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Serubiri Moses  
Hunter College, New York

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## Art after the Epistemic Crisis. On Nkule Mabaso and Nomusa Makhubu's *The Stronger We Become: The South African Pavilion (2019)*

Serubiri Moses

In this essay, the author discusses the reader that accompanied the South African Pavilion at the 58th Venice International Art Biennale—*The Stronger We Become: The South African Pavilion* (Natal Collective, Newcastle, South Africa, 2019; edited by Nkule Mabaso and Nomusa

Makhubu). The author concludes that the book argues for 'epistemic justice' and that resilience in art can be understood as positive—resilience through laughter—or negative (resilience through neoliberal absorption).

This reader followed the exhibition of the South African Pavilion titled *The Stronger We Become* at the 58th Venice International Art Biennale (2019). The exhibition featured South African artists Dineo Seshee Bopape, Tracey Rose, and Mawande Ka Zenzile. The publication accompanying the exhibition included artist writings by Rose and Bopape, in addition to essays by curators, writers and art historians Nontobeko Ntombela, Portia Malatjie, Gabi Ngcobo, Aïcha Diallo, and Same Mdluli. I note that this publication coalesces the artists' perspectives into a coherent, if at times overly refined, whole. Thus, it functions as a document of artistic research, with the historians and curators finding ways to further clarify how artistic thought can provide a 'refreshed grammar,' as Ngcobo puts it in her contribution (p. 33). As a document of artistic research, and of essays that excavate that research, this book is not a traditional survey of artworks or art history, but rather an examination of the artists' own agency in the crisis of epistemic violence in higher education that has provoked the reanimation of decolonization in South Africa, and elsewhere on the continent, during the past decade. In the curatorial essay by Nkule Mabaso and Nomusa Makhubu (pp. 9–19), epistemic violence is defined, following political scientist Tendayi Sithole (2016), as that which 'excludes, marginalizes, demonizes and even eliminates forms of episteme that differ from modernity' (p. 14).

In an essay titled 'Globophobia' published in the book *Curating After the Global: Roadmaps of the Present*, editor and curator Nkule Mabaso (2019) writes that this epistemic crisis takes place in the university, as evidenced by the marginalization of 'local knowledges and knowledge systems in favor of "universal knowledge"' and by the university's 'failure to produce a curriculum that is epistemically and methodologically relevant for its context' (p. 99). This issue is further expanded on by philosopher and historian Sabelo J.



Figure 1. A view of the art installation *Marapo a yona Dinaledi (Its bones the stars)* by Dineo Seshee Bopape (courtesy of Nkule Mabaso, 2019)

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) in his book *Epistemic Freedom in Africa*, when he describes the 'epistemic line' which is 'simultaneously the ontological line.' He goes on to define 'epistemic freedom' as 'fundamentally about the right to think, theorize, interpret the world, develop own methodologies and write from where one is located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism.' He adds that 'epistemic justice is about liberation of reason itself from coloniality' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 3). These reflections are crucial for enabling an understanding of the curatorial position of the pavilion, which acknowledges an epistemic crisis and the struggle against epistemic violence. If the curatorial proposal was to redress the marginalization of local and African epistemologies via artworks that functioned to 'disrupt' the expectations of Western art history, then we can locate this curatorial position as being adjacent to Sarat Maharaj's (2009) call for the articulation of artistic research that goes beyond 'universal knowledge,' and which similarly resists both the particular and universal paradigms of Hegelian dialectical methods. As Maharaj wrote,

'Agamben highlights the tricky methodological poser we cannot easily shake off—that by opting to treat art practice and research either entirely under the universal or the particular, either exclusively on the immanent or transcendental plane, we miss out on reckoning with its intrinsic condition, its "singularity"' (Maharaj 2009).

He then asked if visual art could 'span "other" kinds of knowledge,' and advocated for an open-ended art predicated not on industrial production models but on what he refers to as keeping the door open for 'the unpredictable see-feel-think processes of no-how' (Maharaj 2009).

