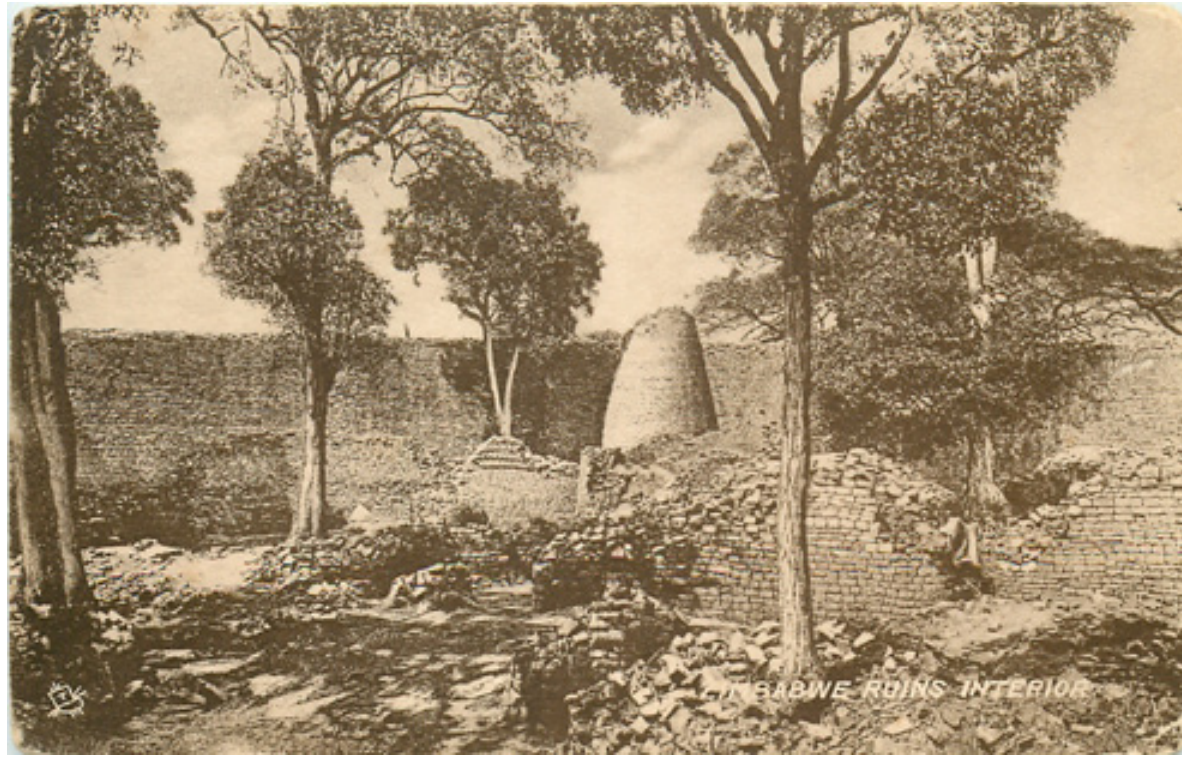




Zimbabwe
Conical Tower.
Touristic post card,
Rhodesia.

The conical structure of Great Zimbabwe's Great Enclosure was also built at the time of increased contact between stellar and terrestrial communities. Richard Wade, archaeologist-astronomer of the twenty-first century at Nkwe Ridge Observatory in South Africa, conjectured that this stone structure was built in the Shashe-Limpopo basin to mark the position of the progressively brightening Vela star as it went supernova.

As I argue elsewhere, one must consider this structure not as an astronomical instrument, as Wade has suggested, but as a politically motivated construction.² It was, in fact, a monument erected to mark the end of the Vela-Zimbabwe complex, thereby commemorating the beginning of new societal orders both on earth and in space. The act of monumental commemoration, although rare in stellar communities, is a reoccurring practice amongst earth societies.

