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CONTEMPORARY BLACK AFRICAN CURATORIAL PRACTICE: THREE BIOGRAPHIC STUDIES IN STRATEGY

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Declaration

I hereby declare that *Contemporary Black African curatorial practice: three biographic studies in strategy* is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

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"The death of an artist is too high a price to pay for the birth of a revolutionary, even when the revolution seems to make more sense than ever before.”

- — Jean-Luc Godard

Abstract

This doctoral thesis is an interpretive study of the emergence of contemporary curatorial practice on the African continent. The inquiry charts the rise of the practice of curating in postcolonial Africa, casting a biographical lens on the curatorial strategies of three pre-eminent contemporary Black-African curators — Koyo Kouoh, Ntone Edjabe and Gabi Ngcobo. It pays particular attention to the conceptual and methodological approaches these individuals have utilised in their negotiation of the emergent genre of curatorial practice on the African continent; in the context of a neoliberalising landscape in the global contemporary art-world. This thesis is an exploration of the present-day expanded role of contemporary curatorial practice, and the nascent formations of cultural production emerging from the rise of the curator — models of which have helped to situate the role of the curatorial practitioner at the political centre of our contemporary moment in the African and global art-world. This thesis problematises the function of contemporary curatorial practitioners in Africa by leading an examination into how three contemporary Black African curators are reconfiguring the historical and contemporary epistemic articulations of the practice in the present. Central to this research's inquiry is understanding the thinking implemented by Black African curators in their curatorial practices and discovering what influence their pedagogies have on existing modes of cultural production on the African continent.

Key Words

Archive, Art, Biography, Cultural Work, Curatorial Practice, Institution-building, Mediation, Self-organisation.

Contents

Whither the African Curatorial?

Curatorial practice emanates from multiple sources that were constrained into the hegemonic project of the European museum in the nineteenth century, which came to dominate curatorial practice. Curatorial practice inherits its disciplinary form, intellectual character and paradigmatic outlook from theories and methods cultivated in the fields of art history and anthropology, which are both cognate subject fields of museological practice (Preziosi 2002: 29). Curating evolved into a ubiquitous profession at the end of WWII, spurred on by Western nations' aspirations to rebuild the cultural bases of their societies in the wake of the catastrophic loss of millions of human lives during the war. These early versions of curatorial practice infamously operated on the basis of arranging indigenous people's customs, material culture and cosmological systems into reductive taxonomies. This model of curatorial practice entered the African continent in the middle of the twentieth century, playing an important role in the establishment and operation of cultural infrastructure in postcolonial Africa. The middle of the twentieth century was an opportune time for the vocation to proliferate on the continent, as many of the fledgling nation-states began to rework their national cultural policies after the end of formal colonial rule (Mansfield 2002: 2).

The 1960s was a time in which the cultural industry was expanding rapidly, boosted by the entrance of Fordist modes of production into the cultural field (Mouffe 2008: 208). The modality of curatorial practice that African cultural practitioners inherited in the 1960s brought with it the racialist anthropological frameworks that characterised the practice since its inception. As an increasing number of African countries gained independence in the 1960s, cultural discourses in the Northern hemisphere began to lag behind the progressive discourses propounded by the anticolonial and decolonial movements that emerged in the Global South in the early to middle parts of the twentieth century. African culture was under the rubric of epistemological registers invented in the West, which served the purpose of obscuring pre-existing cultural synergies between non-Western people, as well as enforcing the epistemicide and culturcide of these colonised societies (Hicks 2020: 15). Displeased with this Western neocolonialist approach to African artistic and cultural production, the first generation of postcolonial cultural workers in Africa — and the African diaspora at large — set out on a political quest to reconstitute the socio-historical scope of Black African artistic and cultural creation.

From the moment of its inception as a museological profession in the nineteenth century to its contemporary derivation, independent curatorial practice, exhibition-making and exhibitions have been the primary modalities of discursive practice at the forefront of the identity of the profession (Mansfield 2002). This, I believe, makes exhibition-making and exhibitions in general, key aesthetic frameworks and discursive entry-points into understanding the revolutionary imprint made by Black African and/or subversive curatorial strategies on the format. Despite the practice's intention to serve the noble function of taking care or being a guardian of objects, curatorial practice does not boast a proud heritage. The dark cloud that hangs over curating is the imperial history of museums — the institutions which essentially gave birth to curating as a professional discipline. Historically, the museological function of curators inside museums has been to assist these institutions to produce archival systems and representational categories which are incorporated to preserve cultures of the past. We know that most of the objects that found their way into the display cabinets of museums in Europe were looted through a vast enterprise of imperial destruction conducted at the expense of non-Western worlds, which were left destroyed in the aftermath of imperial conquest (Azoulay 2019: 19).

Once inside these museums, African material objects assumed different meanings and vitalities than those from which they originated. This was due to the curators of these museums imposing upon them a particular vision of African culture which was devoid of the perspective of the complexity and contradictions that exist within specific African social systems, while additionally obscuring the bitter realities of African contemporaneity (Steiner 2002: 143). Imperial conquest prefigured the arrival of missionary and colonial anthropologists on African land, in the late 1900s and early twentieth century. African art historian Christopher B. Steiner (2002) argues that the imperial agents' invasion of Africa not only changed the social conditions of the natives, but also led to the distortion and demise of African arts and culture altogether. Western anthropologists, in particular, were fixated on the idea of inventing 'the other', and framed essentialist taxonomies which turned the cultural material of native cultures into ethnographic specimens. This was achieved through the display formats used to represent African cultures in European museums, such as the infamous diorama method.

The fact that the now 'decontextualized' objects played a vital social function in the everyday lives of the people from whom they were stolen was a relative non-factor for curators of European colonial museums (Clifford 1988: 198–199). British scholar of museum culture Tony Bennet (1988) refers to the main oppressive discursive technology operating inside museums

as the exhibitionary complex[1], which he claims is responsible for constructing regimes of representation that inscribe patterns of subjective domination that spill out into the public domain (Matsipa 2014: 7). Museums and the exhibitions they house are highly politicised spaces, in addition to being sites that are pregnant with possibilities for intellectual and artistic inquiry (Nooter, Roberts et al, 1994: 34 in Mdluli 2015: 21). The growing realisation of the latent qualities of exhibition spaces has led to curators' use of exhibition-making as a pedagogical tool. Exhibitions are complex discursive constructions which contain physical and aesthetic elements of culture such as material cultural objects, artworks and various other modalities of cultural expression. In curating exhibitions, curators exercise their intellectual power and professional authority to bring forth, organise and express the histories and contemporary narratives of a culture or group of people, an individual or a collective of artists, as well as to represent dominant or counter-discourses (Mansfield, 2002: 4).

One need not look further than the classical model of curating pioneered in the early twentieth century by Alfred H. Barr Jr. to understand how curators influence cultural narratives through exhibition-making. Barr, the late art historian and first director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), curated an exhibition titled *African Negro Art* in 1935 at MoMA, that sought to establish the canon of what could be accepted as authentic African sculptural forms. Although this exhibition was pioneering for its time — many acknowledged it for bringing respect back to African art — critics have subsequently labelled Barr's undertaking as lacking in depth of understanding of the cultures represented. It has also been criticised for manufacturing notions of primitivism in relation to the cultures to which the sculptural objects belonged, despite the curator claiming that his intention was to rupture the ideas of modernism prevalent during that era (Steiner 2002: 138; Hall 1993: 106). Barr's exhibition was a response to artists such as Matisse, Picasso and their contemporaries, whose art was classified as avant-garde and path-finding while there was little acknowledgement of how these artists appropriated the aesthetics of African cultural artefacts in the art they produced.

Historian of African art Sidney Littlefield Kasfir (2020: 10) claims that it was the radically contrasting nature of African art from the traditional academic models of art that attracted to it artists who had begun to reject classical European aesthetic practice — Picasso and others being among them. The aesthetic detours of artists such as Picasso and Brancusi had adverse consequences for the African cultural objects which they copied. These objects became

[1] Bennet argues that modern institutions of confinement (the prison, asylum and clinic) need to be considered alongside a wider range of institutions in order to understand institutional articulations of power and knowledge relations (1988: 73).

relegated into the category of ethnographic items and the fact that the material contributed to the aesthetic development of Western modern art was completely elided (Oguibe, 2023). The conceptual and museological decisions, tripled with the historical biases held by curators such as Barr and his descendants in the Western cultural field reinforced the understanding that African artistic and material cultural objects were inferior to those of the West (Dante 1964: 573). African traditional objects became subsumed into a Western discursive framework which removed them from their inherent social and cultural contexts and covered them in the universalising discourse known to the West as 'art' (Clifford 1988: 196).

Independent curatorial practitioners have been responsible for the practice's gradual disarticulation from its disciplinary locus, namely the museum and anthropological studies. An upshot of the archetypal figure of the museum curator, the independent curator rose to prominence in Europe in the late-1960s and early-1970s. Harald Szeemann, a former director of the Kunsthalle Bern museum in Switzerland, is regarded by many as the first independent curator. Szeemann assumed this role after divorcing himself from the museum he used to direct due to ideological differences he had with the institution's board of trustees. In 1972, as the head curator of Documenta 5 — an art event considered to be arguably the first major international exhibition to centralise the figure of the curator (Sheikh 2010: 68) — Szeemann broke with conventional curatorial language, as he put forward a curatorial gesture which ruptured prevailing understandings of the exhibition as a format in the way he staged the event. The Swiss curator rendered the large-scale event into a site of programmed events and spatially organised the exhibition arena into an interactive pedagogical space, composed of an accessible structure with various sources of cultural activity (Kolb and Flückiger 2013: 11).

The international art-world underwent reformation in the 1980s and 1990s, a period which saw more artists and cultural workers participating in the art-world. This was also a time in which the de-institutionalised genre of curatorial practice introduced by Szeemann began to appear on the African continent (Nzewi 2013: 47). The emergence of the figure of the author-curator popularised by Szeemann coincided with the upsurge in commercial interest in contemporary African art, and simultaneously led to a political, economic and aesthetic transformation in the production and consumption of African art and culture. From the early 1990s onwards, the international art-world began to assume a more deterritorialised and globalised version; reflective of the mass movement of people across the world, a condition which produced extreme cultural hybridisation (Nzewi 2013: 57). At this nascent stage of the commercial African art-world, several African cultural workers equipped themselves with the scholarly facilities and

commercial acumen made available to them as a result of the political and economic dynamics expanding the formal African art-world. These independent Black African cultural workers developed into political agents who operated in the liminal space between formal institutional entities and informal self-organised cultural structures.

African curatorial heavyweights such as the late David Koloane and Okwui Enwezor of South Africa and Nigeria, respectively — as well as Simon Njami, Chika Okeke-Agulu and Salah Hassan — were among the first African curators to apply their trade in international cultural circuits during this juncture of the late twentieth century. The dominance of Black males in the curatorial space abated somewhat in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as female practitioners such as Koyo Kouoh, N'Goné Fall, Bongi Dhlomo, Lorna Ferguson, Marilyn Douala Manga Bell, Olabisi Silva and many others began to emerge onto the African cultural scene in between these two decades. Collectively, this entire cluster of African cultural workers were the progenitors of independent curatorial practice in the contemporary African art landscape after independence, and are responsible for the field's evolution on the continent today into a practice that is able to engage with vast systems of knowledge in disperse geopolitical and cultural contexts; and possessing the ability to manoeuvre ambidextrously between the commercial and aesthetic spheres that compose the African and African-diasporic cultural landscape.

Situating contemporary curatorial practice

Because of the evidence presented above, it is clear that contemporary curatorial practice cannot be encapsulated into a singular classification. What began as a role of custodianship is maturing into a pluralistic discursive and productive activity, and still harbours potential to take on multiple other forms. Although exhibition-making remains its core aesthetic outlet, curating has expanded to incorporate other critically engaged modes of knowledge production and dissemination — such as research, writing and publishing. The practice can also be elaborated in the arrangement of various modes of organising cultural activity, which may be directed at facilitating relationships of cultural exchange between various kinds of publics across multiple social and mass-mediated technological platforms (O'Neill and Wilson 2010: 19). This considerably enlarged remit of curatorial practice distinguishes it from its antecedent formulation. In addition, it places emphasis on approaching the mediation and circulation of cultural knowledge production through reflective discursive models and aesthetic frameworks. The expanded variations of curatorial practice in which this thesis is interested invoke Walter

Mignolo's (2014: 160) notion of epistemic disobedience, a concept that describes the need for political and epistemic de-linking from Eurological ways of thinking and doing, and points toward a necessary turn to decolonial knowledge systems.

The utility of this expanded variation of curating has been particularly interesting to observe in the developing art and cultural spheres in the postcolonial world. Several cultural practitioners in Africa and African-diasporic centres are engaging in alternative and oftentimes multi-disciplinary modes of cultural work attuned to evade and/or respond to the constraints presented to them by structural conditions in their cultural ecosystems. Most cultural practitioners from these territories maintain the inclination to operate multi-modally in order to evade the implacable neoliberal mechanisms of the art-culture system which constantly seeks to homogenise cultural activity, thereby making it easier to commodify (Feld 2015 in Mansell 2021: 7). Cultural practitioners have to be constantly vigilant of these commercial forces and to do so, they have had to produce new avenues of expression which have departed from the visual-centric, to assume aural, digital and a multitude of other aesthetics and registers.

One factor which has come to distinguish nascent curatorial grammars from the more antiquated versions of the practice is precisely how contemporary Pan-African-centric curatorial schemas have reconfigured the rubrics of epistemology and method in the production and reproduction of African systems of cultural knowledge. These manoeuvres have led to a shift in modes of labour production in the cultural field. At present, we are observing an increasing number of emerging curators conceive of the work they produce in the context of post-institutional work. This modality of post-institutional curatorial production has taken their work outside conventional institutional frameworks (Cooke 2006: 33–35). Regardless of the multitude of modalities of curatorial practice that can be seen in operation today, curatorial approaches are still invested in interpreting phenomena in relation to the concepts of time, space, memory, history, archive and identity. Curatorial practice has concerned itself with questions analogous to these notions since its very beginning (Preziosi 2002: 28).

The difference is, however, whereas the classical principles of curating were based on racist Western ideas of scientific objectivity, contemporary modes of curatorial practice — especially those emanating from non-Western regions in the last three decades — have irrevocably disrupted the practice's colonial paradigms (Bayer and Terkessidis 2018: 49). A key conceptual force in curatorial practice's epistemological transformation has been the centring of human subjectivity in the aesthetic production of meaning in curatorial processes. This emphasis on a

closer reading of human subjectivity inspired the turn towards theorising everyday practice, subjectivities, moments and materials in artistic and cultural discourse, as an increasing number of curators are showing that everyday phenomena are not less deserving of attention and examination (Gurney 2022: 67; Bourriaud 2002: 14).

In retrieving these everyday experiences that compose human cultures from their obscurity and placing them into curatorial consideration, contemporary curatorial models are effecting a redistribution of the senses in the discursive terrain of cultural practice as a whole. The proliferation of contemporary curatorial practices has caused the borders that constitute the practice to become increasingly dispersed. This is a positive development, particularly the manner in which it has led to the emergence of novel routes of future socio-historical and cultural inquiry, and stimulated alternative artistic creations to surface in the African cultural landscape (De Certeau 1984: xiv). Today, global cultural discourse and its commercial parallel, the art market, are laden with ideas and narratives that demonstrate an understanding of the collective experiences of historically marginalised groups (Bayer and Terkessidis 2018: 63). This trend has been on a marked rise and can be seen in the increasing number of people from these minoritised groups claiming curatorial practice as a discursive practice to investigate their own histories and produce knowledge related to their indigenous cultures. As this trend continues to develop, we will witness a multiplication of discursive formats and perspectives which cater to the lived experiences of marginalised groups, entering into the domain of public discourse.

Present-day curatorial methods show that the practice has the scope to engage with various socio-political challenges and economic realities which have beset Africans on the continent and those in the diaspora since the dawn of political independence in Africa (Kasfir 1992: 44; Diagne 2011: 48). Furthermore, in addition to contributing fresh lines of inquiry, the methodological pursuits being pioneered in the contemporary field of curatorial practice challenge us to expand our investigative approaches to understanding the practice of knowledge production in a global context in which information is produced in an exponentially fast-paced manner. With new curatorial registers appearing at such rapid speeds in today's cultural economy, it is no surprise that we are witnessing an explosion of curatorial strategies. African-centred or otherwise, these emergent curatorial models are veering further and further away from the stereotypical models of representation birthed in the West, bringing about a wholesale transformation of curatorial practice and reconstituting the cultural field, particularly in the case of the African continent (Bayer and Terkessidis 2018: 50–51; Getachew 2019: 17).

This thesis endeavours to understand the contributions made by three Black-African curatorial practitioners to the overall field of curatorial practice. The curatorial biographies on which this research study will be anchoring its inquiry are those of Koyo Kouoh, Ntone Edjabe and Gabi Ngcobo. Individually, Kouoh, Edjabe and Ngcobo have each traversed different paths to arrive at their current stations in the expanding sphere of African curatorial production. In this thesis, I chart the curatorial biographies of these three Black African cultural practitioners as conceptual tools to explore and understand the processual shifts which have occurred in the field of African cultural production in the last five or six decades. A keen site of interest pertaining to this phenomenon are the curatorial strategies and discursive tactics that Kouoh, Edjabe and Ngcobo have employed to reconstruct the pre-existing structural and discursive relations in the African cultural landscape. These aforementioned African cultural workers are three of the most important and critically relevant curatorial practitioners to emerge inside the broad field of African curatorial practice in the last two decades. This dissertation aims to critically discuss the political, creative and artistic choices in the production of their curatorial practice, in a bid to produce an interpretive understanding of curating as an emergent field of cultural practice in Africa (De Certeau 1984: xix). In order to work with their registers and strategies, I, too, have had to push against the methodological expectations of academic discipline and register in order to do justice to their practice. As a Black African curator, I have tried to pursue a way of working with this that takes its lead from the inventions and refusals of the curators described in this work. I hope that in aggregate, this approach will create a rich instantiation of the radical and disruptive aesthetic genre of cultural practice that is Black-African curatorial practice.

Chapter One of this thesis begins by situating African curatorial practice at the moment of the ascendancy of contemporary African art. The chapter then moves to charting the historical evolution of Black curatorial practice as an emergent genre of African and African-diasporic cultural production, specifically paying attention to the practice's relationship to the anti-colonial movement on the African continent. The argument I make in this chapter is that contemporary Black-African curatorial paradigms are anchored in the conceptual and political pillars which underpinned the foundations and facilitation of the seminal anti-colonial cultural movements, festivals and exhibitions which took place in the Pan-African world or pertaining to African culture, during the period of the twentieth and early part of the twenty-first centuries. The discussion elucidates how these broad historical trends, which occurred in the last century in the African cultural and political landscape, have incisively shaped the field of artistic and cultural production on the continent. This chapter locates the ideological bases of contemporary modes

of Black-African and African-diasporic curatorial practice in the discursive and aesthetic ruptures pioneered through these events.

In Chapter Two I explore the discursive framework and methodological approach that was adopted to investigate and interpret the research data I collected during fieldwork, and utilised to address this study's main research questions. It begins with an autobiographical description of the origins of my research journey and then goes into an in-depth exploration of biographical writing, which is the discursive approach that drove my interpretation and presentation of the data. In the rest of this dissertation, I demonstrate the ways in which Black-African curatorial practitioners, at this juncture in the history of African art, find themselves playing a powerful function in constituting a renewed and liberated political social body — one that is invested in redressing the imbalances produced by Western hegemony, circulating the stories of under-represented people and forging a progressive route for human culture. Contemporary curatorial practice on the African continent is a space for radical intellectual work, as the order of possibilities open to curatorial intervention equip it with the potential to dismantle oppressive structures of knowledge as well as creating space for the possibility of a different encounter with Africa (Bogues 2009: 143).

Chapter Three revolves around the life and curatorial practice of Koyo Kouoh. This chapter begins with a description of the curator's early childhood in Senegal prior to her emigration to Switzerland. It then moves on to discuss Kouoh's early encounters with life in the European nation which led to her deep feelings of estrangement, sparking her desire to return to the continent to raise her son and rebuild a career as a cultural professional. Subsequent to this orientation, Chapter Three then contemplates Koyoh's incipient curatorial projects and gradually develops into a discussion of the central pillars which have come to constitute her curatorial practice.

Chapter Four is based on Gabi Ngcobo. This chapter begins with an exploration of Ngcobo's early encounters with art as a high school learner and then expands into a discussion of her as a promising artist. In the introduction of this chapter, the reader is given a sense of some of the key figures who helped shape Ngcobo's trajectory in the arts. The chapter then goes into a discussion of Ngcobo's curatorial practices, paying specific attention to her work with the Centre for Historical Re-enactments and Nothing Gets Organised. Following this discussion, the chapter contextualises Ngcobo's deep engagement with artistic collectives into a larger historical framework by looking at the history of artistic collectivising on the African continent.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of two of Ngcobo's recent exhibitions, which took place in 2019 and 2018, bringing her pronounced fame and controversy, respectively.

Chapter Five focuses on the curatorial practice of Ntone Edjabe. Due to the fact that Edjabe's practice is so tethered to the organisation Chimurenga, the discussions I explore about his curatorial practice are anchored in the activities of the organisation. The chapter begins with a window into Edjabe's life as a young man in a politically contested Cameroon, and follows his early days as a student at the University of Yaounde and his transition to the University of Lagos. Chapter Five then builds into an exploration of Edjabe's journey to South Africa and his encounter with individuals such as the early poet and anti-apartheid activist Sandile Dikeni, with whom he conceptualised the Chimurenga project. From here, the chapter goes into an in-depth narrative exploration of Edjabe's curatorial practice, reading his practice in the activities of the independent art space, beginning with the activation of the Pan-African Market and the launch of the first issue of the Chimurenga journal. Throughout the rest of the chapter, I explore other important curatorial projects in which Edjabe and Chimurenga have been involved. This thesis concludes with an overview of what I consider to be the main curatorial strategies that I have analysed in these three chapters, which I deem to constitute the main pillars of contemporary Black-African curatorial practice.

Chapter 1: Culture and Politics: A history of African anti-colonial cultural practice

The neoliberalisation of the contemporary African cultural landscape and the rise of independent Black-African curatorial practice

The onset of globalisation in the 1970s brought about increased exposure of African artistic and cultural production to the West, a phenomenon which set off the meteoric rise of the commercial value of contemporary African art in the international art-world (Mosquera 2002: 166; Kasfir 2020: 9). These globalising processes made a significant impression on the socio-economic and political formation of the African cultural landscape, reaching a crescendo in the 1980s when Senegal hosted the Dak'art Biennial — the first international art biennial to take place in sub-Saharan Africa (Nzewi 2013: 16; Griffin 2012: 7–8). The Dak'art Biennial is seen to hold more significance to Senegal and the African continent than the sheer commercial boon that it presented. This is because, in the years prior to the advent of Dak'art in 1989, Senegalese artists placed pressure on their nation's government to resuscitate the cultural spirit in the West African country, pointing to the Pan-African festivals of the 1960s and 1970s as epitomic. While Abdou Diouf, Léopold Sédhar Senghor's presidential successor, sympathised with the artists, the incumbent president had his own ambitions with the event. He considered the Biennial to be an ideal platform and prime opportunity to bolster his nation's profile in the eyes of the international community.

Drawing inspiration from the Pan-African festivals of the preceding decades, the organisers of Dak'art conceptualised an event that would situate African artistic and cultural production at the centre. The festival revolved around the discursive paradigm of Pan-Africanism, as the organisers deemed that the ideology could dismantle the epistemic binaries which dominated the international community's perceptions and understandings of African art and culture (Papastergiadis 2016: 8). This proved to be an effective strategy by the festival organisers because the event enhanced the visibility of Senegalese and African contemporary art in the following decades (De Caeval, Kouoh, Ebbesen, and Nzewi 2020: 21). The biennials which emerged on the African continent in the 1990s and 2000s each equally represented a set of heterogeneous and global-oriented socio-political, cultural, aesthetic and discursive viewpoints which contributed to the demystification of certain Eurocentric stereotypes and falsehoods about cultural life on the African continent.

In the wake of Dak'art, the art biennials which emerged on the continent heightened international art communities' engagement with the cultural multiplicity and political complexities that many postcolonial African societies had in common with one another (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 2009:11). This was made possible by how the biennial format contextualised the work of artists from varying social and political geographies into a neoliberal canopy which brought these artistic and cultural outputs in conversation with one another (Nzewi, 2013). Biennials in their very conception are intended to be sites that permit this kind of cultural confluence. What makes them unique is also the fact that they occur every two or three years, and involve artistic and cultural practitioners representing the commercial and non-commercial spheres of the global art ecosystem, who come together in an attempt to speculate on the zeitgeist of global contemporary artistic expression (De Caeval, Kouoh, Ebbesen and Nzewi 2020: 17). The work of several African-based artists began to shift aesthetically, as artistic producers embraced discourses and aesthetic practices which departed from the decolonial conceits of postcolonial modernism in the African artistic production in the 1960s and 1970s. A prime factor that led artists to re-conceptualise their creative practices was the heightened global mobility to which cultural practitioners from the continent were exposed, which then led to the expansion of their cultural and aesthetic references (Nzewi 2013: 1).

Undoubtedly, the events set off by the 1989 event encouraged a revolution in the conditions of artistic production and the systems by which such production was legitimated and admitted into the field of broader cultural production on the African continent but also internationally (Enwezor 2007 in Griffin 2013: 9). Moreover, the advent of biennials on the African continent helped shift the power dynamics in the global art-world, ushering in an era in the international art landscape which saw African artists and curators being more adventurous in their discursive and aesthetic approach to their work. The shift in curatorial discourse is one of the most significant developments to emerge out of the forces of this era. Similarly to their artistic counterparts, African curators moved away from reference systems specific to the early twentieth century and began espousing alternative models and concepts which were more attuned to the tendencies of the twenty-first century (Griffin 2013: 9). African and African-diasporic curators set out to refashion the context and modes of artistic production and exhibition-making in the new historical epoch (Mdluli 2015: 23). As indicated in the introduction, the African independent curators who emerged during this moment of the biennial boom on African soil initiated novel approaches to the conception and design of the discursive and aesthetic formations which undergirded African and African-diasporic artistic production at these large-scale global art events.

The theoretical approaches introduced during this time by Black-African independent curators suggested that these cultural actors had an inherent scepticism towards the universalist agenda being perpetrated by the international art-world through the vehicle of the biennial. In response they adopted a critical regionalist approach to subvert the broad sweeping narratives that these large-scale festivals had a tendency to produce (De Caeval, Kouoh, Ebbesen and Nzewi 2020: 17). In initiating critical regionalism as a discursive strategy at these biennials on the continent, African curators found a way to successfully mediate the urgencies brought on by global pressures while reinforcing local and regional issues. The ability to operate at the interstice of these micro and macro forces was the leverage that a critical regionalist approach afforded curators of art biennials in Africa (Szewczyk 2010 in Nzewi 2013: 4). An exemplary case in point is the Johannesburg Biennial of 1997, curated by Okwui Enwezor and titled *Trade Routes: History and Geography*. This biennial was an ambitious undertaking by the Nigerian-born and New York-based curator and the star-studded transnational curatorial team which he assembled, consisting of Hou Hanru, Kellie Jones, Yu Yeon Kim, Gerard Mosquero, Colin Richards and Octavia Zaya.

This biennial in Johannesburg would have a crucial impact on shaping the African art landscape. To this day, *Trade Routes* is regarded by many in the art-world as a watershed moment for contemporary African art in its involvement with the global art market. The theme of this biennial conspicuously revolved around the phenomenon of globalisation, and was premised on the idea of shaping new connections or “contact zones" that would generate constructive and enduring ties between cultural practitioners and intellectuals across the shifting cultural, economic and political dynamic that seemed to characterise the contemporary era of the time, and persists in doing so today (Griffin 2013: 9; Enwezor 1997). Enwezor’s 1997 biennial came under a severe amount of scrutiny for what was said to be the event’s aloof and bourgeois conceptual framework. A leading criticism of the intellectual underpinnings of this large-scale exhibition came from the late Black South African artist and curator David Koloane, who criticised the biennial for misrepresenting the state of South African visual culture, and singled out the elitist and exclusionary ideals proposed in the biennial’s artistic direction and curatorial framework as proof of its detachment from the realities of millions of Black people in the host country.

The overall consensus[2] among critics of Johannesburg '97 was that this biennial and the many others that emerged in Africa during the 1990s did very little to disrupt the dominant structural violences that contribute to the disempowerment of the locality or region's socio-economic and cultural ecosystem (Mdluli 2015: 23). Nonetheless, a paramount curatorial strategy proposed by Enwezor during the '97 biennial was to go against the conventional layout of the Western biennial. He famously did this by opting to forgo the implementation of national pavilions at the '97 biennial, in an attempt to transcend the nationalistic curatorial display formats traditionally used at global biennials (Griffin 2013: 11). Okwui Enwezor and several Black African curators harboured a strong mistrust of the intentions of the neoliberal art-world. Their scepticism stemmed from the reputation held by biennials as functionaries of Western capitalist forces, which they believed sought to extract the cultural and economic resources of non-Western societies (Mosquera 2002: 163). Despite their concerns, the 1990s witnessed the multiplication of biennials globally to over 150 in twenty years (Nzewi 2013). The following art biennials emerged on the African art scene after the introduction of Dak'art[3] in 1989: Rencontres de Bamako[4] in Mali (1994); *Africus*[5] and *Trade Routes: History and Geography*[6] held in Johannesburg (1995 and 1997, respectively); PACA Biennial in Nigeria (1995); the Luanda Triennial in Angola (2006); Salon Urbain De Douala in Cameroon (2007); Biennial Regard Benin in Benin (2012) and most recently the Stellenbosch Triennial in South Africa (2020).

Postcolonial African nations used the biennial platform to perpetuate a particular kind of cultural nationalism configured to match with the political agenda of the host nation. South African curator Natasha Becker[7] argued that biennials self-consciously attempt to express the political imagination of the host nation through the vehicle of its country's most perspicuous and inspiring artistic and cultural production. The biennial format has cemented itself as a powerful institution

[2] David Koloane (2003: 125 in Mdluli 2015: 23) states that biennials brought in their wake a new form of expression, however, they ushered in with them new forms of aesthetic exclusion.
[3] The Havana Biennial occurred in 1984 prior to the introduction of the Dakar Biennial in 1989. Organisers of this event sought to represent art and artists excluded from the international mainstream. It focused mostly on non-Western artists from Africa, Asia and Latin America based on a postcolonial discourse of Third Worldism. Its model of internationalism is more aligned with Black cultural politics in the twentieth century, consolidated in the early pan-African congresses and festivals (Nzewi 2013: 9).
[4] The Bamako Biennial is co-organised and co-sponsored by the Ministry of Culture of Mali and Culture France (the French government organ responsible for promoting French culture in the world) and represents France's contemporary cultural relations with its former colonies in Africa (Nzewi 2013: 7).
[5] Marschall (2001: 55 in Mdluli 2015: 34) writes that it was the pluralistic approach that guided the first Johannesburg Biennial that presented a redefined canon of South African art in a South African context. *Africus* (1995) set a precedent of how South African art was shifting towards a more inclusive and expansive approach towards the global landscape (Mdluli 2015: 24).
[6] The Johannesburg '97 Biennial featured six major exhibitions curated by both local and international curators in venues both in Cape Town and Johannesburg.
[7] Becker's talk was titled "Comparative Art History: The Biennale Principle".

in the architecture of the contemporary African art-world, situated alongside commercial phenomena such as art fairs and auctions, insofar as they have revolutionised the exhibitionary landscape, contributed to the rewriting of contemporary African art and culture, in addition to how instrumental they have been to the construction of national cultural identity (Kasfir 2020: 7; De Caeval, Kouoh, Ebbesen and Nzewi 2020: 17).

Black African independent curators emerged from this backdrop of global economic shifts which induced a biennialisation of the African artistic and cultural landscape in the 1980s and 1990s. It was important to prefigure these developments because, in the upcoming section, I will turn towards a discussion which seeks to locate Black-African curatorial practice as an emergent genre of African cultural production that is a corollary of the seminal Pan-African congresses and cultural festivals which took place in the beginning of the twentieth century and ran until the late twentieth century. This is to support the claim that the theoretical conceits which constitute the pedagogical nucleus of African curatorial practice in the present derive their genealogy from the anti-colonial struggles of the last century. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the groundbreaking exhibitions of African art staged in the period between 1960 and the turn of the millennium. What makes these exhibitions special is that they were forged out of a political imagination which sought to reconfigure the discursive course of African artistic and cultural production in the eyes of the world (Becker 2008 in Mdluli 2015: 26).

Historical orientation

The Haitian Revolution is revered as one of the foremost displays of human resistance against Western imperial oppression ever recorded in world history. As much as present-day Haiti is often used as a sign of Afro-pessimism,[8] this historical episode of 1791 to 1804 still stands as evidence of the revolutionary potential of Black people when they unite under a common political cause (Scott 2004: 83–85). The Haitian Revolution was a precursor to the abolition of the enslavement of Africans across the globe and is regarded by scholars of pre-modern and modern Black-African cultural history as a catalyst for the anti-colonial struggle in Africa, which

[8] Huey Copeland (2020: 241) describes Afro-pessimism as at once revealing and reckoning with the modern world's fundamentally anti-Black antagonism which, in political-ontological terms, structurally positions the Black as the slave, the void, the site of non-capacity that makes possible whiteness, relationality, in a word, "the world" itself. Moreover, Copeland states that in its "tending-toward-Blackness" and its refusal to offer a narrative of progress in the face of ongoing racial violence, Afro-pessimism aims to trouble those notions and structures that are constitutive of the current order and actively looks toward its destruction.

gained momentum at the turn of the twentieth century, beginning with the first Pan-African meeting which was held in London, England, from 23 – 25 July 1900 (Getachew 2019: 80). This gathering brought Black minds in the Northern hemisphere together to discuss the need to encourage Pan-African unity, especially throughout the British colonies. The ideas and resolutions reached at this conference conceived by Caribbean and North American scholars, namely W.E.B Du Bois and Edward W. Blyden,[9] began to permeate into other regions of the world where Black people endured under white domination.

It was not long until the political and ideological plans set out at the congress found militant and cultural expression in the various geopolitical territories inhabited by Black Africans. The Universal Negro Improvement and Conservation Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL) Back to Africa Movement, was founded in Jamaica in 1914, under the intellectual auspices of the charismatic political activist and orator Marcus Garvey. This movement was a Black-nationalist anti-colonial organisation which, through the exploits of its outspoken leader Garvey and its various other proselytes, advocated for unity amongst Black African people across the globe. The UNIA-ACL had a resounding influence in the shaping of African-American history and carried on the tradition started at the congress. It had intellectual roots in the Haitian Revolution, which was crucial to the unification of African people in the diaspora and the African continent. In 1919, W.E.B. Du Bois[10], with the assistance of French parliamentarian and Senegalese native Blaise Diagne[11], organised and hosted the world's first official Pan-African Congress, which was held in Paris, France.

The congress situated itself as a pivotal cultural event in that it was during this seminal gathering that the ideas[12] set forth at the preceding meeting, which took place at the beginning of the century, were formalised (Kunene 1956: 19). This gathering of 1919 kicked off a series of events and movements occurring across the Pan-African world. Garvey's UNIA-ACL movement

[9] E.W. Blyden was born on 3 August 1832 in St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, where he spent his formative years. He migrated to the United States in May 1850 and was denied enrolment in Rutgers University's theological programme because of his dark complexion. The following year he relocated to Alkebulan (Africa), settling in Liberia.

[10] Du Bois travelled to France in December 1918 as a representative of the NAACP, confident that the Paris Peace Conference provided the ideal setting for a parallel gathering of Black dignitaries from around the world to discuss the international problem of racism. In February 1919, nearly two decades after the 1900 conference, the first Pan-African Congress took place, and once again Du Bois was at the centre of its proceedings. The meeting was held adjacent to the Paris Peace Conference, and was convened to create a lasting peace following the Great War. The Pan-African Congress attempted to secure a place for peoples of African descent within the new world order.

[11] Blaise Diagne (13 October 1872 – 11 May 1934) was a Senegalese-French political leader and mayor of Dakar. He was the first Black African elected to the French Chamber of Deputies, and the first to hold a position in the French government.

[12] At this congress the ideas around an alternative ideology based on African-centred principles called Pan-Africanism were formed.

reached a climax in the 1920s and had its place taken by the epoch-defining Harlem Renaissance, a cultural revolution that sprouted amongst the Black peoples living in the New York suburb of Harlem in the United States of America. This movement went on to capture the imagination of Black people the world over, as the borough became the epicentre of Black-African diasporic cultural and artistic expression. As Africans migrated to the United States during this period in history, many of them made a point to pass through the culturally bustling streets of New York and Harlem particularly, and the borough became influential in global Black cultural practice.

Harlem was a Black cosmopolitan centre, its Afrocentricity earning it the designation of the 'Mecca for Black people' in the diaspora (Boukari-Yabara 2020: 22). The 1920s were abuzz with political activity, with Black people globally mobilising campaigns of resistance against European imperialism and domination around the world (Orser 2012: 739). Pan-Africanist ideology was the catalyst for many of these anti-imperial and anti-colonial forces and was certainly foundational in the constructions of global Black Consciousness occurring in the first decades of the twentieth century, right through into the twenty-first century (Scott 2004: 79). In a different part of the globe, another significant ideological movement had begun to take root. In the late-1920s in Paris, three Afro and Caribbean students — Aimé Cesaire, Leopold Sedhar Senghor and Leon Gotran Dumas — founded the literary and political movement which came to be called Négritude.

Much like its sister doctrine, Pan-Africanism, Négritude[13] sought to cultivate an intellectual climate amongst Black-African peoples in the Francophone world, whose intention was to nourish a new humanism for the twenieth century. The outlook of the philosophy of Négritude departed from a revisionist Black intellectual orientation that aimed to reconstruct the trope and poetics of Black people and Black life in global conversations about the human, and adapt these phenomena according to a register that was entrenched in pro-Black and African human consciousness (Scott 2016: viii). The three students encountered one another in the literary circle formed by Jean and Paulette Nadal, two sisters who were from the Caribbean island of Martinique. Cesaire coined the term Négritude, which became a philosophical ideology, based on the principle of Black people needing to assert their identity, culture and other contributions towards human civilisation (Diagne 2018: 14).

[13] Jean Paul Sartre, in his essay, expounds on the essence of Négritude philosophy: "The negro cannot deny that he is a negro, nor can he claim that he is part of some abstract colourless humanity: he is black. Thus he has his back up against the wall of authenticity: having been insulted and formerly enslaved, he picks up the word "nigger" which was thrown at him like a stone, he draws himself erect and proudly proclaims himself a black man, face to face with white men" (___: 18)

The political and ideological currents of the early twentieth century were at the forefront of a formation of the radicalised Black-African political subjectivity that emerged in the twentieth century. Pan-Africanism and Négritude provided the conceptual and discursive framework which gave rise to the political resistance against European political domination of Black-African people that followed in many parts of the globe. In Indonesia in 1955, non-aligned nations gathered in Bandung to discuss the freedom and future of the so-called Third-World nations. The Bandung Conference blew a wind of change all across the Global South. Two years after the Bandung Conference, on 6 March 1957, Ghana became the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to obtain independence from European colonialism. The West-African country's independence set off a domino effect, with a plethora of other African states also obtaining their political sovereignty in subsequent years and decades. The Martinican postcolonial theorist, Frantz Fanon (1963: 1), states that the primary aim of the decolonial movements which emanated in the so-called Third-World in the aftermath of the Bandung conference were all driven by the ideology of world-making.

World-making, for the leaders of these emergent post-independent nations, came with the objective of liberating and transforming the economic and political conditions of their people, as well as removing European imperial interference in their countries' affairs. Pan-Africanism and Négritude provided the ideological scaffolding for these post-independent African nation-states. Adom Getachew (2019: 1) affirms that the political changes that occurred in the mid- to late-twentieth century, particularly in parts of the world inhabited by Black people, were a consequence of the Pan-Africanisation of the Black struggle. The internationalisation of Black struggle was propelled by the upsurge of national consciousness that was catching fire among newly independent states on the African continent. National consciousness was vital to the construction of a national culture among these countries and, in fact, served an integral role in envisaging a project of anti-colonial world-making that would support the formation of postcolonial nationalism in African societies. But this nationalism was often articulated as a Pan-African struggle, a nationalism connected to many other similar struggles. The socio-political currents of the mid-twentieth century filtered into the cultural debates and affairs of the time, by and large providing the political and ideological stimulus that gave rise to the momentous cultural revolution that permanently transformed the African cultural landscape.

The festivals that will be discussed in the following segment occurred at a point in modern African history in which newly independent African countries were ardently trying to detach themselves from their European colonialists. Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi (2017: 61–62) asserts that the cultural festivals that took place in the 1960s and onwards were motivated by

the sweeping wave of independence, reinforced by the growing footprint of Pan-Africanism and Négritude on the continent. The festivals were in many ways a statement from the postcolonial African states to the international community that they had the wherewithal to determine their own modernisation agendas. Additionally, the Pan-African cultural festivals served to communicate the idea that the newly independent nation-states harboured their own ideological commitments which radically broke with the ideologies of the colonisers. These Pan-African cultural events were introduced to celebrate the demise of colonialism in many parts of the continent, by means of turning colonial life inside out through bringing together global Black culture in one space; and honouring it through the formation new models of interrelationships between the participants through the aesthetic vehicles of visual art, music, dance and intellectual discourse (Nzewi 2013: 10; Conde 1999: 92).

Africa in the 1960s was a terrain notably marked by a convergence of politico-ideological forces with cultural uprisings, which came to shape the social landscape in many parts of the continent. It is to these moments of African culture's aesthetic rupture in the aftermath of formal colonialism that this discussion will now turn its focus. The overarching theme of the subsequent discussion is to illustrate the impact that these debates — ongoing in the transitional period of the mid- to late-twentieth century in Africa — had on the discursive patterns that sprung up in the field of artistic and cultural practice during this period, constituting the bedrock of African cultural discourse in the present. Not coincidentally, around the same time as these events, curatorial practice was beginning to emerge into a more expansive field of intellectual cultural inquiry and a professional vocation in Africa. I argue that the festivals and surrounding events that took place in post-independent African states in the mid- to late-twentieth century instigated what I claim to have been a curatorial turn which subsequently ensued in the field of African and African-diasporic cultural production.

First World Festival of Black Arts (FESMAN), Dakar, Senegal, 1966

In 1966, the first president of the independent nation of Senegal, Leopold Sedhar Senghor, and the Senegalese State hosted the Festival Mondial des Arts Négres (First World Festival of Black Arts), otherwise known as FESMAN, in the country's port-side capital of Dakar. Working in cooperation with the African Society for Culture and the esteemed Pan-African journal *Présence*

Africaine[14], with the support of UNESCO, Senghor and his team of organisers, which included the legendary Alioune Diop, arranged the ground-breaking festival dedicated to celebrating African cultures. FESMAN was an ambitious undertaking — the event took three years of concerted preparation before commencing on 1 April 1966. It received much attention from the international media. In the build-up to the event, Senghor's government enacted a series of large-scale cultural projects that saw the city of Dakar undergo a sizeable transformation. A vast number of buildings were erected, entire neighbourhoods were renovated and hotel complexes were built. Amid these developments a new museum, called the Musée Dynamique,[15] was constructed. The organisers of the festival envisioned the event as a forum in which the participating countries could collectively grapple with the promises tied to an Africa in the throes of post-liberation. FESMAN was indeed the first major cultural event organised in Africa by an independent sub–Saharan African state.

The event ran until 24 April 1966, and boasted a diverse array of modes of artistic and cultural expression across the mediums of dance, theatre, cinema, visual arts, handicrafts, literature, poetry and music. Uniquely important as this festival was for Senegal's foreign policy in relation to the fast changing African socio-political landscape, the organisers of the festival — Senghor in particular — were criticised for their framing of certain key ideological aspects which were integral to the festival. One of these aspects was the outright exclusion from participation of African countries which were not part of the sub-Saharan demarcation of the continent. This issue and other related political, artistic and intellectual matters were debated at the colloquium[16] which gathered scholars of various African nationalities in fields as varied as Anthropology, Literature and Political Science (Nzewi 2017: 61).[17] Ideologically a socialist, Senghor's exclusion of states north of sub-Saharan Africa revealed his underlying biases which

[14] Présence Africaine is a Pan-African quarterly cultural, political and literary magazine, published in Paris, France, and founded by Alioune Diop in 1947. The journal was highly influential in the Pan-Africanist movement, the decolonisation struggle of former French colonies and the birth of the Négritude movement.

[15] The museum was part of a series of cultural projects initiated by President Léopold Sédar Senghor. The museum was inaugurated on 31 March 1966 by Senghor and André Malraux and played an important role in the Dakar Festival of Negro Arts, which ran from 1 – 24 April 1966. The museum was designed to act as a decolonial celebration of African culture, and featured artefacts and history from the Iron Age Nok culture all the way up to the modern era. Its first exhibition featured over 600 pieces of African art which were borrowed from 50 museums around the world.

[16] The colloquium, "Function and significance of Negro art in the life of the people and for the people", was held from 31 March – 8 April 1966.

[17] "African Art: Old Idioms/New Objects in Our Fashion", article in *incarNations* , magazine. "incarNations" is the name of an art exhibition curated by South African artist Kendell Geers and Sindika Dokolo himself. The conceptual framework of this exhibition sought to redirect the focus from the European gaze and colonial fantasy and place the mask back on the African aArtist to look at the iInternational traditions of art with African eyes and with an Afroc-Centric spirit. See: https://artafricamagazine.org/incarnations-african-art-as-philosophy/.

critics argued were contrary to the mission of the festival, namely, to unite the people of the African continent. Senghor's decision to rule out Arab participation in this festival was made on the basis of his disavowal of North African people's attitudes which reflected an affinity with European whiteness rather than Black Africanness.

The Négritudean vision, which aspired to the emancipation of Black African people, was in full force during the festivities of FESMAN. At the festival, Black people from disparate cultural backgrounds and perspectives came together, engaging in dialogical processes aimed towards constructing a new universal humanism. The idea at the basis of creating a space for cultural exchange between people who share in the Black experience was to restore the integrity of Black cultural values and celebrate their instinctive sameness and differences (Sartre 1964: 38). Proponents of Négritude staunchly believed that the aesthetic traditions of African art best evinced these synergies between African cultures and affirmed that African artistic and cultural expressions[18] are the Black man's most significant contribution to the world (Diagne 2011: 7). It is particularly clear to me that claiming cultural heritage has always been integral to the process of African liberation. African cultural leaders like Senghor and many others challenged discourses that claimed otherwise (Mudimbe 1988: 158 in Truscott and Van Bever Donker 2017: 20–21).

This has been a critically important task because it is crucial that Africans experience themselves as makers of culture (Ndebele 2006: 26). Nevertheless, the doctrine of Négritude had political and theoretical shortcomings which were exposed during the festival. Critics claimed that the political ideology's weakness was that it was too narrow in its outlook and needed to adopt a broader and much more inclusive approach to these questions around African and Black identity. Despite its anti-racist approach, the organisers still chose to exclude Arab participation in the event. The prejudice Senghor displayed towards the region of North Africa, including his and Senegal's intellectual proposition during this festival, is considered contrary to the more inclusive ideology of Pan-Africanism. Scholars of Black and African studies argue that there are sustaining ties which exist between Négritude and Pan-Africanism. Denise Ferreira da Silva (2020: 12–17) has likened Négritude to a Francophone version of Pan-Africanism.

[18] "The Black man's secret is that the sources of his existence and the roots of his being are identical" (Sartre 1964: 38), Black Orpheus.

The lessons of FESMAN '66 were further explored three years later in the Pan-African Festival[19] held in Algeria in 1969. This festival, held in the North African nation, is said to have contained a bigger political impulse due to the contingence of nations who attended the gathering, like the members of the Black Panthers of the United States. The Pan-African Festival in Algeria was followed five years later by a music festival held in Zaïre, now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo. Zaïre '74 was a three-day live music festival that ran from the 22 – 24 September 1974 at the Stade du 20 Mai (20th of May Stadium) in Kinshasa. This event was conceived by the late South African musician and political activist Hugh Masekela and his friend and record producer Stewart Levine. Zaïre '74, was also meant to be a promotional event for a heavyweight boxing championship match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman. The boxing match alone, famously known as the Rumble in the Jungle, was reportedly attended by close to 80,000 people. In addition to being a promotional event for the Ali and Foreman fight, the event was also intended to encourage racial and cultural solidarity between Africans and African-American people. Both the Zaïre and Algeria festivals were organised with the financial and bureaucratic support of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and together paved the way for the iconic FESTAC '77 festival.