Perhaps this non-dialectical form of engagement evident in the curatorial essay by Nkule and Makhubu, structured in the book as a 'glossary,' accordingly raises more questions than it provides answers, as well as unsettling rather than resolving various terminologies, such as laughter and/or resilience. The curators imagine laughter as a core of resilience, but also refer to a different mode of resilience in neoliberal terms, when it connotes the state's ability 'to respond effectively to shocks' (p. 12). This is understood as neoliberal absorption.

In reference to violent moments in recent twenty-first-century South Africa, like the murder of mine workers in Marikana and the unnecessary use of police violence during the Rhodes Must Fall movement at Rhodes University, the curators coin the phrase 'negative manifestation of resilience' (p. 12). The monopolization of the means of violence by the state, whether sexual, racial, homophobic or political violence, signals this negative turn of resilience, which otherwise is defined by the curators positively such as when laughing in the face of racism.

One of the book's major contributions is its engagement of artistic research, by presenting artists' writings by Seshee Bobape and Rose (Ka Zenzile's writings were not published), and by elaborating on the artists' sources through various scholarly responses. For the book and exhibition, artist Tracey Rose produced the text and single channel color projection *Hard Black on Cotton* (2019). Similar to Rose's other single channel projections and performance works, *Hard Black* is based on a text that the artist wrote, in this case one which had been readapted to the 'master discourse' through its translation to Latin by Astrid Khoo. The work includes a character role of iSangoma, or healer, played by South African actor Denzel Edgar, and a voice-over narrator, played by Swiss curator Simon Njami. The work presents an impossible dialogue between the actor and narrator, by and large viewed as opposites representing Western and Eastern ontology, as if taking G. W. F. Hegel's accusation that in Africa 'all are sorcerers' literally. According to curator Nontobeko Ntombela, who writes about the work in an essay called 'Untranslatable Histories' (pp. 87–95), the dialogic process between one voice and another in the theatrical play for the screen fails due to the complexity of exchange and what Ntombela calls its 'one-directional approach.' That is, varying languages produce noise on both ends of the 'dialogue.' The artist, Rose, in her contribution to the book, lists important black artists such as Ernest Mancoba, David Koloane, Dumile Feni, Kori Newkirk, Jean Michel Basquiat, Gerard Sekoto, and other lesser-known figures. Called 'Hard Black on Cotton DRAFT' (pp. 79–82), the text includes succinct lines that reflect epistemic loss such as 'The story of secrets lost' and 'If you dissociate yourself from your / ancestral heritage, you are lost.' Thus, when the artist's text is translated into Latin, the language of the master discipline of philosophy in Europe, instrumental in colonial and imperialist discourses, the text can appear to evoke black feminist theorist Audre Lorde's (2015) famous essay 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House.' In that gesture of naming, there is a throughline of the history of art and the erasure of black figures in broader twentieth-century history. In a more explicitly political text that the artist wrote and adapted into another single channel projection, *The Black Paintings: Dead White Man* (shown at the Goodman Gallery in Cape Town as part of curator Natasha Becker's exhibition *Speaking Back* in 2012), Rose wrote the word 'white' about eight hundred times. This body of textual whiteness was interspersed with mentions of dead black men (often political figures) such as Patrice Lumumba, Malcolm X, and Thomas Sankara, whose murders were reported to have been politically motivated. Nontobeko Ntombela's discussion of that work (pp. 87–94) begins with the idea of that failed dialogue:

'All these gestures—even writing down and reading out loud what is being said by Njami—are meant to let us know that there is an exchange between the prophet and the professor, with the prophet trying very hard to listen and understand, yet failing dismally to grasp what is being said' (p. 88).

Ntombela introduces concepts such as 'untranslatability,' borrowed from literary and cultural studies scholar Carli Coetzee, in which she refers to the 'culture of the language' and the possibility of losing nuance through translation of marginal languages into English. She also cites theorist Njabulo S. Ndebele's 1994 essay 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa,' which argues that 'tactical absence' is an approach through which to introduce 'new definitions of the future,' and artist Zen Marie's 2011 essay 'Post-Apartheid Identity in Visual Art,' which provides for 'conventions of picture-making.' Marie's terms are employed to view portraiture in a broader social and critical context. Ntombela references anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (1995) book *Silencing the Past* following an interrogation of how meaning is made in the discourse of history through the various acts of 'the making of archives,' 'the making of narratives,' 'the making of sources,' and 'the making of history' (p. 90). Following Rose, Ntombela briefly engages the history of European painting in Caravaggio and the chiaroscuro style, both noted in the artist's work.