Whether it be the conical structure of Zimbabwe's Great Enclosure or bird relics from Vela's secret societies, studies of ancient Vela civilisation cannot fully be appreciated if the terrestrial component of its earth-star complex is not adequately considered. The same holds true for all other earth-star social complexes; past or present. The Vela-Zimbabwe case clearly illustrates that the role of terrestrial civilisations ought not be downplayed; for it may create blind spots in our galactic heritage.

² Kapwani Kiwanga. "Monuments in Prehistoric Earth Terrestrial Societies," *Journal of Galactic Anthropological Archeology* 47 (00), 37–59. For information on Wade's suggestions, please refer to: Stuart Clark and Damian Carrington. "Eclipse Brings Claim of Medieval African Observatory," *New Scientist*, December 4, 2002.

Speaking Truth to Power: Censorship and Critical Creativity in South Africa

I have been away from South Africa for the last two years and every time I visit, some new artistic / cultural venture has emerged. While government funding for individual artists remains as sparse as ever, new private galleries and artistic enterprises, as well as individual or collective initiatives are challenging the discipline of visual arts.¹ Even while structural racial inequalities exist in every field in South Africa, including the arts, these are exciting times to be living and working as an artist in South Africa with what is possibly the largest number of opportunities we have ever seen in our history.

Interestingly, in recent years, visual arts productions have courted controversy and generated some of the—occasional—public discourse that there is on race-gender-class-sexuality representation. Some of these include the public criticism of the use of blackface in the "transgressive" works of Afrikaner artist Anton Kannemeyer by curator Khewzi Gule (2010) and in the subsequent responses defending Kannemeyer's modus operandi;² Brett Murray's *Spear* painting of President Jacob Zuma with his penis exposed, which elicited public protests and death threats, and resulted in the defacing of the work in a Johannesburg gallery (2012); and more recently, artist Ayanda Mabulu's painting, *Yakhal'inkomo* (Black Man's Cry), which features Zuma trampling on the head of a Marikana miner,³ which was removed before the opening of the 2013 Joburg Art Fair. Much of this follows on the heels of a very public spat between political satiric cartoonist Zapiro (Jonathan Shapiro) and Zuma, who tried to sue the cartoonist for defamation for his representation of the president, pants open, approaching a Black lady justice being held down by other Black⁴ political allies (the case was later dropped in 2012).⁵

¹ The Joburg Art Fair has concluded its fifth edition, and the Cape Town Art Fair has concluded its first. South Africa now has its own pavilion at the Venice Biennale while ever-cradling the hope of a resurrection of the Joburg Biennale. Art South Africa, the country's leading art publication, is turning its head towards the rest of Africa and opening minds to the wealth of history and talent on the continent. The Mail and Guardian newspaper has created an online platform focusing exclusively on women, and the second year of the Mbokodo Women in Arts Award has recognised the immense creativity and legacy of South African women cultural producers. South African artists feature globally, winning loads of awards along the way.

² D. Marais. 27 August 2010 (b). "Denying the Privileged a Voice," *Mail and Guardian* [online]. See: <http://mg.co.za/article/2010-08-27-denying-the-privileged-a-voice> (November 2013).

³ This refers to the miner's strike at the Lonmin Mining Company in Marikana, South Africa, in 2012. Protests in which the miners were demanding increased wages turned into a violent confrontation with the armed national police force, which resulted in the death of over forty-four miners. Increasing evidence in the subsequent legal hearing shows that policemen likely instigated the violence and in some cases, even executed the miners while they were restrained.

⁴ This text employs South African racial categories: White, Black, Indian, Coloured. "Black" signifies indigenous African ethnicities, while "black" is used to denote the previously disadvantaged groups of Black, Indian, Coloured and Chinese (and instead of the term "non-white").

⁵ Ex-African National Congress (ANC) Youth League President Julius Malema, ANC Secretary-

All of these cases point to problems of representation in post-apartheid South Africa, and necessarily highlight the intersectionality of categories of race-gender-class-sexuality. For instance, Kannemeyer's use of blackface is seen by critics as that of a privileged White cultural producer utilising demeaning racial stereotypes of underclass Black African natives to critique fellow White Afrikaners. For me, the humour in his parodies can only be had if one disregards the bodies of his Black characters as props in his endeavour to expose White paranoia, and then aligns oneself with the gaze of the White characters, the White audience, and the producer.⁶ Murray's controversy presented a unique case when the coding of visual artworks within the safety of the white cube was deemed offensive and disrespectful when forced into the wider culture.