[19] In July 1969 thousands of people gathered in Algiers, the capital of Algeria, for the groundbreaking Pan-African Cultural Festival. The festival took place seven years after Algeria won its independence from French colonialism after a very protracted armed struggle which began in 1954, extending into 1961. Officials from over thirty independent and contested nations on the continent were sent to participate in this ten-day extravaganza organised by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The Pan-African Cultural Festival brought together a strong contingent of artists, intellectuals, journalists and political activists from different African countries, as well as the Black Panther Party from the United States.

Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC '77), Lagos, Nigeria

FESTAC '77 (or the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture) was held from 15 January – 12 February in Kaduna, Nigeria. This festival was very much a continuation of the cultural ferment that sprung up from the 1966 Dakar and 1969 Algeria multicultural festival encounters. The Nigeria event was third in the line of consecutive large-scale geopolitical gatherings on the African continent. Wole Soyinka (2019), himself a native of the West African state that the event should actually have been dubbed the *Third* World Black African Arts Festival. FESTAC took place in the socio-political context of a postcolonial state that was experiencing the rapid transformations brought about by the injection of petro-dollars. The Nigerian government invested heavily in the organisation of the cultural festival, reportedly putting forward an approximate two billion dollars. FESTAC was embroiled in all of the contradictions that were a consequence of the collusion of cultural politics and state affairs (Apter 2005: 8). This is because the festival was largely sponsored by the host country's oil rich government, a situation which caused mounting fears and concerns at the time about whether this was a move by the Nigerian state to attempt to commodify national culture.

This perceived gesture by the state led to some accusing the festival of reinscribing the centres and antipodes of the colonial world, while failing to acknowledge the relationship between Africa's turbulent history and the contemporary ebbs and flows of the time (Apter 2005: 53; Aterianus-Owanga 2019: 1). FESTAC involved cultural representations produced by Africans hailing from forty-five Black-African, Arab and Afro-Caribbean countries, including the participation of territories such as Guyana and the West Indies. This momentous spectacle showcased African cultural and artistic expression in their mellifluous vernaculars, i.e. music, dance, cinema, drama, literature, fashion and and also a literary congress. The literary congress was the discursive component of the event. It was similar to the colloquium held during FESMAN '66. FESTAC managed to gather the world's foremost academics and bring them into critical dialogue with jazz musicians, singers, actors, painters and sculptors about the colonial past and also to generate exciting visions about the emergent African modernities that were vigorously alive at the festival.

The events at FESTAC markedly situated the gathering within a modernist Pan-Africanist worldview that characterised the political jouissance of African politics in the mid- to late-twentieth century. Pan-African modernism was indeed the fundamental ideological catalyst prevalent in the formation and emergence of Black power and Afro-centric movements in the

1960s up to the 1970s. The spirit of cultural hybridisation was on the rise in the African cultural landscape after the end of colonialism as the traditional art aesthetics began synthesising modernist elements; launching African art into the era of contemporary art. Art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu (2015) refers to this period as the advent of postcolonial modernism in African art. According to the professor, postcolonial modernism became an ideological and aesthetic consciousness that buttressed the modernist project which took precedence at art schools in Zaire and Nigeria, such as the Poto Poto School of Art and Zaria Art Society in the 1950s and 1960s, respectively. The artistic production of many modernist artists working within the continent of Africa in the 1960s echoed the cultural sensibility of this historical period (Nzewi 2013: 14–15). The introspective and critical attitude of postcolonial modernism towards African culture and Western imperialism reflected the political discussions of the epoch. African-American feminist writer bell hooks (1990) criticised these Black struggle crusades for conforming to a universalising agenda, which she claimed was a by-product of the Western neo-colonial modernist agenda.

Pan-African modernism, however, differed from European modernism in that it offered a larger discursive scope to understand how global Black-African subjectivities articulated, framed and represented themselves in the periods after the struggle for the independence of Africa and of Black people across the world (Getachew 2019). In fact, the popularity of Pan-African political ideology was bolstered further in the course of festivals such as FESTAC. The president of the festival's organising committee, Anthony Enahoro, and festival secretary Alioune Diop, desired to curate a mood at the 1977 large-scale event which portrayed an extension of the spirit of Pan-Africanist solidarity towards Black people in apartheid South Africa and also people in Palestine. However, upon hearing about the organisers being sympathetic to the presence of Arab countries at FESTAC, Senegal withdrew its involvement in the festival in protest. On the other hand, FESTAC's organisers held strongly the belief that joint Arab and Black participation at the event would send a stronger political message into the arena of international politics.

Andrew Apter (2005: 3) suggests that FESTAC '77 was an attempt to remap the African diaspora into a new vision of the Black and African world, which although centring Nigeria, also sought to reflect an expansive model of racial equivalence and political inclusion of Black people into the game of global cultural politics. This idea is exemplified in the call for Afro-Arab unity, which was not only meant to be a critique of Western colonialism but also a symbol of Pan-African solidarity. Senegal — whose misgivings about the Arab world had to do with Arab nations' historical and contemporary cultural position around the notion of Black political subjectivity — eventually reinstated its involvement in the festival before its opening in 1977.

The participation of African-Americans in the event was deemed acceptable because of the people's history of slavery as well as the acknowledgement that there was a direct link between the Black Power movement in the United States and politico-ideological forces in Africa (Apter 2005).

This political conception by the festival organisers alone made the event fertile ground for the production of Afro-diasporic global integration. The conglomeration of Black nations known as the African Triangle — comprising Black subjects of the United States, the Caribbean and Euro-African diasporic people — were assembled at the festival under the historiographic relations that connect the people of these territories. Those connections were built and sustained by intellectuals and organisers to demonstrate that the Black experience transcends the geographical and political boundaries demarcated by Western imperialism and colonialism. FESTAC '77 paid homage to this historical reality and therefore organisers worked hard to imagine a space that could facilitate a sense of belonging to members of the Black transnational community, in an effort to exceed any colonial cartographical markings (Nascimento 1980: 22). Latin America, a region that has been historically overlooked in transnational discussions related to Black politics vis-a-vis the Pan-African world, was well represented at FESTAC. The reason for the region's marginalisation in these discourses is due to the fact that the ancestral connections tying Afro-Brazilians and the greater Latin American Black populous to Africa were underrepresented and under-theorised in Black scholarship during the mid-twentieth century (Nascimento 1980: 203). This is despite Haiti being the birthplace of the first anti-slavery uprising by Black people in the history of the modern world. Access to this history and many other anti-imperial histories have been tightly controlled or otherwise totally eradicated (Grosfoguel 2013: 74).

Latin American scholars like the Afro-Brazilian playwright Abdias Nascimento and his contemporaries were integral to recentering the history of Black Latin America back into contemporary Black discourses. Reflecting on the debates held at the festival, African-American intellectual Cornel West[20] (1987: 42) claims that Black intellectuals struggled to find common ground on how to reimagine discourse about global Black subjectivity anew. Although discourse on the Black experience was gradually on the rise during that time, the intellectual infrastructure about this subject was still relatively underdeveloped. Nonetheless, the ambiguous positions

[20] Cornel West asserts: "I would suggest that there are two organic intellectual traditions in African American life: the black Christian tradition of preaching and the black musical tradition of performance. Both traditions, though undoubtedly linked to the life of the mind, are oral, improvisational, and histrionic." See West, Cornel. "The dilemma of the Black intellectual". *Critical Quarterly* 29(4): 39–52.

adopted were debated in full measure at FESTAC, and the aftermath of these discussions constructed the conceptual roadmap that African cultural politics heeded from then onwards. This, in my opinion, is why the 1977 festival was the important historical event that it was. FESTAC ’77 has gone on to have a long-lasting effect on the composition of the cultural landscape. The festival emboldened African countries that were still in the grips of colonialism to take seriously the progressive role that culture can play in instigating political change. Subsequent to FESTAC ’77, a spurt of cultural festivals came into existence as a result of the political strides made during the festival.

A year after the end of FESTAC, the World Cultural Festival of Youth and Students took place in Havana, Cuba, in 1978. This festival blended into the ideological fabric crafted during FESTAC and the two festivals preceding it. What was unique about the Cuban cultural festival is that it was anchored inside a discursive framework that revolved around the Africanisation of the Caribbean. Four years later in Southern Africa, the banned South African political party known as the African National Congress (ANC) had established regional cultural committees everywhere in the world where the anti-apartheid organisation had a physical presence (FESTAC 2019). This organisation spearheaded two Culture and Resistance Festivals which were hosted in Botswana in 1982 and Amsterdam in 1987, respectively. The main purpose of these two festivals was to discuss the role of culture in the anti-apartheid struggle, and it was from these events, specifically the 1982 gathering in Gaborone, that the term ‘cultural worker’ was introduced in the vocabulary of African cultural practitioners.

The cultural events of the late-1960s to the late-1980s were urgent signifiers of the progress that Pan-African discourse was making in terms of imposing itself on the global geopolitical discursive power dynamics. In the mid- to late-1980s and 1990s, the project of weaponising culture in the fight against oppressive states reached a resounding climax. The international community came under extreme pressure to act on the developments in Southern Africa. As the oppressive regimes succumbed to the calls of liberation, it was not long after that that the grand themes and narratives came out in the aesthetic overtures present in cultural production of African artists during that time.

The exhibitionary complex in African artistic and cultural production

What we call ‘the arts’ is very much a discursive concept that encompasses a broad set of cultural practices, which independently and interdependently function to reflect and reproduce the larger social and cultural context of our lifeworlds (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2013: 215). The curator's role in the constellation of practices which constitute the field of ‘the arts’ has in recent decades grown to prominence. As I have attempted to illustrate in the above portion of this chapter, the curatorial practitioner’s ascendency in modern society and the radical divestment of curating from its institutional origins (dating back to the nineteenth century) are a by-product of various interlocking structural, political and aesthetic factors which together necessitated the practice’s evolution. What followed in the aftermath of the invention of the discursive and politico-economic domain of art — namely, the acts of ownership of objects, erasure of productive communities, the deindividuation of artistic producers and the reduction of human creativity to the fabrication of products in the name of mastering the universal language of artistic brilliance and cultural sensibility — were the main advances of the imperial conquest in the twentieth century (Azoulay 2019: 107).

The regimes of representation set forth through the exhibitionary practices used to display African art in the early- and mid-twentieth century defined and projected categorical order onto the social realms in which African objects circulated (Matsipa 2014: 9). With the arrival of political and cultural independence in Africa, African curators and scholars began to challenge the ethnocentric notions purveyed by the West. Propelled by developments on the political front, anti-colonial curatorial discourses gradually emerged and destabilised the archaic Western hierarchies of the gaze and the hegemony of the narratives it produces (Hall 1993: 105). The exhibition titled *Tendencies and Confrontations,* which formed part of the 1966 festival in Dakar, is an illustrative case of the earliest manifestations of the curatorial intention to re-situate the consumption of African art. Featuring an assemblage of artworks from Senegalese and other modernist painters and sculptors, the exhibition was another prism through which the spectre of modernism in Africa and the larger Black-African world would be understood (Nzewi 2017: 62).

This exhibition, in the grand context of the festival in which it was staged, sought to problematise the insularity of the historical accounts which downgraded the aesthetic value of traditions of African art (Taiwo 2010: 2). The 1977 festival in Nigeria, FESTAC, hosted an

exhibition called *Africa and the Origin of Man* which followed in the same discursive vein as *Tendencies and Confrontations*, in how it captured the profound socio-political and cultural shifts that were happening on the continent and around the world. The transition from late colonialism to independent political statehood engendered much of the aesthetic transformations undergone by a majority of African artistic practices. The political upheavals of the 1960s in Anglophone and Francophone countries induced an aesthetic rupture in art-making. Lusophone African countries experienced theirs in the 1970s, and for the Southern African region, the aesthetic rupture occurred in the 1980s into the 1990s (Kasfir 2020: 9).

A seminal exhibition that materialised in the 1980s, whose import completely fractured the established regimes of curatorial representation, was *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989). This exhibition, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin and hosted by the Centre Pompidou in Paris, happened on the cusp of the commercial globalisation of art from the Third World. The exhibition consisted of work from the global "margins" not only to counter museums in Europe, especially Paris — prioritising the work of artists produced in the West, but also to question the very Western idea of art (Griffin 2013: 10). The exhibition displayed work from more than a hundred artists, who came from more than fifty countries in the non-Western world or regions of the Global South. What Martin attempted to do through this exhibition was to renegotiate the borders between art and ethnography, while simultaneously foregrounding the emergent discourses of hybridity and difference that were instructive to understanding the postcolonial experience (Coombes 1994: 495). The exhibition was lauded for the impact it had on how non-Western or European artists became accepted into the Western art canon, following its influence on the art landscape.

Martin's critics claim that his gesture of representing the heterogeneity of non-Western cultures did the opposite, reinforcing certain misconceptions about African art and its relationship to the West (Mduli 2015: 19). However, history would absolve the French curator as the events that ensued shortly in the African and cultural landscape pointed to the diminishing of Western dominant discourses, and a mainstream paradigm shift towards discourses of peripheral zones. *Magiciens de la Terre* blazed the trail for the visual art world to engage alternative discourses, and was a harbinger of the radical global political shift that catalysed the entry of African artists into the global art world (Mosquera 2002: 165; Enwezor and Oguibe 1999: 10 in Mdluli 2015: 29). The new era of exhibition-making ushered in by *Magiciens de la Terre* saw African-focused projects such as *Seven Stories About Modern Art in Africa* (1995), *Africa Remix* (2007), and numerous other small and large-scale exhibitions centred around Africa.

A theme that carries throughout the exhibitions of African art that emerged in the '90s and early 2000s, is that in each of these exhibitions, the overarching narrative was that of wanting to undo the epistemic violence of Euro and Western-centrism on African culture and human subjectivities. Another crucial exhibition that created lasting echoes is the survey exhibition titled *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements 1945–1994*, curated by Okwui Enwezor, that opened in Munich, Germany, in 2001. The curatorial thesis of the exhibition set out to pay homage to the momentous period in Africa's history, which saw a plethora of African states gain their long-awaited independence. Enwezor intended for the exhibition to speak to the beginnings of a politically autonomous continent and the parallel phenomenon of the new subjectivities that were emerging with the continent's liberation. In the exhibition, Enwezor acknowledges the role played by the congresses and festivals that were held on the continent in accelerating the collapse of white rule, particularly in places such as apartheid South Africa.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate the important role that the field of art and culture have played in Black people's experiments to liberate themselves from Western imperial and colonial rule since the beginning of the twentieth century into the present moment. I have also tried to elucidate the point that Black-African curatorial thought has a longer genealogy than we may typically acknowledge. The historical overview that I provide above excludes numerous other episodes which have been instrumental in the development of the field of Black-African artistic and cultural practice. I have tried to highlight and discuss a few of the major historical episodes, defining master-discourses and seminal exhibitions which have left an indelible mark on the configuration of the contemporary African landscape. The main purpose of this being to contextualise the historical landscape as a means of situating the discursive and political terrain from which the emergent profession and intellectual discipline of Black-African curatorial practice emanates.

Chapter 2: Methodological considerations

Auto-ethno-biography

Edward Said (1975: 5) asserts that the beginning of any creative project is the primary step in the intentional production of its meaning. Interpretive ethnography, which constitutes a core part of this study's research process, is strongly dependent on the researcher's ability to practise critical self-reflexivity. As an emergent practitioner in the field of African curatorial practice, it is important that I articulate my own views, perceptions and experiences in the multifarious encounters and projects that I was involved in and facilitated over the course of this research study (Denzin 1999: 510 in Alexander 2017: 417). Which I believe then makes this study a vulnerable and in some ways performative auto-ethnographic investigation into the field of Pan-African curatorial practice. Before I begin to auto-ethnographically recount my personal journey in the field, it is important to foreground that ethnographic research should not be seen as merely an objective description of people and their behaviour from the researcher's point of view. Through immersing myself in the field of curatorial practice over the course of this research, I would like to make a case for the researcher conducting this mode of research to make a systematic effort to engross herself or himself in the that the group of people that is being researched; learning enough about them organise her or his behaviour in relation to the research participants (Spradley and McCurdy 1972: 9 in Alexander 2017: 419).

This is why in the following pages, I put forward my experiences as a curatorial practitioner engaged in practice in the African artistic and cultural community. These experiences have uniquely positioned me to engage multiple other practitioners in the field and gain insight into tangible and intangible dynamics existing in the African curatorial space (Alexander 2017: 419). If ethnographic researchers are going to make interpretive research meaningful beyond the scope of the individual practitioner and her or his experience, it is crucial that the insights gathered by such researchers are translated into action. Throughout this research I made a concerted effort to find channels to put into practice what I was learning from my research participants with the hope of contributing to the theoretical and practical scope of the field of curating in Africa, and the experiences of the people engaging with the work I was doing, either research-based or practical (Alexander 2017: 432). Since initiating this research project in 2018, this study's main research questions and objectives have shifted considerably over time. What set this project in motion was a keen but nebulous impulse and curiosity about the historical and contemporary forces revolving around the formation of artistic collectives on the African

continent. My intrigue in artistic collectives stemmed from a desire to understand the structural conditions that necessitated the existence of these socio-cultural entities.

I was interested in understanding what the internal working principles were that informed the functional dynamics of the group, and how these factors went on to have an impact on the external forces that go into processes of socio-cultural production and reproduction. Thus in July 2018, I embarked on my first research trip after being granted the opportunity to participate in an artistic practitioner-led workshop organised by the Fine Arts Department at Rhodes University in the Eastern Cape town of Makhanda. This workshop was framed around the theme of 'decolonial aesthetics[21]', introduced by Argentinean scholar, Walter Mignolo, and functioned as a think-tank for the invited participants to critically contemplate and engage on ways in which contemporary African artistic and cultural practitioners could de-link the work they do from dominant Western modes of artistic thought and practice. This was the first research trip I undertook wherein I found myself in the midst of artists, cultural scholars, writers and curators since developing a scholarly interest in African and African-diasporic cultural production in 2015. Being within such an interdisciplinary environment not only challenged views as a scholar and researcher but also enriched my understanding of the discourses of decolonising the Humanities in the Pan-African world. This made me come to terms with the consequences which these pre-existing and ongoing debates had on the practical and conceptual articulation of African cultural practice.

Subsequent to participation in this workshop, towards the end of 2018, during a writing fellowship I took up in Toronto, Canada, I came across a book at the University of Toronto Libraries titled *Symposium on Building Independent Art Institutions in Africa*. This book, whose editor happens to be one of this study's research participants (Koyo Kouoh), featured contributions from several African and international curatorial practitioners. At the time of reading the edition, I had no knowledge of these practitioners. The book is composed of a collection of essays adapted from presentations made by participants during a symposium held in 2012 which addressed the morphing role of independent art institutions and initiatives in an African landscape, in which state programmes and bureaucratic structures are so predominant (Kouoh 2022a). Reading this book expanded my perspective on the important role played by

[21] Decolonial aesthetics refers to the need for a political and epistemic rupture in the ways in which cultural knowledge is aesthetically engaged. The paradigm calls for cultural producers to de-link from the ideological notion that situates Western modes of knowledge production as hegemonic. According to proponents of this rethinking of the world is necessary for us to do, if a just, and non-imperial and colonial society is going to emerge (Mignolo 2009:160).

independent cultural organisations in cultivating conducive conditions for the emergence of Black artistic and cultural production. In this process I came to understand that independent cultural spaces in Africa and elsewhere are the products of a group of people who defy the external pressure of the institutional apparatus of the art-world in the quest to open a space in which liberated forms of exchange can develop (Verwoert 2010: 28). What struck me in digesting the essays in the book was the function of curatorial practitioners in the formation, management and widespread distribution of the conceptual operations of these entities. Upon returning to Cape Town from Toronto in the summer of 2018, I recall conducting research while on a self-organised writing retreat with academic friends. As I was scouring the internet one evening, I stumbled upon an open call issued by RAW Material Company, the independent art space founded by Koyo Kouoh. The call invited cultural practitioners interested in artistic and cultural research, who are working in the nexus of the arts and artistic institutional bodies, to apply to participate in a two-and-a-half month residency hosted by the Dakar-based organisation.

I compiled and submitted my proposal and in January 2019, I received an email notification that I had been shortlisted for an interview with the RAW academy faculty. The interview took place in the third week of January 2019 and my memory of its contents, after almost four years, is blurry. I do, however, remember Koyo, who was part of a panel consisting of five or six interviewers asking me a question that conceptually frames all of my curatorial ideas to this day. To understand why I found this question challenging, one would have to know the contents of the proposal I submitted. My proposal was based on what had been the animating thrust of my intellectual pursuits in the beginning of 2018, which I had obviously carried with me throughout the year into 2019, but had found a more expansive way of articulating. My residency application included a vague concept concerning artistic collectives in a neoliberalising art-world. It was not a project that I was proposing but more of a research inquiry, which explains why Koyo asked me the all-important question, ‘How are you thinking about your concept curatorially?’ At the time, as much as I had been reading a lot of literature around artistic production both on the continent and abroad, the term ‘curatorial’ as a discursive concept that can be practically applied, had never occurred to me.

A week after the interview, I sat in the artist Atang Tshikare’s studio in Woodstock, Cape Town. It was sometime in the middle of the week. I recall receiving an email notification on my mobile phone and immediately opening the message. It was from RAW academy — I had been accepted to participate in the residency programme. I still have vivid memories of the joy that

filled me on receiving the news. The overarching sentiment can be summed up in these four words: ‘Senegal, here I come!’ Late in the summer and beginnings of the Southern African fall in 2019, I headed off to Senegal to spend two-and-a-half months as part of a residency on curatorial practice named “CURA SESSION 6”, which was to be hosted by RAW Material Company and artistic director Koyo Kouoh. Mind you, at the time of beginning the residency I had not at all thought of the work that I did prior to this stage as being of a curatorial nature. Nor do I remember having or entertaining thoughts of translating my research interest into any form of curatorial practice. Before joining the residency programme, the closest I had ever gotten to conducting any kind of curatorial work was through the research projects I embarked on in my Honours and Master’s degrees. The reason I say this is because my research interests at the time still had to do with phenomena, such as the economic sustainability of being a Black professional artist in Bloemfontein, South Africa. A small city that has a handful of galleries which are all white-owned and one state-owned art museum that boasts a great collection of art by Black modernists and contemporary sculptors and painters, but constrained by a lack of curatorial flair and devoid of a transformative political project. I would only see Black art in the museum, which is, on one hand a good thing but, on the other hand, when I started thinking about the non-existence of Black artists and Black art in the Bloemfontein gallery system, it became evident to me that the system was imbalanced.

Following the completion of my honours degree, I shifted my gaze more towards the inward lives of artists. I became interested in understanding what happens inside the creative process of art-making; what forces propelled and repelled creativity from unfolding and how did each of the artists I worked with in this study approach art-making through their artistic medium of choice. It became clear to me in the course of conducting this research that art had immense potential to transform human lives. I was also beginning to develop a keen interest in the role that art and culture played in society; from the microcosmic of the individual extending to the structural levels of society. I touched down at the Blaise Diagne International Airport in Dakar on 15 March 2019 and was collected by a taxi driver sent by my hosts for the next few months — an interracial couple in their early- to mid-thirties. The woman was Yanira, a Spanish-speaking Canarian who worked for a pharmaceutical company with business ties to the United Nations. Her husband was Roberto, a Bissau-Guinean who spoke Portuguese and managed a nightclub right on the beach in the northern part of the city. The taxi driver, whose name I have since forgotten, dropped me off at my lodgings in Fann Hock.

Upon entering the apartment I was met by a Frenchman, perhaps in his late-twenties or early-thirties. He was on his way out, but I managed to speak to him briefly before he left. He told me that he had been in town for about three weeks, for work purposes. He worked for a French developmental agency which was implementing water purification systems in different parts of the continent, but mostly West Africa. Later that afternoon, after putting my luggage down and settling into my new home for the next few months, I would learn that the prolific curator, writer and art historian Okwui Enwezor had lost his protracted battle with cancer.

The residency commenced on 18 March. There I was, among eleven aspiring curatorial practitioners, each hailing from a different corner of the world, although the majority of the group came from a country in the Global South. We all had one fundamental thing in common: an interest in thinking deeply about the role of curatorial practice in a constantly developing world. The organisers structured the educational component of the residency in such a way that every two or three days a different curator from a significant art capital in the world would join us for a few days to discuss aspects of their curatorial practice with us, while engaging us in in-depth conversation about pertinent issues related to the art-making, curatorial practice and other important factors related to the political economy of the art-world. A typical lecture would entail the practitioner discussing the curatorial process that went into the making of her or his exhibition; her or him would also speak about the practices of artists she or he works closely with, and we would go on studio and institution visits, in and around Dakar, with them. The residency or 'curatorial intensive' — the art-world term for an immersive workshop experience involving curatorial practitioners — was the exact creative and intellectual catalyst I needed. A major take away from this intensive, for me, was the notion of reading the work of curators as one would read a composer's discography. More specifically: how might we think about curatorial practice in the same manner in which we relate or think about an artist's body of work?

By the end of this programme, I had finally landed on what I wanted to pursue in my Doctoral research. I subsequently shifted my focus more fully towards curatorial practice — I was interested in it not just as a professional vocation that was making inroads into my sphere of knowledge but also as an emergent field of intellectual inquiry and cultural production on the African continent. It was during my time in Dakar that I met Koyo Kouoh and Gabi Ngcobo. Prior to reading "Condition Report 4", I had not known of these people's names, let alone what constituted the bases of their curatorial practices. During the residency, I learnt a great deal about Ntone Edjabe and the activities of Chimurenga. The organisation was regarded highly by

so many at the intensive, and as the only South African member of the cohort, I remember my embarrassment when asked to share my opinions about the space and its activities and I simply did not know enough about Chimurenga to contribute to discussions. I returned to Cape Town in the middle of May 2019 invigorated by what was, without exaggeration, a life-changing educational experience. I spent much of the winter and spring months trying to embed what I had learned at the residency into a coherent and comprehensive research proposal.

Later on in 2019, I participated in another curatorial intensive, this time taking place in Cape Town, where I resided and studied. This intensive was organised by Independent Curators International (ICI), a New York-based curatorial organisation. The ICI curatorial intensive programmes are basically itinerant curatorial workshops that train participants — usually curators and cultural professionals on the essential political, technical, logistical and discursive considerations which cultural professionals navigate in contemporary curatorial practice. At the time of participating in this week-long workshop in November 2019, I had not quite yet found my intellectual bearings as far as the broad scope of curatorial practice since my return from Senegal. I had found it particularly challenging to merge my initial research interest with my newfound knowledge path into a legitimate research question. Amongst the many useful teachings taken from this workshop, I took away the fact that I needed to develop a curatorial practice of my own. Therefore, in 2020, I began cultivating this component of my cultural practice with intent.

In 2020, prior to the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, I spent some time conducting research in the UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archive, a centre housed at the University of the Western Cape, established on the basis of finding a home for the artistic artefacts, photographic documentation, audio recordings and textual documents made in protest against the apartheid regime. My interest in archival research was inspired by two workshops I participated in while in Dakar the previous year, and when I learnt of the existence of this particular archive, I committed my time to exploring it. Perusing these annals with a colleague, we discovered a body of material which captured the history of exhibitions held in 1986, a time during which South Africa was in its second state of emergency. Realising what a shame it was that all of this rich information could only be seen by a select group of ‘qualified’ individuals, we created an online platform — an Instagram account where we would publish as much of the materials we found in the archives as we could. Our goal was to make this history freely accessible to the public.

The Instagram page was later accompanied by a full-fledged website, called “About00Time” — a reference to the exhibition which opened for just one day on the Hiddingh Campus of the University of Cape Town during the second state of emergency in 1986. “About00Time" was a platform dedicated to making publicly available cultural archives related to South African and African resistance histories. Another project on which the now defunct cultural engine “About00Time” embarked was a collective book we titled *Creativity Under Confinement*. The idea behind this project was to offer our contemporaries and colleagues an avenue to express themselves. We considered the book a necessary intervention as many people became confined at home by the onset of the global and international lockdowns. We reached out to nearly one-hundred people, and of that, eighty wrote back positively, expressing their keenness to take part in the project. This endeavour was one of the most challenging projects I have embarked on, particularly due to the state of the world at the time. At the same time as I was engaged with “About00Time” and its publication, I was also involved in other projects. Six weeks before the national lockdown in South Africa, I had begun working as a research assistant in the curatorial department at Cape Town’s Zeitz MOCAA. It was, in fact, towards the end of my residency in Dakar when, in a conversation with Koyo Kouoh, she expressed that she could see my need for experience within the field, and therefore offered me a job at Zeitz MOCAA when she took up the role of chief executive director.

Kouoh took up the position as Chief Curator in May 2019 and in February 2020 I started at the museum. I also used this as an opportunity to conduct ethnographic fieldwork at Zeitz MOCAA, considering the role would bring me closer to Kouoh and allow me to observe her practice at close quarters. I spent a period of sixteen months at the museum, from February 2020 to June 2021 — the longest amount of time I have spent in any professional capacity outside that of being an academic scholar. In 2020, I embarked on another exciting project which saw me co-founding an artistic project space called Mutha_Ship Landing, dedicated to providing space for experimental Black artistic practices. The brick and mortar project space was situated in Salt River, Cape Town. Activities at the space were severely hampered by COVID-19 and the impact of the pandemic on modes of social interaction and cultural organising. Therefore, there was no activity at the space until later on in October 2020 when the lockdown restrictions in the country had eased. Upon leaving Zeitz MOCAA in the middle of 2021, I collaborated with numerous art spaces and museums in the city of Cape Town, undertaking exciting projects ranging from an online music and film festival called Ha Ho Cha Festival, which took place in August 2021, to an online exhibition working with artworks belonging to the Scheryn Art Collection — one of the largest collections of South African contemporary art.

At the beginning of 2022, I worked in collaboration with a gallery to produce a group exhibition about art and football, titled *Exhibition Match*. Conceptualised as a response to the dominant commercialism of the art-world and the Cape Town Art Fair, *Exhibition Match* not only presented a group show of photographic, sculptural and other football-related artworks but also functioned as an event which closed off the art fair by bringing together practitioners within the city's art ecosystem to enjoy an afternoon in the sun, playing and watching the beautiful game. My most recent curatorial project took place in April of 2022 for a conference organised between three institutions: the University of the Western Cape, the London School of Economics (LSE) and Cambridge University. The title of the exhibition I produced and curated was *Quiet dog bite hard: clandestine networks of revolutionary papers*. I list all of these activities in which I have participated in the last five years in order to demonstrate my immersion in the curatorial space since I began the Ph.D. project. In each of these endeavours, I have carried the practical experience and pedagogical knowledge and teaching garnered from my conversations with this study's research participants, my readings about curatorial practice and my intuitive development as an emerging Black African curatorial voice in South Africa and on the continent at large.

Throughout the years of my immersion in this study Norman Denzin's (1997) six levels of reflexive engagement helped ground and direct my activities in the field. These six levels are as follows: firstly, it was important that I maintained what he calls a subjectivist reflexivity, which allows for a productive mode of self-critique; a necessary principle to have in one's armour when dealing with human beings because of the degrees of affective involvement that come into play in these processes. Secondly, it was crucial that I exercised the same reflexivity in the methodological approach to this study. One of the overarching aims of this study is to decenter African modes of curating from those practised in the West, and to do this one cannot persist with ideals which aim to sustain and argue for methodological purity. Thirdly, in tandem with self and methodological reflexivity, it was important to adopt the same reflexive attitude in the texts that I read. This intertextual reflexivity is significant because I add my voice and experiences to the larger conversations that are happening in and around the research phenomena this study is interested in. Fourth, I applied reflexivity when it came to the ethical standpoint I assumed in relation to the research participants, the greater field in which this research forms part of and thus I had to constantly negotiate my subjective and objective involvement throughout each phase of this research process. This was followed by point five, which speaks about a gendered reflexivity — a matter that surfaced multiple times in the research process and had me thinking

about myself as a gendered subject with agency and self-identity and how this shaped my interactions with the research participants. Lastly, the sixth level is about feminist and/or materialist reflexivity which had me question the very nature of what it means to write about others in light of my own fragmented and constantly shifting identity (Alexander 2017: 420). Together, all these points of reflexive engagement come to bear in the findings of this study and make of this dissertation a well-rounded inquiry into the lives of central figures in the Pan-African curatorial landscape.

Biographical study

A long-held assumption in the field of social research is the idea that the researcher is the only one capable of analysing and interpreting data produced in the course of research. What makes this viewpoint problematic is that it presupposes that the 'subjects' of the research lack the skills and expertise to systematically synthesise and interpret the data themselves. This thereby inadvertently positions them as incapable of understanding the nature of the information being exchanged between themselves and the researcher. The three research participants on which this research study focuses are highly skilled and experienced curators and cultural professionals. This meant that, as a researcher, I did not find myself occupying a better position in the balance of power between myself (as researcher) and them (as the study's research participants). In fact, as a relative newcomer to the art-world and the curatorial space specifically, the power dynamics were tilted more in their favour, on the basis that all three of my subjects are many years my senior and possess more knowledge and experience on the subject matter of my investigation. Furthermore, as much as I am aware that, as a researcher, I possess the tools to observe and analyse social phenomena, it was important for me to continually ask myself why a scholarly exploration into the curatorial biographies of the chosen individuals is necessary. This prompt was important in that it helped me to maintain a reflexive mindset, while also assisting me in making the choice of methods that would be most useful in conducting the research. Moreover, the prompt made me aware of the constraints that might hamper my achievement of a veritable interpretation of the stories that compose the lives of the individuals in which this research study is interested in (Taylor 2018: 182).

Asking these questions of oneself can, to a large extent, help to steer one clear of reproducing the misleading and bigoted assumptions of old-school research practice that inscribes an asymmetric power dynamic between the researcher and their research participants. It is

detrimental for the researcher to be ignorant of the intersubjective forces that play such a significant role in such intimate processes of knowledge production. In that case, how one accounts for these processes in the generation of knowledge will be a key component in the approach one adopts in telling people's stories. In recent times, academic disciplines — such as anthropology and sociology — which are interested in understanding human subjectivity, in heeding the validity of these claims, have turned towards literary techniques to enrich the efficacy of their research processes and outcomes (Finnegan 2015: 13). The conceptual framework of this study takes on a core subject in which the humanities and social sciences have had a longstanding interest — that is, the condition of human lives. Moreover, as a researcher I utilise the research device of life history or personal narrative that has long been recognised in the social sciences, especially in the field of anthropology, as an important vehicle for learning about how culture is experienced and created by individuals. Without the personal narratives of my research participants, I must acknowledge it would have proven near impossible to arrive at a truly complex and rich understanding of their intellectual contributions and the processual progression of their curatorial approaches as discussed in this dissertation.

The participants' oral narratives, personal memories, creative and discursive practices are used as analytical tools to understand the ideas, movements and strategies that constitute the field of curatorial practice. I construct a narrative around these individuals' stories as a way of endowing their experiences with meaning. I make use of narrative as a metacode, a structure that holds and describes other structures, and therefore can function as a human universal on the basis of the ability it possesses, as a method, to transmit transcultural messages about the nature of shared reality (White 1980: 6). The narratives I impose as a researcher on the experiences, methodological and conceptual approaches, and what I here call curatorial strategies, are conducted with the intention to construct curatorial biographies which deeply engage with the complexities of the subjective and objective dimensions of these individuals' lives. Biographies can take several forms: in the context of Africa, political biographies have been integral to the configuration of anti-colonial discourses on the continent (Rassool 2016: 172). Modern formal biographies and sometimes unauthorised biographies are characterised by the compilation of records, files, time sheets and identity documents which are assembled together to produce a biographical portrayal of the individual (Browne 2015: 5). My approach to constructing these biographies did not extend so far as to comprehensively seek out the personal records of these individuals. The findings of this research are derived from juxtaposing the oral interviews conducted with the research subjects, with their professional archives available online and in

other archival interfaces, including my own personal observations of the practitioners made during the process of my fieldwork.

I do subscribe, in large parts of my exploration of their curatorial biographies, to a dominant style of biographical writing. For example, certain segments of my exposition follow a chronological order to layout these narratives. However, in thinking with Bakhtin's concept of the chronotype, I unpack the narratives through a discursive approach which attempts to thicken the notions of space and time. My intention is to cause both concepts to commingle productively with one another, as a means of countering any inhibition that the chronological method can impose on our understanding of human subjectivity (Nwafor 2021: 252). Kouoh, Edjabe and Ngcobo, the three figures whose curatorial biographies are constructed in this dissertation, are each leading political figures in the African and African-diasporic cultural space and therefore wield a great deal of power in this discourse community. Therefore, a conceptual concern I have carried throughout the writing of these curatorial biographies has been how to understand and expound the curatorial practices of these individuals in relation to the interesting lives that they lead as African people in the world. This is because it is so easy to fall into the trap of reading their practices through a lens that situates them in the context of European or Northern curatorial practice — as though they exist as a counterpoint to these regimes.

The romantic mode of historical emplotment that rides a rhythm of the progressive overcoming of obstacles and culminating in ultimate victory, is often the narrative style most biographers use in constructing the biographies of their subjects. Indeed, there are elements that conform to this narrative arc in the curatorial biographies presented in this dissertation. However, there is a thinking through with the critical concept of tragedy or the tragic mode, which helps to facilitate a reading of the lives of the research participants that is more complex. For it is the romantic conception of social history that tells us that we are living in a post-apartheid or postcolonial world order. By this, I mean a world order in which the systems of colonialism and apartheid are seemingly thought to be behind us. However, the tragic mode of narrating history informs us that these oppressive systems are still with us, that we are still living with the colonial and variegated modalities of apartheid in our world today (Scott 2004: 135). Tragedy as a historical, social and narrativistic phenomenon is inconclusive, however, in its failure to offer us any simple resolutions, it opens up multiple orders of possibility for us to problematise our pasts and our futures in the present. In light of all the political and subjective complexity that constitutes these individuals' lives, I have resolved to adopt a thematic approach to writing these Black curatorial biographies. Human life is shaped by so many forces and the tragic narrative framework can

help us account for the contingencies that impose themselves on human freedom (Scott 2004). The intention in thinking with the tragic mode is to understand how the subjective and objective coexist while also analysing how these phenomena impinge on each other, as a way of balancing out some of the tensions between subjective and factual modes of representation.

Biography is still a dominant medium of social production and despite it revolving around the interior and exterior lives of a singular individual, biographies can still be operationalised to illuminate a lot of macro and micro social phenomena. This is because, historically, biographical production tells the story of the individual while also elaborating on the interplay of the individual with the structural and subjective forces that comprise the individual's life. Biographers tend to analyse these contingencies in a mode that interpolates the lives of human subjects into potential history-making instruments/agents, which offer us the ability to understand and constitute sociological constellations and cultural phenomena. The problem with traditional genres of biographical writing is that they do not sufficiently account for the interconnectedness of individual subjectivities and social identities with the external world. The truth is that people's lives are irrevocably tethered to specific socio-historical factors, institutional forces and categorical and opaque discursive formations which play a large part in how individuals project themselves into the world (Rassool 2016: 171–172). The dominant style of biography writing is a typically chronological and empiricist approach which tends to elevate individual — and often male stories, situating these stories in relation with European modernisms, which thus inhibit the work of careful contextual interpretation.

Limitations of the biographical method

Despite biography's importance in decolonial objectives to re-historicise postcolonial national and cultural historiographies of African and African diasporic people. Questions about the methodological utility of the genre in contemporary articulations of humanities research have risen considerably over the last twenty to thirty years. A starting point for these questions is the aforementioned notion that modes of biographical writing, which have come to form the basis of Pan-African socio-political history, are mimetic of modes of biographical scholarship propounded in the West. This situation is unsurprising considering that the main exponents of extant critical biographical scholarship are either American and/or American trained scholars (Hyslop 2010: 109). The resultant effect of these derivative frameworks adopted by African scholars doing the work of biographical writing is the proliferation of seemingly un-problematised linear trajectories, hero-worshipping and non-complex representations of the relationship between the individual

and his or her life-world. Emphasising these points, Professor Ciraj Rassool (2010) claims that biographical scholarship, in the context of South Africa, has been inclined towards the production of the great man archetype; a phenomenon which, Rassool states, is underpinned by the ideal of heroism that undergirds the construction of these critical stories, in addition to the related tendency to inscribe the life of these individuals inside teleological narrative arcs.

Biographies produced from this school of thought typically focus on organised movements led by great men. These biographies often represent the life histories of these men as historical documents through which nations' histories are constructed and futures shaped. A common theme in the assemblage of biographies written in the Pan-African context is the narration of the lives of the individual through a discursive paradigm which situates the subjects in an ideological scaffolding anchored on form(s) of anti-hegemonic resistance. There are a plethora of biographies of an academic and secular orientation, written about African political and cultural leaders, which provide unrealistically coherent representations of the selfhood of the individuals whose stories are being told. These narratives fail to reflect a nuanced understanding of the dynamic confluences which are constantly at play between the personal and political lives of biographical subjects. Such decisions to omit the politics of daily life, in their plenitude, is indicative of a non-engagement with the complexities which go into the structural and intersubjective formation of an individual's life (Hyslop 2010: 104). The notion of complexity is crucial to ponder on, as another criticism which has been labelled against populist genres of biographical writing is that these texts express a heavy-handed and one-sided treatment of the lives of biographical subjects, as characterised by untroubled notions of stability, autonomy, self-determination and unfettered rational choice (Hyslop 2010: 105).

There are periods in the temporal evolution of a human's life in which it is possible to envision instances of these conditions at play. However, it is a truer representation of a human's lived-experience that shows the numerous difficulties which constitute their lived-experience. Most biographies operate according to a romanticising narrative framework which operates in the mode of the former. It is only in recent decades that we have started to see biographical writing shift away from this biased mode of representation to a more deconstructed and elaborate articulation of individual life-world documentation which is in line with the latter reality (Hyslop 2010: 109). The former approach to biographical writing stems from an epistemologically positivist and realist standpoint. These biographers oftentimes use documentary-based approaches which, according to Rassool (2010), have them treating archives as storehouses of political documents. As a result, they fall into the conceptual trap of

providing chronological accounts in which the biographer's chosen mode of narration takes on a historiographic course. This is indeed one of the strong points of biographical writing — the fact that it is a mode of historical production which uniquely combines elements of art, industry, scholarship and literature (Hyslop 2010: 104). At the same time, a big weakness of such dominant forms of biographical writing is that, in their treatment of an individual life as an object of historical analysis, biographies fail to sufficiently theorise gender, identity and subjectivity, if at all (Hyslop 2010: 109).

This is what distinguishes this dissertation's approach to the discussion of the biographies of this study's research participants from the prevalent modes of critical biographical study. Inasmuch as there is a large element of glorifying the creative, political and discursive abilities of the individuals lives being discussed — namely Koyo Kouoh, Ntone Edjabe and Gabi Ngcobo — the discursive approach employed in this dissertation departs from the same milieu as preceding schools of thought in the genre of biographical writing which have been subject to various forms of critique. To compensate for this practice, the manner in which the life-worlds of these individuals are discussed and elaborated in this research study also accounts for occurrences in each individual's life which have had an influence on the life of the human subject. Secondly, the biographies discussed in this dissertation do follow a somewhat linear timeline in the way in which the stories are recounted. However, the use of the actual words of the individuals complicates this linearity by offering insight into the subjective life-worlds of these people, and thus complementing the inclination towards linearity with an in-depth inner-view of the circumstances surrounding each individual's experiences, emanating directly from the words of the research participants.

What was important for me to do as researcher as a counterpoint to staid formats of biographical writing which precede the production of this dissertation was to provide concepts of their individual selfhoods which indicate a specificity to our current contemporary moment in history, and which also display that human beings are constituted of various components and their identities are not fixed (Hyslop 2010: 107). Lastly, the research study focuses on the curatorial practices and strategies of two Black African females and one Black African male. This composition alone de-stabilises the heteronormative male figure as the primary source of knowledge production in the field of curatorial practice by relying on the methods and embodied epistemologies of two non-male curatorial figures: Kouoh and Ngcobo. Designing this biographical research study in this way goes a long way in undoing the Western approaches to biographical production, which are male-dominated and tether individuals to the spectre of the

hero or the the trope of heroism that is known to set individuals up for failure. Juxtaposed in relation to one another, the intention with operationalising these conceptual and methodological tangents in the process of conducting this research study is to display an understanding of the mutability of human life, rather than aiming to arrive at a predetermined conclusion (Eagleton 2003: 84).

For these reasons, it becomes necessary that a project such as this approaches the speculative production of the curatorial biographies of the three aforementioned practitioners through an analytical reading that spans a multitude of epistemological registers. This is important if it is to produce a rigorous and potentially novel mode of critical curatorial scholarship, one that also reimagines the use of narrative form in the representation of powerful and influential Black African cultural figures in the world. How might taking seriously the cultural practices of Kouoh, Edjabe and Ngcobo — which are broadly directed towards re-envisioning African and African-diasporic artistic and cultural futures in new and provocative ways — contribute to our understanding of the cultural trajectories of discourse formation in the spectrum of curatorial practice in Africa (De Certeau 1984: 5)? In light of the European genealogical foundations of curatorial practice and the epistemological inheritances of this tradition, the curatorial biographies of three preeminent Black African curators in a discourse community in which Black people have historically been relegated to the margins suddenly becomes filled with emancipatory possibilities. Therefore, this research departs from this intention and aims to understand the significance that Kouoh's, Edjabe's and Ngcobo's curatorial actions have had on Black African curatorial practices, while simultaneously taking into consideration the influence of real-life events on these processes (White 1980: 14).

The biographical narrative approach becomes a vehicle for exploring the discursive formations and lived experiences that dynamically shape the curatorial approaches of these three individuals — in particular the aspects of their respective practices which have been and continue to be transformative — while also underscoring how their identities are connected to processes of social production (White 1980). This dissertation does not set out to produce a purely romanticised narrative of Kouoh's, Edjabe's and Ngcobo's curatorial biographies, even though it is of primary importance to this paper to understand how their curatorial strategies can lead to the emancipation of African art and cultural practice from the clutches of neo-colonial regimes of aesthetic and discursive cultural production. As a result, turning to the work of narrative and particularly tragedy as a discursive modality that does not attempt to compensate

for past suffering (in a redemptive fashion), but allows one to conduct a reading that does not elide or flatten out the complexities that surround these individuals' lives (Steiner 1980: 8).

This approach creates room for the entanglement of ideas, histories and narratives that compose the political, professional and subjective lives of Kouoh, Edjabe and Ngcobo to be understood in a critically holistic sense. I read their biographies in relation to each other and juxtapose them with historical and emerging political trends and currents in the cultural sphere in order to approach understandings of the field of curatorial practice anew (McKittrick 2015: 2). The method of analysis and interpretation used to peel away the interior and exterior conditions of the lives of three Black curatorial practitioners weaves through archival research, artistic and exhibition history, popular culture and various other forms of cultural production, bringing them into dialogue with critical race scholarship, social theory and feminist theorising. A large part of the reasoning in formulation of this project is that certain acts of cultural production attributed to this study's research participants can be understood as modes of seeking artistic and cultural refuge, as well as providing us with alternative suggestions for being in the world differently, in a global neoliberal economic climate in which creativity from Black cultural practitioners is under constant threat of being appropriated and flattened out by neoliberal forces (Browne 2015: 7–8).

Rethinking methodology: a Black studies approach

A prevailing issue with aspects of European modernism — which can be found in the writing of biographies as well as in the production of ethnographic texts — is that both textual modalities operate on the presumption that social reality is inherently stable and therefore should be able to be recorded by a stable and objective scientific observer. The general sentiment shared in these schools of thought, which stem from the European modernist tradition, is that although the external reality may yield itself to multiple interpretations, it is assumed that the interpretive, agentic consciousness of the researcher-as-observer is able to form certain conclusive observations about it (Denzin 1997: 31). This is indeed how social scientists situated in the fields of sociology and anthropology are trained to approach the nature of their work and the subjects that they encounter in the field. The danger of this method is that it places very little consideration on the research participants — the lives they lead and the external phenomena which the researcher may or may not encounter in the process of conducting fieldwork. Amongst the series of problems presented by this Europeanised model is the implied

objectification or de-subjectivisation of research participants. This framework lacks the reciprocality that this (qualitative) kind of research requires and instead invokes an extractive quality that is reflective of Euro-modern approaches to colonial and postcolonial contemporary life.