Figure 2. A view of the exhibition installation at the South African Pavilion at the 2019 Venice International Art Biennale (courtesy of Nkule Maba-so, 2019)

An engagement with Tswana epistemology is evident in Dineo Seshee Bopape's contribution to the reader (pp. 38–40), named after the art installation *Marapo a yona Dinaledi (Its bones the stars), Sketch no 22* (2019). Similar to Rose's text informing *The Black Paintings: Dead White Man*, Bopape's writing presents a large textual body of ellipses. These ellipses are interspersed with Tswana words that clearly refer to spiritual, metaphysical, or astronomical languages. The open space of ellipses could be read as the textual equivalent of the expansive space

'Man awakens the universe, he speaks to it, he listens to it, he tries to create a harmony with the universe. It is man who turns parts of the universe into sacred objects, and who uses other things for sacrifices and offerings. These are constant reminders to people that they regard it as a religious universe. [...] In many African myths it is told that at one time in the distant past, the heavens (or sky) and the earth were united as one' (p. 36).

of the celestial/heavenly being. The Tswana words are action-oriented, and thus charge the reader with what it means to *do* knowledge. Echoing ritual practice, words such as 'marapo' (bones), 'dinaledi' (stars), 'golola' (to loosen), 'lerole' (dust), or 'kapamelo' (obedience) force the reader to reassess their interpretation of the physical work, and draw links for the reader between acts of undoing, dis/obedience, and the celestial or heavenly body. What becomes clear is that earth, evoked by the mounds of brick and mud brought into the gallery, is a 'spiritual' entry point connoted by 'lerole' in the Tswana episteme. By way of comparison, in the Ganda episteme, a particular kind of clay, 'mumbwa,' is said to possess healing properties and is given to expecting mothers. This clay

is also used in some forms of divination. In regard to the planetary in African thought, philosopher John Mbiti (1991) made a connection between the universe and sacred objects when he wrote,

Then 'lerole' (dust), 'marapo' (bones), and 'dinaledi' (stars), after Mbiti's analysis, reveal objects which function in dialogue between earth and sky, and the role of human spiritual and ritual practice within that dialogue.

Curator and art historian Portia Malatjie uses Afropessimist theory to discuss Seshee Bopape's work *Morapo ayona Dinaledi* in the essay called 'A Constellation of Voids' (pp. 53–57). Following black theorist Calvin Warren's (2017) use of terms such as 'black non-being,' Malatjie writes that

'if we are to follow the Afropessimist belief that blackness is preceded by ontology and that blackness is that which is born out of violent encounters such as slavery or colonialism, then land becomes the central point on which the becoming non-human (or becoming nothing) of black people reveals itself' (p. 55).

Warren (2017) follows Fred Moten and Saidiya Hartman, important thinkers related to Afropessimism, in order to position the discussion of black being in relation to what Hartman names as 'the hold,' or being held captive in the Trans-Atlantic slave ship's interior, as a moment that is consequential to black life in the United States in particular. Malatjie significantly re-routes Afropessimist geography to South Africa in discussion of the beginning of Blackness in the legal construction of land expropriation in the 1913 Native Land Act. She writes that 'land is the nucleus around which blackness comes into being' (p. 55). The Hegelian dialectic of 'presence' and 'absence' is mirrored in this discussion of black being and black non-being. However, the essay goes on to overturn such dialectical thinking by arguing that 'something always already exists in nothingness' (p. 56). Warren (2017) discusses 'fugitive

existence' when writing about the life of enslaved Africans on plantations in the United States as a way of describing acts of anti-slavery and fugitive practices of the Black radical tradition. Malatjie thus updates this argument by positioning it in the sphere of white Dutch and British settlers and their forceful occupation of native land in South Africa. Thus, speaking to a tradition that dates back to what historian Ntongela Masilela called the 'New African Movement' (2013), including black author Sol Plaatje's (2007) anti-colonial book *Native Land in South Africa*, Malatjie addresses 'anti-occupation' as a gesture of spiritual practice and black being in Seshee Bopape's *Morapo ayona Dinaledi*.