At some point in the discussions elicited by these different cases has emerged the rhetoric of "freedom of speech" (which is equated with the ability to criticise whomever, however) being under attack currently in South Africa. This "freedom of speech" rallying cry has, to a certain extent, been racialized in that there is a persistent claim by White artists that they are not only being silenced, but victimized.⁷ Such perspectives align with what Critical Whiteness Studies scholar Melissa Steyn has called a resistant "White Talk" in South Africa, as White South Africans have to negotiate the change from apartheid privilege to post-apartheid redress.⁸ Characteristics of this "White Talk" include a pessimistic view on Black / African governance, the stacking up of negative tropes of the living conditions of Africa, the idea that Whites are disproportionately affected as a community by criminality, corruption and black economic empowerment policies, as well as the belief that when they criticise such issues they are standing up for more universal conditions which all liberal minds would agree with. Much of this exemplifies a spirit of victimhood that is persistent in "White Talk".⁹

However, criticisms of the artwork of Zapiro, Kannemeyer and Murray have not tried to *silence* the critique of these artists directed at Black / African governance (which are often conflated), but rather, have tried to question the *choice* of iconography by the artists. This *choice*, which

General Gwede Mantashe (with a speech bubble that says "Go for it Boss", South African Communist Party President Blade Nzimande and Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) chairperson Zwelimgzima Vavi.

⁶ In my current PhD research on postcolonial strategies of masquerading in South Africa I elaborate on this critique of Kannemeyer's use of satiric parody in his *Pappa in Afrika* (2010) book.

⁷ Ever since apartheid, the South African visual arts field has been dominated by White producers, gallerists, writers, "critics", historians, collectors and other mediators. White visual artists are unaccustomed to being challenged on their perspectives and aesthetic considerations by Black intellectuals and artists.

⁸ M. E. Steyn. 2004. "Rehabilitating a Whiteness Disgraced: Afrikaner White Talk in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Communication Quarterly* 52 (2), 143–169; M. Steyn and D. Foster. 2008. "Repertoires for Talking White: Resistant Whiteness in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31 (1), 25–51.

⁹ The South African 2011 Census found that Black-headed households earned on average an annual income of R60 000 while White-headed households earned per annum an average of R365 000, and that White men still maintain the most privileged economic spaces (highest level of education, the best jobs and the highest salaries).



Ayanda Mabulu, *Yakhal'inkomo* (*Black Man's Cry*), 2013. Oil on canvas, 250 x 350cm. Courtesy of Commune 1 Gallery.

the artists present as natural representations of the addressed issues, often pathologizes Blacks, Africans and Africa. In Kannemeyer's work, African governance is visually associated with the dictatorships of Idi Amin Dada and Robert Mugabe, and corruption is racialized as Black greed, which is evidenced in numerous references to "Black Fat-Cats" and Black Economic Empowerment. Both Murray and Zapiro have vehemently defended their right to activate colonial racial stereotypes of rampant Black animalistic sexuality in the *Spear* and *Rape of Lady Justice* cartoons. While we do "get" parody, metaphor and allusion, the question remains as to why White male cultural producers would choose to reduce important questions regarding the country's problems (the ruling tripartite alliance, populist politics, the dearth of credible political opposition, mismanagement, corruption, lack of accountability and transparency, sustainability and the growing gap of rich and poor in capitalist democracy amidst blatant police repression, to name a few) to just one person and his genitals.¹⁰ When that person is a Black individual, heading up a black majority government in a black majority country that is steeped in a history of racial segregation and the denigration of blackness, it is not only necessary to interrogate the appropriateness and naturalness which attends elected representations in a post-apartheid, postcolonial context, but also to point to the silences surrounding this

¹⁰ None of these problems are particular to South Africa or the African continent. They are all problems that various governments have faced throughout history, and they manifest themselves in a multitude of ways in postmodern democracies. It is however important to note that critiques of these issues take into account their particularities in South Africa.

discourse. While the liberal media would like us to believe that these instances symbolise a fundamental blow to free speech in South Africa, contradictorily they signify a win for democracy—even the President of South Africa has been unable to bring any action against these public criticisms of his character.

