dissonance between his old friend, Dr. Henry Jekyll, and an evil surrogate figure, called Edward Hyde (Stevenson). The work is commonly understood to be a fictional rumination on the psychiatric phenomenon of "split personality" or dissociative identity disorder, whereby more than one distinct personality occupies the same body. In Stevenson's novella, there are two personalities within Dr. Jekyll – one apparently good and the other evil, each inhabiting a completely oppositional moral universe. On one level the book might be read as a satirical denunciation of the Victorian tendency towards double-standards – public respectability and inward lust – and the social consequences of people's failure to reconcile the darker, wilder sides of their nature with their espoused values. More pertinent to this study though is the reading that gives credence to Stevenson's Scottish identity. In this version, the Jeekyll and Hyde duality alludes to the national and linguistic dualities inherent in Scotland's relationship with Britain and the English language – and the repressive effects of the Calvinist church on the Scottish character. This reading can be validated by numerous biographical details concerning Stevenson's life and worldview, and I am keen to pursue the postcolonial nuances in Stevenson's text in a future curatorial/ research project.

²² Gikandi is Robert Schirmer Professor of English at Princeton University and editor of *PMLA*, the official journal of the Modern Languages Association (MLA).

In this emerging field of criticism, very little has been written about post-Victorian artworks within a postcolonial frame. Yet in my work as an independent cultural critic, I constantly observe how contemporary “refigurings” (Hamilton, Harris, Pickover, Reid, Saleh and Taylor)²³ of the Victorian archive take on new meanings and resonances in a South African context where the postcolonial implications of these Victorian figures and tropes are charged with urgent political tension. It is this critical nadir into which I write with this thesis. Initially, my decision to engage with these century-crossing texts was based on a sense that part of what makes the Victorian period so magnetic to contemporary artists and writers is the sense of multiplicity and abundance, the absence of tired repetition of forms, the frenetic curiosity and interdisciplinarity that flourished during the nineteenth century. In *The Victorians*, AN Wilson sees nineteenth century Britons as the harbingers of modernity: the first society to grapple with and agonise over the Darwinian struggle of social mobility and industrial growth. “Theirs was the period of the most radical transformation ever seen by the world,” writes Wilson (1), and yet:

No one can consider Africa in any corner of the continent from Egypt to the Cape without going back to the problems which the Victorians both discovered and created there for subsequent generations. (2)

The more I considered artworks of this nature within a postcolonial context, the more I confronted the pathological flipside to the curiosity of the Victorians. In *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe writes about “the chaotic nightmare that followed the abolition of slavery and ended in colonization” (12) and the effects of these transnational catastrophes on African humanity and discourse, arguing that:

... the question of the violence of tyranny was already posed to Africans by their remote and their recent past, a past slow to end. This obsession is found in African awareness in the nineteenth century. The slave trade had

²³ Collectively, the contributors to this volume (including Jacques Derrida, who famously argues for the future orientation of the archive) demonstrate, the degree to which thinking about archives is embracing new realities and new possibilities. In keeping with the central thrust of this book, which expresses a confidence in claiming for archival discourse previously un-entered terrains, my research explores how artists are actively countering official or accepted versions of history as made manifest by the objects of knowledge sequestered in the archive by reacting to and riffing on archival objects, themes and aesthetics.

ramifications that remain unknown to us; to a large extent, the trade was also the event through which Africa was born to modernity. Colonialism also, in both its forms and substance, posited the issue of contingent human violence. Indeed, the slave trade and colonialism echoed one another with the lingering doubt of the very possibility of self-government, and with the risk, which has never disappeared of the continent and Africans again being consigned for a long time to a degrading position. (13)

From an epistemological perspective, the Victorian archive is irrevocably tainted because of the centrality of race and the racial sciences to nineteenth century modes of knowledge production. The Victorian legacy is grossly marred by the violence of colonialism, the entrenchment of power structures and social hierarchies, the subordination of peoples, control over the production of knowledge and colonial era constructions of “the other” founded on the racial sciences.

As my interest in works of this nature grew, Gikandi’s essay, which explores the “appropriation, rehearsal and reformulation of a belated Victorianism by colonial subjects” (159) provided a crucial conceptual bridge, linking the discursive field around post-Victorian cultural production to the terrain of postcolonial theory and culture. In it, he argues that:

... in rehearsing Victorianism and its core values, the colonized were also transforming Victorian categories; they were using the dominant forms of colonialism to express their own experiences. There is no better illustration of... the invention of a post-Victorian culture in our contemporary postmodern and postcolonial world than the process by which the colonized imagined themselves to be Victorian and the way they adopted the idiom of Victorianism to understand and inscribe their cultural and moral universe. In this sense, colonial subjects were perhaps the first post-Victorians. (Gikandi 159)

What it meant to be in a colonial situation and how the colonized reinvented the core categories of Victorian culture – “notions of labour, moral character, respectability and progress” (160) – to account for their own identities in and outside of colonialism are the subject of Gikandi’s essay. His argument circulates around the writings of the great Afro-Caribbean writer and intellectual C.L.R. James (1901 – 1989) and of the nineteenth century Episcopalian missionary and man of letters Alexander Crummel both trailblazing post-Victorians. “Like many others of his generation, Crummel was certainly interpolated by Victorian culture; he clearly carried the baggage of post-

Enlightenment Eurocentricism and racial thinking,” he writes, “but he also strove to go beyond his condition of possibility... [gesturing] toward a post-Victorian state of mind” (170). There is something of a temporal and disciplinary schism between Gikandi’s essay and my dissertation in that his text is essentially a retrospective work of literary historiography and mine is concerned with contemporary visual cultural production. But in its articulations of black Victorianism, his essay provides a crucial historical and philosophical basis for my reading of the type of aesthetic recovery and re-scripting at play in the artworks about which I am writing. In some instances, these contemporary artists might even be said to be taking the baton from the historical figures about whom Gikandi writes. Reflecting on the intersections and points of departure between narratives of decolonization and his own conception of Victorian re-scripting within colonial contexts, he writes:

For the colonized, in particular, the temptation for retrospective illusion or collective forgetfulness has been great: the Victorian age represents such a powerful reminder of colonial domination and cultural alienation that it is hard to associate it with a discourse of freedom or moral progress. It is much easier to privilege the narrative of decolonization and to read it as the process by which African subjects overcame the colonization of their consciousness than to posit it as the source of the cultural grammar that enabled decolonization. But... the vocabularies through which generations of Africans at home and abroad used to will a decolonized consciousness into being to go beyond Victorian culture, as it were came from a set of beliefs that originated from, and were embedded in, mainstream Victorianism. (160)

This is a crucial and provocative point to digest in a contemporary South African context, in which popular culture is heavily laden with the rhetoric and logic of African nationalism, which has sought to repress or exorcise the ghosts of Victorianism in order to valorise the narrative of national liberation as the sole alternative to colonial and apartheid culture. It is an interpretation that gives way to more entangled readings of South Africa’s shared and separate histories and the impossibility of fully erasing or ignoring the deep psycho-social imprint of colonialism, which will continue to be revised, rehearsed and rewritten across time. Critically, it does not divorce the idea of post-Victorianism from the idea of decolonization. Instead, it configures them as being fundamentally intertwined. In its exploration of the writings of two trailblazing post-

Victorian black intellectuals, Gikandi's essay also functioned for me as springboard text linking the initiating *Victorian Afterlife* anthology to more recent projects of postcolonial excavation by scholars like Hlonipha Mokoena, Victoria Collis-Buthelezi, and Ntongela Masilela, all of whom engage with the deeply entangled history of missionary-educated black intellectuals²⁴ and the subsequent betrayal of the black middle class by South Africa's colonial administration.

In *Magama Fuze: The Making of a Kholwa Intellectual*, Mokoena explores the life of the first Zulu author to write a book in his mother tongue. Magema Fuze learned to read and write after enrolling at Bishop John W. Colenso's Ekukhanyeni mission school in Natal in 1856. His book, *Abantu Abamnyama Lapa Bavela Ngakona (The Black People and Whence They Came)*, was published nearly seven decades later, in 1922, when Fuze was in his eighties. "As an author and as an individual, Fuze represents the colonial experience in its acutest form," writes Mokoena (17), who describes his book as an inherently hybrid and ambiguous text that complicates the existing categories of South Africa's literary history in crucial ways. Fuze's book "both represents a decisive break with earlier oral traditions while also marking a sustained attempt to initiate a new kind of literate dialogue about culture, custom and community", she argues (18).

Iconically, *Abantu Amamnyana* represents a tradition of black intellectual thought that could have been. As literati produced by mission schools and educated for acculturation, Fuze and his *kholwa* contemporaries were at the vanguard of the intellectual, social and political transformations of indigenous communities in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century southern Africa. From this position of intellectual advantage these *amakholwa* intellectuals could have been a foundation for an indigenous or native intelligentsia. (18)

The provisional or hypothetical tenor of Mokoena's assertions, signalled by her repetition of the phrase "could have been", is key here because the work of Fuze

²⁴ Earlier watershed studies in this terrain include Brian Willan's biography of Sol Plaatje, Catherine Higgs' biography of D.D.T. Jabavu and Tim Couzens' biography of H.I.E. Dhlomo, as well as Bhekizizwe Peterson's *Monarchs, Missionaries and African Intellectuals: African theatre and the unmaking of colonial marginality* (Wits Press, 2000).

and his ilk was halted in its tracks by the unification of South Africa in 1910²⁵ and the establishment of a white state, which locked them out of any form of meaningful acknowledgment or broad cultural impact. Betrayed by the imperial culture that wooed them, this intellectual tradition was stifled before it had any real chance to take hold. Yet, over the past few decades, there has been a fervour of scholarly interest in recuperating the biographies of figures like Sol Plaatje, John Tengo Jabavu and H. I. E. Dhlomo, fuelled by a desire to understand and connect with the complex, cultural, intellectual and social positions they negotiated and inhabited in their time. In a newspaper review of Mokoena's book, author and columnist Jonny Steinberg writes:

Why would a turn-of-the-century black man write a book in the first place, Mokoena asks. And why would he choose as his subject the history and origins of black people? Was he a wannabe Englishman writing about the black past in order to distinguish himself from it? Or was he, on the contrary, appropriating a colonial enterprise, the writing and printing of books, and harnessing it to African ends? There is a photograph of Fuze on the cover of Mokoena's book. He wears a starched white collar and a three-piece suit, a walking cane in one hand, a bowler hat in the other. Those who see in this picture a faux Englishman are surprised when they open the book to discover that Fuze wrote about black history and custom because he felt that they would otherwise disappear, and black people degenerate into half-castes. (Steinberg)

The complicated figure of the black man posing for the camera with bowler hat and cane, and the surge of contemporary cultural interest in the bricolage outfitting of Zulu metrosexuals and black dandies will be explored further in my chapters on the work of Nicholas Hlobo and Santu Mofokeng, but here I am signalling the ways in which Mokoena's study echoes Gikandi's interest in black colonial intellectuals who were "in constant dialogue over language, customs and modernity" (Mokoena 15) attempting to articulate the complex interstitial position they occupied in relation to the colonial state, Victorian culture and their own indigenous traditions. In her introduction, Mokoena speaks about how the

²⁵ The Anglo-Boer/South African War (1899–1902) precipitated the 1910 Union of the British colonies of Natal and the Cape, and the Boer republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, as the white settler colony, and eventually nation-state, of South Africa.

shutting down of this nascent intellectual tradition at the start of the twentieth century puts the onus on contemporary black intellectuals to pick up where their predecessors left off. Self-consciously encoded into Fuze's text is an implicit message to his intellectual descendants: "this is the work I have completed; you take over from here" (3) In the same way that Mokoena's twenty-first-century biographical text can be read as a response to the call of her intellectual forebears, Sibande, Hlobo, Smith²⁶, Kabwe and Mofokeng's artworks might be understood both as resuscitations of currently repressed forms of cultural hybridity and embodied visual conversations with the unfinished identity struggles of their ancestors.

Along a similar vein, Collis-Buthelezi's doctoral thesis excavates the burgeoning print culture of peoples of African descent from the Diaspora and the continent from 1900 to 1946 in which the British Cape was idealised as a possible black utopia.

With the abolition of slavery in 1834 across the British Empire and the Cape Colony's qualified nonracial franchise of 1853, the Cape took on special significance for black men and women in search of freedom. In print and in English, their magazines, pamphlets, journals, and auto/biographies were produced in the hope that they would eventually garner their writers' inclusion in the body politic of a bygone liberal British empire. Blurring the borders between Diaspora and homeland, history and fiction, polemic and poetry, they pushed for a radical kind of imperial belonging that not only redefined Britishness as a political category but also the genres of English literature... By turning to the traffic of ideas between Africa and its diaspora in Cape Town, my dissertation recovers a vision of (black) modernity that had not yet succumbed to some of the assumptions of anti-imperial nationalisms. (Collis-Buthelezi)

This revised understanding of the British Cape of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a "possible black utopia", of black post-Victorian intellectuals arguing for a "radical kind of imperial belonging" that had the conceptual power to reformulate what it meant to be British, offers a distinctly counter-cultural narrative. Departing from the atomizing cultural binarism of the

²⁶ As a white artist, the content of Smith's visual dialogue with her ancestors is both different *and similar* to the work of the other four artists under discussion here. The originating ancestral impulse informing their work is, I argue, a shared one, as will be explored in my chapter on Smith's *Jack in Johannesburg*.

dominant historical script, Collis-Buthelezi's scholarship provides a new critical lens through which to view Sibande's commanding, self-consciously imperial Sophie figure or the dapper tennis players in Mofokeng's recovered black-and-white portraits.

The *New African Movement* is another significant project of redress in relation to the negation of black intellectual history in South Africa. Compiled by Masilela²⁷, this comprehensive online archive brings to life the writings of 19th and 20th century black intellectuals like Fuze, Plaatje, Jabavu, Dhlomo, Tiyo Soga, W.B. Rabusana, S.E.K. Mqhayi, W.W. Gqoba, R.V. Selope Thema, and Benedict Vilakazi. "The website is a historical appraisal of the making of South African modernity across the twentieth century," writes Masilela on the homepage of the site (Masilela), which also features, among others, a watershed quotation from the writings of Dhlomo, mentioned earlier in relation to Mokoena's book.

One thing, so far we have been guilty of, [is] neglecting our cultural men. They write and write, but very little is written about them... We need more books by Africans on Africa... Another book we need is on the New African. Let us forget our lamentations for once, and tell of our achievements. (Dhlomo)

Linking Masilela's quote with that of his intellectual ancestor, Dhlomo, highlights the rationale underlying this online project – a recovery of textual forms of African modernity. Along with Mokoena and Collis-Buthelezi's texts, Masilela's virtual repository provides fertile ground for deeper understandings of the visual entanglements at play in the works of Sibande, Hlobo, Kabwe, Smith and Mofokeng. Introducing a chapter by Masilela in the essay collection, *Becoming Worthy Ancestors: Archive, Public Deliberation, and Identity in South Africa*, Xolela Mangcu, speaks of how he "gives close attention to the formation of intellectual constellations and draws our attention to the processes by which the intellectuals of what became known as the New African Movement sought, as early as the nineteenth century, to imagine a new African modernity. Their modernity

²⁷ Masilela is Professor of English and World Literature and the Director of the H.I.E. Dhlomo Center for African Intellectual History at Pitzer College in Claremont, California.

incorporated the African past in ways very different from the intellectual texts of European modernity, effectively using the new newspapers of the time as the setting for public deliberation on African modernity” (viii ix). The modernity of these post-Victorian African intellectuals might indeed have been “very different” from the texts of European modernity, but my point here is that it was also irrevocably linked to and entangled in the mediatory and aesthetic forms of European modernity, and remains so in intensely contradictory, dialectical ways that are inherent to the boundary-breaking energy of modernity itself.

Theoretical entanglements: Postmodernism, the postcolony and beyond

Eschewing Marxist critiques of postmodernism as a purely formalistic indulgence of an obscurantist and inward-looking elite, my work is an attempt to navigate the tension between these two critical trajectories and to forge a syncretic critical language that enables me to explore the potentialities in the post-Victorian – a notion that is starkly underwritten in the field of contemporary South African literature and visual art. In a South African context, the term “postmodern” has frequently been disaggregated or set against the term “postcolonial”, with the former being dismissed as having an insular, private European taint and the latter being viewed as more actively concerned with the politics of global public culture. This tendency is observed and critiqued by Carrol Clarkson in *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (2009) in which she examines the relationship between Coetzee’s fiction and his critical writing, exploring the ethical and aesthetic implications of his contribution to contemporary literary-philosophical debates. She draws the reader’s attention to an interview in *Doubling the Point* (1992), in which David Atwell and Coetzee discuss the intricate relations between modernism, postmodernism and postcolonialism and quotes Coetzee’s response to the contention that “the self-reflexiveness of modernism is politically irresponsible” (Clarkson 142). She notes a hint of impatience in Coetzee’s tone, when he responds:

The general position Lukács takes on what he calls realism as against modernist decadence carries a great deal of power, political and moral, in South Africa today [ie. 1989–1991]: one’s first duty as a writer is to represent social and

historical processes; drawing the procedures of representation into question is time wasting; and so forth. (202)

“It is easy to assume that a self-reflexive fictional enterprise and a world of socio-political engagement are mutually exclusive,” writes Clarkson (143), casting a reflective eye on debates that reached their zenith in the 1990s. Arguing in favour of Coetzee’s cognizance of the subtle connections between these two worlds, she points out how, in his fiction, “the calling into question of the procedures of representation *is part* of an ethical concern with social and historical processes” (143).

In 1991, around the same time that Coetzee was arguing for an ethical basis to the self-reflexive turn, Kwame Anthony Appiah asked the critical question: “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” Although my understanding of the term “postmodern” does not always concur with Appiah’s use of what is widely acknowledged as a dangerously fluid term, to me the key point to be taken from this watershed essay is that:

If there is a lesson in the broad shape of this circulation of cultures, it is surely that we are all already contaminated by each other, that there is no longer a fully autochthonous echt-African culture awaiting salvage by our artists (just as there is, of course, no American culture without African roots). And there is a clear sense in some postcolonial writing that the postulation of a unitary Africa over against a monolithic West – the binarisms of Self and Other – is the last of the shibboleths of the modernizers that we must learn to live without. (Appiah 354)

In keeping with Appiah’s optic, it is a generative enmeshment of the radical boundary-breaking capacities inherent in both the Victorian and the postcolonial that concerns in me in this thesis – not just an externalised symmetrical placing alongside, but a deep fission, an irrevocable mutual implicatedness of cultural inheritance. Since the locking of horns between postmodern and postcolonial theory in the early 1990s, critical theory and literary studies have moved on to embrace modes of reading in which comparative modes of circulation, translation and transnational relations across time

and place supersede a fixation on national cultures of origin²⁸. “We encounter the work not at the heart of its source culture but in the field of force generated among works that may come from very different cultures and eras,” writes David Damrosch (2005), in an essay published in a recent volume on World Literature, noting how the reading and studying of world literature involves the discipline of distance and difference. “Works of world literature interact in a charged field defined by a fluid and multiple set of possibilities of juxtaposition and combination: ‘intercourse in every direction,’ in Marx and Engels’s apt phrase” (2005). And yet, in South Africa, this ready acceptance (within the academic terrain) of systems of meaning that operate in transnational circuits beyond the narrow interpretive immediacies of time and place cannot always be taken for granted within the public sphere. On the contrary, post-apartheid society continues to define itself in terms of indigeneity and foreignness, with re-emergent racial (disenfranchised black versus privileged white) and ethnic (Zulu versus Xhosa) rivalries having taken hold of the country’s political culture since Jacob Zuma’s ascendancy to the presidency in 2009 (Mangu “To the Brink”). Cultural policy and public funding has, in accordance, been largely in support of projects that celebrate heritage and cultures of origin over the ongoing complexities and intimate enmeshments of transnational identity within a South African context. “The culture of denial and racial solidarity among whites provides the backdrop of understanding why black nativist leaders are able to entrench themselves further in power,” writes Mangu (102). So, even as cultural and literary theory have moved on dramatically since the debates of the early 1990s, there is still a sense in navigating the vertiginous craters and straits of public life in South Africa of being overcome by intense, momentary spells of déjà vu, in which the enmity between postmodern and postcolonial thought remains bitterly entrenched. And the struggle to articulate positions outside of the deadlock continues.

“Entanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with,” writes Sarah Nuttall in her invaluable introduction to *Entanglement: Literary and cultural reflections on post-apartheid* in which she traces the theoretical trajectory of an

²⁸ This turn toward transnationalism in the humanities is further explored in the next section of my introduction.

idea that has been explored by scholars from across the disciplinary nexus, from anthropology to literary studies (Nuttall 1). The field of entanglement encompasses theories of mimicry and the ambivalence of colonial discourse (Bhabha 1994); multiculturalism, diasporas, transruptions (Hall 2000), and creolisations (Verges & Marimoutou 2005); complicity (Sanders 2002), the seam (De Kock 2001) and improvising the seam (Titlestad 2004); the Black Atlantic as a counterculture of modernity (Gilroy 1993) and transnationalism and the Indian Ocean sphere (Hofmeyr 2007), among others.

Most critical to this study, which focuses on a range of artworks that span a century, linking the present to the past, are those theorists who grapple explicitly with the temporal aspects of postcolonial entanglement. In *Terrific Majesty* (1998), Carolyn Hamilton writes back to Edward Said (*Orientalism* 1978) and Jean and John Comaroff (*Of Revelation and Revolution* 1991), arguing that “colonial politics entailed the uneven mixing and reformulation of local and imperial concerns” (Nuttall 3) and that categories and institutions forged under colonial rule should not be understood as the exclusive creation of white authorities, but rather as a product of “the complex historical entanglement of indigenous and colonial concepts” (Hamilton 3–4). In other words, some of the colonisers’ most important ideas, practices and texts, were taken up from, and critically shaped by, the ideas, practices and responses of the colonised.

Like Hamilton, Achille Mbembe also stresses unevenness and discontinuity in the historical entanglement of colonial and anti-colonial concerns. Writing about *the time of entanglement*, he has argued that “the postcolony encloses multiple durées made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another: an entanglement” (14). For Mbembe, the time of entanglement is “not a series but an interlocking of presents, pasts and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts and futures, each age bearing, altering and maintaining the previous ones” (16). This conjuring of a variety of temporal trajectories overlaid on another is a useful theoretical lens through which to view the objects of my study. Whether or not the artist intended us to view the work in this way, I propose that looking at these works as visual representations of the kind of temporal collapse about which Mbembe speaks provides a useful entry point into an understanding of

these works as crystallisations of postcolonial experience in South Africa today.

Holding in mind these thoughts in relation to the temporal discontinuity of traumatic cultures, it is worth reflecting, for a moment on comparative literature professor and cultural memory theorist Marianne Hirsch's understanding of the shared prefix "post" in critical terms, like "postmemory", "postsecular", "posttraumatic", "postapartheid" and "posthuman", that continue to shape our intellectual landscape. Drawing attention to the "layering and belatedness" inherent in this prefix, she points to the "practices of citation and supplementarity" that characterise its use, arguing that:

Postmodernism' and 'poststructuralism', for example, inscribe both a critical distance and a profound interrelation with modernism and structuralism; 'postcolonial' does not mean the end of the colonial, but its troubling continuity... (Hirsch 5)

In as much as the "post" in "postcolonial" signals a "profound interrelatedness" and "troubling continuity" with colonialism, it also subtly binds the notion of the "postcolonial" to related concepts like "posttraumatic", "postapartheid", "postmodern", highlighting the interrelationship between these conceptual worlds. In none of these instances does the "post" denote a concession to sequential logic or linear temporality. Rather, it signals precisely the kind of "interlocking of presents, pasts and futures" about which Mbembe speaks (16).

Transnationalism: Navigating faded cartographies

Although this study grapples with artworks that transfigure the colonial moment, reigniting discussions around empire and its after-effects in a post-empire world, it is consciously limited in terms of the localities it engages. In my choice of artworks and my readings of these chosen works, I look mainly at provocative nineteenth-century Victorian inflections in contemporary South African artworks, confining my discussion to artworks that contend with the volatile paradoxes of South Africa's colonial legacy.

While being centrally concerned with the symbolic power of these artworks within a South African context, in some instances, as in my chapter on Santu Mofokeng, I do look at their circulation and reception within the global art circuit, and hypothesise as to why a particular body of work, like *Black Photo Album: Look At Me*, has been in such high cultural circulation in centres like London and New York in recent years, having been acquired by the Tate Modern and exhibited as part of *Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive*, curated by South African-born scholar Tamar Garb, at the Walther Collection space in New York in 2012 and 2013.²⁹ What makes these images so captivating to contemporary North American audiences? What symbolic power do these photographs of black South Africans in Victorian attire hold for curators or culture brokers convening visually driven conversations around race and the enduring effects of empire? In this instance, my analysis triangulates an otherwise two-way conversation between Britain and South Africa, introducing New York into the equation.

Similarly, my chapter on Mwenya Kabwe's adaptation of Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* deals explicitly with the transnational tenor of the production, importing concepts around the black Atlantic into the contemporary moment in ways that encourage audiences to think about race in less localised and immediate, more transnational and historic terms. "[The black Atlantic] has become a shorthand term for understanding the Atlantic seaboard as the site for the emergence of capitalist modernity as a transnational system," writes Isabel Hofmeyr in an article exploring new cultural and literary paradigms of transnationalism for the Global South (Hofmeyr 3).

This articulating system in and across the ocean draws in the African slave trade, the American plantation economies and the European industries that these enabled. From the sixteenth century onwards, the peoples of the Atlantic are hurtled into this vortex of modernity, some more violently than others (Gilroy, 1993; Rediker, 1987; Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000). Building in part on Rediker, Paul Gilroy (1993) has deepened the analysis to understand the Atlantic as a site of transnational black modernity, neither African nor

²⁹ Interestingly, the title of this exhibition, *Distance and Desire*, is also the title of J. Hillis Miller's biography, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Harvard University Press, 1970). In my chapter on Santu Mofokeng, I dwell at greater length on the post-Victorian nuances at play in this synchronicity.

American, Caribbean or British, but a complex translation of these various traditions into something new. (3)

For the purposes of this study, my field of interest concerns the visual and aesthetic manifestations of what is essentially a two-way conversation, while acknowledging that this conversation is unfolding in a very noisy room. The transnational nexus of empire and its aftermath vastly exceeds the limited geographical range of my study, recalling Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar's assertion that modernity today is global and multiple and no longer has a Western 'governing centre' to accompany it. "To be sure there is a widespread feeling that we are at some sort of a turning point in the trajectory of modernity," writes Gaonkar.

That sense of a being at the crossroads might have less to do with the ending of an era than with the fact that modernity today is global and multiple and no longer has a governing centre or master-narratives to accompany it. Besides, even if modernity were ending, its end as in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, would turn out to be an eternal duration, an endlessly fading twilight. In the meantime we have to continue to think through the dilemmas of modernity... from a transnational and transcultural perspective. (Gaonkar 14)

My arguments pay some credence to the transnational turn in the humanities, but only really within the framework of the black Atlantic. I am however pressingly aware of the limitations of this framework, given the trailblazing scholarship of Hofmeyr and others (Gupta, Pearson, Samuelson, Jamal, Ravinder Frost, Punt, Ojwang) who have expanded the cartography of the South African literary and cultural milieu by supplementing the framework of the black Atlantic with a new emphasis on Indian Ocean-oriented studies. Rather than offsetting the Indian Ocean as a "pre-modern zone of timeless Islam" against the modernism of the capitalist Atlantic, writes Hofmeyr, "we need to think of the Indian Ocean as the site par excellence of 'alternative modernities'; those formations of modernity that have taken shape in an archive of deep and layered existing social and intellectual traditions" (13).

In light of this generative Indian Ocean-oriented emphasis in contemporary South African literary and cultural scholarship, other scholars might be inspired to take the conceptual prism of this study further, exploring contemporary artworks with

a radical counter-archival bent that have emerged out of other former colonies within the Indian Ocean network, and tracing connections and points of departure that transcend national boundaries to generate new perceptions.

Narrowing the field: From texts to ‘texts’

At the outset of my doctoral investigation, I imagined that my research would incorporate both visual and literary objects of study, and my initial proposal included chapters on Ann Harries’ novel *Manly Pursuits* (2000), Ingrid Winterbach’s novel *To Hell with Cronje* (2010) and Reza de Wet’s play, *African Gothic* (1986).

Set in the latter half of the nineteenth century and featuring a range of fin-de-siècle figures including Wilde, Ruskin, Carrol, Jameson, Milner and Selous, Harries’ novel tells the tale of a frail ornithologist on a mission to introduce birdsong to the slopes of Table Mountain, who finds himself drawn into the coterie of blue-eyed young men surrounding the weakening colossus, Cecil Rhodes.

Regarded as a milestone in South African theatre, De Wet’s play tells the story of the final “dance macabre” between a brother and sister who face eviction from the ruined family farm by an officious lawyer.

Woven around a protracted encounter between two scientists, Reitz Steyn and Ben Maritz, who find themselves in a transit camp for those temporarily and permanently unfit for battle during the Anglo-Boer/South African War, Winterbach’s novel interrogates the founding moments of the South African nation.

In terms of narrative content, I was drawn to the eroticism and subversive gender politics at play in Harries’ portrayal of the Victorian colonial elite, and the taut anti-imperialist nerve that runs through both De Wet’s play and Winterbach’s novel. I imagined these themes providing a contextual and historic backdrop to the post-Victorian strains in my chosen artworks in ways that highlighted an authorial tendency toward a rewriting of the colonial encounter. But I came to a decision to exclude them on the basis that they appeared to me to be fairly conservative at a formal level and did not display the kinds of deliberately disorienting, self-referential, meta-textual or experimental tactics of deconstruction that, for me, constituted the postmodern strain

in the “Victorian postmodern”. The willful disruption or fragmentation of the narrative to draw attention to the artificiality and authority of the text itself did not seem to be of principal concern to these authors. In other words, to return to Coetzee’s framing of the self-reflexive strain in postmodernism, these works did not seem to “[draw] the procedures of representation into question” in any notable way (202).

I chose instead to focus on the field of visual art and on works in which engagements with the nineteenth century seemed to be accompanied by a spirit of provocative revisionism and formal experimentation. My instincts with regard to a surge of post-Victorian works in twenty-first century South Africa were validated by my research which confirmed a proliferation of radically divergent contemporary South African artworks that revisit the nineteenth century, drawing on aesthetic tropes in ways that transport the contemporary imagination to a bygone, but still highly fraught age of colonial consciousness. These include: Leora Farber’s *Dislocation / Re-Location* (2005), a practice-led visual arts project exploring the visual embodiment of identities in a post-colonial environment; *Beast in Mind* (2012), a series of works by Cape Town illustrator Elise Wessels visually interpreting the Shadow archetype, as defined by C.G. Jung; Fabian Saptouw’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* (2011), a response to a work of the same title (1974) by Allen Ruppersberg, in which the artist transcribed the entire textual content of the Oscar Wilde novel with a Pentel marker onto twenty 1,83m² canvases³⁰; and Aliza Levi’s *Books on a White Background* (2013), an ongoing series of large-scale photographs of disavowed and ideologically troublesome books from the era of empire, which lie dormant in the official archives or have been consigned to unofficial circuits of vintage paraphernalia and vintage Africana bric-a-brac due to their racist or imperialist content³¹.

The five selected bodies of work by Sibande, Hlobo, Kabwe, Smith and Mofokeng explored in this thesis might also be read in relation to the fervour of cultural production that has been catalyzed by the active curatorship of the Bleek and

³⁰ In this work, Saptouw has compressed the entire novel onto a single sheet of paper, rendering the text illegible and Wilde’s engagement with morality, mortality, art and dandyism completely opaque.

³¹ My text responding to this body of work by Levi, explores the unnervingly alluring aesthetics at play in the elaborate tactile surfaces of these ideologically tainted books, and is currently under review for publication in a special edition of the journal *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies* on theme of “African Photography: Realism and After”.

Lloyd Collection housed in the Special Collections of the University of Cape Town library – the record of a unique instance of cross-cultural interaction “between two very different groupings of people in nineteenth-century Cape Town” (Twidle, 19). In the opening chapter of the *Cambridge History of Southern African Literature* (2010), Hedley Twidle explores the literary afterlives of the Bleek and Lloyd archive. “For almost a century these ‘Bushman researches’ received little scholarly attention from anyone outside the Bleek family, but in recent decades steadily more of the archive’s narrative and visual material has been brought into the public domain by visual artists, curators, writers, anthologists and, most recently, digital scanning,” he writes. “Read in dialogue with contemporary fieldwork amongst Ju/’hoansi and Nharo communities in Namibia and Botswana, the nineteenth-century records have become a fragmentary, speculative yet vitally important means of reconstructing a wider indigenous expressive culture which once existed throughout the subcontinent” (21).

Some bodies of work germane to this study only came into public circulation after research for the five chapters of this text was well underway. These include Minette Vári’s *Revenant* (2012), Andrew Putter’s *Native Work* (2013), Nelisiwe Xaba’s *The Venus in Venice* (2013) and James Webb et al’s *The Uncommercial Traveller* (2013). *Revenant*, which features a video work and a series of photographs based on Victorian/Edwardian memorial photography, ties in with the idea of the “uncanny return”, one of the core themes of my research, and the notion of contemporary art performing the function of ancestor ritual or séance within a predominantly secular public culture framework. “In this narrative, figures wake from their deathly slumber (or take turns to be the ‘dead one’). They are ‘revenants’, returning from the dead,” reads the exhibition text that accompanied Vári’s exhibition at the Goodman Gallery, Cape Town. “While referencing how technology would be applied in the search of the paranormal, and the world of spiritualism in the late nineteenth century in its visual lexicon of double exposures, images of ectoplasm etc., it is also set against the backdrop of the Johannesburg of the Randlords era” (Vári).