*In Untitled (Of Occult Instability) [Feelings]* (2018), shown at the tenth Berlin Biennial of Contemporary Art, Seshee Bopape brought these various traditions of anti-colonization and anti-slavery into dialogue via her use of Black American and Black South African modern literature and music. Her citations of Nina Simone's iconic performance at Montreux Jazz Festival in 1976 and Langston Hughes' (2001) 'Dream Deferred' are brought into dialogue with Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's television interview on black land struggles (c. 1970s) and Bessie Head's (1974) novel *A Question of Power*. Curator Gabi Ngcobo's essay in the reader views these entanglements as rooted in the notion of a 'refreshed grammar' (pp. 31–34). She writes that

'we start winning when we commit ourselves to creatively working towards rearranging the systems for the creation of new knowledge and understanding that winning is us ending up on the same side of the future' (p. 34).

Further, Ngcobo advocates 'listening carefully,' as it can 'help us avoid problems inherent in the grand commemorative initiatives that have come to define us as a nation.' Her citation of black theorist Fred Moten's (2017) book *Black and Blur* seems to draw a connection between her own and Malatjie's essays.

Echoing the overall theoretical framework of the exhibition, Ngcobo discusses epistemic freedom via the creation of new (artistic and political) knowledges and fresh (artistic and political) grammars, also described as 'a continuous writing and re-writing of an ever-emerging story' (p. 32). In this context, it becomes crucial to consider the artist as an agent of authorship and power in the production of thought and language regarding black being. Yet, when she discusses 'grand commemorative initiatives' that 'define us as a nation' (p. 32), it is crucial to recall that Ngcobo is referring to public memory work in post-1994 South Africa by problematizing how history gets told. If such memory work tends to uphold the problem of epistemic erasure, deep listening is understood as a momentary suspension of epistemic violence.

Then, curator and art historian Same Mdluli's essay on Mawande Ka Zenzile ('A Case of an Art Language,' pp. 113–123) engages Ka Zenzile's philosophical sources, including Ngugi wa Thiongo's (1992) book *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, as well as art historical

sources in French romanticism in dialogue with the French Revolution. Following white critic Sean O'Toole's (2014) (mis)reading of Ka Zenzile's use of cow dung as a gesture comparable to British artist Chris Ofili's use of elephant dung, Mdluli clarifies this (mis)reading by deploying her own scholarship on the writings of black artist David Koloane. Mdluli writes:

'In Art Criticism for Whom? Koloane presents two main ideas to consider when discussing and writing about art in South Africa. The first relates to the effects of the apartheid state in so far as it denied black people the basic right of choosing the type of education they preferred. Koloane's views are informed by his experience of being subjected to a system where the government not only enforced a substandard education for black people but also made this part of a concerted effort to turn black people into cheap labour to serve the white minority' (p. 113).

These views reflect the need to address the artist's alternative pedagogy and the artist's sources in spaces outside of purely white or Eurocentric art canons, considering that art education itself has produced epistemic violence. Ka Zenzile, addressing that epistemic crisis in art pedagogy, responded to O'Toole (2014) thus:

'If I say art is shit I would be emulating Piero Manzoni or Chris Ofili, whose context or conceptual framework might differ to mine. My main intention with using cow dung, which is similar to the use of earth in my work, is to revive Xhosa art and traditional decorative materials, particularly in relation to myself and to examine this aspect of the culture in contemporary ways of art production inside Africa' (pp. 116–117).

Mdluli's use of Koloane's arguments on bantu education are consistent with the problem of epistemic erasure as well as Ka Zenzile's own rejection of genealogies of contemporary art that are centered in the West. Thus, Ka Zenzile views this rejection as an opportunity to invent new (visual and textual) grammars. Writing on black artists, Mdluli talks about '[t]he individual quest by these artists to articulate artistic language in their own way, despite the prescriptive models available to them' (p. 114). Mdluli goes on to discuss how colonial languages 'left behind an indomitable neo-colonial condition where the former colonies now define themselves in terms of the languages of Europe' (p. 114). This statement throws down the gauntlet on art criticism and visual analysis that assumes the natural hierarchy of Eurocentric contemporary art over African contemporary art.