Ethnographic research thrives on one (in this case, the researcher) spending protracted periods of time building rapport and establishing a relationship of reciprocity between themselves and their research participants. The researcher has to commit themselves to creating this space for themselves and their research participants to make equal use of before attempting to capture and represent the authentic, original voices heard and felt in the setting of the field (Denzin 1997: 32). As I discuss in the introductory segment of this chapter, where I discuss my auto-ethnographic experience and its methodological resonance in the research process, I dedicated sufficient time as a peripheral figure observing the structural layout of the South African art landscape prior to approaching this study's chosen research participants to see if they would participate in this research study. Due to the small size of the South African arts eco-system where, at the time of writing this dissertation, all three of these figures lived and worked, the levels of proximity were never too vast and it became obvious that one would eventually meet and get to know the other. The arts industry in South Africa is especially small in comparison to other commercial industries. This means that it is possible to quickly encounter people you have admired and find yourself working closely with them in a relatively short period of time.

My paths crossed with each of the three research participants and I made acquaintance with all of them prior to asking them to participate in this study. As Black curatorial and cultural practitioners in our own right there was an overriding level of collegiality that formed the basis of our initial relationship. This aided our engagements with one another, as I (as the researcher) had textual knowledge of them and the work that they had conducted and they knew of me in my capacity as an adjacent colleague and interlocutor, purely on the basis of all of us being Black African cultural workers operating inside a historically white establishment. In essence we are members of the same community, on the basis that we all operate within a structure that racialises us as Black subjects in the same field, and because we are economic subjects who ply our trade in the same discourse and economic community. This meant that I had to reconfigure my mindset in how I approached the research process. For example, I had to place all prior knowledge I had of the research participants aside, to allow for new information to surface. When I speak of bias, I am not speaking specifically about negative bias — although

this was also operative in the process — but am also referring to the various forms in which knowledge that I had accumulated about these individuals outside and inside of the process of ethnographic fieldwork entered my frame of mind in the context of my conversations with them.

This becomes the context of ethnographic research in a setting such as the South African art-world that continues to be dominated by white money but reliant on Black labour for relevance. Despite needing the artistic and cultural products of Black people, the art-world remains exclusive and usually the people who get left out are those whose labour props up the system. The inverse effect of this reality is that Black people in this industry tend to get to know each other very quickly as there aren't many of us here. Therefore, what does it mean to conduct such a study that lends an in-depth look into the lives of people that are integral figures in one's pre-existing community network? We live in a time in which information technologies have become so advanced that information arrives to us even when we aren't searching for it. Additionally, because of the high levels of competition in the ecosystem, it is normal to be exposed to information which is meant to discredit others, and others in this case are this study's research participants who have achieved what many Black people before them have failed to achieve in the context of a white dominated art-world. It becomes important for one to weed out the lies from the truth and allow space for the research participants' voices to play a key role in the demystification of these conspiracies. This requires a strong element of openness, critical empathy and methodological rigour to be in place as one encounters people and various bits of information throughout the process. The latter was achieved through mixing in other modes of discourse such as everyday speech, poetry, novels, music, academic articles and observations that contextualise and ground the words, activities, conceptual thoughts and methodological strategies of the research participants (Denzin 1997: 36).

Due to the nature of this research and the profile of the participants, it became important to rethink the methodological approaches used in the research process. One key aims of this research is to contribute to the creation of a knowledge base and proliferation of Pan-African centred genres of curatorial practice. Another important element of this research is to move away from hegemonic Western epistemologies and methodologies that have dictated and defined the ways in which Africans on the continent and in the African diaspora approach the work of curatorial practice. The success of this study's findings relies on the methods that I as a researcher incorporated in this study's research design. Most of the methods that I use in this study are derived from long-standing research traditions which have been applied over time in academic research. Regardless of my reliance on these tried and tested methods, I was

cognisant throughout the writing and interview process of my positionality as a Black African subject interested in the work of the three Black African curatorial practitioners whose careers form the basis of this research study. I carried this awareness when engaging my research participants in conversation and during the periods in which I was conducting participant observation. These learnings come across in the modalities that I used to gather information from the participants and these techniques are discussed at different stages throughout this research paper.

The conversational mode

A defining characteristic of my fieldwork is the manner in which the research participants engaged in reciprocal discourse over the interview period of this study. The research participants and I engaged one another in prolonged conversation about historical and emergent trends in the realm of global and African curatorial practice which provided rich contextual information that I make use of to explicate the findings of my research. Unlike the typical one-dimensional interview format, the conversations I had with the research participants did something different from what the interview typically does. Firstly, the conversation format completely flattened the implied hierarchy and power dynamic which is embedded in the structure of social science research. By engaging each participant in conversation we both became knowledge producers and created space for us to express our thoughts and feelings about the work that we do in a way that values the experiences of one another.

Conversations are by definition reciprocal phenomena, in that they rely on a shared interest in building on the other participant's ideas and experiences. The many discussions that I held with this study's research participants are in theory interview-like. However, in practice, these discussions possess a conversational character as I was engaging my interlocutors on the nuances of the field of curatorial practice and cultural work. There was hardly a moment in which I felt that there was a one-directionality to my conversations with the three participants. These are well travelled and richly experienced individuals who are aware of the age and professional advantage they had over me. But, there was not a time in which I felt spoken down to or lectured by them. Nor did I take up a position of being in the superior position granted to me because I am in the capacity of researcher and therefore placing me in the position of power. Incorporating conversation as a research technique allowed me to shift the focus of the research from the perspective of the ethnographer as an outsider to form an intersubjective

communion with the research participant (Spradley and McCurdy 1972: 9 in Alexander 2017: 419). Conversations are modalities of knowledge creation and I realised the value of exercising this framework in this research study because it allowed me to get to know and understand the research participants, not only as individuals at the forefront of curatorial knowledge production in Africa but also as human beings who have a shared interest in the cultural future of Africa and Africans around the world.

Oral interviews

The first interview I conducted for the purpose of this research study took place in March 2020, at the start of the global outbreak of the COVID-19 virus and thirteen days before the first nationwide lockdown was enforced in South Africa. This first interview was with Ntone Edjabe, conducted at the Chimurenga offices in Woodstock, Cape Town. Since then, I have proceeded to conduct a series of ten in-person and online oral and video interviews with the three chosen participants. The interviews transpired over a period of just over two years, with the concluding interview taking place in April 2022. Over this time, the participants and I covered a vast array of subjects, ranging from discussions about their biographical backgrounds and upbringing to participants' recollections of their experiences of engaging with the cultural sphere. Included were conversations in which we spoke about their seminal curatorial projects, with a specific focus on the discursive and methodological approaches the participants employed to frame their cultural activities. Overall, the narratives collected from these interviews are dynamic and the stories told by the participants are tremendously rich. After spending a substantial amount of time listening, transcribing and critically processing the material, it becomes evident how these narratives have transformed over time and taken on multiple forms of meaning.

The interviews I conducted with the research participants were shaped by the quality of the rapport I had with each participant. I knew neither of them personally prior to embarking on this project and, as mentioned in the preceding introductory section of this chapter, I had not known much about their cultural practices before immersing myself in this research process. In this regard, my relation with each participant was a combination of collegiality, cordial acquaintanceship and a deep level of mutual respect. This mutual respect, which underpins my rapport with each participant, is evident in how our interactions to this day are conducted with the utmost care. The majority of interviews I conducted with Kouoh took place on Zoom, and each lasted for about forty minutes to an hour. The first interview took place in October 2020

and the last occurred in February 2021. One can infer, based on the period during which my interviews with Kouoh took place, that the situation for her as a museum director was tenuous, as cultural institutions were hit hard by COVID-19 and the subsequent restrictions imposed on human gatherings and travel.

My last interview with Kouoh in February 2021 was not, in fact, intended to be our final interview. We had discussed possibilities of in-person interviews when she returned from Switzerland, where she had been based since the latter stages of 2020. The overwhelming responsibility on her to steady the museum through these unprecedented difficulties, coupled with her being abroad, ultimately impeded even our best-laid plans. Making contact with Kouoh was significantly easier when I was still employed at the museum. However, having resigned from the museum in June 2021, I found it increasingly challenging to reach her from outside the ecosystem through which we had become accustomed to interacting. All things considered, however, the sixteen months I spent working and conducting participant observation fieldwork at Zeitz MOCAA helped to bridge the gaps in communication that resulted from my departure from the institution. The interviews I conducted with Edjabe all took place at the Chimurenga offices in Cape Town. I would say that, of the three participants, I spent the most time interviewing Edjabe, who was remarkably generous and enthusiastic about making time to converse. Altogether, I conducted a total of eight interviews with him, each lasting anywhere from an hour and a half to three hours. My interest in speaking with Edjabe was inspired in part by the many things I had heard about Chimurenga during my residency at RAW Material Company. On the other hand, I also attended a reading group on Fred Moten in 2019, which was facilitated by my supervisor Dr. Kelly Gillespie and hosted by Chimurenga. Hearing Edjabe share his ideas on Black Study during this event was the second factor contributing to my interest in approaching him to be a participant in this research project.

With regards to Gabi Ngcobo, most of our conversations occurred at first on Zoom, as I am based in Cape Town and she resides in Tshwane. I conducted two Zoom interviews with her, both of which took place in October 2020. I struggled to organise another online or telephonic interview with Ngcobo during most of 2021, until I was able to arrange a three-week research trip to Gauteng to meet with her in person. I travelled to Johannesburg in September 2021. During my time there I managed to conduct one in-person interview with Ngcobo before her hectic work schedule ultimately curtailed our progress. This interview took place on a Saturday morning at a trendy eatery in Parktown North, Johannesburg. During our interview, Ngcobo spoke about her involvement as co-curator of the Cape Town Triennial in 2004 and her

reflections of the position as Assistant Curator at ISANG[22]. The rest of my time in Gauteng was spent engaged in participant observation at Javett Art Centre, where Ngcobo took up the post of Curatorial Director in November 2020. I also had the opportunity to take in a number of the exhibitions on show at the institution and to speak with members of the Javett staff — an experience that I found to be highly generative and deeply enlightening.

I will now discuss the factors that, according to my assessment, have influenced my configuration of the data I collected in these oral interviews. The aim is to break down this research study's oral interview process according to the three stages that Isabel Hofmeyr (2016) proposes are extant in oral interviews. Hofmeyr (2016: 103) identifies these three stages so that researchers can monitor their content closely when conducting and reflecting on the information gleaned from oral interviews. The first stage is mainly the interview itself; a process which entails the narration and interaction that occurs within the context of the interview. Stage two involves the events recalled by the interviewee; events that are oftentimes evoked by means of comparison with extant and other related sources of information. The third and final stage comprises the intervening period during which there is a significant possibility for the shifting and morphing of the meanings co-produced in the interview process by interviewer and interviewee. In stage three, data typically undergoes an added layer of interpretation imposed by the methodological and conceptual schemas the researcher appropriates to understand the data collected. Permeating across all three stages are specific phenomena which involve the work of narrative that are important for the researcher to take into account in the construction of their research findings.

[22] Iziko South African National Galleries in Cape Town.

Orality and language

When contemplating the first stage, it was important that I factor in the important role that language plays, generally, in the structuring of our everyday lives; and specifically, in the context of an oral interview. The factor of language use required my utmost cognisance as a researcher because of its capacity to modulate the exchange between myself and the research participant through the vast and multidimensional ways in which language allows messages to be communicated inside the framework of an oral interview. Being aware of the multiplicity of spoken language provoked an enquiry into other forms of communication that could be used as forms of research data, such as written interviews with the practitioners available in articles and PDF files I found online and inside physical books, in addition to other subtle expressive vernaculars which played a functional role in the interview process and which shaped my understanding of the research participants (Finnegan 2015). It is imperative for a researcher to be attentive to the covert (as well as overt) forms of expression through which human beings communicate and create meaning. Of course, the researcher has to be very selective about what kinds of information they privilege when it comes to analysing data.

This is an issue that has been at the centre of a longstanding debate in the field of oral studies, especially among scholars in the Third World who, since the emergence of the discipline in these regions, have problematised what modes of data collection are considered to be best capable of constituting true evidence. These scholars tried to complicate the binary imposed by European structural linguistics which operates on the premise of African cultures being strictly oral while European cultures are literary. This binary opposition has fundamentally shaped the ways in which we engage with the knowledge of certain groups of people, particularly in terms of what forms of information or knowledge are regarded as legitimate in the social sciences and the humanities, and which others are not. African cultures are, by and large, oral in their cultural orientation, however, they do have their own history and relationship to writing and literature. Despite this, the introduction of Europeanised modes of writing into African societies has had massive implications on the aesthetic, social, political and intellectual progression of the technical and mnemonic functions of literacy and orality in African societies (Mokoena 2016: 193). I make this point because the oral interviews I conducted for this study were carried out mostly in English, despite the language being neither mine nor the research participants' first language. Edjabe and Kouoh were both in Cameroon — I am uncertain as to which indigenous

Cameroonian languages they speak, however, I know that they are both fluent in French and English. Ngcobo's first language is isiZulu, while mine is a combination of Setswana and Sesotho.

The English language, particularly in South Africa (where all of the interviews took place), is the primary language of verbal and written communication. I concede the possibility that imposing English as the main language of conversation and data interpretation may have resulted in certain pieces of information or experiences not receiving the fullest expression or understanding. However, because of the language's hegemony in our lives, one must ultimately accept that it is virtually impossible to completely escape its sphere of influence (De Certeau 1984: 10). Yet there is a specific purpose for the use of English in my dialogues with the research participants, and this was to guarantee a more or less maximal mutual understanding in our engagements (Emerson and Holquist 1981: xix). Curatorial practice is a specialised discursive terrain that contains its own unique set of terms and discursive formulation which practitioners use to produce and disseminate information in the same manner as everyday language is used. Throughout the staging of the interviews and reflection periods in between, I have tried my best to keep an eye on the socio-ideological forms in which meaning is packaged inside language, particularly considering the multimodal and discursive character of the research participants' practices.

Language's plurality is articulated well in a discursively oriented practice such as curating. This is due to the fact that different language terms and concepts mutate into different forms to suit the framework of the various modes of articulation which have become available to the practice since its expansion. The curatorial practitioners interviewed for this study are also very adept at manipulating language in ways that make it work to match their particular discursive aims (Emerson and Holquist 1981: xix). On numerous occasions during our interviews, as well as on online interviews conducted by the research participants, particular concepts, idioms and jargon terms were introduced into the conversation. These notions were used to refer to their own cultural practices and sometimes to the broader thematics that relate to the arts as a regime of truth. I adapt these terms in conducting analysis of the data and include them in constructing a coherent argument revolving around each practitioner's curatorial approach. The intriguing use of the terms and language turns by the research participants does not mean that these concepts are not operational in other discursive fields. In fact, most of them are, however, my duty as interpretive researcher is to understand these ideas in the context of this study's research objectives. In addition, in examining the fluidity of language in the framework of an oral

interview, it is equally important for the researcher to account for their involvement in the process in which meaning is produced within this format.

The oral interview is a dialogical encounter in which the researcher is implicated in the process of meaning-making that ensues. Therefore, in as much as I needed to understand the meaning of what the research participants were saying, it was equally important to account for the role that my own subjectivity played on the interpretation of this data. The inter-subjective process of meaning-making that occurs in the interview process carries over into the transcription process in which the oral data is converted into written text. This is a necessary step in the research process, especially because of the significance transcribing bears on the analysis of the data collected and also points to the continued dominance of the written word over oral speech. In humanities research, the written word is still, by and large, considered as the primary mode of providing evidence. The supremacy of literature can be traced back to the Greco-Roman era in classical antiquity in which scholarly information was transmitted mostly in the manuscript tradition which was devoid of any audible speech or audio (Finnegan 2015: 2).

In this thesis, I chose to use long quotations from the curators' interviews to give a sense of their spoken language in the text, and to record in the dissertation itself an archive of the conversations. This transcription from spoken word to text is important for the work because it was necessary for the thesis to become an archive which materialises the subjective ideas that the three research participants have around curatorial practice (Lalu 2009: 38). One of the benefits of hindsight is the ability to see historical phenomena from a wider perspective. Contemporary humanities research acknowledges the limitations that transcription and translation systems may contain. It is common for there to be a disconnect between these systems and the multiplicity of meanings that researchers try to convey through them (Emerson and Holquist 1981: xx). These are key variables that researchers need to take seriously because these factors have an affect on the data collected in the interview process. I revisit this discussion on the relationship between oral and literary data when I discuss Hofmeyr's (2016) third stage in detail, in relation to the process of this study's oral interviews. Before I embark on that, I would like to touch on the second layer of interpretation in the oral interview process, which consists of modes of recollection and memory work which were constantly at play in my dialogical exchanges with the research participants.

Orality and memory

Historians Gary Minkley, Ciraj Rassool and Leslie Witz (2017) argue that rather than seeing oral history solely as a research methodology, it could enrich our understanding of oral narratives if we seriously consider the historical properties contained in oral data. They argue that the oral accounts people share consist of traces of their own memories which narrators internalise over time in their minds and bodies. This is what constitutes oral histories as an independent genre of historical production; the medium contains modes of history-making which proponents reproduce through unique forms of oral storytelling. It is common for one to evoke or call upon memory to make certain points and transmit certain ideas, particularly when the demand is for them to relate personal narratives. This phenomenon occurs quite frequently in interviews and is due to the fact that human beings are psychologically habituated to think of themselves historically. We construct our identities based on the stories we tell ourselves and are told about ourselves — which are drawn from our past experiences. In relation to this is also the truth that our individual life histories tend to be very much linked to the life stories of other people. This element demonstrates itself several times in the anecdotes related to me by the research participants; in their narratives it is possible to see the forces of individual and collective memory engaging in dialogue with one another (Minkley, Rassool and Witz 2017: 42).

A point which, for me, brought to light the issue of how I would make interpretive sense of the role of memory, is how the research participants made use of it as a tool to generate evidence of their experiences. The work of memory in the lives of individuals is crucial. People use memory to resist the erosion of their family legacies, to reestablish connections which have been fractured by time, displacement and violent political circumstances, amongst a cluster of other purposes (Hirsch and Miller 2011: 10). Once memory is activated through the vehicle of the personal voice, such as what tends to happen in the interview process — the combination of these two modalities possess the potential to reconstruct social imaginaries anew. In the interviews conducted for this study, the research participants shuttled backward and forward between past, present and future, orally relating their life histories to me. What stood out for me in this process was how intimately connected their histories are to historical events as well as to the lives of members of their families and communities in which the participants inhabited (Hirsch and Miller 2011: 12). Feminist theories have attested to this phenomenon in claims pertaining to the political nature of personal experience which serve to express that one's personal space is inherently porous and therefore is more often than not shared with others (Hirsch and Miller 2011: 5). It is with this understanding in mind that I am led to the conclusion

that the oral stories shared by this study's research participants could be interpreted as modes of collective memory, which would allow me to extrapolate from their accounts with the aim of comprehending the collective experience of modernity in the contemporary African cultural landscape (Minkley, Rassool and Witz 2017: 42).

Orality and translation

In working through the oral texts compiled from the interviews, I have engaged each transcript as documentation of the research participants' conscious thought process. What has been key for me in this process is not to separate the oral narratives from the discursive constellations in which they are embedded (Hofmeyr 2016: 103). Despite the transcribed narratives going through a procedure of editing and a layer of interpretation which undoubtedly changed the structure of the material, I made sure to maintain as much of the essence of the dialogical interaction with the narratives that made it into the written text (Glissant 2020: 74). This was important for me to do because in applying an interpretative lens to understanding the participants' narrations, maintaining the dialogic essence of the texts goes a long way in upholding their social and discursive meanings. The meaning of the oral texts fluctuated multiple times in the course of transcribing the oral data into written text. This was, in part, due to the inability of oral transcripts to adequately replicate all of the data produced in the interview.

It was fundamental that I do not rely on this technique alone to account for all of the intersubjective forces at play, such as the linguistic and bodily mannerisms that people tend to use to convey meaning inside the dialogic interview (Finnegan 2015: 3). The act of transcribing oral data necessitates the occurrence of a process of translation, however, this action is still very much under-theorised in humanities research. More often than not, transcribing is seen as constituting the simple act of extracting data from facts spoken in an interview. Many people overlook or fail to take into account the process of meaning-making that occurs when data is moved from word to text (Minkley, Rassool and Witz 2017: 41). The assumption tends to be that oral data maintains its truthfulness when it is converted into text. This process of transference is far more political than we tend to recognise and requires us to think critically about how we theorise texts which contain elements of oral and literary data (Hofmeyr 2016: 102).

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to reflect on the discursive framework and research methods that I adopted in this study's research process, which made it possible for me to offer insights into the lives of this study's chosen research participants and their curatorial work. As is clear from the discussion put forward in this chapter, I utilised a variety of research methods to collect the relevant data, which I then analysed through the prisms of narrative interpretation and critical biographical writing. Another important aspect which came out in this chapter is that a large volume of the data was collected through conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with the research participants. In addition to these interviews, I supplemented my investigation into their curatorial strategies with interviews conducted by other individuals with the participants, which I was able to find in physical publications and texts I found on the internet. The purpose behind opting to use these research methods and discursive frameworks in this study was to enhance my capacity to grasp the scope of each of these individuals' life experiences and curatorial practices. Moreover, the biographical and narrative approaches activated the potential to understand the interior lives of the research participants and how their unique subjectivities informed the formation and articulation of their curatorial strategies (Verwoert 2010: 24).

Chapter 3: “People are more important than institutions”

There is a story to every beginning

Koyo Kouoh was born in December 1967 in the bustling port-side city of Douala, Cameroon’s largest commercial metropolis. Like many cities dotted along Africa’s coastline, Douala has a history of European colonists and enslavers arriving on their ships, and the violent encounters that ensued between them and the region’s indigenous people.

> I was born in Douala, Cameroon in the late ‘60s. Douala is a very interesting city because it's a city in the Gulf of Guinea so it's something between Nigeria, Gabon, Congo and Equatorial Guinea. I think that that corner of the continent is quite loaded in terms of energies and mysticism and all you want. It's also a port city which means it's a trading city. You have people from virtually all over the Gulf of Guinea and all the way to Senegal who are part of the fabric of the city. Then of course you have the very strong coastal societies of that region who also sort of flock to the city and contribute to its gist, if you want.

One of the first questions I asked Kouoh was for her to share with me some of her earliest memories as a youth growing up in Douala in the 1970s. One of the memories she recalls is of the distinctly exotic presence of a Senegalese family who lived in the same neighbourhood as her family:

> I grew up with Senegalese neighbours in a part of town where usually Senegalese immigrants to Cameroon didn't live. There were those Senegalese neighbours of ours when I was growing up that I was very fascinated by. I was always fascinated by them for one reason, the smells coming out of their homes, in terms of kitchen, in terms of incense that

> the Senegalese like to burn. They were so different from the smells that were coming out of my home.

Douala's geographical location has meant that the city has historically been an epicentre for economic trade and activity. A decade into Cameroon's independence the city was moving in the direction of becoming an economic powerhouse in Central and West African commerce. Douala was an attractive economic destination for diverse peoples from Central and West Africa, especially those from Francophone regions flocking to the city to conduct business or find work — ultimately in search of upward mobility. Africans have an innately borderless connection with the geographic landscape of the continent. Our bodies, very much like our ideas, have travelled the length and breadth of this continent, defying the imposition of metaphysical and physical borders which have sought to restrain and divide us. This is how we have managed to exchange culture through the narratives and material cultures we carry with us. The Senegalese family about whom Kouoh shares her anecdote are an embodiment of the borderless phenomenological existence of African bodies since time immemorial. Contemporary Douala is a cosmopolitan city — it boasts the flattering honour of being home to Africa's most literate population. In the 1970s, the city was an emerging postcolonial metropolis and therefore it was common to find people from other parts of the world living in the city.

The Senegalese family's presence in that particular part of town, however, was unusual, even for the post-liberation Douala of Kouoh's upbringing. They were welcomed by the community, although they were often identified according to their strangeness, evident in the memory Kouoh summons of the unusual aromas which emanated from the kitchen each time the family prepared their meals. Irrespective of the family's intentions, these exotic smells had an aesthetic that resisted any sort of policing thought and practices (Erasmus 2018: 25). Their difference rather excited the imagination and created within Kouoh an inexplicable wonder about the nation. Kouoh's affection for Senegal began during these youthful moments. Mr. Papa Niang, the father of the family, had a special name for Kouoh: he called her a *pearl girl* because he likened her to the young Senegalese girls he knew from back in his home country.

> So the father of that home, I will never forget his name — Mr. Papa Niang — always said to me that I look like a little pearl girl. I look like a little Senegalese girl.

Later on, in her young adulthood, Kouoh learnt about the great African statesman, Leopold Sedhar Senghor, the first Black African president of an independent Senegal. Senghor presided as the country's long-standing political leader for a period of two decades, between 1960 and

1980. Like so many promising young Africans during the early twentieth century, Senghor was, too, a conscript of modernity — to borrow a term used by Jamaican anthropologist David Scott (2004) to describe Africans who were sent to receive colonial enlightenment education in the European metropoles, only for them to be returned to their home countries to be manipulated by colonialists who sought to entrench the ideology of imperialism in the colonies (Bhabha 1994: 305). Leopold Sedhar Senghor, like so many conscripted Africans, returned to Senegal to lead the West African nation after its independence in 1960.

From the outset of his presidency, Senghor set forth on developing the tenets of Négritude philosophy as the scaffolding models upon which Senegal and many Francophone countries on the continent would construct the supranational identity-based discourses which had begun to rumble underneath the surface (Harney 2004: 9). Senghor, in many ways, used the young postcolonial African nation as a laboratory to conduct his philosophical experiments with the ideology of Négritude. He developed the country's national cultural policy frameworks around the philosophy. Its ideals permeated through the cultural system and were inculcated in the art schools and national museums which were established. Moreover, it bellowed proudly in how the touring art exhibitions and cultural activities which inflected in the post-independent environment took root at the onset of his presidential regime (Harney 2004: 2). The late American-born African art scholar, Sidney Littlefield Kasfir (2020: 203), labels Senghor's fawning over European — particularly French — modernity a condition of the tendency of African states after obtaining political independence to seek to refashion their nation's cultural identities by distancing themselves from the traditional perceptions hedged onto the cultures indigenous to these nations.

Kasfir asserts that this is what gave the cultures of the colonial metropole prominence in the intellectual projects of postcolonial African states. European ideologies were assimilated for these reasons into these countries' national and cultural identities and statesmen such as Senghor were criticised heavily for their involvement in this social process (Kasfir 2020: 207). It is in the nation of Senegal, in particular, where art and culture became weaponised to advance a new African modernity. Senghor and his allies made use of the sub-ideology of Négritude known as Africanite to galvanise calls for a re-valorisation of African identity (Harney 2004: 9). Négritude and its ideological sub-formulation, Africanite, filtered into the farming of anticolonial and national imaginaries of many post-liberation African states. This point is underscored by historian Benedict Anderson (1991: 2) who claims that since the end of the Second World War,

nationalist positions were central to the success of every anti-colonial revolution on the African and Asian continents.

By the time Kouoh was approaching her mid- to late-teens, Senghor's much-fêted political ideological influence on the continent had begun to wane. It is clear to me and many other scholars of Senghor that, as limited and reactionary as his politics were, they should be understood within the context of the mid-twentieth century. Nonetheless, it is also important to note Senghor's vital contribution to Senegal's cultural revolution after independence. Furthermore, considering that much of Négritude proliferated into the national discourses of many African countries, it is also clear why Senegal became a desirable destination of study as well as a heart for Kouoh and millions of her Francophone African counterparts.

> I always had Senegal in my head, you know, just from those neighbours. And of course, beyond that, I come from quite a modest family and there was a tradition in some segments of my family, where after graduating matric — you guys call it matric, we call it baccalaureate — after graduating from high school those family who could afford to send their kids to Europe, America or England or what have you… and those who couldn't afford this kind of education for the children, they will send the children to Senegal to study because the University of Dakar has a very good reputation among the Francophone kind of academic field. And so, I also grew up with that part thinking that higher education in Africa is in Senegal, so to speak. So Senegal has always been part of my imaginary.

In the early-1980s, following the completion of her baccalaureate in Cameroon where she did her formal schooling, Kouoh and her mother emigrated to the Central European country of Switzerland. Like most European countries, Switzerland has historically been racially homogenous. Kouoh and her family's departure from their culturally and linguistically diverse home of Cameroon to a society as parochial as Switzerland would not be a smooth transition. European societies are known for their prioritising of ethnic and racial purity. History suggests that Europe is indeed the laboratory of racist and white supremacist dogma. Although Switzerland has worked hard to extricate itself from the affairs of international politics, there remain factions within the citizenry of this nation that have persisted in exhibiting racial prejudice against non-white and non-European people (Diagne 2018: 39–44). Kouoh and her family would soon experience the disorienting effects of Swiss white Europeanness, and feel the effects of its capacity to take up space (Ahmed 2007: 150).

Kouoh and her family had to make major adjustments, the most significant of which had to do with her education. She found particularly challenging the switch from an educational system in Cameroon — in the grips of political changes in the aftermath of the post-liberation and twentieth-century revolutionary movements in Africa — to a modern Swiss education system. The education system in her country of birth was struggling to free itself from the strangulation at the sociopolitical hands of machiavellian French assimilation. In the Swiss case, the educational, juridical and political systematic frameworks were entrenched in the ideology of understanding Europe as a monolithic institution (Appiah 1992: 153). The disease suffered by most European national cultures primarily in the last 450 years is their inability to imagine humanity beyond their limited nationalist standpoints, whereas in Africa, cultural identity has throughout cultural time been elastic and infinite (Anderson 1991: 7).

A child of the late-1960s, Kouoh is part of a generation of Africans who seemingly inherited the ideological burdens of the anti-colonial generation that preceded hers. In relation to this, arriving into adulthood in the politically boisterous decade of the 1980s, Kouoh's generation was reared on the political rhetoric propounded by the first postcolonial generation of Africans (Scott 2009: xi). These included the likes of Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Sedhar Senghor and others. Kouoh's generation had its own curtailments. A prominent one which she related to me was that people of her generation had limited freedom in deciding on what professional paths they would pursue after university. Because of the global socioeconomic and political status of millions of Black people at the time, there was an expectation imposed on most young people of Kouoh's generation to pursue careers that were considered 'safe'. The main objective and expectation imposed on her by her family was for Kouoh to have economic stability.

> My generation didn't have that luxury. You had to go into a path and do your studies and graduate and start being independent. Because this is how life goes and I was also worried that I didn't want to be a financial burden for my parents for too long.

Most families desire this for their children when they send them to school, however, it happens that Africans — especially those in Western school systems in the metropoles — tend to internalise this in a much more violent way than their European counterparts. Kouoh exclaims that the three primary academic paths chosen by young career-oriented students of her generation were Law, Medicine and Commerce. These were the three popular fields amongst her peers, and together this triad was anointed as the 'The Holy Trinity'. As such, young people saw them as the straightforward professional routes when they entered the tertiary education

system. Faced with little choice because of the high expectations of her family, Kouoh followed suit and registered for a degree in Business Administration. Switzerland is an economically prosperous country and for a generation of Africans rising high as embers escaping the sociopolitical bonfires alight in their countries of origin, obtaining any degree as an African in a European or American institution was seen as certain to set you up for a grand future. It took Kouoh some time before she properly settled into the ways of a new country in a completely different world.

The spectre of her Blackness in a white European country loomed large for Kouoh. In fact, it was only when she emigrated to Switzerland that the realities of her Blackness dawned on her. This intensified her pining for a return to the continent of her birth. She knew that she would, however, have to wait, as a return would not be imminently possible — at least not for the time being. She had to first complete her university studies and then see what happened next. Humans, in general, have tended to be victims of the circumstances of their times. Each generation is bound to its own particular set of expectations, aspirations and responsibilities. This is a generation that is full of stories of people like Kouoh who took a direction which they knew was not ideally the one they wanted to take but were also aware that this is what was required of them. Kouoh admits to growing up not envisioning herself as someone who would ultimately work in the financial sector, but rather knowing from a very young age that her interests truly lay in the arts.

In the background of Kouoh's jagged adjustments to societal life in Switzerland, the field of African literature was beginning to proliferate in popular European cultural discourse. African literature gained global prominence in the 1950s and was influenced by the political currents occurring in the decolonial wave which was underway on the African continent. In the 1970s and 1980s, Modern African literature was absorbed into the Western academic fold (Quayson 2019: 134). The writing which emanated out of the milieu of African writers who were writing specifically in the mid-twentieth century echoed with resounding revolutionary agitations. You can find, saturated in this body of literature, literal and figurative narratives about the social, political and cultural events which have riddled the continent and its people. Alongside the African literary space, an array of other African artistic enterprises were on the rise globally — African articulations of theatre-making, as well as musicking and filmmaking had also sprung up during the anti-colonial wave that ensued after the Second World War (Kasfir 2020: 202). Proponents of these artistic fields, which included the work of artists such as Wole Soyinka,

Ousmane Sembene, Mariama Ba and many more, proposed an image of postcolonial Africanness which ruptured the lens through which the world perceived the continent.

> I've always had a love for literature so I read a lot of novels which I miss actually because I don't really have time to read novels anymore. I read all these African classics, I mean literature, novels. They really opened up [a] world for me of understanding African history, African contemporary issues and so on. These books that really forged and sharpened my sense about the continent, about Africanity, about our position in the world, about our history and about what kind of future we can design for ourselves.

Kouoh's discovery of her love of reading African stories and experiences filled the void that opened when she left the continent. Immersing herself in this literary tradition somehow softened the harsh feelings of estrangement that had overcome her since relocating to Europe. Additionally, her reading of books written by African writers lifted her consciousness and further conscientised her regarding the improper treatment of Black people in Swiss society and the world in general. What she was reading in these books corroborated the experiences to which she and many other Africans were phenomenologically subjected in white European societies. All these factors merely underlined how much of an existential issue her Blackness would become, particularly in the context of the European society in which she lived (Campt 2021: 7). In Africa, she was never required to be this self-conscious. Life in Europe had forced her to interpellate herself. It defamiliarised her from herself and tried to trick her, as it did with many former colonised people, into despising where she came from. Kouoh is a staunch Pan-Africanist today because of her unrelenting curiosity about Africa which began in those dreary early years in Switzerland where, in an effort to quell her forlorn longing to return to the continent, she would endlessly devour the words imparted by African writers.

Her ideological views began taking the form of the literature she was reading. African literature was heavily influenced by radical Pan-Africanist thought and advocated for a return to African traditions in the literary forms it adopted. Because of the underlying African nationalist sentiments that the writers conveyed, this stream of thought in African literature became labelled as 'methodological nationalism'. As with most things during that time, this disciplinary category was itself a category of European fabrication. It was invented by elite European academics who sought to restrict the bold literature emerging from out of the new postcolonial nations to anti-colonial and nationalist frameworks (Appiah 1992: 149–150). The literature consisted of a mixture of Négritude and radical Black Marxian Pan-Africanist ruminations. Kouoh spent large amounts of time preoccupied with understanding the metaphysical questions

posed inside the books she read. Gradually she became radicalised by these stories and the ideas embedded in them.

> By then, I was in my late twenties and it was also a moment for me as a young African person, gaining more understanding of where I was, where I came from, where I wanted to go. By then I was already a full Pan-Africanist because I think that I belong to the entire continent and the entire continent belongs to me.

The subliminal effects of these stories on her began to permeate into her social life, challenging her to reorient her relationship with the society in which she was living — a society which constantly questioned her place in it. The literature that Kouoh was reading caused her to contemplate the plight of Black people all over the world, particularly how we are raised in Africa knowing that our identities are multiple, overlapping and perennially contradictory. Kouoh[23] defied conforming to any given status quo, refusing to acquiesce to the compromises that most Black people have historically had to make in order to be seen by their European or Asian counterparts. However, despite being a student of commerce, she surrounded herself with creative and artistically-minded people.

> While I was doing this banking administration programme, in my so-called private life or leisure time I was entrenched in the creative space, you know. Through literature I was surrounded by creative people. Most of my friends and colleagues — not colleagues, friends — they were people coming from the humanities, from fields such as architecture, graphic design and theatre, cinema, fashion design and so on.

Living a life that embraces the plurality of human beings could only be problematic in spaces which privilege homogeneity. Blackness cannot thrive in such geographies because in its very being it defies any monological and definitive meanings (Wicomb 1998; Erasmus 2018: 24). A very little-known fact about Kouoh which I am privileged to have learned is that, after completing her business administration degree, she worked as a social worker for the city of Zurich. In the course of conducting research into Kouoh's curatorial practice, I noticed that the media has shown a partiality to her background as a banking professional. Modest professions like social

[23] In 2020, Kouoh was awarded the Swiss Grand Award for Art, also known as the Grand Prix d'Art or The Meret Oppenheim Prize. The Swiss Grand Award for Art/Prix Meret Oppenheim was founded in 2001 to honour and recognise individuals whose work in the arts, which includes architecture, criticism, curating and research, have been of relevance in Swiss contemporary art and architecture (https://thesoleadventurer.com/koyo-kouoh-wins-2020-swiss-grand-award-for-art/).

work are not recognised in hyper-capitalist industries like the art-world, so this could explain why this detail does not feature at all in what has been written about her within the art-world.

Kouoh's aptitude as a commerce-trained person is widespread knowledge to those informed on her background. It bodes well for her to be known in such a way by the art public because she is seen to offer the best of both worlds: having a uniquely refined cultural sensibility and a robust economical foundation. These two pillars form the main scaffold of Kouoh's professional architecture as a curator and would prove to be indispensable throughout her life, especially in the period of her career during which she is at the helm of a corporate-style contemporary art museum. Nevertheless, it is true that she worked for a short time as a social worker, doing work for the city of Zurich, and then moved to an advocacy organisation in Switzerland. The advocacy organisation known as Frauen Informationzenstrum or FIZ was focused on representing the rights of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women. This job exposed Kouoh to the demographic presence of minorities and migrants in Switzerland and the West at large. She was confronted with the systematic social inequalities facing the people whom her organisation helped and with which she happened to share a political subject position.

Kouoh could not stand the xenophobic treatment meted out to minorities and migrants by the state apparatus and saw how it had rendered them into its enemies. In defence of the national identity of its society, the Swiss state employed proto-fascist governmental methods towards these people which it assigned as aliens (Diagne 2018: 40). Working on the ground as a social worker brought Kouoh to the realisation of what the insular Swiss government officials failed to see — a Swiss society in the midst of a cultural shift. The shift was being spearheaded by minorities and migrants who, through the cultures they brought with them, were stretching the character of Swiss society and making it transnational (Bhabha 1994: 306). Along her professional journey, Kouoh has carried with her the experiences and lessons she garnered during her time as a social worker. There are parallels that can be drawn between the social roles of social workers and that of curators. Both professions are founded on the ontological basis of being practices that require a significant amount of empathy and care in their operations. Because of their formulation on the generalised notion of caring work being a feminine disposition, both social work and curation are vocations which women are expected to administer (Buurman 2021: 22–23).

> During the time that I was working as a social worker for the city of Zurich, I became convinced and very conscious of the challenges of migration in respect to the imposed borders and other systemic disadvantages, so to speak.

At the risk of reinforcing the exhausted gendered stereotypes which have become attached to both professions, there are analogues between the work Kouoh performed as a social worker in Switzerland and what I believe have become signatures of her curatorial practice over the past thirty years. In particular, she described a principle of care in her work that seems to connect strongly to her training as a social worker and her curatorial practice. In both, care is born out of a keen sense of the harm that can be done to people and representations in the aftermath of the catastrophe of colonial rule and generalised Afrophobia. In the subsequent sections of this chapter, I will conduct an analysis of some of Koyo's seminal curatorial projects which have come to define her career thus far, and will draw this theme and other thematics out from her work and interventions which have made her a powerful African cultural voice and curatorial strategist in the world.

> I am a genuinely empathic person and care is essential in my being. I care for people and I think that people are more important than anything else because people are kind of the magic but also the doom of the world. Most people, I don't think most people will know me or know me well. I care a lot for people. I am very mindful of people.

Mediation as a foundational medium in the configuration of Black African curatorial practice strategies

At the onset of the 1990s, Kouoh found herself in the throes of an all-consuming transition. Work as a social worker was going on as usual alongside developments in her private life. In 1992, two events took place that would forever transform the trajectory of her life. The cultural space is unique in that it is one of the few social realms in society in which the line between one's professional and personal life is extremely thin. This is because, unlike other professional spheres, there is a lot of emphasis placed in the cultural space as a political community on negotiating terms of agreement through mediatised processes of affecting and being affected — as standard forms of exchange and circulation — what is called an affective community (Lehmann, Roth and Schankweiler 2019). In other political domains, one often finds that the personal and professional are typically seen as separate. The first life-changing event that occurred in Kouoh's life was the birth of her first and only child — a boy, whom she named

Djibril. Djibril is biracial and the thought of raising a mixed-race child in European society was a frightening prospect for Kouoh, as she knew that his racial difference would always be a social and psychological marker that he would have to carry with him throughout his life. As accepted as racial hybridities are in our contemporary moment, in the early-1990s, this was not completely the case. While being of a hybrid racial identity does still carry its own set of complexities in the present, on the whole, the human race has made significant strides towards a more inclusive and tolerant world — of course, more can still be done to transmit these positive changes on a universal scale.

Argentinian philosopher and sociologist Maria Lugones (2010: 746) avers that coloniality is still with us and can be seen residing at the intersection of race, gender and class. White heteropatriarchal supremacy hides itself in the social norms and moors around which contemporary society organises itself. However, its mechanical functions are not simple to identify because of how it has been able to imbricate itself in the structures of power in society. Extending Lugones's provocation, literary scholar Epifanio San Juan (2002: 91) states that European nation-states such as Switzerland are organised according to racialist frameworks. Having experienced these antagonisms since her arrival in the country and how she was judged by the state and society on the basis of how she looked, Kouoh did not want her son to grow up bearing the same psychological burden which she had borne since she began living in the country — that of being othered (Masondo 2021: 77). Djibril's birth became the catalyst for her decision to move back with him to live on the African continent.

> So thinking of the life of my son, I was just thinking that he will always be confronted by his Blackness. For him to be solid in his identity, I think that there is no way I could convey that heritage, knowledge and consciousness whilst living in Europe. Because your environment has such an influence on you, you're socialised by your environment regardless of what kind of culture you have at home. So, this is when I decided to go back to the continent. I wanted to bring him to grow up in Africa.

The second life-altering event was the release of Magaret Busby's famous anthology *Daughters of Africa* (1992). Kouoh was struck by the stories of the women authors in the book and mesmerised by its feminist-leaning discursive framework. The book was a radical response to what has been purported by Black feminist scholars such as Valerie Smith (1997: 317) that the scope of literature which came out of the mid- to late-twentieth century enclosed Black women's experiences to those of people who are subjected to subjugation. Black women's experiences were seen as not warranting any attention, both discursive and non-discursive, in the context of

human culture. The literature space was sexist, classist and racist. Black women were the ones who often bore the burdens of white heteropatriarchal society's bigotries. Margaret Busby, the editor of the anthology — who was born in Ghana and moved to England at a very young age — was Britain's first Black female publisher. This was a time in which it was scarce to find published texts written by Black women writers, and so the emergence of a Black woman publisher in England was a radical leap in-and-of itself. It was more common to see the literary works of white men and women being published and if it was a text by a Black person, it was often written by a Black man.

However, there existed a handful of Black female writers whose work had received acknowledgement from the literary establishment, even prior to the release of Busby's publication. Names such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Maya Angelou come to mind (Obi-Young 2019; Busby 2019). These writers, alongside many others, are featured in Busby's anthology which charts a literary canon of Black matriarchal thought traditions that date back to the 1900s. The Indian-American literary critic Gayatri Spivak (1985 in Warhol and Herndl 1997: 896) states that literature contributes richly to the production of systems of cultural representation. Postcolonial scholars have exposed the underlying connection between discourses in African literature and the literary construction of African subjectivities in the West. *Daughters of Africa* fractured this phallocentric order, superimposing the radical imaginaries of authors into the dominant cultural aesthetic and advancing the world's understanding of the Black feminist subject (Wright 2004: 142).

> I was going through that path of transition and also self finding — social, intellectual, emotional self finding. I was working as a social worker and it was the year I think that Margaret Busby published that amazing anthology book, *Daughters of Africa*. An anthology of writings by women of African descent. I got that book when it came out in '92 and it opened up a totally different world for me. I immersed myself into that book and that's when I realised I was gaining consciousness about where I am. How is my environment, you know, impacting me as a person and how am I impacting my environment? I realised that I was not really impacting my environment because there was no room for me in that environment so to speak. This is not to critique Switzerland, as such, but it was more, it is more, the realisation that you live in a society of which you don't feel part of.

Busby's multivocal anthology left an indelible impression on Kouoh, who resonated with so many of the women's stories. Chief among the many insights it offered her was the ability to embrace her plurality as an individual. More importantly, though, the anthology taught Kouoh to

appreciate the diversity of African people, a fact that was bastardised by Europeans (Diagne 2018). Realising the ignorance of white Europeans and how alienated the experiences of Black women were in Switzerland, Kouoh became aware of the pedagogical applications of Busby's book in Swiss and European society at large, where Black people's voices were already marginalised in literary circles.

> So with that publication I realised that I can do something, you know. To expand the knowledge of literature by women and particularly literature by women of African descent. I was living in the German speaking part of Switzerland. Back then I have to tell you in the early '90s there was virtually no representation and no visibility for these kinds of practices. So, I just said I would set out to create a version of *Daughters of Africa* which would be specifically directed to the German speaking area. So that's what I did.

She undertook a project to translate the entire anthology into Swiss German, which was the predominantly spoken language in the region of Switzerland in which she resided. *Töchter Afrikas,* the German translation, was released at the international Frankfurt Book Fair[24] in 1994. This was Kouoh's very first official project as an independent curator. In translating the book into German so that the stories could be accessed by the German-speaking population of Switzerland, Kouoh re-situated the narratives of the women authors in the publication into the European discursive machinery and social logic which had a deep-seated enmity for Black women's experiences (Mombaca 2018: 43). Kouoh organised a series of promotional lectures and presentations to accompany the launch of the book. This programming lasted for a period of one year. A critique of this particular curatorial move by Kouoh could be in the argument that she was, either knowingly or unwittingly, replicating the malaise from which the postcolonial intelligentsia suffer. This is the tendency of a small, educated core of professionals who appoint themselves as cultural mediators of the 'Third World' to the West. Running the risk of being self-aggrandising, these bourgeois Blacks see themselves as the intermediaries of postcolonial thought and culture and thus trade their unique circumstances in European centres of world capitalism as though it were a commodity (Appiah 1992: 149).

The cultural industry has the habit of wanting to render the subjective experiences of people into capitalist libidinal commodities which override their ontological function (Bhabha 1994: 31). It is a classically European way of thinking to believe that only a small group of people are deserving of the capacity to translate reality on behalf of other people (Britton 2020: 2). Black cultural

[24] The Frankfurt Buchmesse or Frankfurt Book Fair is one of the oldest book fairs in the world, boasting a tradition that goes back 500 years (Frankfurt Book Fair 2022).

discourse has changed remarkably since the mid-twentieth century, and privileged Black African cultural practitioners have had to be cautious of how they navigate the line between what we have reason to presume is a noble desire to represent the narrative realities of marginalised Black subjects against what the dominant aesthetic regimes constitute as possible (White 1980: 16). The emergence of fields of scholarship like Black Studies has helped to unmask these inequalities in society. Critical Black Studies reminds us constantly to remap our relations with the past and the present, and not to take for granted how the past continues to influence the present (Sharpe 2015: 60). Why is it, Black scholars ask, that in the eyes of the white European global order our Black African cultures can only be seen in translation, and not as possessing any substance in and of themselves (Phalafala 2020: 739)?

We are often relegated to having to explain the essence of what constitutes us to those who have historically othered us. However, we cannot dwell too much on pessimism. *Töchter Afrikas* was well received by the German-speaking public for which it was intended. But, perhaps more crucially, Kouoh's curatorial deployment of the cultural models of book editing, publishing and translation of African knowledge systems evolved into the kernels of her curatorial practice in the decades that ensued.

