



Whitespeak: How Race *Works* in South African Art Criticism Texts to Maintain the Arts as the Property of Whiteness

Sharlene Khan and Fouad Asfour

In 2001, South African black¹ feminist scholar Desiree Lewis critiqued a review by White “cultural writer” Nick Dawes of the South African Colored artist Berni Searle’s work *Snow White* (2001):

¹This research utilizes official South African racial categories as established in apartheid and their continued usage post-apartheid: “White” (persons of white European descent), “Black” (local indigenous Black Africans), “Colored” (persons of mixed race and descendants of Malaya/Indian/Mozambican slaves and prisoners), “Indian” (persons of South Asian descent that arrived as slaves in Cape Town in the seventeenth century and, in the second half of the nineteenth century, first as British-indentured laborers and then as merchants), and “Asian” (at one time it included Indian and Chinese but later primarily addressed people of Chinese descent as well as “new” post-democracy Chinese, Pakistani, Indian, and Sri Lankan migrants). Where the term “black” (lowercase “b”) is used, it is used in preference of “non-white” and includes Black, Colored, and Indian South Africans also grouped under the term “previously disadvantaged” (which recently constitutionally includes Chinese South Africans), as does the term “people of color”. These terms are also used to denote identification with blackness as a political self-affirmative project and stance. Generally, “White” and “Whiteness” relate specifically to the South African context, whereas “white” and “whiteness” refer to discussions internationally. Quotes and discussions follow the capitalization and usage of authors in their contexts/works with regard to racial terms such as “white”, “black”, or “colored”, as well as the US/UK spelling employed by authors when quoting them.

S. Khan (✉)

School of Fine Art, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa

F. Asfour

Independent Scholar, Grahamstown, South Africa

© The Author(s) 2018

A. M. Krache et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Race and the Arts in Education*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65256-6_11

Indeed, as one stands poised between the two screens that comprise the video installation, a single question imposes itself: “And who among you, when the public asks for something to chew on, would give them a video of Berni Searle making roti?”... Instead one simply sighs in affirmation: indeed race, gender and domestic labour cut across the body of the black but not-quite-black woman in complicated ways. Indeed woman’s work has a transformative and even sacramental character, but how tedious the lecture, how dully the point is inscribed on tape [...]. In the end we are standing in front of yet another video of a naked woman performing a repetitive task, and we are bored beyond words. (Dawes, 2001)

Lewis notes the racial-cultural bias of the South African visual arts field and particularly in art criticism written by White writers.² Using black-African feminist critical thought, she argues that Dawes’s dismissiveness toward the work does not lay in the work itself but in the viewer’s inability or refusal to decode the work outside of hegemonic Western art framings and “fine art” values: By using the coercive but entirely fictive “we”, Dawes obviously speaks on behalf of those determined not to acknowledge the vantage points of society’s “others”, those who unabashedly define their partial perspectives as universal and comprehensive. (Lewis, 2001, p. 111).

In South African art discourse, the Eurocentric basis of art history, appreciation, and art writing has been challenged since apartheid for the White writers who inhabit the proxy position of validation and authority. For instance, Black South African artist-writer-curator David Koloane has often raised concerns about the racial framings in which Black artists are spoken about negatively. He elaborates on this in his article “Art Criticism for Whom?” that, “It is interesting to note that the reviews on black artists’ work contain an implicit concern whereas the one on white artists’ work is decidedly affirmative and positive” (Koloane, 1997, p. 71). This chapter maintains that South African art writing suffers from a lack of sustained political interrogation of who is writing, the writer’s body and voice, what and whom they are writing about, how they are writing, and for what purposes. “Art writing” is a rather large terrain that can cover many different forms of writing about art (and we do mean this purposefully), but for this chapter, we want to concentrate on art criticism texts which contain an implicit evaluation and critique of contemporary works of visual art by a writer on a public platform.

Using critiques that have emerged over the years, this chapter unpacks how anti-black colonial racism works in South African art criticism to maintain White bodies—and the narratives and understandings that emanate from them—as central to the wider field of visual arts. We highlight the writer as an embodied subject, pointing out how Whiteness stays invisible in its ethno-specific cultural value judgments and continues to appear as “universal” and

²We investigate the specific art writing that is “art criticism” (which is often conflated with exhibition reviews in the South African context) by White South African writers published in print or online publications and as such refer to it as “White art writing”.

“natural”. We propose that White colonial values that are located in “arts”³ education systems are still based on foundational European colonial-modernity discourses (with all of their racial and ethnic biases). While there are many political levels that need further interrogation in the visual arts in South Africa, and in the corpus of formal and non-formal arts educations, this chapter serves as an introduction to one mechanism (art criticism) by which South African Whiteness frames appreciation, evaluation, historicization, and education about “non-White” cultural productions through art criticism texts in the country.

Why the focus on art criticism texts? South Africa only has a few publications featuring writing on visual arts,⁴ and with a limited publishing field, short newspaper write-ups and exhibition reviews not only have a wider readership (than for instance academic journals), but they become important sources of primary information about artists. As such, these shape the cultural capital of artists and writers, and artists of color have to cope with White writers covering the field. Far from being just fleeting opinion-based texts, art criticism constitutes a form of knowledge framing and evaluating artworks in their current social contexts.