A response to Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin’s lifelong project to photograph black southern Africans, *Native Work* comprises a series of black-and-white reinterpreted ‘ethnographic’ portraits of contemporary black Capetonians in “tribal” or

“traditional” costume offset by a second colour series, for which the sitters chose what they wished to wear based on how they see themselves in the present. “Cognizant of the dangers inherent in Duggan-Cronin’s colonial, ethnographic approach to making images, *Native Work* nevertheless recognises an impulse of tenderness running through his project,” writes Putter in an article about his project in the journal, *Kronos: Southern African histories* (Putter 249). “By trusting this impulse in Duggan-Cronin’s photographs, *Native Work* attempts to provoke another way of reading these images, and to use them in the making of new work motivated by the desire for social solidarity, a desire which emerges as a particular kind of historical possibility in the aftermath of apartheid.” By exploring his own complex feelings towards an ideologically tainted but aesthetically compelling visual archive, Putter enters the fraught terrain of ethnographic representation to wrestle with himself about his personal implicatedness as an artist and a white South African in this troubled visual legacy. The subjective turn in this body of work echoes the first-person tenor of my own research (as outlined in the “Bedlam Walz” section of my introduction).

Xaba’s performance, *The Venus in Venice* (performed as a specially commissioned piece at the South African national pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2013), takes the biography of Sara Baartman, the South African Khoikhoi woman who was displayed in nineteenth century circuses and travelling shows across London and Paris under the pseudonym “Hottentot Venus”, as its starting point. Instead of dying in Paris in 1859, Xaba asks the audience to imagine that Baartman has been deported back to South Africa under the ruling of [former French president] Nicolas Sarkozy. “The Venus finds herself lost, no longer allowed in Paris, alienated from her home life, and makes her way to Venice,” reads the artist’s statement. “The Venus is a rumination on the impossible task of understanding or accessing the thoughts of the dead – and on the rigidity of the archive, which paradoxically opens itself up to the interpretations of the living. *The Venus in Venice* is as much about the artist’s issues with the exoticised black body in contemporary performance and fine art as it is about the exploitation and eroticised body of Saartjie Baartman in Europe in the 1800s” (“South African artists to perform in Venice for closing of 55th La Biennale”).

The Uncommercial Traveller unfolded as part of Cape Town's Infecting the City public arts festival in 2013. Inspired by the detailed social realism of Charles Dickens in his portrayal of the joys and tragedies of city life, artist James Webb worked with directors Owen Calvert-Lyons and Raquel Meseguer and 16 local theatre practitioners to develop creative and reflective audio-guided tours of locations in the city of Cape Town.

Were I to curate an exhibition based on my research, these four bodies of work and others would undoubtedly broaden the range of multimedia engagements at play in the conceptual field of post-Victorian embodiment in contemporary South African art. But for the purposes of this study, I have chosen to limit my focus to five bodies of work, which elucidate the significant valences of what I perceive to be a post-Victorian turn in contemporary South African art.

Image as text

I employ the analytical tools of semiotics as articulated by Umberto Eco, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and later by the neo-Marxist sociologist, Stuart Hall (whose thinking is also key to this study in relation to questions of cultural entanglement) as a mode of addressing my research question. Although closely allied to literary theory, art history and theory, and cultural anthropology, semiotics is a methodology for the analysis of texts regardless of modality, and is therefore ideally suited to this interdisciplinary study of visual 'texts' located within the discipline of Literature. As a study of signs and symbols, this methodology differs from linguistics, which is concerned with the structure and meaning of language, in that it understands signs to encompass any medium or sensory modality. In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects.

My reading of these artworks as illustrative of the phenomenon of post-Victorian embodiment is the product of my own intimate engagement with the symbolic signification mediated through the language of their forms. In keeping with Derrida's view of language, it will not be an accident or error if my reading of these works deviates substantially from the intentions of the artist concerned or other

interpretations of the works circulating within current art discourse. ‘Derrida does not suggest that we can ever break free from the conceptual universe we inherit, but we can resist the attempts made by thinkers to impose upon us one pole in a particular binary opposition (eg. body/soul, good/bad, nature, nurture) and to treat it as a guarantor of truth and presence,’ writes Raman Selden in a chapter entitled ‘Structure and Indeterminacy’ (Selden, 380). Similarly, my readings of these artworks are not based on some misguided sense that I can entirely escape the impositions of institutional and political expectation, but they are an attempt to resist the interpretive binaries (black/white, maid/madam, queer/straight, colonizer/colonized, foreign/indigenous) that I consider to be dominant and restrictive features of contemporary South African critical discourse. I do this by refracting the interpretive lens and reading these works through the tropes and figures of post-Victorian self-consciousness.

For Derrida, who avoids determinate concepts in his own discourse, the signifier is not directly related to the signified; there is no one-to-one set of correspondences between them. Word and thing (or thought) never become one. He sees the sign as a structure of difference: half of it is always “not there” and the other half is always “not that”. Signifiers and signified are continually breaking apart and reattaching in new combinations. No one can make the “means” (the sign) and “the end” (meaning) become identical (Sarup 33). So, while it is my conscious intent to stretch the interpretive possibilities put into the conceptual field of play by the material forms of these artworks, it is not my desire to totalize these objects through my reading of them, nor to grasp their meanings completely.

In my work as a critic, I have solidly rejected a clear boundary line between literature/art and criticism based on the instinct that the indeterminacy of writing/making affects criticism as much as literature/art, and my responses to these selected bodies of work are no exception. As exercises in intersubjectivity, they are very much in keeping with the theorisations of the Dutch cultural theorist and critic Mieke Bal, whose watershed work, *Narratology* (first published in English in 1985), is a systematic account of narrative techniques, methods, their transmission, and reception, and of the ways in which we understand *both literary and non-literary works* (Bal 1985).

This project is at one with Bal's thinking in several ways. Firstly it is work of interdisciplinary cultural analysis that draws on semiotics in its readings of visual and performance art objects as 'texts'. Secondly, in its open examination of concepts or tropes that travel between disciplines, historical periods and cultural contexts, it rehearses her notion of 'preposterous history' – the idea that modern quotations from archival 'texts' can renew our understandings of the original work and the time in which it was made. (Bal 1999)

'For Bal, the art of the past exists undeniably in the present, where it continues to generate powerful cultural effects.' (Bryson 2) Her notion of 'preposterous history' applies to how contemporary quotations from Caravaggio can renew current understandings of the work of this Italian seventeenth-century painter; for this study it might as easily apply to how twenty-first-century post/decolonial refigurings of the Victorian archive can reshape contemporary understandings not only of the nineteenth century, but also of this current era refracted through that one.

But to return to the relationship between subject and object, signifier and signified, Bal is particularly succinct in her observations regarding the relationship between the maker and of an object and its meaning in the world. 'As I have written many times ... the maker of an object cannot speak for it,' she writes, in *Travelling Concepts*.

The author's intentions, if accessible at all, do not offer direct access to meaning. In the light of what we know about the unconscious, even an alert, intellectual, and loquacious artist cannot fully know her own intentions. But nor can the maker or the analyst who claims to speak for the maker speak for the object in another sense, the sense closer to the anthropological tradition. The object is the subject's 'other' and its otherness is irreducible. Of course, in this sense the analyst can never adequately represent the object either: she can neither speak about it nor speak for it. (Bal, 2002)

As I have said, it not my desire to totalize these objects through my reading of them, nor to grasp their meanings completely. But it is my intention to subjectively and 'intersubjectively' engage with their meanings and, in so doing, shift and be shifted by them. For Bal, there is no need to move beyond the subjective in research, but nor is the opposite of the subjective the objective. In her writings she repeatedly highlights

the constitutive power of “intersubjectivity” that which is shared by more than one conscious mind. For Bal, whose understanding of how vision unfolds in the field of power, is rhetorical, sight is semiotic and operates with a vast interpersonal, reciprocal system of signs. In his introduction to Bal’s *Looking In: The Art of Looking*, Norman Bryson writes:

When we recognize something in the world, it is because we treat it as a visual sign, part of a vast field of discourse, which as sign-using subjects we are competent to deal with. The space is that of discourse rather than projective geometry: of any human language where there are signs for I, you, she, he and where there exist stories, narratives (perhaps the key term in all of Bal’s work). The advantages of Bal’s sense of the image as visual narration—as distinct from scenic view—begin to emerge when one considers the interpersonal of visual representation that this first step proposes... Bal’s work does not ignore third-person narrative... But her interest is in deixis, in I-You reciprocity... The significance of Bal’s work for others engaged in projects of cultural analysis is that it points to places where some of the models that currently guide critical thought may unwittingly reproduce the master/slave dialectic they seek to oppose—and it maps ways out of that impasse. (Bryson 8-9)

As subjects involved in the constant flux and change of culture, it is our “intersubjective”, reciprocal experience of knowledge that is the basis of meaning. My readings attempt to take to into account the “intersubjective” power of each body of work, reading it not as a fixed or static object, but as a source of unfolding meanings that morph as they travel between disciplines, historical periods, communities convened by curatorial circuits of exhibition and public reception.

In *Countervoices*, Clarkson observes how the impetus of Coetzee’s discussions about art differs from the orthodox structuralist approach, which stops short of exploring the ethical dimensions of the artwork (13). Noting at the same time how his writing takes into account all the implications of the linguistic turn in stylistics and in approaches to narrative, she points to the complexity of Coetzee’s aesthetics and draws on a particular scene in *Youth*, when John encounters *Elegy for the Spanish Republic*, a painting by Robert Motherwell. Despite the fact that that the painting consists of “no more than an elongated black blob on a white field”, the protagonist:

is transfixed. Menacing and mysterious, the black shape takes him over. A sound like the stroke of a gong goes out from it, leaving him shaken and weak-kneed. Where does its power come from, this amorphous shape that bears no resemblance to Spain or anything else, yet stirs up a well of dark feeling within him? It is beautiful, yet it speaks like beauty, imperiously [...] Does *Elegy for the Spanish Republic* correspond to some indwelling shape in his soul? (Coetzee 92)

Clarkson notes how “the painting ‘speaks’ to its viewer in a singularly complex and intimate way” (14), that has more to do with the subjective hold of the artwork on the viewer in a particular context and moment than with the intentions of the painter at the time of creating the work. Coetzee speaks about writing in similar terms, as an act of experimentation with words on the page during which the writer is unable to determine what the outcome will be. It is only once the text is complete that the writer, the reader, the writer as reader can begin to appreciate “the dynamic and protean force-field of the work of art” (Clarkson 14) as it takes singular effect in each reader’s response. My reading of these artworks and my writing about them is governed by a similarly subjective mode of aesthetic reception that, although historically situated, is ultimately more spell-like than directly causal in its logic.

For theorists like Derrida, Foucault, Hayden White and Paul de Man, who took up Nietzsche’s claim that there are no absolute truths, “language is essentially figurative” and “discourse is always shaped by ‘desire’, which in turn is communicated in tropes and figures” (Selden 380). This approach is well described by Oscar Wilde in his seminal essay, *The Critic as Artist* (1891), which reads like a stroke of clairvoyance in relation to post-structuralist theorisations of textual reception a century later.

“[Criticism at its best] treats the work of art simply as a starting point for a new creation,” he writes.

It does not confine itself – let us at least suppose so for the moment – to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final... For the meaning of any beautiful, created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of [him] who looks at it as it was in [his] soul who wrought it. Nay, it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvelous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age, so that it becomes a vital portion of our lives, and a symbol of what we pray for, or perhaps of what, having prayed for, we fear that we might receive... For when the work is

finished it has, as it were, an independent life of its own, and may deliver a message far other than that was put into its lips to say. (Wilde 968)

Emergent re-readings of the Victorian era as a time of radical experimentation

Almost a century has passed since Lytton Strachey penned *Eminent Victorians* (1918), his punk-style Modernist debunking of the era that went before him (Strachey). From a twenty-first century vantage point, I hope to contest this now out-dated notion of the Victorian era as a time of uptight stagnancy, prudishness and puritanism, that was disrupted only by the avant-garde genius of the Modernists, who stepped boldly into the 20th century rejecting all previously held norms and beliefs and questioning the very fabric of reality itself. Rather, this thesis scrutinizes the political and historical effects of an over-identification with the radical originality of Modernism and embraces alternative readings of the Victorian era as a time of illicit sexuality, trans-nationalism, fevered social inquiry, class and race consciousness, doubt and reluctant atheism. “It is easy to ridicule the Victorians for covering their table legs lest they aroused salacious thoughts, and for dressing up their women like dolls – incapable of free movement, let alone free expression,” writes Adrian Hamilton in his review of *Victoriana: The Art of Revival*. “But that is to ignore the rumbustious working-class culture which arose from the industrial cities and to underestimate the confusion of often contradictory impulses which made up the clamour of the period – where an obsession with death could sit beside a fantastical imagination about progress, and where tracts of religious piety could share the shelf with science fiction and brutally realistic novels.” (Hamilton)

Although the profusion of recent articles, studies and exhibitions that illuminate the marginal and silenced histories of Victorian counter-culture would likely fill a dedicated library, a few particular books and exhibitions have directly informed my arguments in relation to gender, race and ritual. From a gender perspective, these projects range from the exhibitions, *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde* (2012) at Tate Britain in London and *Tea and Morphine: Women in Paris, 1880–1914* (2014) at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, to Richard Fantina’s prescient study, *Victorian Sensational Fiction: The Daring Work of Charles Reade* (Palgrave

MacMillan, 2010) all of which are informed by a desire to rescript the deep-seated sexism and homophobia of the canon, investigating gender ideology and inscribing alternative sexualities.

The work of the Pre-Raphaelites has frequently been upstaged by their transgressive lifestyles and drifty, dreamy romantic imagery, but the aforementioned exhibition at Tate Britain reveals that the group was far more politically radical and socially engaged, and its female members (notably Elizabeth Siddal, Rosa Brett, Florence Caxton) more numerous and productive, than previously thought. “Way beyond their controversial flouting of stylistic painterly conventions, the Pre-Raphaelite artists were concerned with the blatant inequalities and questionable moral standards of Victorian society itself,” writes Fiona MacCarthy (33) in an article that expounds on their sustained preoccupations with sexual politics and, even more so, the politics of labour in an increasingly industrialised Britain. These claims are further explored in *Desperate Romantics*, a six-part television serial about the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which was first broadcast on BBC 2 in 2009, and in *Constance: The Tragic and Scandalous Life of Mrs. Oscar Wilde* (2014), Franny Moyle’s biography of Constance Lloyd, which depicts London of the 1880s as a place where women increasingly roamed freely among certain artistic circles, particularly the Aesthetics, a coterie that included painters James MacNeil Whistler and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, actress Ellen Terry, and poet Charles Swinburne. Grosvenor Gallery welcomed women and their friends to converse with artists and sometimes show their own art, and Dorothy’s, London’s first restaurant for women, opened on bustling Oxford Street with the radical proposition that could women to sit and eat alone in public. These victories might not seem so radical today (and the Pre-Raphaelites remained, after all, a “Brotherhood”), but they were underpinned by courageous life choices and strident women’s rights activism that belie the dominant stereotype of tightly corseted and mannered restraint.

On a slightly different tack, *Tea and Morphine* exposes a darker side to the lives of nineteenth-century women. Through depictions of female drug addicts, prostitutes and alcoholics by a wide range of artists including Edgar Degas, Eugène Grasset, Odilon Redon, Mary Cassatt, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Alfredo Muller, this

exhibition illuminates the daily trials of working-class women for whom leisure hours were not an option. “This iconic era yielded transformative artistic innovation and with it major social and cultural upheaval, leaving both men and women scrambling to keep their lives and sanity in place,” reads a short review in the *Huffington Post*³².

Delving into the realities of working class life in nineteenth-century England, Fantina’s book illuminates the important contribution of the neglected Victorian author, Charles Reade, whose bold critiques of the power relations in the fields of medicine, criminal justice and sexual mores, prefigured the theories of Michel Foucault a century later. Fantina makes the case that, along with sensation fiction by other authors, Reade’s work, “with its frank portrayals of sexuality, including passages in which homoeroticism seems obvious to today’s readers” (2), presents “an alternative set of readings, almost a counter-canon, to what has become known as classic Victorian realism” (5).

My central argument regarding the magical, ritualistic aspects of embodied or performative art practice was enriched by the recent recuperation of the darkly fantastical paintings of Victorian painter Richard Dadd,³³ as well as by the exhibition, *Charmed Life: The solace of objects*, at the Wellcome Collection in London (2011–2012), which resulted from artist Felicity Powell’s engagement with a collection of 1 400 amulets assembled by the Edwardian amateur folklorist Edward Lovett. Borrowed from Oxford University’s Pitt Rivers Museum, these charms, which were once carried in the pockets of Londoners for luck or protection, bear witness to countless personal narratives, most of which are now lost to history. “Each has been invested with hope or belief in that it could somehow mediate on behalf of its owner” (Powell). Although amulets have appeared throughout history and across many cultures in an infinite

³² “Tea and Morphine exposes a darker side of nineteenth-century women”, *Huffington Post*, 19 Nov. 2013. Web. 25 January 2014.

³³ Dadd was an English painter of the Victorian era who suffered from a form of paranoid schizophrenia and was committed to Bethlem psychiatric hospital (known as Bedlam) and then Broadmoor after murdering his father. His paintings are noted for their obsessively detailed depictions of fairies, goblins and other supernatural scenes. His most celebrated painting, *The Fairy Feller’s Master Stroke*, was recently exhibited as part of the aforementioned Pre-Raphaelites exhibition at Tate Britain. “The painting itself has a magic in the colour, in the detail that no photograph, no poster, no postcard, even begins to capture,” writes fantasy author Neil Gaiman in a recent article in *Intelligent Life* (Gaiman 95). Dadd’s life and work was also the inspiration for the radio play, *Come Unto These Yellow Sands*, by Angela Carter, which was first broadcast on 28 March 1979 on BBC Radio 3.

variety of forms, this particular collection of charms evidenced for me the pagan, folkloric, mystic aspects of my own familial inheritance³⁴ and the fact that nineteenth-century working class culture was much more superstitious and enthralled to magic than is commonly acknowledged. The pagan folkloric aspects of English working-class culture rarely translate into popular postcolonial accounts of South African history and seem to have been largely suppressed by the dominance of missionary zeal and the secular rationalism of the colonial authorities. This study is driven by an insistent sense that the ritual power of these artworks draws on an entangled inheritance of superstition, magic and belief.

Bedlam waltz: First-person hauntings and hankerings

From the outset of this project, I have chosen to employ the potentially divisive term ‘Victorian’ over the more neutral signifier ‘nineteenth century’. It is the haunting aftermath of the imperial period in contemporary postcolonial cultures and countercultures that I wish to foreground here – the paradoxical valence of the lingering psychosocial imprint. More crucially though, my choice of the term “Victorian” is an acknowledgement of my English/Scottish/Irish ancestry and of my childhood growing up in Durban (which was then still frequently referred to as “the last outpost of the British empire”) and a declaration of my desire to re-imagine the terms of my own citizenship in a contemporary postcolonial African context by means of this project.

In *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon argues that the self-reflexive tendency that began to emerge in prose fiction in the late twentieth century represents not just a development in literary history, but a dramatic challenge to traditional forms of prose fiction, signalling a revolutionary shift in power relations among authors, readers and critics. She

³⁴ My grandfather, Frederick Walter Goodall, was a working-class Englishman whose father (according to the Census of England and Wales, 1911) was a general labourer/bricklayer. Frederick was able to advance himself socially through the employ and personal patronage of a Jewish property developer on the East End and, at the start of World War II, had the wherewithal to relocate his family to a farm in Devon for the duration of the War. When the War was over, he moved his family to South Africa, and settled in Durban. In this sense, an aspect of my cultural history resonates with Smith’s Durban/London Jewish roots through the surfacing of the Whitechapel link, as discussed in Chapter Four.

describes the “modes, forms, and techniques” of this movement as “narrative narcissism” or “metafiction”, and goes on “to study the implications of these formal observations both for the theory of the novel as a representational genre and also for the theory of the interpretative and creative functions of the act of reading” (Hutcheon 155). Although I recognize the risk of narcissism and narrative self-indulgence in the self-reflexive turn, it is the power shift implicit in this narrative mode that compels my ethical imagination. My affinity with this willfully self-referential mode of historicity is in the ethics of self-exposure as a tactic of narrative *hara-kiri*³⁵ – a self-conscious dethroning of the authority of the author by the author. In works of this nature, in which the author/artist is deliberately foregrounded (sometimes even clumsily so, to draw attention to the illusion-building capacities of the text and the author as trickster/con-artist), the process becomes as intriguing as the product or material artifact. Not limited to narrative genres, Hutcheon views this self-reflexive postmodern turn in literature as being part of a much broader cultural phenomenon. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the visual arts and music have arguably become even more obsessively self-reflexive, signaling increased interest in *how* art is created and not just *what* is created. The artworks around which this study orbits are no exception. A key element of postmodern authority (in both political and artistic terms) is a rigorously self-reflexive gaze, a mode of inscription that resists the illusion of seamless omniscience and insists on a reversal of the lens to reveal the artifice and subjectivity of authorship/authority.

In a project that concerns contestations around South African identity and hybridity, it is crucial that I lay bare the situated, partial, conflicted and subjective strains of my own text. From the start, this project has been an active engagement with my own entanglement in the subject matter about which I am writing. So what of my own body in relation to these five chosen bodies of work? What of my own residual colonial white female body memory and my Jekyll-and-Hyde subjectivity in relation to this project of Victorian resuscitation and postcolonial exorcism? Ever attuned to this country’s dark history of ethnographic observation and spectatorship, the outward

³⁵ Ritual suicide by disembowelment with a sword, formerly practiced in Japan by samurai as an honorable alternative to disgrace or execution.

gaze must at once be inward. Conducted by the ethically fraught authorial politics of my project, I submit myself to this text as both subject and object, rendering myself vulnerable to the potential violence of my own gaze – open to the re-scripting force of my language, the possible constrictions of my naming and framing analysis. In generating this new embodied field of theoretical engagement, and remaining attentive to the performative aspects of the objects of my study, I draw attention to the situation of my own disciplined body – not just my shape and spine, but my convictions made flesh, my personal body politic – in relation to this emergent text. Like Mary Sibande casting her body in resin to create her sculptural alter-ego, Sophie, I cast the first-person singular entity of myself into this text so that it might retain a shape of me to be read in relation to these other bodies of work.

With this in mind, I incorporate some fragments of my own post-Victorian body memory into this text from the outset to be viewed, like randomly collected bones, pinned butterfly wings or dust-encrusted perfume jars, in the museological vitrine of my own text. As flawed and partial as it can only be, this subjective incantation, catalysed by my sustained engagement with these artworks, is an attempt to perform and record a crucial aspect of the core theoretical work of this thesis – to enact textually a key episode in the decolonization of my own mind. The core fragment is a song by Laurie Anderson, which goes some way toward setting a tone or articulating my position regarding the talismanic power of art in relation to the trauma of history.

The Dream Before (for Walter Benjamin)

*Hansel and Gretel are alive and well
And they're living in Berlin
She is a cocktail waitress
He had a part in a Fassbinder film
And they sit around at night now
Drinking schnapps and gin
And she says: Hansel, you're really bringing me down
And he says: Gretel, you can really be a bitch
He says: I've wasted my life on our stupid legend
When my one and only love
Was the wicked witch.*

*She said: What is history?
And he said: History is an angel
Being blown backwards into the future
He said: History is a pile of debris
And the angel wants to go back and fix things
To repair the things that have been broken
But there is a storm blowing from Paradise
And the storm keeps blowing the angel
Backwards into the future
And this storm, this storm
Is called
Progress*

Laurie Anderson, from the album, *Strange Angels*

In one of his last works, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin meditates on a watercolor painting by Paul Klee that he owned, seeing in it an apocalyptic vision of human history. 'A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread,' writes Benjamin:

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (257)

Writing in South Africa in the second decade of the twenty-first century, where the wreckage – not just from 40 years of apartheid, but from over three centuries of colonial occupation – is piled so high and wide we can sometimes hardly see beyond it, it is not difficult to identify with the catastrophic tenor of Benjamin's prose. This project has been wrought in that violent turbulence within the angels wings – a dialectical heat between a striving to 'fix things' and a simultaneous melancholic awareness of the impossibility of that desire, given the immensity of the postcolonial wreckage. Although its main thrust is defiantly utopian in spirit, its genesis lies in the

melancholic longing of the angel's backward gaze. But it is not so much longing for what *was*, as much as it is a longing to *heal* the past, to summon the dead and convene with them, to hear their eternal song of grievance and respond.

It is an illusion of progress, one of modernity's prime myths, to imagine that, by virtue of merely living in the present, we automatically inhabit the higher ground of a more morally or ethically evolved society than the one our ancestors' inhabited a century or centuries ago. The same violent degradations of human dignity persist transnationally, moving in ever quickening migratory circuits of capital growth and environmental collapse.

Meanwhile, in certain spheres of public life in this country, it is still perfectly legitimate to refer to "colonial style" as the quintessence of middle-class aspiration. Breathtaking "colonial-style" architecture and immaculate "colonial-style" interiors are the object of much breathless aesthetic fetishism on the pages of countless contemporary design bibles and décor magazines, valued for their eclectic up-to-the-minute insight into the private-realm longings of the old and new elite. Silencing and glossing over the mutual source of ancestral wounding, these invocations of the nineteenth century seem largely limited to the superficial, conscience-free realm of the decorative arts and fashion quite legitimately fixated on the inventive splendour and free-range curiosity of the Victorians. Yet, given the tortured relationship that has prevailed between the races for the past 350 years, in the shadowy id of the very same instant, the words 'Victorian' and 'colonial' continue to invoke a brutal legacy of damage and division. And in the shadowy wings of our unfettered interior decoration project, the perpetual race debate devolves to knuckle-clenching articulations of tit-for-tat binarism as both interlocutors state their opinions from a static position of fixed opinion galvanised by rage or a stubborn commitment to an accessioned point along the fiercely etched continuum between privilege and dispossession.

"Race remains a central feature of South African life. It is not far fetched to characterize it as an obsession," writes Steven Dubin in *Mounting Queen Victoria*. "Regrettably, racial distinctions have been re-inscribed in the post 1994 period in ways similar to the way they were pre-1994. The Employment Equity Act, for example requires employers to itemize their workers by racial category in order to assess how

far they have progressed in meeting affirmative action targets... Race thus continues to be highly politicized, and the question of who is who isn't 'African' is vigorously argued" (51).

These dialogues have the capacity to be injuriously divisive, leaving the reader or audience feeling corpse-like as if the blood has been drained from one's body by the hell-bent fractiousness of rival claims. Sticks and stones can break our bones and words and thoughts can deform our cellular life. Ideas have the power to do bodily damage. Equally, they have the power to heal, to find spaciousness in cramped circumstances, to invent new modes of transport and consumption, to intimately connect people across vast distances, to change the shape and form of bodies, structures and cities. A statement in advance of the forthcoming 2014 Session of the Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism at the University of the Witwatersrand, organized in partnership with the University of California Humanities Research Institute reads:

The problem of the twentieth-century, wrote W.E.B. Dubois more than one hundred years ago, is the problem of the color line. Dubois' century of the color line has now passed. Yet, at the dawning of the twenty-first century, racial hierarchies are still with us. New ways of imagining bodies and populations and coding differences are already under way. Old and new racial regimes are being reconfigured around genomic and gene-centered determinism. Under such circumstances, what would the project of liberation from race and desegregation of culture and politics possibly mean? (JWTC)

The theme of this year's session is "Archives of the Non-Racial". Along similar conceptual lines, this doctoral project was catalysed by a desire to take note of the numerous and disparate contemporary artistic resuscitations of nineteenth-century motifs in order to trigger a more searching, self-reflexive and healing approach to the heavily tainted Victorian archive.

Although he was writing in the Modern pre-Web 2.0 era, before the advent of the World Wide Web, social networking sites, blogs, wikis, video sharing sites, hosted services, web applications, mash-ups and folksonomies, Benjamin comprehended the transcendental capacities of art as an alternative to the hyper-mediated political and economic master-narratives that are enacted on and through the contemporary human

subject. In his essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), he defined the specific “aura” of the individual work of art as bolstering our etiolated faith in the numinous or the unique. It is within the realm of this sublime sorcery that my project finds its home. I have focused my attention on the ecstatically quantum work that is being done by South African artists to recode the deathly categories of race and gender that have as much power to entrap us and hold us in a rigamortis-like position of repetition compulsion in the present as they did in the past.

In 1989, the performance artist, Laurie Anderson, released the album *Strange Angels*, which included the song, *The Dream Before*, a composition based on Benjamin’s conception of the human experience of time in “Theses on the Philosophy of History”. It was also my first year at university. After nine years of state schooling under the regime of Christian National Education (in all-white and/or all-girl schools) and three years in a private school where my education was framed by colonial aesthetics (panama hats and charity cake sales at Saturday morning hockey matches) and rituals (hymns, policing of posture, surveillance and snitching by prefects, English manners, elocution, immediate expulsion of girls caught up in any scandalous or forbidden activities, secrecy around illness or any other aberrance from the behavioral norms) that were the direct inheritance of the Victorian administration of the East African port of Durban, where I grew up, I began my undergraduate studies at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, a previous settler outpost of the colonial regime. In addition to filigreed wrought iron verandahs, stone churches with stained glass windows, English gardens filled with roses and aloes, and parlours lined with gold embossed volumes and bric-a-brac in which literature scholars hotly debated the psycho-sexual symbolism of Jane Austen’s fiction, the town also ‘boasted’ a prison based on Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon system of ‘ceaseless surveillance’. Built in 1838 on the orders of Sir Benjamin D’Urban, governor and commander-in-chief of the Cape Colony, the Provost Prison serves as a reminder of the town’s formation in 1812 as a militaristic British settlement during the Frontier Wars against the Xhosa.

Over a century and a half later, when I began my undergraduate studies in Literature at the Rhodes English Department, the town was again at the centre of deep unrest in the Eastern Cape. It was just two years before the unbanning of the African

National Congress and the release of Nelson Mandela from Robben Island, and the anti-apartheid struggle was at its height. Following the declaration of the second State of Emergency in June 1988, armoured vehicles of the state security forces would make their way onto the campus in the middle of the night to raid student residences and summarily seize activists to be held in detention without trial until further notice. In Politics I, I attended a radicalising series of lectures by the late Marian Lacey, who, with her signature hoarse voice, enlightened us (although it felt more like the dark antonym of ‘enlightenment’) about the calculated machinations of apartheid, starting with the colonial control of the gold mines, and the capital requirement for cheap underground labour which spawned the brutal logic behind the 1913 Land Act, the establishment of the Bantustans and the degradation of agricultural communities into depleted rural ghettos for urban manual labour. On viewing the recent centenary exhibition, *Umhlaba: Commemorating the 1913 Land Act*, at the Iziko South African National Gallery, which offers insights into the complex and contested nature of land and questions how it is used and what it means to South Africans, it occurred to me that these photographs were a delayed visual accompaniment to the political awakening I had experienced two decades earlier. For me, Lacey’s lectures were a baptismal moment of sudden, violent understanding which inaugurated my own halting and circuitous personal journey of decolonization, in which I am still currently entangled. Hugh Masekela’s *Stimela* (which captures the sound of the train that carries migrant labourers to work on the mines) and Laurie Anderson’s *Strange Angels* were personal anthems on the soundtrack to my political becoming – postcolonial consciousness and postmodern subjectivity written into the body through the sensory transmission of song. The coming together of these three tracks – postmodern subjectivity, postcolonial consciousness and the body as a medium of expression at the intersection of the personal and the political – was a crucial conceptual moment in the development of this thesis.

In keeping with the definitive tenor of the works around which this dissertation orbits, the opening line of Anderson’s song seems absurd at first: “Hansel and Gretel are alive and well and they’re living in Berlin”. She casts the archetypal male and female characters from the classic fairytale as a couple of freelance drifters whiling

away their off-duty hours in a cocktail bar in Berlin. Bearing in mind her reference to Benjamin, and Benjamin's death³⁶ in 1940 in Franco's Spain while fleeing the Nazi invasion of France, this collapsing together of the timeless narrative of folklore with the prosaic details of everyday life strikes me as a distinctly postmodern response to the incommensurability of everyday experience in a post-traumatic culture. The artworks under discussion in my thesis adopt a similar aesthetic strategy, combining overblown, magical or supernatural forms with documentary or prosaic elements to grapple with questions of postcolonial identity in ways that bespeak the distorting, overbearing effects of the past on the present.

The foregrounding of Berlin might seem like a non-sequitur in a thesis that grapples with the postcolonial refashioning of the loved and loathed English legacy in contemporary South Africa. But when one considers contemporary South African cultural production within a broader transnational nexus, the centrality of Berlin can hardly be ignored. Alongside New York, London, Paris and Beijing³⁷ Berlin remains one of the current cultural capitals of the world, and it is perhaps no coincidence that German curators currently hold the top positions at the Tate Modern in London and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, both of which have been key institutions in shaping the international careers of many leading South African artists, since the end of the cultural boycott and the advent of the two Johannesburg Biennales in 1995 and 1997, which instantiated this country's reentry into transnational circuits of contemporary art production and reception. It is under the directorship of Chris Dercon that the Tate Modern has appointed Elvira Dyangani Ose as its Curator of International Art, with a special focus on Africa. Ose is also guest artistic director of the third edition of the 'Rencontres Picha', Lubumbashi Biennale (2012–2013), maximizing connectivity between the museum and current art projects unfolding on the African continent. Both Dercon and Klaus Biesenbach, current

³⁶ Whether he committed suicide or was murdered by Soviet agents is a matter of contestation.

³⁷ Beijing's cultural policy has tended to centre more on the international circulation of Chinese artists than the wooing and patronage of artists from around the globe. It is Europe and America that are more justifiably concerned with art as a means of historical redress, as it is Europe and America who have been involved and continue to be involved in imperial pursuits in Africa. Notwithstanding some evidence of early trade connections between Africa and China dating back to the 15-century Ming Dynasty voyages of Admiral Zheng He and his fleet (which rounded the coast of Somalia and followed the East coast down to Mozambique), the Chinese imperial presence on the African continent seems to have only just begun.

