BOGASATSWANA: Redbuilding the Boat while Sailing

Thebe Phetogo

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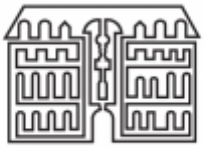

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DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree.

It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Signed by candidate Date:

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Thebe Phetogo - *Bogasatswana: Rebuilding the Boat while Sailing*

Bogasatswana: Rebuilding the Boat while Sailing, is an attempt to both transmit and disrupt a story-world whose make-up is based on my country of origin, Botswana. It is an exercise in worldbuilding through painting, wherein I establish post-colonial Botswana as a fictional place.

The project's title, *Bogasatswana,* comes from inserting the Setswana verb *gasa,* which can mean either to scatter or broadcast, into "Botswana". This, I believe, lends support to the aims of the project which include showcasing (broadcasting) my viewpoint as a Motswana while disrupting (scattering) aspects of Botswana's prescribed history. The subtitle "*Rebuilding the Boat While Sailing*" is taken from a Dana Schutz painting title "Building the Boat While Sailing" (2012) which depicts – exactly as the title says – figures in the process of building a raft or boat while it is already in the water. Like several of Schutz's other paintings this work can be seen as an allegory for the act of producing a painting. My goal is to extend this metaphor to include the act of building a world and, as when solving a mathematical equation, show my working in the building of said world. The addition of the prefix re- to this title was made as I focused my worldbuilding efforts to certain key concepts that I will discuss in this text, retroactive continuity being one of them. Through my research and practical work, I came to acknowledge that the "boat" I was building comprised of the parts of an already existing vessel.

My interest in this reinterpreting or remaking Botswana's history arose from several interrelated concerns which I will lay out below. My Postgraduate Diploma body of work, titled "*NGWOW*"[1] (2017), consisted of a series of paintings on canvas and works on paper that sought to engage the Botswana government's programmatic support of stereotypical imaging of Setswana cultural tradition. In response, I attempted to question the notion of culture as fixed and unchanging by creating hybrid objects that contain both historical and contemporary elements from life in my native Botswana.

As a Motswana making work in South Africa, I realised most of my South African audience were using their own perspectives to read the work. The ethnic, traditional and cultural background similarities between a Black Motswana and a Black South African allow for this to happen. These instances prompted me to consider the possibility of a body of work that was potentially more difficult to interpret as South African.

Given that Botswana figures centrally in my experience, my thinking, since coming to South Africa, has been preoccupied with my perception of the country from the vantage of a different locale. As the Korean artist Do-Ho Suh notes, "displacement gives me a space to

[1] Can be read as a portmanteau of *ngwao* which means 'culture' in Setswana and and the exclamation Wow, or an anglicised spelling of *ngwao.*

have some critical distance to everything, it allows me to see things differently"(Sollins, 2003). There also exists a blind spot in the current audience of the work that is available for me to exploit as a Motswana in South Africa, where details of my work such as Botswana-specific national symbols, become illegible to audiences who are not familiar with my background.[2] I became interested in creating a space to work with historical and contemporary issues and events that are relevant to me as a Motswana, as both creator and audience, through the medium of painting. This thought was partly stimulated by the ongoing decolonisation project[3] at the University of Cape Town which was part of a nationwide South African discourse on contemporary South African identity[4]. Viewing these events through a Motswana's lens, it occurred to me to examine whether similar sentiments existed in Botswana, to examine Botswana's historical relationship to colonialism and the manner in which the country had constructed its post-colonial identity

In the light of these reflections present-day Botswana can already be seen and thought of as an "imaginary world". There exist national myths within the country itself—peddled to citizens by a government eager to construct a national identity. *The Invention and Perpetuation of Botswana's National Mythology, 1885- 1966* (Morton and Ramsay, 2017) reveals, if indirectly, that the building blocks of nationalism are "constructed histories, signs, narratives, and identities". The prevailing tale of the formation of Botswana tells us that in 1885 three "tribal"[5] chiefs asked for the tribes that occupy the now-Botswana to be made vassals of, and receive protection from, the British Empire and that Queen Victoria guaranteed this protection, resulting in a markedly peaceful colonial period. Historians have exposed this tale as a fabrication by the British colonisers to facilitate a bloodless coup of those territories. Ramsay's *The Birth of Botswana* (1987) more accurately relays this. Yet, the myth persists, and this popular history pervades the national consciousness so much so that it is taught in schools as fact. In his paper, *An African Miracle: State and Class Leadership and Colonial Legacy in Botswana Development* (1999), Abdi Samataar traces how the Botswana of today capitalised on this 'peaceful' foundation to build up the current image of a stable and well-governed state. This myth exists today because it was adopted by pre-Independence tribal leaders to stay the hand of the British in handing over the country to a racialised Cape administration[6] as well as later in independence efforts[7]. The co-option of this myth by the Botswana government has aided the current political situation in the country where one

[2] Or an audience that has not been educated on historical events or contemporary life in Botswana.

[3] This was in the form of various student-led decolonial activities and discussions that took place at the University of Cape Town, Hiddingh Campus 2016-18 - and #RhodesMustFall .

[4] This included the critique and possible dissolution of South Africa's Rainbow Nation myth

[5] In "*The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*" (1989), Leeroy Vail traces the very concept and existence of these "tribes" as a colonial 'divide-and-rule' tactic created by European anthropologists.

[6] Tribal leaders used British public opinion to persuade the Queen and the British government against this by reminding them of an earlier promise of protection that never actually existed.

[7] Seretse Khama as a descendent of one of the three chiefs was an agreeable collaborator in transitioning Botswana to an independent nation state.

party[8], the Botswana Democratic Party, has governed since Independence; a party founded in the 1960s by Botswana's first president, Seretse Khama, a direct descendent of one of those vaunted three chiefs who also happens to be the father of Botswana's fourth president. This tale is inextricable from Botswana's national identity and has aided in the building of nationalistic sentiment by government.