Allied to contemporary visual arts and reflecting on what is “worthy” or “good art” versus what is not, critical art writing straddles cultural-monetary valuation, opinionated judgment, and field knowledge. While our chapter engages the South African context—and how racial dynamics play out in this post-apartheid setting—our observations can certainly ring true in other societies where Western “fine art” and “art history” valuations are foundational. This chapter analyses 20 exhibition reviews written by White South Africans of visual arts practitioners of color between 2001 and 2015, with one review from 1990 (as well as, in some cases, written responses to criticisms leveled at these texts). We critically analyze the language of these texts which has been primarily culled from South African newspapers, the online visual arts magazine *Artthrob*, and the print and online art magazine *Art South Africa*. Our discussion exposes ethnicized socio-cultural value judgments *and the bodies that articulate them* and how they inform the field of visual arts.

LANGUAGE: WHITE TALK + ARTSPEAK = WHITESPEAK

This chapter draws on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986/1993) concept of “field”, where the field of cultural production is constructed not merely by individual skill(s) but by the *invested* interests of elites with capital.⁵ Capital (monetary, cultural, knowledge) is a fundamental determinant in who gets to

³“Arts” here includes visual arts, music, performance, and dance (although often in Western colonial texts the word “art” is usually indicative of “fine art”).

⁴This includes newspaper reviews, two online contemporary visual arts magazines (*Artthrob* and *Art South Africa*—now rebranded as *Art Africa*), exhibition catalogues, and one accredited art historical journal (*De Arte*).

⁵Bourdieu (1977, p. 660) argues that “linguistic capital is an embodied capital”, which is carried out in the “articulatory style” of bodies performing a habitus that is inscribed by class, race, gender, and so on.

participate in fields, at what level, and based on which criteria. The elitist field of the visual arts in colonial, apartheid, and post-apartheid South Africa is a prime example of such a field in which the vested interests of a 10% White minority remains central and eminent in a country that is majority 90% people of color (Black, Colored, Indian, Chinese).

Relatedly, Bourdieu defines the concept of “habitus” as “structuring structures” that generate, regulate, and “organize practices and representations” (Johnson, 1993, p. 5). We argue that not only the elite-making structures which govern naturalized tastes need to be exposed but, relatedly, the bodies that regulate such structures and dispositions. White European settler values, from Dutch and British colonialism, and apartheid’s legislated dominance of people of color in South Africa continue to underscore artistic value systems and related artistic discourses. The White habitus determines the social practice of the art fields not just through a determination of what is art, but also importantly through “structuring structures”.⁶ These include private galleries and privately owned media (the dominant platform for arts representation in the country); White dominance in institutions and publications, determining discourse such as educational curricula and what is authorized in art history (who has access to writing, publishing, and printing); art reviews (print and digital magazines and newspaper reviews); and art criticism (whose opinion “matters”).⁷ In the field of contemporary visual arts (globally), the language of the field itself is exclusionary. Roy Harris (2003) terms this specialist language “artsppeak,” arguing that as the visual arts field has become discourse based, particular codified modes of talking about art and opinion have emerged.⁸ Harris (2003) notes that “right from the beginning of the Western tradition, artsppeak emerges as a linguistic weapon in an ongoing war waged between different parties, all of whom are competing for public attention and prestige not only in the practical business of making a living but in a debate about education and the right way to run society and one’s own life” (p. 28). Thus, who speaks about art, who has the power to judge art and write about art, is a form of power.

⁶ See Khan (2006) which discusses the dominance of White South Africans in the field of visual arts and art history.

⁷ In South Africa, the visual arts field is inseparable from the art history, art writing, and art criticism fields. While art historians have tried to maintain separate frameworks and platforms for themselves, the boundaries between contemporary visual arts and art history are porous in this country, particularly in post-apartheid times where South African art history is under contestation by contemporary theorizations and revisions of the art history canons (moreover, artists and curators write, art historians curate and produce artwork, and anybody with an art degree can lecture in art history).

⁸ Harris (2003, p. xii) says that his term *artsppeak* “covers the whole range of discourse about works of art and their appreciation”, as opposed to David Carrier’s notion of *artwriting*, which “he restricts to ‘texts by both art critics and art historians’”.

In South Africa, the speaking body is too often still the White body of European heritage that problematically frames discourses around its identity. Art writing is a field where personal value judgments, material fact, and disciplinary knowledge are inextricably entwined. Problematically, “art history” (even as it has morphed into “visual culture” disciplines⁹) continues to be framed within a Eurocentric universalized epistemology that simultaneously draws its legitimacy from White speech acts at the same time that it invisibilizes the White speaking/writing body.¹⁰ Many race, feminist, and postcolonial scholars have challenged the codes of art valuation and its white bodies of legitimation internationally, as well as the terrains of visual arts and art history as white resource and cultural property.¹¹

Critical race theorist Cheryl Harris (1993) suggests that “whiteness as property” is based on demarcating the white body as property, both in the sense of “being white” as well as “having a white body”. This property/ownership secures exclusive access to a realm of privileges which “non-white” bodies are barred from. “Thus, the concept of whiteness is built on both exclusion and racial subjugation. This fact was particularly evident during the period of the most rigid racial exclusion, as whiteness signified racial privilege and took the form of status property” (Harris, 1993, p. 1737). Harris’s work is based on a materialist historical analysis of social relations in the US. This reified relation provides whiteness not only with the ability to own, but also the task to “civilize” the savages (through culture and technology), and extends to further rights such as “expectations,” the right “to use and enjoyment,” and the “absolute right to exclude” (ibid: 1736).