Director of MoMA PS1 in Queens, New York City and Chief Curator at Large at The Museum of Modern Art, have spoken as part of the public talks programme of the Johannesburg Art Fair. This annual contemporary art market exceeds its prime commercial impetus, functioning also as a local/international networking event for African artists and international curators in the absence of the transnational connectivity afforded by a major event like the Johannesburg Biennale. Although it went defunct after its second iteration organised by Okwui Enwezor in 1997, these biennales were pivotal events in the presentation and reception of South African contemporary art, the impact of which can still be felt in the global art world today.

I note this not as a slavish devotee to the facilitating powers of the Western metropole, but out of an acute awareness of the enduring creative and capital flows between this periphery that is my centre, and that centre that is my dizzyingly imposing periphery. Nicholas Hlobo has, for example, exhibited as part of *La Triennale, Intense Proximity* at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris (2012); *Touched*, the Liverpool Biennial (2010); the third Guangzhou Triennial, China (2008); and *Flow* at the Studio Museum in Harlem (2008), while Mary Sibande's work was shown as part of *Le Festival d'Automne à Paris* in association with MAC/VAL, Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne in 2013. Santu Mofokeng's *Black Photo Album/Look at Me: 1890 – 1950* was recently restaged as part of the curator Tamar Garb's three-part exhibition, *Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive*, at the Walther Collection in New York (2012–2013) – Artur Walther being a prominent German collector, primarily of African ethnographic photography. This contextual framing will be further explored in Chapter Five, in which I attempt to decipher the recent resurgence of international curatorial and public interest in this body of work, which was initially produced by Mofokeng in the early 1990s. In the absence of sustained interest or budgetary input into the field of conceptual art by the national Department of Arts and Culture (which has poured the vast majority of public resources into the more politically productive field of national heritage and craft), the Johannesburg-based French and German cultural institutes – via their numerous programmes in the field of socially-driven arts practice – have held sway as the key funders and convenors of contemporary art and cultural production in the first two decades of South Africa's

democracy. Somewhat surprisingly, given this country's overbearing legacy of empire, or perhaps even strategically, The British Council has, up until now, played a much more low-key role in convening public culture and supporting contemporary art practice in South Africa.

So, like the apparent dead-ends that end up being essential plot cues in the narratives of German writer and academic W.G. Sebald, the Berlin location of Anderson's song has its strange place in my exploration of contemporary post-Victorian aesthetics within the transnational flows of contemporary cultural curatorship. Yet the city's mention is secondary to the primacy at the outset of this text of Walter Benjamin and of Laurie Anderson herself – Walter Benjamin *through the medium* of Laurie Anderson. Anderson *quoting* Benjamin seems apt for a project that began with an interest in Postmodernism's rejection of Modernism's progressive universalism. Along with parody and pastiche, *quotation* is one of the key strategies employed by postmodern artists in their radical reinventions of the past. Just as visual appropriations from the past are key to postmodern aesthetics, "the story within the story" is a central feature of postmodern literature, which is intent on revealing rather than concealing the mechanics of its own narrative alchemy. Anderson *quoting* Benjamin on the question of history puts Benjamin at a remove from the reader or listener, manifesting his distance from the present in formal terms and establishing the significance of his writing as a text among texts, rather than an unquestionable truth.

Anderson is key here as a conductor of two core theoretical currents that run through this thesis – postmodernism and embodiment as they relate to the ways in which South African artists are making new sense of the nineteenth century. She was strongly featured as part of the exhibition, *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970-1990*, which ran at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London in 2011 – an exhibition on Postmodernism as a pop cultural phenomenon housed in a museum dedicated to keeping those quintessential Victorian qualities of curiosity, wonder and invention alive in the twenty-first century. "Anderson's work resists both disciplinary categorization and easy understanding," write Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt in the opening essay of the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition. "Her lyrics, too, occupy a tonal never-never land, caught somewhere between a public address

announcement, deconstructivist theory and modernist poetry... Her work might be considered a polymorphous, staged equivalent to Cindy Sherman's³⁸ rather more focused photographic project *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–1980). With their combination of specific narrative and absent identity, these images are an inevitable reference point for postmodernism in art history" (55–56).

I have opened with an unpacking of this song by Anderson by way of setting a mood, or establishing a conceptual climate, for the introduction of my thesis, which explores Post-Victorian embodiment in contemporary South African art.

Structure

In the following sketch of the structure of my argument, I not only outline the hypotheses that emerge through my readings of each selected body of work, but trace some thematic and conceptual threads that run from chapter to chapter, sustaining the main thrust of my thesis.

Dressed to Thrill: Counter-archival imaginings in the work of Mary Sibande

In Chapter One, I explore the repeated implosions of the colonial master/servant binary as enacted through the body and costumery of Sophie, the persona that dominates Mary Sibande's sculptural installations and digital prints. The question at the heart of this chapter concerns Sibande's reach into the past and her repossession³⁹ of a nineteenth-century trope or fragment—in this case, the Victorian dress, which functions as a powerful mnemonic device triggering a range of emotive responses to the ongoing legacies of inequality, bondage and subjection that persist not just in the field of domestic labour, but beneath the surfaces of South African public life more generally.

³⁸ Cindy Sherman re-enters this text in Chapter Four, where I examine artist Kathryn Smith's staged auto-critique of her own gendered consciousness in relation to Sherman's self-portraits and Judith Butler's theoretical interventions.

³⁹ See discussion in Chapter One regarding A.S. Byatt's novel, *Possession* (1990), the magical, séance-like qualities of Sibande's artworks and the fact that Sophie's eyes are closed at all times, as if she were in a trance.

Binding together the timeless uniform of the maid and the Victorian dress of the madam in the hybrid form of a fantastically florid dress, the artist gifts her alter-ego with the superhuman capacities to transcend or transfigure the inherited limitations of class, race and gender. The transformative symbolic power of Victorian fashion and costumery is a theme that re-emerges in my chapters on Santu Mofokeng's *Black Photo Album/Look At Me: 1890-1950* and Mwenya Kabwe's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. Inspired by Sibande's work and by the ornately costumed, headless figures fashioned by Yinka Shonibare before her, Kabwe uses the symbol of the outsize Victorian dress to depict the ongoing power of Queen Victoria's legacy in contemporary transnational relations – although the dress has a much more menacing presence in Kabwe's adaptation of Kennedy's play, which anatomises the devastating psychic effects of racial thinking.

In both this chapter and my chapter on Kathryn Smith, I explore the contemporary notion of artists-as-archivists illustrating how their work not only represents, but provides an opportunity for audiences to work through “new orders of affective association, however partial or provisional”, as Hal Foster put it in his 2004 essay, “An Archival Impulse”. My argument is in keeping with Thomas Hirschhorn's assertion in his dialogue with Okwui Enwezor that the work of art has an important memorialising role to play in countering the symbolic power of public monuments and reclaiming the world “according to the biases of individual commitments” (Hirschhorn). “The counter-monument or counter-archive is... a form of recollection of that which has been silenced and buried,” says Hirschhorn – in this case the persistence of unequal and abusive labour relations and master/servant social dynamics that underlie the state's failure to transform the economy radically. Counter-monumental artworks of this nature have the capacity to stand against the monumental history of the state. Commanding, powerful, self-determining, Sibande's defiantly syncretic Sophie figure stands against the separate identity politics of the apartheid state, but also the enduring legacy of inequality and unequal labour relations that persist under the current government. However, the counter-archival status of an artwork is not a fixed position, I argue, but a set of power relations in constant flux that can shift substantially according to the institutional status and public life of the

artwork or body of work, and the degree to which the work becomes valorised, canonised or co-opted into official discourse.

Central to my argument is the power of Sibande's own body and the way in which she has quite literally crafted new social and economic freedoms for herself through the embodied fictions of her sculptural alter-ego. The Sophie figure, both physically and metaphorically, bears the imprint of Sibande's body and personal history. Cast in resin from Sibande's own body, Sophie is a static three-dimensional replica of Sibande herself, whose mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother before her were all domestic workers. Sibande's self-conscious body casting is offset against a dark imperial legacy of body casting. It is through self-reflexive acts of embodiment, and through the fantastical, all-powerful echo-body projections of the Sophie persona, that Sibande has cast or sculpted an alternate future for herself, while smashing stereotypes in relation to the submissive black female body.

Pump up the Parlour: Entanglement and desire in Nicholas Hlobo's *Umtshotsho*

In Chapter Two, I delve into the territory of entanglement and desire in an immersive installation by Nicholas Hlobo, called *Umtshotsho* (Youth Party). While postcolonial theory has accounted for the complex enmeshment of European and African values and the creation of transcultural forms with the contact zones of the public sphere, this installation visually incarnates an equivalent entanglement in the realm of intimacy and sexuality. In this chapter, I explore how Hlobo's work articulates an embodied, physical sense of a culturally entangled sexual inheritance. In the central installation, *Isithunzi* (meaning "shadows") several gloopy black humanoid or alien forms are situated in a salon-style setting that, I suggest, physically and spatially conjures the restrained parlour-room antics and highly mannered mating games of nineteenth century novels. And yet the more immersed one becomes in the installation, the more apparent it becomes that it is not so much the familial front room of Victorian romantic novels that is being conjured here as much the lamp-lit parlours of nocturnal decadence that recall scenes of fin-de-siècle excess from Oscar

Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) as well as Will Self's reprisal of that text⁴⁰ just over a century later, set in the throes of delusional surplus that were lubricated by the dot com boom at the close of the 1990s.

The setting of the *Umtshotsho* (Youth Party) installation could be read as Victorian, but the characters who populate the scene seem to have emerged from no man's land – an otherworldly interzone somewhere between human and alien. They are, I argue, the embodiment of alienation. Meanwhile, the dark tactile surfaces of these black rubber creatures of the night are simultaneously bodily and post-industrial, infused with sado-masochistic stylistics that recall the back rooms of gay clubs in Hillbrow. Taking these unscripted moments of psycho-sexual entanglement as my starting point, I argue that, in its embodied, sensual, performative aspects, Hlobo's oeuvre affirms the radical social power inherent in the sensuousness of difference.

The Persistence of Empire: Unveiling Transnational Legacies of Race in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*

Chapter Three concerns the translocation of a play that was initially staged in Civil-Rights-era America to twenty-first century Cape Town and how a production restaged almost fifty years after its first run exorcises old damage inflicted in one moment in time and lodged in the collective psyche. Billed as “a dark comedy about race, hair and Queen Victoria”, *Funnyhouse of Negro* is a South African adaptation by Fleur du Cap Award winning theatre director Mwenya Kabwe of a one-act play written by Adrienne Kennedy in 1960 and first produced professionally at New York's East End Theatre in 1964. A funnyhouse is a place of grotesque distortions, and the play exudes the terrifying surrealistic qualities of a nightmare. Brimming with postmodern absurdity, the script is rife with metaphor, absurdist visual imagery, and allegorical complexity. Its protagonist is as a young, light-skinned black woman named Sarah, who delivers a repetitive monologue describing her various ethnic selves, recounting her educational background, her lineage, and her desire to become an “even more pallid Negro”

⁴⁰ *Dorian* (Penguin, 2002)

(Kennedy 5). Drawing on the embodied poetics of Frantz Fanon, I examine the ways in which Kabwe confronts the persistent psychic legacy of race by means of a theatrically hyperbolic staged battle across the internalised colour line, exploding the spatial unity of the stage into a fragmented kaleidoscope of burlesque sideshows to depict a vast multi-temporal vision of race as a transnational legacy of empire.

My focus in this chapter is on the ways in which the play physically enacts this global inheritance; on the active embodiment of post-Victorian thematics to foreground the nineteenth-century source of current experiences of race. Literature and art were central to the construction and reification of race theories during the nineteenth century, manufacturing imaginative associations that contributed to the racialisation of self-consciousness. Conversely, I argue, it is through the radical provocations and disassociations of contemporary art practice in postcolonial contexts that the internalised imprint of this toxic legacy is being undone. Reflecting on the experience of directing the production, Kabwe writes:

As hair pieces, extensions and wigs rained from the sky, we became Time Travellers, Shape Shifters, Body Snatchers conducting our own autopsies: cause of death – psychic disjuncture. We sewed ourselves back up again, breathed life back into parched lungs and stepped out of the vortex of the theatre into the world, to practice performing Africa differently. (Kabwe, 43)

Victorian post-mortem: Forensic conjurings in Kathryn Smith's *Jack in Johannesburg*

Kabwe's incantation of terms like autopsy, time traveller, body snatcher and psychic disjunctive provides a fitting entrée to my chapter on Kathryn Smith's *Jack in Johannesburg*, a body of work made in response to British painter Walter Sickert's alleged relationship to (and documented obsession with) the Jack the Ripper murders in Victorian England, and works by Sickert in public collections in South Africa. *Jack in Johannesburg* includes a two-channel projection featuring footage from the performance piece produced at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2003, where Smith's upper left arm was tattooed with the aphorism "Never look for unicorns until you run out of ponies". Smith's Standard Bank Young Artist Award exhibition, *Euphemism*,

which grew out of the *Jack in Johannesburg* series, featured photo and video works, based on pseudo-forensic working methods that recreate or reinvent situations, representing them not as complete histories, but as abstracted or suggestive moments. Research for this project included walking tours of the Ripper crime scenes in London's East End with criminologists and crime historians, a trip to Dieppe (France) where Sickert often painted, and the production of a video documenting accounts of the theft of a Sickert painting (Royal Hotel, Dieppe) from the South African National Gallery in 1998. Original works by Sickert were incorporated into the installation in galleries where these works exist in their holdings.

There are three interrelated themes at work in this chapter: Smith's parodic performance of her own race and gender identity, her commentary on the colonial collecting practices of the South African museums in which this body of work was sited, and the uncanny ancestral discoveries she has made through the embodied media of practice-led research and performance that have informed this body of work.

Picking up on the dominant gender theme that runs throughout the previous three chapters, I draw on the work of queer theorist Judith Butler to unpack the burlesque performativity of the *Jack in Johannesburg* installation, and the outlandish, camp ways in which Smith stages the terms of her own femaleness in relation to a highly gendered archive. I observe how the drag-styled auto-burlesque of Smith's performance draws attention to the unnatural, constructedness of her own gender identity, recalling the self-portraits of Cindy Sherman and South African artist, Tracey Rose.

I look to Steven Dubin's *Mounting Queen Victoria: Curating Cultural Change* (2009) and Daniel Herwitz's *Heritage, Culture and Politics in the Postcolony* (2012) to unpack some key debates around heritage and archival art practice to inform my reading of Smith's critical engagement with the overbearing colonial spectre that haunts South Africa's museum collections and collecting culture.

Although *Jack in Johannesburg* was initially performed within the public context of the Johannesburg Art Gallery (with the video projection having been shown in several other public gallery spaces too), the terms of engagement are simultaneously intimate and familial. Acknowledging the secret histories and unspoken desires that

exist between private and public space, Smith's work is connected to both conceptualist and formalist traditions, and is innately tied to the romantic notion of the art of murder. As a referent in this chapter, I look to *The Fox and the Flies: The Criminal Empire of the Whitechapel Murderer*, penned by historian Charles van Onselen around the same time that Smith conceptualised and performed *Jack in Johannesburg*.

I also give attention to the surreal, séance-like atmosphere of the performance itself and to the ways in which this body of work has provided a premise for the artist to uncover unknown and unresolved aspects of her familial history. While Sibande's sculptures rescript the narratives of her matrilineal line, and Hlobo's morphed bodily forms work through Xhosa ancestral traditions, there is also a genealogical imperative to Smith's "scéantific investigations". Her embodied research and enacted wanderings are similarly underpinned by a desire to make contact with her ancestors, and her investigations have revealed that they were, in fact, immigrant Jews who hail from Whitechapel – the same nineteenth-century London milieu in which the Ripper murders took place.

Live transmission: Intimate ancestors in Santu Mofokeng's *Black Photo Album/Look At Me: 1890-1950*

If the gender theme of this thesis reaches its apex in Chapter Four, my argument in relation to art functioning as an embodied medium for ancestral contact and the honouring of historical crises reaches its crescendo in this chapter, in which I explore a haunting collection of portraits transferred from the still quietude of private collections to the live field of public engagement by photographer Santu Mofokeng. I explore the haunting ghostly quality of these photographs, touching on the spectral dimensions of late-nineteenth century visual culture, and the role that fin-de- siècle photography played in tethering mystic aspects of popular belief to evidentiary practices of social realism.

Recalling Susan Sontag's pithy assertion in *On Photography*, that "photographs furnish evidence" (5), these images evidence not just the existence, but the subjective presence, of black men and women who belonged to the working and middle classes,

defying crass attempts at narrow classification based on distortions of Darwin's thinking, as well as efforts by the colonial authorities to erase them from the history books. "We see these images in the terms determined by the subjects themselves, for they have made them their own," writes Mofokeng in the text that forms part of the *Black Photo Album* installation. Revealing something about the desires and aspirations of the sitters and how they imagined themselves, these portraits offer a rare glimpse into the shifting self-image of black working- and middle-class families in nineteenth century South Africa under conditions of colonial rule. In my reading of the recuperation and fevered contemporary reception of these images, I return to Simon Gikandi's chapter in *Victorian Afterlife* in which he argues that "the Victorian frame of reference was indispensable in the construction of what would later become known as postcolonial culture" (182).

Conclusion: Somatic utopias

With this thesis I hope to contribute to the field of Post-Victorian cultural production by theorising the relationship between a Victorian past and a postmodern, postcolonial present through explorations of a selection of late 20th and twenty-first century artworks in which themes that initially sprung to life during the nineteenth century are recalled and re-imagined. In each chapter I look at a particular body of work, exploring the ways in which the artist is grappling with this country's troubled colonial inheritance to reveal less binary, more entangled understandings of nineteenth century social relations. In my reading of each body of work, I ask the question: In what ways do these fresh conceptions of our past disrupt and revivify rote thinking about racial and sexual difference to forge more productive forms of identity making for the future? The answers that emerge through my research reveal that strategies of aesthetic embodiment are central to each of these vastly varied bodies of work. In conclusion, I trace the theoretical trajectories underlying the compound term "aesthetic embodiment", highlighting some historical and philosophical precursors invested in its utopian political strain. I observe how the tactics of embodiment common to the artworks explored here reflect a broader turn toward "live art" and performance in the

South African visual arts arena. Returning to Jacques Derrida, and Achille Mbembe's meditations on the postcolony enclosing "multiple durées made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias" (14), I reflect on the phylo-genetic, trans-generational aspects of these artistic projects as ritual dialogues with the dead. In these works, the body emerges as the prime medium of address powerfully foregrounding the poetics of desire and individual subjectivity in these visual rewritings of the binary frameworks of the national identity-making project.

University of Cape Town

Chapter One

Dressed to thrill: Counter-archival imaginings in the work of Mary Sibande

Her eyes are closed, as if in a trance or a grown-up game of blind-man's bluff. Her arms are stretched out with the tentativeness of someone lost in the dark, but it is a plain of apparently unmitigated whiteness that she is navigating – blinding whiteness all about her, as crisp, clean and untainted as her headscarf and apron. There is nothing here to touch or hold on to, no familiar recognisable objects to help her feel her way to a known destination. She is in uncharted territory, the empty space of risk and initiation.

Meet Sophie, a sculptural alter ego conjured to life by artist Mary Sibande from fiberglass and silicone casts of her own body. A young Johannesburg-based contemporary artist, who grew up in Barberton, Mpumalanga, Sibande emerged from a line of domestic workers that stretches back three generations. Although she graduated with a BTech (Hons) in Fine Art from the University of Johannesburg, Sibande's thwarted initial intention of becoming a fashion designer plays itself out in her work as a visual artist, through the lavishly hybrid costumery of her static sculptural nemesis⁴¹.

The peat-black figure wears the starched uniform of a maid, the collar and apron rimmed in homely Broderie Anglaise, a technique of embroidery that originated in 16th-century Europe. But this small standard-issue note of deference to European sensibilities has escaped tidy domestication, infecting other elements of her attire. The sleeves of her *royal-blue*⁴² dress are puffed, and the full, wide skirt, supported by a scaffolding of undergarments, falls to the ground in a voluminous flourish that recalls

⁴¹ Although Sophie is in many ways similar to Sibande, a sculptural auto-portrait or depiction of her familiar "Self", she also an invocation of her cultural/class opposite, the imperious, foreign "Other" that has antagonistically defined the constricting social limits of her selfhood – hence the word 'nemesis'.

⁴² This regal aspect has become more pronounced as the narrative subtext has unfolded across her oeuvre, with the Sophie character taking on increasingly florid queenly postures and personae, in more recent works such as *Her Majesty, Queen Sophie* (2010).



Fig. 1. Mary Sibande, *The Reign* (2010). Mixed media installation, 330 x 200cm. Photo by John Hodgkiss. Courtesy of Gallery MOMO.

the dress of an elegant Victorian lady. Her hands and arms are sheathed in vintage black satin dress gloves.

Sophie's eyes are always closed as if in a "constant ecstasy of fantasy" and it is in *her* mind that her dress becomes a thing of voluminous Victorian splendour. "If she opened her eyes, it would be back to work – cleaning this, dusting that. Her dress would become an ordinary maid's uniform," says Sibande, asserting the expressive power of the imagination. This favouring of generative fictions over the verisimilitude of documentary forms is key to the transformative power Sibande's work, particularly in relation to a consideration of "the role of aesthetics, and more specifically affect, in post repressive regimes" (Hamilton, 2009). With reference to Arendt (1998 [1958]), Hamilton observes that:

In the aftermath of situations which crush the individuality of self, explorations of subjectivity, affect and new interiority become essential, often as an act of reporting one's consciousness and expressing identity *through the body itself* (this especially being the case in the aftermath of torture or extreme physical violation, whether as victims, perpetrators or witnesses). (Hamilton, 2009)

Art has the potential to open up a world beyond an empirical or manifest order of knowledge and for Sibande, the body is the core site of representation and transformation. Her depictions of her own body "emphasise the limitations that history has placed on identity". (Sibande, 2009) Sophie's large scale and her dominant, imposing presence, rendered even larger by the overflowing abundance of fabric in her various dresses, militate against rote expectations of servility in the viewer's idea of what it means to be a maid.

The skin in particular is, for Sibande, the site where history is contested and fantasies play out, enabling her to express concerns in relation to stereotypical depictions of women, particularly black women. Sophie's skin is painted a flat, monochromatic black, so she stands out like a dark and static shadow, haunting and daunting all at once. The flatness of this hue transports her out of the realm of the real into the hyper-real, graphic, colour-saturated terrain of the superhero where miraculous supernatural feats of transformation become possible. Like superheroines,

who are dedicated to serving the public, Sophie is a figure of the public realm. Superheroes actively combat threats, such as aliens, magical entities, godlike or demonic creatures, but also threats to the American psyche, like Nazism or Communism. Similarly, I argue, Sophie's superpowers are outward bound – intended to have bearing, to work their magic in the social, popular-culture terrain.

In *They don't make them like they used to* (2008), a witty and ironic homage to the power of fantasy, the Sophie figure is depicted knitting a Superman cape. In the same way that Superman gains his superpowers, it is through the effects of a particular mysterious garment (in his case, his bodysuit and cape; in hers, her Victorian dress) that Sophie metamorphoses from the limitations of constricting, humdrum (political) realities into the terrain of desire and imagining where all manner of possibilities become real.

The pneumatic dress: Re-fashioning the past

Sibande's explorations of race, gender and sexuality are inspired by the work of American artists Kara Walker⁴³ and Cindy Sherman⁴⁴, but perhaps more pressingly by London-based Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare (Dodd 2008), whose exploration of colonialism and post-colonialism within the contemporary context of globalisation, have also taken the form of figures elaborately attired in Victorian frills and flourishes. In a spirit of post-colonial subversion, Shonibare's figures are created using headless dummies, in a nod to the mode of execution by guillotine favoured during the French Revolution, while their costumes have been fashioned from brightly coloured wax-printed cotton, a fabric that is popularly identified as African, but is, in fact, mainly

⁴³ Walker, who has produced works using ochre gouaches, video animation, shadow puppets and Victorian-style "magic-lantern" projections, is best known for her cut-paper silhouettes, beginning with her panoramic wall installation, *An Historical Romance of Civil War as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of a Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994). Her shadow-figure projections, with their unsettlingly violent depictions of antebellum characters caught up in a range of twisted and sadistic scenarios, critique historical narratives of slavery and the perpetuation of ethnic and gender stereotypes.

⁴⁴ Sherman explores the role and representation of women through the medium of self-portraits in which she adopts different female personae, based on stereotypical depictions of women in film, on television and in magazines.

exported from the Netherlands, pointing to an obfuscated hybridity in global trade circuits.

Both Shonibare and Sibande call on the elaborate attire of the Victorian era to, in some way, *re-fashion* our contemporary thinking about the past in relation to the present. Both artists – in quite different, nuanced ways – seem intent on collapsing binaries around race and power and alerting us to unexpected interplays between apparently oppositional and asymmetrically related cultures. Among art’s most crucial developments worldwide since the 1960s has been a turn to the archive. In a seminal collection of writings drawn together by art historian Charles Merewether, he posits that:

One of the defining characteristics of the modern era has been the increasing significance given to the archive as the means by which historical knowledge and forms of remembrance are accumulated, stored and recovered... The archive is not one and the same as forms of remembrance, or as history. Manifesting itself in the form of traces, it contains the potential to fragment and destabilize either remembrance as recorded, or history as written, as sufficient means of providing the last word in the account of what has come to pass. (10)

In Sibande’s case, stereotypical emblems (uniform: working class maid/florid dress: bourgeois madam) are fantastically stitched together around the idea of a single persona, disrupting the entrenched and highly-politicised dichotomy that has tended to govern popular depictions of the maid and madam. The Victorian dress seems to operate in Sibande’s work as a kind of “mnemonic device” (Merewether 10), an associative pattern that assists in recalling the Victorian era more broadly – tapping into an attendant array of cultural associations lying inert in the subconscious mind. The hybridity of Sophie’s dress might be read as a visual incarnation of Anne McClintock’s arguments, in *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity and Victorian Culture* (1995), regarding “the impossibility of purity and the inevitability of hybridity in representations of ethnicity, sexuality, gender and race”. Binding together the timeless uniform of the maid and Victorian dress of the madam, this absurdly flamboyant garment exceeds the limits of the confining documentary reality of these two historically divided class positions.

In a South African context, the Victorian era invokes the epicentre of the colonial moment, the high point of imperialism when Britain not only consolidated its existing empire, but expanded its colonial possessions in an unprecedented way. The Victorian legacy is irrevocably tainted by the violence of colonialism and the entrenchment of power structures and social hierarchies by means of which the production of knowledge was controlled, giving credence to colonial-era constructions of the “Other” founded on the racial sciences.

In the postcolonial context, and even more so in the post-apartheid climate, the rote maid/madam binary is loaded with other inherited associations (black/white, colonizer/colonized, oppressor/oppressed, European/indigenous) which stem back to the nineteenth-century intensification of colonialism and continue to mould contemporary understandings of servitude, locking discourse around this theme into a polarised space haunted by guilt and shame.

Transcending submission

In what ways does Sibande’s work address this troubled inheritance, and the challenges it embodies? Productive public sphere engagements with the history of domination and servility have been limited, considering that domestic service remains a widespread feature of post-apartheid life. It is perhaps the *perpetuation* of exploitation in what is officially an era of democracy and heightened adherence to human rights that renders domestic service such an “uncomfortable” topic for discussion in the “formally convened public sphere” (Hamilton 2009).

Perhaps because of the edginess it stirs up, representations of servility have tended towards the comic and humorous modes. Zukiswa Wanner’s debut novel, *The Madams*, published in November 2006, ventured into uncharted literary space by creating South Africa’s first Black “madam” and White “maid”, and the popular satirical comic strip, *Madam & Eve*, regularly pokes fun at political figures, both South African and elsewhere in the world. But potent engagements with what Alison Light describes (in her invaluable glimpse into the hidden history of domestic service, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*) as the “messy, painful, intimate, damaging feelings of

inferiority, envy, deference and belligerence” (Light xxi) involved in domestic labour have been few. In the literary sphere, Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat*, an epic reworking of the farm novel, grapples, in gruelling, sado-masochistic detail, with the relationship between Milla, a land-owning matriarch, and her maid/carer/victim/dominatrix, Agaat Lourier, the badly neglected Coloured girl she appropriated and renamed as a child.

Similarly Sadean is performance artist Steven Cohen’s video piece, *Maid in South Africa* (2005), which features the artist’s childhood nanny, Nomsa Dhlamini, (84 years old at the time) stripping down and dressing up in tacky lingerie to perform domestic duties in Cohen’s childhood house – most hauntingly, cleaning the toilet. In this piece Cohen reflects on the demeaning aspects of domestic labour. “This work has a bitter taste,” said Cohen in an article by arts writer Robyn Sassen. “We are not just voyeurs but protagonists.” (Sassen 25)

Cohen’s insistence on an acknowledgement of complicity in apartheid recalls the questioning of the ethics of representation of the ‘Other’ that came to the fore with the Grey Areas debate, which emerged in South African visual art circles around 1999 with the publication of *Grey Areas: Representation, Identity and Politics in Contemporary South African Art* (Atkinson and Breitz).

Whereas it would take an act of ethical gymnastics for a white South African artist to approach the representation of black domestic labour free of the constraining spectre of complicity, Sibande’s biography (like that of artist Senzeni Marasela, who has also stepped into the shoes/uniform of her forebears to take on the persona of a domestic worker in her work), places her in a unique position of radical freedom in relation to her subject matter.

“Both my great grandmother and my grandmother were maids, and my mother worked as a part-time maid every afternoon after school until she finished high school,” says Sibande, who recalls, as a little girl, visiting the house where her grandmother worked. “I’m still not sure whether that house really was so huge, but in my mind it was massive. There were toys everywhere and I remember eating a polony sandwich and it being so nice... It was like Neverneverland. I couldn’t believe that a place like that really existed.”

It was this otherworldly life of the imagination, the fantasy of a fully self-

directed autonomous individual that gave rise to the Sophie persona. In a series of five installations featured in the exhibition *Long Live the Dead Queen*⁴⁵ (2009), Sibande pays direct homage to her great-grandmother (*Sophie-Elsie*), the first domestic worker in her family line; her grandmother (*Sophie-Merica*); and her mother (*Sophie-Velucia*), whose “dress is bigger because her dream is closer”. It was her mother who “broke the domestic worker cycle” by becoming a hair-stylist.

The last of this series of installations is *Sophie-Ntombikayise* – the artist as herself, the incarnation of a familial line of aspiration. The conjoined names in the titles of these works provide insight into the author/subject relations at their heart. By assuming the working class subject positions and dreamspace of her own kin, her own flesh and blood, Sibande cancels the “Self/Other” dichotomy; she is both “Self” and “Other”, author and subject. At the same time, by dressing this fused Self/Other persona in the Victorian attire of the bourgeois lady, she is also, most productively, both maid and madam.

“My grandmother didn’t have a choice, yet I have a choice – even the choice to dress up as Sophie,” says Sibande. “I have the choice to play around with the figure of Sophie. I like the idea of Sophie riding on a horse. The stunt is an impossible one, yet she doesn’t fall. She’s in control, like a lady” (Zvomuya).

Born in 1982, Sibande emerged into adulthood in the post-apartheid era and, having graduated from university, is part of a young generation of future-minded black artists who live and work out of studios in August House, on the eastern edge of twenty-first century metropolitan Johannesburg. From this vantage point of relative freedom and autonomy she pays homage to her forebears by giving free rein to their imagined desires, liberating their spirits from the ordained strictures of remembrance. The Sophie figure, both physically and metaphorically, bears the imprint of the artist’s body and personal history. Sibande’s self-conscious body casting is offset against a dark imperial legacy of body casting. It is through self-reflexive acts of embodiment, and through the fantastical, all-powerful echo-body projections of the Sophie persona,

⁴⁵ This regal aspect becomes more pronounced as the narrative subtext unfolds across Sibande’s oeuvre, with the Sophie character taking on increasingly florid queenly postures and personae, in works such as *Her Majesty, Queen Sophie* (2010).

that Sibande has cast or sculpted an alternate future for herself, while smashing stereotypes in relation to the submissive black female body.

Counter-archival freedoms

Thomas Hirschhorn describes the counter-monument or counter-archive as “a form of recollection of that which has been silenced and buried”, “standing against the monumental history of the state”. He argues that art can play an important role in reclaiming the world “according to the biases of individual commitments” (Merewether 16). In her role as archivist, Sibande retrieves a fragment from the Victorian past to actively reconfigure our thoughts/feelings in relation to a section of South African society that remains largely silenced and in the shadows of public discourse. “The counter-monument or counter-archive is... a form of recollection of that which has been silenced and buried,” says Hirschhorn (Merewether 16) in this case the persistence of unequal and abusive labour relations and master/servant social dynamics that underlie the state’s failure to transform the economy radically. Counter-monumental artworks of this nature have the capacity to stand against the monumental history of the state. Commanding, powerful, self-determining, Sibande’s defiantly syncretic Sophie figure stands against the separate identity politics of the apartheid state, but also the enduring legacy of inequality and unequal labour relations that persist under the current state. “Although there has been a political change in our country, there are some conditions that are still prevalent, that are direct results of apartheid,” says the artist. “Although one can argue the freedom of our country under the new democratic dispensation, many members of the South African society are not free in their minds, haunted by lingering self-doubt” (Sibande).