> Well, I think first and foremost as a curator and this is kind of my curatorial mantra, you have the duty to to mediate the best possible art in the best possible conditions. That's kind of the baseline of my practice. Building on that, I also believe that curatorial practice is a very subjective practice that deals with subjectivities, you know, in the sense that your sensitivities is what guides you.

This project also signalled the culmination of her residence in Switzerland. She was in her mid-twenties at this point and was two years into motherhood. Djibril's presence in her life also forced her to think seriously about the prospect of either remaining in Europe or choosing to relocate back to Africa. Africans in the diaspora often speak passionately about their dreams to return to the motherland. However, the Africa which is represented in their rhetoric often smacks of the patronising Western stylisation of the continent as a landscape replete with primitive peoples and cultures. Having lived on the continent as a child, life in Africa to her was not the incomprehensible mist that colonial narratives of the continent constructed it into (Bhabha 1994: 304). Kouoh's idea of Africa had matured as she saw it as a place that we as Black people of the world deeply had in common. She saw Africa as a place in which Black African people all over the world could feel whole again in their identities (Britton 2020: 2).

Kouoh wanted her son to grow up feeling like he was a whole human being and not a product of a white man's negation of themselves. The notion of looking back or returning bears great mythological significance in African culture. In Ghanaian mythology, the Twi expression 'Sankofa', which means "go/return and pick", is an ancestral motif which speaks to ideas relating to the act of looking into the past in order to make strides towards the future (Kasfir 2020: 223). This philosophy is encapsulated in the axiom, 'in order to move forward, one has to look backwards'. Heeding these urgent calls, Kouoh and Djibril moved back to Cameroon a year after the release of *Töchter Afrikas.* In the interim years of 1995 and 1996, Kouoh found herself shuttling back and forth between Douala, Abidjan and Dakar. In the back of her mind, Kouoh was trying to decide in which of these cities she would choose to settle on a more permanent basis. At the start of 1996, after a period of about six months of backward and forward perambulation, Kouoh finally decided to settle in the Senegalese capital of Dakar.

> I was not really interested in the traditional path of people going back to go back to where they come from. I was more interested in going back to experience the continent in an expanded way. So, the expanded way for me was to go to live in a country that is not necessarily my own but that to a large extent in my understanding of the continent that is mine, you know. And also following Senghor's kind of call in the '50s, and in the early '60s when he became President, that, you know, Senegal is a country of all Africans, so to speak. So, and then I had been there a few times and I fell in love with the city and this is why I decided to go back. I was ready to move back when I was twenty-five and I effectively moved back twenty years later when I was twenty-eight. I was looking at Cote d'Ivoire or Senegal, because I love Abidjan as a city, and I love Côte d'Ivoire as a country as well. So, I was very tempted to move to Abidjan but I decided to move to Dakar.

Within a few years of making Senegal hers and Djibril's home, she began working at the Goree Institute[25]. Kouoh secured a job in which she was tasked with helping to establish the institute's arts and cultural department. The Goree Institute was initially conceptualised in 1992 by President Abdou Diouf. The establishment of the institute happened years after the historic "Dakar Meeting" which was a gathering of members of South Africa's anti-apartheid political party, the African National Congress, and a group of liberal white South Africans. Amongst the white liberal representatives were politician Witsie Slabbert and writer-poet and activist, Breyten Breytenbach. The leading reasons behind the establishment of the institute was to strengthen political dialogue between African states and to contribute to resolving national conflicts and

[25] The Goree Institute, formally the 'Goree Institute, Centre for Democracy, Development of Culture in Africa' is a Pan-African organisation located on Goree Island in Dakar, Senegal (Goree Institute 2022).

foster cultural and socioeconomic exchange between countries on the continent (Goree Institute 2022). Taking up employment at the Goree Institute fast-tracked Kouoh's already fledgling career as a cultural professional. It was at the institute where she would set forth on her second major cultural undertaking and her very first on the continent.

African cultures are steeped in oracular modes of self expression, claims Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu who, in the 1970s, coined the term 'orature' to index the practices of orality as existing within a knowable system of performative artistic mediums which operate according to a particular idea of time and space (Moolla 2012: 343). These aural and oral modes of aesthetic representation are seen as existing on a lower rung in the Western linear timelines of the development of literature (Wa Thiong'o 2010: 4). In Zirimu's opinion, 'oral literature' was a contradiction in terms. Orature was a response to this self-contradictory concept that is used at present to refer to the non-written expressive African aesthetic traditions. Zirimu felt that orature was by far the greater definition of the African aesthetic because it took into account the performative elements of the oral tradition which differentiate it from the mere literary (Wa Thiong'o, 2010:7). Most, if not all, of the cognitive and technological advances we have made as a human species derive from the oral. Orality is the precursor to the metaphysical writing transcribed by art-makers in the form of their social and artistic processes of art-making (Barber 2008: 69; Diagne 2011: 54).

> I started working for the Goree Institute establishing the Arts and Culture Department and within that I did another curatorial project around literature which is called the "Poetry Caravan". That project is one of my defining projects in understanding the power of curatorial practice and the importance of mediation of artistic and creative production.

"Poetry Caravan" was the name given to the cultural programme which stemmed from the concept of creative caravans formulated by Goree Institute board member Breyten Breytenbach. The idea of the creative caravans came about through Breytenbach's plan of creating a synthesis between traditional and modern modes of artistic expression. It was conceptualised around those expressive mediums which were unique to the people and cultures of the African continent (Kouoh 2000: 15). With the millennium fast approaching, global culture was moving further away from traditional customs. The digitalscape had not only encroached into every social fabric of society but it was also beginning to change the way people memorialise history. As a project, "Poetry Caravan" deviated in its content and structure from *Töchter Afrikas* which was more of an editorial challenge. This project focused on the spoken

word and poetry as the main aesthetic interests of concern. Kouoh was appointed as the coordinator of the project and, as part of her assigned duties, brought together a motley ensemble of African-based contemporary poets. The purpose of having the poets in the project was to have them engage in intercontinental and inter-generational poetical conversations with traditional African griots.

African griots have had a special place in the constellation of African societies throughout precolonial and postcolonial Africa. These are usually individuals who are born into a family of masters of the word who are then brought into the world expected to exercise their special ability in the furtherance of cultural custodianship. When they die, griots pass their gifts on to their sons and daughters, who keep the generational cycle going. Each culture has its own specific order of griots, and some of the most famous and widely discussed griots in Africa are from the Mandinka-speaking tribes of modern-day Mali, Guinea, Senegal and Ghana (Charter 2009: 6). “Poetry Caravan” took on an itinerary project structure. The group of contemporary poets were meant to travel along the major African rivers such as the Niger, Nile and Zambezi, stopping at certain points along the journey to converse with the griots living in these particular regions. Writing for a publication which asked her to review the project, Kouoh (2000: 19) shared that the whole idea behind the project was for the caravan to follow the ancient routes which transported people, goods and ideas on their flowing waters. One hears echoes of the Sankofa principle again in the composition of this project — particularly in how it was based around the idea of merging the past to the present and future.

> It was a very excruciating project to run. It took me at least like two full years to plan. Funding was very difficult, it was very difficult to find funding for such a project and what we did finally, we only did one iteration which was the Niger River. We didn’t go to the Nile, we did go into the Congo, we did go into the Zambezi. But I still love that project and that programme, and maybe one day I will go back to it because I think that travelling itinerant programmes are very powerful.

The project had a strong metaphorical message that it hoped would come through in its itinerancy — the idea that, just like ancient African traders did on their sailing trips, this contemporary caravan also carried cultural information which it wanted to impart along the paths of the participants' peregrinations. Travelling in the way Africans did in precolonial times opened people's sense of place and allowed them to join up with others and exchange ideas in the process. “Poetry Caravan” challenged the cultural immobility that was imposed by the colonial

project through the establishment of borders in Africa. Reflecting on the programme in *Gallery: The Art Magazine from the Delta*, Kouoh wrote:

> Between October 24 and November 11 in 1999, nine poets from Egypt, South Africa, Mali Senegal, Cameroon, Zimbabwe and the region of Central Sahara went through a unique poetical experience. In search of inspiration, they made a journey to their oral colleagues. The poets left Goree Island, off the coast of Dakar, Senegal, on a Sunday morning to go on a journey of 2,500 km through a region drenched with past glory. They travelled to meet and perform with traditional poets, the griots, and to pay homage to the historical places on the route to Timbuktu (2000: 20).

The recourse to African traditional cultural motifs is a leading curatorial strategy appropriated by many postcolonial African curators. One of the key models in which this revisionist tactic has been disseminated across the continent is through the vehicle of the travelling exhibition. Travelling exhibitions, by virtue of their itinerant orientation, transported this pedagogical motif into different parts of the Pan-African world. Wherever these exhibitions went, they complicated the imposition of colonial borders in Africa, both ideologically and literally. Most Africans know of the travails that come with travelling on the continent. It is more difficult to travel inland on the continent than it is to travel outside of the continent's borders. Itinerant cultural programmes that take place on the continent are important because they bring these contradictions to life and do a critical job of exposing European neocolonial presence on the continent. In placing emphasis on the 'word', Africa's preeminent cultural export, "Poetry Caravan" not only managed to transgress physical boundaries but transcended psychological and emotional boundaries as well (Kouoh 2000: 25).

The African continent is a quintessentially polyethnic cultural landscape containing a litany of linguistic categories that bristle continuously on its mystical geography. What shaped it into the multilingual and culturally rich environment that it is, are the historical and contemporary transfusions of cultural knowledge which have occurred over centuries on the continent. Pidgin English, a derivative of formal English, is a language that is widely spoken in West Africa. Its genesis demonstrates transcultural translation that occurred between indigenous and Europhonic languages (Quayson 2019: 141). Black African cultural professionals, in working with African symbolic or artifactual cultural material, have utilised the strategy of translation to foreground African experiences in the face of Westernised neoliberal patterns of cultural productions. Similarly, to the literary-based methodologies employed by postcolonial African

novelists, curators such as Kouoh have thought closely about ways in which critical translation can be used to support the frameworks of their projects.

Since the collapse of formal European domination on the continent, there has been a large volume of art exhibitions and cultural programmes dedicated to the philosophical project of re-enchanting the familiar within African societies. This objective and the many which bear a conceptual resonance with this one are fundamentally directed at delegitimising the Western imperium through what is termed a conscious revalorisation of African cultural traditions and customs of the past (Garuba 2003; Appiah 1992: 152). Working on the groundbreaking “Poetry Caravan” project was an immensely invaluable experience for Kouoh. The project expanded her knowledge of the continent and introduced her to the political shenanigans of cultural diplomacy on the continent.

Storytelling as a discursive strategy in Koyo Kouoh’s curatorial practice

Indian critical theorist Homi Bhabha (1994: 304) proposes that postmodernity is merely the name that has been given to a periodising narrative that serves to explain the transformation undertaken by global capitalism between the 1970s and 1990s. The transformations in capital were reflective of an epochal shift taking place. Global economic culture was moving from a Fordist to a Postfordist economic structure. The changes which occurred in these three decades drastically altered the networks of aesthetic and mechanical production in the art-culture system. There was suddenly an influx of capital and technology which revolutionised the cultural landscape. The social function of creative labour gained recognition amongst wider publics and improved the perception of the cultural field in the formation of a society's political economy. When the global economy transitioned into this new standard of capitalism in the 1970s, new forms of cultural and artistic expression emerged with it (Hobsbawm 1994: 501). The art-culture system as a subcategory of the global political economy was one of the main beneficiaries of the commercialisation which was taking root in the cultural sector.

The three decades between the 1960s and the 1990s were a tumultuous time in the history of Black struggles against white colonial domination. Debates around the postcolonial futures of Pan-African cultures were fomenting alongside a growing chorus of African scholarly voices who, in their work, questioned the colonial production of transcultural narratives about the continent. The term ‘postcolonial’ began proliferating in scholarly historiography about Africa

which came out during this crucial juncture in Africa's social history. Some scholars were suspicious of the term and its potential to articulate the realities of Africans after colonialism. Many volumes of scholarship were generated in response to the queries that arose about the term. These discursive currents, a subject that I discuss in nuanced detail in the opening chapter of this dissertation, poured into the field of African art and cultural scholarship. The last decade of the twentieth century saw a plethora of publications, exhibitions and doctoral studies which began to plough into this field. By the turn of the new millennium, African contemporary artistic and cultural production was being received with a sense of newfound appreciation and critical engagement from local and international publics.

Contemporary artists from African nations such as Benin, Senegal, Mali, Tunisia, Nigeria and especially post-apartheid South Africa were gaining global appeal. African contemporary artistic production began doing the rounds in museums, galleries and large-scale art events in the Global North (Harney 2004). The works' commercial value rose rapidly and so did that of the artists. Soon enough, contemporary African art was dubbed as the 'new Avant-Garde'. A coterie of white European and American curators of African contemporary art surfaced around about the early 2000s. These Western curators maintained an interest in understanding how African artists were aesthetically translating their social experiences into unique artistic objects of expression (Hassan and Oguibe 2001: 22).

> I think that in the 1990s, all the way up to the early 2000s, there was a very perceivable, perceptible trend of some savvy European curators who have started to curate Africa sort of… there was a whole generation. A few of them, you know, struggling through the continent doing whatever projects that they were doing and kind of wanting to take and occupy, so called pioneer positions, as you know, claiming ownership of them, so called, you know, opening up the conversation or the field of global curatorial practice to the continent.

The white European scholars and curators were perceived with scepticism by their African counterparts who claimed their actions to be appropriative and guilty of whitewashing African cultural discourse. However, this was not a universal sentiment, as the contributions of these European cultural agents were regarded as productive to the expanded circulation of knowledge about African art and culture in what was a new era. The perennial question was, 'What entitled white European curators and scholars to discuss and produce knowledge about African art when they had no ontological and in-depth epistemic relationship with the cultures of the continent?' There were African curators who were present and active on the continent and who were best suited to articulate the artistic urgencies and conceptual conceits of African artists

(Goniwe 2017: 19). This led to institutions in Europe where African art is abnormally fetishised and where institutions would approach practitioners like Okwui Enwezor, Simon Njami, Olabisi Silva and Kouoh, to name a few, and ask them to curate exhibitions about African art inside their buildings. The circulation of African contemporary art in Europe definitely had a transformative impact on the emergence of Black African curators who came to prominence in the global art arena. As I have indicated in Chapter One of this thesis, a seminal moment in the history of Black curatorial practice was the appointment of Okwui Enwezor as artistic director of the Second Johannesburg Biennial. This development triggered the recognition of Black African curatorial practitioners as transversally agentive figures capable of successfully operating in the global artistic landscape.

The factor distinguishing Enwezor's generation of African curators (of which Kouoh is a part) from subsequent generations of Black African curators is their unwavering advocacy for African self-determination in the sphere of identity politics. One can see the prevalence of this trait in the scope of most African curators' curatorial work which emerged between the 1990s and the present day. In an interview she recently gave with online news publication *The Africa Report*, Kouoh (2022) underlines:

> I belong to a generation of African professionals who want to talk to themselves, who inhabit the world from a Pan-African perspective and who, first of all, talk to Africa.

The work she conducted for "Poetry Caravan" increased the status of Kouoh's visibility as an up-and-coming Black and African-based cultural professional. As a result of the exposure afforded her by coordinating the project, Kouoh was approached by Swiss-born curator and writer of African descent, Simon Njami. Njami had just been appointed chief curator of Les Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie, Bamako, 2001 and asked Kouoh to be part of his curatorial team. She worked with him on both the 2001 and 2003 editions of the African biennial. Her curatorial participation in consecutive iterations of the Bamako Biennials catapulted her firmly into the international art-world's radar. Subsequent to these biennials, the trajectory of her career undertakes a marked ascent. She began receiving invitations to work on cultural projects abroad in Europe and at home in Africa. In 2011 and 2012, respectively, Kouoh was appointed the curatorial advisor for Documenta 12 and 13 and worked on this amongst a slew of impressive cultural projects.

Kouoh's participation in the Bamako Biennial carries another semblance of discursive importance which I would like to illuminate. Being on the curatorial team of the biennial — whose artistic focus was photography — placed Kouoh at the forefront of people who were propagating discursive trends about Africa in the art realm. The legacies of photography on the continent are well documented. There is a long list of African artists, scholars and curators who have grappled with the medium's influence in the colonial project in Africa. Anthropologist Heike Behrend (2013: 18) elucidates how its introduction on the continent in the 1900s deeply transfigured people's practices of everyday life, shaping their economies of representation and how they performed their rituals and memorialised their customs. Generations of African artists, curators and intellectuals have consistently geared practical interventions towards dislocating the scopic chokehold that European episteme has over the medium. The Black body has become fragmented through the space-time perceptions of the European episteme via the colonising gaze of the imperial camera (De Rezende 2021: 52; Hicks 2020: 17).

Black feminist theorist Tina Campt (2017: 7) compares the artistic practice of photography, especially when carried out by Black people, as a political act of self-affirmation and radical confrontation of the violence inherent in Eurological scopic regimes. Photography is buttressed by the discursively political currents of representational and identity-based politics. This is why the medium and its accompanying discussions have been the most popular amongst African curators, artists and art writers. In an essay titled "Reframing the Black subject: ideology and fantasy in contemporary South African representation", Okwui Enwezor (2002: 376) concedes that Black bodies stew in vengeance because of the desire to salvage their historical identities from the distorted proclivities of white representation. Black Queer studies scholar Rinaldo Walcott (2018: 61), underscoring Enwezor's statement, claims the latter shifts in representational politics are tantamount to the colonial reparations debate, as they similarly imply a working through missing, lost and/or cultural historical records of formerly oppressed people.

In 2013, Kouoh was appointed the educational curator of the talks programme at the inaugural 1:54 Art Fair in London. Throughout the span of her career, she has been entrusted with the role of discursive mediator of African aesthetic cultural affairs (Drabble 2013: 19). This is by no means a simple responsibility, but over the years she has tackled it with flair and criticality, whilst demonstrating political intelligence, historical insight and collegial generosity. Speaking to the online art publication *ART AFRICA* 2017, this is what Kouoh outlined as the discursive framework of the ART FORUM talks programme:

> This edition of FORUM will examine how strategies of resistance take shape and how a language capable of fighting back against a matrix of oppression can develop out of them; a language which rekindles the dignity and compassion of those who advocated and resisted before us; one capable of articulating a diverse set of voices and celebrating the differences between them. As systems of oppression and control contact our lives in more pervasive and affecting ways, militating against them remains critical: from addressing the new challenges presented by a volatile political climate to, as Raél Jero Salley puts it, "still-active legacies." As artist methodologies filter into and blur academic disciplines, activist and social practices, we look to the radical traditions of artmaking in search of strategies for political liberation.

Kouoh's in-depth understanding of African cultural history as well as her critical reasoning faculties are qualities that any cultural practitioner should possess. This is more so for a Black cultural practitioner such as she, operating at the highest rung of the institution of the art-world. She has built a reputation for herself as a curatorial practitioner who takes seriously the notion of curatorial practice as a mode of cultural communication. Her practice has revolved around organising discursive seminars, symposia and conferences whose purpose has been to create discussion around aesthetic traditions in African artistic practices, as well as make publics aware of certain dangers that the neoliberal art market poses to African artists and cultural practitioners (Verwoert 2010: 29). The art market has been exposed for treating the Black figure, Black stories and experiences as sites of commercial extraction. It was important that people had knowledge of these characteristics so that they could resist the racialised and tokenist representations of Black people (Bradley and Da Silva 2021).

Curatorial practice as institution-building (RAW Material Company and Zeitz MOCAA)

Decades on from the independence of the first African country, the residual effects of imperial extraction and colonial suppression continue to affect many African governments. Postcolonial African nations have struggled to rid themselves of the inadequate bureaucratic systems left over by colonial governments. These governments have also shot themselves in the foot — instead of labouring to reform the enduring deficiencies, the political and administrative bourgeoisie somehow perpetuated the injustices (Kouoh 2014: 15). The effects of this sociopolitical sabotage have had a negative impact on the many spheres of postcolonial society. One tier of society that has incurred massive damage due to a lack of sufficient funding is the arts and cultural sector. There is a blatant disregard for arts and culture by postcolonial African

governments, and a bigger neglect towards independent initiatives, particularly those in the arts. This is just to illustrate a few of the several shortcomings which have beleaguered professional advancement in the African art and cultural sectors.

Should we be surprised that the art-culture system in the West is generally better organised and funded than those in Africa? Absolutely not. It is by design that the path of independent cultural and artistic organisations in Africa is severely more arduous than for those in the West. In Africa, only a very small fraction of independent cultural organisations has managed to survive beyond the year of their establishment. Why is this so? The political economies of African governments are structured in such a way as to breed dependency on the West. These dynamics resonate in the governmental psychologies of institutions in the art-world. Institutional autonomy has been rendered highly onerous to obtain in this space and therefore independent cultural entities have to be financially dependent on the state and neoliberal funding bodies (Kouoh 2014: 15).

The Master's research study of South Africa's Kabelo Malatsie — who was appointed director of Kunsthalle Bern in 2021 — demonstrates how too much dependence on state or external funding has resulted in a loss of autonomy for independent cultural entities in Africa (Malatsie 2018). The power dynamics inherent in the system have favoured funders more than the projects which they have funded. As you can imagine, this is not an ideal scenario for independent entities and artists as it interferes directly with the outcomes of their work. The art eco-system operates on the principle of symbiosis — to exist and participate in the space one needs the active participation of others. But, as I have endeavoured to explain above, certain institutions (i.e. galleries and well-funded large-scale institutions) have a better commercial advantage which allows them to dominate the rest of the participants in the ecosystem. The objectives of smaller entities are disrupted by the bureaucratic forces of these larger government and more corporatised cultural institutions.

The role played by museums, public institutions, galleries and foreign funding bodies should not be underestimated. Their value is emphasised by art historian Dorothee Richter (2021: 47) who avers that Western civilisation historicised artistic and cultural materials inside the popular imagination as institutional entities. It has convinced us to believe that there is no art without the art-world to confer it as such. The art-world, after all, is a meta-institution fabricated on the idea of a loose network of people who construct a set of discourses that result in the emergence of a particular field of relations (Danto 1964 in Richter 2021: 47). Africa's art-world is still very much in its juvenescence. A variety of smaller art-worlds exist and one can find them scattered across

various parts of the continent. An even smaller number of them are able to be competitive in the global arena. Countries with some of the biggest economies on the continent like South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya have decently performing art economies.

Many of us working in the field agree that the continent remains starved of critical independent cultural structures. We need more initiatives invested in addressing the artistic and critical voids that exist on our landscape. The inconsistency of capital investment in the space coupled with the dearth of skilled professionals are some of the reasons for the absence of more of these entities in the art and cultural scene (Harney 2004: 219). In the last three decades, the African continent has witnessed the rise of a number of private art initiatives in the African art field. Independent formations such as Doual'art (Cameroon, 1992) and Townhouse Gallery (Egypt, 1997) came into existence during the 1990s. They were followed by a deluge of independent art and cultural spaces such as Chimurenga (South Africa, 2002), the Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA, Nigeria, 2007), Trinity Sessions (South Africa, 2001) and RAW Material Company (Senegal, 2008) which burst onto the scene in the new millennium.

Since their introduction, these formations have managed to fill some of the gaps caused by the administrative failures of programmes led by their countries' governments. What has set these entities apart from state and commercial bodies has been their interesting use of pedagogy and methodology to reimagine the African work of history, archival work and visual grammars in the contemporary (Kouoh 2014: 16). In the editorial notes of *Condition Report: Symposium on Building Art Institutions in Africa,* a book that Kouoh edited which comprises a collection of essays resulting from a symposium held in Dakar in 2012 to address the morphing role of art and initiatives on the continent, Kouoh had this to say about the birth of RAW Material Company:

> Raw Material Company was born out of the necessity to create a space to share knowledge. Its core motivation was to establish a space for alternative education and learning. A place that provides contemporary artistic theory and in turn generates discourse, ideas and practices with a primary emphasis on Africa and African related matters, all the while including a broader range of origins and intellectual tools. The name RAW refers to Africa as a traditional provider of raw materials for the global industry. It also refers to art and intellectualism as a raw material for human development. Company stands for an entrepreneurial approach to artistic production as well as for a collaborative sense of togetherness (2014:17).

She adds that:

> It is very odd that a space as mythical as Dakar did not have a single formal space to address theoretical ideas around contemporary artistic production (2014:17).

The arrival of initiatives such as RAW and the others I have mentioned have added much needed attention to the artistic and pedagogical models utilised in the rethinking of Africa (Sheikh 2010: 63). These spaces have succeeded in bridging the divide between cultural discourse(s) and ordinary people, mobilising art to increase people's awareness of important debates unfolding in different parts of the continent and the world. The presence of independent art and cultural bodies in Africa has generated a change in cultural pedagogies and the perspectives from which they are approached. They have done so by challenging traditional formats and tinkering with the orthodox methods which they have found in their local contexts (Silva 2017: xxii).

RAW Material Company has gone on to make a significant impact in the African cultural landscape, but also abroad. Since 2011, the art space has hosted a biannual programme consisting of residencies that are open to writers, researchers and curators from all over the world. I myself am a product of this residency. I witnessed first-hand RAW's dynamic residency, exhibitionary platform, library and public programmes. It is certainly a space that revolves around artistic interventionism, knowledge and critical thinking.

> My interest in starting a space in Dakar in a very concrete way was to see how and what I could contribute to the production of art and the discussions about it in the setting of Dakar. I wanted to add to the city's cultural field what I thought was the need for analytical and theoretical conversation about art. This, in my opinion, was needed in order to translate, communicate and make accessible the power of art so that people can understand what art can do.

I would like to think that it is of importance that we see independent artistic and cultural spaces as contemporary descendants of the independent schools that came into existence in the 1950s and 1960s. It will do us and these spaces a service if we situate them along the long assembly line of alternative art initiatives on the continent, such as Poto Poto School (Congo Brazzaville), Shona art workshops (Zimbabwe), and the Mbari Mbayo Club (Nigeria) (Silva 2017: xvi). The trends have not changed much, as European intervention was prevalent in the founding and administration of these schools. Today, the majority of independent art and cultural entities are

Black-run but their working principles reflect the demands of their white European funders (Harney 2004: 7). However, no two independent art spaces are the same. There has been a clamour of resistance coming from Black cultural leaders going against this issue of European soft power on the continent.

The global interest in contemporary African art precipitated the emergence of contemporary art museums. The latter are a nascent phenomenon on the African continent, coming into existence in the last three decades after the advent of independent private museums (Hudson 1998). During the same time, there was a growing number of commercial galleries and public art museums in aesthetic theory (Duncan 1995). The appropriation of aesthetic theory into modes of contemporary art instigated shifts in the methods used to display art. Curators moved away from showing art in historic spaces to displaying it in neutral, non-interventional and sometimes post-industrial spaces (Suzuki 2008). These factors combined contributed to an upsurge in the building of museums and their consequent commercialisation (Lucie-Smith 2001: 7). The beginning of the 1990s saw the emergence of new museology, a discursive movement in curatorial practice that was based on the reappraisal of the functions and procedures of the classical museum as a means of leading to a greater understanding of the power of institutional representation (Kolb and Flückiger 2013: 10).

The commercialisation of art and the buildings in which it is kept has had a significant impact on the configuration of the contemporary museums sector. Zeitz MOCAA is the second museum of its kind to be built on the continent. The first was Morocco's MACAAL (The Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden), established in 2018. Since its establishment, the museum has been subject to heavy criticism for its supposed commercialistic museological practices, i.e. its art collection strategy; its institutional engagement with publics as well as the pertinence of the discursive scope of the curatorial exhibition-making and public programming — particularly, how these elements have failed to respond to urgent calls to reshape historical and contemporary currents of African and African-diasporic cultural production. In March 2019, Zeitz MOCAA appointed Kouoh as its new chief executive director. Before her appointment, the contemporary art museum, one of the first of its kind on the continent, was just coming out of a turbulent period of high instability since its establishment in 2017. The decision of the museum's board of directors to appoint her as the institution's new leader was seen as a bold and radical one.

> It was very hard. I had only just taken up my post in May 2019, having been appointed in March of that year, when I had to close in March 2020 and could only start reopening

> gradually from the end of October 2020 — four days a week instead of seven. I took over an institution that was already in crisis and a few months later another crisis came along (Kouoh 2022).

Upon taking up the position of the museum's chief curator, Koyo immediately set out to effect radical changes to decenter the European worldviews according to which this museum was built on (Hicks 2020: 4). She shifted the museum's curatorial programme from one that was heavily focused on group exhibitions to one which placed emphasis on monographic exhibitions of individual artists' bodies of work.

> Basically, I am orienting the museum towards individual exhibitions and retrospectives in order to write other pages in our art history. We must not forget that, for the last thirty years, contemporary African art has always been contextualised through group exhibitions. This allowed us Africans as well as the rest of the world to affirm the richness of this production. There was a need to play catch up and I participated as a curator. I intend to give priority to retrospectives dedicated to an artist or a collective in order to bring out the aesthetic genealogies, the intergenerational influences (Kouoh 2022).

One can surely understand Kouoh's thinking behind implementing this curatorial mandate upon assuming her position at the museum. Since the beginning of the 2000s, an overwhelming number of African artists' works have been placed within group shows, which have drowned out the aesthetic practices of these artists. Therefore, the decision to adopt the monographic approach was made with the intention to foreground the mastery of African artists' practices, as a way of showing that Africa has produced its own artistic masters. However, this curatorial strategy does come with the very clear risk of reinscribing the highly mediated European trope of the blockbuster exhibition which lauds singular artistic brilliance (Cooke 2006: 40). It is fundamentally the role of museums to mediate the subjects and objects of knowledge in a manner that facilitates the transference of knowledge whilst also mitigating the dangers of the European illusion of the sole artistic genius (Sheikh 2010: 65). This ideal of artistic embodiment, because of its genesis in European classical antiquity, has racialist underpinnings which may, in today's African artistic landscape, appear benign, but it is important that we are cautious of the unequal hierarchy that this artistic disposition can assert, especially in relation to highly capitalised cultural institutions such as Zeitz MOCAA (Bassene 2018: 197).

On the balance of things, since Kouoh joined Zeitz MOCAA in 2019, the museum has gone on to make significant transformations. In terms of its exhibitions programme, the museum has

staged impressive monographic exhibitions of some of our era's most influential contemporary African artists such as Otobong Nkanga, William Kentridge, Johannes Phokela and Tracey Rose. The museum has made a concerted effort to connect itself to its local constituency with the ground-breaking exhibition *Home Is Where The Art Is, 2020 - 2021*; a flagship project which has made a crucial contribution in this regard. For this exhibition, the museum invited members of the Western Cape public to submit to the museum the artwork they had in their homes, which would then be displayed inside the museum's galleries. The fact that this exhibition took place during the COVID-19 pandemic makes it an even greater feat than we might imagine. Zeitz MOCAA has also gone on to stage pioneering transnational group exhibitions such as *Indigo Waves 2021 - 2022* and *When We See Us 2022 - 2023*. The former is a research-based exhibition project which is a collaboration between several museum institutions on four continents, based on the subject of charting the Indian Ocean as a body of knowledge which holds the histories of so many cultures located along the Afrasian ocean. *When We See Us* is an ambitious project in which the museum has brought together a hundred years' worth of Black figurative painting from Africa and the African diaspora.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Kouoh boasts a practice that spans three decades, in which time she has worked across numerous geopolitical terrains, curatorial platforms, pedagogical mediums and collaborated with numerous artistic practitioners. My exposition of her curatorial biography certainly does not include many of the other projects on which she has worked since embarking on her first curatorial project in the early 1990s. However, from the projects I *have* discussed in this chapter, one can point out the curatorial strategies which have driven her approach. The most prominent of these is critical translation or mediation — since translating Margaret Busby's book *Daughters of Africa* into the German language, Kouoh's curatorial practice has become synonymous with publishing pedagogical material which has typically taken the form of edited books. In line with this, her practice of critical translation has not just materialised in the shape of books. Secondly, Kouoh has employed storytelling, not only as a discursive method, but also as a curatorial strategy. Kouoh is a big proponent of discourse, but not of the kind that is meant to alienate the audience. Instead, Kouoh organises symposia, public panels and lectures in order to create a space in which the theory behind African aesthetic traditions can be made accessible to a broader public. Thirdly, Kouoh's curatorial strategy is rooted in radical care. As the staunch feminist she is, since her very first project, Kouoh has made it her duty to improve

the lives and careers of Black-African women working in the cultural sphere. This is an endeavour to which she is still very much committed to this very day. Finally, and perhaps Kouoh's most important strategic contribution to the field of Black-African curatorial practice, is her profound capacity for institution-building. In a continent in which artists and cultural practitioners cannot solely rely on the support of institutions to sustain their careers, Kouoh has created a blueprint for cultural institution-building on the continent that has encouraged cultural practitioners to experiment with their own versions of institution-building on the continent of Africa (Panchia 2021: 2).

Chapter Four: Angazi but I'm sure

The mis-education of Gabi

Gabisile 'Gabi' Ngcobo's abiding relationship with art began in high school while a learner at Ogwini Comprehensive High[26] in Umlazi, the largest township in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. Ngcobo was formally introduced to art as a school subject in the tenth grade — standard eight, as it was referred to at the time. She was asked to choose one subject between the following three: Mathematics, Biblical Studies and Art. Whichever subject she selected, she would be required to study throughout her last two years of high school, and ultimately pass in the final school-leaving examination. Up until that point in her schooling, Mathematics had not been Ngcobo's strongest subject; she had attempted Biblical Studies for some months, however, the subject had failed to enthuse her. After this process of elimination, Ngcobo eventually settled on Art. In our interviews, Ngcobo and I did not explore any political reasons why Art became included in her school's curriculum, particularly during this period of the late-1980s. What we do know about the country's political history is that South Africa's education system at the height of the apartheid regime was designed to oppress Black people, and one of the ways in which it did so was to deprive Black subjects of an aesthetic education.

The Bantu Education system was introduced by the apostle of apartheid, Hendrik Verwoerd, who designed the education system to impede the development of Africans, who would then feel that their spiritual, economic and political home was outside of, or separate from, the civilised community of the country, explains Joe Slovo (1995: 76). This could explain why Ngcobo told me that, before her introduction to art in the tenth grade, she does not recall imagining that she would study Art as a subject at school — let alone conceive of herself pursuing it as a professional career after the completion of her formal education. Her attitude towards art was not because she was practically disinclined towards art-making nor because she lacked the imaginative capacity for it. All human beings are fundamentally imbued with the innate potential to create symbolic meaning out of their internal states and the external phenomena which they encounter. Whether these sensations result in what can be considered art is a matter of individual application as well as interpretation (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2013:

[26] Ogwini Comprehensive Technical High School is located at Umlazi, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, located south-west of Durban.

227). Nevertheless, Ngcobo opted to take up Art as a subject at school and studied it for the next two years under the tutelage of the school's art educator, Ms. Joyce N.K. Khoza.

Ngcobo stills recalls how Eurocentric the school's art curriculum was at the time. The Western secular education system, which has become adopted by most postcolonial African countries today, is structured in such a way that, from a young age, African youth are taught to view Europe as the centre of the world. This type of education causes us to base our implicit thoughts and values about the arts and the functions of artists on the grounds of dominant Eurocentric ideals (Gaztambide-Fernandez, Kraehe and Carpenter 2018: 2). Europe's cultural imperialism is deeply entrenched in the liberal education curriculum inculcated in African schools and Ngcobo's memories of learning about the Greco-Roman art epochs only underscore this point. In spite of the European curriculum, and not because of it, Ngcobo flourished at Art as a subject, and her love for it began to grow. She asserts that art was the first subject in which she was genuinely interested at school. In her two years of studying art, Ngcobo gradually developed the skill for painting. In 1990, while in her final year of high school, Ngcobo won the award for the best art learner at Ogwini Comprehensive. The European arts establishment connives to generate and sustain the myth of 'the special, creative individual artist' which psychologically instils within us a self-interested conception of elite human creativity (Willis 1990: 1 in Gaztambide-Fernandez 2013: 228).

Ngcobo was awarded a copy of Gavin Younge's book *Art of the South African Townships,* which was published in 1988, two years before the unbanning of political organisations in the country and the start of the talks to transition South Africa into a democratic society (Witz 2022: xi). Ngcobo has vivid memories of this time, mainly due to the socio-political events unfolding in the country during that period. In February 1990[27], Nelson Mandela was released from prison after serving a protracted sentence of twenty-seven years as a political prisoner detained by the oppressive apartheid state. Ngcobo remembers witnessing, on the day of his release, endless scenes on television and in the streets of Umlazi and the greater eThekwini area, of people toyi-toying[28] in celebration of this historical moment. Mandela's release from prison signified the beginning of a time of great hope and aspiration, especially for the masses which comprised

[27] On 2 February 1990, the State President of South Africa F. W. de Klerk delivered a speech at the opening of the 1990 session of the Parliament of South Africa in Cape Town in which he announced sweeping reforms that marked the beginning of the negotiated transition from apartheid to constitutional democracy. On 10 February 1990, De Klerk made a speech that Mandela will be released from prison and on 11 February 1990, Mandela was released from prison at lunch time.

[28] The Toyi-toyi is a South African dance used in political marches and protests. It involves a unified 'jogging' movement, the pumping of fists and the chanting of political songs and slogans.

South Africa's non-white population. Emboldened by the shifting socio-political currents in the country, Ngcobo made the decision to go to university but, perhaps more importantly, she decided to register to study Fine Art. Her parents expressed their misgivings about this choice, however, winning the art prize as a matriculant had demonstrated to them that she had the potential to succeed in the career.

Ngcobo initially submitted an application to study at Natal Tech, known today as the Durban University of Technology (DUT). She was invited by the institute's arts faculty to attend a selection interview, which she did, but was taken aback upon arrival when she realised that the interview would be conducted by a jury composed strictly of white men. One can understand why this may have hit her as an unpleasant shock because critical discourse informs us that white racial stereotypes contribute towards much of the structural inequality sedimented in our society (Gatzambide-Fernandez, Kraehe and Carpenter 2018: 4). Reinforcing this point, Ngcobo intimates that the jury concluded she would have to undertake a year-long preparatory course before she could be accepted into the university's Fine Art programme. The jury's supposed reason for this was that the Fine Art programme was quite onerous and therefore had doubts over whether Ngcobo could withstand the rigours of the course, especially with her being so young. Ngcobo claims she could not understand what the jury meant by this as she had performed well enough at school. Her school-leaving (or 'Matric') results clearly indicated that she was qualified to enter directly into the university's undergraduate programme. More than anything, the reservations of the jury members were a testament to the apartheid structural logic of South Africa's higher education institutions.

British feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2007: 157) argues that whiteness has a tendency to seek to institutionalise a certain kind of likeness which, for any subjectivities considered 'other' to this likeness, automatically causes a spatial discomfort. Acknowledging what was happening, Ngcobo decided to forgo her enrolment at Natal Tech and instead opted to make a late application to enrol at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW), which was one of the few universities that non-white people could attend during apartheid. Established in 1972, the University of Durban-Westville was initially established to address this very issue and catered primarily to the province's Indian citizenry. At the turn of the 1990s, the university's student population began to diversify and the arts program was one of the first departments that began to accept Black African people (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2013: 223). The fact that the university actively sought out students for its Fine Art degree points to the notion that the political gears had begun to shift in the fledgling nation-state. Ngcobo managed to study Fine Art at UDW, an

experience which she says exposed her heavily to Eastern art canons and philosophies. However, she describes the curriculum as otherwise conventional and quite conservative.

Notwithstanding, Ngcobo immersed herself in her studies and says that it began to occur to her at this time that she was not the best artist in her school, but claims that what made her stand out was her perspicacious painterly eye. Art has more to do with one's ability to see ordinary things in an extraordinary way rather than merely the act of making beautiful objects. Ngcobo's enthusiasm for art began to wane in her second year of study, and due to her disinterest for the curriculum she stopped attending her lectures. However, she did continue to work in her studio, but only in the evenings, so as to avoid being seen by her lecturers during the day. Her interest was revived again when Lalitha Jawahirial was appointed as the new painting teacher at UDW. Jawahirilal played a significant role in reviving Ngcobo's passion for art — the educator helped to unearth her hidden prowess as a painter. Midway through Ngcobo's undergraduate studies, South Africa as a country was also approaching an important milestone since the advent of apartheid in 1948 — the country's first democratic elections were on the horizon. In the background of these imminent changes, the country was wrestling with the political uncertainties that came with the looming transition. The KwaZulu-Natal province was a hotbed of ethno-political tensions as the turf war between the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the African National Congress (ANC) turned the province into a battleground. These macro-scale political skirmishes would eventually filter into the university as multiple student-led protests broke out over the duration of the academic year, causing a series of intermittent seizures to the academic programme.

Ngcobo participated in some of the political activities happening around her, particularly those protests taking place on campus. She claims that these events began shaping the subject of her art-making. Identitarian discourses featured significantly in contemporary African art in the '90s, and composed the thematic of the first Johannesburg Biennial that opened in February 1995. Conceived by Lorna Ferguson and Christopher Till, *Africus* (the name given to the first biennial in South Africa) had two broad themes: the first, titled "Volatile Alliances", explored issues of cultural difference and identity. The second thematic, titled "Decolonising Our Minds", encouraged investigations of colonialism on indigenous arts (Mdluli 2015). Ngcobo and her peers were very much in dialogue with the emergent trends in contemporary art, and as Black citizens of a South Africa undergoing rapid change, she and her peers were producing with the expectations that came with imminent political freedom. Former South African Supreme Court Judge and anti-apartheid political activist Albie Sachs published a controversial paper at the

beginning of the 1990s. Titled “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom”, the former judge called for a perceptual shift in the conceptual and aesthetic pursuits of the country’s artistic and cultural production (Sachs 1991). He suggested that there should be a five-year ban imposed on the phrase ‘culture as a weapon’, so as to encourage artists to shift their imaginations in accordance with the historic transition from oppression to democracy (Jamal 2005: 124).

Prior to Sach’s call, South African artists did not heed this call for aesthetic action. Ngcobo emphasises that Black South African artists were being very literal in their portrayal of their realities. Despite the literal quality of Black artistic production, it did not make the Black experience less of a non-communicable, non-universalisable and opaque ontology (Diagne 2018: 43). In her final year of university, Ngcobo met the late South African artist and curator David Koloane. Koloane was the external examiner for Fine Art at UDW, and the maestro passed Ngcobo with an A for her final examination. Clearly impressed by her artistry, Koloane and Ngcobo’s relationship evolved into that of mentor and mentee, lasting for two decades until his death in 2019. Ngcobo drifted away from her peers in art school, who went on to become teachers and pursued careers outside of art after the completion of their undergraduate degree. She is of the opinion that the reason for so many of her peers following other career paths is that not enough was done to inform Black students of other possible careers in the arts and cultural domain. The tacit assumption was then, and is still, to a large extent, that the arts are a form of white property and aesthetic inheritance (Gaztambide-Fernandez, Kraehe and Carpenter 2018: 9).

Emphasising this point, Ngcobo asserts that she did not even know what a curator was at this stage in her life, despite the fact that in the 1990s, the post-apartheid government was trying to address the inequalities in the country by trying to create a Black middle-class. Therefore, providing the nation’s non-white population with access to university education was crucial to achieving this goal, as university education is regarded as a vehicle to produce professionals who could obtain upward mobility in a class-stratified society (Gillespie and Naidoo 2019: 191). The fact that imagining a curatorial pathway in her career was a distant reality for Ngcobo at this stage in her life may indicate that the curriculum at UDW had not yet evolved. This issue has carried over into South Africa’s post-apartheid era, where art graduates from historically Black universities leave school with very little sense of direction with regards to what to do next. Art graduates from historically white universities such as the Michaelis School of Fine Arts at the University of Cape Town are more likely to have a successful career as artists or art professionals than those from any other art school in the country. This is, of course, an outcome

of the structural racism embedded in South African institutions since apartheid which has changed very little since the latter's demise as a political system (Bonilla-Silva 2014 in Gaztambide-Fernandez 2018: 6).

Sociologist Jacklyn Cock (2013 in Gurney 2022: 33), drawing on the work of Rob Nixon (2013), refers to this deep-seated infrastructural violence as slow violence, due to the manner in which it replicates the injustices of the past in the present and causes destruction slowly over an extended period of time. These invisible mechanisms are imposed to discourage Black students from pursuing careers in the arts and other historically white professional fields. With the career trajectories of Ngcobo and her peers taking varying paths, she gradually became isolated from like-minded people. In the months to follow, Ngcobo met Durban-born painter Zamani Makhanya, an encounter she asserts had a transformative impact on her life. Makhanya was several years her senior but the two struck a harmonious chord. Ngcobo would frequent the Durban University of Technology campus to attend the events Makhanya and his peers hosted in the art department. This is where she encountered people such as Khwezi Gule and Thando Mama, individuals who have gone on to establish themselves as leading voices in the art and cultural space of post-apartheid South Africa. To be closer to the activity, Ngcobo relocated from Umlazi township and moved into a hipster commune situated in a student-occupied part of Durban. Upon taking up residence in the house, Ngcobo conspired with Makhanya to turn the commune into an art space. In appropriating this private space and turning it into a common space for the practice of cultural activities, Ngcobo and Makhyana were responding to their alienation from the flows of the formal art terrain (Mouffe 2008: 208). They had the awareness that they could create better opportunities for themselves if they worked together. Between the two of them, the pair did not know one artist of colour who had finished art school and gone on to sign onto a major gallery, locally or internationally.

They called themselves 'THIRD EYE VISION' and Ngcobo remembers the sheer size of the turnout — especially of Black audiences at the launch of the art space, which attracted so much attention that she and her collaborators were interviewed by a local news outlet. 'THIRD EYE VISION' held their activities in a house situated on Cradock Avenue which, very quickly after its opening as an artistic space, developed into a gathering place for Black youth who were either involved or harboured an interest in the arts. The space made an indent in the city's dormant art eco-system, and Ngcobo shares that before their collective entered the picture, Durban's art eco-system revolved around the activities of formal institutions like DUT, the University of KwaZulu-Natal and KwaZulu-Natal National Art Gallery (KZNSA). The dominance of these

established institutions marginalised everyone else who was not connected to them. ‘THIRD EYE VISION’s introduction into the space created an alternative route for local artists to showcase their work. This is where Ngcobo’s passion for organising unifying cultural events began. She wryly remarks that, at the time, she never considered including these events in her curriculum vitae because the political or economic impact of these activities was not premeditated — they were, in some measure, a by-product of her youthful reliance on the contingent and the act of doing as a way of arriving at, or creating, meaning.

Ngcobo recalls something that Black South African art historian and curator Theminkosi Goniwe once said to her. Underlining the urgency for Black cultural producers to claim space in the white art world, Goniwe urged that Black people should begin finding names for the activities that they undertake or risk losing them. While fundamentally in agreement with Goniwe, Ngcobo says she has an ambivalent relationship toward this practice of labelling all the activities she conducts as curatorial practice. She admits that there are moments when the nature of her work takes on a curatorial quality and there are times when it does not. Therefore, she prefers not to claim everything that she does as curatorially motivated. Ngcobo’s position on this matter demonstrates that, as broad a discursive and creative category as curatorial practice is today, it is not not an all-encompassing discipline for other variations of cultural practice that continue to exist out there. Ngcobo’s relationship with curatorial practice demonstrates that she prefers to inhabit a terrain which enables her to productively shift and assume different forms in the articulation of her cultural practice. It is important for contemporary African curatorial practitioners not to constrict themselves to the inherited frameworks of this practice. Constructions such as the white cube and art collections are not of our own creation and definition. Ngcobo encourages African curatorial practitioners to constantly rethink these models and the principles that undergird them.

What I have attempted to do in the introduction of this chapter through the use of elements of Critical Race Theory, is to demonstrate the cosmological lines of what Martinican writer Édouard Glissant (1991) refers to as kinship, which has been fundamental to Ngcobo’s continuous engagement with the arts since her introduction to the field as a school subject as a Grade Ten learner at Ogwini Comprehensive High School. Furthermore, components of what Black studies scholar Orlando Patterson (1982) calls ‘fictive kinship bonds’ run through this period of her life. These fictive bonds become significant in that one constructs them in relation to others in order to survive in a social system which relegates them to the subject position of a minority. These ties become even more important in a social structure such as the art-world which continues to

extract and exploit Black bodies in the pursuit of its racialist and capitalistic ideals. I have tried to show how Ngcobo has consciously and subconsciously adopted these sensibilities and entrenched them as core intra-and-interpersonal modalities of her own curatorial practice. Perhaps, this is why Ngcobo has formulated a curatorial practice grounded in the principles of co-production and knowledge and used this modality as a discursive and creative lynchpin to enrich the work that she does.