Thus, a questioning of privileges, access, rights, values, and speech acts not only points out the bodies that can do so but also the bodies that are not allowed to, or cannot. Anti-colonialist psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon’s oft quoted line, “O my body, make of me always a man who questions!” (Fanon, 1952/2008, p. 181), draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the body as an “object of consciousness.” “For a being who has acquired consciousness of himself and of his body, who has attained to the dialectic of subject and object, the body is no longer a cause of the structure of consciousness, it has become an object of consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty in Fanon, 1952/2008, p. 175). This body that questions does not hide or take for granted its geo-political positioning but rather places identity and locationality as central to the questions it asks, the answers it elicits, and the things it makes. To speak about art, therefore, is not to speak just about an object or an experience but rather to extend discussions of speaking bodies *in* works of art to speaking bodies *about* works of art. The dynamics of analyzing-writing-discussing bodies of artwork

⁹ See for example the article by Mieke Bal (2003), “Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture”.

¹⁰ See, for instance Walter D. Mignolo’s (2007) article “DELINKING: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality”.

¹¹ See for instance bell hooks, Vernon Hyde Minor, Henry Louis Gates, Olu Oguibe, Okwui Enwezor, Geeta Kapur, and Jim Supangkat.

already points to the cohesion that exists between written language and visual artworks—how written language writes material bodies and objects as well as ephemeral experiences into being beyond exhibitions, into discourse, into education, and into history.

In South African society, part of this speech act is a “White Talk” identified by Critical Whiteness Studies scholar Melissa Steyn. According to Steyn (2004), White Talk “functions around the comfort, convenience, affirmation, solidarity, psychological well-being, advantage, and advancement of whites ... white people experience their social space as neutral and individually determined” (pp. 144–145). Steyn (2004, p. 151) further argues that White Talk is a naturalized White supremacist ethnic talk around certain symbolic institutions like language, religion, history, arts, and sports.

Features of Steyn’s White Talk include a sense of compatriotism based on “liberal” values; Afropessimism (the belief in African dictatorship, corruption, and ineptitude); White victimhood (reverse racism); amnesia; and White ululation. The re-centering of Whiteness through White Talk in various media post-apartheid¹² serves a maintenance function of securing White cultural perspectives and economic privileges. White Talk can be located in South African visual arts and art history fields, and when combined with the language of Eurocentric value judgment of these fields (artspeak), results in what we lay out below as a “Whitespeak” which frames black artists/arts in particular ways.

This results in a hyper-visibility of the racial-gendered-ethnic body of artists of color, even while the body of the White writer-critic is invisible in its making of discourse. What we outline below are four features of South African White Talk as it manifests in the field of visual arts in the art criticism texts we examine.

WHITESPEAK #1: DISSING—THE LANGUAGE OF OPINIONATED-NOT AS TRUTH

One of the most prominent features of Whitespeak in the art criticisms reviewed was a “language of lack” used to evaluate and talk about black art exhibitions and black artists. For instance, in his review of David Koloane’s exhibition *Explorations* in 1990, White artist and writer Kendell Geers declares that the title of the show is inept because it raises the viewer’s expectations which are never fulfilled. Only in the eighth paragraph does a singular sentence describe the physical and conceptual properties of, or rather the lack thereof, in Koloane’s work:

There is very little evidence of exploration of any kind in Koloane’s work itself, which displays very little development from the earliest works of 1976 to those produced this year; There are a number of small representational works from

¹² Melissa Steyn, in various research, examines mainstream newspaper opinion articles by liberal and conservative White South Africans, as well as workplace environments.

various points in Koloane's career that demonstrate his inability with this particular genre, suggesting that the move into abstract expressionist may have been due to a lack of options rather than the product of any real exploration; It is evident through the repetition that the titles are nothing more than an old formula and the antithesis of any real exploration; **This loss is cunningly disguised** by the gold leaf frames and appropriate mounts that produce a slick, consumable object; There is nothing within the works themselves that is able to shift them beyond the purely decorative. (excerpts from Geers, 1990, emphasis added)

In this 1990 review, we see the overwhelming negativity about Black artists' works that Koloane raised in his 1997 essay. In a similar manner, Julian Brown's (2004) vitriolic review of Black artist-curator Gabi Ngcobo's first solo exhibition (there is no mention of the title) begins with the exhortation that her "show has generated a disproportionate excitement." It is only six paragraphs (out of eight) later of aesthetic *dissing*¹³ that we encounter the first titled work.

...disjointed, quality of works on display varies significantly, premature; weakest part of the exhibition; lurid brown; roughly hewn; feel raw, roughly-stretched, cracking edges; incomplete; bled of their interest by the clumsiness of their construction; angry, intellectual tensions; none quite match; does not convince; **sudden and ambitious artistic expansion merely an aberration**. (excerpts from Brown, 2004, p. 72, emphasis added)

In both textual instances, it is impossible to get a sense of the exhibition and how the artworks exemplify creative concepts and methodologies. Discarding description, framing of the exhibition, or interviews with the artist, the writer casts a negative judgment of the work *and the artist*. There is little contextualization or significance of black artworks which relate them to historical or current art practices and wider discourses of signification. This engagement of black artists utilizes a language of lack that *dismisses* and *disrespects* black creative production as worthy of attention: they never reach potential, they never go far enough, and an investment in their practice will not be rewarded, as we see in the following statements:

Ngcobo seems, in these paintings, incapable of mustering the technical clarity to convince the viewer that her work will repay attention. (Brown on Gabi Ngcobo, 2004)

The work is naïve in an unconscious way. (Sean O'Toole on David Koloane, 2002)

But somehow Tadjó's text ... tends to leave one feeling unfulfilled. (Sean O'Toole on Veronique Tadjó, 2002)

¹³According to the Oxford dictionary, to "diss" means to speak disrespectfully to someone or criticize. In urban slang, to diss someone means to disrespect them.