The invention or reinvention of history is one of the shared tenets of nationalism and worldbuilding. In the case of nation-building this reinvention often occurs with founding myths. As the text reveals, there exist popular myths within the country that are peddled to citizens about the founding of independent Botswana. Myths about the exceptionality of present-day Botswana are also very prevalent, often presented to the outside world[9] . Whether one takes these myths only as inspiring stories which allow us to make ourselves, or fabrications which allow certain groups to legitimize their power and perpetuate the domination of other groups within the structure of a nation, incorrect national memories with enough momentum to make truth claims make the foundation of any nation fictional. As Eric Hobsbawn (1992) writes, "nationalism requires too much belief in what is patently not so." National memory needs to be a selective memory in order to fulfil its role as a unifier. This mythical element in shared national memory is what enables popular history to provide a motivating power, so much so that the discipline of history poses a threat to this role. The threat of academic history to the story of nations is given a Botswana-specific lens in *Unravelling History and Cultural Heritage in Botswana* (Parsons, 2006). Parsons explicates the contest between history with its deep research and analysis of the past, and heritage and popular presentations of the past, which emphasise myths and legends, the latter a constant remaking of meaning through retelling. History largely faces the academic community and heritage largely faces the public, which lends it a larger/louder voice. The contest skews heavily to the side of heritage when lent the weight of powers who wish to use these popular stories to maintain the status quo.

The globalised arena of politics has resulted in the emergence of the related, but distinct, fields of Nation Branding and Branding National Myths and Symbols (BNMS). While the two share principles such as applying corporate marketing strategies, communications and sociological theories to countries, nation branding is mainly concerned with raising the image of a nation globally with the hope of gaining better economic standing, while the concept of BNMS is concerned with promoting and explicating the meaning behind a nation's own symbols and myths for its citizenry or for better relations with other countries (Sitki, 2012). In transmedia storytelling terms, both of these fields of research place the nation-state at a similar plane as a

[8] Botswana is a multi-party democracy despite this fact.

[9] Literature about such myths, often highlights economic success but belies issues such as lack of press freedom, social inequality and the problems of dynastic power. See Tutwane, L.B.B. 2011. *The myth of press freedom in Botswana: From Sir Seretse Khama to Ian Khama*; and Mogalakwe, M. 2008. *Botswana : exploding the myth of exceptionality.*

media franchise, both in its efforts to create profits and in the transmission of stories to its 'fandom', which in this case is its citizenry.

Works by scholars of the building of imaginary worlds have identified traits of nationalism as some of the tools used in the creation of fictional worlds[10]. The writer Poul Anderson (1991) for instance, gives the creation of history, geography, cultures and aesthetics as well as detailed and consistent socio-political dynamics as a set of these tools and Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca (2004), define a story world as having three core features: 1. Mythos – the establishing narration of the world and its defining struggles 2. Topos – setting of the world geographically and historically 3. Ethos – the moral code of behaviour of characters.

Positionality and awareness of one's own perspective aid literary worldbuilders in their task as "where we stand determines what we're able to see" (Butler, 2000). If individuals each have different perspectives, which are informed by our differing experiences, beliefs, culture, ethnicity, or gender and sexual identity, the ways in which we see reality are all different as well. Meaning we all carry different world-versions. And if that is the case there is "no primary real world which we subsequently subject to various forms of representation" (Andrews, 1984). In Richard Proctor and William McCulloh's view, each of us "makes 'the world' from the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life; from available data; frames of reference; from the social, the cultural and the ideological" (2016:482). In other words, it is our positionality that allows us to imagine each of our own immediate worlds, rendering all other worlds secondary. Theoretically Botswana becomes a secondary world from the viewpoint of a South African, and a Motswana in South Africa (in this case, me) has the vantage to see this.

In the book *Retcon Game: Retroactive Continuity and the Hyperlinking of America* by Andrew J. Friedenthal, a specific method of worldbuilding is expanded upon: Retroactive continuity, more popularly known as Retcon. This specific method of worldbuilding is one I have used to aid the making of my work. It is a term that started as comic industry-specific jargon for a process which has existed in various other forms of storytelling and beyond, which is akin to historical revisionism. Friedenthal posits that retconning in the real world can have a positive impact on society, "engendering an acceptance of how historical narratives can and should be recast to allow for a broader field of stories to be told in the present". This is something I aim to achieve with my own project, and a point I will expand on later.

Friedenthal differentiates the retcon from the reboot, noting that the former maintains the continuum of that particular narrative by making any changes to it part of the story. The

[10] A useful text in the field is *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* and *Revisiting Imaginary Worlds: A Subcreation Studies Anthology* by Mark J.P. Wolff (ed).

reboot is simply a restart that doesn't acknowledge what came before[11]. A retcon is only viable, says Friedenthal, if the narrative is a long-running one. With 52 years as an independent nation state, Botswana qualifies for reconsideration, particularly if one finds fault with aspects of the telling of this tale. The basis for the content of my paintings draws from the wellspring of myths associated with the origination of the Republic of Botswana in 1966. The creation, building or writing of the story of post-colonial Botswana has, in my opinion, established itself as a grand narrative that has been long-running and until recently, been relatively uninterrupted.

My project is rooted in ideas borrowed from transmedia storytelling. This is partly because my current relationship to Botswana is as a citizen, removed geographically from home, experiencing Botswana through media sources instead of direct physical experience. Part of the challenge of attempting a retcon or "rewrite" was deciding which authorial voice or role to take on. In his paper, 'The Secret Untold Relationship of Biblical Midrash and Comic Boot Retcon' (2002), A. David Lewis reveals further historical preludes to retconning, linking the concept to that of *midrash*[12] in the Jewish faith. Lewis probes the aim of the new author or interpreter of the text and what power they seek to gain over it. Lewis states that the clerical (midrash) or corporate (comics) motivation carries a weight that the motivation of the fan and in this case, citizen, does not, calling them "innocuous enough so that their retcons are easily accepted." (2002: 267) This supports the contention that "even the weakest groups have the ability to interpret their own history"(Morton & Ramsay, 2017) and specifically as it relates to Botswana's national mythology, that such stories should remain open to subjective engagement in the hands of the populace.