The years since 2012 have been the most protest filled period since the end of apartheid. Since the gunning down of 44 people during the Marikana miners’ that year, the country has been plagued by relentless, violent industrial and public sector strike action, infusing the public sphere with a restive mood of struggle. With the politics of labour hanging thick in the air, Sibande’s Sophie works take on a more solemn, urgent tenor. In this sense they have something in common with the work of the Soweto-born

artist Mohau Modisakeng whose photographs, performances and subtly wrought sculptural pieces grapple with notions of conflict, aggression and the potential for simmering resentments to escalate to physical violence. In his photographic triptych, *Qhatha* (2010), he enacts a game he recalls from playground scraps as a child growing up in Soweto, where a dual or will to fight would be declared by clapping together fistfuls of red earth. Yet the figure in the images is not a boy, but a grown man wearing a leopard-print vest and an industrial apron to denote his working class identity. The intent of the depicted persona to take the fight to the next level could be read as a metaphor for the spirit of discontent underlying the recent violent industrial action. Bringing working-class disgruntlement with the continuing inequity of the post-apartheid regime into the bourgeois terrain of the white-cube gallery, these works were a chilling portent of the Marikana massacre of August 2012. Although Sibande's works are more utopian in their energy, they do similarly address the historic and ongoing inequities of labour in the domestic sphere. In this sense, they are decidedly counter-archival.

However, the counter-archival status of an artwork is not a fixed position, but a set of power relations in constant flux that can shift substantially according to the institutional status and public life of the artwork or body of work, and the degree to which the work becomes valorised, canonised or co-opted into official discourse. In this regard, it is worthwhile turning to the circulation of this evolving body of work, to explore this argument in-situ. Looking at both the sculptural and flattened out two-dimensional renditions of the Sophie figure, it hard to ignore the divergent cultural capital set in motion by the display of these artworks across socially disparate localities. The large-scale public manifestations of Sibande's work have been sited in contexts as dramatically varied as downtown Johannesburg and bucolic Stellenbosch. In the case of downtown Johannesburg, a city that has undergone dramatic transformation since the end of apartheid, it is clear that the collapsed maid/madam binary imaginatively embodied in the form of Sophie has some basis in contextual reality. But the same cannot be said of Stellenbosch, a provincial town in the Western Cape that, at visual street level at least, remains a stark stronghold of white privilege. Wandering about the streets of the town, one could be forgiven for imagining that one had been

momentarily transported to the South of France. A giant image of Sophie plastered across a Cape Dutch building on Dorp Street plays to a completely different audience and field of reception to the Sophie works that were exhibited on the sides of nineteen buildings in central Johannesburg in 2010 for the period of the football World Cup. It could be argued that the work has valuable work to do in the Stellenbosch context that it plays a transformative role in actively shifting perceptions in relation to the gendered aspects of race and labour. On the other hand, there is always the danger of radical artworks being co-opted as symbolic surrogates for real social change. This is, after all, part of the cultural capital and hyper-inflated value of contemporary art – the useful circulatory power of the image in exhibiting a high level of social consciousness in the *haute* milieu that serves to ameliorate the conscience of the privileged classes in the absence of any real social action or radical change. The extent to which this co-optation of counter-archival power occurs depends on the ingenuity of the artist and his/her capacity to internalise the public status of his/her work and respond in ways that bring new conceptual challenges into the field of reception. And in this sense it is worthwhile tracing some of the varied personae the Sophie superhero has taken on as the artist has sought to respond to the constantly shifting tenors in the public reception of her work. These characters range from general leading an army towards victory to conductor waving her baton, intuiting a muted symphony. When Sophie was at risk of becoming too much of a symbolic darling of the middle class ladies who lunch, Sibande was quick to respond with a more militant incarnations of her alter ego. Works like *Lovers in Tango* (2011), *Everything is not lost* (2011) and *Living Memory* (2011) feature Sophie as an Umkhonto we Sizwe⁴⁶ cadre, wielding an invisible AK47 lest viewers become too seduced by the surfaces, forgetting the radical intentions invested in this immense body of work.

Sibande's work makes a crucial shift from melancholic understandings of a post-traumatic culture in "a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter-memory", which "harbours the possibility of an unexpected utopian dimension" (Merewether 14). By unlocking inherited binaries that haunt our understandings of difference in South

⁴⁶ The founding of Umkhonto we Sizwe (Zulu for "Spear of the Nation"), the armed wing of the African National Congress, in the wake of the Sharpeville Massacre represented the conviction that the ANC could no longer limit itself to nonviolent protest.

Africa, Sibande opens up fresh possibilities for how this nation might imagine its collective future.



Fig. 2. Mary Sibande, *Long Live the Dead Queen* (2010). Artworks presented on nineteen buildings in the Johannesburg CBD. Photo by Dean Hutton. Courtesy of Gallery MOMO.

University of Cape Town



Fig. 3. Nicholas Hlobo, *Kubomvu* (2009). Found table, found lamp, rubber inner tube, ribbon, red light bulb. Installation view, Monument Gallery, Grahamstown. Photo by Carla Liesching. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Chapter Two

Pump up the Parlour: Entanglement and desire in the work of Nicholas Hlobo

In creating his unsettlingly sexual sculptures, Nicholas Hlobo stitches and weaves together materials like coloured silk ribbons, black rubber, gauze and leather. For him, each of these materials has a cultural inheritance, and his works are layered with references to Xhosa tradition, as well as to his own gay identity, to race, ethnicity and the limits of language. Much has been written about Hlobo's roots in Xhosa culture in an attempt to articulate the complex nuances of his cultural and sexual identity as it informs his artworks.

Here I wish to pursue a more precarious tack, exploring the unexpected spatial connotations in his Standard Bank Young Artist Award exhibition, *Umtshotsho* (youth party) in which several gloopy black humanoid or alien forms are situated in a salon-style setting that conjures the restrained parlour-room antics and highly mannered mating games of nineteenth century novels. To what extent does this muted Victorian subtext that hovers beneath the surface of the work, point towards a more decadent and outré metropolitan aspect of his entangled cultural inheritance?

The question at the heart of my project concerns what this act of symbolic retrieval achieves or allows for in the public realm of the present. In what ways does Nicholas Hlobo's work disrupt and revivify rote thinking about racial and sexual difference to forge more productive forms of identity making for the future?

With regard to the title of the installation, *Umtshotsho*, or "youth party", the artist explains that the term refers to a traditional rite that marks the transitional phase young people go through as they start waking up to their sexuality, but points out that "the works are not trying to tell a story about an old way of partying for teenagers, but to look at the new conventions and draw similarities between different times" ("Nicholas Hlobo: Umtshotsho").

In an essay, entitled "Under the Covers, Out in the Open", in the catalogue

published in tandem with the *Umtshotsho* exhibition, Mark Gevisser explores the ways in which this installation embodies a complex entanglement of biographical resonances for Hlobo, stemming back to his vicarious childhood experiences of *umtshotsho* rituals in the village of Newtown outside Idutywa in the Eastern Cape. Hlobo never went through the *umtshotsho* ritual himself. “The *umtshotsho* he has created here, then is in part a fantasy, a willed reconstruction of a world Hlobo was denied; one in which he imagines he might have had the opportunity to channel his own illicit desires,” writes Gevisser (11), who goes on to narrate the tale of Hlobo’s tentative coming out, his “self-guided” (15) *umtshotsho* which unfolded within the steamy confines of Skyline, Johannesburg’s iconic gay bar at the Harrison Reef Hotel on the corner of Pretoria and Twist Streets in metropolitan Hillbrow.

Gevisser’s essay offers a compelling glimpse of the multiple worlds Hlobo inhabits: “Xhosa son, Eastern Cape homeboy, gay cosmopolitan, artworld rising star” (Gevisser 10). An exploration of the complexities of Hlobo’s cultural and sexual identity, it deepens our understanding of the work within a social realist frame. But in reading the work solely through this conceptual mesh, we risk silencing a range of other interpretive possibilities that hover outside of the terrain of documentary realism, which has dominated South African art and literature for decades. As discussed in my introduction, my reading here is an attempt to effect a temporal shift away from the dominant tenor of present-day South African cultural production and analysis, which has tended to be stifflingly contemporary (or located strictly post 1948), inscribing a hegemonic pattern of thought and cultural production that perpetually reinscribes the dethroning of one mode of nationalism and its replacement by a new (more heroic and ethically justifiable) form of nationalism. Irrevocably caught up with the politics of the present and the traumas of the recent past, much South African cultural production is inscribed within a constricting temporal narrative that enshrines the monumentality of 1994 as the date of our national becoming. I am attempting here to explore the degree to which texts and artworks that reference the nineteenth century undo the valorised pre- and post-1994 conception of history – and therefore of the present – as the only version via which the citizens of this country are capable of imagining ourselves. In stepping into the liminal zone of the past then, I seek to

retrieve and recover discarded material – wasted history, trashed narratives – and recycle them so that they might be valuable in the making of fresh conceptions of the future.

Entering the parlour

Retracting our focus for a moment from the strangely humanoid rubber forms in the installation, let us give attention to the furniture and to the unexpected spatial connotations of the installation. The figures are situated in a salon-style setting that conjures the restrained parlour-room antics and highly mannered mating games of nineteenth-century novels, introducing a vague sense of inherited European manners, restraint and propriety to the room. The elaborate brass lamp stand and the curvaceousness of the carved wood and upholstered couch place them in an era that pre-dates the clean geometric lines of Modernism, conjuring a sense of the Victorian parlour.

Keeping in mind the title of Hlobo's installation, *Umtshotsho* (youth party), it is worthwhile to note here that the Oxford English Dictionary derives the word *parlour* from the middle English word *parlur*, from the Old French *parleur* – “to speak” and that the earliest recorded use of the term in the thirteenth century denoted a space at a remove from daily work reserved for social interaction. In the nineteenth century the parlour was the domestic space in which young women received their suitors, who would sit a modest distance away from the young lady, conversing politely, perhaps in the presence of a chaperone.

“It was within the space of the Victorian parlour that the men, women and children of middle class Britain acted out the dramas of domestic life. These domestic settings were of critical importance in shaping Victorian experience, delimiting the horizons of character, and constituting the particular visual, spatial and sensory embodiments of human culture at a particular historical moment,” writes Thad Logan in *The Victorian Parlour: A Cultural Study*. “The parlour, whether in life or in art, is a site at which we can explore potentially explosive disturbances in psychic and social

fields and can trace attempts both to articulate and resolve such disturbances” (Logan 1).

Entering the parlour from a postcolonial perspective, I am not interested in the resolution of disturbances. Rather, I am drawn to the productive possibilities initiated by disruption and disturbance, and turn here to the popular literary phenomenon of the mash-up or post-modern parody as it relates to the nineteenth-century novel. The most notable example of this form is Seth Grahame-Smith’s *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), a fiercely irreverent pastiche that combines Jane Austen’s classic 1813 novel, *Pride and Prejudice* with elements of contemporary zombie fiction. This contemporary work of postmodern parody not only reconstructs a classic of the Western Canon, but enacts willed violence on its form. What is it about Jane Austen’s text that inspires this desire for such radical, violent reconfiguration? And what does it say about contemporary responses to hallmark, canonical notions of the nineteenth century? In both its cult popularity and its parodic intent, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* seems to provide a touchstone for my reading of Hlobo’s parlour scene, affirming the transfiguring power of this installation and its intent to disrupt the familiar, disturbing the normality of the received stereotype.

On closer inspection the red light and the lamp tassels suggest that this might not be the kind of parlour where a bit of stiff-upper-lip repartee between nervous suitors unfolds beneath the watchful eye of a dowager aunt stirring her tea or doing a little tapestry at the walnut occasional table in the corner. No, this is a much less cosy set up. The mood is unsettling; the darkness of the room, the ruby light and the effusions of black rubber evoking an off-limits salon-privé atmosphere that is strangely gothic, sinister, and bewitching. The found object sculpture featuring the lamp and occasional table is aptly named *Kubomvu* or “beware”.

To immerse us in the mood of this particular parlour a little more, I turn to an extract from Will Self’s novel, *Dorian*, in which he reprises Oscar Wilde’s, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, mapping Wilde’s late nineteenth-century moment onto Thatcher-era Britain and finding uncanny similarities between these two fin-de-siècle eras. Describing the Dorian’s lair, Self writes:

Those who did happen to be invited back for a nightcap, and to have their body toyed with as if it were an anatomical model, found a domicile with all the posed artificiality of a small but expensive hotel, or the stage-set for an antiquated play. The furniture was of mahogany and leather, the standard lamps were of brass. Mirrors were bevelled, invitations were propped on the mantelpiece. There was the occasional piece of chinoiserie. The prevailing colours were russets, maroons and browns. The floor coverings were Persian kelims *on top* of carpet, which, as in invariably the case, imparted an overstuffed atmosphere – and this despite the fact that the whole of the ground floor was one single room. Fustiness was the order of things and revival was the style, without there being any real indication of what it was that was to be revived. (156)

Hlobo's is not a faithful or realistic conjuring of the Victorian parlour. Unlike the parlour depicted by Self, this parlour is devoid of a proliferation of decorative trinkets and bric-a-brac.⁴⁷ In an act of dissociation, the *Umtshotsho* parlour is shorn of the accumulations of decorative detail that characteristically crowded the Victorian parlour. The hewn down elements of this parlour or imaginarium, seem to operate here in a similar way to the Victorian dress that dominates sculptural installations by Mary Sibande. Like the dress, the Victorian-era couch and lamp seem to function as a kind of “phenomic device”, an associative pattern that assists in recalling the Victorian era quite broadly – tapping into an attendant array of cultural associations lying inert in the mind. Recalling the nineteenth century in this way, instantiates odd flashes of uncertain hybridity.

Alien nation

While Hlobo's strange figures might simultaneously evoke tribal initiation ceremonies and adventures in urban clubland, their setting appears to be the haunting spectral presence of an inherited set of European mores. The excesses of Victorian taste seem to have been transferred to the very bodies of the *Izithunzi* or shadow creatures, who appear to be exploding beyond the seams of their own physical limits, bulging onto the

⁴⁷ The development of consumer capitalism led to the establishment of the middle class home as a privileged cultural space, while a confluence of particular historical conditions gave rise to middle classes eager to consume and display mass-produced goods. The parlour, in particular, was a site of collection and display comparable to the museum, department store and trade fair.

furniture and oozing into the space around them like some weird liquorice ectoplasm. The setting of the *Umtshotsho* (Youth Party) installation could be read as Victorian, but the characters who populate the scene seem to have emerged from no man's land – an otherworldly interzone somewhere between human and alien. They are, I argue, the embodiment of alienation. Meanwhile, the dark tactile surfaces of these black rubber creatures of the night are simultaneously bodily and post-industrial, infused with sado-masochistic stylistics that recall the back rooms of gay clubs in Hillbrow⁴⁸. Theatrical, camp and self-consciously menacing, these depictions of queer subjectivity challenge the politics of reconstituted hetero-normative “respectability”, defiantly speaking back to postcolonial narratives about homosexuality as “un-African”. “Homosexuality in Africa is bound up with a contradictory modernity that has been produced from both within and against imperialism, and this is what makes the question of gay rights in Africa so politically fraught,” writes Brenna M. Munro in *South Africa and the Dream of Love to Come*.

Europe's ‘civilising mission’ constituted itself through attempts to eradicate indigenous social formations that were deemed deviant, from polygamy to ‘female husbands’, all while unruly new sexual cultures were being forged in cities, industries, and institutions of a changing Africa. Ideas about what constitutes ‘sex’, as well as the formation of sexual identities and the production of sexual taboos and desires, were thus shaped by these histories, on both sides of the colonial divide. (Munro xiii)

⁴⁸ In keeping with the subjective, self-reflexive and public cultural strains of this project, this is not a detached, anthropological or theoretical observation. Rather, I am commenting on a place and time in history in which I was deeply personally entangled. When I first moved to Johannesburg in the early 1990s, I worked as a waitress at The Three Sisters in Hillbrow before starting my journalism career as a rookie reporter on what was then *The Weekly Mail* newspaper, when I took on an after-hours job at Rumours jazz club in Yeoville. Throughout the 1990s, I spent many high-density hours on the dance floors, balconies and rooftops of gay clubs and lofts in Hillbrow, Braamfontein and Doornfontein, immersed in the shapeshifting sexual and racial culture of Johannesburg at the peak of the city's transition from apartheid to the postapartheid. This chapter of my life is evidenced by an archive of articles I wrote as an arts-and-culture reporter on *The Weekly Mail* and, later, the *Mail & Guardian*, as well as by my appearance as a character in two books (one “fiction”, one non-fiction) which narrate the sexual and social politics of the time: *Ponte City* by Norman Ohler (David Philip, 2003) and *AidSafari: A memoir of my journey with Aids* by Adam Levin (Zebra Press, 2005), which was the joint winner of the Alan Paton Award for works of non-fiction in 2006.

Although postcolonial theory has accounted for the complex enmeshment of European and African values and the creation of transcultural forms with the contact zones of the public sphere, there is little to account for an equivalent entanglement in the realm of intimacy and sexuality. Rather than hankering after exhausted binary notions, which stem back to the nineteenth-century intensification of colonialism and reinstate cultural essentialisms in the present, Hlobo's figures articulate an embodied, physical sense of an entangled cultural inheritance. Bearing in mind the affirming theoretical valences around subjectivity and desire articulated by Pletcherová, Cvetkovich, Munro and Hoad, I argue that *Umtshotsho* affirms the radical social power inherent in the sensuousness of difference. His dark, lurking semi-human figures are so strikingly unlike any other figurative sculptures we've commonly encountered that they conjure new vocabularies of feeling. Rather than hankering after exhausted hand-me-down notions of cultural essentialism, the figures seem to connote an unknown and unfettered post-human future.



Fig. 4. Nicholas Hlobo, *Izithunzi* (2009). Rubber inner tube, ribbon, organza lace, found objects, steel, couch. Installation view, Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town. Photo by Mario Todeschini. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.



Fig. 5. Lesoko Seabe (above left) in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, directed by Mwenya Kabwe. December 2010. Arena Theatre, Cape Town. Photo by Ingrid Masondo. Courtesy of Ingrid Masondo.

Fig. 6. Nadia Caldeira (above right) in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, directed by Mwenya Kabwe. December 2010. Arena Theatre, Cape Town. Photo by Ingrid Masondo. Courtesy of Ingrid Masondo.

Chapter Three

The Persistence of Empire: Unveiling Transnational Legacies of Race in ‘Funnyhouse of a Negro’

*It is my dream to live in rooms with European antiques and my Queen Victoria,
photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano, oriental carpets, and to eat my
meals on a white glass table.*

Adrienne Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964)⁴⁹

One of the most dazzlingly catalytic aspects of Homi Bhabha’s introduction to the 1986 re-edition of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (first published in England in 1967) is his insistence on the radical poetics of Fanon’s voice. It is the embodied *poetics* of Fanon – the *affective* power of his existential meditations on transgressive racialised desire and its mad, sad dysfunctions that serves as the inspiration for this text. This essay turns around a play written in the mid-1960s at the height of the Black Power era and drenched in Fanonian conceits of psychic disturbance. In it, I explore the play’s reinterpretation in the postcolonial context of contemporary Cape Town and anatomise the effects of its geographic and temporal translocation. The contemporary production is an intensely postmodern affair employing a dizzying mash-up of genre-crossing interpretative strategies, from Victorian aesthetics to cartoon projections to the omniscient remixing presence of a god-like DJ in his elevated booth. I posit that these postmodern tactics of fracture and fractal serve as the ideal vehicle for the transmission of the playwright’s disjunctive Fanonian poetics of race into the present tense.

“Memories of Fanon tend to be mythical. He is either revered as the prophetic spirit of Third World Liberation or reviled as an exterminating angel, the inspiration to violence in the Black Power Movement,” writes Bhabha. “[But] Fanon’s work will not be possessed by one political moment or movement, nor can it be easily placed in a

⁴⁹ Kennedy 6

seamless narrative of liberationist history. Fanon refuses to be so completely claimed by events or eventualities. It is the sustaining irony of his work that this severe commitment to the political task at hand never restricted the restless, inquiring movement of his thought” (Bhabha vii).

Fanon’s full-blooded commitment to the violence of armed struggle over incremental decolonisation and his personal involvement in the Algerian war of independence as a member of the National Liberation Front have contributed to a broad and valid perception of him as the “theorist of revolution”. But Fanon’s writing reaches terrain much deeper and more enduring than those hot flints that served the immediate instrumentalising politics of war. His early work was massively influenced by phenomenology,⁵⁰ and almost half a century since the blood-letting era of independence struggle in Africa, it is the intricate psychic and sexual dimensions of his voice, wrought from his experiences on the inside of a psychiatric hospital at Blida-Joinville in Algeria during the war against the French, that provide us with diagnostic keys – for Fanon was after all a doctor, whose calling and core purpose was psychic healing. It is, I contend, in the Fanonian strains of the play that we may find keys to liberation from the haunting damage of racial encounter in the enduring postcolonial aftermath of colonial and anti-colonial violence. While others may have drawn on the more historicist and nationalist aspects of Fanon’s prose to political effect, it is his privileging of the psychic dimensions of the colonial condition, as brought home by Bhabha, that interests me here – and how old damage inflicted at one moment in history and lodged in the collective psyche might be exorcised by means of dramatic restaging at another moment and place in history.⁵¹ After all, “it is through image and fantasy – those orders that figure transgressively on the borders of history and unconscious – that Fanon most profoundly evokes the colonial condition” (Bhabha xiii).

⁵⁰ It is worth remembering that Jean-Paul Sartre wrote the preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

⁵¹ In addition to Fanon’s major influence on the work of revolutionary leaders, such as Steve Biko, Malcolm X and Ernesto “Che” Guevara, his ideas have also had a huge influence across the sphere of the arts, from the music of Rage Against the Machine, Gil Scott Heron and Linton Kwesi Johnson, to films by Isaac Julien, Denys Arcand and Claire Denis, to novels by Philip Roth, Salman Rushdie, Tom Wolfe and Fausto Reinaga. Fanon appears as a character in British playwright Caryl Churchill’s *The Hospital at the Time of the Revolution* (“Frantz Fanon”).

Staging racial subjectivity

The African American playwright Adrienne Kennedy's best-known work, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, was first professionally produced at New York's East End Theatre in 1964, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in America and the emergence of numerous anti-colonial movements worldwide. The play's direct engagement with the psychological hell of a woman undone by her denigrating racial conception of self was ignited by the socio-historical context in which it unfolded – a period of major campaigns of civil resistance aimed at outlawing racial discrimination against African Americans and restoring voting rights to the Southern states. Exuding the surrealistic and absurdist qualities of a nightmare, the play chronicles the last hours in the life of Sarah, a young African American woman who is tortured by race and identity issues, and struggling with self-hatred and alienation from the dominant culture. In her corrosive sense of inferiority, her obsessive desire to surround herself with Western objects and aesthetics, her choice of a white Jewish boyfriend and her shame in relation to her own origins, Sarah is an embodiment of “the state of absolute depersonalization”, as described by Fanon (Bhabha ix). We encounter her – like some phantasmagoric conjuring of Fanon's psychopathology of colonisation – in a state of acute schizophrenia brought on by a history of various physical and emotional abuses, which seem to have originated in the violence of colonisation and slavery. Four personae coexist in her mind: Patrice Lumumba, Jesus, the Duchess of Hapsburg and Queen Victoria. The assassinated Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba speaks for the African aspect of Sarah's mixed heritage and points to the second half of the twentieth century, which saw the construction of postcolonial, independent states in Africa and elsewhere. The other three figures are antagonistic toward this African father-figure, who is charged in several deranged monologues (in which Sarah takes on other personae) with the rape of Sarah's white-looking mother. Sarah is consumed by an irrational logic that all ensuing problems have emanated from that signal event – the moment of violent miscegenation in which she was conceived – and that Blackness has infected and tainted her entire existence. Her invocations of her rapacious father recall Fanon's reading of the colonial subject as being maddeningly

“tethered to treacherous stereotypes of primitivism and degeneracy” (Bhabha xii).

Almost 50 years later, the Zambian-born, Cape Town-based theatre maker Mwenya Kabwe has resuscitated the script with a series of translocations of the original play, starting with a production at the Arena Theatre on the University of Cape Town’s Hiddingh Campus in 2010. Perhaps the most chilling aspect of the play’s inscription into a post-apartheid South African context is the fact that, despite Kabwe’s fidelity to the original text, the play does not seem at all dated, or any less loaded with fraught political meaning than it might have been in 1960s America. The old wounds it picks at seem just as raw as they ever were. Although this is, in part, testimony to the power of Kennedy’s writing, it is also a deeply unnerving reminder that – although the restaging of the play took place almost half a century since the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, and almost 20 years after Nelson Mandela was freed from prison – the construct of race continued and continues to wield immense metonymic force over contemporary twenty-first-century social relations, fostering inequality, breeding in-group biases, justifying exclusion and oppression, and bolstering a sense of moral inferiority or superiority. The languages of race and ethnic identity – along with ideas about nationality, authenticity and cultural integrity – are characteristically modern phenomena that “crystallised with revolutionary transformations of the West at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries and involved novel typologies and modes of identification”, writes Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (2).

Any shift towards a postmodern condition should not, however, mean that the conspicuous power of these modern subjectivities and the movements they articulated has been left behind. If anything, their power has grown, and their ubiquity as a means to make political sense of the world is currently unparalleled by the languages of class and socialism by which they once appeared to have been surpassed (Gilroy 2).

Confirming Gilroy’s assertion that the power of racial subjectivity has grown rather than shrunk, the production leaves one with a crucifying sense that, despite the fact that race has no taxonomic significance among human beings, who all belong to the same hominid subspecies, *homo sapiens sapiens*, it is inescapably obdurate – wired into our psychology by means of socially driven narrative and aesthetic repetitions that are

as absurd as they are persistent.

“It was interesting to do a play that seemed old in terms of its issues. Its race politics and black hair politics feel old, in a way – in that 1960s Civil Rights-era atmosphere of black people making major statements about the states of their psyches, slave history, colonial history . . . But [in re-staging the play] it was quite depressing to realise how current these issues still are. The script still feels visionary,” says Kabwe. “Even with the distance we have, the play is disarming – partly because it is so confrontational. The language is aggressive and in-your-face. It is radical and it doesn’t let you go. It is short, cyclical and nightmarish. It holds you and there you are holding on until the lights come up at the end. The script does that all by itself” (Personal interview). She says the young racially mixed cast (Lesoko Seabe, Chuma Sopotela, Nadia Caldeira, Emile Minnie and Malefane Mosuhli) struggled to place the play conceptually, for, as old as they seem, its race politics still hold true – “particularly in Cape Town where so much of this kind of conversation doesn’t happen – publicly at least. A lot of the theatre here tends to be fairly tame in terms of talking about these kinds of issues” (Personal interview).

Patterns of movement, transformation, relocation

The question at the heart of this text concerns what these symbolic acts of recovery achieve or allow for in the public realm of the present. In what ways is Sibande actively grappling with this country’s troubled colonial inheritance to revivify rote thinking in relation to racial and sexual difference? Like Alice in Lewis Carroll’s imaginative wonderland⁵², who follows the White Rabbit down a rabbit hole and swallows the potion from a bottle labelled “drink me”, in this chapter I follow the symbolic cues around the figure of Queen Victoria, embedded in both the script and staging of the original play, and given prominence in Kabwe’s adaptation of it. By pursuing these cues and reading the play through a post-Victorian lens – a conceptual framework

⁵² A novel written in 1865 by English author Charles Lutwidge Dodgson under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* serves as an imaginative touchstone inspiring a curious, lateral, open-ended approach to my research, constantly reminding me that my approach to the Victorian world, and the worlds entangled in it, should never be reductively political (Carroll). That would entirely defeat my purpose.

which emerged within Anglo-American scholarship, but which, in my research, I am translocating to a postcolonial context. I hope to shift the optic away from a narrowly nationalistic and temporally immediate interpretation of the contemporary production.

Inspired by Gilroy's exploration of the contributions of black intellectuals to "Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment concerns" (ix), his anxieties regarding the "fatal junction of the concept of nationality with the concept of culture" (ix), and his assertion that "different nationalist paradigms for thinking about cultural history fail when confronted by the intercultural and transnational formation" he calls the Black Atlantic (2), my attention is drawn to the patterns of movement, transformation and relocation that have informed the lives of the play's author and director, the writing of the text and its incarnation as a production. Bearing in mind the author's and director's travels, it is also worth recalling that Fanon was born in colonial-era Martinique in 1925 and studied medicine in France, yet penned *Black Skin, White Masks* in response to his experience of the colonial condition in Algeria. His acute personal experience of the depersonalising effects of the racialised response transcended the immediate borders of a single nation and must surely have contributed to his ability to make embodied deductions about the workings of race as a transnational phenomenon. Whereas Gilroy's project is limited to exploring the "intercultural positionality" (6) of black intellectuals whose lives criss-crossed the Atlantic Ocean, by further triangulating the route it is my intention to explore the traffic of meaning between Europe, America and Africa as encoded in the symbolic language of the play. By tracking the restless discontinuities in the mind of Kennedy's culturally schizophrenic protagonist, I rise to Gilroy's challenge to further "break the dogmatic focus on discrete national dynamics which has characterised so much modern Euro-American cultural thought" (6). Echoing the fact that Kennedy wrote the play in Accra, Ghana, and Rome, much journeying has been encoded into the script. A sense of perpetual movement is established by constant references to comings and goings. Although symbolic references to Europe are inscribed by means of the characters of Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg, most of the remembered journeying of the characters takes place between America and Africa. Sarah tells us that her parents travelled to Africa after they were married, that she was conceived

there, but that her mother fell out of love with her father and with the place and had to return to New York because she was losing her mind. “She had long since begun to curse the place [Africa] and spoke of herself trapped in blackness,” says Sarah (Kennedy 15). Her father, too, returned to New York and “lived in Harlem, where no white doves flew” (Kennedy 15). In this line, Harlem – the legendary African American neighbourhood of New York – stands in for the idea of blackness, while associations of the white dove with peace and freedom are negated by the bird’s absence. The language of the play is bursting with these kinds of metaphorically loaded repetitions of the racial binary.

At one stage, the landlady informs the audience that “ever since her father hung himself in a Harlem hotel when Patrice Lumumba was murdered she hides herself in her room” (Kennedy 8). The compression of this line effects a kind of spatial collapse, as the reality of Lumumba’s assassination is brought home to a hotel room in New York. The actual geographic distance between the Congo and Harlem is subsumed by the cultural proximity and entanglement of the two places within her father’s internalisation of the politics of blackness. Ever present within the politics of black identity, these troubled transatlantic circuits of migrancy date back to the forced migrations of the slave trade. But far from being distant history, they are inscribed by Kennedy in distinctly twentieth-century terms by the references to Sarah’s parents journeying between America and Africa, and by repeated references to Patrice Lumumba. In many ways the play’s transatlantic conversations also echo Kabwe’s nomadic personal history and her attempts to come to terms with her own racial identity within the constantly shifting geo-politics of the twenty-first century.

Born in Zambia in 1976, Kabwe went to boarding school in England when she was ten. “From very early on I had to grapple with living in these two very different cultural spaces, with strong blood family ties in one place, while forming a new ‘boarding-school family’ in Dorset, where there is nothing but sheep, trees, fields rolling greenery for miles. I went straight from a developing African city to the middle of the English countryside, which made my head spin a bit,” she says (Kabwe, Personal interview). In the early 1990s her family moved to New York, and she registered for her undergraduate degree (in psychology, African studies and theatre) at Northeastern

University in Boston. “I went from the middle of the English countryside to what felt like the biggest city in the world,” she says (Kabwe, Personal interview). After completing her undergraduate degree, she worked in America for eight years before returning to Africa in 2004. “Being in the States started to feel awkward for me culturally. The displacement thing was playing out in unsettling ways. There is a major disconnect between African Americans and Africans that I couldn’t figure out at the time. I expected there to be a sense of familiarity between us in the big white United States, but no – it just didn’t gel” (Kabwe, Personal interview). Kabwe’s first-hand experience of cultural dislocation during her time in America echoes the displacement that haunts Sarah’s consciousness in the play, bespeaking a broader Fanonian sense of dislocation and alienation that persists in a world that will only ever really be decolonised in a fragmented, partial or broken kind of way.

Since relocating to South Africa and re-entering the world of theatre and performance, many of Kabwe’s projects have explored issues of mobility, cultural dislocation and racial subjectivity. In 2007 she performed a work called *Please Do Not Leave Your Baggage Unattended* at Johannesburg’s Drill Hall, an experimental art space situated in the thick of the moving sea of commuters who populate the frenetic hubs of mobility that are the taxi ranks of Joubert Park. In 2007, she participated in the Out the Box festival with a piece entitled *for nomads who have considered settling when the travel is enuf*, a title which plays on Ntozake Shange’s 1975 experimental play, *For Coloured Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, prefiguring her interest in the internalised racial dynamics of Kennedy’s play. That same year Kabwe was one of the winners of the Spier Contemporary art award for a collaborative performance work called *unyawo alunampumlo (The foot has no nose)*. For *Scratching the Surface Vol. 1*, at Cape Town’s Association for Visual Arts and Rabat’s L’Appartement 22 gallery in August 2008, she and Gabi Ngcobo co-curated an exhibition which featured visual and performance work “by artists working individually and in collaboration, between places on the planet that are becoming less and less disparate as we charge ahead to global imagining” (“Scratching the Surface Vol.1”). Perhaps not surprisingly, the “object of obsession” that generated the final production of her master’s thesis at UCT was none other than a suitcase. This production, called

Afrocartography: Traces of Places and All Points In Between, was staged at the Scalabrini Centre on Commercial Street in Cape Town across the road from the building that houses the Department of Home Affairs, which is a first point of call for many African immigrants. “The xenophobic riots [of May 2008] happened around that time and I became forcefully aware of different forms of migration, so I did research around migration and xenophobia as part of my exploration of my own placement in South Africa as a particular kind of migrant,” she says, adding that the production was inspired by her “interest in cartography, mapmaking, alternative mapping and my personal definition of the word ‘Afropolitan’” (Kabwe, Personal interview).