Besides not being able to fulfill White writers' visual arts expectations, black artists are only clever/cunning in their ability to hide their lack as highlighted in Geers's quote above.

In her review of Kemang Wa Lehulere's exhibition *History will Break your Heart*, which incorporates the works of the forgotten 1960s Black woman artist Gladys Mgundlandlu, Mary Corrigan (2015) insinuates that this strategy is "an expedient way to avoid risk and fill a room with art (and in a short amount of time) that is above criticism" (p. 7). Downplaying the artist's visual historical dialogue with an artist who has not been canonized, the writer suggests that the artist "cunningly shift[s] attention away from himself" (ibid). She further reduces his investigation, with an artist his aunt knew personally, to a "novel solution" (ibid). The language of lack creates a discourse where Wa Lehulere's much lauded decolonial inclusive creative methodologies have no place within the Western fine arts/visual arts code.

The language of lack is all encompassing: black artists cannot get the titles of their works/exhibitions right, black signatures are too prominent or not placed in the correct place, the frames are either too commercial or not good enough, race/politics—sigh—is (again) being brought up. "Not-rightness" keeps black artists in an ever-maturing phase, what South African art historian Colin Richards (1997) notes as a "forced cultural infantilism" (p. 78). In South Africa in the 1990s, it used to be a popular joke that black artists, well into their 40s, could still be regarded as "young artists," a trend that continues in the texts examined:

They are young artists who simply weren't ready for a solo exhibition and I do not discount the fact that they may startle me with their art sometime in the future (Corrigan on Gugulective, 2010)

Ngcobo is a young artist and this is her first show [...] It is to be hoped that the very exciting, new pieces fairly represent her ambitions, talents and her future direction (Brown on Gabi Ngcobo, 2004)

These statements are misleading. At the time of the review, Gugulective already had gained attention in the contemporary South African visual arts field and had won the prestigious Brett Kebble visual arts award. Brown is also incorrect when he states that this was Ngcobo's first show as she had already participated in several group shows locally and abroad and had been nominated for several visual arts awards. Whiteness does not meet black bodies in the here and now but always in an imagined future.

WHITESPEAK #2: MIMESIS AND ALMOST-BUT-NOT-QUITENESS

A second feature of Whitespeak, following black artists' inability to make good art, is the framing of black artists' methodologies as mimetic, as evidenced in some of the quotes below:

The language of the abstract expressionists is appropriated wholesale, without any consideration given to either its specificity or that of our particular contexts; **David Koloane merely plagiarises** an existing style without engaging any of the issues involved. (excerpts from Geers on David Koloane, 1990, emphasis added)

Mahlangu's 2007 works ... seem somehow to have erased this nuanced history, as well as the difficult present faced by many of the amaNdebele today. Endless variation on an (outmoded) theme; catering to a foreign gaze; a selective memory rather than a comprehensive one. (excerpts from Amy Miller on Esther and Speelman Mahlangu, 2007)

To compare a Nobel Laureate, one who has based her whole existence on words, with a painter slash writer is probably unfair; Quite possibly it is because **she attempts to mimic in words** the highly impressionist style of Koloane's painted works, Tadjó also tends to lapse into moments of maudlin sentimentality. (excerpts from Sean O'Toole on Veronique Tadjó, 2002, emphasis added)

In each of the above texts, the Black creative is compared to a White predecessor and is found lacking or not up to standard: David Koloane to Jackson Pollock and Western Abstract Expressionists; painter Esther Mahlangu with Damien Hirst, Sol LeWitt, and David Goldblatt; sculptor Speelman Mahlangu with Cecil Skotnes; painter-writer Veronique Tadjó with fellow writers Nadine Gordimer and Andre Croucamp.

These texts (like those which lament the “youngness” of black artists) are framed by the trope of lateness, suggesting that artists are simply not “there,” that their work is naively mimetic. According to postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), colonized mimetic subjects are almost-but-not-quite, almost-but-not-white (the slippage in these framings is necessary to uphold colonial valuing). This language of mimesis creates ambivalence in the fields of art history, art education, and “fine art”: black artists and their artwork can be used not only as barometers of White sophistication and standards but also as boundaries to mark off the terrains of “fine art” and “art history.” Blackness can almost mimic what Whiteness does, but, importantly, in the failure to do so, Whiteness retains its cultural superiority.

The almost-but-not-quite slippage allows the mimetic to always be read relationally to what is mimed. Thereby, Whiteness and European colonial-modernity is operationalized constantly. Geers could have *chosen* to say Koloane's work “references” a Western Abstract Expressionist vocabulary but instead he *chooses* the words “merely plagiarises.” O'Toole could have *chosen* to say Tadjó's writing is in conversation with Koloane's style but *chooses* instead to lament her mimicry. O'Toole says it is unfair to compare the work of a Nobel laureate with a “painter slash writer,” but in saying so this is exactly what he does, showing that the White writer was able to convey in a sentence the Black artist's practice, which the Black writer could not execute in a whole book.