Organised ways of undoing: an inquiry into an extended form of curatorial practice

In a lecture titled “Working with the Unknown" or “Angazi, But I’m Sure”, presented at Monash University in Australia in 2018, Ngcobo starts off her presentation by sketching out the conceptual framework of the Centre for Historical Re-enactments (CHR), the art collective she co-founded in 2010 with South African artists Kemang Wa Lehulere, Donna Kukama, Dineo Seshee Bopape and Iranian-American curator Sohrab Mohebbi, with whom Ngcobo first conceptualised the project as students at Bard College in New York. Addressing the attendant crowd, Ngcobo set out the following as the collective’s conceptual point of departure:

> So I submitted this title: “Working with the Unknown” and then now I have an alternative kind of title and it’s “Angazi, But I'm Sure”. And this is something that South Africans say, when you ask for directions or when an event is starting, someone will say: “Angazi, but I'm sure" which means: “I don't know, but I'm sure”. And to say I don't know, but I'm sure may seem strange and contradictory, but it's within this contradiction that we can allow for a space for the speculative or for imagination to be free.
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> When I was very, very young in 1997, when the Johannesburg Biennale took place for the second and last time in Johannesburg, we travelled with my university from Durban to Johannesburg to find that the Johannesburg Biennale had been prematurely closed. So it's one of these events that I did not see and one that is engraved in a lot of people's minds and experiences, especially a particular generation who were in Johannesburg in 1997 that I tend to meet in many parts of the world and they always asked me about Johannesburg or the biennale itself. So it's one event that I kind of have lived with its memory without having experienced.
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> Now defunct, the Johannesburg Biennale which is like a cloud or is a phantom pain in the country's art scene became a witness to the city's spatial challenges in the early stages immediately after the official end of apartheid. Held for the first time in 1995, the biennale

> was set as South Africa's re-entry into the international discourse, discourses of contemporary art. The discontinuity of the Johannesburg Biennale held '95 and '97 respectively generated a social memory and an official archive, from which we as CHR (Centre for Historical Reenactments) foregrounded ways of considering what the biennale represented both in South Africa and internationally, and where its memory resides presently (Ngcobo 2018).

Ngcobo spends a large portion of the lecture discussing the scope of activities upon which the collective has embarked. She also points out that the word 'historical' in the collective's name infers a speculative and critical approach to problematising established historical episodes. The art collective's work shows a particular investment in South African history, but with a focus on the nation's entanglement with imperial and colonial legacies. CHR's ambit of cultural activities consists of a composite of artistic and curatorial interventions, mainly into public space, in which they adopt an interesting approach to connecting site-specificity with notions of historical temporality. In many of the CHR's projects, one will find the components of history and meaning-making to be the animating thrust at the core of the collective's undertakings. In these activities, the CHR was not merely asking us to rethink our histories in relation to the places that define them, but they also offer an added means of interrogating hegemonic modes of historical production, through intervening into the discursive regimes which these processes are constituted around.

Re-enactment is a strategy that the CHR used to revive these political issues in the present. By doing so, they brought new ideas and questions to understanding historical occurrences in the present. A great example of how the CHR utilised the strategy of reenactment is an exhibition curated by Ngcobo in 2010 called *PASS-AGES: References & Footnotes*. This exhibition was the collective's inaugural project together and featured works from its members and offerings from members outside of the ensemble such as Zanele Muholi and Mary Sibande (two artists who have gone on to entrench themselves as mainstays in the South African contemporary art scene). The exhibition's title is an allusion to the apartheid regime's excessively harsh pass-law system and probes into the contemporary consequences imposed on South African society by the personal and social violations caused by this extreme law (Crayshaw-Hall 2020).

Speaking to Bertie Ferdman via Skype in an interview conducted for a publication titled *Curating dramaturgies: how dramaturgy and curating are intersecting in the contemporary arts*, published in 2020, Ngcobo had this to say about the genesis of the exhibition:

> Yes, it was produced just one time. I had just come back from New York and was approached by the Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism (JWTC) to do a curatorial project. I said if they can find this space for me, which was a former Pass Office — so this is where black people had to go to get permission to be in the city, to work in the city, and it had to be signed by their white employee that they had a right to be in the city, and if you were found without this passbook, you would be deported to the homelands from the city. In Johannesburg, that office was the Pass Office, where this kind of activity took place. I was quite interested in that history but also in its present because now it is a shelter for women and children, most of whom are homeless. They are destitute or they have crossed the border to come to South Africa and they don't have any kind of accommodation. In this shelter, there is a basement which was in use, where the piece *PASS-AGES* took place. I wanted to work with artists but not necessarily to exhibit works, but to show the research processes, the things that are in their studios that would never see an exhibition, which are important for their thinking practice.

This project perfectly encapsulates the ideological interests and methodological approaches typically adopted by the collective in their activities. But, more importantly, it evinces fascinating details related to Ngcobo's curatorial thinking, specifically at this time when she had just returned to South Africa after completing her Master's degree at Bard College. In the same interview, referring to other large-scale exhibitions she undertook after the CHR's dissolution — namely the 10th Berlin Biennial and the 32nd Sao Paulo Biennial — Ngcobo said this in relation to the topics of audience and the power dynamics latent in discourse, particularly how these components structure her curatorial practice:

> It is important to know who you are talking to or who you are addressing with your initiatives. In the context of South Africa, which has a particular history, also within Africa, it means that we are always somehow addressing the West or responding to what the West is doing. I prefer a conversation that is much more global. Not to say: "they are the West, and this is what I am doing".

Ngcobo's distinctly curatorial approach to historical inquiry is summed up in an interview with Katarina Bruch (2017) wherein she underlines the need for us to re-examine the narratives we have inherited from past generations which tell us about our own histories. She goes on to say that we must pay close attention to which positionalities have and have not been exalted in (and by) these accounts. Scholars such as Premesh Lalu (2009: 7) via John Mowitt (1992), have, in their scholarly writings, attempted to elucidate how history — and more so its crystallised form, the archive — works as an apparatus to produce forms of human subjection. This is a

provocation I believe resonates strongly with the artistic and curatorial excavations of the CHR into grand historical narratives, which the collective has sought to dismantle and recompose. Towards the end of this chapter, I return to these ideas pertaining to history and the contemporary moment. I briefly tease out how these conceptual nodes reemerge in Ngcobo's most recent curatorial projects. But before I arrive there, I would like to put forward a discussion in which I chart an integral aspect that has come to define Ngcobo's curatorial approach. The approach I refer to, specifically, is the conscious political act of organising cultural activity in the art domain, which I perceive to evince her collectivist approach to merging artistic practice with political engagement. I consider this a central pillar of Ngcobo's curatorial practice and in the following section I plot the origins of artistic collectivising inside a historical contextual landscape featuring other resonances of this activity which have occurred in South Africa and the African continent at large.

Artistic autonomies on the African continent: a contextual landscape

Artistic collectives are typically formed by a group of artists who come together around an initial binding condition or problem which members decide to address collectively (Davies, Dillemuth and Jakobsen 2013: 34). They are often connected to decentered and heterogeneous social cartographies — artistic collectives introduced a cultural labour model that, at the start of the 1970s, became appropriated into Post-Fordist economic systems (Bishop 2012: 12). Africa is home to some of the most ground-breaking avant-garde artistic formations to emerge in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Senegalese art collective Laboratoire Agit Art (LAA) is one of the oldest independent artistic formations and the pioneer of many avant-garde cultural movements in sub-Saharan Africa. Established in 1974 by Youssouf John in Dakar as an improvisational artistic library situated in the heart of the capital city of the West African country, the formation came as a retort to Senghorian assimilationist cultural policies which the collective claimed were geared towards institutionalising the arts. LAA were against the Senghor administration's efforts to absorb the arts into the institutional framework of the state, as the collective believed this would lead to the obstruction of artistic freedom (Harney 2004: 106).

LAA fought hard against government control of the arts and were also publicly sceptical of the instrumentalisation of Négritude philosophy towards these ends. They believed that unhindered collaborative engagement and artistic exchange were the main vectors that would bolster the growth of Senegal's post-independence cultural sphere. Art in its ontological dimension requires

a condition of autonomy in order to access and achieve an order of possibility that can trigger social change (Bishop 2012: 27). The collective battled to distance art from the Senegalese state apparatus for these very reasons, and their internal orientation to the question of artistic autonomy enabled them to bring novel aesthetic styles to the nation's cultural scene. The freedom with which the collective had made it possible for its members to experiment opened up different mediums and models, such as public art and theatre-making. It also made it possible for the group to play with new unorthodox materials and collaborate, improvise and produce culture across disciplinary platforms, such as creating elaborate art installations with objects found on the streets of Dakar. This embracing of artistic, creative and cultural confluences cultivated by the LAA engendered productive conditions for new artistic aesthetic grammars and cultural models to emerge.

On the other side of the African continent, LAA had an artistic contemporary that emerged from the modernist Khartoum Art School in the late -1960s and '70s in Sudan. Similar to LAA, the Crystallist Group deviated significantly from the aesthetic norms and moors embedded in the artistic trends arising from that era. However, the Crystallist Group differed ideologically from the Dakar collective, who were known to have been opposed to the infusion of modernist elements in the aesthetic conceits of indigenous art-making traditions in Senegal. Crystallist members embraced the notion of cultural hybridity, both as a reality of the present and also as a cultural aesthetic. The group was heavily influenced by European ideals, which reflected in their artistic and literary outputs. African conceptualism and feminism-steeped artistic and cultural practices were relatively uncommon during that period. The Crystallist Group and LAA were the main purveyors of these ideals and the aesthetic traditions spawned from their impact foregrounded the contemporary African field of cultural production. These formations demonstrate the necessity for forces that oppose the dominant narrative in any cultural ecology. In the realm of the arts, avant-garde formations have a responsibility to resist homogeneity and invent new sensible forms and material structures that can offer constructive alternatives capable of driving society forward (Ranciere 2004: 29).

Throughout Ngcobo's career as a cultural practitioner, the principles of collaboration and interdisciplinary participation have been key modalities which she has used in the articulation of her practice. When she began teaching at the Wits School of Arts in Johannesburg in the early part of the previous decade, Ngcobo claims she would urge her students to collectivise. Ngcobo tried her best to educate the students on the multifaceted advantages of producing culture collectively provided to the individual and the collective. This was her way of pushing back

against the neoliberal framing of artistic production as a process undertaken by an individual in isolation and not in community with others. The latter is a clearly Euro-modernist vision of art-making which, in its discursive and practical formulation, does not account for the sociopolitical conditions in which Black art is produced. This would explain why Black art is partial to avant-garde movements which have historically distorted the European figure of the sole artistic producer. Avant-garde artistic formations have attempted to reconnect the politico-ideological motives attached to this figure of the sole producer to broader social and political agendas (Bradley and Da Silva 2021; Ranciere 2004: 29).

Staying with the interview conducted with Ferdman cited above, Ngcobo had this to say about the ways in which the principles of self-organising and collaboration figure in the make-up of her curatorial approach and conceptualisation thereof:

> I am most interested in self-organised practices and so, for the longest times, I have been in collectives or kind of a collective movement. Collaboration for me is important; it is integral because I don't believe in working alone. There is always the need to bounce off and to think with others. As an educator, this is something that I also try to influence on students. I can see how it changes the artistic landscape when people work together. More things can happen or more self-organised initiatives tend to take place which means that, in the context of South Africa, we don't have to rely so much on commissioned galleries, which I would say are more powerful than museums because museums often do not have money or funding (Ngcobo in Eckersall and Ferdman 2018).

The political and ideological motives undergirding the ontological foundations of autonomous artistic formations are constantly in direct opposition to the neoliberalising art-world's capitalist imperatives. Walter Benjamin (1970: 88) considers the formation of a collective to be a reactionary principle, and this, he explains, is why collectives can never be revolutionary. When it comes to the field of aesthetics, artistic collectives are known to function in a way that seeks to dematerialise artistic production by placing emphasis on the social process and relational exchanges to render the transaction between producers and consumers indivisible (Bishop 2012: 22). This complicates modernism's idealisation of the artwork as a unique object of individual creativity (Aronowicz 2016: 45). The threat that art collectives externally pose to the neoliberal art establishment is their inherently fluid quality which, if left unchecked, is able to reconfigure socio-economic and political relationships within the art-world (Benjamin 1970: 85). In the backdrop of the neoliberalisation of the African cultural landscape in the 1970s and

1980s, Black people in Southern Africa were fighting for their liberation from the oppression they faced in their own lands at the hands of white-settlers and colonists.

Medu Art Ensemble, a collective that emerged during a time in Africa's history when the cultural landscape on the continent was commercialising and self-interest in the ecosystem was beginning to take root, was very much a politically engaged artistic ensemble and deemed itself to represent the authentic values of artists and artistic production. The words of Thamsanqa Mnyele — in a speech delivered at the Culture and Resistance Festival in Gaborone in 1982 — sum up the group's ideology when it came to the role of art in human society:

> It was in the Medu Art Ensemble where the role of an artist concretized itself: the role of an artist is to learn; the role of an artist is to teach others; the role of an artist is to ceaselessly search for the ways and means of achieving freedom. Art cannot overthrow a government, but it can inspire change (Mnyele 1982 in Peffer 2009: 140).

Mnyele made these comments during a period in Southern African history in which culture was instrumentalised to foment processes of political resistance and essentially became another channel to wage resistance against settler apartheid. Meanwhile, during the same time — but in another part of the world — new global artistic visions were being shaped in the form of the Triangle Workshop. The Triangle Workshop was founded in 1982 in New York by British sculptor Anthony Caro and art patron Robert Loder. The duo conceived of a workshop concept whose purpose would specifically be to provide space for artists to practise their art in community with other artists. They saw this as a way of stimulating ideas and cultural exchange between artistic producers from different social, cultural and historical backgrounds (Aronowicz 2016: 16). The workshops were created to function as contact zones for artists whose aesthetic practices could cross-pollinate in a dynamic setting and also possibly engender unprecedented hybridised aesthetic formulations. As the wave of globalisation gathered steam in the late-1970s and 1980s, these workshops served as microcosms of the global artistic trends which were fast on the horizon. Cultural discourses loosely based on the notions of multiculturalism and internationalism were also on the uptick during this time. These discursive patterns, produced in cultural discourses, were artistically being experimented with in these workshop heterotopias.

Clifford Geertz (1976 in Aronowicz 2016: 54) forecast the phenomenon of translocal exchange such as the one Triangle Workshop represented which oftentimes takes place inside porous transnational formats. Geertz theorised the notion of translocal reciprocity to explain why he

believed the concepts of the 'local' or 'global' should not be restricted solely to their geopolitical understandings. He preferred that we envision these ideals as also characterising the socio-aesthetic dimensions used by artists — especially those exposed to such transnational formats — to configure their relationship with systems of production that are conversant with local and global discourses. Prior to the advent of these workshops, a majority of Black artists in South Africa and Africa had been starved of platforms which encouraged them to work in such hybrid ways. Artistic workshops were a space for collective thinking, meaning-making and coexistence and were a microcosm of global and local realities. It is not a coincidence that the Triangle Workshop's first international visitors and participants were the venerated South African artist duo of Bill Ainslie and David Koloane, the latter of whom Ngcobo mentions as an important mentor-like figure in her life.

The portal of the late South African artistic maestro and pioneering curator into the workshop is intertwined with the beginnings of one of the first manifestations of artistic unionising in South Africa — the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA). A self-organised Black community initiative, FUBA was one of the only Black-run artistic organisations in existence at the time. According to author John Peffer (2009: 139), FUBA materialised from a conversation between the leaders of township-situated cultural organisations, namely the Market Theatre and the African Music and Drama Association, at both of the helms of which Bill Ainslie sat. Ainslie, in discussion with both of these parties, envisaged plans for an interdisciplinary school and when 1978 came around, the merger of these parties was finalised. FUBA was born from this conversation and Sipho Sepamla was sworn in as the organisation's first director. David Koloane became one of South Africa's first Black curatorial practitioners when, in the 1980s, FUBA was bestowed with an art collection courtesy of Anthony Caro. Caro decided to assemble the collection following a visit to South Africa during which he was taken aback by the flagrant disparities he saw between white and Black cultural institutions. The purpose of the collection was for it to serve as a fundraising tool and as a nucleus for the FUBA Gallery (Aronowicz 2016: 108).

Koloane was earmarked to be the custodian and curator of the FUBA collection, and so was sent to London for a year to enrol in a museum studies programme. However, due to internal disputes, Koloane never came to fill the position of curator of the FUBA collection. Instead he was appointed facilitator of the visual component that was part of the seminal political event which occurred in Gaborone, Botswana, in 1982, during the Culture and Resistance Festival. Upon Koloane's and Ainslie's return from the International Triangle Workshop in the mid-1980s,

the duo initiated a local model of the international workshop. The pair hoped that it would foster a sense of community amongst South African artists, in addition to imparting valuable technical skills to Black artists. This South African alternative of the Triangle Workshops was called Thupelo[29] Art Projects. The Thupelo workshops emerged during a time when the work of South African artists was attempting to break from stereotypic formats and was adapting to an expressionist style, largely inspired by fledgling trends in the United States of America. Black artists' experimentations with non-figurative work came under enormous scrutiny, especially in the aftermath of the Culture and Resistance Festival.

A key resolution was made during the 1982 gathering, namely that the domains of arts and culture had to play a more fundamental role in the South African anti-apartheid movement (Peffer 2009: 129). The abstract expressionist aesthetic that emanated from the Thupelo workshop was lambasted by proponents of the 'culture as a weapon' school for being too apolitical and therefore disadvantageous to the struggle being waged against apartheid. Beginning in Rustenburg in 1985 (and ongoing to this day), the Thupelo workshops have been a groundbreaking venture and are perceived to have revolutionised the aesthetic path of South African artistic visual production (Peffer 2009: 139). The informality of the environment facilitated for a process of non-transactional collective learning, and through its enablement of cross-cultural encounter, the Thupelo workshops followed in the footsteps of its historic predecessors: community centres such as Polly Street Art Centre, The Community Arts Project (CAP), Rorke's Drift Arts and Craft Centre, FUBA, the Johannesburg Art Foundation and the Culture and Working Life Project (CWLP — a South African artistic union founded in Durban in 1983) (Aronowicz 2016: 111).

It is evident from the historical layout sketched above that the phenomenon of artistic collectivising and cultural self-organisation have long and storied roots in the African continent. Self-organising amongst cultural practitioners, as I have indicated, is a strategy that typically arises out of the need to rebel against powerful, repressive and seemingly outdated social codes. Criticisms that have emerged about these counter-cultural artistic movements usually accuse these currents of being reactive and not active, presupposing that these agents struggle to cede their pathological attachment to oppressive systems and therefore remain constrained to the instinct of the unfree slave (Jamal 2005: 3). This is a point which I not only understand, but with which I agree with to some degree — it has not been abundantly clear thus far how

[29] Thupelo is a Sesotho word meaning to teach by example.

these seemingly autonomous artistic forces come into being without the existence of a contrapuntal force against which to resist (Aronowicz 2016: 53).

Perhaps the issue could lie with how acts of collective self-organisation have been politically historicised. Expressions of this political artistic paradigm are tethered to Marxist political ideological frameworks which have aptly upheld the phenomenon as a revolutionary strategy, however, ultimately tie these gestures to a historic/ideological dialectic that is almost impossible to surmount or escape. I would, however, like to emphasise what I believe are some of the pivotal contributions of these autonomous artistic and cultural formations. Firstly, they generate rich conditions for processes of invention and innovation to take place within the art and cultural landscape, as one order of possibility (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: xxiii). Secondly, artistic collectives demonstrate the continued necessity for us to defy the institutional and commercial constraints which the neoliberal mechanisms in the cultural landscape utilise to exercise control on human creative autonomy (Blamely 2013: 11). Thirdly, autonomous art formations offer us constructive alternatives to the working conditions entrenched by formal institutions — a very significant working modality associated with artistic collectives is their experimentations with working according to non-hierarchical organisational models. This paradigm of cultural practice alone contradicts the centralised and vertically organised structures which are often implemented by formal institutions within the cultural landscape.

In the years subsequent to the dissolution of CHR, Ngcobo proceeded to found another artistic and curatorial ensemble, whose title is an ironic reference to the perilous failures of self-organisation in the South African cultural landscape. The name of this project is Nothing Gets Organised. NGO was founded by Ngcobo in collaboration with a core of Johannesburg-based curatorial and visual practitioners, namely Dineo Seshee Bopape and Sinethemba Twalo. The curatorial formation's mission statement states clearly the objectives of its activities: "exploring an interest in un/conventional processes of self-organising — those that do not imply structure, tangibility, context or form. It is a space for (NON)SENSE where (NON)SENSE can profoundly gesticulate towards, dislodge, embrace, disavow, or exist as nothingness!" (McMichael 2015). This most recent articulation of Ngcobo's collective curatorial pursuits still bears resounding significance to the foundational elements present in the constitution of alternative formations which she founded prior to this one, and also the ones which came before her. Moreover, I believe drawing out this overarching picture of histories of the genre's artistic collectivising on the continent enables one to appreciate the cultural and artistic genealogies in which Ngcobo's own curatorial approach — specifically as it relates to the

acts of organising and collectivising as liberatory cultural strategies in the arts sphere — can be located.

Narrative strategies in two of Ngcobo's recent curatorial projects

Cultural scholar and literary critic John Mowitt (1992: 17) adduces that discourse is a disciplinary object, in much the same way as any other paradigm used in the realm of cultural studies to design, legitimate and conduct research. This entails that the theories and ideological tools with which artists and scholars work are framed with differing sets of discursive practices which can be brought together to construct or conform to a certain narrative structure or discursive standard. The same can be said for the construction of ideologies around the invented onto-epistemological categories related to Blackness, in disciplines concerned with social and historical inquiry which have been the subject of racist discourses. This condition was discursively produced in the early twentieth century by white imperial supremacists who sought to imagine themselves as hierarchically superior (Scott 2004: 79; Gatzambide-Fernandez Kraehe and Carpenter 2018: 4). Blackness as an epistemological category and ontological condition has, as a result, become inscribed against the backdrop of discourses in which it is perpetually in an inferior discursive mode and position (Moten 2008: 177).

This consciousness is pervasive in contemporary humanities and social science studies. Its origins can be traced back from the late-1900s to the early twentieth-century Western scientific and humanities scholarship discourses about African cultures. These records also demonstrate, and rightly so, that African cultures are cultures of resistance and that African cultural subjectivities are those formed under conditions of oppression. Oppression, as history will tell us, has taken multiple forms, from the plantation system in North America to the Caribbean, where Creole subjectivities emerged. There is also the colonial and settler-colonial variation of white domination which governed the temporality of the everyday lives of people on the African continent. Subjugated Black subjects, whether in the plantations of Haiti or in the concentration camps called townships (locations or slums in Africa), somehow formulated the means to launch anti-imperial and anti-colonial reprisals against systems of white oppression. These are important histories to document and historicise, and their significance to the formation of Black subjectivity subsequent to this is paramount. These histories are crucial to remind us of the violent modes in which historical consciousness has been produced, however the risk of

dwelling on this too much is that they ensnare narratives of emergent discourses inside an unproductive and redemptive logic.

In 2018, Ngcobo led a team of co-curators, consisting of cultural practitioners Nomaduma Rosa Masilela, Serubiri Moses, Thiago De Paula Souza and Yvette Mutumba in curating the 10th Berlin Biennale in Germany. The title of the large-scale art event was “Dear History, We Don’t Need Another Hero”. In choosing this title, I argue that Ngcobo and her curatorial team in effect made two movements: on the one hand, the first part of the title references the mythical figure of the tragic ‘hero’ in Greek mythology. I speculate that in titling the bienniale "Dear History, We Don’t Need Another Hero”, the collective speaks to the necessity to dislocate the proverbial figure of the hero in Greek tragedy that Scott (2004) states as describing the teleological condition of radical Black subjectivities in white European discourse. Ngcobo and her team of collaborators problematise the hegemony of hetero-patriarchal European discourse, which has become fundamental to the construction of human subjectivities. I argue that the collective made use of the curatorial, not just in the semantics of the title alone, but in its conceptual framework; to push the boundaries of this dominant humanist discourse beyond the limits it has become entangled (Lalu 2016: 223–224).

Referring to the lecture she gave to the crowd at Monash University, Ngcobo speaks about the collective’s approach to curating a biennial in a German-European context, claiming that the ensemble were interested in the post-liberation euphoria that had circulated around the world and wanted to understand its resonances in the local Berlin art scene where the Bienniale took place. The collective thought of the Bienniale as something that could be an analytic tool to read the contemporary moment. Ngcobo is quoted in various journalistic and scholarly pieces speaking about the importance of unlearning history. She discusses this position and prompts us to think about the possibilities of reconstructing new ways of knowing which could be justified by subversive processes of undoing. Addressing a question posed to her about this thematic in her Bienniale, Ngcobo notes the following regarding her team’s curatorial agenda:

> I think of the curator’s role as a way of undoing. We exist in this society where a lot has to be undone, and in Berlin we tried by all means to not use the term ‘decolonisation’ or ‘post-colonial’. If you read what we wrote or what we said you won’t find decolonisation or post-colonial but if you read what other people have written, they would immediately use those terms. And we are trying to move away from these terms not because we are not doing that, but because it becomes so easy for people to say “oh that is decolonial” without really understanding what it is (Ngcobo 2018).

As she states in the quote above, the curatorial collective were intent on decentering Western models of discourse, opting instead for what Stuart Hall (2005: 2) terms a more transcultural and translative perspective on cultural practice and production. The artistic direction of the 10th Berlin Bienniale took on institutional spaces and established knowledge circuits which validated canons of critical cultural thought in the contemporary mainstream. Because Berlin is a diasporic and multicultural city, it became necessary for the event to have international significance. The all-Black African and diasporic curatorial team refused to be limited by national boundaries, and instead insisted on a horizontal, fugitive and transnational viewpoint (Hall 2005). This approach created room for other pertinent issues in contemporary cultural politics, such as LGBTQIA-related issues, to enter into the arena of social discourse. The physical catalogue produced for the event encapsulates the problem space through which the exhibition and Ngcobo continuously try to think in her curatorial praxis.

The contemporary moment is a contradictory space and Ngcobo wanted to capture this essence in the choice of design behind the 10th Berlin Bienniale catalogue, specifically the decision to make it pink and grey in colour. The colour pink is associated with the future or is meant to allude to futuristic ideals. Ngcobo, in fact, in a previous interventionist project titled *Nakurandza* (conducted with the CHR), utilises the object of a pink elephant situated on top of a liquor store located in Doornfontein, Johannesburg, to speak to some of these ideas around futurism and the re-imaginations thereof (Ngcobo 2018). The grey used in the cover represents the past or the idea of history and she often speaks of the concept of history as one that is contradictory, uncertain and something that can, and perhaps should, be fictionalised in the present. By bringing the past and the future together in the form of a curatorial and artistic provocation in the contemporary moment, the collective dug at the roots of the modern consciousness of the Bienniale's time — an attempt that is not easy to understand, particularly because of the present moment being a space-time engorged with historical contradictions (Hall 2005: 4). Here, Ngcobo speaks again about how her curatorial offering in Berlin sought to address these concerns:

> Also, we don't believe that it is a duty of certain people and not of others. It is humanity's duty. Because we are black immediately people thought that we are going to fix everything — that we're going to decolonize the shit out of Berlin! So, we were like "no, there is a mess. It's our mess and we all have to do it." It was a way of distributing responsibility (Ngcobo 2020: 161)

Around September 2019, I found myself in Johannesburg, staying at a backpackers in the grimy post-industrial artistic district of Maboneng. I had barely scored the lodgings from a friend of a friend I met in Dakar. I recall this memory of myself in Johannesburg because of one early spring day meeting I had with Ngcobo at her apartment in Parktown. The plan was to travel with her to the Javett Art Centre in Pretoria, where she had just opened her controversial exhibition *All In A Day's Eye*. I had met Ngcobo for the first time earlier that year in Dakar — she had been one of the international curators invited to share their curatorial practices with the cohort at the RAW Material residency. The feeling in the air on that morning was of excitement on my part, as the Uber driver dropped me off outside of her apartment. I called Ngcobo to let her know I had arrived and she opened the downstairs door and invited me in. What was going through my mind during this time as I entered the elevator was that I should remember to ask her the right questions, remember to observe and take notes — the usual stuff that we are taught to think about and do when we anthropologists enter the field.

The elevator stopped on the sixth floor and I walked out. As I looked around, taking in my surroundings, I could not help but feel enamoured with the relaxed pace of the leafy semi-suburban area of Parktown. I walked down the winding passageway on the sixth floor, taking note of the numbers on each door I passed until I found the one corresponding with Ngcobo's apartment. Her door was three-quarters open. She was speaking to someone on the phone but was obviously expecting me. She gestured to me with her hand to come in. I could hear by the tone of her voice and the tenor of the conversation that she was in mild distress. Ngcobo told the person that she had to go as I had arrived and that we were due to depart for Pretoria together. When she got off the phone, she and I exchanged pleasantries and she offered me some water. I gladly accepted. Ngcobo, who was standing in the kitchen at the time, turned to the sink and withdrew a glass from the rack to pour me some water. Once I had finished my drink we went downstairs to her car. It was an old blue Hyundai i10 that she said she was renting from a friend. Hopping into the vehicle, we set off to Pretoria. It was not long until we had joined the N1, headed for the country's capital, when Ngcobos phone began to ring — an incoming call from one of the curatorial assistants at Javett Art Centre. While it was not my intention to eavesdrop, as the Setswana saying goes, "the ears do not have lids". I gathered that the call was in relation to the exhibition, particularly Zwelethu Mthethwa's artwork. Ngcobo and I had met up a few days prior to this engagement, at one of the stylish live music spots in the edgy inner-city Braamfontein district.

At this meeting, Ngcobo told me that there was some controversy around her inclusion of Mthethwa's work, but at the time she did not expect that the small murmurs would turn into the media storm that they did. Therefore, I went into our meeting that Tuesday morning aware of the existence of this issue but I, too, did not anticipate that it would spiral out of control. Ngcobo's phone rang incessantly throughout our drive to Pretoria and I remember her being viscerally vexed by all the phone calls she was receiving. The above is a bit of the backstory I got into Ngcobo's life during one of the most difficult times in her curatorial career in recent memory. The rest of what happened on that day — the media storm that resulted from that exhibition and that one specific painting — is now history. However, it is the recurring trope of the figure of the fallen hero that figures quite prominently in Greek tragedy and, by extension, in the orchestration of Black lives (Scott 2004) that I again find to be interestingly at work here. In addition to this, it is the preoccupation of local cultural production in paradigms that are predicated on predetermined racial and political categories, that I would like to briefly unpack (Schmahmann 2012: 8).

Historian Leslie Witz (Forte, Israel and Witz 2016: 6–7) indicates that the stereotype of the African as an enemy emanates from discourses which were formed around the industrial revolution in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The global cultural industry was built on ideological principles which subjugated the Black subject and inscribed them to a regime of thought which fixed views about race to the very anatomy of the body (Lalu 2016: 228; Scott 2004: 82). Black cultural production has since tried to elude and/or refuse the aesthetic and discursive categories which seek to circumscribe them to a racialised script (Gilroy 2000: 268). At the time of the exhibition, *All In A Day's Eye,* in 2019, Ngcobo was still de-escalating from the successful staging of the 10th Berlin Bienniale which she curated in Germany the previous year. The 10th Berlin Bienniale was a platform for Ngcobo and her curatorial team to intervene in the socio-political realm of German society, through foregrounding identity-related issues (Schmahmann 2012: 9).

These issues not only preoccupied the visual arts in Germany and other parts of Europe but also in South Africa. The exhibition *All In A Day's Eye* came to fruition after Ngcobo was approached by the Javett family to curate an exhibition at Javett UP using artworks from the Javett family collection, which stretches as far back as the nineteenth century. Ngcobo's curatorial proposal for this exhibition was based on her desire to challenge the ways in which we look, think and write about artworks produced by modernist South African artists from the twentieth century into the present. Ngcobo was also interested in eviscerating the ways in which

the subjection of non-white and non-masculine subjectivities are portrayed through the artworks she selected for this exhibition. The reference to the 'eye' in the title calls to mind something she said in a conversation I had with her on Zoom in October 2020, while the world was in the iris of the Coronavirus storm:

> It's about deep looking and also seeing beyond the usual. Because as human beings and animals, I can't speak for the animal world but for those of us who are able to see and are gifted with sight we take things for granted, because we just look and see. Like an artist, as you know, you are one as well, and you hang around with artists: they see things in a deeper way, in a less superficial way and sometimes in a skewed way. Because we just don't look straight, we also look from the corners of our eyes and I think that's really important. Deep listening and deep looking are important for creativity. I didn't grow up drawing. My parents didn't say, 'Oh you're so talented'. This wasn't the case. Destiny and fate put me in this world and I would say that I was destined for it. But because of the way we grew up, often these things are not nurtured and there are so many other things that are going on. People always wanted representation and I guess people like that. When you can think beyond representation then you enter in another dimension. You enter into a different space of imagination.

Ngcobo sought to trouble the Javett family's colonial art collection through the exhibition by evidencing the choices the family made in their collection practices (Lalu 2009: 30). The way her curatorial proposition was received by the South African public — particularly the response the exhibition elicited from members of the SWEAT[30] organisation due to the inclusion of a painting by convicted murderer Zwelethu Mthethwa[31]—was unanticipated in its sheer scope. The human rights organisation regarded Ngcobo's decision to include Mthethwa's work as giving the murderer an inexcusable platform. It was clear that Ngcobo was engaged too closely with politics in this instance and South African culture is one that is fixated on operating according to a politics that establishes identity as an end game (Schmahmann 2012; Lalu 2009: 40). Ngcobo was severely criticised for the decision to show the piece, but in the midst of this there were segments of the public who understood her conceptual reasoning in including the work. The public also failed to recognise that it was not Ngcobo alone who had made the decision to

[30] The Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce ('SWEAT') is South Africa's leading sex worker human rights organisation.

[31] In 2014, Mthethwa was charged with the murder of a twenty-three year old woman named Nokuphila Kumalo. According to Jillian Steinhauer, Mthethwa "brutally hit and kicked Kumalo — who was believed to have been a sex worker — to death on a street in Woodstock, a suburb of Cape Town".

include the piece in the exhibition. She worked with a team of assistant curators with whom she workshopped the exhibition at length before it surfaced in the public realm. Whichever side one might take on the matter, one thing became clear — very little had changed in the political formation of the arts between the apartheid years and the post-apartheid moment. The conditions in the South African art eco-system are still not conducive for Black African cultural producers to exercise their freedom of expression and imaginative thinking, as it is so tightly censored. Due to the country's socio-political history, the fact that people's identities are not a given but are a social construct is disregarded (Rahier 1999: 21).

Since the 1990s, the South African art eco-system has been dominated by identity politics[32]. Cultural production in postcolonial countries is cursed by identitarian politics and this would offer one explanation as to why a painting of a man dancing with a woman in the foreground while his wedding-gown-clad spouse looks on forlornly in the background would cause such public furore. Of course, Mthethwa is not just a regular artist, but a man convicted of femicide. The meaning embedded in this painting is not innocent, but in light of what Ngcobo was trying to propose by showing it, we might ask ourselves as a society what we would like art to do? Vaclav Havel (1984: 49), speaking about his home country of Czechoslovakia (now Slovakia and the Czech Republic) identified three conceptions of artistic cultures that exist in society. The first one he calls 'official art', which is primarily art that adapts itself to the ruling ideology. Secondly, there is 'anti-official art', a genre that is overtly of a dissident variety, typically fronted by people with a penchant for the life of a rebellious bohemian. Finally, there is what he refers to as 'modern art', which is for us in the present, contemporary art (Havel 1984). Havel believes — and I concur — that in a free society, art should be left to stand alone, distanced from the politics that come with different kinds of ideologies. The answer to the question of what we want the function of art and artists to be will determine which of the three options we will choose.

Conclusion

It is incredible to think that Ngcobo's illustrious career in curatorial practice began from an arbitrary decision, in the absence of more viable options, to take on art as a subject in the tenth grade. She grew to love the subject in subsequent years, developing into a competent artist

[32] Identity politics refers to a discursive encapsulation of a wide range of political activities and theoretical constructs rooted in experiences of discrimination and inequity shared by varying but oftentimes excluded social groups (Heyes, 2020).

during her tertiary education. It was also important to highlight the role that the community of people played in shaping her path. This is often an underrepresented phenomenon in the formation of the lives of influential individuals. Ngcobo's segue into curatorial practice was catalysed by the relationships she fostered with artistic practitioners, like herself, who needed a channel to grow their practice. The formation of 'THIRD EYE VISION' was the genesis of Ngcobo's polyvocal curatorial approach which places a lot of emphasis on collaborative practice and co-construction. Cultural formations such as the Centre for Historical Re-enactment and Nothing Gets Organised would not have been possible had Ngcobo not experimented with the creation of the independent art space in Durban in the 1990s, in the first place. The main curatorial strategies which stand out from her practice are acts of co-creation, self-organisation, collectivising and opacity as a mode of refusal. This last one has become associated with her quite prominently because she is considered by many individuals to be an elusive and enigmatic character in the art-world.

Chapter Five: The production of culture as a constant state of rehearsal

'Dynamic' and 'unapologetically Pan-African' are but some of the many words that might come to mind at the mention of Chimurenga. The organisation's offices are situated amid a cluster of formal and informal businesses occupying space on Woodstock's Victoria Road in Cape Town. Chimurenga's offices sit directly on top of a Bangladeshi-run convenience store, vertically adjacent to the Shoprite supermarket ensconced on the corner of the building. Outside the supermarket are a few informal traders selling second-hand books, fresh produce, herbal medicines and the odd hustler or beggar who are a constant feature of the bustling Woodstock social economy. The entrance into Chimurenga is nestled in between the fruit and vegetable market and the two retail businesses flanking it. Access into Chimurenga's offices requires one to ring a bell connected to the gate downstairs on the populated pavement. Once buzzed-in, one ascends a white-tiled snaking staircase leading directly into the space. At the top of the

staircase and right next to the entranceway, you are welcomed by a music stand displaying an issue of *Chimurenga: The Chronic,* spread open at the centrefold.

To your left, you are invited in by the exuberant golden yellow colour of the walls wrapping around the studio office. Inside to the right is a large window with an enviable view of Table Mountain above and, looking down, one can see the seemingly endless locomotion of people and cars that happens on Victoria Road. On a normal day, you are bound to find Graham 'Boeta G' working away at his desk, with Edjabe also sitting at his, puffing away on a hand-rolled cigarette. Somedays, you can walk into them in the middle of an editorial design discussion about an upcoming publication, meaning you would have to wait patiently on one of the bright red couches until they finish. If you are not in a hurry this is not a problem, as there is so much inside the space with which to occupy one's mind. Chimurenga has an impressive and expansive library consisting of books and records spanning various genres and subjects, mostly having to do with the continent and the people of Africa or Pan-Africa, at large.

Hanging on the bright yellow walls are a variety of posters from previous Chimurenga covers and event flyers, either bearing an interesting visual illustration or a witty political slogan or message. Perhaps one of the most telling of the art objects hanging on the wall is a poster advertising a documentary on the life of Fela Kuti, called *Music Is A Weapon*. This poster is perhaps the most meaningful of all the many artworks adorning Chimurenga's walls because Fela Kuti happens to be one of Edjabe's favourite musicians and a figure who has shaped a great deal of the philosophical outlook of Chimurenga as a space of cultural activity and thought. However, in order to understand how this came to be, it is important that I go to the very beginnings, not just of Chimurenga but also of Edjabe as a human being. Edjabe's and Chimurenga's lives are so intertwined it is almost inconceivable to think of the one without the other. The two entities are mutually-constituted in that regard, notwithstanding the fact that Chimurenga (the organisation) and Edjabe (the person) each have their own functions and responsibilities.

As the co-founder and leader of the organisation, Edjabe is a vital member of the project. However, he is wary of the machiavellian methods employed by the art system to create divisions between people, and is firm about not wanting to reproduce its tendencies. Nevertheless, he and his curatorial practice — a large part of which he has carried out at Chimurenga — are the main focal points of this chapter. Because of what I conceive to be Edjabe's and Chimurenga's inextricability, the chapter conducts an in-depth and critical reading

of Edjabe's curatorial practice by foregrounding both his lived-experience and the cultural archive of organisational activities. In reading across these planes, the aim is to understand the principles that undergird the curatorial thinking and methods of practice of both the individual and the organisation. If Chimurenga is the exoskeleton, Edjabe is the entelechy, and this chapter reads into contributions made into the modes of Black African curation by both the individual and the institution as existing on a singular phenomenological continuum. The chapter discusses the crucial aspects of the organisation's biography juxtaposed with that of the individual's to understand the strategies, tactics and pedagogies which emanate at the convergence of Edjabe's curatorial practice as it is articulated in the project of Chimurenga.

"There are other worlds out there they never told you about"

Ntone Edjabe was born in Douala, Cameroon, in 1970 — a period in the country's and continent's history marked by the revolutionary sentiment that came with post-independence liberation. Like most African countries in the last 400 or so years, Cameroon's history is one of resistance against European colonial rule. In 1884, Cameroon was declared a German colony, which it continued to be until the end of the First World War when the League of Nations mandated that the country be divided into two halves. The one half was given to France and the other portion to the United Kingdom. These colonising nations both had a complex relationship with the natives. Protracted battles between Cameroonian anti-colonial factions broke out sporadically throughout the almost eighty year period until 1960, when the French colonialists became the first to be ousted and the north of Cameroon became the first to gain independence. The south of Cameroon, colonised by the British, federated with the Francophone territory a year later in 1961, which saw the country become the Federal Republic of Cameroon, which was abolished over a decade later in 1972, as the country was renamed as the United Republic of Cameroon (Cameroon 2022).

> The fact that I was born in 1970, which means ten years after total official independence, which means eight years after the reunification project, re-unification of the English and French speaking colonies. Essentially, a conflict context where the people who took power at independence were the people who fought against independence with the French.
>
> So all this history produces the political context in which I'm born. I'll just say I'm born into a place where organised politics has a quite particular character. Those who fought for independence lost. However, we are independent. That's the political context I was born into.

Despot, current president and long-time state leader Paul Biya ordered the decree for the country to change its name to the one the nation holds today. Colonialism's fall in Cameroon led to a trend that has repeated itself quite often in numerous newly independent states in Africa — the country descended into authoritarian rule. Edjabe spent the majority of his childhood seeing different parts of Cameroon because of his father's vocation — he was a self-employed electrician who would take Edjabe along to various parts of the country where he had business to conduct. Cameroon occupies a unique geographical station; the country is situated between Central and West Africa. Nigeria lies to the north-west of the country, Chad to the north-east. The Central African Republic lies to the east, and Equatorial Guinea, Gaboon and the Republic of Congo to the south. Edjabe says that, as a young man, he found himself perpetually mesmerised by the diverse features of Cameroon's geographic landscape.

> First to establish is the fact of my birth in Douala, which is the biggest city in Cameroon. There's no divisions between the rural and the city, they're never cut off from what could be seen as the village or the rural setting. Growing up with the mentality of the city as a village. The city itself is a village. The neighbourhood you're born in is a village. There's your uncle and your aunt, there's the family in the city. I think those facts are important in what kind of begins to shape epistemologically how I begin to operate in the world.
>
> My father, who worked as an electrician, took him to different places, so he would go wherever the work was. So movement becomes something that I assume to be completely natural. Growing up, the sense of permanence had nothing to do with staying in a sedentary mode. The sense of permanence has to do with the consistency of the movement.
>
> Movement is one thing, but moving in what here [South Africa] will be considered over your work. So for example, when you come to this town, you go to school in this town, but the difference between this town and the previous town is as vast as the difference between Mpumalanga and I suppose a place like Dakar. They have nothing in common. Climatically the landscape, the language, the culture, the food, I mean… Cameroon is so diverse culturally, but topographically, it is so diverse. You can move from a mountain area where it's cold down to the savanna to the ocean to the forest. These folks have very little to do with each other because the entire ecosystem shapes culturally how they operate if you live in the forest, the rainforest, if you live in the savanna, if you live in the desert, if she leaves the coast, your relationship with the world is through water. If you live in the mountainous area, which is more agricultural based… So it's not so much about cities as it is about worlds, so you keep shifting worlds. So we will go, for example, to a town like Bafang, which is in a

> mountain area in the west and will live there for two years and you have to learn a new language. I mean, you don't have to learn it. Because the only language spoken you can speak French because we speak pidgin but just to operate socially, language capital L because the food, weather, everything is different, completely a new habit. And two years later you find yourself in the forest or whatever. So it's not so much shifting from town to town, it's shifting worlds actually. So that I think is another fairly constitutive aspect in terms of how you think.

After completing formal school, Edjabe enrolled to study Law at the University of Yaounde. He spent a year studying at his home city's university before relocating himself and his studies to Lagos, Nigeria. His move to the most populous African country was induced by the heightened levels of civil and political unrest in Cameroon as its citizens opposed the dominance of the Cameroonian People's Democratic Movement (CPMD) led by Paul Biya (Cameroon 2022). Edjabe made the decision to move to Nigeria during a time when throngs of Africans were emigrating to the European metropole in search of a better life. He could have chosen to migrate to Europe like many of his peers but he did not and, unlike his countrymen, he chose to remain on the continent but moved in a somewhat horizontal direction to Cameroon's neighbours, Nigeria. In Nigeria, Edjabe continued with life as an undergraduate law student, picking up his studies at the University of Lagos.

> Around that period when I happened to be old enough to go to university, it coincided also with the feeling where we're feeling the first effect of the structural adjustment. So the university is basically defunded and public services are defunded. Salaries for ordinary people are cut in half, the devaluation of the currency and so on and so forth. There's a whole set of processes. So it is only at the point where going particularly to it is no longer aspirational for the elite. It's actually becoming a necessity, so I am that generation. The first generation for the University of Yaounde is a sort of waiting room for those who are about to crossover.

> Following the fall of the wall of Berlin and everything that triggers through the world, there is a kind of wind of multipartyism, I wouldn't call [it]. It is really a call for multiparty democracy or electoral processes. Cameroon is very immersed in that and naturally, the student movement picks that up. So we have this phenomenon we call 'ville mord', which means that cities where it's kind of similar to the ungovernable processes that were put in place, you can't go to school, basically, you have to make the statement. Right. And for us, it was called 'ville mord'. And so, in my finishing school years I find myself kind of caught up in that, you know, so I'm finishing school, I have to get my end of school degree, but there's also the struggle

that is going on at the same time, and you have to be both in and out. You know, you can't, you have to finish your school degree but at the same time, you have to participate in this thing. You develop strategies to be both in and out.

This is quite crucial in terms of the level of repression and all of that. By the time I get to university, because through that process, the students are then marked officially as enemy number one for the state. The university acquires a particular character, almost camp like confinement of the troublesome characters of the society. This the place so, so this sense that I was saying that, you know, I was there willing to exit is filled by all of these factors.

First and that's really kind of one of the first political choices that I'm making. I can see politics at this point, because at that point, the easy trajectory is pretty much northwards and northwards means the destination of your movement should bring you closer to the destination. So you may not be able to go to France or to Belgium or even to Canada, but you may go to Senegal or you may go to Morocco. Which brings you closer to the metropole. And I mean that not only in geographic terms, but also in terms of infrastructure. They are literally closer which means the metropole is more felt in those places. European institutions are more present in those places. My intuition already at that time was not to follow that journey, but rather to move sideways so, with a group of friends with whom I graduated from high school at the same time, I managed to convince these other friends of mine that we should go to Nigeria.

In Lagos, he connected and became friends with a small crew of other Cameroonian students, who were also enrolled at UNILAG. Such was the preference of so many of his countrymen to pursue studies in Europe, that Edjabe had not anticipated that he would find any students from Cameroon studying at the Nigerian university. This is why he was initially reluctant to take the journey on his own. He claims to have crossed paths with a small group of exiled Black South African students taken in by the Nigerian state as political refugees, escaping the oppression of the apartheid regime in South Africa. The solidarity and support that African countries gave to Black South Africans during the height of apartheid state violence and political control was a true reflection of the Pan-African unity prevalent throughout the continent at the time. Many people question whether, since the end of apartheid and the ushering in of a democratic South Africa, the Black South African government has managed to reciprocate the same kind of solidarity and support for flailing African postcolonial states and their embattled citizens.