Kabwe’s commitment to making works that explore the mutability of identity in circumstances of migrancy has everything to do with her embracing the global reach of Kennedy’s script and the fact that it was written by an African American playwright in three different cities outside America. Against this backdrop, I contend that reading the play through the web of empire enables a more productively transnational understanding of what both the writer and the director are attempting to say about obdurate issues of race and identity as they play out through the geographic shards and aftermaths of colonialism. Instead of reading race through a purely African American lens or a purely post-apartheid South African lens, my choice is to follow the signals offered up to us by the geographically disparate makers of the production so as to effect a reading of the play’s conjuring of race not only as the dramatisation of an isolated incident of psychological hell, but as a deeply entrenched transnational phenomenon with roots that stem back to the broad global reach of empire.

“Long live the dead queen”

Queen Victoria is not only central to the cyclical plot of Kennedy’s play; her presence is also made physically manifest in the form of a statue near the bed, among Sarah’s photographs and books – as described in the author’s note at the beginning of the text. In Kabwe’s adaptation, this fairly unimposing statue, or bust, is forsaken for an overblown image of Queen Victoria, conjured by the striking regalia of her outsize garments, hovering spectre-like over the stage on which the action unfolds. Queen

Victoria's larger-than-life regalia are installed in the corner of the stage, so the echo of her imperial presence is never quite absent from the unfolding narrative. Everything that transpires, the entire spectacle, seems to be presided over by her magisterial presence, but not by her gaze for, like the French aristocrats who suffered death by guillotine during the French Revolution, she is headless. She is disembodied too. The only vestige of her being is in her outward attire or regal garb, yet even that is enough to dominate the entire stage, overlooking it and transforming the atmosphere of the room with a muted haunting of empire.

"The Victoria figure has a bizarre prominence in the play," says Kabwe. "In terms of visual references, I was working very strongly with Yinka Shonibare and Mary Sibande. Those were my two driving aesthetic impulses" (Kabwe, Personal interview) The headlessness of the Victoria figure in her adaptation of the play was inspired by the installations of Anglo-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, whose life-sized sculptural figures are dressed in Victorian costumes crafted from wax-print fabrics that appear African, but in a riff on the invisible economic inequity of global trade circuits are, in fact, inspired by Indonesian batik design, and produced in Manchester, and Helmond in the Netherlands. Modelled on revered European oil paintings, by artists like Thomas Gainsborough, the English portrait and landscape painter, the scenes depict the follies and pleasures of aristocratic life, but in a subversive nod to the French Revolution, Shonibare's dressed-up dummies are disconcertingly headless. His work also served as inspiration for the creation of a sculptural alter ego, called Sophie, by Johannesburg-based artist Mary Sibande. Sophie is a larger-than-life postcolonial superhero who appears as the protagonist in an unfolding series of sculptural installations wearing a florid Victorian dress that is also a maid's uniform. *Long Live the Dead Queen* [one of Sophie's earlier manifestations] is one of my favourite works ever, so the costuming of the Victoria statue in particular was very much inspired by that imagery," says Kabwe. "Mary's images articulate something that is so recognisable we know it to exist in our heads: the image of the black-maid figure in a Victorian design dress . . . For some reason it's like two magnet pieces that draw together, and, as much as they freak you out, they fit in a tragic, absurd way. They don't pull apart where they almost should. It should be: 'Oh my god, that could never be' that's awful.

How could you? How could you?” But instead, you think: ‘Yes, that’s the tension’. There is a triumphant power in her [Sibande’s] work – a sense of productive energy” (Kabwe, Personal interview).

The productive energy of Sibande’s work and the contemporary power of the imploded maid-madam binary is brought home by a television news bulletin⁵³ which features a report about the (subsequently suspended) African National Congress Youth League President, Julius Malema, apologising to President Jacob Zuma’s rape accuser for his comments in public that she enjoyed the experience. Malema says he extends this apology to all the women of South Africa, who deserve full respect, but then, in his signature inflammatory style, adds that the only woman he excludes from this apology is Lindiwe Mazibuko, national spokesperson for the Democratic Alliance (DA). No, he says, on national television, he does not retract his statement about Mazibuko. Instead, he reiterates his view that Mazibuko is the “tea girl” of the DA leader and Western Cape Premier, Helen Zille. Mazibuko has no political voice of her own, he says. Zille is the imperious madam and Mazibuko is the voiceless maid at her service. If Mazibuko utters a word of her own thinking, he says, she will be kicked out by “the Madam”. In speaking these words, Malema, a master of popular incitement, is drawing on the same source of historical wounding that Sibande draws on in her Sophie installations, but to an entirely different end. Both the artist and the politician have their attendant publics. The artists deride the politicians; the politicians attempt to belittle and trivialise the voices of artists. It is a timeworn tradition, but it tends to take on a scarier tenor at tinderbox moments in history, when governments turn paranoid and seek to control freedom of expression.

As wildly absurd as Kennedy’s play aspires to be, the dominant presence of the persona of Queen Victoria is no empty folly in a play that examines the enduring legacy of race. The ideology of race – which conceives of races as natural, primordial, enduring, immutable and distinct – emerged between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries with a merging of folk beliefs and scientific claims about difference, and was central to establishing political relations between Europeans and people from different parts of the world during the age of European imperialism and colonisation that was at

⁵³ 7 p.m. eTV news bulletin, Thursday, 23 June 2011.

its apogee during the reign of Queen Victoria. The Victorian era was a period during which race was reified. “The eighteenth-century debates surrounding the abolition of slavery, which continued to hold force at the beginning of the Victorian period, combined with an era of aggressive imperialism, in which Western Europeans had increasing contact with the appearances, manners and customs of non-European peoples,” writes Shearer West in the introduction to *The Victorians and Race*. “These new relationships engendered changing and ambivalent attitudes, which were fed by the advent of modern science, the growth of print capitalism and the spread of literacy. Race, and all its concomitants, was no longer a barely conceived prejudice; it became the subject of both academic discourse and popular journalism” (West 2).

As the play begins, the voluminous empty dress infuses the implied presence of Queen Victoria with a strange floating omniscience, which recalls the spatial politics of the panopticon of Victorian-era prisons and workhouses. Designed by the English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in 1785, the panopticon structure gave architectural expression to “a political outlook based on the idea that central control depends on keeping an eye on dissident or recalcitrant elements in a state” (Wilson 38). Observation or surveillance has everything to do with power and control, and, in this production, the highest vantage point in the room – towering above even the audience itself – belongs to Queen Victoria. Yet, in keeping with the absurdity of the script, her head and body are strangely absent, so this is power of a disembodied, decentralised kind. This mode of power, which operates through citizens via capillary networks of ideological belief, instantiated via the media and other institutions of state and enforced via surveillance rather than being imposed on us visibly and flagrantly from above (as it was in the days of town square punishments by the ordained agents of the king), is anatomised by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) (Foucault). It is a kind of power that is enacted remotely – in absentia, much like the hovering imperial legacy of Queen Victoria in post-independence Africa.

The scene opens with a young woman dressed in a white nightgown walking across the stage in a trance, mumbling some-thing inaudible to herself. This is Sarah or “Negro Sarah”, as she is archly named in Kennedy’s unflinchingly self-flagellating script. Unsurprisingly, Sarah’s Victoria persona is the first character to speak. “It is my

father,” she says, in response to a knocking sound. “He is arriving again for the night. He comes through the jungle to find me. He never tires of his journey” (Kennedy 3). This early invocation of “the jungle” instantly establishes the violently oxymoronic terms of the play, introducing an intensely parodic version of Africa in distinctly exoticised Conradian terms⁵⁴, set in direct opposition to the haughty, deranged Victorian persona of the speaker. The tortured European African binary is introduced by means of Sarah’s very first utterance. And, later in the play, she refers to her landlady as “Mrs Conrad”. It seems to be no coincidence that the woman who owns and controls the space inhabited by Sarah is named Mrs “Conrad”. The presence of the Polish-born English novelist is invoked in spatial terms, giving us an uncanny sense that his ideas of empire and colony, his precise linguistic command of atmosphere, hold sway over the property of Sarah’s mind or the territory she temporarily inhabits, not as an owner, but as a lessee, a person in transit without a fixed address of her own.

Africa is represented either as a dark jungle of a place or in the Edenic terms of the mythologised African American return to the motherland. In the language of Sarah’s black father and his mother (Sarah’s patrilineal grandmother), Africa is romanticised as a “Genesis in the midst of golden savannahs, nim and white frankopenny trees and white stallions roaming under a blue sky” (Kennedy 15). But nobody who goes there seems to stay there. Sarah tells us that although her parents travelled to Africa after they were married, and that she was conceived (by rape) in Africa, both her mother and her father returned to America, unable to withstand the torture of their own minds while in Africa. In Sarah’s first monologue she tells us that she lives in:

a small room on the top floor of a brownstone in the West Nineties in New York, a room filled with my dark old volumes, a narrow bed and on the wall old photographs of castles and monarchs of England. It is also Victoria’s chamber. Queen Victoria Regina’s. Partly because it is consumed by a gigantic plaster statue of Queen Victoria, who is my idol, and partly for other reasons; three steps that I contrived out of boards lead to the statue which I have placed opposite the door as I enter the room. It is a sitting figure, a replica of one in

⁵⁴ In 1975 the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe published an essay, ‘An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness’, which has become a landmark of postcolonial discourse, provoking ongoing debate in most subsequent criticism of Conrad (Achebe).

London, and a thing of astonishing whiteness . . . Raymond [Sarah's white Jewish artist boyfriend] says it's a thing of terror, possessing the quality of nightmares, suggesting large and probable deaths. And of course he is right. When I am the Duchess of Hapsburg I sit opposite Victoria in my headpiece and we talk . . . Victoria always wants me to tell of her whiteness. She wants me to tell her of a royal world where everything and everyone is white and there are no unfortunate black ones, for as we of royal blood know, black is evil and has been from the beginning . . . It is my dream to live in rooms with European antiques and my Queen Victoria, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano, oriental carpets, and to eat my meals on a white glass table. I will visit my friend's apartments, which will contain books, photographs of Roman ruins, pianos and oriental carpets. My friends will be white. (Kennedy 6)

Undeterred by Raymond's remonstrations that the Victoria totem is "a thing of terror", "suggesting large and probable deaths" (Kennedy 5), Sarah is blinded to the violence associated with Victoria's reign, seduced, instead, by the realm of beauty invoked by the aesthetic and the literary. It is no coincidence that Sarah describes herself as "an English major" – a student who has occasional work in libraries. "But mostly I spend my vile days preoccupied with the placement and geometric position of words on paper. I write poetry filling white page after white page with imitations of Edith Sitwell," she says, drawing the audience's attention to the capacity of the canon of English literature to produce and reproduce a mindset of racial inferiority (Kennedy 6). Similarly, the appearance of the Victorian parlour with its standard repertoire of objects – books, photographs and oriental carpets – seems to have a far greater sway over Sarah's imagination than any intimation of political violence associated with the iconic queen. The ideological import of and emotional attachment to things are crucial to an understanding of how racism was reified during the Victorian era, argues West. "The proliferation of race theories in the nineteenth century was in no small part fuelled by both visual and verbal texts which served to plant certain ideas of race into the minds of their audiences," he writes. "Given that race was seen to be encoded in such specificities as skin colour, gesture and costume, the contribution of painting and sculpture and graphic art to the formation of race theories should not be underestimated... Literature, as well as art, manufactured imaginary spaces from fragments which could be read as 'real' to Victorian audiences; the hints and

associations of these shards of fictional experience enhanced the complexity of Victorian racial self-consciousness” (West 5 6).

Although West is referring to the effects of the reception of art and literature by Victorian audiences, judging by the contemporary pop-cultural allure of Victorian aesthetics, his argument seems to be an enduring one. In the context of the play itself, the centrality of the Victoria figure and of the spatial and aesthetic allure of the Victorian era is firmly established in the opening monologue in which Sarah reveals herself to be somehow entranced or in thrall not just to the idea of Queen Victoria, but to the attendant notion of whiteness and racial purity encoded in her collection of fetish objects. The sheer plain of whiteness conjured by the image of the “white glass table” is a recurring motif in the play. Kennedy’s text is scattered with references to blinding, unsullied whiteness, which is set in direct parodic opposition to the filth and depravity of blackness – exacerbating, rather than discreetly downplaying, the blinding chiaroscuro of the racial binary.

The impossibility of purity

In *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity and Victorian Culture* (1998), Jennifer DeVere Brody uses black feminist theory and African American studies to read Victorian culture, looking at the construction of “Englishness” as white, masculine and pure and “Americanness” as black, feminine and impure. Her readings of Victorian novels, plays, paintings and science fiction reveal the impossibility of purity and the inevitability of hybridity in representations of ethnicity, sexuality, gender and race.⁵⁵ She shows that Victorian culture was in fact inextricably bound to various forms and figures of blackness; so, while “Negro Sarah” reveres the notion of whiteness, the play itself explores the excruciating personal reality of living with an entangled inheritance when the dominant culture denies the reality of hybridity.

Populating the same plot and the same stage with the temporally and geographically disparate figures of Queen Victoria and Patrice Lumumba establishes the link between the European colonial past and the American imperial present. The

⁵⁵ Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina’s *Black Victorians, Black Victoriana* (2003) is another attempt to correct the historical record and fill the gap in our understanding of the lives of blacks in Victorian England. Using a transatlantic lens, the contributors restore black Victorians to the British national picture.

critical distinction between these two forms of dominion over foreign territories is outlined by Enseng Ho in his essay, “Empire through Diasporic Eyes: A View from the Other Boat”, in which he writes that “colonialism refers to foreign presence in, possession of, and domination over bounded, local places” whereas “imperialism refers to foreign domination, without the necessity of presence or possession, over expansive, transnational spaces and many places” (211). “Within the purview of US power, then, the appropriate term for this frame is not postcolonialism, but ongoing imperialism” (Ho 211).

Describing the particular forms of sociality that inform the movement of peoples across the planet, Ho traces two kinds of diaspora – the Jewish model and the British model. The Jewish model bears no relevance to my argument here, but Ho’s observations in relation to the British diaspora have great bearing on this essay and on my research more broadly, shedding some light on the enduring power and sometimes maddening seductiveness of nineteenth-century British aesthetics and mores in colonial and postcolonial contexts. He takes as his starting point recent works by British historians, such as David Armitage (2000), who argues that “after the union of the Scottish and English crowns in 1707 a coherent notion of Britishness grew up across the Atlantic, and was expressed most strongly first away from the homeland. Abroad, the notion of Britishness was understood in terms of belonging to an empire, a British empire . . . If we think of the empire as a diaspora, then Scots, Irish and Englishmen came to think of themselves as commonly British as they became mobile. They moved, and only then became homogeneous” (Ho 214).

There is something very alluring in this idea of a cosy, common culture of Britishness and the sense of belonging it seems to have proffered to global travellers cut loose from the apron strings of the motherland. It is not hard to imagine how effective this Argyle blanket of British belonging – this gravy and Yorkshire pudding of unification – was in bringing together the disparate groups and kingdoms of the homeland. How seductive it must have seemed to colonial subjects when they first encountered British fashion, food, architecture and literature – all the popular forms of culture imported to their lands and touted as part of the general intoxicating brew of modernity that flourished amidst the fledgling colonial metropolises. Britishness was

paraded as the high ideal of moral accomplishment and fashionable attractiveness – a cultural state to aspire to. The effectiveness of this social spell, the enduring transnational allure of Britishness, is powerfully conveyed in Kennedy’s play by means of Sarah’s desperate desire to align herself with the purity and composure of Queen Victoria, while violently disavowing her African ancestry. But the play is, at once, an acid-tongued satire and a dark tragedy that exposes the excruciating psychological damage wrought on the lives of those who have been lured to the portals of the great transnational country club of Britishness, but then unceremoniously shut out – denied access to the seamless mannered dance of mutual beneficence that is the privileged preserve of members only.

Catharsis

The outcome of the play – what the protagonist’s experiences have to tell us about race – is in no way redemptive. Rather, it paints an extremely dark picture of how violently oppressive it can be to think of oneself in racial terms. The liberating energy of the play comes through its wildly irreverent and absurdist structure – its determination to say out loud the things we secretly think, to air the perversities and constrictions of prejudice and the crass assumptions on which the bleak fiction of race was scientifically crafted. Ghoulish, dark and gothic, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* draws on the tactics of absurdist theatre, from its vaudevillian comedy, to its mixture of horrific and tragic images, its depiction of a character caught in a hopeless situation and forced to perform repetitive or meaningless actions, its cyclical plot and its parodic tone and powerful dismissal of realism. The *New York Times* critic Clive Barnes once noted that “While almost every black playwright in the country is fundamentally concerned with realism . . . Miss Kennedy is weaving some kind of dramatic fabric of poetry” (Barnes 39). Kabwe draws on the power of the absurd to highlight the themes of madness and irrationality in her interpretation of Kennedy’s play in which repetition and *déjà vu* figure strongly, conjuring a sense of history repeating itself, words playing themselves out again and again with only the mildest of variations. Sometimes the speaker changes gender or the interlocutor is different, but the same phrases are repeated over

and over again, externalising the protagonist's maddening interior monologue, but also conveying a sense of history itself being stuck in a vice grip of repetitive perturbed injury and malfunction. And, certainly, there is a zombie aspect to the Victorian political inheritance in Africa; in one sense it is a long-gone, mortified chapter of distant history, but in another its gangrenous body continues to live, haunting the carved-up landscape, spasmodically influencing the political and social realities of the day.

No political solution is proffered here. The conceptual power of the work is in the performance of the play itself – the alchemy of release that takes place within the four walls of the theatre and the wildly irreverent airing of old wounds in a public present. This is the power of performance art in South Africa today and, arguably, this is why the form has seen such marked growth and (creative and economic) investment in recent years (although, it must be said, the key to its infectious energy is the fact that most public interventions take place beyond the constrictive four walls and bourgeois conventions of reception that continue to dominate mainstream South African theatre culture). Performance art is not a national political solution. It does not provide an alternative to rallies or demonstrations, but it does offer a release valve in a country that remains as politically and socially fraught as it, perhaps, ever was. “The state of emergency is always a state of emergence,” writes Homi Bhabha, riffing on Walter Benjamin's assertion that ‘the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule’ (Bhabha x). The dark humour of the play's absurdist energy is wildly cathartic, lifting the lid on the unspoken, warped logic of racial thinking that persists in an era in which that kind of thinking is *supposed* to be a thing of the past. According to the statute books and the Constitution, it *is* a thing of the past. It has no place in the official record, which has been cleaned up and reconciled. The stain of racial thinking has been bleached out of the hallowed texts of governance and social contract, but it continues to seep darkly through the minds and memories of twenty-first-century citizens, who still, mostly, imagine themselves in restrictive national and racially essentialist terms. Rising imaginatively to the agonies of this spectral legacy presents audiences with an opportunity for conceptual liberation, a chance to imagine ourselves as part of the more expansive flows and hybrid encounters of transnational history.

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Fig. 7. Kathryn Smith, *Jack in Johannesburg (and elsewhere)* (2003). Johannesburg Art Gallery. Performance still. Photo by Andrew Meintjies. Courtesy Kathryn Smith.



Fig. 8. Kathryn Smith, *Jack in Johannesburg (and elsewhere)* (2003-2004). DVD. Length: 14 min 24 secs. Courtesy Kathryn Smith.

Chapter Four

Victorian post-mortem: Forensic conjurings in Kathryn Smith's *Jack in Johannesburg*

An exaggerated costume drama of a moment out of step, out of time. But still now. The space a vaulting mausoleum in a museum mise en abyme. The staged scene and the action... slow comings and goings (talking of Michelangelo?), the supine violence on the body frozen in the tepid atmospherics of wrapped pictures and the fuzzy ferocity of lions and lambs... And then the sense of a somnambulists' ball, a social séance (à la Paul Delvaux). The traceable but tenacious coincidence of London's sicker East End, and the east end of this city centre. The railway rift valley outside where people sit, shit, sun...

Colin Richards, *Euphemism* (2004)⁵⁶

In 2003, artist Kathryn Smith enacted a public, site-responsive performance called *Jack in Johannesburg* in a darkened room of the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) with its grand colonial architecture dating back to 1910, when the city was still a dusty mining town⁵⁷ with, not so much delusions, as bold Modernist projections of grandeur. The performance was part of an ongoing cycle of work, arising out of the artist's childhood obsession with Jack the Ripper, the unidentified serial killer who preyed on female prostitutes in the working class slums surrounding Whitechapel in the seamy, cosmopolitan East End of Victorian London in 1888, and possibly, further afield. "The Ripper himself allegedly claimed to have 'given birth to the twentieth century'; in other words, modernity as we know it," writes Smith in an artist's

⁵⁶ Richards 17

⁵⁷ "In February 1889, John X. Merriman described the place as a 'sea of mud and slush', a characteristic it retained for most of the 1890s. The roads were barely maintained, there were hardly any trees and even fewer cultivated public parks," writes Jillian Carman in *Uplifting the Colonial Philistine*, her searching study of the making of the Johannesburg Art Gallery. "Although there were a number of modest public spaces scattered through the town, including Joubert Park [where the JAG is situated], which was laid out in 1892, open spaces were generally viewed by the government as potential building sites rather than as communal leisure areas and were often encroached upon by private buildings" (Carman 39).

notebook that would lead to the production of this work. “The Ripper is also the model serial or ‘signature’ killer, driven by intense visual fantasies, desire and process” (Richards 8). Implicit in Smith’s notes is an observation concerning not just the depravity of the Ripper, but the Ripper as emblematic of the toxic foundations and perversity of modernity itself. This observation cannot be divorced from the situated, site specificity of the performance, which took place in the context of a Modernist institution in cultural crisis, struggling to adapt and acclimatise to the postmodern, postcolonial conditions in which it found itself at the outset of the twenty-first century. Perhaps even more compelling though is the cultural auto-critique vested in the idea of the toxic Modernity about which she writes. As a white artist consciously, and quite intimately (as I will go to explain) engaging with the avant-garde edges of her own ancestral culture, she constructs a work that stages, in the most camp and burlesque terms possible, the depravity of her own European origins – this at a moment in Johannesburg’s history when artists, architects, urban thinkers and cultural activists are actively interrogating the failures of the structures and institutions of early twentieth-century colonial Modernism to accommodate or address adequately the urban realities of an exploding twenty-first century African metropolis.

The performance played directly into these self-reflexive anxieties about urban public space. Lying in front of Walter Sickert’s painting, *The Pork Pie Hat*, and surrounded by works by members of the British School covered in ghostly cloths, Smith’s arm was tattooed to a “mock-macabre muzak” (Richards 16) accompaniment by Edith Klug and Johnny Fourie. An aphorism from an FBI investigator and serial murder specialist – “Never look for unicorns until you run out of ponies” – was inked into the artist’s upper left arm using typography culled from a letter bound up in the Ripper murders⁵⁸. It is worth noting here, that the wording of Smith’s tattoo captures something of the definitive blend of social documentary realism (implied by the word “ponies”) and fantastical utopian projection (implied by the word “unicorns”), which, I argue, is common to all five selected bodies of work under discussion in this thesis.

⁵⁸ Smith sourced the lettering of the tattoo from a Ripper letter written with a paintbrush and pigment. At the “Art of Murder” conference held at Tate Britain in 2003, this letter was authenticated as having been written by Sickert, testifying to the artist’s involvement or self-inscribed entanglement in the hyper-mediation of the Ripper crimes.

The surreal, séance-like atmosphere of the occasion was enhanced by the burlesque Victorian costumery of the musicians, videographers, photographer, the tattooist, Milo, and, of course, the artist herself, who swooned about all dreamy and damsel-like in a spirit of baroque melodrama on white linen sheets, which became stained with her own blood. The drawing of real human blood in the performance was part of its direct visceral impact; Smith's blood rendering the cultural memory of the Ripper murders in impoverished nineteenth-century Whitechapel sensually immediate a chilling reminder of crimes that were taking place in the Joubert Park precinct and beyond in the present tense. The fact that the Ripper's victims were female prostitutes who lived and worked in the London slums, whose throats were cut prior to them being abdominally mutilated, drew unnerving attention to the kinds of crimes that were (and still are) being perpetuated against women and children in contemporary South Africa. Far from being a remote social memory, gender-based violence is a definitive feature of the post-apartheid South African social landscape, manifesting itself in a multitude of different forms – some brutal, some subtle – ranging from physical violence to sexual and psychological violence, domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse of women and children, “corrective rape” and murder on account of sexual orientation, forced pregnancy, trafficking of women for commercial sex work, and sexual harassment and intimidation at work. “Unbelievably so, after eighteen years of democracy, South African women are regularly confronted with systemic sexual harassment and violence,” write Azwifaneli Managa and Bertha Chiroro of the Africa Institute of South Africa. “The government somehow seems to have failed to enforce laws and policies intended to safeguard women's rights, and even the police often fail to provide adequate protection. Instead of women enjoying the fruits of democratic freedom, they are constantly living in fear of rape, harassment, discrimination and murder” (Managa and Chiroro). Despite the official national rhetoric of freedom and gender equality, the threat of gender violence is an everyday reality for South African women. The counter-cultural thrust of this artwork drew partly on this gross anomaly between national rhetoric and reality.

In its embodied enactment of the constructedness of her own female gender and desire, Smith's performance blurred the lines between reality, fiction and fantasy

in provocative ways that tied her sexual identity to her displaced, marginal cultural identity⁵⁹. Both were performed or acted out in a way that rendered them absurd, out of place, and at the same time, slightly rotten and twisted on the inside. In this chapter, I explore some of the ways in which that performance gave resolutely oblique public expression to the more shadowy aspects of Smith's own identity as a white female artist in twenty-first Johannesburg working through the psychic and cultural traces of her colonial-era origins.

Forensic reconstructions

As the Ripper murders were never solved, the legends surrounding them became a combination of genuine historical research, folklore, urban legend and pseudo-history. Fevered newspaper coverage bestowed sweeping and durable international notoriety on the Ripper, and the case has inspired multiple works of fiction. The enduring folkloric aspect that shrouds this series of brutal killings ties in with the observations made in my introduction concerning the pagan aspects of English working-class culture and my sense that the ritual power of the artworks under discussion in this thesis draws on an entangled inheritance of superstition, magic and belief. Key to the genesis of Smith's series was her discovery of the painter, Sickert's, alleged relationship to and documented obsession with the Ripper murders, coupled with the fact that a number of Sickert's paintings are housed in the public collections of several South African art galleries, a legacy of these institutions' colonial-era origins. So Sickert's story and his paintings become a strange kind of conceptual bridge linking

⁵⁹ In this regard the *Jack in Johannesburg* performance recalls the travelling exhibition *Dislocation/Relocation: Exploring Alienation and Identity in South Africa* (2007–2008) by Leora Farber and the fashion design duo, Strangelove, which included Farber's performance for the exhibition in which she wore Strangelove's Victorian/modern costumes. In the light of post-colonial and feminist theory, this exhibition drew together the stories of three generations of South African women struggling to negotiate their European heritage in an African landscape. One of these characters is based on Bertha Marks, a British Jew brought to South Africa from Victorian England to marry a colonial entrepreneur, Sammy Marks. She clung tenaciously to her Victorian lifestyle, refusing to compromise with adaptation, going so far as to import weekly batches of British roses and other flora for her "English country garden on the Highveld". Marks was also, notably, a friend of Florence Phillips, the Johannesburg Art Gallery's pioneer patroness.

the artist's self-reflexive cultural and aesthetic musings with the troubled colonial legacy of the city of Johannesburg and its main art museum.

Artistic practice and an equally fervent interest in forensic investigation⁶⁰, particularly the psychological aspects of criminal activity, have preoccupied Smith since her childhood. Her artistic practice owes much to the forensic investigator's ability to recreate compelling narratives from evidence that is often best described as debris. In a 2003 article about Smith's work, arts journalist Sean O' Toole cites the Los Angeles-based art critic Ralph Rugoff, who argues: "Forensic modes of art lead us to consider the residue of a surrounding historical field. It is an art of scattered and ambiguous clues, in which information seems to be straightforwardly presented but we are nevertheless denied the whole story" (O'Toole 2003). If the forensic aesthetic forms part of a significant shift in the history of the relationship between viewer and subject, Smith's work is illustrative of this shift, writes O'Toole. "Her method evidences an attempt to reveal how images, taken out of context, start to tell other more sinister stories." Working principally in photography and video, with excursions into performance, Smith's process and research-based working methods are based on methodical recreations (or reinventions/remixes) of events or situations, which are not presented as complete 'histories', but abstracted moments fraught with suggestive details. This recycling of trashed narratives/forms to forge a new object with a fresh conceptual proposition is a theme that runs throughout this thesis.

The artist took her conceptual cue for *Jack in Johannesburg* from an obscure text called *Sickert and the Ripper Crimes: The 1888 Ripper Murders and the Artist Walter Sickert* (Mandrake, 1990) by Jean Overton Fuller, in which claims are made linking British painter Walter Richard Sickert to the most hyper-mediated criminal case of the nineteenth century (Overton Fuller).⁶¹ This theory was resurrected in 2003 by popular

⁶⁰ From 2012-2013, she took a sabbatical from her position as senior lecturer in the Department of Visual Arts and head of the Fine Arts Studio Practice programme at the University of Stellenbosch to read for an MSc in Forensic Art at the University of Dundee in Scotland, the only Masters programme of its kind.

⁶¹ *Sickert and the Ripper Crimes* derives from the testimony of Florence Pash, a woman who had particular reason to fear for her life. Pash, a friend and colleague of Sickert and herself an artist, confided to the author's mother when in her late eighties, a story that she had kept even from those closest to her. She and Sickert had both known Mary Kelly, the last woman to be brutally murdered by the Ripper – and Sickert had warned her that, because she knew what Kelly knew, she could become, if she ever began to talk, the Ripper's next victim. Sickert told Pash that he was painting into his pictures clues to the murders

crime fiction writer Patricia Cornwell with the publication of her *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper, Case Closed* (Berkley, 2003) in which she pins the Ripper murders on Sickert, albeit with no reference to the original Overton Fuller text (Cornwall). “These texts are amusing, and informative in their way,” writes Smith, signaling her critical distance from the apparent facts of the story, which serve only as the basis for an aesthetic adventure governed by affect and strategic associative derangement.

The *Jack in Johannesburg* performance provided the conceptual seed for *Euphemism*, Smith’s Standard Bank Young Artist Award exhibition which toured the country from 2004 to 2005. *Euphemism* featured photo and video works, based on pseudo-forensic working methods that recreate or reinvent situations, and re-presenting them not as complete histories, but as abstracted or suggestive moments. Smith’s research for this project included walking tours of the Ripper crime scenes in London’s East End with criminologists and crime historians, a trip to Dieppe (France) where Sickert often painted, and the production of a video documenting accounts of the theft of a Sickert painting (Royal Hotel, Dieppe) from the South African National Gallery in 1998. But it is the 2003 performance and the two-channel projection piece arising from it (featured as part of *Euphemism*) that is the focus of my interest here.

Joubert Park/Whitechapel: Spatio-temporal echoes

In one sense, Smith’s 2003 performance was a flagrant flight of the imagination. But it was also a wilful public declaration of the kinds of risqué private fetishes and intellectual fancies that animate the artist’s inner world. *Jack in Johannesburg* was an open public performance that took place, not in the seclusion of a salon privé, but within the bounds of an established public institution – municipally funded and the largest gallery on the sub-continent. In this sense, the work insisted on a reckoning with private desires and concerns within a definitively public setting – more specifically it seemed to claim space in the chaotic heart of a radically transforming African metropolis to voice private anxieties in relation to a dark and twisted chapter

as he wished people to know the truth after his death. Using her artist’s eye, Overton Fuller pieces together the visual clues.

in European/English history; the Jack the Ripper murders that stalked the nightmares of Victorian England. Although perhaps not overtly or immediately apparent, in retrospect *Jack in Johannesburg* emerges across the ether of memory as a vivid incarnation of the decadence, perversion and psychic/psychotic disturbance that characterized European Modernism as the legacy of the late nineteenth century, an era replete with tuberculotic, nail-biting fin de siècle anxieties about the end of the world and the end of godliness as the Victorians knew it⁶². It is a performance drenched in all the Freudian neurosis, sexual confusion, decadence and intellectual feveredness of European modernity, which, like a virus, was imported into South African culture via colonialism and has insisted itself into the cellular life of the body politic. True to the subversive, Dada spirit of its avant-garde antecedents, the work delights in these surfaces and forms of twisted European excess. This is part of the unspoken threat and the dark political thrill encoded into the hovering visual life of a performance, which like the histories it resuscitates, happens only once, but endures in recorded artefact and memory.

Although critics at the time gave some attention to the gendered aspects of Smith's performance, drawing comparisons to the conceptual self-portraits of American photographer Cindy Sherman (more of this later), little has been written in response to the original ways in which the artist sought, by means of this performance, to interrogate some of the more esoteric aspects of her racial and cultural inheritance. In this chapter, I reveal how Smith's ancestral roots can be traced back to Victorian Whitechapel, arguing that the performance, as well as the social research that preceded and followed it, was a vector or medium that enabled her to make contact with previously unknown and distinctly *unsettled* aspects of her "settler" history.

"It [the performance] also functions as something of an oblique response to Johannesburg's reputation for violent crime, bringing the colonial past and the democratic present into a close and discomfiting relationship through the figure of the

⁶² For a rigorous account of the intellectual and spiritual anxieties underlying the Victorian zeitgeist, see A.N. Wilson's *God's Funeral: The Decline of Faith in Western Civilisation* (1999) in which he traces the growth of "a new imaginative order of unbelief" that supplanted organized religion, leaving devastating doubt in its wake. The inner landscapes of the Victorian psyche are also fictively conjured by A.S. Byatt in her novella, *Angels and Insects* (1994), which shows how science and spiritualism were both common manias, and how domestic decorum coexisted with brutality, secrecy and perversion.