As part of the accepted versions of historical events and founding myths, i.e. the canon of Botswana, there exists visual material in the form of national symbols such as flags and coats of arms, whose history I find somewhat perpetuates these myths. Such material forms part of the trappings of a nation's identity and constructed image of itself. The story of the selection of these symbols as conceived for a new Botswana, post-independence, is laid out in, 'Under Two Flags in Africa' (2000, cited in Moore, 2012) by George Winstanley, a white colonial administrator in the former Bechuanaland and one of the architects behind the final selection of the flag and coat of arms of Botswana. Of the flag, he says: "I became much involved in selecting national symbols and in the design of the Coat of Arms and flag...the entries we received in the flag competition were hopeless, so I designed the flag myself." Peter Fawcus and Alan Tilbury in the collaborative memoir Botswana: The Road to Independence (2000, cited in Moore, 2012) corroborate, revealing that: "George Winstanley, the Clerk to the

[11] In popular culture all instances of a different actor playing the superhero character Spiderman were reboots, with the new installments having no connection to previous versions. The 2009 Star Trek film is a retcon because an alternative timeline plot is used to explain away and preserve the canon of previous films and tv shows.

[12] Midrash refers to writings which "fill in gaps, by way of crafting new stories, in biblical texts by making connections between contemporary Jewish realities and the unchanging biblical text."('What is Midrash', n.d.)

Cabinet, undertook to produce a design for a flag, and his version with its now well-known horizontal stripes of blue, black and white was immediately admired by Khama's cabinet."

With regards to the selection of the coat of arms, Fawcus and Tilbury note that "it was decided to use a modification of a design that Isabel Fawcus[13] had made for this purpose before leaving the country, using a shield in the African style, charges appropriate to Botswana and the zebra supporters. Both designs were unanimously approved by the Legislative Assembly and the coat of arms was sent to the College of Arms in London for production of an official version and associated letters by the Kings of Arms."

A different account, again from Winstanley, has it that that "the coat of arms proved more difficult. We received two good entries, one from Lady Fawcus and one from Lady England. However, cabinet decided that neither was suitable as it stood and asked me to arrange for the best in both to be combined. My wife (Bridget) made the sketch as directed and after Cabinet approval this was submitted to the College of Heralds in the UK who made more alterations and produced the final design." The designers of the coat of arms were two white British citizens, being Lady Fawcus and Lady England, with chief credit attributed to Mrs Winstanley for her work in sketching the final amalgamated design, receiving an MBE for her efforts. The identity of the creators of this symbol becomes significant when the authenticity of the symbols used is examined. There is an unsettled debate about whether the Botswana government chose an unsuitable symbol for its coat of arms. Christian Makgala, a Professor in the Department of History at the University of Botswana documented this particular bit of history. In Neil Parsons, National Coat of Arms, and Introduction of the Pula Currency in Botswana, 1975–1976 (2014) he explains that this debate was ignited in 1975 by Dr Neil Parsons who at the time was a lecturer at the University of Zambia and would move on to the University of Botswana years later. After learning that Botswana wanted to adopt its own currency, Parsons appealed to its designers through The Botswana Daily News letters page, to “not to make the same mistake as on the country’s coat of arms, where a Zulu rather than a Tswana type of shield is used.” (Parsons in Makgala, 2014), He submitted drawings of the two types to back up his claim, showing the ‘authentic’ Tswana shield to have an hourglass-shaped while the Zulu-style shield has an oval shape.

I call the debate unsettled because a counter argument was put forth by a Ron Pahl, a Peace Corps volunteer stationed in Botswana around 1975, using the same forum as Parsons. The source of Pahl’s counter arguments was a series of alleged consultations with unspecified tribal elders in Kanye, stating that fighting between Batswana groups and the Amandebele from 1826 to 1884 may have had influence on the shield used by Batswana. Amos Pilane, an oral historian specialising in the Bakgatla tribe’s history, stated that Batswana increased their shields after these encounters. It is said that the Amandebele carried very large Zulu-style

[13] Peter Fawcus’ wife.

shields which many Batswana warriors adopted afterwards. It is of interest to note that the hourglass shaped shield exists in the popular conscious of a lot of Batswana as it is recorded in the written accounts of travellers and European missionaries which made their way into prescribed school textbooks, yet it is the account of an oral historian which lends credence to the state's decision.

It is specific bits of history such as these which provide me with the gap to realise my interventions within the grand narrative of Botswana. As a visual artist in the present, as well as the audience of this long-form narrative, I have the benefit of insider knowledge of the current continuity and can create my own visual material in response to this particular part of the tale. One such strategy has been to prod at the national symbols of Botswana as a means to question the colonial hand in the writing of the narrative of Botswana. This hand appears as ever pervasive, even shoehorned in, when you look to the meaning behind these symbols concurrently with the identity of their creators. The compounded truth of these events and inventions, from my vantage as a Motswana today, has resulted in a feeling of alienation from these symbols and more broadly the story-world they represent.