At the University of Lagos I first added English to my course to familiarise myself with the language. I had never really worked with English as a language of study. It was just a

> language that was spoken, so I took some classes at school. So I did think it was close to a year to study the language and then register to study philosophy, which is something that I picked up from school as something I was personally interested in. I was always drawn to it because I had a very good philosophy teacher at school. In your last year of school, in Cameroon, you study philosophy, just basic introductory concepts — Descartes, Pascal and this kind of stuff. Aristotle and so forth. I was particularly interested in it, and I developed a relationship with my philosophy teacher, you know, I just liked the person. So when I found myself having to choose a course of study, I just remembered the theme that I was particularly drawn to and that I really paid attention to, and so I registered for that.

Edjabe's time as a student at UNILAG was regularly interrupted by student protests, which meant that for large swathes of the year the students were not able to attend classes. However, his innate curiosity did not allow for the disorder to curtail his hunger to learn and grow. He utilised the spare time to integrate himself into the Lagosian social scene, which he did so sufficiently that he claims he received the 'real' education he needed not in the university system, but as a young man negotiating life in the boisterous West African city — what some call the capital of the Black world. Edjabe frequented Fela Kuti's nightclub, 'New Afrika Shrine', to watch the Pan-African music superstar during his and his band's open rehearsals, what Edjabe personally calls 'the unofficial curriculum'.

> The campus itself opened other side paths. Like I said, it was intuition, but I'm constantly looking for side paths. The kinds of side paths that were open to me… what Fela was doing, not him per say because I was too distant to even see him and imagine any of these, but there was a practice of learning that was going on the site, which was as rigorous and as intense as the formal thing. I was particularly drawn to that.

> By the second year, I was already pretty much studying at this other school (New Afrika Shrine). This is the shrine mainly but it's not so much as far as space, it is the world around the Shrine and what he opens up to you. The Shrine is just a meeting place for the world but it's like it's a bunch of panel area boys just different ways of making life in Lagos that opened up to me a completely different sense of being in the world. The Shrine where we will hang out. Ultimately, the rest of the week you're hanging out with people, you're going to the bus station, it's a hustle, different modalities, you know.

'New Afrika Shrine' became one of the sites of what I am sure were many sites where Black study was happening in Nigeria. What is interesting in Edjabe's account, though, is the fact that the turbulent situation at UNILAG inadvertently fostered conditions for Black study to emerge in

different pockets around the city. The oppression Black bodies are made to feel in Western institutions such as the university create the necessity for the emergence of liberating enclaves such as Fela's 'Shrine'. Places like the 'Shrine' surface due to the recognition that Black social life must be preserved; they become a cradle for Black people to connect with one another and find ways to cope with the brokenness of their being, particularly under unrelenting conditions of white supremacy (Harney and Moten 2013: 18; Halberstam 2013: 5).

> So the campus opened me up to this space which is like what I'm actually, what I'm most curious about. Also, coupled with that, it's always circumstances, but also coupled with that there are a lot of... these are, I think, these are the Babangida years, in terms of military regime. So they are pretty much student revolt protests. Every three months the campus is shut down.
>
> This was supposed to be like what I'm actually doing in this country but the university so constantly closed that I'm starting to run out of fucking alibi and justify to myself, but also to my family, and people who love me like why actually are you doing this?
>
> Right, you know, so it became kind of untenable, and also me finding resources to even just support my being there [become difficult]. You know, like in terms of earning a little bit of money to be able to pay rent and like it just became such a stress and at some point, right. I think he was one last closure at the beginning of the year or not in the middle after the new year. Early in 1993. Yeah. I phoned my family and asked them to help me to get a plane ticket back, you know, so family members helped out and I went back to Cameroon.

After four years in Nigeria and with the reality of an unchanging political climate at UNILAG, the time came for Edjabe to reconsider his time in the country. He made the decision to return home. He had not visited his family in Cameroon in all of the time he spent in Lagos; finances were the main reason for his absence. He did, however, stay in contact with his family through sporadic phone calls. Once back in Cameroon, he hibernated for some time, planning his next step:

> I'm in the family home reconsidering my options, I'm really still interested in study, probably more than before, because now I know why. It's no longer just, oh, you finish that? No, I'm actually very clear as to why and how. So one of the two things I'm clear about is this: 1) is the intuition that made me study in English in the first place and in Nigeria, and the second place are all in the speaking countries is clearer. Because what happens in Nigeria, it's almost like the left side of my brain started working.

> There was a part of my brain that was not active in terms of, there was a whole library that I had no access to that I didn't even know that it existed. It's just a library you have access to through English, because even though I come from a French speaking country, you know, the first time I read Fanon is in Nigeria. There's a whole library that relates to me, to my life and my people that I have access to for the first time in English.
>
> So all of that confirms to me very clearly, I'm unequivocal about this. I will continue studying and that I will continue studying in English because it has opened up analytical tools that I can actually use to understand this thing better than I had access to before I didn't even know they existed to be honest.
>
> I've just been in Nigeria for three-and-a-half years and I'm kind of clear that okay, my options are kind of limited there, so what are the other options on the continent? Because that's another thing that I'm clear about is that I will remain on the continent. The only option that happens at the time — this is early 1993 — is South Africa, and the reason it happens to me as a possibility is that while I was at University of Lagos I met some ANC students who had a scholarship there. Because Nigeria used to give them all these South African movements scholarships for people to come and study.
>
> So in that time, when I'm back in Cameroon, all of the events happening in this country, I'm now paying more attention than I ever have before. I'm actually paying attention, it's not just a fact happening in the news, it's not just 'oh they killed some people in Soweto' or whatever. I'm actually paying attention, and I'm reading sideways, not just what's happening in the news. I'm going to find out, you know? I'm starting to actually study this thing and it's through that process that I feel like this is where I want to go.

Edjabe touched down at the Jan Smuts International Airport[33] in Johannesburg, South Africa, on 1 June 1993, approximately ten months before the first democratic election in the country. ‘Jozi’, as the city is affectionately called, is Africa's economic hub — it has held this status for decades, some would even say centuries, if one goes back to the city’s Gold Rush era of the 1900s. Since this period, millions of people have flocked to the city in search of economic opportunity. This city, much like many big cities and small towns in South Africa, was largely built through the exploitation and extraction of the labour of Black and Brown people. The country’s history indicates that the white South African population, which is the demographic minority but holds

[33] What is now the O.R. Tambo International Airport.

the majority of social and economic power, has controlled over eighty percent of the country's land and economic capital.

How Edjabe moved to South Africa is actually clever and amusing in its orchestration. He claims to have travelled to the country under the pretence of coming to conduct commercial business. The plan had been for him to spend a two weeks in the country, mainly Jo'burg, in which time he would frequent several tertiary institutions in the city, shopping around for a suitable one in which to enrol. Spurred on by the idea of continuing his studies in a South Africa that had a lot bubbling under the surface and was on the cusp of political change, Edjabe caught a ride from the airport to the Carlton Hotel. His uncle, a government official in Cameroon, had arranged a room for him to stay at the hotel in the inner-city of Johannesburg.

> [In Cameroon] I have no way of finding out about the schools and universities and so forth. So through family, friends and a little bit of hustle work I did in Cameroon, I saved enough money to buy a plane ticket [to South Africa]. Cameroonians at that time were not allowed to travel to South Africa, actually most Africans, because of the ban that was imposed by the OAU in the '70s is still in place. So on your passport, it says you can travel anywhere but South Africa and Israel.
>
> There's no way I can get a visa to come here. There's of course, no South African representation in Cameroon but there's also no Cameroonian representation in South Africa, right? There's no diplomatic relations. So the only country that had diplomatic relations with South Africa next to us was Gabon, because Gabon was selling them oil or selling the Boer oil. And so I then have to travel to Gabon to find my way to South Africa.
>
> Now, since there's no diplomatic or any relation, information we had to get, usually get them from embassies and things like that. But because the relationships are opening and South Africa is working itself towards a democratic state, what is happening is that they start to seduce various chambers of commerce of these countries and say, 'Please send your business people to check out opportunities', you know, in the country, or 'let's begin economic relations'. There's this process of [inaudible-french word], you know, that is in place. So it's then through that process that I find an uncle club at the chamber of commerce.

Upon arriving at the hotel, Edjabe checked in and left his luggage in the room. He decided to go downstairs to buy a coffee with the traveller's cheques he had brought with him. Neither Edjabe nor anyone else could have anticipated the events that would unfold next.

I'm curious, go downstairs to the lobby and I order coffee and I'm sitting there and I kid you not, while I'm sitting there for maybe fifteen minutes or so, I see Winnie. I'll never forget that she's wearing a red leather coat with black boots, Afro. She's cutting through diagonally. I'm sitting in the lobby somewhere. She's coming, I don't know where, from which part of the hotel, and she's cutting across the lobby, heading for the exit. Because I've been studying, I mean, just paying more attention, I recognise her immediately. I remember just saying “Wow, that's Winnie Mandela".

And I remember saying to myself, while I'm sitting there, and she's walking she has two bodyguards on each side and walking. It's quite a sight in the records, it's a movie scene and she just walks and walks out. I'm just like, I've been in the country for one hour, from the time I land, arrive at the airport, drop my bag and sit down here — this is my actual first sight. I'm like 'wow'!

I finished my coffee. Went back to my room. You know, just still trying to process all of this. Go back to my room and I find that my room has been broken into, all my shit is gone. I was downstairs for really less than twenty minutes.

So it's my passport, basically the bag that we should put everything in. So it's only one hour after my arrival in this country. I've lost everything except the clothes that I have on and $30 change in my pocket from the traveller's cheque I gave to the guy at the counter, you know, to get the coffee.

That introduction meant that whatever it is that I had in mind that brought me into this country, studying all of that is out of the window inside one hour. It's these kinds of life processes that lead to, you know, all the things and other encounters which bring other processes, you know. It just never ends.

In 1994, a year after Edjabe’s arrival in South Africa, the country held its first democratic election, heralding the nation’s transition into a parliamentary democracy. The country’s relatively amicable change in political dispensation is still considered a miracle by many, considering the staggering degree of violence enacted by the draconian apartheid government on non-white South Africans. Non-white South Africans were praised by the international community for their magnanimity to accede to a peaceful shift of political and social processes in the country. State-sanctioned projects like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), implemented by the post-apartheid government to carry out processes of healing and forgiveness on a public platform, were hailed as path-finding interventions and became the subject of many academic studies, locally and internationally.

Postcolonial historian and critic Premesh Lalu (2009: 4) claims that the TRC was established by the post-1994 Black South African government to probe into and account for the gross human rights violations and atrocities committed under the white apartheid government. TRC scholar Heidi Grunebaum (2011: 23) asserts that the commission was a vehicle introduced to instate legitimacy in the rhetoric of healing spewed by the incumbent government, arguing, however, that inasmuch as the commission gave credibility to people's aspirations of a peaceful transition, the TRC did not materialise into the curative modality that would reconcile the majority of South Africa's population with the ills that befell them in the country's past. Grunebaum concludes that the TRC fell short of its intended purpose because it failed to account for the historically entrenched structural, material and symbolic registers of violence[34] which have remained in the fabric of South African society after the fall of apartheid.

Nevertheless, South Africa's re-entry into the global sphere catalysed an economic boom for the country. Post-democratic South Africa internationalised its financial markets and deregulated spheres of the economy in a bid to attract foreign investment (Matsipa 2014: 8). The rapid economic changes to the burgeoning nation's fiscus led to a rise in the nation's Black middle-class. Money was also injected into redressing issues related to housing, education, poverty and other social inequalities which mostly affected the Black majority. Edjabe's first few years in South Africa were marked by these massive socio-economic and political transformations occurring in the country in the middle of the 1990s. Life was understandably difficult for a Cameroonian citizen forced into migrancy in the unforgiving urban geography of Johannesburg. He earned his survival through conducting piecemeal jobs around the inner-city and stayed at a YMCA in town.

> I find myself at the YMCA, a Christian youth centre in Braamfontein, in the basement of a building. I'm given a space in the basement, where I do the dishes, and where there was practically an ANC army who took refuge and waited for the call. Actually, the guy who could have become South Africa's first real president, Chris Hani, had been murdered. I found myself parachuted in this place without knowing what was happening (Aterianus-Owanga 2019: 8)

[34] Lindsay Bremner (2004: 461) argues that the phenomenon of crime provides a generative symbolism with which to talk about contemporary experiences. The architect and scholar proposes that through the experience of crime, people are able to encode uncomfortable processes of social change and mobilise defensive mechanisms against the phenomenon (Hale 1996: 84 in Bremner 2004). She asserts that the terror the victim experiences from a crime can become a trope through which periods of transition are lived and made sense of (Bremner 2004).

While working as a car-guard outside a popular restaurant in the vibrant district of Yeoville, Edjabe met renowned anti-apartheid activist, poet and writer Sandile Dikeni. His encounter with Dikeni proved to be a tremendously fortuitous one as the pair's coming together altered the trajectories of their lives forever. The two men subsequently grew very close, developing so tight a friendship that Dikeni asked if Edjabe would be open to relocating to Cape Town to work as a member of his editorial team at the *Cape Times* newspaper. At that time, the *Cape Times*' organisational culture mirrored the racialist dynamics and attitudes of certain white sections in the city of Cape Town. Dikeni, making use of the authority he had as editor at the newspaper, assembled a collective of young radical Black writers to join the newspaper along with Edjabe.

> I mean, Sandile personalised this into a collective thing because as we were but you really produced the templates. And he was just practising. You know, he's appointed editor, the *Cape Times*, and the people he's inviting to write for him like me. People encountered, you know, on the street. While he's drinking whiskey, I'm guarding his car. Those are the people he's invited to write for him as the editor of the newspaper. If you have to live through something that you don't know is possible.
>
> So Sandile had created some sort of sanctuary inside one of the most racist organisations in the city, newspaper house. He created a floor for us where I could come in there and feel like we're the motherfucker and go straight to the seventh floor and everybody there was like "what's going on?" Because we're all Negroes. Up there we can smoke, we can do whatever the fuck we want. It's our joint, inside a newspaper house, with the level of racism both white and coloured in this city and people who are feeling all kinds of ways. But what can they really do because Sandile is bringing them money. But he creates this space, this physical space but he also creates an interactive space. So it's me, Carl, a couple of guys and women, Sandile brings it together like that through the resources that are made possible. In a way it was kind of utopian, like living in some kind of bubble. I was earning absolute shit doing all kinds of shit, doing all kinds of freelance work. I'm actually paying the *Cape Times* to work there. But I'm working with this guy and I know that this is the education that I've come here to get.

The prevalent racism at the *Cape Times*, coupled with Dikeni's and Edjabe's discontent at the standards of journalism at the paper, led them to defect from the newspaper. The two conjured the idea of starting their own literary organisation. Infatuated with this idea, Dikeni suggested to Edjabe that they call their magazine 'Bongo' — an Afro-Cuban type of drum. Dikeni had always

aspired to form a magazine publication that would follow in the footsteps of the legendary *Drum* magazine.

> He was thinking about starting a magazine on the side and talked to me about, why don't we start our own thing and call it 'Bongo' as a nod to *Drum*. He was a big fan of all the *Drum* writers and what they were able to achieve in a different time in a different context and he was trying to produce that image, you know that level of freedom, and that level of reverence, that level of forward thinking.

In 1996, Dikeni, Edjabe and a friend of theirs — a woman by the name of Vuyo Koyana — came together and decided to collectively rent a space from which they could conduct their work. The trio found a space in the central business district of Cape Town. The space that would go on to be called the Pan-African Market, was a three-storey building on 76 Long Street (Aterianus-Owanga 2019: 6). The Western Cape province, and Cape Town in particular, has a painful history of slavery dating back to the establishment of the town as a Dutch colony in 1652 (Baderoon 2014: 8). In the 1990s, when Edjabe and his friends occupied the building, the city of Cape Town was entering into a process of sanitising its public spaces (formal and informal markets), in line with the city improvement policies and entrepreneurial governance (Aterianus-Owanga, 2019:7). The '90s in South Africa were a period invariably marked by the drastic social, economic and political changes in the country — the 'Rainbow Nation Project' was solidly on the go.

In the wake of 1994, the South African government had also restructured its foreign policy and opened the country's borders once again to the international community. Millions of people from the continent and further abroad began to immigrate to South Africa. Historically a diasporic city, in the 1990s Cape Town began to embrace this again; and the CBD of Cape Town in particular flowered into an African-diasporic melting pot. The city centre became dotted with small and medium-sized pockets of semi-formal and formal trading operations run by African immigrants. Enthused by the presence of these communities mushrooming in the CBD, Edjabe and his collaborators occupied a space in the building that used to be an artist studio. Their occupation was met with antagonism from the white businesses around them, but regardless of these racial biases, the group went ahead with their project.

Shortly after inhabiting the building, Dikeni left the trio to take up a position as spokesperson in a senior governmental department in the ANC, leaving Koyana and Edjabe to see to operations at the building together. Of the two of them, Edjabe claims Koyana was the more

business-minded — a quality that proved quite valuable as she and Edjabe soon came face to face with serious issues relating to the financial maintenance of the building. Thinking horizontally, Edjabe and Koyana approached the African traders around the building to move their operations into the building and essentially occupy it with them. The traders responded positively to the pair's offer and soon the building was abound with a bevy of small-scale African-run enterprises. It was not long before the building adorned a distinctly Pan-African character. From the moment one walked into the space one would immediately be greeted by an undeniably Afrocentric energy that felt like nothing else one would encounter in the rest of the Eurocentric city. This aura is what earned the building its name — the ‘Pan-African Market’.

The three storey-building housed several dozen traders and artists from different African countries and became a popular place for tourists visiting Cape Town who loved African crafts (Aterianus 2019: 6). Edjabe occupied two rooms on the third floor of the building, a space which effectively was where he worked on developing the literary magazine that he and Dikeni had dreamt of starting together. The Pan-African Market had at this time begun functioning as a business co-operative — an independent conglomerate of sole proprietors who voluntarily unite to meet common socio-economic needs. Having a space to trade business was one point of commonality shared by the occupants. Another, I presume, was the tangible sense of belonging and community that the activities inside the building had begun to generate for everyone, even outsiders. To earn some extra money, Edjabe had begun disk jockeying in several spots in and around the city, however, now having a space of his own, he could invite people to listen to him DJ there. The late Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina also happened to be an occupant at the Pan-African Market. Wainaina had just relocated to Cape Town from Makhanda (then Grahamstown), where he had been a student at Rhodes University. Besides being an astute writer, Edjabe remembers the Kenyan as an outstanding cook who also operated a small restaurant in the building.

Edjabe and Wainaina merged their combined passion for music, food and culture and organised a cultural happening, wherein they brought together the key cultural ingredients of food and music — crucial elements in the social act of fostering community. ‘Happening’ is a concept coined by artist and writer Allan Kaprow and is used primarily in the cultural sphere to describe cultural gatherings which offer an alternative to the object-centricity of art while serving as a critique of the consumerist nature of the formal art-world (Graf 2021). Happenings are interactive, audience-friendly and relational contexts which create the possibility for collective

engagement (Bourriaud 2002: 8). Interestingly, Edjabe considers these ‘happenings’ to be the early manifestations of what became the Pan African Space Station.[35]

> From the very beginning, it was an important space. In the various rooms you would find people occupied with various things. I'm doing my writing, but I'm also DJing, so on Fridays, I will set up my turntable there and play records... The music is kind of spreading into the city. So that alone, also brings new people. At the newspaper, I'm working with people like Sandile Dikeni the poet, on different trajectories with people I've met already in Joburg. So he invites other poets onto these Friday sessions and reads, you know, sometimes really, like, world famous. I remember, Benjamin Zephaniah was in South Africa. He performed but Sandile knows him, so he's like, "You know, we have this gig on Friday" and Sandile uses his platform as editor of the *Cape Times* to publicise this thing. Cape Town to publicise this thing. So, the day that I realised the magnitude of what we were doing was that day when Zephaniah was on the balcony of the Pan-African Market. So, Sandile just mentioned in his column 'Benjamin Zephaniah' this place called the Pan-African Market on Friday and then thousands of people showed up. I had no idea about the resonance of what we were doing. It was so personal, it was so necessary for each and every one of us. I had no idea about the resonance. I'll never forget this: Benjamin was reading, there were so many people on the balcony overlooking Long Street, there were so many people, they couldn't come into the building, so the people occupied the street. There were so many of them that the cops couldn't move them so they ended up blocking the streets.

Edjabe related to me that this experience was a revelation for him and marks it out as having pointed him in the direction he, in many ways, wanted to go in his life. This first ‘happening’ demonstrated to him, amongst other things, what the work of culture could do to augment the relationships between people and spaces. Particularly in a spatial context such as that of a racially segregated Cape Town, designed to occlude a certain demographic of people, the Pan-African Market had the symbolic function of a maroon-archipelago, a place of refuge for Black people feeling ostracised by the violent and racist logics of the city. Subsequent to the first happening, the Pan-African Market began hosting ‘happenings’ every Thursday. Edjabe and Wainaina organised the hospitalities at these weekly gatherings, which initially infused food and music and eventually included visual arts and oral performative practices such as poetry readings. The events carried an experiential novelty and atmosphere which had been virtually non-existent in the city before. They also fostered a semblance of cohesion and familiarity amongst the people who patronised them.

[35] The Pan African Space Station or P.A.S.S., is a sonic oriented platform inside the Chimurenga stable. Later in this chapter I return to this conduit and discuss its intricacies in more detail.

These happenings had no official name at the time. In fact, it would be years after their inception that they would finally inherit one. Meanwhile Edjabe, working from the two rooms he occupied in the building, spent most of the '90s working on his literary publication and doing some intermittent DJ-ing. He had begun assembling pieces of writing obtained from various authors and contributors located in different parts of the world. The activities that happened in the Pan-African Market consisted of a diverse range of commercial and cultural enterprises which all contributed to making the Pan-African Market the microcosm that it was of the cultural and economic marketplace. Perhaps more pertinently though, the Pan-African Market was the birthplace of the small literary organisation that evolved into Chimurenga.

What I have attempted so far in this chapter is to narrate the key moments in Edjabe's formative years, which include his early memories of peripatetic travels with his father as a young boy in his country of birth, Cameroon. With this, I delve into his experiences as a politically engaged student in the heady days of student uprisings at universities in Cameroon and Nigeria, respectively. His time in Nigeria is especially crucial because of the encounters he had at Fela Kuti's famous nightclub 'New Afrika Shrine' — a place at which Edjabe would become acquainted with strategies of Black study, that later in his life would become synonymous with Chimurenga's approach to cultural practice; a cultural tactic that would also become adopted wholesale by various scholars, artists and cultural producers in the formulation of aesthetic and discursive bases of their practices. Collective practice and acts of forming community, which emerge at significant junctures in Edjabe's life before and in South Africa are significant discoveries in his development as a curator. The cultural mediums of food and music — each essential modalities in bringing people together — are pointed out in this chapter because, in the years to come, food and music become central components to the experiences, activities and cultural events curated and facilitated by Chimurenga.

The naming of an activity

> I think that there are several beginnings as far as Chimurenga is concerned. One of the beginnings is of course the naming of an activity. It's commonly understood that one thinks about the things and then that thing materialises. That's a very Christian conception of genesis — it's like God imagined the world and the world came into existence. I think it's also

> a very hegemonic way of producing history. It's really the Western way of producing history, to identify the progenitor, the initiator because in terms of the pyramid scheme the ideas are always at the top.

The formation of Chimurenga came after several years of sustained endeavour into how to produce a literary journal of African history, culture and politics in the postcolonial moment. Edjabe continued his pursuit of journalism and DJ-ing right into the new millennium, and in 2002 the first issue of the journal that came to be known as *Chimurenga* was launched. The flagship literary journal landed into a mainstream literary milieu starved of radical Pan-African writing emanating in the contemporary moment. “Chimurenga: Music Is The Weapon!” was the name of the first issue of the journal Chimurenga launched on the 1st April 2002. The single publication dealt with the issue of ‘Music and Politics’, based on a paper that Edjabe had written about Fela Kuti, and on invitations he extended to his network of peers and colleagues (Aterianus-Owanga 2019: 9). This first issue was forty pages long and featured written contributions from household names such as Professors Njabulo Ndebele, Neville Alexander, as well as many other writers and thinkers practising at the time. Edjabe distributed the first collection of copies at the Cape Town International Jazz Festival, which all sold out. Even though digital technology was beginning to grow into prominence in the early 2000s, print media was still very much the dominant format and medium of knowledge circulation and consumption at the time.

Subsequent to the publication selling out from this DIY distribution method he employed at the music festival, Edjabe became inundated with requests to purchase copies. He had not foreseen that the journal would be so well received by the public and, of course, the inclusion of written texts from respected writers certainly assisted the journal’s appeal to the literary masses. This can arguably be seen as a critical curatorial choice that Edjabe made as one of the editors of the issue. Firstly, he showed self-awareness in understanding that, as a Cameroonian living in South Africa, it was best not to portray himself as someone who sought to speak for South Africans. By including South African voices in the issue to write from their perspectives about issues concerning Black South Africans, the journal as a text could then perform this duty from a specific but simultaneously broader vantage point. He also understood that South Africa’s history and political struggles were intricately linked with those of other countries in Africa and international Pan-African communities.

At the time, most writing about Africa was held in the tight grip of Western-centric perspectives which portrayed African subjectivities in the mode of the other (Mbembe 2002 in Comaroff and

Comaroff 2012: 115). This condition has a historical precedent of the production of African discourse having been centralised in Western universities. The disadvantages of this state have been that, in order for the work of African writers to have any semblance of legitimacy, they have had to be published in African Studies journals situated in universities in the West. African scholar Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ (2021) brands this extractive system as an African Studies Industrial Complex. The first issue of the *Chimurenga* journal had an ideological stance that went against the Western-centrism pervasive throughout mainstream bodies of African cultural thought. It departed from a Black internationalist, Pan-African perspective which envisioned the global Black subject in an increasingly nuanced manner than the Western discourses were doing (Shepperson 1962: 347 in Aterianus-Owanga 2019: 3).

The journal was a novel intervention in the field of postcolonial studies, specifically in how it endeavoured to reconstitute African history, critique the Western epistemicide of African knowledge and highlight the violences and dangers of colonial and neo-colonial imperialism on the continent. There was no intention from Edjabe and the team that assisted in producing the first issue to create a durable magazine (Aterianus-Owanga 2019: 9). However, the sheer volume of requests from interested readers prompted the team to reconsider their disinclination towards the likelihood of a second issue. Eventually, and by popular demand, in July 2002 the second issue of *Chimurenga* was born. This issue was conceptualised around the seminal book written by the journal's co-editor titled *Discovering Home [Run Nigga Run]*.

> The naming occurs, publicly, through the release of the first edition — what then became the first edition, at the time it wasn't imagined as the 'first', because the first is a precedent to a second. There was no 'second' in mind. It was an intervention in a particular time, moment, situation, space... And that intervention called itself 'Chimurenga'.

In the book homonymous with the journal issue, *Discovering Home Part 1: Going Home*, the author, Wainana (2005), lambasts European writers and their ways of writing about Africa, and provokes them to rid themselves of their colonial fetishes which he claims obscure their visions of African people. Seemingly suggesting to them that Black African life is not as homogenous and devoid of complexity as Western accounts seemed to portray. To write about Black life requires humility as well as an anti-colonial commitment to reconceptualising notions of historical time. This issue, such as the one that preceded it, aimed at producing a novel discursive channel that was capable of rupturing Europe's version of the past and also had the

potential of envisioning the future (Glissant 1990: xii). The second issue went further in the direction of experimenting with formats that dismantled the traditional Western format of journal publications. Initially published in English, the journal was caught in the logical bind of producing writing in a colonial language. However, what the journal conceded on the linguistic front, it compensated for on the conceptual end. Albeit in an imperial language, the content of the journal retained its radical and critical quality.

The issue came out in an unconventional format. For example, the graphic design of the journal's front cover resembled the liner notes of a music compact disc (CD), in what I regard as a blending of literature and auditory cultural aesthetics in the design of the physical copy which mirrors the discursive framework of the publication. These experimental gestures, which have become emblematic of the self-started literary publication's editorial style, produced non-imperial grammars, taking a language and format stuck in antiquity and inventing them anew (Azoulay 2019: 196). This strategy is related to the aesthetic and ethical technique of Black study which mobilises against the discursive closures inherent in Western knowledge practices. Black study has the tendency to disarrange the post-Enlightenment epistemological field — it unsettles the aesthetic ground upon which the transparency of European hegemony emerges (Bradley and Da Silva 2021). Each publication since the first two has assumed a unique visual layout; anthropologist Alice Aterianus-Owanga (2019: 10) indicates that to challenge knowledge boundaries, the journal used original forms, mixing novella, essays, poetry, comics, science- fiction, paintings and photographic creations and addressed eclectic issues ranging across topics such as the destruction of universities to African cartographies and food.

Edjabe, however, does admit that it took them a long time to get the publication to the level of sophistication at which it is in the present. He is a staunch believer in the notion of constant iterative practice and conceives this condition to be vital in any form of cultural work. As someone who takes sound and music seriously as thinking apparatuses, it is with this context in mind that his statement on how he tries to remain in a 'constant state of rehearsal', takes us back to a philosophy he learned from his idol, Fela Kuti, during those days when he would frequent the 'Shrine' in Lagos. According to Edjabe, Fela Kuti hardly ever performed an old song during a live performance. He and his band would normally use live performances as an opportunity to rehearse new music or sometimes create fresh music in the presence of a captive audience. This was an enthralling strategy by the Nigerian musician and composer. It entailed that rehearsals and performances were infused and his live performances were spaces of

creative flux which had no stable or expected outcome. Fela Kuti's approach to his live gigs in many ways embodies a cultural praxis which, for Edjabe, evolved into a way of being and perceiving the world around him (Diagne 2011: 6).

Instilling these principles into Chimurenga, the outlet became a renowned agent provocateur in the cultural space, distinguishing its operations from other cultural entities through the intrigue, that its opaque methods and unique cultural activities generated in people. The sense of motion and being in constant flux certainly carries through in how the organisation navigates the condition of operating inside and outside hegemonic commercial structures and geopolitical contexts. This fluidity of thought and action affords the organisation the ability to accommodate the multiple contradictions and tensions inherent in producing culture in the context of postcolonial Africa. The work Chimurenga has undertaken in the past two decades, particularly in the field of African and African-diasporic writing, has contributed to suturing the discursive fractures and cellular zones which typically used to riddle Pan-African discourse. Since the launch of the journal's first issue, Chimurenga has provided a platform for writing about Pan-African thought and culture that exposes the failures of Western-centrism and its lack of nuanced articulation of African cultural and political life (Garuba 2003: 284). The writings published inside Chimurenga have envisioned how contemporary African and Pan-African culture and politics can be developed in the spirit and legacy of anti-imperial and revolutionary history.

Chimurenga solidified its influence in postcolonial African writing through its insistence on producing original critical thought on matters pertaining to Pan-African Black subjectivities — an honest endeavour which has led to the organisation inventing a form of grammar that is distinctly its own. Forming part of the emergent genres of postcolonial Black African and diasporic writing, Chimurenga's publications allow us to perceive the disparities in our global contemporaneity and equips readers with the agency and thinking tools to dismantle the unequal power dynamics inherent in discourses about Pan-African societies (Da Silva 2020: 15). By doing this, Chimurenga's publications perform what African philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne (2018: 44) asserts as the essential task borne on African cultural scholars of reinventing obsolete colonial and imperial epistemological grammars. Writing is a didactic act of elocution. By focusing on publishing writing based on African culture, Chimurenga and its contributors make the aesthetic gesture of speaking on behalf of a people, and therefore to write about culture — the organisation bears the weight of an entire civilisation of people on its shoulders (Phalafala 2020: 741).

The editorial choices that determine the themes of the publication are important as they also dictate what kinds of written texts appear in the issues. Most of the texts that make it into the publications have a particular way of situating Blackness inside a transnational and transhistorical frame of reference. The manner in which the heterogeneity of Africa and Blackness are foregrounded in the publication is meant to chip away at the cultural hegemony of Eurocentrism, while facilitating the critical gesture of revitalising conceptions of the universal that are separate and distinct from the one conceived and functionalised by the West (Diagne 2018). In doing this work, the editorial ethos of the publication has privileged texts that set out to reconceptualise misrepresented narratives and neglected histories, discursively reinserting them into the socio-historical and ideological processes of our time. This has required an eye for thought that is willing to construct new concepts, terminologies and languages that harbour this utility in the present. Chimurenga moved closer to this ideal when, in 2008, after the publication of several issues of the flagship journal, a new publication vehicle, congenital to the organisation, came into existence.

Curatorial activism: the birth of *Chimurenga: The Chronic*

In May 2008, the international community witnessed the flare of xenophobic pogroms across South Africa. These attacks were targeted at African nationals deemed 'alien' by virtue of being ethno-national minorities in the socio-demographic context of post-apartheid South African society. Horrendous occurrences of Black on Black violence spread across the country, sweeping through informal shack settlements and metastasising into urban regional metropolises. This resulted in thousands of African nationals being beaten, doused in petrol and set on fire — ultimately physically dispossessed through these gruesome assaults (Chance 2018: 13). These attacks of May 2008 signified a poignant moment in the recent postcolonial history of the continent and cast a negative spotlight on the role of South Africa in Africa, more so with the nation-state holding the status of being the number one economic powerhouse on the continent at the time.

The country's post-apartheid Black government came under severe criticism for the ineptitude of its response to the crisis. On top of pointing out the exceptionalism of the country and its citizens, critics also maligned the government for its inability to put an end to the fratricidal violence occurring frequently in the country. The attacks occurred at a time when the country

was nearing a decade-and-a-half into its democratic era. It was a time of great hope and expectation in the nation, however, South Africa had also demonstrated clear frailties in its reformation as a nation-state in the years of the country's transition into a liberal democracy. from the 1990s into the 2000s. Unwarranted and deeply shocking, the 2008 attacks were crucial in highlighting these frailties and also exposing the nefarious traces of neo-colonialism that existed in the socio-political fabric of South African and African society at large. The xenophobic attacks not only implicated politicians but also put scholars and cultural practitioners under the spotlight, asking these groups to contend head-on with the fraught realities of the postcolonial situation on the continent.

If cultural practitioners were caught between two minds before, or perhaps wanted to claim neutrality and even extricate themselves from politics altogether, these events forced many of them to reconsider their stances. Conscious of the implicit obligation imposed on it as a Pan-African organisation, Chimurenga decided to respond to these events by embarking on a large-scale, nation-wide public poster campaign. The campaign involved the placement of posters on the facades of public buildings, fences and street posts; the posters were worded with political messages speaking out against the scourge of xenophobia terrorising the country. This curatorial campaign had a novel effect and acted as a much-needed example of a cultural organisation willing to engage directly in social activism. Chimurenga's response was also antithetical to the disquieting tendency upheld by most art and cultural institutions, particularly in South Africa. This is the propensity of these entities to detach themselves from direct participation in social issues. I find this to be a disconcerting phenomenon, especially when one reflects on the political role culture has played in the histories of anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggle on the continent. The pervasiveness of institutional amnesia is deeply unsettling.

Chimurenga's social intervention symbolised a pivotal turning point in the existence of the organisation. The campaign also prefigured a new era in artistic and cultural organising in South Africa — an era that would see the formation of artistic collectives and independent cultural spaces such as Gugulective, Keleketla! Library and The Centre for Historical Re-enactment — all Black-organised and autonomous formations that in their artistic and cultural practices did not shy away from engaging in political issues. These organisations' presence and activities in many ways functioned as an inherent critique of the apoliticality of hegemonic neoliberal art and cultural formations. Cultural institutions, especially those formed and located in Africa, should be made aware of their responsibilities to the social and cultural development of societies on the continent. The individuals who work within these institutional spaces have a duty to keep these

entities accountable. What Chimurenga initiated vis-à-vis the poster campaign is one of the earliest cases in South Africa in the mid-2000s of curatorial activism executed by an independent cultural organisation.

Curatorial activism is a term coined by Maura Reilly (2018: 22) used to denote curatorial strategies that are committed to endeavours dedicated to levelling hierarchies, challenging normalised assumptions, countering the erasure of identities and histories, promoting the periphery over the centre; recentering the minority and inspiring resistance — with the aim of offering hope and affirmation. Often attributed exclusively to the visual arts, the campaign strategy for Chimurenga's 2008 project was diverse in format. *Chimurenga: The Chronic*, a quarterly gazette produced by the organisation, was spawned during this moment. *The Chronic* emerged as a specific and highly mediated intervention into conventional modes of knowledge production and circulation. Like the flagship journal, which started in 2002, this publication — conceptualised to be a pavement-style literature object, i.e. the newspaper — emanated from the idea that most knowledge about Africa remains discursively simplistic and reductive in formulation. With that agenda in mind, *Chimurenga: The Chronic* mobilised contributions from writers in different regions of Africa and beyond, including academic and non-academic writers, artists, musicians, painters and comic-makers, with the intention of capturing as best as possible, through the perspectives of the contributors, the complexities which express so much of the quotidian experience of life here in Africa (Aterianus-Owanga 2019).

> We have to use the archive of the things we've done, of our own methods. And it happens that while we are not using it, capital is. So this is the first place where I saw newspapers advertising their contents on boards in the street. This is where I saw it for the first time. I just had never seen it. And since we are now thinking about rethinking the publication and saying, fuck this literary magazine thing, we got to go into the belly of the beast, like, we we get to go inside the instruments of society. We got to go inside the apparatus.
>
> So let's assume the posture of a newspaper. Now.. so we're gonna do all the things newspapers do but we are going to reinvent them, but not reinvent them as we are the first one to do, but we're going to use a different archive, y'know? So we're going to produce newspaper posters, like the *Mail & Guardian*, *Sunday Times*, etc and we're going to produce them like we made posters before to contest the very newspaper. So we are going to produce newspaper posters that contest newspaper posters. What they say, how they say, their graphic thing. So I sat down with the crew at Keleketla who were also emerging at the time, Ra, Malusi... and said, "You guys are working in graphics, this is what we want to do". We want to produce newspapers, posters, but actually we want to produce empty newsprint

> posters. You know, we want something that someone looks at and they identify immediately as a newspaper, except that it's actually doing the contrary work. Just like, we want to produce a newspaper that is sold everywhere, in tuck shops, on the street, everywhere.

That immediately you identify as a newspaper, but at the same time, is doing the contrary work. It's actually contesting the newspaper, right? Like, everything must go in line with that. Let's go in. Let's talk from outside. Let's go in. Let's occupy all the billboards we can occupy in this city. In Joburg, in Nairobi, in Lagos. Let's occupy every single one. Every open wall that we can find.

Zones of liberation

One of the most difficult conditions to achieve as an independent cultural organisation everywhere, but particularly in Africa, is the state of economic sustainability. The socio-economic and political predicaments faced by independent cultural initiatives in the postcolonial moment make it difficult for many of them to survive beyond a set period of time. A crucial factor affecting independent formations is the dearth of widespread funding options available, on a regional and national scale, to support most of these organisations. This has led to most of the formations that exist to rely on other methods to stay afloat — sourcing funding from external cultural funding bodies is a common route followed by independent spaces and cultural practitioners. Western European bodies provide a lot of financial support for arts and cultural bodies in Africa, and their financial aid plays a crucial role in maintaining the dynamism of the arts in Africa. Positive as these contributions (external or internal) may be, they have the potential to produce negative consequences for the independent entities that rely on them. It often happens that the thematic content of the activities of independent formations can be contradictory to the expectations of local and international funders (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: xxiii).

Throughout its two decades of existence, Chimurenga has benefited from the largesse of numerous funding grants. The organisation has managed to obtain support from external sources, despite the organisation's work being critical of these mostly European funding bodies. In the years 2011 and 2018, Chimurenga was awarded the Prince Claus and Vera List prizes, respectively. The organisation has redistributed some of the money it acquired into cultural projects that help develop the cultural infrastructure in Southern Africa and other parts of the continent. "People's Education" is one initiative among many other similarly socially-engaged interventions to which the organisation has contributed its support. The organisation's ability to

maintain its critical voice and radical style since its inception into the present is one of Edjabe's greatest achievements. Regardless of the responsibility to negotiate sponsor-sponsee relations with numerous funding bodies to maintain its continued operation, Edjabe has made it a point not to allow money to dictate the tenor and quality of the cultural activities and material the organisation produces. He is conscious of the dangers posed by today's neoliberal cultural system, particularly the way in which social mechanisms are organised to de-individuate actors in the cultural field.

> For me, what I then chose to do quite consistently, where I could have said things in my name, where I could've signed a paper in my name, where I could've done an activity in my name. I then started to make that activity, that work... which is of course personal, to be identified as Chimurenga.

Edjabe is wary of the corruption that neoliberal mechanisms in the cultural ecosystem can induce. The procedure or performance of issuing awards is the product of an arbitrary value-system that designates individuals and/or entities into elitist categories created to exclude some people and include others in the cultural sphere. Besides inculcating a spirit of competitive individualism in the realm, the art-culture system erects economic and political structures which make a politics of recognition the default mode of social engagement (Bishop 2012: 14; Dimitrikaki and Shaked 2021: 12). Moreover, social augmentation technologies such as award systems fabricate illusory hierarchies between people, hindering the construction of solidarity formations interested in fostering collective autonomy within the art and cultural field. What they do, instead, is encourage the social production of political subjectivities which conduct themselves as entrepreneurs of the self. People with these subjectivities exist in most parts of the world — the entrepreneur of the self is very much a condition of the cultural and economic currents of the last forty years, which have resulted in the extant capitalist modes of production. The biggest issue with too many of these subjectivities existing in the cultural sphere is that collective good will continues to be neglected in the service of the individual (Campbell and Sitze 2013: 19–20), a factor that would portend quite a bleak future for us all.

Since his time working as a member of his friend, Dikeni's, dissenting core of young Black journalists at the *Cape Times*, to being a founding member of the Pan-African Market and Chimurenga, Edjabe has dedicated his cultural work towards learning and reproducing modes of collectivity while formulating innovative means of remaining economically sustainable. During the time of Chimurenga's occupation of the two rooms at the Pan-African Market, which

adjoined a permanent exhibition of paintings by some Congolese artists, the one room was the editorial office, where the designer and sub-editors worked and the second was composed of desks, sofas and an exhibition of Chimurenga products for sale, such as their gazette, magazines, books and T-shirts (Aterianus-Owanga 2019: 6). These items, along with the hosting of cultural events, have formed part of the organisation's self-sustaining economic model over the years and right up to this day. The organisation has somehow managed to strike a tenuous balance between playing to certain unavoidable aspects of the art and cultural market and strategising as an entity in collectivity with others to continue initiating conditions of transformation in the cultural landscape.

This modus operandi, already prevalent at the Pan-African Market and sustained through the first issue to more recent ones, is tangible in the other modalities materialised by the organisation. The intermittent pop-up curatorial interventions and online ancillary vehicles of the organisation articulate the essence of Chimurenga's cultural presence and approach. There was a time when Edjabe deepened his explorations with music, especially jazz, when he ran a jazz club in Cape Town called Tagore's, while still working as the editor of the *Chimurenga* journal. In the evenings, after knocking off at Chimurenga, he would head over to Cape Town's southern suburb of Observatory to oversee proceedings at Tagore's. Tagore's deserves a special mention, not only due to it being a productive cultural experiment in its own right, but also because it was the laboratory in which the online and pop-up radio station, the Pan African Space Station, was produced. Tagore's holds a mythical place in the memories of many cultural practitioners, especially those who were residing in or visiting Cape Town during the years of its existence, between 2012 and 2017.

I, for one, was not fortunate enough to be living in the city during those years of the fêted jazz club's existence. However, the memories and stories of those who experienced it are enough to inspire a vicarious connection. Many accounts depict Tagore's as a microcosmic Black cultural utopia; a space of free jazz frequented by free-thinking and radical-minded persons. Some of these representations make the jazz club out to be an unlikely object emanating out of the social anomie of a city that has historically been violent towards non-white bodies. It is evident in these stories that Tagore's caused a seismic rupture in the colonial space-time configuration of post-apartheid quotidian life for non-white bodies in Cape Town. The Tagore's experiment forms part of a pattern of activities conducted by Edjabe and Chimurenga in which music, specifically, and sound, in general, are focal points to probe and open up a complex set of experiences and histories specific to Pan-African subjectivities (Jaji 2014: 205).

Sound as laboratory

> There's nowhere else we [Black people] speak as clearly, precisely and as powerfully, and as historically aware as in the sound world.

Edjabe's long-standing affinity for Pan-African music has developed into a fundamental component of the work he does through Chimurenga. Sound, particularly music, has played a critical role in deepening people's understanding and appreciation of African and African-diasporic cultural sensibilities. Throughout precolonial and colonial Africa, musicking and sounding practices remained touchstones of African social and political thought. This continues to be the reality in the postcolonial moment. His activities as a cultural journalist, DJ and curator have earned Edjabe high esteem as one of Africa's leading curators of thought and sound. Not fixated on these individuating titles, though, Edjabe is more interested in the social templates in which modes of producing music are grounded. Jazz music's improvisatory sensibility is a productive example of fugitive collective activity that he tries to reproduce in the work he does through Chimurenga.

> You can ask anybody you know. It is clear that in the twentieth century, black people established music as the predominant grammar for all music in the world, in the twentieth century. There is no music form produced in the world today that has any relevance success, this is not mediated by the practice of Black people.

The Pan African Space Station, or 'PASS' as it is fondly called, is a periodic, pop-up live-publication radio studio, research platform and curatorial space conceptualised by Edjabe together with his long-time friend and contributor Neo Muyanga. At the time of birthing the platform, Edjabe and the Soweto-born composer and performer Muyanga operated under the moniker "Heliocentrics", a name inspired by the work of Black American Afro-futurist Sun Ra and as well as South African Jazz pianist Abdullah Ibrahim. Founded on 12 September 2008, the platform was launched through a thirty-day music intervention which began on that day and ran until 12 October. Envisaged to be a sound laboratory, PASS has propagated novel vocabularies of collective consciousness and self-discovery through mixing sound, music, oral and aural, artistic and discursive modalities. The introduction of this platform in 2008 happened

a decade later following the first glimmers of the initiative, which echoed in the 'happenings' that transpired at the Pan-African Market in the late 1990s. PASS is evidence of Chimurenga and Edjabe's manoeuvrability and responsiveness to the shifting forces of our time.

This is because, in the last three decades, cultural discourse has accelerated towards embracing the epistemological scope of the principle known as "ensoniment"; the notion emphasising the role of human beings' auditory perception capabilities in how we know and come to be in the world (Rice 2015: 105). This epistemological standpoint seeks to resist ocular-centrism and questions the predetermined status of sight in the dominant epistemological hierarchy. A proponent of this movement, the sound-based activities of PASS, enable Chimurenga's revolutionary content to reach wider audiences, but the engine mainly gears its content towards advancing the scope of the aural imaginaries of Pan-African listening communities (Jaji 2014: 230). Speaking to David Morris in a conversation published in the book, *Curating After The Global: Roadmaps For The Present* `(2019), as part of a chapter entitled "Performing Pan-Africanism", Edjabe (2019: 285) provided the following synopsis of PASS's and Chimurenga Library's activities:

> I mean these are all spaces that we already consider libraries. If people are knowledge and infrastructure, then markets, bars, etc. are our biggest libraries. And in these spaces knowledge circulates primarily through sound, so we needed an instrument to gather this information and recirculate it, which is what the Pan African Space Station is — it can land wherever we need it or are invited. But the point is not to move into 'alternative' spaces, an idea I find really irritating. I mean, we also consider formal archives. The Cape Town Central Library, for instance, is the city's largest library and consists of several archives. The place is used by some parents as an unofficial crèche, because they can leave their children in the children section for a few hours; the homeless can hang in there all day, so it's also a shelter. And so on. So through these multiple uses, it's a library beyond the material that's on the shelf and that's catalogued there. There's the stories of the people who meet there, and that's really an important element for me for what constitutes a library.