British painter, Walter Sickert,” writes Smith, framing the work within unmistakably postcolonial terms and drawing attention to the fact that there was nothing accidental about the place and circumstances in which the performance unfolded (“Jack in Johannesburg (and elsewhere)”). The action took place within the stately colonial architecture of the Lutyens Room, named after the internationally renowned architect, Sir Edwin Lutyens, who was responsible for the design of the fifteen exhibition halls and sculpture gardens that constituted the original 1912 building⁶³. The fact that it took place in a darkened space on one of the lower floors of the gallery rather than in one of the large well-lit galleries that bound the building’s central courtyard is also not devoid of metaphorical cargo. The subterranean setting of the performance amplified the counter-archival and séance-like aspects of *Jack in Johannesburg*, and the ways in which the work gives credence to the less monumental scripts and unspoken histories that run beneath the official currents of South African public life. A work exploring the psychic traces of the most notorious serial murder case of nineteenth-century metropolitan London is enacted in the bowels of a colonial-era building in the seething ghetto heart of a crime-ridden twenty-first-century African city. A white female artist chooses to enact a work, which obscurely resuscitates a series of sex crimes that harks back to nineteenth-century London, in one of the most intensely populated migratory zones of the post-apartheid African metropolis plagued by incessant reports and analyses of ubiquitous violent crime. The context and spatial politics in which the performance unfolded are central to the work’s meaning. Its content gains depth taking into consideration the museum’s location in Joubert Park as a microcosm of Johannesburg, a city in radical post-apartheid transition. Despite the introduction of new amenities such as the greenhouse project (previously known as the Victorian Hothouse) on the northwest corner of the site, the big screen television to the east wing, and the Rea Vaya bus terminal at the outer eastern edge, policing and reinventing the area remain a massive challenge to Johannesburg’s municipal

⁶³ Sir Edwin Landseer Lutyens (1869–1944) was a British architect who is known for imaginatively adapting traditional architectural styles to the requirements of his time. Evidencing the ways in which the names of the big men of empire live on through the names of places, investing their legacy with a spatial command, it is worth noting that the “Lutyens Room” is also the name of one of the Royal Institute of Architects’ most popular conference rooms, and of a “private and intimate” dining room at Johannesburg’s palatial Westcliff Hotel.

government⁶⁴. It is worth noting here that Smith was a founding member of the Trinity Session, an organisation that subsequently played a leading role in foregrounding public art practice as a key strategy in the renovation and upgrading of the city. In 2003, when Smith's performance took place at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, the eastern flank of downtown of Johannesburg, where the park and gallery are situated, was something of an open laboratory for social transformation, with a wide range of interventions and experimental happenings spilling out into the park and taxi rank surrounding the gallery⁶⁵. Underpinning the multiplicity of critical arts interventions that engaged with the shifting cultures intersecting in the congested core of the district, were critiques of the Modernist architecture and flawed urban planning that went into the making of colonial-era Johannesburg. These retrospective critiques were a key aspect of projects like *Urban Futures 2000*, an international inter-disciplinary conference and related programme of exhibitions and events, hosted by the University of the Witwatersrand in collaboration with the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, which focused on all aspects of city life, identifying key issues facing metropolitan structures in the new millennium; *Blank: Architecture Apartheid and After* (Judin and Vladislavic 1999), an exhibition and related compilation of over forty essays, both written and photographic, which sought/seek to present the complexities of the built environment and the deep structures of divisive spatial planning in South Africa⁶⁶; and the Joubert Park Project (JPP), a collective of artists and non-artists who sought to bring the strategies and instruments of the contemporary arts to bear on the environment in a manner that asked questions both of arts practice and the complex reality of the shifting urban context – in relation to the country South Africa and global linkages. The JPP later led to the foundation of the Drill Hall, a participative

⁶⁴ At the time, regular violent evictions by the “Red Ants” of squatters living in the buildings surrounding the Park disturbingly recalled the forced removals of apartheid. Usually hired by the government or property owners to remove people from private land or condemned buildings, the squad would arrive on the scene dressed in red overalls and helmets, carrying crow-bars and/or guns (Motumi).

⁶⁵ It was not at all uncommon for artists working on projects in and around the gallery to be mugged or held up at gunpoint on route to a workshop, performance or exhibition. In 2003, the same year of Smith's performance, my friend and colleague, Zingi Mkefa, a fellow arts writer on *ThisDay* newspaper, was, for example, held up at gunpoint and pistol-whipped while exiting the gallery in broad daylight.

⁶⁶ On a self-reflexive note, at the turn of the millennium, I was deeply immersed in this broader public culture of urban critique and review in Johannesburg, and as the co-organiser of the events programme of *Urban Futures 2000*, helped to get the landmark *Blank* exhibition brought to MuseuMAfrica in Johannesburg as part of the conference's cultural programme.

public art centre adjacent to the taxi rank on the southern flank of the park. Pamela Allara⁶⁷ gives an account of this fervour of public art interventions that took place in and around Joubert Park at the start of the new century in a publication, entitled *Johannesburg In and Out of the Museum: The Joubert Park Project: 2000–2001*, which was released by *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* in 2003 (Allara 28–33). In this text, Allara makes reference to “Notes towards public South African art”, an unpublished lecture delivered at the Joubert Park Project Open Day on 3 December, 2000. Situating Smith’s performance within the greater ambit of urban self-reflexivity and body-centric interventions at the time, it is also significant that she curated her second major exhibition with James Sey, *Two Icons: the atom, the body* (2000), as part of the *Urban Futures 2000* conference. This atrocity exhibition displayed “the body in pathological modes, in sickness, mutilation, pain and death, as well as demonstrating the normalizing attempts of technoscientific systems to present and understand the body’s elements within wider spatiotemporal arrangements” (Smith and Sey). Bearing in mind my core argument concerning these post-Victorian artworks as instances of aesthetic embodiment, it is noteworthy that the body was powerfully foregrounded in Smith’s engagements with the early twenty-first century spatial politics of Johannesburg. This was evident as early as 1998 in the first exhibition she curated with Sey, in tandem with the conference, *Histories of the Present*, the Fourth Annual Qualitative Methods Conference hosted by the Department of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. It is by no means insignificant that the keynote speakers at this conference were Mark Seltzer – Professor of English, Cornell University and author of *Serial Killers: Life and Death in America’s Wound Culture* (1998) and French performance artist, Orlan⁶⁸ who is renowned as a pioneer of radical body

⁶⁷ Allara is currently a visiting researcher at the African Studies Centre at Boston University.

⁶⁸ Orlan is best known for her work with plastic surgery. From the early to mid-1990s the artist transformed her face through a series of surgeries to resemble the features of the female subjects in canonised sculptures and paintings of women. Although she has been accused of being anti-feminist, Orlan has responded by saying that her identity is nomadic and shifting, and that her work is “a struggle against the innate, the inexorable, the programmed, Nature, DNA (which is our direct rival as far as artists of representation are concerned), and God!” (Zylinska 128) In this regard, her thinking is very much in tune with Judith Butler’s arguments in relation to gender, which I will explore later in this chapter. In light of my conclusion, in which I situate the objects of my study within the turn toward performative practice in the South African visual arts, it also of consequence that Orlan founded the International

modification practices. “In drawing its theme from Foucault’s methodological (and genealogical) injunction at the beginning of *Discipline and Punish* (1979), the Conference is not hoping to station itself in the present and make enquiry into an ‘opaque’ past,” reads the conference announcement which was posted on the contemporary arts website, *artthrob*. “Its objective, by contrast, is to bring together work within various (and broadly understood) qualitative methodologies that have the capacity to uproot the commonplace understandings, normalities and subjectivities of present knowledge, lives and practices.” The emphasis on the body as an archive of everyday practice was foregrounded in the exhibition curated by Smith and Sey. While being actively involved in projects like *Urban Futures 2000* and the Joubert Park Project, foregrounding the body as the core site of social experience was key to Smith’s practice at the time. I have traced her involvement in these various projects to emphasize the body-centric, performative aspect of her broader practice at the time and how this dovetailed with engagements interrogating the spatial politics of the city of Johannesburg. But now I return to my observations concerning the siting of Smith’s performance within the fraught, dense, socially contested atmosphere of the city itself and Joubert Park in particular.

At the time, in 2003, the Joubert Park area was not a far cry from Victorian Whitechapel; plagued by high levels of inequality, poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and marginalisation. The centre of the city underwent a serious decline in the 1980s and 1990s, and was known to be a major centre of crime in a country that has an extraordinarily high rate of murders, assaults, rapes (adult, child and infant), and other crimes compared to most countries. According to a survey for the period 1998 to 2000 compiled by the United Nations (just three years before Smith’s *Jack in Johannesburg* performance took place), South Africa was ranked first for rapes per capita, leading to the country being referred to as the ‘rape capital of the world’. After the scrapping of the Group Areas Act in 1991, Johannesburg was affected by urban blight as thousands of people, who had previously been forbidden to live downtown, moved into the city from surrounding townships, like Soweto. At the same time,

Symposium of Performance in Lyon in 1978, and currently sits on the board of administrators of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

following South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994, many immigrants from economically beleaguered and war-torn African nations flooded into South Africa's biggest city in search of new lives in the "rainbow nation". Defeated by the violent intensity of the shifting social dynamics, many landlords abandoned their buildings, especially in high-density areas, like Hillbrow and Joubert Park. Corporations and institutions, including the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, moved their headquarters away from the city centre to northern suburbs, like Sandton, and property speculators directed large amounts of capital into suburban shopping malls, decentralised office parks and entertainment centres⁶⁹.

The history of Whitechapel is not so starkly different. In the mid-nineteenth century, an influx of Irish immigrants swelled the populations of England's major cities, including the East End of London. From 1882, Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe and Tsarist Russia moved into Whitechapel, which became increasingly overcrowded as work and housing conditions worsened, and a significant economic underclass developed. Robbery, violence and alcohol dependency were commonplace, and endemic poverty drove many women to prostitution. In October 1888, London's Metropolitan Police Service estimated that there were 1 200 prostitutes and about 62 brothels in Whitechapel (Evans and Skinner 283). The economic problems were accompanied by a steady rise in social tensions (Begg 131-149). Between 1886 and 1889, frequent demonstrations led to police intervention and further public unrest. Racism, crime, social disturbance and real deprivation fed public perceptions that Whitechapel was a notorious den of immorality (Marriot 31-63). It was at this exact moment in Whitechapel's history that Joubert Park came into being. Civic planning for the first open space to grace downtown Johannesburg was initiated in 1887 strangely enough, only the year before the Ripper murders took place in London. This strange socio-temporal echo between Johannesburg and Whitechapel is also explored by social historian Charles van Onselen in his book, *The Fox and the Flies: The Criminal Empire of the Whitechapel Murderer* (2007). In his exhaustive biographical

⁶⁹ For detailed accounts of Johannesburg as a city in transition, see Alan Morris's *Bleakness and Light: Inner City Transition in Hillbrow, Johannesburg* (1999); Tomlinson et al. (eds), *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on the Postapartheid City* (2003) or Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (eds), *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (2008).

study, Van Onselen portrays the life and crimes of Joseph Silver (1868–1918), who terrorized women on four continents in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, rising from humble Jewish roots in a small Polish town to become a leading trafficker in female slaves. Silver’s dark trade saw him active in Europe, North and South America and southern Africa, including some years in London’s East End between 1885 and 1889, and again from 1895 to 1898, when he relocated to Johannesburg. “Working class women were intercepted in London with promises of employment at actresses, barmaids, dancers, domestic servants or waitresses in South Africa. Some... were seduced or raped prior to departure and ended up working as prostitutes in Johannesburg’s bars, beer halls, cafés, cigar shops, dance halls and restaurants, or on the outer fringes of Yiddish theatre,” writes Van Onselen (156), his account of women’s circumstances in the Victorian era recalling my point (in my introduction) concerning the prevalence of emergent re-readings of the Victorian era that reveal the darker side of the lives of nineteenth-century women and how sexual politics collided with the politics of labour in an increasingly industrialised time. Picking up on the points made in my introduction regarding the transnational nexus of empire and its aftermath, Van Onselen’s text is a definitively peripatetic, transnational history that undoes a commonly held misperception of the nineteenth century being utterly parochial and static in relation to the accelerated mobility of the globalised present. Although his theory has been strongly critiqued in both *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, where it was described as a “drastic case of overreaching” (Grimes), he argues, in the final chapter of *The Fox and the Flies*, that Silver might well have been Jack the Ripper. Uncannily, both Smith’s performance and Van Onselen’s study were produced in the crime capital of Johannesburg at the start of the twenty-first century and both explore the dark legacy of Jack the Ripper and the criminal underworld of the nineteenth century.

The apparent paradox between the sophistication and privilege of the nineteenth century London metropole and the dangerous unruliness of the twenty-first century African periphery collapses in on itself when the historic particulars of the two areas are brought to the surface. Social and spatial similarities between the two ghettos unseat the binary, and Whitechapel and Joubert Park emerge as temporal

döppelgangers in an unfolding set of repetitions and refractions that belie linear histories of urban progress. By locating this performance, which explicitly recalled the social chaos of nineteenth-century Whitechapel, in the unruly centre of downtown Johannesburg, Smith enacted the aesthetic tactic of temporal collapse, to which this thesis draws attention. In this way, a very particular and directed “interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures” (Mbembe 16) was achieved by the situated staging of *Jack in Johannesburg*.

In with the old, in with the new: A pre-cursor to *Time’s Arrow*

In addition to the Whitehall/Johannesburg, petropole/periphery continuum, there is another dimension to this strategy of spatio-temporal collapse, which concerns the siting of the performance in the museum itself. “People talked about it more in the language of female performance photography, whereas I was also trying to talk about the art politics of the moment through the colonial lens,” says Smith, reflecting on critical reception of the work (Smith, Personal interview).

At the time, there was a lot of discussion about how we need to re-hang our museums and how the foundation collections were being relegated to the storerooms. They were being archived. And new contemporary South African work was being given far greater prominence. You wouldn’t walk into the [Johannesburg Art] Gallery and see the British School; you’d walk in and see something contemporary, South African. So these other works that I’d grown up with around Durban – all the Victorian paintings and things – I didn’t get to see them any more. But I’ve always been interested in the histories of the present and how one can only really deal with the present by understanding the past (which is why it’s such a travesty that no-one teaches art history any more). So this project allowed for a certain amount of retrieval – and in a completely politically incorrect way. (Smith, Personal interview)

In its reflexive archival underpinnings, the *Jack in Johannesburg* performance might be viewed as an un-inscribed precursor to *Time’s Arrow*, which was curated by Anthea Buys and staged at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) seven years later, in 2010. Billed as “live readings of the JAG Collection”, this time-based exhibition looked at “the relationship between the formation of the Johannesburg Art Gallery’s collection

of artworks and how this collection is viewed, read, imagined, forgotten, resented, buried and dug up again years later” (Buys). A group of thirteen emerging and established artists⁷⁰ and researchers were invited to select and respond to artworks in the JAG Collection by producing new works that encouraged reflection on “the initiating artwork’s significance as part of an institutional archive, and the relationship between these museological archival layers and the broader context of Johannesburg” (Buys). In creating a performance around a bizarre underwritten aspect of the life of Walter Sickert, one of the key painters in the largely disavowed foundation collection of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Smith was playing up the tensions underlying museological practice during a particularly fraught moment in South Africa’s transition from colonialism and apartheid, into postcolonial museum culture although the terms “colonialism”, “apartheid” and “postcolonial” are woefully inadequate descriptors, which fail to account for the interlocking, paradoxical valences of that “time of entanglement” “that moment when different forms of absence become mixed together” (Mbembe 16–17). Nonetheless the unfolding tensions, which informed South African museological practice in the first decade of the twenty-first century are comprehensively examined by Steven C. Dubin in *Mounting Queen Victoria: Curating Cultural Change* (2009). Dubin taps into contemporary responses to the commanding presence of “an oversized portrait of Queen Victoria that reigns imperiously over the main stairway of the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg” (Dubin, back cover) as a prism through which to look at the ferment in South Africa’s cultural institutions. Certain key ideas surface repeatedly throughout Dubin’s book, including “transformation”, “the politics of representation”, “the politics of reception”, and “social and collective memory”. “Transformation refers to undermining those exclusive social structures, and the myopic modes of thought and behaviour, which were spawned in an earlier era. By design, transformation entails constructing new

⁷⁰ As one of the “artist/researchers” who was invited to participate in this exhibition, I presented a work entitled *Making Room*. I selected six portraits by early twentieth-century painters – including Maud Sumner, Ruth Everard Haden, and Freida Lock – that had been consigned to the still quiet subterranean storeroom of the museum, and included them in an installation that reflected on the shifting spatio-temporal aspects of solitary authorship in response to Virginia Woolf’s question in her 1928 text, *A Room of One’s Own*: “What is the state of mind that is most propitious to the act of creation?”

ways of thinking and doing and understanding,” he writes (Dubin 6), noting that, within the greater context of social transformation, key museums and public galleries and collections are tasked with being instruments of social change.

As Dubin observes, museum and gallery culture is a highly contested arena of identity shaping in which rival claims about the way history has played out are in constant conversation with one another through a curatorial mix of contemporary and archival collections. Writing about a broad range of South African museums, from those focusing on art, cultural history, natural science and natural history, to agriculture, military matters, and traditional crafts, he observes that:

All these establishments are fraught with the history of South Africa’s past. As a *general rule*, however, the colonial legacy has been felt most acutely in art museums, where ideology was directly incorporated into traditional works of painting and sculpture and fortified by collections constructed along doctrinaire lines. The apartheid legacy is most apparent in cultural history, natural science, and natural history museums, where the ideology was interwoven into the narratives that their curators composed, and it dictated the decisions they made about what to highlight, and how they chose which phenomena “innately” belonged where. In actuality, these legacies blended together; these broad observations do, nevertheless, hold true. (Dubin 4)

Dubin’s observation that “the colonial legacy has been felt most acutely in art museums” is a crucial in relation to my argument about contemporary art being one of the key vectors through which constricting ideological codes laid down during the colonial era are currently being re-scripted, reimagined. His observation also recalls Annie Coombes’s contention, in *Reinventing Africa: Museums, material culture and popular imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (1994), that anthropological museums, colonial exhibitions, the popular press and other organisations and forums created for nineteenth-century British audiences were complicit in the imperialistic programme of establishing one group’s superiority at the expense of others. Dubin points out that, in the abundance of colonial and Victorian art and artifacts they own, both the Durban and Tatham art galleries bear the stamp of the British legacy on the

province of KwaZulu-Natal. “The Tatham, for example, was founded with an assemblage of works imported from England in 1903,” he writes (Dubin 248).

Along similar lines, a number of Sickert’s paintings are housed in the public collections of several South African art galleries, a legacy of these institutions’ colonial-era origins. Smith’s intervention shone a light on this Eurocentric bias that had governed museum acquisition policies and practices. It is worth noting here, that *Jack in Johannesburg* took place at the JAG in 2003, prior to the more intensified postcolonial transformation of South African museums, which ensued in successive years. It was, in retrospect, a subtly catalytic work that pre-figured a more intensified programme of transformation, decolonization and hybridization in South African museum and curatorial practice, following, for example, the appointment of Riason Naidoo as Director of the Iziko⁷¹ South African National Museum and the exhibition, *1910–2010: From Pierneef to Gugulective* (2010). In recent years there has been a marked shift toward a more inclusive mix of exhibitions that reflect and incorporate a multiplicity of perspectives, formal strategies and aesthetic preferences. Current exhibition policies tend to be more postmodern, mixing different categories of items and curatorial strategies to develop inter-texts between concurrent exhibitions. Read inter-textually, these exhibitions function as critiques of one another, highlighting the limits of contesting curatorial rationales.

But Smith’s performance was not simply a critique and dismissal of Sickert as an example of the Eurocentric bias in South African collecting practices. On the contrary, in her research-based practice, Smith came to identify strongly with some of the meta-textual strains in Sickert’s approach. A painter and printmaker who was a member of the Camden Group, Walter Sickert (1860–1942) is considered a prominent figure in the transition from Impressionism to Modernism. But far from being a tame Impressionist painter of anodyne picnics at the river, Sickert is credited as being an important influence on distinctively British styles of avant-garde art in the twentieth century, and something of a proto-Modernist in his own right. By consciously inserting

⁷¹ “In 2000, the South African Museum and over a dozen other cultural institutions in the Cape Town vicinity were consolidated into a single entity, Iziko Museums... Iziko means ‘hearth’ or ‘hub of cultural activities’ in isiXhosa, those being the guiding ideals for the member organisations of this entity.” (Dubin 59)

and insinuating himself into the Ripper case by means of letter writing, Sickert's active blurring of the boundary between fact and fiction prefigured the postmodern literary emphasis on the constructedness of historical narratives. "Sickert's position in this history is most interesting, but not as chief protagonist in one of the most wildly open-ended stories of modern life. Rather, it is a question of imagined identification. His fascination with the murders is well-documented, he made explicit reference to the case in a number of works, and at the very least, he inserted himself into these events as the alleged author of several 'Ripper' letters received by police at the time," writes Smith ("Jack in Johannesburg (and elsewhere)"), whose interest in Sickert dovetails with her broader research interests in forensic aesthetics⁷² and avant-garde practices⁷³. Most significantly though, *Jack in Johannesburg* was an embodied staging of Smith's personal identification with an era that contains the seeds of the modern – both for better and for worse.

What the Victorian period represents for me is everything I understand to be modernity. The camera, machine technology and Sigmund Freud – they all came out of this moment. And these are the things I'm really interested in. They're the things that make us modern. Crime writing as a fiction genre was also a product of the Victorian era. So, for me, working with the accoutrements of that period was very much about making my own history painting, but as a *tableau vivant* – talking about the moment by working with its own technology and aesthetic modalities. It was very much a conscious conceptual choice to do that." (Smith, Personal interview)

Gender, "performativity", and performance

As mentioned earlier, critics at the time of the *Jack and Johannesburg* performance and its projection as part of the touring *Euphemism* exhibition gave attention to the

⁷² The strange subtext of art and crime that informed both *Jack in Johannesburg* and *Euphemism* was brought to the foreground by an actual criminal event that was incorporated into the Cape Town run of Smith's *Euphemism* exhibition by means of witness testimonies. "When I was researching the Cape Town show, I discovered that there had been a theft from the National Gallery of a Sickert painting. Someone came in one morning and prized it off the wall with a screwdriver and made off down Government Avenue. The head of security gave chase. I couldn't find the CCTV record, so I decided to interview people who were most closely connected to the event. I didn't have access to the thief and I didn't have access to the person who allegedly commissioned the crime. The painting has never been recovered." (Smith, Personal interview)

⁷³ In 2009/2010, she co-curated (with Roger van Wyk) *Dada South?* at the Iziko South African National Gallery, and in 2007 produced *One Million and Forty-Four Years (and Sixty Three Days)*, an anthology about contemporary attitudes to the avant-garde, at Stellenbosch Modern and Contemporary (SMAC).

gendered aspects of Smith's performance, drawing comparisons to the conceptual self-portraits of American photographer Cindy Sherman. One of the exhibition's harsher critics was Lloyd Pollack, who slated it in his review for the agenda-setting online arts journal, *artthrob*. "Cindy Sherman is a constant inspiration, but Smith suffers by comparison," writes Pollack.

Smith's movie stills possess an urgency and tension that compel the viewer to forge a narrative that explains the ambiguous situations in which the artist portrays herself. In this process, she transcends all artifice: the coincidence between her and the character she impersonates becomes absolute, as does the suspension of disbelief. Smith's glamorised images of herself as a slain Edwardian harlot in the video *Jack in Johannesburg*, as a murder victim covered in maggots in *Memento Mori*, and as a bored modern spouse in her contemporary make over of Sickert's *Ennui*, look rigged, stagy and contrived. Smith never becomes her subject as Sherman does, and her charade-like photography generates an irritating sense of theatrical pretence, rather than Sherman's illusion of reality. (Pollack)

His observation that Sherman's self-portraits "transcend all artifice" invites contestation, but will for the purposes of this discussion, remain moot. But when he slates Smith's self-representations on the grounds that they come across as "stagy" and "contrived", generating a sense of "theatrical pretence", he is, however, in danger of missing one of the main conceptual thrusts of both the performance and the exhibition. Far from aspiring to naturalism or verisimilitude, Smith's representation of her own femaleness was, I contend, purposefully overstated and staged. This was very much in keeping with the postmodern tactics of pastiche and self-conscious artifice that informed the piece as a whole.

The players in the piece look like Victorians, but these are all costumes that I got from the State Opera. So they're not authentic. It's all artifice – all smoke and mirrors stuff. There's nothing authentic about any of this. I wanted the costumes to look not quite perfect and seamless, but like constructions, artificial. On the surface they look fairly faithful, but there's something that's not sitting quite right. And the minute you identify the thing that is not really working so well, suddenly the whole house of cards comes falling down. (Smith, Personal interview)

If anything, Smith's performance of the swooning damsel in *Jack in Johannesburg* might be read as a woman enacting her own gender in a moment of purposefully parodic artifice. Read this way, the performance was a drag act of sorts – a woman playfully mimicking culturally constructed notions of femaleness⁷⁴. In this regard, perhaps Homi Bhabha's understanding of the subversive power of "mimicry" in relation to race⁷⁵ under conditions of colonial domination might be productively imported into the field of gender studies.

The role-playing and costumery in Smith's performance lends credence to the notion of gender as socially constructed or historically produced. "Identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results," writes Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (25). Butler suggests that certain cultural configurations of gender have seized hegemonic hold, coming to be seen as natural. In response, she calls for subversive action, or "gender trouble" in the present – the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of shifting gender identities. By choosing to construct our identities differently, we might work to change gender norms arising out of a binary understanding of masculinity and femininity. Understood in this way, our identities, gendered and otherwise, do not express some authentic inner "core" self, but are the dramatic *effect* (rather than the cause) of our repeated performances. But there is a latent threat encoded in this conceptualisation of identity as free-floating, not connected to an "essence" – it disrupts notions of gender as an unquestionable biologically determined imperative.

"I try to work with the secret histories and unspoken desires that exist between the private and the public," writes Smith. "Issues of transgression and license are primary areas of interrogation, focusing on the threat of danger and its association with the erotic" (O'Toole, "Kathryn Smith"). Her outré performance of gender and desire in *Jack in Johannesburg* has a particular kind of dissonant charge when read against an

⁷⁴ "The problem with drag is that I offered it as an example of performativity, but it has been taken up as the paradigm for performativity. One ought always to be wary of one's examples. What's interesting is that this voluntarist interpretation, this desire for a kind of radical theatrical remaking of the body, is obviously out there in the public sphere. There's a desire for a fully phantasmatic transfiguration of the body," writes Butler (Osborne and Segal 32–39). My reading here is just such a "voluntarist interpretation". I do not see Smith's performance as a "paradigm for performativity", but a theatrical, phantasmic performance of it.

⁷⁵ I explore this notion further in my next chapter in relation to Santu Mofokeng's *The Black Photo Album*.

official public culture that, following President Jacob Zuma's polygamous example, trumpets heterosexuality and essentialist notions of femaleness couched in the wholesomeness of wifely and motherly duty. One instance of this culturally inscribed tendency toward compulsory heterosexuality took place in April 2012, when the House of Traditional Leaders made a submission to Parliament's constitutional review committee arguing for the exclusion of "sexual orientation" from Chapter Two of the Constitution, which deals with the Bill of Rights. In its response, the review committee said the submission was under consideration, leaving activists deeply concerned as decades of lobbying and progress for LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex) rights in South Africa were placed under threat.

I am aware here that there is a difference between performance and "performativity", as it is articulated by Butler; the former presuming a subject, while the latter contests the very notion of the subject. "Performativity" is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established – the discursive mode by which these effects are installed, and, in Butler's enunciation of it, always happens through a "certain kind of repetition and recitation". Performance, on the other hand, is a once-off spectacle that does, indeed, presume a subject. In this sense, *Jack in Johannesburg* might be read as a performance of performativity.

Psycho-geography and ancestral impulses

Jack in Johannesburg was not a performance of gender in isolation. It was also in many ways a burlesque staging of Smith's cultural inheritance – less an abstracted observation of the public culture dimensions of contested museological practice, than an embodied staging of the impact of those contestations on the psyche. Dubin's scholarly observations in *Mounting Queen Victoria*, were a matter of intimate, embodied, first-person experience for Smith, who grew up in Durban. She recalls being immersed in the colonial affect of what was then colloquially referred to as the "Last Outpost" (of the British empire):

I'm very conscious of my education at Durban Girls' College – the building and everything about it was so colonial... [I remember] going to the Durban Art Gallery virtually every weekend with my grandfather, who was extremely influential in my life... Smelling that musty giraffe [a prized feature of the museum's natural history collection] and being so conscious... It was also the place that I saw Paul Stopforth's elegy to [anti-apartheid activist Steven Bantu] Biko – and that made a massive impression on me as a young child. So there was all this Victoriana on the one hand, and then this image of death... My grandfather used to take me on tours through the city and go and visit all the statues. We'd go and visit Dick King, Queen Victoria.' (Smith, Personal interview)

Far from being detached public-sphere observations, Smith's recollections about the colonial milieu of the city in which she grew up are directly connected to personal, familial memories. *Jack in Johannesburg* and *Euphemism* turned out to be much more personal works than even the artist could have predicted.

I knew that my [maternal] grandfather was from England and that he'd come to South Africa, but I had never been there. So as the descendant of settlers, my exotic was England. We had family from England who would come and visit us from over the seas. Going to Durban Art Gallery and seeing all those paintings was, for me exotic – a world of imagination and fantasy. So this [*Jack in Johannesburg* and *Euphemism*] became a project of fantasy and desire – but in the real psycho-analytic sense; less about pleasure than drive. And that drive can have libidinal aspects, but also quite entropic elements. But it is about the exotic, which is always bound up with a sense of danger of as well. (Smith, Personal interview)

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, a two-channel projection featuring footage from the *Jack in Johannesburg* performance later formed the centrepiece of *Euphemism*, which travelled around South Africa in 2005. As part of the “psycho-geographies”⁷⁶ series that was also part of *Euphemism*, Smith went to Dieppe, where Sickert often

⁷⁶ The Situationist International grew out of avant-garde artistic movements like Dada, Surrealism and Lettrism, and began as an artistic movement with a rigorous theoretical and left-wing political basis which aimed to bring about a revolutionary union of everyday life and political engagement, through play and freedom, rather than what they saw as the acquiescent acceptance of mainstream consumer culture. It later became a key theoretical influence in the French student revolt of 1968. Although the Situationists invented the theory of “psychogeography”, they didn't *do* much with it, but it has subsequently been taken up very seriously in literature, most notably by W.G. Sebald in his novel, *Austerlitz* (2001), in which strange impulses and physical spells instantiated by specific places and sites lead the protagonist along bizarre lines of investigation that ultimately lead to the discovery of facts concerning hidden aspects of his biography (Sebald).

painted⁷⁷ a city which was heavily bombed during the Second World War. She was interested in how much of these buildings would still remain – she walked around with a sheath of Dieppe paintings, tried to find all the places that were depicted by Sickert then photographed them. Back in her studio, she superimposed Sickert’s paintings onto her photographs so that she could see where the painter’s eye deviated from the photographer’s eye over a century later. The present and the past occupy the same image plain, so there is a man coming along in a horse and trap and there is a car. There are nineteenth century bathers in striped bathing suits taking a swim in the sea and there are twenty-first century beachgoers doing exactly the same thing. Smith produced about twelve of these ghost images.

Her research for *Euphemism* also included walking tours of the Ripper crime scenes in London’s East End with criminologists and crime historians. “When I first went on those walks around the East End, I had this uncanny sense that I knew where I was,” she says, but she dismissed this sense of familiarity as being the product of her immersion in her research. “And yet it wasn’t that wasn’t that kind of familiarity. It was a deeper sense that I knew where I was” (Personal interview).

It wasn’t until 2010, that the real genealogical connection to this material became apparent to the artist. Years after the *Jack in Johannesburg* performance, Smith discovered that her paternal great-grandfather was in fact born in Whitechapel, where the Ripper murders transpired.

About a year ago my father said he was interested in applying for his ancestral visa... This took me by surprise as it is my mother’s side of the family that has the English connection⁷⁸. But it turns out that his grandfather is from England. He takes out his birth certificate and there it is: Abraham, born in Whitechapel in 1886... Now that I’ve found this birth certificate of my great-grandfather from Whitechapel, I feel a lot of the footnotes of this project can be reinvestigated. I want to go and track down members of the family – immigrant Jews who were part of that milieu in London. It was only two generations ago. (Personal interview)

⁷⁷ It was here that Sickert painted *Royal Hotel, Dieppe*, the painting that was stolen from the South African National Gallery in 1998.

⁷⁸ She later discovered that her maternal grandfather, to whom she’d attributed her genetically inherited sense of Englishness, was not her mother’s biological father, and that her mother had been adopted.

Smith's discovery recalls Mary Sibande's reflections on the imaginative genesis of her sculptural alter-ego, Sophie, as a response to her grandmother and great-grandmother's lived experiences. The work of art was in no way external to Smith's genealogical discovery that her ancestral roots could be traced back to Victorian-era Whitechapel. Rather, *Jack in Johannesburg*, was very much a ritual performance. At once conceptual and visceral, it was an act of channelling the ancestors that was performed in the secular, public context of an art museum. "That's the other thing the Victorians were really good at – the occult, séances and things like that," says Smith.

It's that thing of being born with 100 years of inherited memory imprinted somewhere in your makeup, so you hold the trace of something that happened before you were born... I always have these constellations of things going on inside my head and there are moments in time where they coalesce. I did a germ of a project for an exhibition with Ruth Sacks and Chad Roussouw [aka Robert Sloon]⁷⁹ that would only ever exist as a book, so the work itself didn't ever have to exist... I was interested in going to have a DNA test to track to my origins, so I went and had one of those tests, and then I went and had a séance with a medium to see what aspects of my ancestry the two methods would show up. It was part science, part séance, so I called it "Ancestry: A scéantific investigation" ... and it started to occupy that space between the empirical and the imaginary, which is the occult. When Hal Foster talks about the obscene, it's not the obscene in the sense of the perverse, but etymologically the word refers that something 'off scene' – to the edges. (Personal interview)

Although I will not be dwelling here on the intricacies of Smith's "scéantific investigation" project, the term might equally be applied to *Jack in Johannesburg (and elsewhere)* – both the performance itself, and the psycho-geographic research that ensued from it, leading to the discovery of Smith's ancestral roots in Whitechapel. The idea of the artwork as a form of secular séance is at the pulsing heart of this thesis.