Fig 1.A Bechuana Warrior in the 19th Century by Keith Johnston, Published 1884

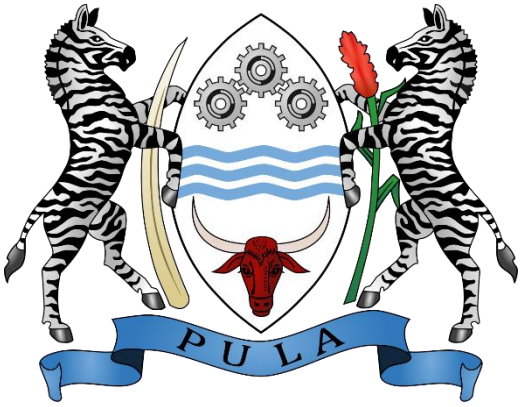


Fig.2 The Botswana Coat of Arms

Through my project I propose an alternative to the blue, black and white flag with one made up of ultramarine blue, permanent light green and black but keeping to the same design dimensions as the place where I "narrativise" my changes to the ongoing story. This where the "extreme end", as Friedenthal puts it, of the forms of retcon comes into play in my work; the revision. This flag can be read as a meta, retroactive entry into Winstanley's competition or contemporary remake. The types of blue and green I have used in my version of the flag are typically used in chroma keying – the blue screen and green screens used in film

production which provide a background for subjects to be filmed while allowing a separately filmed or digitally created background to be added to the final image. The colours thus provide me with a tabula rasa that acts as a ground and setting for my paintings, where fantastical projections, and my reinterpretations and reinscriptions of the histories and myths can be made.

Readings on traditional creation myths of Batswana provided further avenues for thinking, in conjunction with their political counterparts. It is within traditional mythology that I found an equivalent for the retroactive continuity I am exacting in my work. This potential equivalent is called *Lowe*. In Setswana mythology, particularly that of the Bakgatla ethnic group, in a specific creation myth in oral tradition it is believed that the Kgatla tribes emerged from the cave of Lowe. Lowe is also the name of the deity in charge of the cave. The cave metaphor as a genesis or place of creation is prominent in Tswana oral tradition and this creation myth exists in both Botswana and South Africa. It is also believed that all Tswana were created by a supreme being, Modimo, who emerged from a cave known as Lôwe, some eleven kilometres northwest of Mochudi in Botswana. The Lôwe cave has a sand bottom, with stone imprints of animals and human feet as alleged proof of this creation (Reyneke 1971). The place is now a heritage tourist site because of the footprints found there. Another similar cave exists in the Maokagane hills in Kopong, Botswana. In South Africa, in the province of Limpopo, the Madimatle Mountain are a place of spiritual importance for the same reason. A cave of Lowe is also to be found there. The fact that various sites carry a similar origin story, for the same group of people, makes me think of Lowe as a doorway to a shared space between these people. It's transnational nature also makes it a mythical diplomatic station of sorts. My sculptural work of the same name explores this line of thinking, but it is the work of painters who engage in worldbuilding I would like to look at next.

Art making, specifically figurative painting, is already much like worldbuilding (Sharp, 2017). Visual Artists have engaged with myths and visualising worlds throughout the history of art. This lineage includes the fantastical depictions of hell of Hieronymus Bosch, to what can be thought of as one of the first acts of transmedia worldbuilding in art, by Henry Darger[14], and the imagined sculptural cities of Bodys Isek Kinglez. Contemporary artists working in the terrain of worldbuilding and fiction include Toyin Ojih Odutola, and Trenton Doyle Hancock and Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum. These artists engage in the creation of their own worlds and stories, which explore the cultural and political happenings of the real world and those of their own lived experiences. The brand of worldbuilding they employ is

[14] Darger created an expansive world with his novel, *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion,* which came in at around 15 000 pages and produced some 300 drawings and paintings which illustrated events from the book.

transmedial[15], spanning animation, comic books, novels and toys or conversely borrowing from these media to incorporate into their painting or drawing practices. Often their work gives the impression that it has its own life outside the picture plane. Artists who employ another version of worldbuilding that refers back to the medium of painting or the conventions of representational painting include Daniel Richter and to an extent, Sunstrum again. Artists such as Kerry James Marshall and Odutola have also helped elucidate my ideas on painting the figure.

Representational and figurative painting has features which seem to allow/create a greater imaginative absorption in an audience. Its use of the human or humanoid figure and other recognisable elements of reality, can allow for what fantasy author J.R.R Tolkien (1947) terms "secondary belief". This concept can be extended to painting in the case of work by Hancock and Odutola. Writing and storytelling are the conceptual basis of their artistic projects, offering a context for the explicit worldbuilding at play in said work.

Trenton Doyle Hancock, Family Portrait *(Mound Half and Ape Half*), 2003, pencil and acrylic on paper

Trenton Doyle Hancock is an American artist who has been exploring a mythical world of his own making, using drawing, painting, sculpture and installation. The artist's work chronicles the battles of invented creatures known as Mounds and Vegans and gives details of this world such as character profiles (Oliver, 2014). The *Moundverse* is influenced by the artist's childhood creations as well as his family background as the son of a Baptist minister. Questions about good-versus-evil and morality play out through the narratives, the characters and the wars that ensue in his work (Hancock, in Crawford 2007).

[15] Transmedia worldbuilding, as defined by Dan Hassler-Forest (2016) is worldbuilding that takes place across different media beyond the traditional fantasy and sci-fi novel. It involves audience participation and defers narrative closure.

Hancock draws influence from storytelling media such as comic books. The combination of text and imagery is what makes Hancock's acts of worldbuilding more explicit. The use of text on the surface of the work itself in labelling characters and creatures, as well as brief exposition notes about the features of this world directly conveys additional contextual details to the viewer.