Such language is not exclusive to White art writing but is learned from art historical texts which are disseminated through high school and university education systems in South Africa. Repeatedly, we read how Black artists learn “art” from White European South Africans who notice their innate intuitive skills; they are shown European art via books and are encouraged—even if illiterate—to mimic what they see; they are unable to develop conceptually; and it is taxing on White patrons, educators, and scholars to inculcate the rules of European “fine art.” Art historical writing in South Africa has been dominated by White writers (this is not limited to local writers) who have often replicated their white Eurocentric art training in their writing, even while acknowledging and validating Black practitioners.¹⁴ As an example, South African art historian Elizabeth Rankin’s text “The Role of the Missions in Art Education in South Africa” (1992) is exemplary of how art education in non-European countries is framed by a rhetoric of “art as white property.” Linked to mainstream Empire whiteness, White settlers have access to an inherent skill set to teach art (even when they are unskilled themselves). Typically, the native artists need to be *encouraged* in their creative practice, and art writing texts often feature words such as guidance, encourage, direct, follow, change, stimulate, influence, inspire, benefit, exercise, and exposure.¹⁵

Rankin’s text not only focuses on the alleged “benefits” of colonial missionary art education, but the author is also invested in actively affirming and reproducing the colonial entitlement to White supremacist rhetoric: the European colonizer/missionary (art educator) as the patron, promoter, benefactor, and agent of change and the Black South African (artist) as passive recipient. In the same vein, local indigenous creative practices, before and during colonization, do not qualify as art educative processes. In art history writing, non-formally trained Black artists are always referred to as self-taught and, by implication, naïve in their production and their knowledge of art practices. Thus, missionary centers which offered arts education to Black South Africans, and private art centers run by White artists, become the origination myth of arts education (as evidencing White philanthropy and morals) in the country. White patrons and artists, thus, are the imparters of “art” and civilization. Such scripts continue to inform the way in which black artistic production is written into being.

¹⁴ In “The Origins of Racism in the Public School Art Curriculum” (1992), F. Graeme Chalmers analyses racial prejudice in the art history texts of the South Kensington School. The impact of this art education curriculum in South Africa is further researched by Rhoda Krut (1983) in *South Kensington to South Africa: Art Education in Government Elementary Schools and Schools of Art in South Africa 1800–1910* and outlined in Mary Ann Stankiewicz’s (2007), “Capitalizing Art Education: Mapping International Histories.”

¹⁵ See for instance Rankin (1992) and Morton (2013).

WHITESPEAK #3: BLACK KILLJOYS, MERITOCRACY, AND THE WHITE (DIS)APPEARING ACT

In 2010, an issue of *South African Art Times* opened a review of the exhibition *From Pierneef to Gugulective* at the South African National Gallery (SANG) with the header “SANG’s reputation trashed.” Curated by SANG’s first black Director, Riason Naidoo, the exhibition brought together South African visual art and craft works. The reviewer, Lloyd Pollak (2010), however, without engaging with the curatorial vision, mostly complains about formalities and that he is unable to find any method to the madness “in this rambling shambles... a pratfall of this magnitude” (p. 1). Pollak attributes what he sees as the failure of this exhibition to Naidoo’s “gross lack of professionalism” and “piteous little curatorial experience.” Editor of *South African Art Times*, Gabriel Clark-Brown, is quoted in a later 2010 *Guardian* article, identifying the problem with the show:

He [Clark-Brown] acknowledged that a recent survey found South Africa’s art market was still 80–90% white but said he opposed the politicisation of art. “As soon as you introduce quotas, it’s going to be a political tool and Stalinise the industry.” He [Clark-Brown] added: “I believe Riason Naidoo was a political appointment rather than on merit. That inevitably leads to certain things. When he starts with his, ‘I’m here to politicise art,’ people do get a bit iffy” [sic]. (Clark-Brown quoted in Smith, 2010)¹⁶

According to Pollak and Clark-Brown, the failure of the exhibition was in large part due to Naidoo’s appointment itself. Sharlene Khan (2011) questions the notion of meritocracy that comes up in employment sectors, including sport and art, arguing that there is no transparency to merit. No criteria are ever outlined by individuals who use these yardsticks, so “meritocracy” is almost impossible to achieve. It is merely known by Whites who lament that their expectations have not been fulfilled.

Here, art history is passed on generationally to other Whites as intellectual cultural property and becomes an embodied merit which is linked to a political, cultural, and economic history. People of color may participate in arts, but they enter the canon of art history only by invitation. Accordingly, White merit does not need to be reflected in academic qualifications in South Africa. Where black scholars need several degrees, White bachelor of arts students can write, lecture, and curate without experience and without

¹⁶ David Smith (*The Guardian*, 1 September 2010) also quotes the editor’s criticism of Naidoo’s decision to remove historical paintings from the Abe Bailey bequest: “The manner in which they came down was a bit distasteful and there were more subtle ways of doing it. He regards them as colonial but they are part of the nation’s heritage and evolution. I find them valuable in terms of keying into the value of art to the nation. They paid homage to the great English masters”.

their merit being questioned.¹⁷ In this disappearing act, Whiteness is turned into qualification in itself.