Although they are performed or displayed within the secular, public official terrain of the museum/gallery, I contend that the artworks under discussion in this thesis also have mystical⁸⁰, ritualistic underpinnings, functioning as vectors of communication

⁷⁹ *I'll stop believing in you, if you stop believing in me?* (2007) was an exhibition-as-book project curated by Robert Sloon and Ruth Sacks as part of the Documenta 12 Magazines Project.

⁸⁰ My use of the term 'mystical' is consciously not qualified here or limited to a particular socio-historical or cultural circumstance. I use it to describe that which is 'of or related to ancient religious mysteries or other occult or esoteric rites'. Although the term has Ancient Greek origins and referred to the biblical, the liturgical and the spiritual or contemplative dimensions in early and medieval Christianity, in modern

between the artist and his direct or indirect ancestors. By staging this conceptual trans-generational contact within the officiated public realm of the museum, these works give audiences access to a private, mystical layer of cultural communion, which provides the premise for a similar process to transpire in the act of reception. Whether the audience/viewer takes up this opportunity is a subjective matter of personal choice and inclination. Going back to the point made in my introduction about the subjectivity of interpretation, different people experience works at completely different levels. As discussed earlier, my argument is in keeping with Jacques Derrida's assertion that the signifier is not directly related to the signified; there is no one-to-one set of correspondences between them. Word and thing (or thought) never become one. Signifiers and signified are continually breaking apart and reattaching in new combinations. No one can make the "means" (the sign) and "the end" (meaning) become identical (Sarup 33). Nonetheless, the opportunity to commune with the past at an intimate level is implicit in the conceptual language of these works, which are presented in the social space of a museum. In this regard, the sociality of these works is key. This takes me to the etymology of the word "séance", which stems from the French word for "seat", "session", or "sitting", from the Old French "*seoir*", "to sit". In French, the word's meaning is quite general and could, for example, refer to a film screening, "une séance de cinéma".

In English, however, the word came to be used specifically for a meeting of people who are gathered to receive messages from spirits or to listen to a spirit discourse with or relay messages from spirits; many people, including skeptics and non-believers, treat it as a form of entertainment... (Séance)

According to this English understanding of the word "séance" then, one of its most striking features is its sociality – the fact that it takes place when a *group* of people are gathered. In other words, it is not a solipsistic activity, but an intimate communication that occurs within a social context of a group. It is also worthwhile noting that,

times it has acquired a broad application pertaining to a worldwide range of religious traditions and practices associated with extraordinary experiences and states of mind, as well as attempts at union with the absolute, the infinite or God.

although the popularity of séances grew dramatically in the mid-nineteenth century with the founding of the religion of Spiritualism, “a tradition has also grown up of conducting séances outside of any religious context and without a leader” so as for the people involved “to test their understanding of the boundaries between reality and the paranormal” (“Séance”). Like the other artworks discussed here, Smith’s performance was séance-like in all these senses of the word. A gathering was convened in a darkened room in which a group of people witnessed Smith communicating obliquely (through the embodied ritual of tattooing) with her intimate cultural and ancestral inheritance. But, as I have shown here, this was not simply an act of intimate auto-critique. Rather, the meanings of the performance had acute counter-cultural resonances within the highly contested public spheres of a Modernist museum and city in a time of radical social transition.



Fig. 9. Santu Mofokeng, *Black Photo Album/Look At Me: 1890-1950*. [Names of sitters unknown.]
Slide 32/80, black and white slide projection (1997). [Photographer unknown.]
© Santu Mofokeng. Courtesy Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg.

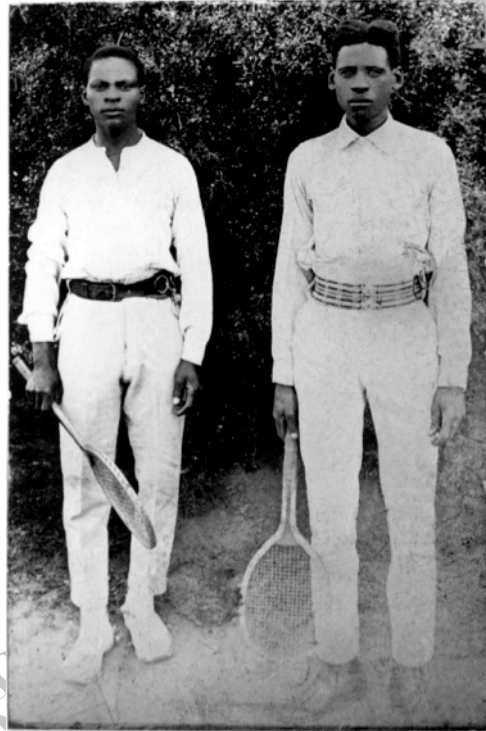


Fig. 10. Santu Mofokeng, *Black Photo Album/Look At Me: 1890-1950*. [Names of “sitters” unknown.] Slide 8/80, black and white slide projection (1997). [Photographer unknown.] © Santu Mofokeng. Courtesy Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg.

Fig. 11. Santu Mofokeng, *Black Photo Album/Look At Me: 1890-1950*. Moeti and Lazarus Fume. Slide 10/80, black and white slide projection (1997). [Photographer unknown.] © Santu Mofokeng. Courtesy Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg.

Chapter Five

“Live transmission”: Intimate ancestors in Santu Mofokeng’s

Black Photo Album/Look at Me: 1890–1950

In 2011, the music video for South African singer/rapper/producer/DJ Spoek Mathambo’s “Control” (2010) went viral on YouTube, garnering hundreds of thousands of hits across the globe. A deeply hybrid sonic brew that draws on contemporary African and British post-punk references, the song is the fourth single from Mathambo’s debut album, *Mshini Wam*⁸¹ (2010). With its driving danceable bass-line and eerily distorted vocals, “Control” is a cover-version of British post-punk band Joy Division’s “She’s Lost Control” (1979) and reinterprets the gloomily frenetic mood of working-class Manchester in the 1970s as a “darkwave township house” anthem for the a new generation of rebels and dancefloor dissidents. Like Mwenya Kabwe’s adaptation of Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Mathambo’s song translocates the original, overlaying the grim mood and atmosphere of grimy post-industrial North West England with the edgy energy of township life in twenty-first-century South Africa. But much more hauntingly post-Victorian than the song itself is the music video, which was shot on location in a derelict boarding house in Langa, Cape Town. Produced by South African photographer Pieter Hugo and cinematographer Michael Cleary⁸², this video has subsequently been featured at numerous film festivals across the world, establishing Mathambo as the “heir apparent of Afro-futurists such as Sun Ra, Bootsy Collins, George Clinton, Rammellzee, Del Tha Funky Homosapien, Andre 3000, DJ Spooky and Kool Keith” (Leonard). But at the same time that the video is heralded as being “Afro-futurist”, it was shot in self-consciously retro black and white, and draws on some decidedly vintage aesthetic tropes. Like an amped-up postmodern version of Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1838), it explores the milieu of

⁸¹ The album’s title riffs on the popular Zulu struggle song *Umshini Wami* (Bring me my machine gun). Formerly sung by members of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the military wing of the African National Congress, this struggle anthem is now more strongly associated with the persona of current South African president Jacob Zuma, and is often sung at rallies attended by him.

township cults, street preachers and teen gangs⁸³. In both its hybrid African-Gothic aesthetics and its hyper-mediated global reception, the “Control” music video provides some powerful cues for my reading of *Black Photo Album/Look at Me: 1890–1950*, a series of nineteenth-century colonial portraits of Black South African families, retrieved from archival stillness, digitally reworked and exhibited by South African photographer Santu Mofokeng, who is regarded as one of the most important and influential African photographers living today.

“Chasing shadows”

Like Mathambo’s deranged music video, Mofokeng’s urban landscapes go beyond straight political and social commentary into meditations on existential madness and the absurdities of living. Born in 1956, he started taking pictures in the early 1980s. After a short period as a street photographer and some jobs in the dark rooms of newspapers, he completed his first photographic essay, *Train Church*⁸⁴, in 1986, and went on to become one of the most respected photographers of the struggle years, as a member of the Afrapix collective⁸⁵ and a photographer on the newspaper, *New Nation*. He worked as photographic researcher for the Wits Institute for Advanced Social Research⁸⁶ for nearly ten years, and as a result, became an early proponent of research-based photographic practice in South Africa⁸⁷.

⁸³ It features a cast made up mostly of local neighbourhood boys who run their own dance troop, Happy Feet.

⁸⁴ Note how the title of this photographic essay tethers together the secular and the sacred – a mode of representation that is core to my arguments here in relation to these works performing the function of a “secular séance”.

⁸⁵ Founded in 1982, the members of this photographer’s collective and agency were committed to photographic practice as a form of activism.

⁸⁶ The Institute was then under the leadership of the trailblazing social historian, Professor Charles van Onselen. Van Onselen was mentioned in my previous chapter on Kathryn Smith as the author of an exhaustive study of the life and times of the arch criminal Joseph Silver, who may well have been Jack the Ripper. *The Fox and the Flies* is a social, political, and economic history of the Trans-Atlantic underworld from about 1890 until 1918.

⁸⁷ In his critique of the Wits Art Museum iteration of *Chasing Shadows: Thirty Years of Photographic Essays* (2012), the Mofokeng retrospective curated by Corinne Diserens, Rory Bester writes: “...Diserens misses some of the value of such documents in connecting photography, circulation and meaning. Not enough is made of Mofokeng’s nearly ten years of working as a photographic researcher at the Mofokeng was, intentionally or not, at the centre of one of the earliest South African examples of enabling photography as a research practice.” (Bester)

His photographs capture the visual landscapes that shape the daily lives of working class black South Africans, focusing on key elements and recurrent themes, like the sordid ironies of billboard advertising or the experience of commuting. Most critical to the “Secular Séance” thematic that runs through this thesis though is the pervasiveness of spirituality in his work, his sustained photographic enquiry into spiritual belief and practices having resulted in the evocative series, *Chasing Shadows*. Mofokeng’s explorations of landscapes invested with spiritual significance form part of a wider enquiry into space, belonging and the political meanings of landscape in relation to ownership, power and memory.

In 1989, his interest took a new turn when he began to question the commodification of his work by the art world. He started asking black families if he could make photographic copies of their old family photographs, covering the period 1890–1950. State-sponsored publications of the time, like the tourist brochure, *Native Life in South Africa* (1936), had seemed intent on representing black people as resistant to change, perpetually locked into old rural and tribal cultures. Mofokeng wanted to recover a different sense of the past; to show the complex modernity of black family life, so he set about convening a counter-archive that has gathered resonance both within South Africa and internationally over the past two decades.

“These are images that urban black working and middle-class families had commissioned, requested or tacitly sanctioned,” writes Mofokeng in the text that accompanies the exhibition of *Black Photo Album* images (whether as a slide show projection or as photographic prints). “They have been left behind by dead relatives, where they sometimes hang on obscure parlour walls in the townships. In some families they are coveted as treasures, displacing totems in discursive narratives about identity, lineage and personality. And because, to some people, photographs contain the ‘shadow’ of the subject, they are carefully guarded from the ill-will of witches and enemies. In other families they are being destroyed as rubbish during spring-cleans because of interruptions in continuity or disaffection with the encapsulated meanings and the history of the images. Most often they lie hidden to rot through neglect in kists, cupboards, cardboard boxes and plastic bags.”

In a lecture in conjunction with the exhibition at the Walther Collection, Dr. Jennifer Bajorek told her audience that when Mofokeng showed his personal works (the aforementioned black-and-white documentary pictures describing township life, religion and land), his subjects did not like them at all. He began collecting *The Black Photo Album* pictures in order to discover what types of images his neighbours in fact preferred, and thereafter only exhibited his own photographs interspersed with ones that had been commissioned by people in his community. The differences in the depictions are obvious, of course, but so are the time warps built into the project. Multiple temporalities converge when the records of the original sittings (represented by the faded original prints) jostle with the contemporary vision of an artist interrogating the meaning of his forebears' photographic experience.

Before Mofokeng's intervention, these images ran the risk of being dismissed or ignored as evidence of pathologies of bourgeois delusion. And indeed many of these pre-apartheid integrationists were property owners who had acquired a Christian mission education and lived a life in manner and dress very similar to those of European settlers. Despite the political and economic limitations they faced, by the beginning of the twentieth century, many of them had become "self-consciously politicized", actively spurning or questioning the policies of the colonial regime, yet it was by no means the case that they recognized their oppressed status only by the early decades of the twentieth century. On the contrary, black intellectuals had been expressing their "disenchantment with the unfulfilled promises of the enlightenment" throughout the late nineteenth century (Mokoena 21). *The Black Photo Album* images reflect the sensibilities, aspirations and self-image of a particular class of black South Africans at a threshold moment in history, giving contemporary viewers an inkling of the complex allegiances they were negotiating through their everyday life choices.

There is something simultaneously alluring and threatening about these photographs of these late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South Africans who chose to be depicted wearing modern European-style dress and fancy hats. Are these images evidence of "mental colonization"⁸⁸ or do they challenge prevailing impressions

⁸⁸ This is a question Mofokeng poses in the interstitial text that punctuates the images in the slide projection installation and in the Steidl/Walther Collection book, discussed later in this text.

of Africa and Africans based on a damaging legacy of colonial photography? It is this haunting doubleness that I explore here, although ultimately there is no answer to this question. The pictures represent neither and both – capturing instead a sense of the irreducibly contradictory life worlds knotted together in conditions of entanglement. For a work of research-based photographic practice, the centrality of the question is key. The resolutely open-ended spirit of Mofokeng’s project is enshrined in the prevalence of the question as the mode of address in the interstitial texts authored by him that punctuate the sequence of photographs in this series. “Who are these people?” he writes. “What were their aspirations? What is going to happen to those aspirations at the end of twentieth-century South Africa?” These words, on slide 66/80 of *The Black Photo Album* slide projection, appear in plain white type on a black background, recalling the inter-titles in early motion pictures, emphasizing the mode of the work as a project of archival recovery.

The self-fashioning impulse

“When we look at them we believe them, for they tell us a little about how these people imagined themselves. We see these images in the terms determined by the subjects themselves, for they have made them their own,” writes Mofokeng in the exhibition text. The sense of self-determination about which he speaks – the active fashioning of self-image by the nineteenth-century subjects of these self-styled portraits – prefigures the voguish tone of Mathambo’s comment to *Mail & Guardian* journalist Charles Leonard over a century later. Attempting to account for the deep syncretism of his signature sound, he said: “We are trying to push ourselves into developing an honest and authentic voice in sound that really represents us as postmodern, post-apartheid, post-everything poster boys raised on a steady diet of TV, internet and Chicken Licken” (Leonard). The objects and trappings of contemporaneity have clearly changed drastically, but a familiar drive towards active self-determination – self-authorship – can be recognized across a century of colonial administration and apartheid rule. The desire not just to be seen, but to be seen through a self-selected mix of current fashions and shifting global styles, is as potent as

it ever was. In this affirmative, self-determining spirit, *The Black Photo Album* photographs pre-figure a well-populated trajectory of African studio portraiture ranging from the famed Malian portraitists Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, to Oumar Ly of Senegal, Ghana's James Barnor, and, more recently, Cameroonian photographer Samuel Fosso.⁸⁹ "These photographers adopted the studio photography practiced from the mid-nineteenth century by European ethnographers. But they updated it and put their own stamp on it. [They] took the method of 'documenting' Africans that European photographers practised in the colonies and made it their own," writes Stephanie Jason in a recent review in the *Mail & Guardian* of an exhibition by Nigerian photographer Lakin Ogunbanwo, who follows in the footsteps of these renowned studio photographers who captured Africa's popular culture as the winds of independence swept across the continent (Jason 5).

"Photographs are perhaps the most mysterious of all the objects that make up, and thicken, the environment we recognize as modern (3)," writes Susan Sontag in her seminal work, *On Photography* (1973). "Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it. In one version of its utility, the camera record incriminates... In another version of its utility, the camera record justifies... The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists or did exist, which is like what's in the picture" (5). In the instance of *The Black Photo Album* collection, the camera record justifies. As visual traces of the affective power of this self-fashioning impulse, these photographs refute mainstream colonial photography's denigrating anthropological and ethnographic framings of Africa and Africans as being caught in a passive state of naïve and timeless primitivism⁹⁰, "moved by the blind force of custom", "resistant to

⁸⁹ Until fairly recently, there were very few histories of the creation and deployment of photography by Africans in everyday contexts, but this is changing with the emergence of texts like Hudita Nura Mustafa's "Portraits of Modernity: Fashioning Selves in Dakar's Popular Photography" (2002), in which she reiterates the reversal of the photographic lens and writes of the great importance that indigent women in Dakar attribute to photos of themselves arrayed in finest borrowable couture. Two other recent texts that explore photography as a vector for self-assertiveness and social mobility in everyday African contexts are Terry Kurgan's *Hotel Yeoville* (2013), to which I contributed the opening essay, and *Shoe Shop* reader (2012). These are but three examples within a multiplicity of texts that constitute this emerging field of scholarship.

⁹⁰ During the second half of the nineteenth century, Europeans began to distance themselves from the eighteenth and early-nineteenth Enlightenment notion of "romantic primitivism". The aesthetic and

change” (Mbembe 4). Unlike a myriad official archival photographs of anonymous subjects denied the honour of personal inscription, these are named portraits, “which appear to have been either commissioned or sanctioned” (Greenberg 7) by the sitters themselves. Calling attention to this dissonance, the first part of the *Distance and Desire* series set Mofokeng’s collection in dialogue with A.M. Duggan-Cronin’s ethnographic study, *The Bantu Tribes of South Africa* (published in eleven volumes, between 1928 and 1954). “It was logical to begin the series with [this] comparison,” says curator Tamar Garb in an interview in *The New Yorker*. “Mofokeng’s project is about negotiating the archive and constructing a counter-archive, reacting against the dominant view exemplified by Duggan-Cronin of Africans as part of nature, primitive, outside of time, and uncivilized” (Garb). Yet, unsettlingly for many viewers, the *Black Photo Album* photographs evidence a seemingly contradictory pleasure in the surfaces and textures of Victorian modernity and the interpolation of these objects of material culture into the culture of mores, tastes and lifestyles of the colonized.

Describing a tactic by means of which colonial subjects imitate the language, dress, politics, or cultural attitudes of their colonizers, “mimicry” is often viewed in colonial and postcolonial literature as an opportunistic pattern of behavior: one copies the person in power, because one hopes to have access to that same power oneself. Historically, it is often constructed as something shameful—a source of derision and the basis for colloquial insults, like the commonly used term “coconut”. Frantz Fanon, for example, mocked the affected pretentiousness of Martinician “been-tos” in *Black Skin, White Masks*. At the same time “mimicry” remains a key concept in thinking through the relationship between colonizing and colonized peoples, and in Homi Bhabha’s formulation of the notion in *Of Mimicry and Man*, the term is freighted with subversive power. In Bhabha’s conception of it, mimicry is a kind of performance that exposes the artificiality of all symbolic expressions of power. Bearing in mind Bhabha’s

rhetorical trope of the sentimentalized “primitive” ceased to be employed as a moral reproach to offset the decadence of the over-refined European. Instead, a new technologically driven concept of human history came into force whereby representations of native peoples and their traditions were increasingly used as a symbolic foil to highlight the accomplishments of Europe and the expansion of the Imperial powers, whose policies were justified on the basis of a presumed racial and cultural superiority. (Ellingson 249 323)

emphasis on the subversive power in this form of doubling or transcultural drag, Mofokeng's collection might also be read in relation to Terrence Ranger's review of Wolfram Hartman et al's *The Colonising Camera*. Whereas the latter had presented colonial photography from the position of the colonial "gaze", Ranger's alternative take is that Africans in the colonial era managed to reclaim their subjugated visual selves by appropriating the colonising camera to their own ends (Ranger 171).

In this sense, the *Black Photo Album* photographs also directly recall Simon Gikandi's arguments, in the *Victorian Afterlife* volume, that "colonial subjects did not seem to detect any implicit contradiction between Victorian ideas on questions such as tradition, morality and progress and their own programme of liberation and self-identity" (Gikandi 181).

In their garden parties, their newspapers, schools, and universities, the African elite in places as far flung as Cape Town and Lagos displayed their Victorian identity and frame of reference as a badge of honour and celebrated their Victorian world picture as a mark of their arrival into the modern world, the world of civility and civilization... On the surface black Victorianism was indistinguishable from its metropolitan version: its vocabulary was that of paternal empire, its axioms were those of the civilizing mission, its evangelicalism was as legendary as that of colonial missionaries, and its patriotism was properly English. (Gikandi 168)

But this was just the visible surface of things. Gikandi calls it "the embarrassment of Victorianism" (169) and goes on to explore its productive contradictions, asking why these black colonial subjects felt impelled to express their identity through the idioms of Victorianism. He weighs up several possible explanations, one of them Kwame Anthony Appiah's reading of them as being "hopelessly imprisoned in a certain Eurocentric discourse on literacy and civilization, a discourse that accepted the Enlightenment's view that Africa was devoid of the capacity for literacy and by extension rationality and moral culture" (Gikandi 170). He accepts that Appiah's reading is valid, but argues that it is incomplete. While acknowledging that many Afro-Victorians were "interpellated by Victorian culture, carrying the baggage of post-Enlightenment Eurocentricism and racial thinking" (Gikandi 170), Gikandi's key point is that they also strove to go beyond their own conditions of possibility. While

rehearsing the key tropes of Victorianism, they were also trying to adapt the moral culture of the nineteenth century to their own histories and experiences as colonial subjects, gesturing to “a post-Victorian frame of mind” (Gikandi 170). Although not always visible, this conceptual contestation was significant to the instigation of black nationalist thought in the nineteenth century. Throughout the period of Queen Victoria’s reign, colonial subjects worked hard “to transform colonial Victorianism into a discourse of their own liberation from imperialism” (Gikandi 168). In this sense, argues Gikandi, Victorianism was not a discourse or ideology that was simply imposed on the colonized; it was also a set of ideas and ideals that were deployed by colonial subjects as a means to a different end – their own freedom.

But that freedom proved a long way off and the subjects of these photographs would go to their graves, as would their children, before anything resembling freedom was eventually wrought for black South Africans⁹¹. “The images in this book record a specific historical catastrophe. They depict the rise and fall of a class of educated, urban, Christian Africans in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South Africa,” writes historian James T. Campbell in the epilogue of the recently published Steidl/Walther Collection publication, *The Black Photo Album/ Look at Me: 1890–1950*, recalling Hlonipha Mokoena’s aforementioned⁹² account of the life and times of the *kholwa* intellectual, Magera Fuze (Campbell). “By the end of the nineteenth century one could talk of an incipient class of educated and literate Africans, especially in what was then the Cape Colony,” she writes.

Although these individuals moved into various professions and occupations, as the products of mission education they collectively shared an identity of being both Christian and educated. They were *amakholwa*. Being an *ikhholwa* was a political and social, rather than just a religious identity. Above all by converting to Christianity and subscribing to progressive ideals of private property ownership, individual rights and the Protestant work ethic, the *amakholwa* within the limited political sphere of colonial governance acquired, according

⁹¹ Although they are often conflated in a South African context, the freedom to vote should not be confused with freedom in a broader sense – freedom from want; freedom to act, speak, move or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint... In this regard, *aluta continua* – the struggle continues.

⁹² Mokoena’s biography of Magera Fuze is discussed in the section of my introduction, subtitled *Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde: Victorian doubleness and colonial modernity*.

to their own understanding, the rights of British subjects... Yet, no sooner were these rights gained than they began to be eroded. Once the *kholwa* began to claim their rights as British subjects and to petition for their extension, successive colonial governments in the Cape and in Natal began, incrementally, to qualify and abrogate such rights as the *kholwa* had acquired. (Mokoena 20)

And so commenced the “historical catastrophe” about which James T. Campbell writes, which began with a renegeing on promised rights, and culminated in the centralisation of white rule, the unification of South Africa in 1910 and, ultimately, forty years of apartheid rule for South Africa. It is almost impossible to take in the *Black Photo Album* series to gaze into the eyes of the young couple posing in their Sunday best in front of a vase of fresh-cut flowers or at the dapper young gent with his boater hat, bowtie, finely twirled moustache and pipe without this history somehow playing itself through the photographs in variant notes of retrospective hypothesis and doom. At the same time that these images evidence self-determination, social mobility and buoyancy, they are also suffused with a deeply melancholic form of socio-political hindsight. “Looking at the images of tennis players, pipe-smoking dandies, gentlemen in riding breeches, ladies clutching parasols, brides and grooms and, later, flapper girls in collars and ties, one is reminded of the identity shift of Jews in Germany on the eve of the Nazi Holocaust,” writes Matthew Krouse in the *Mail & Guardian*. “Somehow history would soon teach them that prejudice does not bow to assimilation. Beyond the myriad images of happy families proudly posing for the camera lies something dark and brooding” (Krouse).

Diffusion/remixing: Remaking self and history

Mofokeng began working on this ongoing project of archival restitution in the late 1980s, and the *Black Photo Album* series was first exhibited in the late 1990s, perhaps most notably in 1997 as part of the second Johannesburg Biennale, *Trade Routes: History and Geography*, curated by Okwui Enwezor⁹³. Almost two decades have passed

⁹³ For further discussion in relation to *Trade Routes*, the second Johannesburg Biennale, see my conclusion.

since then, yet these photographs have retained their social magnetism. If anything, they have resurfaced quite dramatically on the international exhibition circuit in recent years. In 2010, Mofokeng's collection was acquired by the Tate Modern in London as part of the museum's new drive to extend its reach across the world by expanding its Collection to areas outside Europe and North America, including the Middle East, Asia, Latin America and Africa.⁹⁴ During 2012, the images were featured concurrently in *Chasing Shadows: Thirty Years of Photographic Essays*, a retrospective curated by Corinne Diserens at WAM (Wits Art Museum) in Johannesburg⁹⁵, and in Part One of curator Tamar Garb's *Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive*, a series of three shows at the Walther Collection in New York investigating historical and contemporary approaches to images of Africa⁹⁶. At the 2013 FNB Johannesburg Art Fair, Maker, Mofokeng's representative in South Africa, exhibited a selection of rare vintage silverprints hand printed by him between 1995 and 1997, prior to his presentation of *The Black Photo Album* as a slide projection installation for the Johannesburg Biennale in 1997. Moreover, the Steidl/Walther Collection publication, *The Black Photo Album/ Look at Me: 1890–1950*⁹⁷, was recently shortlisted for the Paris Photo Aperture Foundation Photo Book Award 2013 and won gold in the Kategorie Fotogeschichte of the Deutscher Fotobuchpreis 2014. It would be fair to say that this collection of photographs has been in high circulation in recent years, the object of fevered public debate, discussion and desire channeled by some of the most powerful agenda-setting cultural institutions in the European/African/American contemporary art nexus. The peak diffusion of this collection gives rise to the question: What fuels this widespread contemporary fascination with these archival photographs of black

⁹⁴ The Tate's fairly recently adopted transnational acquisition policy is discussed further in my conclusion.

⁹⁵ This Johannesburg showing was the fifth iteration of the exhibition, which originally opened at the Jeu de Paume in Paris in 2011, before travelling to Switzerland, Norway and Belgium.

⁹⁶ Interestingly, Part One of *Distance and Desire* (13 Sept. to 17 Nov. 2012) coincided with the *Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life*, curated by Rory Bester and Okwui Enwezor, at the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York (14 Sept. 2012 to 1 June 2013), and some of Mofokeng's documentary photographs were on view as part of the ICP exhibition.

⁹⁷ The book includes a full reproduction of *The Black Photo Album* slide projection, comprising 80 slides, along with a number of the original vintage images from which the slide-projected installation was produced. It also contains examples of some of the field notes originating from the research compiled by Santu Mofokeng while working on this ongoing project, as well as an extensive text by James T. Campbell of Stanford University.

colonial subjects in Victorian costumery?

A productive cue is offered by Neelika Jayawardane in an article on the programmatically diasporic blog site, *Africa is a Country*. Instead of routinely consigning all responses to the African photographic archive to “the overused phrase, the ‘colonial gaze’”, she writes, “I would rather find ways to exuberantly engage with that all knowing gaze and accompanying epistemologies on Africans” (Jayawardane).

In fact, young digital curators and photographers already are messing with those stock images of the native and the African, using Tumblr, Pinterest, and WordPress. That living digital archive may be where we need to head to next: these movable locations offer us platforms where we can actively engage with problematic archives – it is here that we can remark upon, question, and remake self and history. (Jayawardane)

There are two points that emerge from Jayawardane’s observation, the first in relation to the democratic, dialogic nature of online social media platforms and the live, performative public space they provide for people to take their personal and political concerns in relation to this body of work further, not just in discursive, linguistic terms, via blogs, articles and online commentary, but also visually, via graphically driven platforms like Pinterest, Instagram, Flickr, Tumblr, and YouTube. Her phrase “messing with these stock images” testifies to an online, open-source culture of visual licentiousness governed by an excitement in the innovative fertility of the viral remix rather than respect for the sanctity, purity or copyright of the original. This global media phenomenon has been written about by David Shields (*Reality Hunger*, 2010), Malcolm Gladwell (*Outliers*, 2008), Siva Vaidhyanathan (*Copyrights and Copywrongs: The Rise of Intellectual Property and How it Threatens Creativity*, 2003) Yokai Benkler (*The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, 2007), Lawrence Lessig (*Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*, 2008) and Lewis Hyde (*The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, 2007), among others, and is also the subject of New York-based filmmaker Kirby Ferguson’s four-part video series, *Everything is a Remix* (2010–2013). In this series, Ferguson claims that nothing is original, and illustrates the interconnectedness of creative production,

demonstrating how most celebrated creators – from Bob Dylan to Steve Jobs – borrow, steal and transform. Remix culture allows for and actively encourages derivative works to be forged through the combining and editing of existing material objects to produce new ones – and thrives on the transformation of old media into new media (Ferguson). Considering the folkloric emphasis of my core argument in relation to the ritual power of these artworks to facilitate social transformation, it is also worthwhile noting here that folk tales, songs, art and poetry have been in a constant state of revision and transformation across time through the folk process, in much the same way in which this process is currently unfolding online.

In light of the contemporary prevalence of remix culture, the second and third parts of the *Distance and Desire* show, which were devoted to “Contemporary Reconfigurations” and “Poetics and Politics”, were not an end in themselves, but a skillfully curated departure point for other even more immediately contemporary popular responses to the archives made visible by the exhibition. The second conceptual thread running through Jayawardane’s comment relates to her use of the words: “young”, “living”, “actively”. This emphasis on vitality and currency leads me to my next line of thought.

Contemplating the current fervour of curatorial interest in these images in relation to the viral popularity of Spoek Mathambo’s African-Gothic music video brings to mind the chorus from another Joy Division track, “Transmission” (1979), and the title of this chapter, “Live Transmission”, is borrowed from the lyrics of that song. In the context of the song, which was written in the 1970s, the phrase, “live transmission”, refers to a radio broadcast, but here I am adopting it in a more technologically immediate sense to describe the social effect of the twenty-first-century recuperation of these archival photographs and their dissemination via current circuits of public display and programming, which feeds into a secondary circuit of online articles and social media discussion groups⁹⁸.

⁹⁸ The *Distance and Desire* exhibition, for example, was accompanied by a symposium exploring African photography presented by the Walther Collection in collaboration with New York University and University College London. The symposium bridged the first installation, *Part I: Santu Mofokeng and A.M. Duggan-Cronin*, with the second, *Part II: Contemporary Reconfigurations*, as many of the works discussed and displayed overlapped.

Cumulatively the mediation of these images in the present tense invests them with a “live” effect. Not only have they been actively introduced into a transnational field of “live transmission”, their circulation and reception in the present moment forges a bridge to an elapsed moment in history – a time that has passed and might have been forgotten about if it were not for these photographs transmitting a charge of renewed public feeling to that bygone era. It is possible that this live charge might stem from a sense of agency or capacity for redress in virtually connected audiences – a feeling that they can *do* something with these photographs: post them, share them, “like” them, write back at them, talk back at them, project into them, visually remix them, defile them, honour them... In this regard, the public staging of these “problematic archives” presents contemporary viewers with a rare opportunity. As Jayawardane writes, “it is here that we can remark upon, question, and remake self and history” (Jayawardane).

Photograph and ghost

Thus far, I have focused on the implication encoded into the word “live” that the object being described is electrified, charged, powered, powered or active. Employed in relation to performances or broadcasts, the word “live” also gives the sense of it being not recorded, but personal, in the flesh, which is pertinent to the idea of these images being instances of “aesthetic embodiment”. However, driven by the mystic tenor of this project and by Mofokeng’s sustained commitment to photographing the spiritual aspects and rites that shape everyday life in South Africa, there are further connotations to the word “live” that I am keen to excavate here. In its most animate sense, “live” refers to the fact of being alive, having life, breathing, being sentient. In this sense, it is the opposite of being “dead”, expired, departed, extinct, lost, lamented – or, when used in relation to language itself; obsolete, defunct, disused, abandoned, forgotten – not modern or current. Bearing the fullness of these meanings in mind, I argue that these photographs perform a similar function to the nineteenth-century *séance*, staging moments of desired contact between the living and the dead. In reanimating memories that were in threat of obsolescence, the activation of these

photographs builds a bridge between the departed and the sentient – establishing a third space of pastness that has potency and charge in the present.

Although it is possible to seek for meaning in their broader context, some of the photographs that comprise *The Black Photo Album* are freighted with eerie silences and absences – an abiding sense that these are not the sitters themselves, but photographic surrogates for the human beings who were once living breathing human beings like ourselves, but who are now gone from this world. As incomplete historical residues or haunting traces of their subjects, these portraits are not dissimilar to the spirit traces of the departed. “When Walter Benjamin discussed the vanishing auras of artworks in the age of mechanical reproduction, he was alluding to just such spirits,” writes Paul Landau in *Images and Empires* (23).