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Flora & Fauna (S.C.),* 2011

Toyin Ojih Odutola, *Representatives of State,* 2016/2017, Charcoal, pastel and pencil on paper, 191.8x127cm

Kerry James Marshall, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, 1980, egg tempera on paper, 20.3 x 16.5 cm

Kerry James Marshall, *De Style*, 1993, acrylic and collage on canvas, 264 x 310 cm

Toyin Ojih Odutola is a Nigerian-born draughtswoman whose most recent drawings present an imaginary history of the aristocratic Nigerian families, the UmuEze Amara clan and the house of Obafemi, completed in pastel, charcoal, and pencil. Her work depicts an alternate history where slavery as we know it never happened. Through an act of superfiction[16], the wall text of exhibited work explains that these works are "selected from the families' extensive holdings of art and antiquities by the present Marquess, the Most Honorable Jideofor Emeka and his husband Lord Temitope Omodele" (Hockley and Lang, 2017), who

[16] Coined by Peter Hill in 1989, a Superfiction is "visual or conceptual artwork which uses fiction and appropriation to mirror organizations, business structures, and/or the lives of invented individuals" (Hill, cited in Kazalia 2014)

hope “to engage visitors in the experience of life within a great Nigerian house as well as present an intimate family portrait beyond the public image of respectability” (Odutola in Hockley and Lang, 2017). Ojih Odutola signs the text herself as “Deputy Private Secretary” to Emeka. Her work considers blackness through material wealth. It complicates any one-dimensional readings of blackness through the added dimension of class. How this wealth was accrued is not explained, all the viewer is presented with are images of black characters with means and agency. The resulting imagery easily lends itself to stills taken from a soap opera depicting an upstairs-downstairs or haves and have-nots story. Here, the strict social codes one associates with nobility have seemingly been upended through the fact that the characters at the centre of the series a married gay couple in Nigeria, a country that does not allow or recognize LGBTQ rights (Seale, 2015), foregrounding that this is a Nigeria of Ojih Odutola’s own making. She outlines her characters, their stories, their backgrounds and the whole family tree (Felsenthal, 2017) but still allows the viewer to draw their own conclusions about relationships depicted.

The work of Kerry James Marshall and Toyin Ojih Odutola is of particular interest to me because it engages in what Claudia Rankine defines as “a different grammar of blackness”. This term figures into a series of work I made titled ‘blackbodies’, which I will elaborate on further on in this text. In Odutola’s work, similar to Marshall’s, the artist establishes a raison d’etre in terms of how and why they paint the black figure the way they do. Odutola’s earlier work consisted mainly of portraiture completed in ballpoint pen, graphite, pastel and charcoal to produce sinewy looking skin textures that explored the tonal range of blackness as a colour as much as blackness as an identity marker for her subjects. These portraits typically had blank white backgrounds but as her work progressed, these figures were placed in fully realized settings but still carry the recognisability of her solitary figures.

Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum’s work ranges across drawings, installations, animations and performance. Her work is a combination of mythological, literary and scientific elements which she uses to depict dense narratives (Kedmey, 2016). The cosmos as well as imagined future landscapes are places her figures, including ones in her own image[17], inhabit. These landscapes and backgrounds – such as mountains – featured in her drawings are often overlaid, thus making it difficult to pinpoint the exact locale depicted implying a world that is simultaneously nowhere in particular and several places at once. Geometric shapes are often intermixed with these landscapes. Sunstrum, born in Botswana, but raised across Africa, Southeast Asia and North America, draws on her biography and heritage to produce her works, mining her personal history as a way of understanding her own shifting identity across these places. Image systems from science and technology make up the features of her world. The German painter Daniel Richter has similarly used image systems from other fields in his anti-history and ‘heroic’ paintings. This is exemplified in a work such as ‘Another wasted night’ (2011) which features a cluster of black silhouetted figures which look like a squad of

[17] Previous works have featured an alter-ego of the artist, named Asme.

law enforcement in a multicoloured neon landscape made up of drips and pours, with its features defined by repeated linework. Sunstrum's "*Supersymmetry*"(2011) is an acrylic painting on canvas depicting two mirrored, golden figures that appear to be modelled after the artist, floating in dark space on a sea of stars. The work is titled after the supersymmetry theory, a concept in particle physics that posits that "every boson has a corresponding "super-super-fermion" associated with it and vice versa" (Giles in Sunstrum, 2019). In this work Sunstrum elucidates this idea with the twin figures. She states her interest in how the theory "points to the possibility of the existence of infinite, parallel, simultaneous dimensions by postulating that every particle in the universe has a symmetrical 'twin' particle or 'superpartner' existing somewhere else in the universe" (Sunstrum, 2016). Sunstrum also builds off of her interest in mathematical and scientific theories by literally building her compositions from the visual schema associated with these fields in the form of the square grids of a mathematics workbook and using geometrical shapes to build her landscapes. Richter has similarly appropriated data visualization methods in the form of a line that can read as the stock index or EKG line. He describes this line as having "oracle-like properties" and uses it to denote mountains and other landscape features in his paintings. Richter's large-scale paintings from the decade spanning 2000 onwards have focused on questioning the context of history painting today by using imagery from mediated sources such as news photography. These paintings, done at a heroic scale, depict conflict in the form of modern warfare and urban hooliganism to examine the contemporary moment.

Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum,
Supersymmetry, 2011, acrylic on canvas

Daniel Richter, *Another wasted night,*
2011, Oil on linen, 200x270cm

I situate my own large oil paintings within the tradition of history painting, or at the very least in dialogue with it. I find this tradition an apt metaphor for the grand narrative with its previously held level of importance, and a focus on scale and narrativity. Following the critic Daniel Baird's assertion that "History painting now is impossible in part because no single image can carry authentic, representative weight"(2004), I am interested in how this can be made explicit in my work. It is with the spirit of the retcon and reboot that I would like to

interrupt the canon of Botswana-as-story world through multiple in-world narratives of my own. Such interruptions come both in form and content, using concepts such as *non-finito* and *pentimento* from the traditions of classical western painting further extended by including visual elements from contemporary transmedia sources into painting.

Pentimento, is an Italian word literally translated as 'repentance', referring to an artist's alteration of a painting as part of the decision-making process - it may include adjustments of a portion or all of a work. Traces of these adjustments often remain visible in the finished piece and form part of the meaning of its meaning. Non-finito, literally 'unfinished', may refer to instances of work left incomplete as a result of the artist's death or abandonment of a work, or, more usefully for my own project, when an artist affects or deliberately presents work as incomplete or lacking finish (Baum, Bayer & Wagstaff, 2016) to underline an idea of provisionality.