Cultural psychologist Aída Hurtado (1999) exposes the narrative of the white merit game: “Merit will be defined by me (or those like me) and will have the semblance of objective rules of achievement. When I am questioned about how the rules were developed, I will claim exclusive wisdom for their origins” (p. 238). Merit is exclusionary. It only works if it is able to define who is *not* meritorious. As black artists, writers, and curators have voiced their dissent over White hegemony in the visual arts field in South Africa, and grafted more opportunities since post-apartheid, White critics have taken to bashing their status, questioning their authority. For instance, on the announcement of Black art historian-curator Thembinkosi Goniwe’s forthcoming column in *Art South Africa*, fellow White writer Gerard Schoeman (2009) in his piece entitled “Forget Thembinkosi Goniwe” had this to say:

Readers of this magazine, who have yet to experience the pleasure of hearing Thembinkosi Goniwe pontificate on what is wrong with the SA art world, are in for a treat. His regular column promises to be a perfect platform for more of the same humourless bluster that has made him the enfant terrible at local art history

¹⁷ In 2014, a public debate occurred on the release of statistics of White professors in the country versus Black professors (only 14%), in particular Black women professors. In a *Guardian* article “Why are there so few black professors in South Africa?” (Africa Network Expert Panel, 2014), researcher and filmmaker Zethu Matebeni added to the debate regarding claims around societal and institutional hurdles by stating: “Thirdly, we are often told that it takes about 20 years for an academic to get to a full professor position. This is an incorrect claim, as there have been (and still are) white academics whose careers were fast-tracked and who received professorships even without a PhD. Such processes need to be monitored at universities. How are ad hominem promotions conducted, and who gets to be promoted, when? A number of black academics often share that they do not believe they would ever be promoted, even when they are well-published.” In the comments section of this piece, a commentator seemed to think Matebeni’s statement (that there are White professors without PhDs) unlikely and asked for evidence. The “evidence” is rather glaring in all too many university departments, including Fine Art Departments, where White professors rarely have a PhD. Matebeni’s sentiments can also be noted in Xolela Mangcu’s article “10 steps to develop black professors” (2014) and Busani Ngcaweni’s “How about a qualifications TRC, Professor Bozzoli?” (2016), which hint at problematic criteria in university promotions, particularly attained under apartheid and shortly after 1994 (see also Seepe, 2017 and the Council on Higher Education report 2016). While “professorships” can be conferred on candidates due to their field experience and proven relevance in the field, the authors of this article would like to question the criteria upon which a number of professorships were given to candidates in the 1990s (and how this system is further exacerbated in the visual arts field where persons with social networks and few qualifications become social mediators of value). In response to the racial inequalities of professorships, various “fast-track” programs have been launched at universities, sponsored by the National Research Foundation and the Andrew Mellon Foundation. However, the differential criteria by which many White professors attained their title is vastly different from what professors now have to meet in order to gain professorship (White academics with professorships are not required to get a PhD, while a Black colleague will never attain professorship without one). More related to this chapter, it is never clear what qualifications young White art critics have in order to make the value judgments they do (it is not even clear if they hold degrees in Visual Arts or Art History as there are no art criticism courses in the country).

conferences. Can one be anything but a fan of someone who is so obviously on the right side of history, and where bloated and pugnacious self-image is so demonstrably dying to be recognised and immortalised as a caricature? (p. 23)

Black scholars' contestations against racism are disregarded as "caricaturing." When Mary Corrigan (2010) was critiqued by Goniwe on a patronizing review of a Black visual arts collective from the Cape Town township of Gugulethu, she claims she does not write according to race but then states:

I was disappointed that Gugulethu hadn't delivered...I think he [Goniwe] also chose to assume that because I am white I assess the work of black artists differently to their white counterparts. He should not make assumptions about me and my brand of criticism based on my race. By doing so he is enacting precisely what he is accusing me of doing. (Corrigan on Gugulethu and Theminkosi Goniwe, 2010)

When White value judgments are taken to task, persons like Goniwe are accused of enacting racism by acknowledging the cultural specificity of the bodies of the writers and the particularities of their cultural perspectives and training. There is almost no reflection on the act of reading as being culturally biased. When artworks and creative methodologies by black artists, writers, and curators fail to be understood by White critics, it is a direct result of the failure of the black artist (not simply the visual languages and methodologies employed) and blackness by implication.

Goniwe has noted that the focus on black artists' biographies is always of more interest than the work and deflects from the artist's creative strategies and choices (see for instance in Corrigan, 2010). The embodied rhetoric here posits that bodies of color are always known and are always *spoken for* and *about*. White art criticism texts, then, perform both the role of ventriloquist and judge.

In the above discussions, the bodies of White critics disappear, as White minds are rational, objective, and transparent. Black bodies are rendered too sentimental, emotive, irrational...too bodily. Thus, the Cartesian split between mind-body allows White minds to function without their White bodies (and the privileges and perspectives it brings) to abstract, universalize, and liberalize the discourses they speak and enact. Black artists, writers, curators, and academics who speak out about the lack of racial transformation in South Africa after the end of apartheid are belittled for their stance, which is on the "right side of history" (Schoeman, 2009, p. 23). Since their bodies, works, and methodologies contain no merit, black critics are trying to be troublemakers for the sake of attention. The struggle against race—and institutionalized colonial Whiteness—can always be dismissed as an opinion, a perspective that has no bearing beyond the personal, a card, a game for fame. Larger societal issues are then relegated to the inclusion and presence of particular black bodies, thus making such bodies hyper-visible problems against invisibilized Whiteness.

WHITESPEAK #4: TOO MUCH, TOO LITTLE—NAMING AND VICTIMHOOD

In a country where racial identity was prescribed and surveilled by colonial and apartheid administration for 400 years, it is not surprising that art since the early 1990s has interrogated notions of who “we” are as individuals and groups and has recently become a battleground in representational discourse. Post-1994 has seen many young artists of color challenging critiques of identity in terms of race-gender-sexuality-class-ethnicity-nationalism-religion. Many White writers, however, find it difficult to relate to work that is not centered around Whiteness and, as with the quotes below, regard works structured around black bodies as didactic, literal, and self-indulgent.