The most recent case of the withdrawal of Ayanda Mabulu’s painting at the 2013 Joburg Art Fair indicates another situation of cause-and-effect that must be highlighted.¹¹ The controversies around visual racial stereotypes have created a tender ground on which to tread amidst a climate of political-racial tension. The Fair’s organisers withdrew the painting from the opening, unwilling to upset governmental and private sponsors. In doing so, the organisers were able to do what our despot and legal system weren’t able to manage. Censorship becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in this private censorship of state criticism. This incident evidences the need for the constant unpacking of racial-gender-class-sexuality representations, so as not to cultivate an environment that dredges up easily accessible stereotypical fodder. This is not about dictating to artists what they can produce, but rather is about pointing to the need for wider education on the insidiousness of racism in visual culture. Black feminist bell hooks reminds us that “transgressivity” is not an end in itself and does not denote “progressivity”, as it offers little for overhauling long-accepted knowledge systems. Rather, the keyword should be “transformation”. Part of that transformation is a critical creativity, which is not only outwardly critical of society and its beings and doings, but is committed to inwardly examining and probing its own modes of production, critique and contextual relevance.

¹¹ Ayanda Mabulu’s *Yakhal’inkomo (Black Man’s Cry)* which showcases President Zuma’s dogs attacking a miner and him stepping on another miner—referencing the 2012 Marikana mining strike in which least forty-four miners were gunned down by the South African police—was taken off the display before opening night. With headlines decrying censorship, it took a certain amount of time to realise that it was actually the organisers of the Art Fair themselves who had felt uncomfortable with the work and had thus decided to self-censor. Subsequently, veteran South African photographer David Goldblatt, in solidarity with Mabulu, decided to take down his exhibition of works, prompting a rethinking of the act by the organizers. Mabulu’s work was reinstated the day after the opening, and the directors admitted that they had not considered the full implications of their initial decision. Where Zuma and the ANC have been unable to use the legal system to impose censorship, private individuals with economic interests are now doing so. Mabulu’s work did not merit censorship, but, I believe, the irresponsible use of Black stereotypes by artists such as Kannemeyer, Murray and Zapiro have created the present climate of racial tension around representation.

All of the artworks discussed above circulate not simply as objects of commercial art, but are given currency locally and globally by an inherent criticality that we invest in visual artworks. In doing so, I like to think of artists not simply as “creatives”, but as creative intellectuals with a duty within the larger commoditized fields of visual arts, popular culture and global visual representations to “speak truth to power”, and thereby break down “the stereotypes and reductive categories that are so limiting to human thought and communication” (Edward Said).¹²

It is not often enough that as an artist one is able to be involved in national debates on identity and representation. As bell hooks aptly reminds us, this is not the task of any one group:

Creating new and different representations of blackness should not be seen as the sole responsibility of black artists, however. Ostensibly, any artist whose politics lead him or her to oppose imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, white supremacy, and the everyday racism that abounds in all our lives would endeavour to create images that do not perpetuate and sustain domination and exploitation. The fact that progressive non-black artists who make films, especially experimental work, challenge themselves around this issue is vital to the formation of a cultural climate in which different images can be introduced.¹³

Present-day South Africa presents such an opportunity and it is therefore not one to be taken up without serious consideration of our roles as cultural producers and visual makers.

¹² Following Gramsci’s idea of an organic intellectual defines an intellectual in the following way: “Today, everyone who works in any field connected either with the production or distribution of knowledge is an intellectual in Gramsci’s sense.” Said, Edward, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 9.

¹³ bell hooks, *Reel to Race: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge Press, 1996).