Recognising a spectre presupposes its superannuation as natural meaning in life. The aura of a person means either personality or ghost, does it not? In Africa, these are often kindred concepts: the essence of personhood and the chimerical reflection of the outward self. It was frequently the second phenomenon, the human image, that was thought to survive after death as a ‘ghost’. In Zulu, for instance, ‘isithunzi’ means reflexive self, double or image, and is often given as ‘shadow’. When it was used in ways that missionaries recognised as referencing the past, the same notion became ‘ancestor’ (idlozi). Similar to ‘isithunzi’, the word ‘modimo’ in Tswana located a person as a fading but ever more powerful and inclusive memory, a ‘shade’. Note the association between image and self in these ideas... In many African languages, the word for photographic ‘negative’ is the same as for ‘ghost or dead spirit’, and that photos have been in many places integrated into ancestor veneration. (Landau 23)

Firstly, it is fascinating that in this discussion of the relation between image and self, photograph and ghost, Landau turns to the word “isithunzi”. Recalling Chapter Two of this thesis, “Isithunzi” (shadows) is the title of the central installation of Nicholas Hlobo’s *Umtshotsho* work, which features eight ghostly figures in a darkened room. Some are free-standing, some are seated on a couch in the parlour – not unlike the sitters in the *Black Photo Album* collection. The uncanny echoes across these two bodies of work lend credence to the idea of the subject as ghost and the artwork as medium, but also, in their shared parlour-room settings, recall the hovering presence of the Victorians. When Landau makes the observation that “that photos have been in

many places integrated into ancestor veneration”, he makes it in relation to African cultures, but it might equally apply to the Victorians, whose elaborate mourning rituals involved jewellery, ornate cemeteries and, more significantly here, photography. Far from an occasional morbid afterthought, Victorian postmortem photography was a common practice that came into currency after the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839, when portraiture became more affordable and commonplace. These photographs might have included the corpse alone or with the family. In “spirit photography”, which focused more on the mourner than the mourned, “the basic composition of each is the same: a centralized sitter (the camera’s focal point) with a ‘spirit’ hovering to the left or right of the frame” (Cadwallar 14). Since “physical displays of grief were undesirable in both men and women” (Cadwallar 16), these photographs gave mourners a way to grieve, while assuring them that there was an after-life. Post-mortem photographs served as keepsakes to remember the dead; most especially infants and young children. The popularity of this practice is not surprising considering the prevalence and visceral immediacy of death during the Victorian era, when life expectancy rates were low and infant mortality rates were high. With limited recourse to medical assistance or safe hospitals, Victorians mostly had to attend to their own dying family members within their households, so death and dying were an integral part of their lives. For those who had dealt so directly with the death of a relative, “highly conventionalized social customs and funerary rituals eased the transition from the deathbed to the bed that is the grave” (Wheeler 5). From burial clubs to home care, the prevalence and social immediacy of death in the Victorian era recalls contemporary township practices in relation to death and dying. Although AIDS-related mortality rates in sub-Saharan Africa began to decline in 2005, hundreds of thousands of South Africans have died since the first cases of HIV/AIDS thirty years ago (World Health Organisation), which were met by an initial two decades of counterproductive government policy in response to the epidemic. This death-steeped⁹⁹ social climate might offer some insight into the Dickensian overtones

⁹⁹ “The adult mortality rate is still three times higher in South Africa than in middle-income countries with similar income per capita... The poor are particularly vulnerable, and high HIV and AIDS infection rates, as well as TB infections, have severely strained the health system, contributing to the poor health indicators.” (“South Africa Overview”)

at play in Mathambo's "Control" video, which features a group of young township boys under the spell of an evangelist preacher in a white suit. With a Christian cross embroidered into the preacher's tie, angels, tombstones, hell fire and brimstone, the video's graveyard gothic aesthetic is unmistakably Victorian. But the baptismal ritual of being dunked in water references African Zionist practices, while the white pigment on the boys' skin references Xhosa initiation ceremonies. Replete with eye-rolling possession, epileptic fits and zombie dances, the video is hi-energy, beat-driven and ultra-contemporary. It is also deeply syncretic, its aesthetics drawing freely on a combination of Christian and animist traditions, Victorian and African tropes. In this sense, the video again recalls *The Black Photo Album* collection. My point here is that, whether it is through the medium of literature (Dickens), photography (Victorian post-mortem photography and cartes de visite; *The Black Photo Album* photographs) or video (Spook Mathambo's "Control"), aesthetics play a key roll in mediating people's responses and reactions to the dead – particularly in times or places that are saturated in a culture of death. Reflecting on the recurrent theme of death and dying in Charles Dickens's writing, John Kucich writes: "Dickens's undisguised fascination with death reflects an entire social climate, for the Victorians invented cemeteries, mourning stores, and burial clubs" (59). This might equally apply to contemporary Soweto or Capricorn Park.

But there is another Victorian writer whose pagan prose pertains even more hauntingly to the notion of aesthetics serving as a vector of communication between the living and the dead. The clue lies in the title of the recent Walther Collection exhibition that showcased Mofokeng's collection. When asked how she arrived at the title, *Distance and Desire*, curator Tamar Garb responded:

The title came to me very intuitively, as a way of distilling a huge amount of material in two suggestive terms. Distance invokes travel, geographic dichotomies, estrangement, otherness, and separation in time. Whereas desire implies proximity, closeness, affect, and unfulfilled longing. Both of these terms are in play in this series of exhibitions in multiple, open-ended ways. The title raises questions of who is distant from whom and what is near to where, opening up the relationship between past and present, near and far. (Garb)

But bearing in my mind my reading of *The Black Photo Album* project as an instance of post-Victorian embodiment, it is apposite to note here that ‘Distance and Desire’ is also the title of J. Hillis Miller’s landmark study of thematic unity in the life and works of the Victorian realist writer Thomas Hardy, who, like Dickens, was fiercely critical of many aspects of Victorian society. “Miller evaluates Hardy’s main interests – music, painting, architecture, local Dorset customs, and *things of a funereal or psychic nature* as they relate to his narrative point of view,” writes M. Lynn Seitz in *Victorian Poetry*.

The narrator is simultaneously at one with the thoughts and emotions of the characters, and intimate with the minutiae of their everyday lives, past and present, over which he hovers like a cosmic ghost. Miller explains this as desire on Hardy’s part to conceptualise historic time and eternity artistically, to “bring into the present that which always seems at a distance” because “to be conscious is to be separated; which is to say that if a person, real or fictive, is conscious of himself, he has therefore separated himself from the world of man in which he is forever doomed to play a part. (Seitz, 359.)

Seitz’s observation regarding Hardy’s interest in “things of a funereal or psychic nature” recalls my point in the introduction to this thesis regarding the pagan, folkloric aspects of English nineteenth-century working class culture, which rarely translate into popular postcolonial accounts of South African history. Driven by an insistent sense of an entangled South African inheritance of superstition, magic and belief, I argue that *The Black Photo Album* functions in a similar way to Hardy’s prose enabling contemporary viewers to “conceptualise historic time” and “bringing into the present that which seems at a distance”. Moreover, there is at play in these images, a certain “transgressive seductiveness” (Gikandi 180) – an attractiveness that stems from the pride and confidence with which the stylish sitters in these portraits have chosen to represent themselves. The contemporary circulation of this series in relation to Andrew Putter’s *Native Work* series which was exhibited in tandem with *Black Photo Album* as part of the aforementioned *Distance and Desire* exhibition, highlights the ideologically fraught pleasure associated with seeing nineteenth-century black bodies enrobed in white Victorian costumery, hinting at a disavowed and underwritten level of historical entanglement that was intimate and embodied – as close and personal as cloth touching skin. While acknowledging that the colonies provided “a porno-tropics

for the European imagination – a fantastic magic lantern of the mind into which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears” (McClintock, 22), perhaps there is also some progressive potential inherent in the sensuousness of difference. But any hint of excitement at the thought that our ancestors might in fact have been into each other is quickly undercut by an attendant sense of melancholia at the way that things did turn out. “Are these mere solemn relics of disrupted narratives, or are these images expressive of the general human predicament?” asks Mofokeng in his interstitial text. Rather than providing any answers, these ghostly portraits leave the viewer with further hovering questions. What if history had played out differently? What if this integrationist spirit had been nurtured rather than policed? What kind of mixed moderns would be we now?

University of Cape Town

Conclusion

Somatic utopias

*The body is not a thing, it's a situation; it is our grasp on the world
and a sketch of our project.*

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949)¹⁰⁰

The “aesthetic” is a slippery notion, with a convoluted history in Western philosophy, writes Frances E. Mascia-Lees in the introduction to her recent vital volume on the anthropology of the body and embodiment. In the eighteenth century, Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762) borrowed the term from the Greek *aisthētikós* – “perceptive by feeling” – to name his new science of sense experience. However, shortly after that, “due to the complex socioeconomic and political context in which the discourse of the aesthetic was deployed” (Mascia-Lees 3), Kant (1724–1804) reconceptualised it to mean almost its opposite: a disinterested, distanced, contemplative, and objectifying act of consciousness (Buck-Morss 1992 and Eagleton 1991). So, even though “aesthetics was born as a discourse of the body” (Eagleton 13), denoting corporeal, material nature (Buck-Morss 6), it was transformed at the outset to stand for the rational act of good judgment (i.e. taste) about art and the beauties of nature, and ultimately to a theory of art and beauty. In this understanding of the term, art is considered to be “an autonomous realm of human endeavour separate from social, political, and economic constraints” (Mascia-Lees 3).

It is the Kantian notion of the aesthetic as autonomous, removed from normal needs and desires, that has been under critique in the academy for three decades. Critics argue that this construction renders experience transcendent, universal, and ahistorical, when it is actually a handmaiden of privilege masking political interests. Bourdieu (1984) famously critiques Kant’s conceptualisation,

¹⁰⁰ (Beauvoir 34) Along with other phenomenologists, particularly Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, De Beauvoir recognizes that “to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world” (Beauvoir 39).

exposing his notion of aesthetic appreciation as a form of cultural capital that constructs class identity and maintains class privilege through distinctions in 'taste'. (Maschia-Lees 3 4)

She goes on to trace a long critical trajectory initiated by Marx and taken up by the contemporary anthropology of the senses. Theorists ranging from Walter Benjamin (1968) to Raymond Williams (1978), Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1979), Jean Baudrillard (1983), Frederic Jameson (1984), Mike Featherstone (1991), Susan Buck-Morss (1992) and David Howes (2005), have enumerated the logics by which aesthetics have become the tool of consumer capitalism, numbing and anaesthetizing the senses through an increasingly hyper-mediated onslaught of messages coated in alluring surfaces. This long tradition of cultural Marxism is focused on the political liabilities associated with the everyday commodification of aesthetics and its capacity to create passive, politically inert consumers through tactics of sensory overstimulation.

But Maschia-Lees sketches this critical trajectory by way of arriving at an alternate strain of political thought in relation to aesthetics and embodiment. Her chapter focuses instead on thinkers like Merleau-Ponty (1964, 1996) and Thomas Csordas (1993) who approach the aesthetic as a way of being-in-the-world, re-asserting the generative, adrenalizing power inherent in the Greek roots of the word; *aisthētikós* – “perceptive by feeling”. For Csordas, the art object can contribute to the shaping of an alternative orientation to the world by bringing together affect and intellect in an aesthetic sensibility that produces a particular “somatic mode of attention” (135). Similarly, Merleau-Ponty understands the aesthetic as a means through which humans “respond to forms, shapes and colour... in ways that take on a life of their own and open themselves up to metaphoric meaning” (*The Primacy of Perception* 123). Our tactile experience of the world is what allows us to perceive and logically make sense of our material environment, he argues. “It is through my body that I go to the world, and tactile experience occurs ‘ahead’ of me, and is not centered in me. It is not I who touch; it is my body,” he writes (*Phenomenology of Perception* 316).

To focus attention on Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the aesthetic and to differentiate it from other modes of embodiment, Maschia-Lees, employs the term “aesthetic embodiment” (7). In the context of this study, it is vital to note that she

arrives at this compound term through an applied study of the contemporary American revival of the Arts and Crafts movement which first arose in nineteenth-century Britain (1880–1910) as a reaction to the exploding consumerism and heightened sensory overstimulation of the period. Perhaps even more illuminating though is the crucial link she forges between William Morris and Walter Benjamin, whose *Theses on the Philosophy of History* underpinned the introduction to this thesis.

The original Arts and Craft Movement was rooted in Marxist philosophy, which tethered the political to the aesthetic “by locating beauty in non-alienated labour; celebrating equality, community and immersion in the details of daily life; and linking respect for others with an aesthetic sensibility” (Mascia-Lees 8). The philosophical tenets that underlie the Arts and Crafts Movement inform the discourse of theorists of the “aestheticisation of everyday life”, such as Benjamin, who, like other cultural Marxists, was influenced by the thinking of the founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement, William Morris (1834–1896), a pioneer and leader of revolutionary socialism in fin-de-siècle Britain.

Morris’s claim for the uniqueness of art objects against the mechanical fragmentation of aesthetic experience provides the foundations for Benjamin’s later aesthetic critiques, while Morris’s articulation of pleasure, desire, beauty, and socialism resurfaces in theorists within Western Marxism, such as Guy Debord¹⁰¹. Thus, Morris’s ideas are important for understanding... some of the fundamental ideas of cultural Marxism that have framed “aestheticization of everyday life arguments”. Starting with Morris, rather than, for example, Adorno, alerts us to an alternative way of thinking about the relationship of the senses to consumer capitalism. Starting with Morris, rather than, for example, Adorno, alerts us to an alternate way of thinking about the relationship of the senses to consumer capitalism. (Mascia-Lees 8)

In turning to the trajectory of theories around “aesthetic embodiment” to bolster my argument in relation to the generative, affective power of these post-Victorian artworks and their capacity to shift social perception, it is exhilarating to note that this strain of thinking can be traced back to Morris, one of the most actively radical artists of the Victorian period. And yet, even as we recall Morris and his zealous efforts to break

¹⁰¹ Also germane to this study, Debord’s critique of the commodity fetishism of consumer culture, *The Society of the Spectacle* was cited in my introduction.

down the notorious Victorian separation between the public and private spheres, the factory and the home, the workplace and the family through arts and craft production within the domestic sphere (Mascia-Lees and Sharpe 2000), it is critical not to lose sight of the dark flipside to the Victorian legacy in South Africa.

There is a zombie aspect to the Victorian political inheritance in Africa; in one sense it is a long-gone, mortified chapter of distant history, but in another its gangrenous body continues to live, haunting the carved-up landscape, spasmodically influencing the political and social realities of the day. This spectral legacy demands imaginative responses. By employing aesthetics in a consciously bodily, sensual, overblown fashion, I argue, it is these artists' express intention to address the numbed body in ideological torpor, enlivening the cells with a fresh rush of outlandish possibility; to rethink and undo aesthetic codes of racial and gender binarism that have been besieging the popular psych since the not-so-long gone days of empire. Key to the production and reception of these artworks are strategies of embodiment, from the full-body cast that constitutes Mary Sibande's fantastical sculptural alter-ego, Sophie, to the live tattooing performance by Kathryn Smith in a darkened faux Victorian salon in the bowels of the Johannesburg Art Gallery with its grand colonial architecture. My incantation of the aesthetic as a somatically grounded, culturally mediated, affective encounter also serves to situate these artworks within the recent turn toward embodied and performative practice in South African visual arts over the past decade.

The “live art” turn

The tactics of embodiment common to these artworks reflect a broader turn towards “live art” in the South African visual arts arena. Combining aspects of dance, performance and physical theatre, this practice has been in clear ascendance since 2004, when choreographer Jay Pather¹⁰² directed twenty-four South African dancers in a performance on the steps of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine to mark the opening of *Personal Affects*, a large exhibition that arguably forged a newly receptive

¹⁰² An associate professor at the University of Cape Town, Pather has been a key force in the diffusion of trans-disciplinary performance in South Africa. He has played a role in bringing about many of the events mentioned as part of the following brief chronology.

space for the circulation of South African contemporary art in New York. While there is an explicitly performance-based aspect to Hlobo and Kabwe's work, Sibande and Smith's work can also be clearly located within this broader body-centric trajectory of practice¹⁰³ pioneered by Steven Cohen and encompassing a range of artists from Robin Rhode, to Tracey Rose, Berni Searle, Thando Mama, Julia Raynham, Nelisiwe Xaba, Athi-Patra Ruga, Lerato Shadi, Murray Kruger, Gabrielle Goliath, Bettina Malcomess, Gerald Machona, Johan Thom, Vaughn Sadie, Peter van Heerden, Mohau Modisakeng, Anthea Moys and others.

The year, 2007, seems to have been landmark moment in the unfolding trajectory of performance practice in South Africa. That year, Thom led a performance-art workshop at the Bag Factory Artists' Studios, which culminated in an event that spilled out into the streets of Fordsburg, a gritty post-industrial suburb on the western fringe of downtown Johannesburg. The same year saw *Cape 07*, a multi-sited urban art event, unfolding across the city of Cape Town. But the game-changing happening for performance art in South Africa was the inaugural Spier Contemporary art event. Hosted by the Africa Centre, which was established in 2005 to "provide a new arts and cultural voice in Africa, for Africans" (Pather 1), this massive live-art driven exhibition unfolded in and around a series of giant orange shipping containers that touched down on the rolling green fields of a wine estate outside of Stellenbosch like a UFO landing in the Nevada desert. One of the award winners that inaugural year was none other than Mwenya Kabwe, who participated in a three-way collaboration, *U nyamo alunampumlo (the foot has no nose)*, with actor Chuma Sopotela and artist Kemang wa Lehulere. Kabwe wore a white wedding dress, while Sopotela appeared naked, her body painted black¹⁰⁴.

New interdisciplinary visual languages have continued to be nurtured in Cape

¹⁰³ Studio photography offers them a way to inhabit and activate their work in embodied self-reflexive ways. Smith and Sibande's Standard Bank Young Artist Award exhibitions both featured large photographs of them wearing fantastical retro-futurist costumes that connected them in a direct and physical way to the other sculptural and photographic artworks on show.

¹⁰⁴ The whiteness of Kabwe's wedding dress and Sopotela's painted skin recalls my discussion in Chapter One concerning the hyper-real blackness of Mary Sibande's alter ego, Sophie, and in Chapter Five concerning the self-consciously staged erotics of white Victorian costumery on black skin.

Town by events like the annual *Infecting the City* performance art festival and the GIPCA (Gordon Institute for Performing and Creative Arts) Live Art Festival, which was initiated in 2012 as “the only festival of its kind on the continent dedicated to showcasing innovative Live Art coming out of Africa”. Meanwhile, at a national level, the category of performance art was officially included on the National Arts Festival’s main programme in 2012. For a long time, the annual Standard Bank Young Artist awards covered only four categories: jazz, dance, visual art and music. But in 2013, performance art was introduced to the mix for the first time. The inaugural winner, Anthea Moys, broke new ground for the genre in South Africa with an unusually popular and participative series of performances, *Anthea Moys vs the City of Grahamstown*.

This turn toward performative practice seems to have accelerated substantially since the watershed 1997 Johannesburg Biennale organized by Okwui Enwezor, a pivotal moment in the transnational take-up of South African contemporary art into international circuits of currency. So the performative turn dovetails with an era of increased global circulation of South African artists and art practice, highlighted by the relatively new focus on Africa by the Tate galleries in London. “Since the building of the great modern art museums in New York, Paris and London, the narrative of 20th-century and contemporary art has been told, by and large, through the stories of European and North American cities,” wrote Charlotte Higgins in *The Guardian* in response to the announcement of this new curatorial strategy in 2012. “But the Tate galleries in London have announced that it is time to look further afield... Tate will reflect its new international focus through a two-year programme of activities focused on Africa” (Higgins). The article quotes Tate director Sir Nicholas Serota as saying:

There is not a crisis in British or European art, but we are conscious that art is being made across the world and those areas outside Europe and North America cannot be regarded as periphery. We are recognising that we need to collect across the world. There is no single centre for modern and contemporary art and it certainly isn’t London or New York. (Higgins)

Although Tate had been actively collecting from outside Europe and North America for the decade preceding 2012, the appointment of Elvira Dyangani Ose, a curator who specialises in African art at the Tate, marked a landmark moment for the circulation of African art on the international circuit. Dyangani Ose was quick to pre-emptively deflect any neo-colonial accusations that might be leveled at the Tate: “It is important for African art to be part of a major international narrative,” she said. “We are not taking everything out of Africa, but we need to tell the whole story of modernity” (Higgins).

Bearing in mind this temporal crossover between the “live art” turn and the increased global presence of African art on the global circuit, let us turn for a moment to a recent article exploring the prevalence of performance art in South Africa by journalist Sean O’Toole. By way of explaining the performative turn, O’Toole calls on an observation by RoseLee Goldberg, the Durban-born founder of the New York performance art biennial, *Performa*. By the mid-1980s, media-friendly and spectacle-obsessed performance was entrenched in the American mainstream art scene, writes Goldberg in her influential book, *Performance Art: From futurism to the present* (1988). “More accessible, the new work showed attention to décor – costumes, sets and lighting – and to more traditional and familiar vehicles such as cabaret, vaudeville, theatre and opera” (O’Toole “Welcome to the cabaret of art”). The implication here is that South African artists are mimicking a trend encountered in metropolitan practice abroad, and considering the widespread tendency among South African artists to reproduce innovations and simulate styles that have originated elsewhere, this argument does ring true. But the fevered prevalence of embodied practice in South Africa evidences a more urgent and local departure point for the genre – one that is articulated, in part, by Goldberg in a text that was published as part of the *Spier Contemporary 2007* catalogue.

With its profusion of languages and traditions, whether Zulu, Xhosa, Hindu or Muslim, Western art history is at a considerable remove, and while still influential in art schools and universities, it does not have the inhibiting hold that it does on young artists closer to the metropolitan centres of London, Berlin or New York. South Africans are entirely used to the song and dance of

daily life, to the quick stepping on the streets of political activism as much as to the celebrations of rites of passage of indigenous religions, to the music, television and popular culture that reflects the rainbow nation. It is this cacophonous soundtrack that is a constant to the creative forces of artists in all media, and performance art... is a vivid mirror of these exciting times.
(Goldberg 236-237)

Even in the light of the take up of practice-led research within the context of the post-colonial university, it is worth remembering that academic research is not the same thing as direct experience. Research is not the same thing as bearing witness to another body moving through a form of metamorphosis – experienced internally by the first person and willfully made visible to the third person – the observer of the spectacle. When the action occurs, the third person spectator is, at the same time, the first person, because we are all the first person unto ourselves – experiencing and narrating the world through the radically morphous intimacy of our personhood, our bodies. It is quite possible to close off the body to the power of the performance – render ourselves closed to it. But if we make ourselves receptive, open ourselves up to its relational power, its potential to affect us, our bodies might respond in a language of their own. In this sense, performance art might be understood as language outside of language in a country with no less than eleven official languages, and much bloodshed between them. In a country where racial and sexual differences have been so strongly reinforced and subjectively internalised, performance provides an alternate language to speak the body into being. It is against this backdrop that the autobiographical strategies of performance and embodiment have become a key departure point for so many new media artworks interrogating identity, gender, sexuality, history and language itself, as it plays out in our everyday social relations.

Post-traumatic fantasy

At the close of 2012, with rekindled Mayan rumours of apocalypse in the ether, Stevenson gallery in Cape Town mounted a show that functioned as a kind of rear guard action against the mounting sense of global doom. This third exhibition in the

gallery's year-long *Trade Routes* project paid homage to the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale, the impact of which can still be felt in the global art world today. The exhibition was called *Fiction as Fiction (or, a Ninth Johannesburg Biennale)* and ran from 29 November until 12 January 2013. Curated by Joost Bosland, one of the key features of *Fiction as Fiction* was its inventive, utopian thrust. Reigniting a shared desire to re-script the story was a fitting tribute to an event that was so bold in its intentions it seemed to spontaneously combust. The biennale organised by Okwui Enwezor in 1997 was a pivotal moment in the presentation of contemporary art in South Africa. Yet, while unexpected cities across the earth went on to host biennales galore, South Africa was destined to look back on that fin-de-siècle moment of transnational connectivity as a haunting kind of Ozymandian ruin. "How would (local) art history have been altered if the Johannesburg Biennale had not ceased to exist? What if we imagine there was a third incarnation in 1999? A fourth in 2001? A fifth, after some delay, in 2004? A ninth in 2012?" reads the exhibition text that accompanied Bosland's show. It was around this fabulously fictive premise of a ninth biennale that the exhibition was curated. And true to Enwezor's bold mix of artists from across the moving planet, part of the excitement of the exhibition was experiencing the visual ideas of South African headliners in dialogue with artists who are stinging current on the international circuit, from Yto Barrada (Paris/Tangier) to Ângela Ferreira (Maputo/Lisbon), Robin Rhode (Cape Town/Berlin), Lynette Yiadom-Boakye (London) and Yang Fudong (Shanghai) and Yael Bartana (Tel Aviv/Amsterdam). It was no coincidence that Nicholas Hlobo was one of the artists featured as part of this exhibition. One of his lushly obscene rubber forms, *Tyaphaka* (2012), dominated an entire room of the gallery. Viewers had to move around this sprawling blubbery mass of waste material (rubber, ribbon, hosepipe, packaging material) and step over dark umbilical chords strewn across the floor to navigate their way through the gallery space. Drawing on the bewitching power of Hlobo's work to make his curatorial argument, Bosland writes:

To the extent that mythology and metaphor illuminate reality, they cannot be said to be fictional in any straightforward sense. The reliance of Nicholas Hlobo on the content and structure of Xhosa mythology allows him to speak of South Africa today. Yang Fudong uses Chinese mythology and cinematic history to create a haunting atmosphere in *The Nightman Cometh*. Neither artist provides a

clear narrative – rather, they let the symbolism of mythology speak for itself. Yael Bartana shows how fiction also allows the exploration of real, pressing moral questions. This capacity is especially important when dealing with historical events of which the sheer magnitude eclipses reality, such as the Holocaust or the bombing of Hiroshima. (Bosland, 161)

Each of the selected artists on this exhibition seemed to be pursuing an unapologetically subjective hunch or an outlandish social fantasy through to its fully realised, material form. So much so that the intertextual space between the artworks became charged with the phrase “what if...?”

“The energy of the show seemed to be derived less from dead-end deconstruction than from a zealous impulse toward the construction of fresh fables, stirring new cultural mythologies and imaginative starting points for hypothetical histories,” I note in a review of the exhibition for *Art South Africa* magazine. “History is, after all, the prime fiction, its bewitching monumentality eternally begging for unruly comebacks” (Dodd 62). So, in addition to situating the objects of this study within the South African turn toward “live art” and performativity, I also read them as being part of a broader embrace of fantasy and utopian projection as a narrative response to the ongoing violent contractions of an avowedly post-traumatic culture. In a recent co-authored essay for *Third Text* about a range of South African artworks¹⁰⁵ that were forged in response to the wave of xenophobic violence that erupted across the country in 2008, I observe a similar embrace of self-consciously absurd or fantastical modes of figuration. Almost in defiance of the literalism that governs South Africa’s strong legacy of social realist literature and documentary photography, these contemporary artworks seem to militate for more complex understandings of the impulses that fuel the violence against so-called others in our midst by turning the lens away from those suffering from the violence of prejudice and inwards for a confrontation with the precarious limits of our own individual and group identity. “If there is any binding impulse or shared strategy that informs this diversity of contemporary responses, it might be described as a reluctance to revert to directly representational modes of documentary figuration which are tainted by a heritage of

¹⁰⁵ These works include Terry Kurgan’s *Hotel Yeoville* (2010), Nadine Hutton’s *Alien Invasion (or) Burning People is as South African as Braai vleis* (2009) and Dan Halter’s *Beitbridge Space Invader* (2009).

colonial representations of the other and an incapacity to shake off the unequal author/subject power relations implicit in the ethnographic gaze,” I write.

In their efforts to navigate contested identity discourses in South Africa in ways that emphasize subjectivity and personal identity, these artworks make new kinds of visual sense. But perhaps more crucial than these obliquely shared formal strategies is the glaring diversity of ways in which these projects inhabit and explore the personal particularities of a deeply creolized and cosmopolitan culture. In resisting absolutist conceptualizations of national identity based on ancestry and racial purity, they signal a crucial shift toward a new kind of postcolonial awareness of the particularities of difference and foreignness – not only all about us, but within us. (Dodd 354)

The fantastical re-inscriptions encoded into these five retro-futurist bodies of work play directly into questions of sexuality and desire. In their depictions of homosexual alienation, queer desire, black women with magisterial superpowers and tennis playing metrosexual dandies whose camp insouciance belies the oppressive bureaucratic constrictions of their time, these visual fantasies are laced with decidedly queer and feminist overtones. But far from being merely frivolous or playful, these embodied visual representations actively hit back at a culture fraught with brutal homophobia, demeaning postcolonial nationalist discourses around homosexuality, and wide-spread violence against women, all amounting to “an unacknowledged gender civil war” (Moffett).

“En mal d’archive”

At this point I return to the conceptual weave between two key texts cited in my introduction, Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1996) and Achille Mbembe’s *On the Postcolony* (2001). There are several catalytic notions articulated by Derrida in his extended meditation on remembrance, religion, time and technology that have crucial bearing on the excessive, sensual, hyperbolic qualities of the artworks under discussion here. Firstly the incantatory, spell-like tone of Derrida’s text and his insistence, on the psychic fluidity of the words “impression” and “notion” are very much in keeping with my emphasis on the social power of the affective. In his

deconstructive analysis of the notion of archive Derrida speaks of the “archive effect” or the “archio-nomological event” as “an instant, which dislocates the linear order of presents”. Echoing Derrida’s emphasis on the temporal dislocation of the archive effect, Achille Mbembe notes in “Time on the Move”, the introduction to his landmark text, *On the Postcolony*, that:

Research on Africa has hardly stood out for its attempts to integrate nonlinear phenomena into its analyses... [Yet] there is a close relationship between subjectivity and temporality that in some way, one can envisage subjectivity itself as temporality. Every age, including the postcolony, is in reality a combination of several temporalities... This time is not a series but an interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures... As an age, the postcolony encloses multiple durées made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another and envelope one another: an *entanglement*... To focus on [a] time of entanglement [is] to repudiate not only linear models, but the ignorance that they maintain and the extremism to which they have repeatedly given rise. (16)

These artworks by Sibande, Hlobo, Kabwe, Smith and Mofokeng visually, physically embody this thrilling sense, as articulated by Derrida and Mbembe, of “subjectivity as temporality” and of time as an “interlocking of pasts, presents and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts and futures”. While Sibande’s work has enabled her to transcend an intimate familial history of servitude by creating a fantastical larger than life alter-ego that collapses the maid/madam binary by subversively reinventing nineteenth century costumery, Hlobo continues to grapple with an entanglement of his Xhosa heritage and his cosmopolitan gay identity in increasingly operatic performance-based installations. Meanwhile, Smith’s embodied explorations of intertwined nineteenth-century narratives of criminality and art has led her to mysterious clues concerning her own ancestral origins.

Derrida’s exploration of the phylo-genetic, trans-generational aspects of the archival impulse lends credence to each artist’s use of art production as a means of initiating oblique conversations with their ancestral dead in Sibande’s case with the matrilineal line of domestic workers in her family, in Hlobo’s case with Xhosa tradition more generally, in Smith’s case, with the way forensic art practice has led to the discovery that her great-grandfather hailed from Whitechapel, an area she has

obsessively explored via her exploration of Walter Sickert's entanglement in the Jack the Ripper murders. Kabwe and Mofokeng are slight exceptions here in that their work is less directly autobiographical, but tactics of embodiment and temporal collapse are central to the ancestral dialogues triggered by their work, which unfolds in broader cultural and symbolic terms.

For me, the two most apposite ideas to emerge from Derrida's text are his exhortation, in the opening quote of this thesis, that archives have more bearing on the future than on the past and, perhaps even more crucially, his articulation of the archival impulse as a "fever" or "desire". Apprehending Derrida's ideas in relation to the selected artworks by Sibande, Hlobo, Kabwe, Smith and Mofokeng, it becomes clear how interlocked and mutually dependent these two notions might be. For it is the embodied, erotic, sensual immediacy of these artworks that enables us to experience first hand the 'collapsed temporality' about which Derrida and Mbembe speak. "We are *en mal d'archive*: in need of archives," writes Derrida:

To be *en mal d'archive* is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from the searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive even if there's too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. No desire, no passion, no drive, no compulsion, indeed no repetition compulsion, no 'mal de' can arise for a person who is not already, in one way or another, *en mal d'archive*. (80)

The heady, obsessive madness of desire that infects Derrida's prose here is, for me, experienced as a kind of embodied cognition in the hyper-contemporary retrospective reveries at play in these fevered century-crossing intertexts. Each of these bodies of work has about it a sense of heat, madness and excess – a sense of the kind of raging compulsive passion that is triggered by an immediate physical sense of newness, risk and possibility. With reference to Thomas Hirschhorn's proposition that alternative moments can play an important role in reclaiming the world "according to the biases of individual commitments", Charles Merewether describes the "counter-monument" or "counter-archive" as "a form of recollection of that which has been silenced and

buried”, “standing against the monumental history of the state” (16). By exciting our imaginations in wildly unexpected ways, by collapsing linear chronologies in a Derridean fever of impassioned alterity, I believe these century-crossing intertexts make a crucial shift away from melancholic understandings of a post-traumatic, post-apartheid culture. Each of these bodies of work embodies “a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter-memory”, which “harbours the possibility of an unexpected utopian dimension” (Merewether 14). In bringing unresolved psychic aspects of the past into the breathless present and manifesting them in forms that affront our sensibilities and arouse our fascination, these artworks present us with an opportunity to experience the past as unstable and malleable – ecstatically open to an unscripted future.

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