Drawing from his Xhosa context, Ka Zenzile thus seeks to create an 'art language.' Mdluli constructs this reading by applying wa Thiong'o's (1992) concept of *the language of African literature* to visual art. Ka Zenzile asserts that he is producing in the Xhosa tradition where dung is used in the process of making art. In my own scholarship, I observed how a consideration of what the artist had learned from her grandmother could be narrated in 'simplistic' terms by art historian Marion Arnold's (1996) visual analysis of Helen Mmakgabo Sebidi—for, without reason, the informal education in wall painting Sebidi received from her grandmother could easily slip into the domain of barbarism

(Moses 2019). Thus, Sebidi could easily be (mis)understood as a 'primitive.'

Thus, Mdluli's essay continues to clarify the problematic ways in which black artists are represented or overlooked in art history. Through her inquiry into 'art language,' Mdluli clarifies the aims of Ka Zenzile's artistic research of the Xhosa tradition in ways that complicate rather than over-simplify what one learns from their community. When Mdluli writes that 'language itself is layered, and when embedded in artwork it has a level of dependency on visual literacy' (p. 114), we sense that the particularity here is two-fold: a Xhosa visual literacy, and a Eurocentric contemporary visual literacy that complicates the perception of African art in the West.

Finally, educator Aïcha Diallo's contribution to the reader ('Organic Loops,' pp. 125–128), functions differently, as it focuses on an artwork not included in the South African pavilion. Rather, the essay is dedicated to Moroccan filmmaker Abdessamad El Montassir's film *Resistance Naturelle* (2016). It highlights both trauma and resistance, and informs the co-curators' own articulation of both terms in their curatorial essay. Diallo's focus on desert scenes and desert plants is metaphoric. El Montassir highlights the struggle of the Sahrawi people, who are still being occupied and colonized by the post-independence Moroccan state. In the desert scene, Diallo describes her realization when playing back the film of the 'resilience' of the desert plant *Euphorbia echinus*. The plant becomes a metaphor for trauma, resistance, and resilience. Defining emotional trauma, Diallo wrote,

'when emotional trauma occurs, a process of disintegration comes into play. In other words, within the extent of the available coping mechanism, there are no words or symbols available to absorb and oppose the impact of the traumatic experience' (p. 125).

In conclusion, this reader functions as both an exhibition catalog and a kind of laboratory of ideas. I mention this because rather than settle or conclude, the reader raises issues both old and new in ways that are clearly unsettling. While the exhibition itself could be deceptive in its abbreviated form, illustrated by its seemingly over-refined selection of artworks that leaves little room for error, the accompanying reader functions the opposite way in undoing these limitations, and giving immense room for play. While the exhibition in Venice was an attempt at deploying laughter as a 'political device' that can 'create social hierarchies' (p. 10) and also 'subvert them' (p. 10) in the selection of artworks that refuse the 'models' of Eurocentric contemporary visual literacy, the reader laughs harder. Much harder.

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### Author's bio

Serubiri Moses is a writer and curator based in New York. He is an adjunct assistant professor in the art department at Hunter College, NY, where he teaches contemporary African art history, and an associate researcher in African Art History and the Formation of a Modern Aesthetic, a long-term project initiated by the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies, Germany. He co-curated the biannual public art festival KLA ART (2014) in Kampala, Uganda, was part of the curatorial team of the 10th Berlin Biennale of Contemporary Art (2017–2018), and is currently co-curating the fifth edition of Greater New York, a survey of contemporary art at MoMA PS1, Long Island City, NY. He has published extensively in academic journals, exhibition catalogues, and the media.

Address: Department of Art and Art History, 695 Park Avenue North  
Building 11054, New York, NY 10065.

E-mail: serubiri.m@outlook.com.

ORCID: 0000-0003-1182-2184.

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