And what do these concepts have to do with retcons or worldbuilding? Throughout art history, painting has always borrowed from new developments in representation. Today's digital imagery provides a rich resource. Transmedia sources have their own methods of building up an image, akin to *non-finito,* and it is these methods, or references to them, that I use in my paintings. The examples I have culled from transmedia and digital sources such as green/blue screen backgrounds and figures which flit between partial and full completion in reference to character rigs are useful in this regard. These background processes where image-making, ergo visual worldbuilding, decisions are made but are not usually seen, much like you would not see a painter's initial brushstrokes unless the artist deliberately left traces of *pentimento* or used *non-finito*. This leaves the story-world open to heightened engagement with the audience and does not claim to exact finality on the narratives that are playing out, thus hopefully avoiding the metanarrative trap.

Also adapted from transmedia are the formats I use, such as those used in graphic novels. By hanging or installation of work in close proximity or in a grid format, a canvas can echo the form of a panel from a graphic novel. As in a retcon, the in-world narrative of a preceding painting could be undone by what is depicted in the following panel and vice versa. The paintings can borrow from sequential art, but do not necessarily have to play out in a linear fashion. Interventions to the canvas itself can be a form of *pentimento*. Physical acts such as partially or fully removing a canvas from its support, yet still having it physically interact with other paintings in a space, shows a decision to 'unmake' that specific painting and render narrative mutable within the larger world it occupies. By making the 'unfinished' and the 'undone' the aesthetic of my own story-world, I privilege how this story-world could be made or transmitted as much as what takes place in said world.

Thebe Phetogo, *The Anti-Rain Equation,* 2018/19, Oil, acrylic and shoe polish on canvas, 170x132cm

How they made Rain, 2019, Oil , acrylic and shoe polish on canvas, 132x170cm

‘The Anti-Rain Equation’ is a painting which employs some of the strategies I have outlined, including checkerboard backgrounds found in Photoshop transparency layers framed by the empty panels of a comic book page, which in turn sit atop a green screen background. As one of my in-world narratives the figures and objects depicted engage directly with the chosen storytelling devices in some passages, e.g., the green-clad figure is visible in front of the checkerboard but melds into the green background like a stagehand would on a soundstage. The green figure is blowing out a flame which resembles a thermal energy signature such the type used in weather maps that features the rainbow scale. An echo to that signature appears on the figure’s face. In the top right corner of the painting are the flag colours of Botswana, Bophutatswana and my own alternative flag. These colours enter a turbine (deliberately through the wrong direction) and follow the process of their diffusion into a misty substance. Rain is referenced in the national mottos of both places and in this in-world narrative represents an ideology. This painting has a ‘twin’[18] titled ‘How they made Rain’ which shows, as the title suggests, how to make rain and thus produce these very ideological symbols. The flow of the streams and ribbons of the flag colours used in both of these paintings is used to try and indicate this. The paintings together undo each other and stay in a suspended state of *pentimento*. The layouts of both paintings are borrowed from infographic and technical illustrations. The flat layout, and the cyclic reading of information in these paintings is borrowed from the cross sectional layout of the aforementioned forms of illustration.

How to Bifurcate a National Symbol, 2019, Oil and shoe polish on canvas, 160x120cm

[18] I think of it as a twin both in terms of the two being the same size just oriented differently and by the fact that they engage in similar subject matter. In fact the paintings are two sides of the same of the same coin.

If I broadly categorise the narrative of my body of work into chapters, the first deals with an undoing of history as a way for me to confront the sense of alienation that was building up as I found out certain truths about Botswana through my research. It also deals with finding space for myself within this history to operate in. This chapter poses questions to myself as the maker of the work as well as its audience. This can be seen in a painting such as 'How to Bifurcate a National Symbol' 2019, which depicts a zebra, the national animal of Botswana that is depicted on the coat of arms. The black and white of the zebra share the same meaning with the black and white of Botswana's flag. Following the logic of a 'what if?' scenario, the painting depicts a zebra pinched in the middle and separated into black and white halves. The white half is depicted in the process of being drained of its colour and in doing so revealing a green body like that of the world of this painting. Questions I was ruminating on in its making were whether it was possible to 'assign' blame to what this white half represents and if so, would it be possible to undo this pervasive hand's actions and to what effect. That the green shows through represents a possible 'starting over' point, similar to how I retconned the flag. The second chapter then deals with what to produce within this space, which is the 'blackbodies' work figures. History and nationality/nationhood served as the subject matter for the paintings within the first part of the project, but as briefly mentioned before, I had several interrelated concerns going into this body of work. This blank[19] space thus became an ideal stage to investigate these concerns. As such a generative field is created for engaging with even more recent histories and current plots in the story-world of Botswana, as well as ideas in the field of painting I was interested in. This work poses its questions to a wider, general audience. Arising out of this generative field is the series titled 'blackbodies' mentioned earlier.

I feel that these works operate differently because they engage with the second category of worldbuilding I previously mentioned, as it relates to how to build an image. These works use loaded historical imagery and imaging systems to touch on genres of painting such as landscape and portraiture.

Taken from the eponymous concept in physics, a blackbody is an idealized, hypothetical perfect physical body and absorber and radiator of all electromagnetic energy, with no reflecting power ('Black body', 2019). Blackbody radiation also exists on a spectrum, making it a flexible concept to work with. The genesis of these figures is partly biographical as upon moving to South Africa I became aware of my identity, particularly the component of my blackness, taking on different meaning because of the history and socio-political context of this new physical space it was now in. The idea of a different origin story for a black body became of interest to me, one that could stand outside of imposed conventional readings and work within its own logic.

[19] Read "green" or "blue" screen space – in other words a place of projected imaginings.

