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**‘UN-KNOTTING PLACE AND SPACE’
CONSIDERING THE SIGNS OF AFRICA
IN THE WORKS OF
Yinka Shonibare, Junya Watanabe, Black Coffee and Nicholas Hlobo**

UNKNOTTING PLACE AND SPACE:

The title of this essay is taken from a chapter in Iain Buchanan's interpretation of the work of *Michel de Certeau: Cultural Theorist*¹ that investigates de Certeau's "stories [that] are seen as a kind of labour that constantly transform places into spaces or spaces into places" (2000: 109). Furthermore the idea of 'unknotting' summons both an intellectual questioning and 'undoing', and a tactile, tangible act of loosening the knots that continue to bind notions of culture, stereotype, tradition, gender and identity. In the previous two seminars, I explored how 'Africa' is addressed, referenced and represented in the work of selected creative cultural practitioners, which raised questions around the fragmentary multiplicity of the notion of a fixed and singular African definition. This essay further aims to address this complex idea of 'Africa' and, moreover, reflect on de Certeau's time-space continuum of Africa "on which to construct a new, and indeed renewing, image of culture and society" (Buchanan 2000: 14).

The previous seminar presentations introduced a British-based artist whose work deals with the artificially constructed notion of an 'African' identity by using so-called 'African' textiles, Yinka Shonibare; a Japanese fashion designer whose Spring/Summer 2009 collection referenced an 'authentic', yet clichéd African aesthetic, Junya Watanabe; and, a South African fashion design brand known for their considered, yet subtle use of 'African' influences in their work, Black Coffee. What forms a common construct in their work is the representation of Africa, the interpretation of Africa, and the coded fragments of Africa that simultaneously challenge, splinter and confront stereotypes of what 'Africa' is, as both a past and a present paradigm. Shonibare, Watanabe and Black Coffee all use dressed or fashioned bodies to negotiate hegemonic practices of a predominantly Western art world and fashion system, and present hybrid questions in a homogenous world. It is within this context of research that I have chosen to 'unknot' the work of South African artist, Nicholas Hlobo², whose complex, confrontational sculptures similarly challenge tradition, stereotype and identity; as Sean O'Toole describes, Hlobo's sculptures are "primarily made from rubber inner tubing with details of lace, organza and ribbons, [where] the seams, whether bright pink or blue, [have] become defining metaphors of his work, grafting histories and reconciling opposites (O'Toole 2008).

In Nomusa Makhubu's study on the 'Other' Africans³, it is both Hlobo's sculptures and his performances that confront what "African-ness is; what is perceived as a set of characteristics that can be performed, but also advocated as a state of mind" (2009: 158). Makhubu investigates how the concept of a "true" African is contested by Hlobo who draws attention to the "contradictions in the construction of different kinds of African-ness" (ibid). Moreover, Hlobo's sculptures and performances confront the difference between the manners in which African-ness, or an individual subject, is performed, seen and received; highlighting social conventions that are projected within society to form constructs of race, gender and sexual identities.

¹ Key issues addressed by Buchanan include de Certeau's notions of strategy, tactics, place and space in the study of culture and everyday life

² Nicholas Hlobo was the winner of the Tollman Award for the Visual Arts 2006, and the Standard Bank Young Artist for Visual Art 2009, and the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative 2010-2011

³ Nomusa Makhubu's thesis titled *The "Other" Africans: Re-examining Representations of Sexuality in the works of Nicholas Hlobo and Zanele Muholi*, offers an extensive overview of how the work of these two artists challenge notions of authenticity, sexuality, tradition, performance and art practices within a contemporary South African context

POWER AND POLITICS IN CLOTH:

The explicit references to colonial pasts and traditional practises, the concerns with an 'exotic', and the use of the dressed body by Shonibare and Watanabe called into question notions of history, politics and power, the self and the other. Through the use of 'African' textiles, artist Shonibare (b. 1962, London) engages with notions of the postcolonial condition, power and the politics of art, culture and identity, employing the textile variably in sculptural forms, costumes and canvases. Shonibare's work comments on the impact of colonial intervention and invention, and acts as a critique around notions of "traditionality, (in)authenticity, ethnic categorization and neo-colonial power" (Picton, 2001). Fashion designer Watanabe (b. 1961, Tokyo) experimented with colourful "African" prints in his Spring/Summer 2009 Ready-to-wear collection, which according to Sarah Mower "struck a beautiful balance between tribal references and his own signatures" (2008).

Watanabe's collection confronts the homogeneity of the Western ideal of a fashion world⁴ by exploring the visual experience of an 'other' – exotic, African and hybrid – while Shonibare's installations, photographs and films explore notions of place and hierarchy in his use of cross-cultural aesthetics and visual mimicry. The shared code employed by both Watanabe and Shonibare is the iconic, yet problematic 'African' textile⁵; a cloth itself a hybrid construct of trade and politics. Further investigations into this textile reveals its paradoxical use as a symbol of political independence in Africa, a sign of pride, distinction and liberation in the Diasporas, a site of history, and a code for new identities in a postcolonial world.