Too often cultural products with an intended social objective feel overtly simplistic and didactic; Excessive attention is drawn to the artist’s gender, creating the impression that their oeuvre or aesthetic is shaped by their identity; Of course, such a title neatly pigeonholes all the artists as black female artists and their art as a product of that identity, which does limit one’s readings of their work. (excerpts from Corrigan, 2009, p. 27)

Sociologist Himani Bannerji (1995) reminds us that naming is a significant process, “Those who dismiss so disdainfully all projects of self-naming and self-empowerment as ‘identity politics’ have not needed to affirm themselves through the creative strength that comes from finding missing parts of one’s self in experiences and histories similar to others” (pp. 9–10). Thus, naming as part of redefining subjective positions is not simply an individual process but locates one as part of a collective redefinition, of particular significance to a divided country like South Africa.

Part of this naming outlines how identity categorizations have impacted on black subjectivities. The much-critiqued Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the mid-1990s set the example of acknowledging the pain suffered by persons of color under racial oppression. The recent 2015–2016 #FeesMustFall university movements¹⁸ have highlighted the suffering endured by economically trodden persons of color, particularly women of color who often bear the burden of their households. However, as Steyn noted about White Talk, White South Africans instead view themselves as the new victims in South Africa. Similarly, in art criticism texts, black pain is disavowed, shamed, and considered the reason for any affliction that might befall the black artist for “playing” victim:

But because she keeps the focus on her ‘victimhood’ rather than exposing the duplicity of the system, her audience’s attention is diverted from the nature of the establishment that she wrestles with. (Corrigan on Sharlene Khan, 2008)

¹⁸The #Feesmustfall student protests which took place in 2015 and 2016 at public universities across South Africa called for the suspension of university fee increases, a call for decolonized education, and an end to outsourcing of university non-academic staff which resulted in many workers losing various economic benefits.

This raises a more interesting perspective on the phenomenon of abuse – especially in the light of an exhibition that focuses on women as victims. Wouldn't studies of perpetrators be more interesting? The position of the perpetrator is so much more complex. It is easy to accept and represent victimhood. But predictably it is images of abused victims that are (again) offered up as a means to access and unpack this phenomenon. (Corrigall, 2009, p. 27)

In these ideas above, victimhood is easy, one dimensional, and a position assumed by blackness (a playing of the “race card” or the position of victim)—it is not one conferred by historical and social structures. Since Whiteness may not have experienced racial-class-ethnic victimization and cannot relate, Whiteness cannot see its relevance beyond personal confessionals.

I HAVE AN OPINION, AND I'M NOT AFRAID TO USE IT

Art critical writing in South Africa is indeed in an unenviable state. It has shirked in its responsibility of interrogating racism in the visual arts, art history, and arts education. White supremacist ideologies permeate texts. Art criticism texts are not only an important archive of primary information, and therefore an educational resource on artists in their times, but also function as valuation systems used to validate and dismiss different forms of creative production. Discussions on art criticism in South Africa take for granted a shared understanding of the necessity and importance of this appraising act which presumes informed “criticality” as its basis. From the published art writing we considered in this chapter, it was hard to think of these bodies of writing as “critiques.” Rather, we see them as speech acts of White privilege which did not display much criticality. By “criticality” we mean engagement with artist’s methodologies, concepts, past socio-histories, current geographies, and field innovations and not simply the practice of “criticizing” artists or their chosen creative strategies because one does not personally “get it.” Part of a critical arts education—particularly in a decolonial context—involves understanding perspectives, histories, production, and contexts beyond one’s own. Valuations of artworks can be useful only if evaluators are cognizant of the bias of their criteria but also the illusions of field specialization that it promotes (e.g. the “fine arts”/“craft”/African art categories that still maintain tropes of otherness).

We like to think of art criticism—and art writing more generally—as decolonizing acts themselves. By this we mean not only rethinking how we use language, what we say in content, and an awareness of our criteria of valuation but of art critical writing as being extensions of creative methodologies—so not simply as critique of a material object or experience presented but where writing is a creative act in the reading of, the thinking through and talking back to artworks. Such writing extends the creative capabilities of artworks beyond our physical encounter with them, making them accessible as knowledge. The respect with which we deal with creative production and visual producers in

knowledge-making is beyond personal opinion, particularly in post-colonial societies where support and funding for artists are quite limited and artists tend to produce against incredible odds. Thus, the tasks of enunciation and representing—for all players in the visual arts field—are full of responsibilities to both oneself, larger communities, and previous histories.