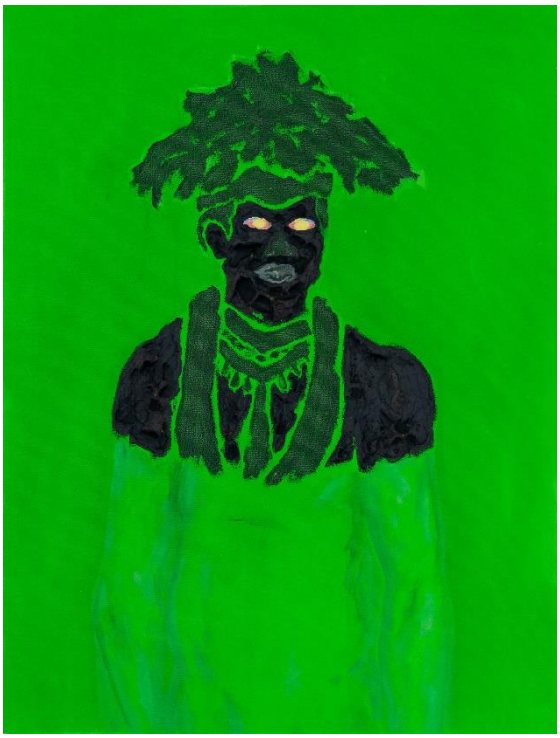
Within the loose narrative chronology of the story-world my paintings make up, the blackbodies are an evolution or natural conclusion of the green-clad figures which populate my work. This turn from green to black is an attempt at visibility within the world of the paintings. In a real-life filmic setting, actors wearing green bodysuits are there to carry props that will be digitally altered in post-production, being erased from the final scene or be altered themselves to portray fantastical characters. This blackness makes the figures visible against the green, they 'become' black in an effort to be seen within their own world.

A blackbody before the compulsion to become one is closer to invisible, 2019, Oil on canvas, 50x50cm

Portrait of blackbody as its Material Self, Shoe polish, collage and oil on canvas, 50x50cm

Made in shoe polish and collage, these figures draw from anti-black imagery such as blackface minstrelsy to complicate the reading of an "idealised" body. Blackface originated as a form of performance make-up predominantly used by performers who were not black to present caricatures of black people. Minstrel shows were "an American form of entertainment developed in the early 19th century that consisted of comic skits, variety acts, dancing, and music performances by white performers in blackface" (Mahar, 1999). While the practice of blackface has fallen out of favour, and is generally deemed offensive across the board, the practice still endures in small pockets across the globe. In the context of South Africa, Leon Schuster is the most well-known recent example, but the practice sporadically happens in universities across the country and the globe. Stereotypical imagery has been cemented from this bygone form of entertainment, usually in the form of caricature. This comes in the form of figures called "coons", "darkies" and "mammies" with bug eyes, pitch black skin, over defined white or red lips and white teeth. The invocation of such loaded imagery influences how these figures are now seen. In this story-world, as in Botswana there isn't a history of blackface and similar imagery. This means that this imagery has the potential to operate differently in this painted realm. Since its heyday as an American tradition, blackface minstrelsy has found routes to Africa in places such as South Africa and Ghana. This

theatrical makeup has, in reverse of convention, become localised by black practitioners and people of colour in those areas, and for the most part these practitioners are unconcerned about its origins. In Ghana, the practice was used in a form of theatre known as 'Concert Party'. The makeup styles of both minstrel shows and concert parties show that the two undeniably have a shared history (Cole, 2013). In visual art, the trope of the smiling darkie has been used by artists such as Kerry James Marshall, its racist implications rewired in favour of self-representation.



Bust of an Incomplete blackbody, 2019, Shoe polish, collage, oil and acrylic on canvas, 60x80cm

The idea of black self-representation is of interest to me. Part of this interest lies in the influence contemporary Black figurative painters – primarily in the diaspora – have had on my ideas and views around painting. My introduction to painting was through the work of artists such as Kerry James Marshall, Mickalene Thomas and Kehinde Wiley. In the post-internet age of today, I was exposed to the work of these artists online before I had ever stepped into a gallery, be it in Botswana or South Africa. And as a previously self-taught Motswana artist with limited Western art-historical knowledge I witnessed a 'filling of the gaps' as it were that these artists were engaging in before I knew these gaps were even there. A subsequent awareness that these artists were operating within a different context registered with me but the ring of that first encounter with this work has always echoed in my head.

The idea that Blackness is not a monolith is not a new one. I am also well aware that I am an African artist operating within Southern Africa. I find an opportunity within the idea of the 'burden of representation' as laid out by art historian Kobena Mercer (1990) in a published article of the same name. This text is wholly concerned with Black British art, and that is where I find a gap to work in. My interest is in how this burden could relate to readings of a Motswana's work against the weightier or more charged context of South Africa. This is not done in an effort to 'legitimize' or measure one reality against another, but more an acknowledgement that these other realities exist. The main argument of Mercer's article is that 'black art' of that time was tasked with the perceived burden of having to 'speak for' and represent the entirety of 'its culture'. Whether the enmeshed constraint of the relationship between black artists and the aesthetics of their work has been partially or completely resolved, especially within an African context can still be argued. It is the attempt at this effort of representation I am interested in, not necessarily the act of self-representation itself. In this way, my malleable greenscreen figures became an ideal vehicle to carry out this "putting on" of blackness. Blackface then becomes a method of representation. This putting on of blackness is two-fold: the first is within the world of the paintings, and is these figures attempt at visibility. The second is as painted gesture by myself as the artist and how this gesture is read by an audience. *Non-finito* is present in these works as well. Frequently, these blackbodies have gaps where the green underpainting comes through, and areas of incompletion as well. In a way, I hope this communicates the hollowness of these figures and that they are attempts at representation or the idea of, and not full representation themselves.

blackbody (Mosimane-wa-Tlala), 2019, Shoe polish, oil and acrylic on canvas, 100x90cm

Part of the challenge of transmitting a world is the degree to which you give access or readability to that world. With my 'blackbody' series I see the act of producing these figures as a translation. My source images run the gamut from political figures to art historical references. One such reference is made in the painting 'A portrait of a blackbody as its material self'. Both the work and the title cite a seminal work by Kerry James Marshall titled "Portrait of the artist as a shadow of his former self"(1980). This is an important painting in relation to my 'blackbody' work. This painting is where Marshall begins his investigations into black[20] invisibility which in his words is a psychological state of being real but unseen. An example culled from current events is found in blackbody (Kgosikgolo). The reference image for this painting is a photograph of Kgosikgolo Kgafela II the controversial traditional leader who reigns over the sprawling Bakgatla tribe both in Mochudi, Botswana, and in Moruleng, South Africa. This image, referencing a real-life figure, with the inherited ability to exercise powers across a trans-frontier network of communities is in many ways a blackbody, in the sense that this is a seat which renders borders porous and is not inhibited by a national identity. Turning this image into a blackbody changes it from a portrait into a more symbolic depiction of this idea.