PASS operates according to what Pan-African sound scholar Tsitsi Ella Jaji (2014) calls a pirate-logic methodology of radio broadcasting. Utilising internet pirating techniques to gather cultural information existing on the digital sphere, the content is organised into radio programming curated to sonically remap our audition of Blackness. The written word and visual representation have, for the longest time, been considered the foremost methods of conducting archival practice. These modes have been demonstrated to possess fragilities which many

emerging postcolonial sound scholars argue sound and aural modalities do not have (Jaji 2014). Consequently, cultural discourse has turned to sound, making it an emergent practice that offers an innovative alternative of thinking about recording and producing history. Western discourse is only recently catching up with these Black-African epistemologies because, in Africa, there has never been any confusion as to the important role played by orality, aurality, sound and music in the quotidian orchestration of the individual and collective self.

One need only flick their ear toward the genre of Black music — specifically its expansive sonic landscape consisting of feelings, epistemologies and imaginaries — to hear the echo chamber that music is in the lives of Black African subjectivities (Jaji 2014: 195). Thus, with these discourses in mind, PASS becomes more than an online radio station; it assumes the role of an intellectual domain in which notions of Blackness can be interrogated and a laboratory through which political actions concerning modes of Black survival, locally and internationally, can be forged (Weheliye 2005: 321). The ideological formation of PASS can possibly be summed up in the statement “act in your locality, think with the world” — a notion which underlines the point that the revolution begins inside oneself and in the place that one is located (Britton 2009: 9). Chimurenga has demonstrated the willingness to respond to this clarion call.

> Because what we’re trying to move to is an area where we don't have to explain anymore. If the only area of creative and intellectual practice is the one where we don't have to explain. You can do whatever the fuck it is still going to blow up. If there is an area like that then I'm gonna walk through there. Because I want to operate from a place of confidence and of strength. You know, because we have complexities. You can't always be going back to 101 just to speak. Always having to define yourself. Go to the place that we all understand as the highest place and operate from there. That is how we are trying to use sound.

Archival reproduction of history

A significant problem with the modernisms emerging out of postcolonial Africa is their mimetic enmeshment with traditional forms of European humanism. This is a consequence of the European colonial empire’s desecration of African archival repositories and modes of archiving, planting epistemological dependence on European humanisms in order for Africans to know themselves (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 118). Then, as it is the case nowadays, African modes of archiving are still considered disorderly and criticised for their unorthodox posture, particularly in relation to Western systems of archiving (Jaji 2014: 219). In recent times, we have

come to understand that this framing of Western archival methods as civilised and African modes of archiving as primitive is problematic and racialist at its core (Lalu 2009: 7). The archive in the orientation of African cultures is understood to be a site of invention and not a container where lifeless objects are stored and observed as they atrophy. Upon closer analysis, one can see that African cultures have more dynamic and sophisticated modes of archiving than those taught to us by the West.

Chimurenga demonstrate this in their production of the book *FESTAC '77*, published in 2019. The book was initially conceived in 2010, when Chimurenga began paying attention to the cultural festivals which occurred in the mid-to-late twentieth century on the continent (those discussed in Chapter One). Their impulse in looking at these events was to consider if these historical moments could provide a better understanding of present-day political and cultural phenomena in Africa. In 2012, with financial assistance from the United Kingdom's Tate Museum, the organisation managed to explore this project further by visiting the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilisation (CBAAC) in Lagos, Nigeria, where the official archives of FESTAC '77 are kept. At the CBAAC archive, the team scanned a large amount of the material they found, including a number of identity cards created for the artists who participated in the festival. This initial trip gave shape to the individual routes of people that Chimurenga began following. From 2014 to 2016, with the financial and infrastructural support of entities in San Francisco, London, New York and Helsinki, Chimurenga embarked on numerous exhibitions and programmes through which they presented on FESTAC and the other Pan-Festivals that took place during this period in the continent's history (Aterianus-Owanga 2019: 11).

The book consists of a comprehensive compilation of letters, interviews, essays and newspaper articles about the gargantuan Pan-African gathering which occurred in Kaduna, Nigeria, in 1977. A mixtape was produced by Chimurenga that acted as a sonic accompaniment to the book; the book and mixtape came from the team realising that:

> There are no books about FESTAC, but I can count over forty albums by African musicians — from King Sunny Ade and Super Boiro, to T.P. Poly-Rythmo and Tabu Ley Rochereau — which announce, praise, promote, critique or just merely document the event. This is remarkable, considering these are independent initiatives and produced by the artists themselves (Edjabe 2020: 283–284).

Envisaged as a collective audio archive, the mixtape follows a nonlinear structure in which we hear the echoes of voices from the past and those still alive in the present. The mixtape and book are great examples of how the notion of the archive is being reconstructed in Africa. Chimurenga was an early adopter of contemporary new media forms of archiving using sound and digital-based technologies. Today, the organisation is joined by a growing cluster of African and African-diasporic cultural practitioners who are working with these technologies. The emergence of research platforms such as the Digital African Humanities is another vector that is spearheading the revolution in African-centred archival practice. This is important work because, believe it or not, Africa is still seen as a continent bereft of culture and history (Shiweda 2021: 198). Therefore, the work that Edjabe and many other cultural practitioners are doing, independently or through university-funded research projects, is contributing significantly to the reconstruction of African imaginaries and the rethinking of the historicity of Africa in the contemporary moment (Nkrumah 1964: 63 in Ndebele 2006: 129).

Conclusion

One thing that is clear from the discussion and analysis of Edjabe's curatorial biography is that his practice is intricately connected to the foundation and making of the institution of Chimurenga. This fusion of the individual and organisation or collective is symbolic of a phenomenon that has increasingly become a common outcome amongst Black curatorial practitioners in recent decades. The activities conducted and curated by Chimurenga over the past twenty years in collaboration with various other cultural practitioners point to the important role of collectivising in the anti-neoliberal project of the contemporary African cultural space (Fanon 1963: 132). Through foregrounding collective participation in processes of African knowledge production Chimurenga, as a cultural vehicle, has managed to disrupt the established structures and totalising forces which constitute the neoliberal art and cultural landscape (Campbell and Sitze 2012: 21). It has taken twenty years of dedication to constant cultural inquiry and practise for Chimurenga to become one of the most well-reputed cultural formations on the African continent, in which time the activities of the cultural formation have been aimed at resurrecting the true and essential function of art, which is to uplift society's moral standards.

This is a purpose that has been lost to many in the cultural field (Flaubert 1964). Romantic as the latter ideal may sound, art and culture are organic vehicles of human self-expression and

should be made available to the service and participation of all (Diagne 2011: 127). The role of artistic and cultural production needs to be returned to where it was during the times of the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles on the African continent. Art and culture need to be seen once again as political tools, to be utilised in efforts to garner collective power in the formation of a politically conscious postcolonial Black African public sphere (Labelle 2018: 11). Pan-Africanism is the ideological fulcrum against which Ntone Edjabe has anchored the activities of Chimurenga. The organisation has resuscitated the political ideology in our postcolonial moment in the attempt to construct a translocalised sense of community between global Black communities. This sense of community under construction has less to do with geographical location and more to do with the fostering of a sociocultural plane in which political and discursive geographies of Blackness are being reimagined. The work produced by organisations such as Chimurenga have incrementally over the years contributed to a reconfiguration of political and discursive imaginaries of Black cultural life while maintaining an active dialogue with global realities (Aronowicz 2016: 54).

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Anthropologist David Scott (2004: 83), in his book *Conscripts of modernity: the tragedy of the colonial enlightenment*, explains that discourses around Black cultural production are stuck inside a narrative tone which he considers Black vindicationist discourse. Scott proposes that this vindicationist discourse emanates from a very rigid epistemological understanding of the amalgamation of Black people's responses to centuries of imperial and colonial subjugation. These experiences have constructed the idea in a majority of Black people that our being has been corrupted, debased or besmirched by the system of white supremacy. Scott (2004) asserts that this redemptive logic has come to constitute the discursive parameters of historical and contemporary Black cultural production. This is evident in how Black cultural producers have, by and large, created work which, in its calibre, has been directed at refuting incorrect or disagreeable claims, as well as constituting other similar acts of reclamation and/or historical revisionism, most often in cases in which epistemic justice or empirical truth have been denied.

The Black curatorial practitioners I write about in this thesis have each developed their own strategies of mediating African cultural knowledge into the formation of curatorial approaches which are intentionally aimed at refashioning the scope of the experience of African artistic and

cultural production in the international arena (White 1980: 5). This research study has endeavoured to understand how each of the three practitioners' approaches to curatorial practice can be instituted in the project to construct curatorial frameworks which are distinctly African (Rogoff 2010: 34). In elaborating on the methodological and theoretical approaches instituted by the three curatorial practitioners, as I have throughout this thesis, it has become clear to me that there are various overlaps between these individuals' practices. The strategies of collectivising and collaboration, institution-building, mediation or translation of knowledge, active historical undoing, self-organisation, Black kinship work and Black study are the main elements which have shone through in all of the three practitioners' curatorial biographies. As a way of drawing this thesis to a summative close, I will make a case for these seven propositions as what I think constitutes a definition of Black African curatorial practice as read through the curatorial biographies of these key practitioners.

Collectivising and collaboration

Collective and collaborative authorship in African cultural practice has a longstanding tradition dating back to the days of anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggle (Beech 2010: 55). It was during this historical period of the mid- to late-twentieth century that the term 'cultural work' came into salience in the realm of African cultural politics, as a vector for the liberation project in Africa. The introduction of this concept of cultural work went a long way towards reviving the revolutionary qualities of cultural and artistic practices in the ongoing efforts to reconstruct postcolonial African societies in the aftermath of colonialism on the continent. Culture is invariably a phenomenon that is produced collectively with others. In recent decades, culture has become so objectified by neoliberal mechanisms that it has lost its true essence. In today's neoliberal cultural landscape, culture is a privatised commodity completely devoid of its emancipatory potential (Parker 2015: 17). However, this does not mean that collective activity does not still occur within the cultural sphere. Black-African cultural practitioners continue to utilise collective and collaborative action as a political cultural strategy to leverage better opportunities for themselves and others in the cultural sphere.

> Collectives use the decentralisation of authorship as an artistic strategy to shift paradigms of thinking in relation to power structures, be they institutional, political or ideological (Weber in Gurney 2022: 38).

As we witness an increasing number of Black African curatorial and artistic practitioners being absorbed into the structures of the white neoliberal art establishment, the threat of individuation looms ever larger. Curators like Koyo Kouoh and Gabi Ngcobo, who lead major cultural institutions supported by funding from corporate sources, have an important task on their hands. As seasoned curatorial practitioners, they certainly have an awareness of the massive transformative potential of working in collaboration with others. The challenge is for them to cultivate institutional conditions that harness and embrace collective social and cultural production rather than the glorification of individual practitioners (Chhangur 2021: 64). Large-scale cultural institutions have the tendency to abrogate processes that instigate collective experimentation and participation (Malatsie 2018: 14). These days, cultural institutions are considered radical if they encourage collective action or produce work that is socially engaged. However, this is gradually beginning to change as an increasing number of Black people are taking up positions in these mega-institutions. These Black nAfrican curatorial practitioners are feeding into African cosmological practices to help articulate the futures of these white neoliberal institutions. A major tenet of Black African cultural practice has been the principle of collective knowledge, and Africans have used this as a political strategy to dismantle white institutional power — the tactic is the closest Black people have come to experiencing autonomy as a people (Verwoert 2010: 30).

Institution-building

You may ask, why do we still need institutions if indeed institutions are the very entities which hinder the true potential of art and culture? Institutions have, by far, become the key functioning paradigm for cultural practice in our contemporary society (Huyssen 1993: 253). However, in the African cultural landscape, relative to other parts of the world, we have suffered a dearth of cultural infrastructure. This deficiency in cultural infrastructure on the continent has been a problem since the transition from colonialism into postcolonialism. I fear that this will turn into a major crisis because of the increasing number of young people on the African continent who are obtaining degrees in the arts and pursuing careers in the field. This is a significant departure from the patterns of old as the realisation is growing that a career in the arts is possible and perhaps even lucrative. Of course, the injection of capital into the field has helped to boost the attractiveness of pursuing a career in the sphere. The problem continues to be, however, a large number of promising artistic practitioners and art professionals are preferring to leave the continent in the hopes of receiving more recognition and opportunities abroad. Certainly, the impact is minimal when one considers only a small percentage of people choosing to go in this

direction. However, if this is not addressed, this phenomenon could cumulatively result in an immense creative brain drain, which would undoubtedly have a disastrous impact on the political economy of the African cultural landscape.

It is for this reason that I consider the founding of independent cultural institutions by Black African cultural practitioners to be so critically important. Institution-building as a component of contemporary curatorial practice has increased in its importance in the African cultural sphere (Lucie-Smith 2001: 7). We know that most of the continent's governments lack the capacity to provide for all of the needs of artists and cultural organisations. In taking up the responsibility of establishing and forming their own independent art spaces and cultural entities, Black cultural practitioners are playing their role in filling the gaps that our governments have not been able to bridge. Over and above this, I believe that there is the necessity for Black people to form their own institutions which are not wholly dependent on white or European funding bodies because, more often than not, it is Black culture produced by Black cultural producers and consumed mostly by the Black masses on which the neoliberal global cultural economy functions (Nzewi 2013: 75).

The white European institutions for which we, Black people, tend to produce labour have their own organisational mandates which are usually dictated by the interests of the individuals or organisations funding them. Often, the mandates or requirements of the funding institutions come into conflict with the principles or desires of the cultural agent, creating gridlocks which ultimately rob the dependent cultural agent of their vital autonomy. Many a cultural worker has faced the agonising decision of whether to remain tethered to a funding organisation and accept the position of a mere cog in the institutional machine or to sever ties with the organisation and initiate one's own institution where they can pursue work that better aligns with their personal or social politics. What has been missing on the continent since the era of colonial domination is Black people's right to be self-determination, and perhaps the fact that institution-building allows Black people to exercise this autonomy is what makes it an important strategy of Black African curatorial practice (Sachs 1991: 191). Additionally, institution-building brings people in close contact with one other and provides them a platform to elevate each other's work whilst also lifting up their own (Ngcobo 2018: 19). The creation of Black cultural institutions by Black people, for Black people, has created a breathing space and broadened the public sphere (Gurney 2022: 45).

Critical mediation or translation

The curatorial strategy of mediation or translation is one of the foundational curatorial methods dating back to the very beginning of the practice. Historically, curators have been ordained as arbiters of cultural information, creating links between the artistic or cultural objects and audiences, as well as artists and institutions. Inasmuch as curatorial practice has undergone various crucial transformations, this has changed very little over recent years and decades. The curator's role is still that of thinking critically about how cultural knowledge is transferred from one source to another. Black African curatorial practitioners have had a far greater cross to bear in relation to this exercise of transferring cultural knowledge. First and foremost, the fact that we can read, write, create, speak and think out loud in a global political system that is configured to keep us down or expects us to fail is, in and of itself, an achievement (Mombaca 2018: 43).

African culture has been contained in the archival repositories and discursive practices of Western institutions and thinkers. This act of containment, as Grunebaum (2011: 92) argues, is a form of mediation in that it frames, holds and pins down meaning. The work that Black African cultural practitioners have engaged in to wrestle African archives back into their own possession is crucial to reconstituting the narrow discursive paradigms through which people have historically viewed African cultures. Mediation or critical translation as Black African curatorial strategy demonstrates that Black African curatorial practitioners are showing a concern for how their culture is aesthetically signified, represented and mediated in the circuit of global discourses (Cox 2011: 146).

Active historical revisionism and undoing

The archive in recent decades has been a site of profound regeneration for Black African cultural practitioners. This newfound interrogation of the archive comes as a response to centuries of Europeans denying Black culture a historical character. Black cultural practitioners such as Gabi Ngcobo (through her strategy of re-enactment), Ntone Edjabe (with his conscious turn to sound) and Koyo Kouoh (through her re-investigation of old African artistic traditions) are driving the agenda of assembling counter-memories that contest the colonial archive (Eshun 2003: 288). The commitment of these three Black African curators to engender dynamic modes of archiving that refuse the European episteme of the archive has led to various other modalities emerging to the fore as valid forms of archival practice (Phalafala 2020: 733). For example, in recent years, we have seen the cultural mediums of sound, aurality and orality, music and

embodied practices enter the conversation. This practice of rethinking the archive has broadened the category of the archive and given space to a larger number of individuals — even those not operating within the cultural economy per se — to tell their own stories in the ways most natural to them and the public to which they are speaking (Walcott 2018: 68).

Self-organisation

Acts of communion and coming together hold a special resonance in the cosmological practices of Black people. However, an institution such as the art-world places Black people in a predicament in which they are fashioned as the minority in the white liberal establishment (Ndebele 2006: 17). The choice that Black cultural practitioners make to self-organise is often a result of the alienation to which Black bodies are subjected within the white art eco-system. Self-organisation is a generative curatorial strategy because it brings cultural practitioners 'in' — it creates a dualistic dependency between the initiator of the self-organised space and the community for which they create self-organised conditions (Karlsen 2013: 11). These spaces can also result in a collective disruption of existing knowledge systems which have caused a considerable amount of damage to marginalised communities (Azoulay 2019: 158). Self-organised spaces which facilitate conditions for Black people to come together in acts of listening, aesthetic appreciation and politicking are crucial because these zones cultivate a sense of belonging and collective autonomy which is typically lacking in the greater cultural landscape. It is far easier for Black people to attend events wherein they know they will encounter individuals who think, look and act similarly to them rather than those wherein they are likely to feel estranged. Self-organised cultural spaces can redefine the politics of everyday practices and interactions among the people who frequent them (Chance 2018: 3). It is an unfortunate reality that Africans cannot rely on our governments to provide us with all of the services we need as artistic and cultural practitioners. There is a lot that we can learn from the avant-garde movements of the previous century which were adamant that art should be detached from state bodies — this, they believed, would allow for the true potential of art to be unlocked. Self-organised cultural initiatives do provide a channel for the established structures of the art and cultural system to be challenged and for new imaginaries to be explored.

Ukuphanta aka Hustling

A central principle emerging from the curatorial practices of the three research participants of this study is the idea of hustling, which can be translated to a form or organising. To engage in organising as a Black cultural worker in the context of a local African and international art-world requires expert levels of grit and determination due to the nature of how the odds are stacked against these individuals. The notion of hustling or Ukuphanta, as Nthabiseng Mostemme (2011: 104) refers to it in the vernacular, implies a means of finding a way in order to survive, getting by and making ends meet. This is a social concept that can be found in several communities, particularly working-class communities around the world. In the context of curatorial practice, Ukuphanta or hustling takes precedence when it comes to organising events such as exhibitions, gatherings and other modes of cultural activity that are self-organised. This is because it becomes increasingly difficult for practitioners who exist outside of the formal structures of the art-world to garner any support for the work they do or wish to do. Similarly, the term Ukuphanta, denoting the necessity to hustle, emerges from the structural complexities which are historically connected to the protracted marginalisation and the oppression of Africans globally (Motsemme 2011: 104–105). It is common for African curators to begin their practices in the informal spaces before entering into the more formalised spaces. They tend to begin from independent practices and they then get absorbed into the mainstream. However, while in the informal or peripheral zones, the prerogative is on these practitioners to make a way for themselves against the structural constraints that are instated to hinder these individuals' progress. Therefore, Hustling or Ukuphanta is a recognition of alternative forces of power. As a result, it produces conditions which allow for curators to make decisions about their everyday lives; that is, maintaining agency under the hegemonic conditions of the global art-world (Motsemme 2011: 109).

Black kinship work

We are raised knowing that the communities into which we are born are an extension of ourselves. This impulse does not leave us as we navigate the outside world and is even more important to keep at heart, particularly in an art eco-system which places the needs of the individual ahead of those of the collective. The irony of this situation is that, as white-dominated and European as the art-world is, it is fundamentally built on the commercial extraction and exploitation of Black labour. As a result, it should not be a shock for one to find that the higher

they climb on the art-world ladder, the fewer and fewer Black people they will encounter. The sad reality is that the competitive individualism that predominates the art-world tends to be most rife amongst Black peoples. One may find that the upwardly mobile individuals become so protective of their station that they are compelled, in one way or another, to keep other Black people out. They are wont to replicate the same exclusionary and violent behaviour that they themselves experienced in the early stages of their careers, and often reproduce it against their Black counterparts. The strategy of consciously forming Black kinship ties becomes significant in this particular regard. The word 'kinship' suggests a deeper or more engaged relationship amongst people which seeks to foster connections that transcend the socio-political and economic pushes and pulls that tend to determine relations between people (Clifford 1988: 190). Black kinship work is a curatorial strategy that is centred on the principles of love, radical care and hospitality, wherein one creates familial bonds with people that have similar or complementary ideological, intellectual, spiritual and professional worldviews. It is important that we nurture the relationships that we foster amongst each other as Black cultural practitioners. This is all part of the practice of making space for ourselves and others who are working in the field with us, but also those who will follow after us.

Black study

In my view, there are essentially two modalities of Black study — the first pertains to the scholarly interrogation of the lives of Black people which looks at their social, political, economic and cultural history. The second is a more fugitive manifestation of the condition of Black ontology and tends to take shape in contexts in which Black subjects are experiencing marginalisation. The latter is typically more constrained, especially in white institutional spaces such as the university and the art-world because it is seen as more radical (Grande 2018: 56). White institutions seem to prefer the former kind of Black study — one may find that there is a considerable amount of money being invested in the study of Black life and Black cultural production but still very little care being exercised in the service of the well-being of Black people. I have noticed a trend amongst Black cultural institution-builders in which the inclination is to want to institutionalise the second, more radical variation of Black study.

These individuals create working principles for their institutions which seek to replicate the conditions one finds in the composition of enclaves of authentic Black study. However, in seeking to co-opt this Black study into an institution, these Black African curatorial practitioners essentially become the proxies of neoliberal white institutions. Black study, in its very ontology,

is elusive. It surfaces in contexts and conditions in which it is not expected to emerge. This is because the conditions in which this orientation of Black study emanates revolve around the principle of auto-construction and contingency, what I call an aesthetics of disjuncture. Therefore, this variation of Black study can come into being under any kind of condition as it has an uncanny quality of hacking its way into existence (Gurney 2022: 63). Black study's ability to take on multiple forms, patterns and functions that are mutable shows how resilient Black culture can be (Bourriaud 1999: 11). We can learn a lot from this curatorial strategy and, instead of seeking to institutionalise it, perhaps it is better if we think with it to explore our power and interests within our communities. This is what can make the strategy of Black study a vital component in the war for Black liberation (Lorde 1984).

Selected Interviews:

Although having conducted a series of more than three interviews with each of this study's research participants. The following interviews were selected because they are the first interviews I held with each individual research participant. Thus, they are a means of documenting the beginning of my long-term research engagements and discussions with all three of them. In each of them I begin by setting up the research framework and stating the objectives of this study.

Appendix A - Koyo Kouoh [Interview Transcript]

Phokeng x Koyo interview 1 (Part 1)
Saturday, July 17, 2021
11:46 AM • 1:00:42

SUMMARY KEYWORDS
Senegal, Senegalese, curatorial, continent, grew, city, Francophone, raw, Cameroon, Africa, neighbours, part, African, live, matric, imaginary, guinea, family, curator

SPEAKERS
Phokeng Setai, Koyo Kouoh

Phokeng Setai [PS]: Look to explore the curatorial strategies of black curatorial practitioners on the continent of Africa. That is how we look at how we experience, cultural production knowledge production on the continent of Africa so I'm looking at three prominent curators on the continent of continent of Africa which are yourself, your track record, definitely speaks for itself Gabi Ngcobo, who in the past, I would say 10 years or so has her position as a curator has received quite a bit of purchase and I attention from an international audience and Ntone Edjabe, whose practice is very much curatorial but in the sense that it's around building knowledge around African culture, and African African ideologies and such but it's not necessarily considered traditional curatorial practice that we mentioned, the one that we see where people are in the museum, or.

Koyo Kouoh [KK]: So it's a very good choice, or to have someone like to name the conversation as well.

PS: Amazing. And I also think his practice is similar to what you did with RAW. It disrupts, you know, the familiar channels of the ecosystem so what we did in creating your own space at all with RAW in Senegal disrupted. A lot of what the Senegalese art ecosystem was before you before RAW came into existence, but it says RAW has become a fundamental component of the Senegalese art ecosystem and even the West African ecosystem. So, that is, that is the intro, the conversation that I said in the second half of our interview next in two weeks time, that's when I go into the specifics of that journey of the Raw Material Company. But for now, I'd really like to begin with, you know, where, you know who Koyo Kouoh is, what is your background.

How did you get to Senegal actually more interested in this particular for the next, maybe 10 to 15 minutes. In your experience, or in your background prior to arriving in Senegal.

KK: Well, I was, I was, you know, as everybody knows, I was born in Douala, in Cameroon, in the late 70s and Douala is, is a very interesting city, because it's a city in the Gulf of Guinea, so it's something between Nigeria, and Gabon and Congo and Equatorial Guinea. I think that corner of the continent is quite loaded in terms of you know, I think energies and mystic and all you want. So, it's also a port city which means it's a trading city. So you have people from from virtually all over the Gulf of Guinea, all the way to Senegal, who are part of the fabric of the city and then of course you have the very strong coastal societies of that of that region who also sort of flock and, you know, live in the city and contributes to it, too it's gist, if you want. So, for my little story, I grew up with Senegalese neighbours in a part of town where usually Senegalese immigrants to Cameroon don't live. So, which was also quite unusual in that sense, so those Senegalese neighbours of ours, when I was growing up. I was fascinated. I was always fascinated by them for one reason, the smells coming out of their homes, in terms of kitchen, in terms of incense that the Senegalese like to burn were so different from the smells that were coming out of my home. So, and of course with proximity neighbourhood, this unity we grew to be, you know a social group in that compound that I grew up in. So, and the father of that home. Always one second. There is a lot of noise around. I hope he doesn't interfere into your recording

PS: I think, Sunday, well, I'm just gonna mute myself because there's also some noise I am having around me but I'm here for you I can hear you quite fine.

KK: So the father, the father of that home, I will never forget his name, Mr. Papa Niang always said to me that I look like a little pearl girl. I look like a little Senegalese girl. So I grew up with those neighbours, until I left Cameroon, to, to, to live in Switzerland with my mother. So I always had Senegal in my head, you know, just from, you know, those neighbours. And of course, beyond that, I come from quite a modest family, and there was a tradition in some segment of my family, where after grad after matric you guys call it matric we call it by baccalaureate. After, after graduating from high schools, those family, who could those with lots of means of course would send their kids to Europe or to America to England or what have you, and those who had who couldn't afford this kind of education for the children, they will send the children to Senegal to study because the University of the car has a very good reputation among the Francophone kind of academic field. And so, I also grew up with that part thinking that you know, higher education in Africa is in Senegal, so to speak. So, Senegal has always been part of my imagination. So I have a few I have a few cousins who studied law and pharmacy and medicine, and, in Senegal, so I saw I grew up with that imaginary around Senegal and then of course, you, you would you would know about Senghor, and is very progressive way of running a state and African state, so. So, Senegal is really part of the imaginary of any Francophone African both was in the imaginary of any Francophone African back then, so later. I live. To live in Switzerland and then of course I started being more and more interested in African culture, and finding out about it and the right angle and all these philosophies of Negritude and I read more about Seneca. I watch Sinbad, I read some classics.

Also, this was also a moment for me to sort of by then I was in my late 20s and it was also a moment for me as a young African person, gaining more understanding of where you are, where you come from, where do you want to go. By then I was already a full Pan-Africanist because I think that I belong to the entire continent and the entire continent belongs to me. I was not really interested, you know, doing the traditional path of people will go back to go back to where you come from. I was more interested in going back to experience the continent in an expanded way. So, the expanded way for me was to go to live in a country that is not necessarily my own but that to a large extent in my understanding of the continent that is mine, you know. And also following Senghor's kind of call in the 50s, and in the early, particularly in the sixties when he became President, that, you know, Senegal is a country of all Africans, so to speak. So, and then I had been a few times and I fell in love with the city, and, and this is why I decided, and back then I have to tell the little story because when I was ready to leave, I was ready to move back when I was 25 and I effectively moved back 20 years later when I was 28 I was looking at, Côte d'Ivoire, or Senegal, because I love Abidjan, as a city, and I love Côte d'Ivoire, as a country as well. So, I was, I was very tempted to, to move to Abidjan and, but I decided I mean I was looking at Abidjan and Dakar. At that time, and, but I decided to go to Dakar and I never regretted it, you know, so this is how I, this is my, my journey to Dakar.

PS: So, thank you for that. I am going to listen back to the interview once we're done with this one transcribed and as I transcribed, there'll be points that I'm going to have to go back and ask you about. So, just in terms of school back to your formative years in high school I would say because that's when, at least according to the educational system in South Africa these days. That's when you are specialising, whether you're going to choose business or commerce subjects or you're going to go more towards the liberal arts. So in your respect in which direction were you leaning more towards at that time.

KK: I have to tell you that, you know I mean you in the in the Francophone system you graduate from high school around 17 18 19 and I think that, I mean, I left the Francophone system by then I moved to Switzerland, which is a completely different kind of primary education system, but I have to say that I back then at that age, I didn't really know you know what exactly I'm leaning towards, you know, I was more like, I wanted to find out more, I wanted to experiment more but my generation, you didn't have that luxury you had to go into a path and and make your studies, and I mean, do your studies that graduate, and start being independent. Because this is how life goes, and I was also worried that I didn't want to be a financial burden for my parents for too long. So, I think I went into the business administration path banking administration just because it was, it was possible and it was, it was, I mean, in retrospect, that was really hard to say was the easiest thing I could do back then and also you don't have to forget, you know, I mean, from my generation, you had the Holy Trinity and the Holy Trinity is is Law, Medicine or Economics, or some sort you know, so. So I did, I did it with full conviction, you know, I just did it because you know you had to be on the path, you had to do something and then, you know, start your adult adult and professional life and see where it leads you. So I did it with that strong conviction, conviction, it's not that I was really interested in becoming a business woman, or a banking person. I was just what was available to do and they did it so. And interestingly, in the course of that. Of course when I started, I've always had a love for literature so I read a lot of novels, which I've missed actually because I don't really have time to read novels anymore. So through literature, of course, I also really, you know I read all these African

classics, you know, so I mean literature, novels, really opened up world for me of understanding, African history, African contemporary issues, and so on, that really forged and sharpened with my sense about, about, about the continent about Africanity about, you know, but our position in the world, about our history and about what kind of future can we can we design for ourselves. So, while I was doing this banking administration program. I was really in my so called private life, or leisure time, I was, I was entrenched in, in, in, in creative space, you know through literature I was, I was surrounded by creative people. Most of my friends and colleagues, not colleagues, friends. They were people coming from the humanities, from architecture, from, you know, graphic design, and theatre, cinema, you know, fashion design, and so on. So, it was, it was kind of a very organic way of transition for me also as banking administration, and studies, I worked a little bit. As for a short time, as a social worker, this is something that doesn't really cover a lot.

PS: I have a funny story for you co you're actually.

KK: Okay, and let me finish. I worked for a short time as a social worker, and it's actually really very, very strongly during the time that I was working as a social worker for the city of Zurich, that I really and after the working for the city, as social worker I worked for another kind of advocacy organisation for migrant women in Switzerland and it is really during this time that I became convinced and very conscious of the challenges, you know, of migration of the challenge in case of respect of borders of the challenges of, you know, systemic disadvantage, so to speak. So, and it's also during this time that I became even more informed and convinced that I cannot, I cannot continue living in Europe that I've had, and by then I will become a mother as a little boy. So, so called mixed brace for as a mother, I was kind of, you know, when you become a mother you become a different person become a different human, you know, because of the care that you have to give to your offspring. So thinking of the life of my son. I was just thinking that he will always be confronted by his blackness. and for him to be solid in his identity, and to really have to be to be armed, I have to say, with the hostility that blackness is still confronted with, globally, including on the continent. I think that there is no way I could convey in that, that, that heritage, or tribal knowledge, that, that consciousness, whilst living in Europe, you know, so, and we've all because your, your environment has such an influence on you, you're socialised by your environment, regardless of what kind of culture you have at home. You're so mainly socialised by your environment so I didn't want to compete with the European environment in raising my child, so to speak. So, this is when I decided to go back to the continent was also one of the reasons because I wanted to bring him to grow up in Tagore in Africa.

PS: Yeah, it was so awesome, cool like you said, a lot of jewels and just, you know, talking, I just have a few things I'd like to comment on and say. The first one is, it's, it's interesting how news articles when they write about you as someone who, you know, for example, who is first and foremost was first and foremost a commerce person so you are very much a business person and from that you went to the arts but what I'm getting from you here is and you can correct me if I'm wrong, you got into business as a, as a problem solving, or stop gap or a solution to live these nest to be self sufficient and on your way you are actually on your way to the art which is what you were getting at originally we're heading towards. In any case where you want to hit towards many in any case.

KK: Absolutely

PS: This observation is very interesting because these articles don't, don't make that distinction. They paint you as someone who's commerce driven who got into the arts and I'm getting another understanding of, you know, his social work. My mom actually wanted me to become a social worker as well. Knowing myself I am too sensitive, to do the kind of work you do to come across in that field needs a specific kind of individual. So it's a very interesting, very interesting information that I'm getting and, and like getting a deeper sense or, you know, the person that you are and it makes more sense now when I think of Raw Material Company and hospitable nature of that space, it shows that the founder of the of the of the institution is someone who is grounded within the principles of social work which is let's put the individual first.

KK: Principles of care. I am a genuinely empathic person, and care is essential in my being. I care. care for people. And I think that people are more important than anything else because people are kind of the magic but also the doom of the world. I think people are more important than anything else, and, and the diversity of people even within the same community in terms of characters in terms of, you know, uh temperament in terms of so many things that makes it extremely exciting and also extremely challenging to live together. So, yeah, of course I am. I am very much into care. I care a lot. Most people, I don't think most people will know me or know me well. I care a lot for people. I am very mindful of people.

PS: Just another thing I'd like to remark on that you said, the influence of the environment on the individual that from the Master's study that I did, which was experiencing the process that I could not get to understand the creative process of an artist if I did not know what was surrounding them. So that's a very revealing part of what we do and that's why I wanted to start the interview from with your biographical background so that I'd like to talk to you about, you know, so going back to the news articles from the, from the article written by Sean O'Toole in the he said that in the 90s . But the day before our 28th of April. So, Djibril, and you are 29 I'm 29 so either I thought I thought actually because I remember when I had my birthday. To know like, cuz I realised when I made Djibril that way. Wait, you were born either a day before me or a day after me. I am in my thirties. So, I am the 29th so he was literally the next day after me. So I remember how you said something about Gibble. On the day of my birthday I didn't know it was so close like literally the next day.

KK: Hello. Yeah, I lost you for one second

PS: It's interesting how Djibril I just like a day apart. And the same yeah and interconnected. The question that I wanted to ask you is, in the article, we said that Jupiter was born. And then, you're a German if I'm not mistaken, I don't know. I don't know. Can you maybe tell me a bit about that, that intervention, my poor dad about I think you I guess from your, your love for literature but also you're using a shortage of African literature or.

KK: Yeah, so yeah. Yeah, that's a very good start. I think that was my first ever curatorial project. So I told you earlier, as I was, you know, going through that path of, you know transition, and also self finding, you know, social, intellectual, emotional self finding. I was working as a

social worker, and it was the year I think that Margaret Busby was an American writer in 92. She published that amazing anthology book and the thing has been in second edition recently. Daughters of Africa, which is an anthology of writings by women of African descent. So, I got that book. In, when it came out in 92. And it opened up a totally different world for me. I immersed myself into that book. And I realised that, that's when I was gaining consciousness about where I am, who I am? How is my environment, you know, impacting me as a person and how am I impacting my environment? And I realised that I was not really impacting my environment because there was no room for me in that environment, so to speak, you know, and this is not to critique of Switzerland, as such, but it was more, it is more the realisation that you live in a society of which you feel part of. In many ways, but also, of which you feel excluded in many other ways. So, with that publication. I realise that I can do something, you know, to expand the knowledge of literature by women, and literature by women of African descent and I was living, of course, in the German speaking part of Switzerland. Back then I have to tell you in the early 90s, you know, there was virtually no representation and no visibility for these kinds of practices. So, I just said I had a version of daughters of Africa, very specifically directed to the German speaking area. So that's what I did.

PS: So you, it was, it was, you got baited into a tournament or something.

KK: No, I did it in German from the start, oh yeah, wow, yeah, yeah.

PS: Okay, Because, that is, that is marked as an important contribution from your side and then your practice takes on a discursive role, I guess, because from the research I've done on on your our people have written about you, I'd say before, you know, Raw Material Company becomes the colossal colossal institution it is on the continent. You are doing a lot more on the discursive engagements,

KK: Raw Material is a culmination of a lot of things that I did before Material Company.

PS: So I am just thinking you're the Virgin of daughters of Africa, kind of launched you into, into the field in a much more forceful way, I would say.

KK: Yeah, in the most professional way to much more and have decided a way. So, after publishing go to some type in 94 Because it came out in 94 I mean it was immensely successful. I mean the book came out for the Frankfurt Book Fair, which is a big thing in terms of literary book fairs, globally. I had for like over a year of kind of promotional and lectures and presentations. So, that book came up in 94, and then in 95, I took a hiatus, kind of thing. I went to live in Cameroon for six months, with Djirbil. And when I came back, I travelled to Senegal a few times by then, and when I came. So when I came back I decided to say in 96 I decided to move so I moved to Dakar in 96.

PS: Just in that period of the early 90s Can you because I know that can't start in 8991. That period of two, three years, what was the African landscape look like in that era and how was it were you just Yeah.

KK: I mean the contemporary art landscape really in the 90s was nothing compared to today. First of all, technology was not so advanced so communication was slower, and communication was very localised, very few professionals had the luxury to be able to travel places and see and meet different people. So it was really, but also at the same time, you also felt this kind of sense of new beginning. Because in Doula you had Douala art that opened I think in 91 or 92. The Dakar biennial started then you had the theatre festivals in Abidjan. And the film festival in worker tuba, which is much older, was always kind of a very defining moment every two years ago for filmmakers. So there were a lot of bands of new beginnings kind of taking control, kind of, you know, shifting narratives that were on the continent and then you had in the mid 90s You know people like the Okwui and the Olu's started to emerge kind of more forcefully. So it was an exciting moment because it was really a moment the 90s I love the 90s as a as a decade, when you look at, you know, contemporary art critical practice on the continent and you have the same time in the social sciences, you know people like Achille Mbembe who were starting to drop the knowledge, and so on so it was a moment of realising that, hey, we have to do this on our own terms, is. And you see that translation in, in many forms. And, in the late 90s, early 2000 Bisi started doing her thing in Lagos, and so on so it was really, it was really very, very important decade for for arts and culture on the continent,

PS: And that's why motivation that's what I see is how your curatorial career really took off in the 90s when, you know, South Africa also was getting, you know, into its democratic era, with the 95 and 97 biennials you had all these stories on Africa. So it was really burgeoning era for for the development of African art, and I always say, wasted too to my peers on whatever that the work that you guys did was to lay infrastructure, you know, but the question is, what I'm scared of is that we've mentioned this in conversations in the museum and, you know, how we're still asking myself the same question, Where is the problem. I told practitioners that the ceiling for the practice is, are they really done the work we're just building on what you guys have done yet to be interesting. People develop in the same breath, my peers, that your guys's cool, okay. I like to be at your guys' school where you had to hustle to lay the foundation okay. You had to have some to lay the foundation. So I say to them that a curator is also a hustler and I think this is something we spoke about. And I think it's something that I'd like to think that you're not ashamed to say I think I'm not ashamed to admit to you.

KK: Well, I don't, I don't like the concept and the idea of a Hustler because it connotes some sort of, let's call it, malice, yeah, it's connotated with the ideal jack of all trades, who's just trying to find the way. It connotes so much, with unskilled on skilfully way where, as I mean real hustlers, are very skilled people. So, I don't like to use to use it that much and I don't like it to be applied to me, because I also, you know, because you also understand the hustler as someone would try anything, you know, just to move on, where as I see myself as, as a woman of very clear purpose, you know, and so that's why I don't, I don't like the concept of the hustler. When not applied in the right way. I don't see myself as a hustler at all because I have. That's not because I really have very much respect for real hustlers. Not science, that is not given to anyone, you know, People just try to go about their lives are not necessarily hustlers. Hustlers are really a very very particular type. And it's a very, very particular, specific modus operandi, in life and work, you know, so, yeah,

PS: no I completely understand that distinction and thank you for that hour just coming to you on how you know you people who have the 90s and late 80s, with establishing your, you know, Dakart, your 95s and 97s and then saving the world, there was very little in the way of infrastructure, we had to hustle, really hard to lay that kind of infrastructure place for our future generation to take over. So appreciate our help. It's just an appreciation for the hard work and skill to have. You know those, you know, frameworks, those interventions in the cultural space, there was very much a victim of epistemic violence from the West. You get that Trump Hi, that sounds a lot like a comic book and I guess. Even with so much at our disposal in the way of resources, there is a need for ingenuity in how we think about, you know, models of taking cultural production about it the right way. So, I don't know if you can call you if you think it's almost 10 to 12. I think for the first part, I've been flooded with a lot of information and I want to thank you for that. If you have any questions,

KK: I am following you. I will follow you. Let's do this until you have all the materials you need, and then we can know we can review stuff later but let's go through your process, the process of addiction.

PS: So, what I will do then, is in the next two weeks I'm going to transcribe our interview. Take it from this interview and then when we meet again on the 18th or 17th I'm not sure when it's a Wednesday in two weeks time, I'll have a debrief on this session, so I'll ask you a few questions based on this session and then advance to the next stage of the interview and then from that one I'll decide if there's necessity for a third one which I think there might be an A fourth, fourth engagement perhaps but that can go towards dynamic to next year. I'm looking to wrap them up by late January, 2021 latest metaphor for all the interviews with you, Gary, and Tony, I'm seeing Gabby mitigator online, on Saturday. That will be out meanwhile take from there as well and see what you found the question while lines of questioning. I can come up with

KK: Gabby is of a younger generation so you really need to, because Gabby emerged. A few years after me, and Tony as well so they're, they're really good people. They're great people. Also very smart and generous, how is it going on with Tony.

PS: So I spoke for the first time in much before the lockdown was in February, and before the lockdown, we spoke for about an hour and a half, really insightful conversation, it was more about how. Moreover, the formation of the chronic to render the chronic is not necessary to render the institution I chose to take the clinic as a point of entry, nor to lead to the wider framework. It was a real conversation because I mentioned to you that I was interested in putting up a journal called about time, though, was going to be my proposal to forecast. So I used that as the conversation will be more about how one begins. But also, as you're looking at. Gold production to atone practices notice production in the medium of journalism as a format of that. So, so yeah. But ever since they went into the lockdown it's been hard to get ahold of him. I went to his 50th birthday party. Two weeks ago when I said he was like, 20 Someone had to read their biography, but it wasn't there. He says, On the days. Yeah, we'll meet. I haven't quoted him since then but he's he's he's definitely aware, he's gonna do it, it's just about time. And it says you just have to be persistent and interested in motivation for me is also is of how with Africa, actually, is dominating in the demands of like practitioners curatorial practitioners or cultural punishing practitioners, we have a continent of prominent for example, someone in

Germany, for example myself actually putting the job a lot of Cameroonians responsible for something bicultural about, Like, you know, I made it. Well, because we don't know what to say. I really don't have an answer for it. I would have enjoyed the course Christina. When I went down. It's incredible. It's incredible. And I'm going to put on my video just to say bye to you properly.

KK: Yes. Put on your video. And then you, and then we'll see you soon. I'll be back soon. I'm going to the pound sad today so from there, from there I come back, And then,

PS: I'm getting a book from you, you want to bring up. Which book? Did you release it from raw material?

KK: The art history is long. Yeah, yeah I'm gonna bring, Of course.

yeah yeah recording and recording. I just want to go back to how we ended the last interview, and just asked a few questions. Go back to daughters of Africa and, and just I want to have a conversation in terms of how the book was circulated and and just the channels in which the book moved, and I know it was released at the Frankfurt Book Fair in the other 94, 95, and then you'd like to let you 94. And then you did say there was a year of promotional lectures and presentations. Right, yeah. So I just want to hear your experiences of that or that, you know, period after the launch of the book in terms of, you know the promo, and how its reception, you know, the feedback you got and, Like, what experience that gave you what learnings or teachings that gave you. Yeah.

KK: Okay. I mean, the book as I said, was really developed for a specific region, it was developed for the German speaking region, which includes Germany, obviously, Switzerland and Austria. So, when the book came out in that region. Back then, They used to be intense. I mean, not an intense, at least a sustained promotion of literature, through readings, you know, either readings in bookshops, or readings organised by your publisher or talks and TV, radio, and what have you. So my publisher back then was Marino Flag in Munich and established and run by an amazing person that I lost track of, a thinker writer publisher in Detroit and who actually was born and raised in Kenya, but of Eastern European descent. So, this is just just my digression. As we went digression. With a refill utilised in the debate. Ilya was extremely active in the publishing field, very focused and very engaged with African literature. So when the book came out it was launched, it was released at Frankfurt, Frankfurt Book Fair, which is one of the premier book fairs in the world. And, and it was followed by many invitations from, as I said, from small book shops to literary circles, and so on. And the reception was amazing. The reception was amazing also because we realised that people want to know, and you have to see also in the context of pre-internet, you know, that was in the early 90s Internet was not here yet, in the way it is now. So, there was really a great interest at the end the great, you know, curiosity about the way in which the book was, was, was composed, I have to say like this like music piece, you know, and, and, and the way, and what the book was conveying in terms of the voices that that were chosen and the anthology I mean it's an anthology you know it's a compilation of writings that look at different forms, I mean different subject matters of, of, of writing by women of African descent. So of course genders to mean feminism, sexuality, body and all these kinds of topical areas were dealt with. In the book, and so I had, I had quite a

successful season of presenting the book like from the book phase usually in October, so like from October to late let's say June, I was quite busy, constantly promoting.

PS: Well, thank you. The reason why I wanted to begin with, that is because, to my understanding, or at least how people have before I actually got the opportunity to know more about to learn more about you and your practice, you were regarded as a spoken about as a discursive curator so you, you did more conversate, panel discussions conversations. So I just wanted to touch back on that and yeah like, to your practice we took on a discursive aspect from there. Right. And,

KK: oh yes definitely yeah

PS: Yeah and okay before I ask a more specific question would like speak to that, firstly and then I asked this question or should ask well

KK: I mean I don't necessarily know what the discursive curator is for, for, for my practice I think that the creative matter is, is, is multifold, you know, of course, mediums are specific, and people have an inclination to this and that medium. From the start, from the perspective of the curator, we will not really make work. As such, you know, we mediate it work. You know that is the work of to curate we translate or, we made it, or we accompany work with commissioned and produced works so I have to say that, from my perspective, of course, words are paramount, you know, I mean, we, we, we, we sort of perceive ourselves also through words, it's a, it's quite a powerful tool. Our language is a powerful tool to define the projection of many things as you know, so, so it's. But, honestly, I have to say that I think that I entered the space of curating literature because it was the closest to me, you know, access to books have always been easy. From where I've come from, and love of literature, love of storytelling has been, has always been promoted and and conveyed. So, and when you translate it into the field of curatorial practice. I said one day that curators are storytellers, you know, the work, the word with artists and artistic material to tell stories that are relevant for us. And so for me it's not such a big jump actually just continuing to tell stories, in, in a different way. The bottom line is storytelling and storytelling is an inherent form of, of, of self recognition of, of, of engaging and understanding yourself and others. And, and, and we need to tell each other stories, you know, so constantly. They you see, for instance, you know, I mean, I love the analogy for instance, you, if you take it with a young couple in love. What did they do that constantly reminisced about themselves, their own love story. So it's something that is so inherent in the human dimension of storytelling, you know, storytelling is fundamental. So Curatorial Practice is storytelling as well.

PS: You play like. So, I get so taken aback at how philosophical you are, to, like, un intellectual definitely about how close you are with blows my mind. Something like storytelling now like storytelling is a form of self recognition. I mean that is. So, yes, to just to ask a more specific question that could apply to fill in this blank between 94 the publication obviously told me there was a year of like really anticipated where you were promoting the book, but there seems to be a lull in terms of how your career is is gonna say written about between 95 and 2001. Right. What happened between the six years?