REFERENCES

- Africa Network Expert Panel. (2014, October 6). Why are there so few black professors in South Africa? *The Guardian*. Retrieved from www.theguardian.com
- Bal, M. (2003). Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2(1), 5–32.
- Bannerji, H. (1995). *Thinking through: Essays on feminism, Marxism, and anti-racism*. Toronto, Canada: Women's Press.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). The economics of linguistic exchanges. *Social Science Information*, 16(6), 645–668.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). Field of power, literary field and habitus (trans: DuVerlie, C.). In R. Johnson (Ed.) (1993), *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature/Pierre Bourdieu* (pp. 161–175). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Chalmers, F. G. (1992). The origins of racism in the public school art curriculum. *Studies in Art Education*, 33(3), 134–143.
- Council on Higher Education. (2016). *South African higher education reviewed: Two decades of democracy*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education. Retrieved from <http://www.che.ac.za>
- Fanon, F. (1952/2008). *Black skins, white masks* (trans: Markmann, C.). 2nd ed. London, UK: Pluto Press.
- Harris, C. I. (1993). Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review*, 106(8), 1707–1791.
- Harris, R. (2003). *The necessity of artspeak: The language of the arts in the western tradition*. London, UK: Continuum.
- Hurtado, A. (1999). The Trickster's play: Whiteness in the subordination and liberation process. In R. D. Torres, L. F. Mirón, & J. X. Inda (Eds.), *Race, identity, and citizenship: A reader* (pp. 225–243). Malden, MA/Oxford, UK/Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing.
- Johnson, R. (1993). Editor's introduction: Pierre Bourdieu in art, literature and culture. In R. Johnson (Ed.), *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature/Pierre Bourdieu* (pp. 1–25). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Khan, S. (2006). Aluta Continua: Doing it for daddy. *Art South Africa*, 4(3), 56.
- Khan, S. (2011, March). But what's all dis here talkin' 'bout? *Artthrob*. Retrieved from <http://www.artthrob.co.za>
- Koloane, D. (1997). Art criticism for whom? In K. Deepwell (Ed.), *Art criticism and Africa* (pp. 69–72). London: Saffron Books/EAR.
- Krut, R. (1983). *South Kensington to South Africa: Art education in government elementary schools and schools of art in South Africa 1800–1910*. Masters thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, SA. Retrieved from <http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/17842>

- Lewis, D. (2001). The conceptual art of Berni Searle. *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 16(50), 108–117.
- Mangu, X. (2014, July 20). 10 steps to develop black professors. *City Press*. Retrieved from <http://www.news24.com>
- Mignolo, W. (2007). DELINKING. The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2), 449–514.
- Morton, E. (2013). Grace Dieu mission in South Africa: Defining the modern art workshop in Africa. In S. L. Kasfir & T. Förster (Eds.), *African art and agency in the workshop* (pp. 39–64). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Ngcaweni, B. (2016, December 30). How about a qualifications TRC, Professor Bozzoli? *Daily Maverick*. Retrieved from www.dailymaverick.co.za
- Rankin, E. (1992). The role of the missions in art education in South Africa. *Africa Insight*, 22(1), 34–48.
- Richards, C. (1997). Peripheral vision: Speculations on art criticism in South Africa. In K. Deepwell (Ed.), *Art criticism and Africa* (pp. 73–87). London, UK: Saffron Books/EAR.
- Schoeman, G. (2009). Forget Thembinkosi Goniwe. *Art South Africa*, 7(4), 23.
- Seepe, S. (2017). Higher education transformation in South Africa. In M. Cross & A. Ndofirepi (Eds.), *Knowledge and change in African universities* (pp. 121–144). Rotterdam, Netherland: Sense Publishers.
- Stankiewicz, M. A. (2007). Capitalizing art education: Mapping international histories. In L. Bresler (Ed.), *International handbook of research in arts education* (pp. 7–30). Dordrecht, Netherland: Springer.
- Steyn, M. E. (2004). Rehabilitating a whiteness disgraced: Afrikaner white talk in post-apartheid South Africa. *Communication Quarterly*, 52(2), 143–169.
- Steyn, M. E. (2005). ‘White talk’: White south Africans and the management of diasporic whiteness. In A. J. Lopéz (Ed.), *Postcolonial whiteness: A critical reader on race and empire* (pp. 119–135). New York: State University of New York Press.

APPENDIX: LIST OF ANALYZED REVIEWS

- Brown, J. (2004). Gabi Ngcobo. *Art South Africa*, 3(2), 72.
- Corrigall, M. (2008, September 21). Here’s what I think of your labels.... *The Sunday Independent*, p. 27.
- Corrigall, M. (2009, August 23). When the gals get going. *The Sunday Independent*, p. 27 (also published on 2009, August 30: Women Themed Exhibitions: Aargh! *Incorrigible Corrigall*). Retrieved from <http://corrigall.blogspot.co.za>
- Corrigall, M. (2010, August 24). Gugulective, Goniwe and the Politics of Race, again. *Incorrigible Corrigall*. Retrieved from <http://corrigall.blogspot.co.za>
- Corrigall, M. (2015, July 10). Award-winning artist uses his moment to focus on fore-runners. *The Star – Tonight*, p. 7 (also published on 2015, July 19: When History is Broken: Kemang Wa Lehulere. *Incorrigible Corrigall*). Retrieved from <http://corrigall.blogspot.co.za>
- Dawes, N. (2001, September). Authentic/Ex-centric at the Venice Biennale. *Artthrob*, 49. Retrieved from <http://www.artthrob.co.za>
- Geers, K. (1990, September 27). It may be fun but it fails to ‘explore’. *The Star*, p. 12.
- Miller, A. (2007, September). Esther Mahlangu and Speelman Mahlangu at 34 Long. *Artthrob*, 121. Retrieved from <http://www.artthrob.co.za>

- O'Toole, S. (2002, December). Taxi-006: David Koloane. *Artthrob*, 64. Retrieved from <http://www.artthrob.co.za>
- Pollak, L. (2010, May). SANG's reputation thrashed for 2010 show. *The South African Art Times*, pp. 1, 3.
- Schoeman, G. (2009). Forget Thembinkosi Goniwe. *Art South Africa*, 7(4), 23.
- Smith, D. (2010, September 1). Gallery director defends decision to swap Gainsborough for African works. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com>