These blackbodies initially only inhabit the greenscreen space, where different methods[21] of their becoming blackbodies are tested out. I have painted several potential phases in the process of becoming a blackbody as well, as a way to reflect the range of the blackbody spectrum.

In this second phase of the work, that of an 'output' process, the tools of transmedia storytelling alone were not enough to build images from the concerns I was grappling with. Or rather, I decided not to limit myself to these tools. Imaging systems such as maps and data visualization methods such as charts offered potential solutions for getting my ideas across.. Blackface, as a system of representation, falls in line with these methods.

The map in visual art has an established history. From making statements about politically imposed borders to establishing routes of movement and seeking new locations, the map in art has been proven a malleable device. The specific map type I use as reference is the meteorological kind. This type of map both crosses geographical borders in a porous manner as well as having built-in boundaries, established by hard-edged lines. In addition, this type of map also carries the predictive quality of forecasting which when paired with the blackbody figures, speculates on the potential of these figures. I try to make this speculative aspect more explicit by painting the map forms as a skyline in the pictures. My work also includes sculptural interventions into these blackbody paintings by incorporating 3-D

[20] Specifically, African American.
[21] I refer to the different types of polish used as well as methods of applying it to the canvas.

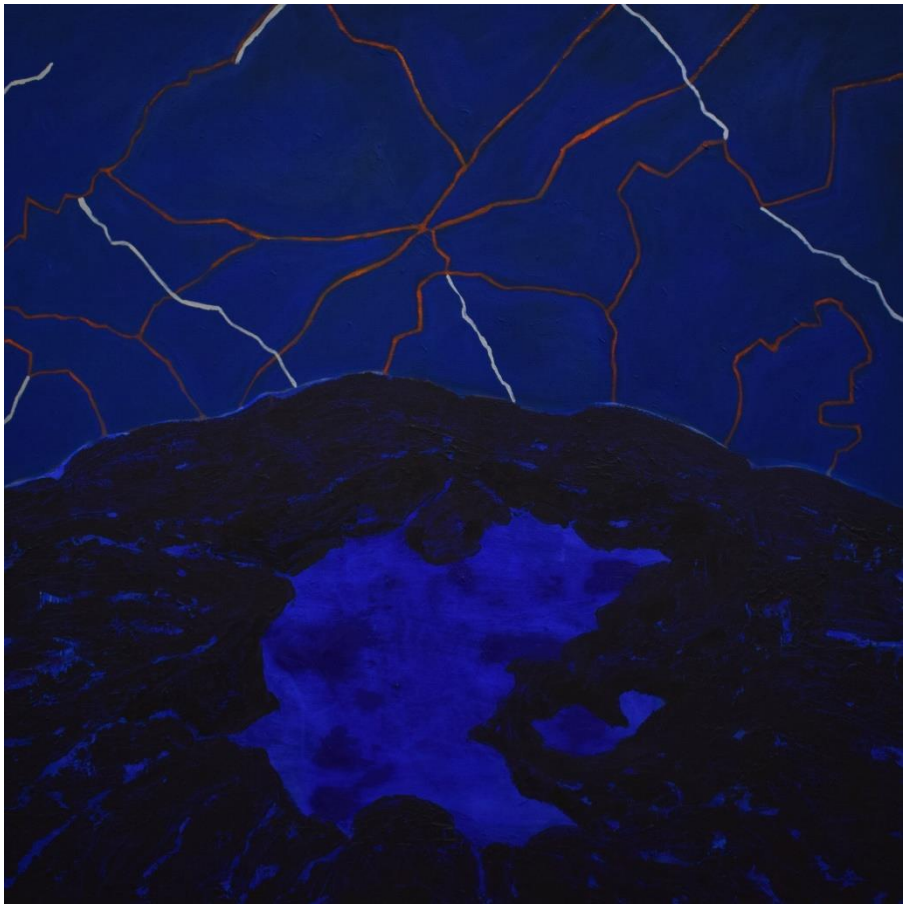
elements and objects that might recall wooden frames or shipping crates into the work as a metaphor for packaging and movement.

Moveable and mutable narratives,
2019, installation photos.

To return to the initial ‘rebuilding of the boat’ metaphor as my initial intention, I find that throughout the making of this work, this boat has not been completely rebuilt yet. What I do feel I have accomplished with this work is test an array of tools in an attempt to find those most appropriate to my task.

This project started off as a way to use my interest in worldbuilding to create a space for myself to explore themes I found relevant to myself in terms of where I am from and my interests within painting. Throughout this process I found spaces for myself in the telling of the history of my country of birth. The tools of worldbuilding provided me with a way of visually articulating this space. Incorporating imaging systems from outside painting helped me find a gap in the kind of figuration I have been interested, and a way to begin establishing my own visual language within it.

Lowe gameboard, 2019, wood, clay,
shoe polish, sand, dimensions variable



Lowe (Matsieng 1), 2018-19, Oil and shoe polish on canvas, 90x90cm

Lowe (Matsieng 2), 2019, Oil, acrylic and shoe polish on canvas, 40.5x30cm

blackbody (The Diplomat), 2019, Shoe polish,
collage, oil and acrylic on canvas, 180x160cm

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