KK: Well I was, I was in incubation. I was in a very important incubation and particularly from 95 to 2001, was, was a very decisive moment and the pivotal moment, you know, in, in my biography, because it is in 95 that I decided to move to Senegal, and it is 95 that I encountered many art professionals from Senegal, it is in 95 that I travelled to Senegal, for the first time, and from then in 95, I went to Senegal for like three times within like six months so to speak. It is a 95 that I fell in love with Dakar. So, but it is in it by. Also, I mean, I fell in love with Dakar already when I was, I guess, six years old, from what these neighbours had told you about. So there was something there was something in my, in my, in deep down in my consciousness, you know, that was calling for Senegal. So, it is in 95 that I made all these decisions, and in 96 I moved for good to Senegal. So when I moved to Senegal in 96 I mean, I like to take my time, you know, I like to take my time of observation, I like to take my time of study. Back then, I still had the luxury to do that nowadays as a museum director, you don't have that luxury. But, so from 96 To 95 I travelled to Senegal as research, so to speak back then we didn't call it research we just call it travel, we know, and, and say 96 I moved to Senegal, and from 96 to tonight to 2001 I mean, I started working at the Goree Institute in 98, I think, yes, in 98, I started working for the Goree Institute establishing the Arts and Culture Department. And within that, I did another curatorial project around literature which is called the Poetry Caravan. and that That project is one of my defining projects, actually in understanding the power of curatorial practice and the importance of mediation of artistic and creative production. So I started working for the Goree Institute in 98 and Goree Institute is an independent centre on Goree Island for cultural and international development, and which, actually, I mean we can talk about it in another time and you can shoot, you will surely come back to it. It was actually an inception based on jus. I mean they have very strong ties to South Africa, because Goree the Goree secured was imposing was launched by Witsie Slabbert it is, was one of the very important South African politicians who work really, I mean you know but, you know, Witsie Slabbert and and Breyten Breytenbach, is pretty. And so I started working there establishing the Arts and Culture Program, and within that program. I organised what is called the Poetry Caravan and the poetry crowd, total ban was an itinerant program of spoken word. And that was bringing together traditional Greek grills, with, with contemporary poets of Africa. And the idea was to, to, to travel along major African streams, like the Niger River The Congo River the Nileand the Zambezi, that was the that was the scope of the project, we of course only managed to do the Niger, they came to Dakar to Timbuktu, so, like, actually linking Goree to Timbuktu, to emblematic sites of African history and African culture, and along the route, stopping at at specific places to interact, to discuss the power of the word the power of literature to Power Poetry, the power of spoken word, with traditional griots and talk his theory, and so on. So I did that project and out of that project. So on that project I invited the filmmaker and, and the photographer, alongside the poet, so there is a documentary film on that. And there is, there was, there is a photographic show. And it is true that a photographic show by Senegalese photographer Boubacar Toure Mandy Moree that I was invited to co curate the Bamako Biennial in 2001, so that fields your gap between 95 and 2000 was.

PS: Thank you, thank you so firstly I just want to ask, is this archive accessible? The poetry caravan puts up the form and the images of the show, photographic.

KK: Well, I can find, I can connect you with the, with the, I don't have anything of that anymore, I have to say I have been. I left everything at the institute, but I can certainly connect you with the

filmmaker who is proud to come from this angle or she used to be my assistant at the institute, but she's an extremely talented thinker and an art professional who specialises in photography and film. So she certainly has an archive of that. And, and the photographer certainly has the archive of the of the of the exhibition that we draw from the experience. So, yes,

Phokeng Setai: if you could connect with them because I can maybe ask if they could share. They'll be wonderful. I'll also remind you. Oh. Okay, thank you so much Korea for that. And just to stay in the 90s I just want to ask a more, you can call it core conceptual question about how I guess in my observation I see that a similarity between your story when you left for Switzerland, you started Africa certainly because of firstly the alienation you experienced in Switzerland, being present. But they started thinking about continuing in a certain way right about happiness. And I just think we had participate to follow the radical solidarity Summit, and how you know it's funny for an African filmmaker you only get access to African archives or, in this case Lesotho archives, when you go to Europe so in Britain, they had all these archives of, you know of Lesotho that he could now make use of anomic films and tell stories about his country. So, this thing about a question about representation and the politics of that, and it's captured in a lot about, oh, a lot of what Curatorial Practice is at least in the political sphere, right. I just like to hear your thoughts on, you know the politics of representation, especially this thing of, you know, having to move away. As an African to see your country in a different way, you know, just like maybe just some thoughts on that. If there's any.

KK: Well, I can only speak from my experience, my experience was not such. I mean, not totally like that, I mean, moving to Europe was a family matter. You know, once again, moving to Europe was, was, was a family matter for me. And I think that my consciousness at 12 to 15 years old, was not sharp. Totally sharpened yet you know, you are still in a very emotional affective space at that age, you know, and, and you follow the compass of those emotions, and those, those affection which is family, friends, neighbourhood and so on. So, and in school. So, when I moved to Switzerland, One of the early observations of course, is there was the ignorance of Europe about Africa, where as I found myself, I found myself coming to Europe, with so much knowledge and influence on of Europe, you know that you, you received back home, being in the post colonial space and being subjugated to European imperialism in many ways, you know, in culture and history. In, literally, all fields of life. So, My real sharp was to that was, of course, as, as, as, as a naive young kid, you, you live in a space where you think that everybody's the same, or everybody is under the same influence or everybody sort of, I mean, or at least that there is a reciprocity, you know, I mean, as a kid in in in Cameroon as a young kid in Cameroon, I was just thinking that, Oh, okay. They are learning about also but they're just as we are learning about them over here, so. So then you travel and you realise that this is absolutely not the case, and, and, of course, the process is slow, it's not something that comes in, like, in, in one act you know there are multiple thin layers of rate of. Had you say, of coming to terms of realising that, realising that condition of that, is that really you know, accumulates with time, and this is how you build your opinions and this is how you sort of, you know, start taking positions start realising the asymmetry of power, you know, it's basically what it is about, you know, so and so and so, it is, it is true that, That's one thing the other thing is also that I strongly, I strongly for me personally, I really felt that I was severed, from the continent or from Cameroon, I have to say too early to too young, I still had an immense hunger for for for Cameroon, because I love my country I love the continent. I love being an African person in the

world, and love being in Africa. I love the African way of life, you know and love the conditions under which we were living, even though they are, you know, we've a lot of challenges, poverty and what have you, but I loved it, you know. So, for me, it was really more than love, that, that, that, that bond that really drew me back.

PS: Okay, cool. So just before I leave the 90s and come back again two more. But I just want to know what happened to the Poetry Caravan that is still running.

KK: No, it was one project and that was a, you know, we never mean It was a very excruciating project to run. It took me at least like two full years to plan. Funding was very difficult, it was very difficult to find funding for such a project and what we did finally, we only did one iteration which was the Niger River. We went into the Nile, we did into the Congo, we did into the Zambezi and, yeah, but I still love that project and that program, and maybe one day I will go back to it, because I think that travelling itinerant programs are very powerful. and, and that's one of the reasons that I really admired in the travelling program, you know, the very fact of travelling on the continent, and around in the context of in a creative context is, it's a very powerful act, you know,

PS: While you were talking about Poetry Caravan and seeing his itinerary diabesity full of innocent and invisible borders and make America okay. I do see the importance of that and I

KK: I did it before them. I am the inspiration of all you guys.

PS: I just want to hear from nuclear people, what happened before, did you do Tanaka before Oh you made this awesome before.

KK: Oh, I met Issa Samb even before I moved to the car for Good is a Sam was one of the first people I met during my very first visit in Senegal in 95, I knew Issa Samb already then.

PS: Okay. So, the reason why I'm asking is because, okay, one thing is your what you always say is you're interested in the knowledge of artists and how they share this knowledge, right. So that's one thing I find important about your practice and your total relationship with it. But then there's also the professional manifestation of your practice which is your Bamako and other things that you did. After that, So, which direction would you like to go to this connection because I remember even in my, my time in Dakar you gave a lecture on Issa Samb shall it's a project Word Words Word that came out in 2013, you know, As I just want to do this, let's start with this as you can, we can go back to how you made this building how that relationship evolved, and only took about 10 years if I understood correctly, for you to do this project.

KK: Well I made this myself in 95 during one of my visits, and how I was not established. I was just based on visiting, coming and going. And he made just such an impression on me. I mean, Issa made an impression on everyone. You couldn't be indifferent in front of this man, because he was just so powerful in his, in his, in his being, you know, and even in his quietness, actually. So, an Issa became my go to person, for, for a lot of things for, for everything basically. And, and we became very close and, and I used to spend days and days in the studio just hanging out there, you know, not necessarily doing anything specific, you know, because he's studio was

also kind of always he seemed downtown, a place where you could just go and be, you know, and without any expectation, without any specific activity, you know, so he's his studio was that for many people, so including myself, but I grew very close to Issa because I was, I was listening to him. We used to have endless conversations because he was also a depository of of the incredible artistic history of Senegal, you know, and the political history of Senegal, particularly of the, of the whole 68 movement, you know, of which was part of so I was very interested in all of that, and this is how he said I became extremely close. And I am. I mean if you study a little bit, the work and the artists particularly not necessarily the work, but the artists. I've worked with, or I continue to work with. They are all people. I've known for years and years and years, I hardly worked we've, we've been not is just one time, you know, and I take a lot of time before even starting working with an artist to understand the person to understand the work so Issa and I spend at least 10 years like that, you know, before we started doing what is could be understood as, you know, curatorial work. So, this is, this is I think this is extremely important because for me. My Curatorial Practice is very much informed by, by the artists themselves, you know, not necessarily the translation and the theory that derived from their from their practice but themselves, who are they, what do they think, what do they feel, what do they do, how do they do it, why do they do it when do they do it, you know, and so on. So, this is for me paramount to understand the practice, and this is why I say that, what animates artists, what, what feeds them is for me more important than the work that they produce or the art objects, or what that they produce so that companionship is, is, is, is extremely defines, really, my relationship to work to the artists so I end up repeatedly working the same artist, over and over again, because I think that Curatorial Practice is a durational conversation with an artist with an artist and his end and their practice. So, this one of gigs that a lot of trending curators do all the time is very problematic for me in terms of, you know, developing a journey, basically. So, I don't know if that answers your question,

PS: It does answer my initial question for now, I'll always next week again approximate but I'd like to ask you something based on what you said. When you said, for you, like it's a good way to understand your practices through the arts that you've worked with, right. I just want to know in this case, who other artists are southern Rockies or sub as well but our services or who else is, is an artist that occupies this like central position in your practice. I know Tracy Rose is one.

KK: Oh yeah, of course, Tracy, Otobong…

PS: Otobong Nkanga of course, can I have one or two more

KK: Kada Attia. Okay. So that was to some extent, George Oshodi, but I have lost, I mean I have to get back to George but some large expanse, George Oshodi of Omean Hatsumi. Who else can I cite in the same vein, more and more now also Alfredo Jaar. Yeah,

PS: Yeah. No, thank you so what I'm gonna do then is also, as part of my preparation for next time I just look into these people's practices more closely, and they just want you as a practitioner, but much better. Okay, so thank you for talking about that period, I think we have now maybe, we have an idea, a snapshot of the 90s and then Bamako comes through a project you do with Boubacar 2000. Right.

KK: Yes.

PS: How was that transition into something that big? How big Bamako was during that time actually wasn't. I think that's when it launched right, if I'm not mistaken,

KK: No, no, Bamako was launched in the 90s I think in 94 or something like that. In the mid 90s Well, I was not the main curator, the general curator was Simone Njame, and as more became my mentor, quite quickly because Simone is also one of those curators who really makes room for younger professionals, a lot, a lot back then. So he invited a few co curators for 2001 and 2003. So I was one of them. I think God if I was younger, another one, and two other words that I forgot. So, this is when he invited me to cocreate Bamako, and to present the Poetry Caravan which we can. So, this is how by Michael Caine, editing, I mean so Simone was the artistic director with a few co curators,

PS: Alright for you, I mean, that's all for now, really. I'm gonna, I'm gonna stop it there. And when I started. It's been a lot since this interview. Thanks for being so generous, I'm gonna put my video back on. Thank you for your extremely generous. I'm gonna talk to the rich guy, and ask if I can get it. I think so. The first one was good. The second one he will better but I think it's getting better but I don't know how long this is gonna take, but I'm gonna ask for maybe one or two more and then, because I think there's so much

KK: Anytime Phokeng, all yours.

Phokeng Setai: I sent you a link to that project space that I was taught about and see, like, your thoughts, but like, Whoa, I always say this for me my work in my profession really well came in Dakar, and I know only so much. I can't even express, you know, so you must know it is just a continuation of what you started.

KK: Just telling everybody that.

PS: You will see the event, particularly the one where I mentioned Gabi because I am talking more about the, you know, the Berlin biennial context conceptualising that and how you know someone became internationally by a cultural practice, but those who know me know know that I am from the Koyo Kouoh school of curatorial practice.

KK: Thank you so much darling. Bye.

Appendix B - Ntone Edjabe [Interview Transcript]

Ntone x Phokeng 1
Friday, August 13, 2021
1:45PM • 41:13

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, inaudible, space, naming, cape town, thinking, political, pan african, publication, called, festival, sandile, journal, studio, practice, world, moment, cultural, music, producing

SPEAKERS
Ntone Edjabe, Phokeng Setai

Ntone Edjabe [NE]: I think that there are several beginnings as far as Chimurenga is concerned. One of the beginnings is of course the naming of an activity. It's commonly understood that one thinks about the things and then that thing materialises. That's a very Christian conception of Genesis, it's like God imagined the world and the world came into existence. I think it's also a very hegemonic way of producing history. It's really the Western way of producing history, to identify the progenitor, the initiator because in terms of the pyramid scheme the ideas are always at the top. beginning is one—as far as Chimurenga is concerned— one of the beginnings is of course the naming. The naming of an activity. Because, you know, it's commonly understood that one thinks about a thing, and then kind of realises... realise that thinking materialised, and things. That's a very Christian conception of Genesis, you know, it's like God imagines the world and the word, became. So, I think... It's also a very hegemonic way of producing history. It's really the Western method of this industry to always identify the progenitor, the initiator conceptualised in terms of the pyramid scheme. The ideas are. So, the most... revolutionary actions or interventions that were made into the world [inaudible] It's not always so. If you look at the Haitian revolution, for example, it's not that in a Marxist-Leninist approach, some guy, developing a vision of another world and then galvanising the masses to make [inaudible] usually it's actually the practice of life, you know, that bodes as it unfolds. It then produces language, you know. So we can go about some very revolutionary actions for some time without preoccupying ourselves with naming it, you know. One of the reasons it is so is because naming it make[s] it recognizable by people who are not themselves involved in the action, and therefore makes them vulnerable to the attack, so fugitist, fugitism and maroon practices, it is that you have to learn to kind of hide in this system. You don't... you don't want to introduce yourself... until you've gathered enough strength and power of introducing yourself, naming yourself, identifing yourself as other, or as [inaudible] you need to establish some basis fo that. So, with that analysis in mind, I think the naming of Chimurenga arrives, many years after the practice. The naming occurs, publicly, through the release of the first edition—what then became the first edition, at the time it wasn't imagined as the 'first', because the first is a precedent to a second. There was no 'second' in mind, it was an intervention in a particular time, moment, situation, space... And that intervention called itself 'Chimurenga'. So that's the kind of, naming, but the practice that led to it is connected to several things, it's connected to, first, several biographies—my own included—my own trajectory; it's also connected to how those biographies that [inaudible] particular place, and that place was the Pan African Market. So, in 1996, a very good friend of mine, Vuyo Koyana, and I... Vuyo Koyana was a friend—I was working as a writer and a journalist, and we became friends and she

suggested to me a place that was... that I've been going to... That's actually the place where we met... a white artist Michael... something, sorry, I don't remember his surname now... Scott. He had initiated... he had a studio on Long Street, in a building. He had this studio and he was sharing this studio with a few people, you know, in the way that these liberated zones announced themselves is a new sense of opening so some of the traders were at the time, this is the mid 90s, who were at the time trading in Greenmarket Square. The studio was adjacent to Greenmarket ... Long Street on the side, some of the traders there from Senegal, from other places. Brothers and sisters, trying to make a living. You know, the sense of opening. So this became the place where, you know, the fell garden, You know I'm saying just for a moment, you know, because he was an artist, the space was an art studio and his brother Michael was accommodating, he liked [inaudible]. So, ourselves, I was working at the Cape Town at that time and ... also being in that... in the proximity of that... There's just this pull, you know, because I knew that would be a space where I would meet brethrens from Senegal, from, you know. And we'll just hang out, have a coffee and whatever. So, Michael wanted to move on—you know, upward mobility and shit, I think he was buying a farm somewhere. And Vuyo just said to me, "you know what, this place is so essential for us," you know what I'm saying, she's a businesswoman, I'm here doing my cultural work. "How about we take over this space from Michael so this is kind of late 96 December, [inaudible] moving into 97, and there's a lot going on in the country at the time... [inaudible] arrived in Cape Town. Well, I arrived in South Africa in 93. In June, 93, but I was back and forth between Joburg and Cape Town for a while. This is another beginning in terms of my own...

Biography Yeah. So, that's one thing. I'm focusing on the Pan African Market for now, where all of this [inaudible]. So, Vuyo and I eventually, you know, take over the space. Now, none of us are really involved in the practice of artmaking, so we don't really require a studio, per se. What we need, pretty much, existentially, is a space where we can feel ourselves in the city. So, what we encourage, then, the space to become is to become [a] sort of cooperative where these brethrens who were coming from Greenmarket Square, ourselves and various other people can then gather, and the way to do that is to turn that thing that was Michael's studio into a restaurant. So, the person that we approach to run the restaurant is a friend of mine who was working at the Argus, at the time—Binyavanga Wainaina—[inaudible] subsequently became world famous writer, but he had just moved back from the Eastern Cape, he was at the University of Transkei, formerly known [inaudible] Transkei... moved to Cape Town, and this was lingual financing for the newspaper, so we're hanging out and he's always talking about food, you know, really into food like, "you know, we have this space, how about we start?" so Binya then becomes a kind of Chef. So, it then becomes official that this space is a Pan African space because of the people [inaudible]... We name it the Pan African Market, ... because, you know, look at us. 'Market', why, because of the activities that the brethrens, from Greenmarket Square were doing. So we say, there's no competition or whatever, but we want to acknowledge that [inaudible]. So we said to them, you know, you can do whatever you do there but you can also do it here, you know, and charge this place with some life. Don't just rent, become an owner. So, it then becomes the Pan African Market and from the first minute, it is charged with these intentions of making a space, in a city, you know, where we know we are not welcome. How was Cape Town back at that time? Wow, I don't have to tell you when you see what it's like now! ... It was really rough, it was actually, as far as I can recall, it was the first Black-owned business on Long Street. So it was an intervention on several levels. It was an intervention on several

levels, maybe it wasn't necessarily the first Black-owned business, but it was the first Black collectively-owned. And that changes things, because it's not a commercial trajectory of self enrichment, it immediately becomes a political project because of an assemblage of Black people, African people, right in the middle of the city. So, from the very beginning, it was an important space. There are various people doing things so I'm doing my writing, but I'm also DJing so, on Fridays, I will set up my turntable there and play records... The music is kind of spreading into the city. So that alone, also brings new people. At the newspaper, I'm working with people like Sandile Dikeni the poet, on different trajectories with people I've met already in Joburg. So he invites other poets on to these Friday sessions and reads, you know, sometimes really, like, world famous. I remember, Benjamin Zephaniah was in South Africa. He performed but Sandile knows him, so he's like, "you know, we have this gig on Friday " and Sandile... uses his platform as editor of the Cape Times to publicise this thing. Cape Town to publicise this thing. So, the day that I realised [inaudible] was that day when Zepheniah was on the balcony of the Pan-African Market. So, Sandile just mentioned in his column 'Benjamin Zephaniah' this place called the Pan African Market on Friday and then thousands of people showed up. I had no idea about the resonance of what we were doing. it was so personal, it was so necessary for each and every one of us. I had no idea about the resonance. I'll never forget this: Benjamin was reading, there were so many people on the balcony overlooking[ing] Long Street, there were so many people, they couldn't come into the building, so the people occupied the street. There were so many of them that the cops couldn't move them so they ended up blocking the streets. Best party I've been to was an Art Fair party, like you guys are used to actually packing down to the rafters soil. Was that really a woman or not so much. The rich have this small, very personal activity and the necessity that we were, you know, that so many people connected to it and wanted to be part of the quarter million black people, Mostly, I mean the city culturally, actually some spaces. Music spaces. So, you know, it wasn't this kind of fascist moment, run by commerce, they were actually cultural spaces. Because of the struggle. So, you were, wow, you know, at least at that point, even though it was a personal political in that sense because politically, you know, project. So from that moment certainly my own involvement was much more difficult, it was no longer about your personal assistants, it was really about the city. This is the late 90s, early 90s I think, was Friday's session coming together listening to records, whoever's reading poetry. So you asked you for that. And it was also an instruction to me about needing people to know how to find space. Keep shooting. Because part of my practice was also talking about something. Experience is not document, recording, which is leaving, emancipating through it. I started thinking about capture Friday. Just to put out this stuff I wanted to write there wasn't a lot of space that our content published. And what's keeping people safe is Sunday as frequently. Please, please let me know. So, my being my working paper. So he's thinking about it enough, this in a lot of what he wanted to create was radical Gail Reagan amazingly talented we had this kind of solid inside that was like a secret crew inside that corporate machine. We'd know the secret space inside the union have fought for this, in this was his crew for him was inspired by from He was a big fan of all the drum writers and what they were able to achieve in a different time in a different context and he was trying to produce that image, you know that level of freedom. And that level of reverence, that level of forward thinking. and he was pushing us so. But to do that, the incident machine was constantly fighting. He was thinking about starting a magazine on the side and talking to me about why don't we start our own thing and call it Bongo as a nod to Drum. college as a not to draw. As the drum, drum, drum magazine. But like a contemporary thing about the use. Yes, so you want, he

wanted. And so while this is also the parents, you can end in that moment of uncertainty. He got called by the government, who works for the Department of Information. So I knew immediately that I did not have the time. You know the one requires a certain level of, you know, when you're going to read popular culture. You have to write it from inside the culture itself. And I knew that I could not write South African popular culture from inside the culture itself. So it was very clear that we Sunday late in the bumble project departed with him. So, when I was thinking about realising what was going on inside the Pan African market, it materialised as an intervention. I was thinking about an African project. This is my personal project. This is what informs opt in this is naturally the things that are getting involved in. So it wasn't going to be about specific cultural critically, to be aware of other levels of synchronisation. That was one thing. The other thing that we both face as journalists and writers working in a system was the difficulty of writing about cultural political causes that seem to have been that sees liberation that politics were done. And therefore, you know I'm saying, we could leave politics to professional politicians, you know, we could leave RealtyShares and just get involved with Lawrence save that he was not saved as an order but you can see directionally, you know, what is encouraged or is given a platform. What Sandile was trying to do was to critique this. So it was very clear to me and this is what protests, as soon as they created that publication that I was thinking about at Pan African yet. Think about the continent, it really surfed mentally of the borders that have been imposed on one hand on the other hand, he had to be political, as he had to be consciously addressing society. The third thing because of my own transition is that music for me was that for that media, which did that work more successfully. Yeah. So you're combining all of that, naming that publication Chimurenga was natural because the word itself suggests all of these things. But I really imagine just as equally so as Sunday listening and juggling DVDs and a lot of older comrades. What meaning the struggle but could not articulate themselves, Culturally, in this new moment Nevil Alexander had hired heavyweights. Here, listen, who sent the paper. Game Reagan, you know, people we've met through our respective networks Steve Gordon, you know, we all have briefcases, you know, music, and politics as this word, I just said to people watching Ranga means music and politics. What do you think of the evolution of the PC? It was written about Neville Alexander's PC and the reason that teachers are suffering anism socialism. You know, so forth. You know, I spoke to a friend of mine. What has been working for newspapers in jobs to help us cannot design it together. There was so much material, and all of it, because it was not a magazine publication. All of it was good so the publisher could only afford in terms of our pocket. I can only afford to pay for publication, I think, 45, or something like that, so we had to cram all of these sheets inside of 45 pages. And that then suggested the design, because you're too cramped together, you couldn't print in colour. So, we took one column and then black into the aesthetic came out, the necessity of what we could do, how we could do it wasn't like oh we want like a summit and now we're actually we're just trying to put this shit together. Okay, where do we say we're gonna run this story, because there's no space to be small because you're putting all these big stories. In fact, 45 pages, and in what format, do you have to be easy to move because I was the only one who could actually sell all of these people were busier. So he had to be in a particular format that would be cumbersome to pull it back, which is that. So all of those things determine what the objects are. Eventually, the form of the object, and when. So, I was just kind of quite opportunistic. At the same time that this thinking was going on, the Pan African market was coming up as a cultural space. Rashid was on loan but another friend was an ex journalist, the elder was launching the kids and Jazz Festival. Right. So I'm like okay, I'm just gonna use that festival. I don't have money to do a

launch or to do publicity, but I know that all of my friends are into music. They're all going to be there, so as to achieve. I'm just going to come to the system. You know, I don't have money, but I'm just going to come in, distribute this. So, for the two days of the festival, the first issue of the first group centre for the two days. I'll go to the African market, load the backpack, take a taxi festival in Weatherford for free, no no no I think it was, was 15 bucks or something like that. Anyway, oh wow he news Peter Tosh will cover shut down this concert in Swaziland. At some moment during the concert. A lot of this gets moving during the course in turn, MC steamship yeah for a woman didn't turn towards LF. So, this photographer Steve Gordon was snapped right so we took that image as the red so a lot of these taps at the festival, they were like, Yeah, this is really. Yeah, so this is, I think this is what you don't want you know. Oh, this thing's still quite fresh for a lot of these cats in their year enjoying whiskey or whatever but they know where all of this comes from so this important in those two days of the festival, we have created like 1500 copies of that object in those two days, I personally saw all of them. Just, you know, back and forth over to the festival started at five o'clock, ranting, wanting to just battle for selling. Selling Selling. So that happens. I was not mindful of the fact that people were buying it as a journal. For me, it was a compilation of writing about music and politics to signify that the slogan of that first edition was destroyed and continues to signify that culture has to remain in place for political renewed vision established through years when people got it, just because of the shape of the journal. The next issue. So, because I sold. Personally, people say, emailing me and saying hey, I loved it. I loved the outward displays, they just spontaneously started sending their own writing. I would just like to say thanks a lot. While that was also in your binder would be running because he lost his model. Okay, I need to go back to Barry studying. So when there is just something that happens in your life. Yeah, by his mother, discovering, because he's really looking for restrictions, he sends me to share what he had written, wasn't, you know, but I'm just like, you know, people have been asking these, I'm looking at this. This was a similar submission, just share it with you before, but I'm thinking maybe we can build the second volume of that publication around this, because this touches all of us. We know migrants, or we actually display really like he really just thought what was going on for many of us. Let me look at what people have been sending that connects to this idea, and build an issue. And that's how the second video came about, we really didn't want to rename the team. Just say team render fallen. So it was still a standalone thing, it was still very much a standalone thing. Okay, Volume Two, you know, he really just went on like just responding to responses, you know, people get it and oh, and he's like therefore until you see something that opens a new platform where you're coming from. This was taking us. So I think for the first few years it was really that, just so you will see if you look at the journal. That's what we call it, but up to the sixth edition of the thing we're currently renting level three, volume four volume five where you know that when the existing journal is a chronic is the chronic but even the chronic. There's a whole difference. A new lecture if you like. But how do you say conversations? Stories are made. So that went on, but by the time we publish a thing. I think it was around four or five, was that we are in a particular practice, and then that practice as history. So we could no longer say we are just responding, no no no we are alone in itself because we kept the form, we are producing a form that comes from somewhere else. You know we are aligning ourselves to particular Miss rushers. And let's not be shy, let's call ourselves a journal, less to the surf into periodicity, we're actually continuing work that stuff riders and all of us. At that point it became a very difficult thing to say, Actually no, let's talk before we adjourn this journal, we had the beginning. Now we wish to continue living here, but because the thing is working through. Everything is personal, so

engaging. So, in that way, condition, you have, whatever. you just started Pretoria which form from job to cater to take over somebody, you know. So when I say Re is really, If you wrote the first kind of. And I'm like, no help you so can you help with the, you know, just, even if you have proofread this was really just so I've seen really in terms of what contributing, which has not organised itself. I think we all drink together. One of the things to do. But it's not a member, it's really based on what you're thinking about. So, the founders piece reason we obviously can so easily find the thing with the narrow range, eventually, you have to you have to realise at the time. After he fought. He fought for integration. So what is happening, why the level was bringing black people into the fold, you know, that was the thing. So the idea, the kind of resistance. The iPhone from some of my friends who are working for a media house. Why are you starting a journal called Chimurenga when we've taken over. What are you trying to see, when you are starting a general coaching, who is actually fighting the conversations I was having appears so. The idea was more or less, with this, with this new initiative. Why don't you take these positions? So I don't know the production. Subsequently, the number of folks especially younger folks try to kind of like fall into one of the things that we actually heard an infrastructural political social basis of this wasn't something that came to mind. And they came up with that place where we realise that this place was. So we had this, he was searching, intellectual, was a political reality with all of these manifestations. Okay, so I think that people were becoming younger people and they like No, you did the wrong

PS: Seeking places to establish, I think that there are several. One of the cases to work within the space, editorially kind of moving it into this Somali shop, which were the main target and the other focused on three different African cities. Why don't we take that feature and make it a reality? The notion of like minded people, spatially, useful, engagement, what. So we just did a side project on this. A do peeking. Give us an internet blog that begins in May 2007. It will run that blog, every day, to new articles from whatever happened in the world that lost everything. just as a way to open up the register that will enable us to talk about this. Rather than starting now as if this thing doesn't have history. This code, doing rapid open talk. Why don't we use, and produce a sort of fictional news that would've appeared in May 2008. That newspaper that didn't appear that wasn't written the way it should've been written. Let's make that thing. It's usually speculative, and all of that stuff, let's assemble all of the tools we've gathered, and that's how the Chronic was born was important. It was important that Chronic came about as one issue of Chimurenga the journal was important that it has a different form, because it was important that it circulates differently. The thing about the journal is that it's usually the culture of like minded people, and then like minded people know where to get it. Like a library you go to the shelf, you know, you will know exactly where to find your thing. So we wanted to be less predictable in terms of form. We also wanted to recharge the very place that was attacked. So we all know this, including querying the newspapers. But, you know, set up places where you have Somali shops. We do a Census of Somali shops which were the main targets in the 60s with many shops in Cape Town in Durban, PE. And these will be the only places where you can get this paper. Except if you find it. Let's use it as an exercise to recharge talk back to the very thing that is trying to kill it. Also as a way of getting them involved, as a way of acknowledging their presence and how their presence is dangerous for themselves, let's make that presence a site of desire because you want this thing. Whatever. Yes, exactly. So that was good, kind of breaking out of this small oneness of the literary journal. The other aspect of the project was to present ourselves, actually, in this same list of the modes of presentation. These posters are

also well, which were based on some of the themes of the issue. Really fundraiser, we wanted to do this public intervention and went to the city and go write for sponsorship and for actually leading up to the release of the paper which was. So like let's get out of our small room. Let's get into the public space. Let's deal properly. Let's stop feeling sorry for ourselves. So that was the intervention among engaging with content for the publication. After that experiment, the publication came out in three countries, it came out in Kenya, it came out in Nigeria simultaneously working with our friends. It comes out in each of these cities at the same time. So he's no longer a South African thing. We are saying that the Xenophobic attacks cannot be discussed as a South African thing. Let's produce it as a simultaneous thing

NE: Because it was an accumulating source. She. And so, are you gonna go for these? I told you. What about everyday? We're about one hour. In what kind of quality can it acquire? What density can it acquire? I suggested to my colleagues why don't we take that fiction that section of the Chronic, which itself was a fiction of a newspaper that presumably is a weekly newspaper that appears in three different African cities, why don't we take the fiction and make it a reality?So it started as a fiction, let's actually produce a newspaper, which will appear simultaneously in these three cities on a quarterly basis, called The Chronic. That's how the Chronic comes about… because it was a once-off. So it came out of that and so he said he knew practice, you know, the journal was no longer an accumulation of intelligence of resources of energy towards these things and congratulate each other, such great things, was not limited practices, and, and you cannot do that, you cannot do that, you have to do it seriously, you have to enter the economy, to produce, everyday you need resources you need to pay people. So we had to change an economy entirely from a journal that was produced primarily from voluntary contributions. Actually, we actually said no more from contributions. Everyone writes a sentence, a comma, contributes to design, everyone should be paid. Now, that's, that's the move that makes what you're doing, authentic otherwise its performance. If you're going to work everyday, you have to pay the rent, you have to raise a family, you have to educate them, so if you're demanding this kind of everyday contribution towards something that will appear. Then you have to pay, you know, so we have to change more than that. If you have to pay people, while at the same time you're very critical of things like funding, whatever, then you have to be able to produce an economy yourself for what you do. So, it's no longer oh we are happy to put the thing we don't know if he sells or not you actually have to sell people actually have to buy because you have to pay. And now you're part of the, you're no longer out there with the world trying to do this work.

PS: We're so fortunate. Organically started to go after you to actually start to start making these decisions. Nowadays, as someone who's interested in walking on the same journey. I don't think I have it.

NE: The point I think is that I think the major, we cannot ignore it. It is so important when we talk about this thing. Let's, let's only talk about creativity, let's talk about what it was in 2011. At the very time we launched the Chronic that very edition of the Somali we won this prize. 200,000 Euro. You never, ever dream. So I was okay. The thing is, let's not produce something that when. Let's use the awards to actually move ourselves through the awards system. Let's use this money to produce an economy, as opposed to producing more of these kinds of tiers that give us more hours. Let's not be passive in a system that we never created ourselves, let's use

this money to create our own system. So, none of these are impossible without having an injection of 100 000. You can then say that we're launching, and for a whole year or two years, we may not make money from it but we're still people will still stick to these principles, until such time that we have enough of the system to actually sell it. We'll learn. But the gesture was to say, we are using this to get means of production, rather than just to be more glamorous, working for the same was as successful.

PS: Would you say that you were successful?

NE: I don't know, I mean it's difficult to say successful. Those things are difficult to evaluate. What is important is that we are still here, and we are still. I don't know if you know one could call it success decline was to kill left. You know, and we are still here and we still have to also everyday but that's, you know you want to make a living from what you are doing. So that's, I don't know if it's still in wisdom. We don't know for long, but we have to change our frame of mind. Nobody else is paying the rent of the space we are paying for ourselves through our work. Nobody can tell us what to do, what not to do, how to do it. Well, that's why we do dash, and we hope to get the economy to do more of that. But,

PS: As I remember when, it's not a given. I actually remember the feeling I got excited that I then aroused in my body in my mind in my stimulation when I learned about the activities that Chimurenga was doing. And I only wish you long that Chimurenga can continue doing what it does. It's been a lodestar for me as someone who grew up in a place where there was nothing like this that could make your mind excited. This was so crucial to my thinking about collectives, about artistic practice, and cultural practice. When I was in Dakar faculty members who came from different parts of the world spoke so highly about the work you do. And those who are familiar with the Cape Town context. I feel like for the cultural space to hold we need a Chimurenga.

NE: But, you know, yeah, no give thanks for that but the thing is, this thing about success is really important to evaluate. For me, the project is no longer a great concept. I think about the life of the journal. I think it became more of a big conceptual question about logistics, so that the work that we do is no longer that we have this concept and then we produce logistics, we gather logistics to materialise. No, we turn it around. Let's depart from the fact that, by the mere fact of being black by the mere phobia of African phobia. In this condition, in this thinking from this place. We have great ideas everyday. That's no longer the question. We don't have to manifest. Oh look at that. Can we invest a portion of our day to day intelligence on how we write? So, this thing about acquiring means of production, is not just, it's not just the kind of, you know it's not solely from the Masters perspective is really also saying, okay, a good portion of the funds that we actually expend we want to print things we want to put objects into the world as wide circulation, you know, the good portion of, of what we spend is towards this thing, we spend years fundraising to print it. So how about we become printers ourselves? How about we cut out that space that the West has constructed between the perceiver and the maker? For the maker to just be the craft person and the con river to be the artist who gets all of the tools to close that space. So we do everything ourselves ourselves, we print ourselves, we cut it ourselves, we package ourselves that way would put out the very structure they put in place that makes these artists remain in the bubble, because someone like Kentridge has two hundred fucking ants

working for him. He is just a big idea. Let's close that gap, so that the person who would talk about this thing is actually the person cutting it. Let's, let's use our resources, create a system that makes them by a printer. It gives us, because you can only do that if you have these things. Otherwise you have to outsource them, pay money to whoever has them. A lot of our work is actually about investigating how to do the work. These things are the concepts. The logistics are really, then you really have practice. If the ideas are relevant, great. I think they always are because we are here and we are alive in this world. The issue is Why do we need the biennial for the work to exist?

PS: Yeah.

NE: There is nothing wrong with biennials but why can that work not exist in that context. Why can't we, what can we actually do ourselves? We are here, we are alive, we're creating everything. Where is it? We need to have. So a lot of the work.

PS: That's all for today, I think. I mean I just knew coming into this as you were asking for. But I think that should still be the issue. And then maybe we can continue the conversation. No, as you wish, I mean as an elder, you my elder and I told you from afar, and I mean, for me it's just I swear to god, it's you do it so many other people who, who I'd never thought that could be in such close proximity to you and have a conversation. So I put this space in with so much humility and I just wanted. So I like going forward. I think this is a conversation that must continue. And I'm just getting a note for this. With your permission, I'm gonna stop this recording, and then we can continue.

NE: As you wish.

Appendix C - Gabi Ngcobo [Interview Transcript]

Friday, September 10, 2021
11:44AM • 40:28

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

art, happening, people, Durban, university, felt, education, drawing, students, church, Islamic, thinking, matric, philosophy, exhibition, painting, started, called, miracle worker, interview

SPEAKERS
Phokeng Setai, Gabi Ngcobo

Phokeng Setai [PS]: So in this first part of the interview, I think it's going to be a series of one hour interviews within the next attempt to finish the interview physically before the next year. I can start sharing a little bit too. It's been a month or 123 months. In practice, like last year, I've got a bit of a field job. I'd find a bit of a feel about the stakes, but they don't tap into that again but for the moment. You know, you know, the more critical conversations are all about ethical

patient service learning to be open, open ended, conversations is like. It's semi structured, there are certain questions, which will be more like your education.

Gabi Ngcobo [GN]: Let's go there because I'm not comfortable with graphical information. I think we don't have to stop there, we'll find our way in. Wait, Wait, people have exhausted, kind of research. Usually they start the table such as, you know how important it is in the spaces that they, you know, that they, that they feel that has been there for a long time so that's why I'd like to start with biography.

PS: So maybe if not, went to education and began as an OD practitioner. Hold on. Yeah. When did you do that, really.

GN: Yeah, I guess. I mean I didn't grow up with art, of course, and I'm not too talented. I didn't like drawing. But like what, what happened was, like, almost like a mistake, or a chance not a mistake more like a chance encounter with art because I was bad with mathematics in high school and I was going to this high school in the township uMlazi P-Section which is called Ogwini Comprehensive High School and then I think I was doing Grade Ten and there were new subjects being introduced in ou curriculum. It was Biblical Studies which wasn't there. There was a choice, you could do Biblical Studies if you didn't want to do Mathematics. I didn't want to do Mathematics so I went to Biblical Studies but then shortly after they said another choice is art. So you can do Mathematics Biblical Studies or art and I left Biblical Studies immediately and I went into art. I remember that the art teacher that was hired at the time was Pat Khoza, Ms Pat Khoza and she interviewed us, the people who had put their hands up to do art and asked us why we want to do art. Basically, I didn't have an answer, nobody had an answer. Some people had an answer like I want to be a fashion designer so art became a way in for them. But I didn't, it was just that I didn't want to do Biblical Studies and I didn't want to do Mathematics. Yeah and the school literally built an art room and we did different things, she would teach us about the Roman Greco, European Art History. We would learn mosaic, paper mache, and pointillism. I really enjoyed it, it felt so natural to me. I think it was the first time since I started school that I was so into a subject. I was into English and then there was at. And then Pat Khoza she taught me for two years and then she went to work at the Durban Art Gallery as an education officer and then there was a new art teacher she was American called Ms. Nicole Huntley. I kind of resolved after some time that this is what I wanted to do. My career choices, I don't think that other one was real, I wanted to be a lawyer. I started telling my parents that I wanted to do art. My father tried but not intentionally did something else. I think he came to speak to my art teacher because I won a prize at school as the best art student in matric. I was given a book by Gavin Young, Art in the South African Townships. It was a critical year Mandela had just come out of prison, so much was happening. I remember in february people were toyi-toying in celebration in the street, so much was happening and unfolding and there was so much space to dream so I was like yeah, I am going to university and I'm going to do art and I applied to what is now the Durban University of Technology, it was Natal Tech at the time and I remember going for an interview there, it was all white men interviewing me and then they told me that if I wanted to come in I would have to do a pre-course and I wouldn't be able to make it. Anyways and then I applied very late for the University of Durban Westville and of course they were very eager for students and students who wanted to do fine arts. There was a point system there and

that point system I qualified to do whatever I wanted to do but I wanted to do art. Even if you did a plain BA you were forced to do art. Students were given two choices, Drama and Fine Arts.

PS: To go back before we go too far. Let's have a question about what are we working with at the time and remember what the work is can you speak to it a little bit, or want to carry

GN: Everything, it was everything. The exam for example our matric exam was for us to draw a still life and then a figure and landscapes. We were asked to do research on one artist and I chose Cezanne, Paul Cezanne. You know with oil pastels I would reproduce some works of Cezanne. I still do like Cezanne and there is a painting of his Black man and I saw the original for the first time in 2015 Sao Paulo in Brazil. Yeah my teacher gave me a book of Sekoto, and I was like what a black person doing this kind of art. I thought I was going to Paris, you know it was this idea of an artist. I went to university then and tried to enrol for French but then it wasn't part of the electives I could choose so I ended up doing Zulu first language and philosophy. It was also interesting because Durban Westville was a historically Indian university. We would learn about Islamic art an Hindu art. I went to university when I was 16 and most of us grow up with very religious backgrounds. In Islamic arts. For me, I don't feel that I'm doing Islamic Western art and I think this is the point I was very young when I went to. When I finished high school, I went to university when I was 16 . We come from a church background. There was this thing that was drowned and normalise that boats with him to go to church. And that's a very scary thing for a child who was hoping Devon recently came across this box full of my pictures. And I was like this photograph of me. And I had shown MSA which is called the case MSA now, and it was still called 323, which is now drawing on. And I think that exhibition was like drones, you know. So like, for me, I was like, thinking about this thing. So when going to the university and other kinds of things. Islamic just opened my mind. And then they are still going to be known as philosophy in other religions. Religions they don't speak about necessarily. Not everybody is Kristin can imagine it 16

PS: Okay. Yeah, I am mentioning interesting because for me it was to like my, I would say, land when she was around that time have been very difficult for me. I guess it's also related to my mom, when I was like, 1516, we started going to church. And it was, We had a West African priest and the congregation was looking back so it was sort of like, he was a miracle worker. But, but, this man was deemed to be a miracle worker. So we were going to the church and I was really a troublemaker. At the time, I was also thinking deliverance means I'm kind of like, you know, down. And I was very active at school, so I broke my ankle. And because the priest was a miracle worker. I was like, Mom, I'm sure I can help. So it's quite a lot of my ankle. I was hospital insurance for the person to pray for land. And, like, you'll find, and I wasn't fine. I wasn't. And you know who was the Lord. And you're supposed to be about disclosure by that. By that example but what was happening behind the scenes, what we were just getting wrong with meeting was an escape and I took two. I think it was simple. Public Library, and I was getting a lot of it. Just getting exported philosophy and different kinds of ideas. My son and I also got started gravitating towards sunlight and reading and literature. So yeah sorry kids. So yeah this was. For those of you that awakening. How was the mental state?

GN: At the same time it was a very conservative program, you know, usually, well first year you kind of did everything I mean I became very good and then I understood that that art is about

seeing. Of course there's people who have talent, you know, but like to see, so that I could be able to draw. I was like the best in my class. We would draw still life with bottles, you know, and make it look like it's gonna break with pencil and rubber. So the lecturers from second and third year come to see my drawings. I was just so focused but it was really conservative, object drawing and then anatomy where we drew the skeleton piece by piece and then a whole full one and then the muscular body. I remember this one time going to the anatomy lab and I saw these students looking at bodies. That's when I started thinking about the bodies. I still remember the smell but anyways it was conservative and in the second year you could choose print making, or sculpture I chose painting. There was actually a year where I couldn't stand the studies, I felt like I was bored and I felt like I couldn't learn anything so I stopped going to class. I absolutely stopped and I would go to the studio at 6pm till 6am so that I don't see the lecturers. Also some of them were racist Indians and racist white people and a Black lecturer who wasn't so clever. The turning point for me when things started becoming interesting again at school when Nalitha came to teach painting, that was great. Nalitha was amazing. She basically saved my life. Because I was still running away, I would just come at night and finish a painting that people would be struggling with forever. And I would spend the rest of the day. I had a radio show on Tuesday's, the campus radio and I just got into sports. I think that's when I started doing sports. So I played soccer and I would just like to run, so I was running for like an hour, then I would do aerobics for an hour, then I would go to soccer for an hour and after soccer I would go to the gym to lift weights for another hour. I would spend all this time working on my body. During the day I would sleep and wake up. I would go to the quad where everyone hung out when they have a free period. That's when I started to make friends outside of the Fine Art students, that was good because I was making friends with my soccer team and radio people. I was always with people from Mafikeng for some reason. Yeah, but I was just like these guys from Botswana from Mafikeng because I didn't want to chill with the Zulu's. Those guys were more interesting to me. I picked up Setswana from there. And then in the final year the external examiner was David Koloane. That's how I met him and he gave me an A. He encouraged me and then he started including me in exhibitions and he invited me to the Bag Factory and I went to Germany for the first time with him in 1998 for an exhibition. He was my mentor basically and Nalitha on the critical side, they kind of knew each other from exile in London. Nalitha had been in exile and when she came back she was an Indian woman from Ladysmith, she was religious in an awkward way, she was into Saibaba. At some point she renounced the world and went to live in the mountains of India but I still see her on Facebook. She just took me on because I was just like lost. I wasn't stimulated, y'know. She came in my fourth year and I would just dodge. I used to make these drawings on my own and one time I showed them to her and she was like 'these are good'. She is a vegetarian and she would cook these amazing meals. She took me to amazing places and we would do murals. The lecturing staff at varsity but the student body was Black and Indian.

PS: Yeah. So yeah, just I want to ask if you remember what was happening, like to see my dealer is busy. And there was no this had been invented in the country. When during that period of width, becoming critical, what was happening in the country. Dimensions were 95 to seven. I think it was just a month or so ago. Take some kind of shape. And also, there were no entry points or access for breaks.If you put in. If you didn't have enough points for university I went through and directed to the finance, so when people are not getting training. Well you like thinking with the, with the pensions of the in the country at that time, we will will this ecosystem

as an introduction to that. The other possibilities of being an artist, professional artist. How were those like what was, what were you What were you, I would say that at the time you as a professional artist had just won an award as well and was willing to sing.

GN: I was political. There were a lot of things that were happening. The University of Durban Westville was a political space. So there were always protests and I would often join, understanding that there was something at stake. There was CODESA at the time, there was unrest, a lot of unrest between IFP and ANC even in the township where I lived. I remember this one time I think I was going to write my final exam in anatomy or something and in the middle of the night people came into our house and broke windows. Shit was happening. My father had to secretly move us out and find us a new place to stay in a different part of town. Even when I had to graduate there was protesting happening all around us. The academic calendar was severely disrupted by the political events. If there was a toyi-toyi I would be there. There was a point when the university was shut down but then everybody was like we are going to university. There were a lot of things that were going on, shaping what I was thinking about what I do in terms of representation. So I was looking at pictures that I made at that time especially after 94' and I felt like people were waiting for something that wasn't really coming. So I started making these paintings, 'the waiting series' just like a man sitting by the boat waiting for a job. People waiting outside of the clinic in queues or cues or queues. I had to learn the hard way that the world is not open to us. Like I said, Pat Khoza who was my teacher in High School who was at the Durban Art Gallery, and I remember she invited me for a workshop that she was doing. She was working with Karen Brown and were both Education Officers at the Durban Art Gallery, we did this small exhibition which was really good. The government, the department of art and culture had this scholarship for graduates for recent graduates who would be placed into different departments, government or city departments. I applied and they said okay. I knew someone who had been placed at the Durban Art Gallery.

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