South African fashion designers Black Coffee⁶ have also worked with textiles, accessories and details that are recognisable codes of 'African-ness' in their collections, which garnered them the Mercedes Benz Award for Fashion Design 2009 for their interpretation of the theme '*Modern South Africa*'. Yet, what positions the work of Black Coffee beyond clichéd applications, is the disturbance of expectations and rules in their constructions of alternate South African fashion aesthetics. As Adam Levin noted:

The fact that Black Coffee is an African label is almost incidental to their success. I say almost, because the African influences have always been conscious and well considered in their work. But they [the influences] have been refined and nuanced to the point that the garments stand their own anywhere in the world (2009: 22).

It is this considered presentation of fashion by Black Coffee that blurs the boundaries between cultures and traditions, between gender, race and class, in the construction new modern identities where the cultural ambiguities collapse notions of distinction and difference. The dressed body acts as contemporary social commentary, constructing new dialogues, questioning the politically polarised histories of South Africa. In this sense Black Coffee not only engage with the codes, but also, simultaneously combine and subvert these signs into abstraction, as a way of negotiating the ambiguities, complexities and instability of a new, postcolonial South Africa.

⁴ See Sandra Niessen's text in *Oriental Fashion: The Globalisation of Asian Dress*, pp230 -268

⁵ The most common 'African' textile is Vlisco, produced by the Dutch as a copy of Indonesian batik, manufactured in Manchester, and sold in Africa as an authentic 'African' textile

⁶ Black Coffee, a fashion brand based in Johannesburg, was launched in 1998 by Jacques van der Watt, and joined by Danica Lepen in 2004

SIGNS, SIMULATIONS & SEMIOLOGY:

In this postcolonial, post-Apartheid South Africa, the radical dissolution of previously established social rules has made urgent a need for codes or signs that reference the erasure of the distinctions of most notably race and class, but also gender, culture and religion, as visual evidence of change and transformation. This correlates with Jean Baudrillard's notion of post-modern societies that he maintains are "being organised around *simulation* [where] the play of images and signs, denotes a new social order, [and] codes and signs have become the organising forms" (1994: 18-19). In a society of simulation, identities are being constructed by the appropriation of images, and codes and models that determine how these individuals perceive themselves and relate to other people. As South Africans continue to re-identify themselves within a new democratic context, Baudrillard's notion of differences between "individuals and groups imploding in a rapidly mutating, changing dissolution of the social, [becomes relevant] where previously boundaries and structures existed" (1994: 16). Questions around the definitions of 'African-ness', the constructs of belonging, and the symbols and signs of place and time, complicate the reading of 'Africa', in this case, addressing identities in contemporary fashion and art.

Roland Barthes (1957) adopted the "different orders of signification" from Hjelmslev (1961). According to Chandler in his introduction to *Semiotics*, the first (denotative) order (or level) of signification is seen as primarily representational and relatively self-contained (2002: 145). The second (connotative) order of signification reflects 'expressive' values, which are attached to the sign, and in the third (mythological or ideological) order of signification the sign reflects major culturally variable concepts underpinning a particular worldview – such as masculinity, femininity, freedom, individualism, objectivism, Englishness, etc (ibid.). Watanabe's use of Africa in his collection can be seen as denotative and primarily representational. Shonibare's reference to Africa through his use of the so-called 'African' textile is connotative, as the textile reflects certain values or meanings attached to the 'sign', and similarly, Black Coffee's use of details, colours, cuts and accessories work with the connotative values inscribed in their functions as 'signs' (of Africa). It is in the work of Nicholas Hlobo, that the third order of signification is addressed; where the ideological constructs of masculinity (and femininity), Xhosa⁷ cultural identity, sexuality, religion, ritual, tradition and difference are all reflected and contested.

Referencing Africa as a category involves the "oscillation between the real and the imaginary, the imaginary realised and the real imagined" maintains Achille Mbembe, as "Africa experiences many metaphorical births and deaths that project its pasts as ghosts that are tagged with authenticity" (2001: 241). These *many* constructions of Africa compete with a confusion of the different singular constructions of 'Africa's' and the singular notions of West⁸, maintains Makhubu (2009: 55). Much recent

⁷ Hlobo draws strongly on his Xhosa heritage in his work, invoking idioms of the Xhosa language, exploring Xhosa evolving traditions, his place as a gay man within Xhosa culture, and the role of ritual in defining Xhosa identity

⁸ Makhubu elaborates how "the idea of Africa and the West as opposites obscures certain realities. It must be kept in mind that for different African countries, the coloniser was not one singular country and that not *all* African countries were formally colonised and not *all* European countries were colonisers" (2009: 56)

research and writing has focused on the continued polarisation of the terms 'traditional' and 'modern' where the term traditional is equated to 'African, stagnant, primordial' and the term modern is seen to mean 'Western, dynamic, and innovative'⁹. These distinctions situate "traditional" and "modern" as oppositions (Makhubu 2009: 55).

Homi Bhabha's "DissemiNation: Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation," in *The Location of Culture* also identified "the signs of a coherent national culture" as the "scraps, patches and rags of daily life [which] must be repeatedly turned into signs" (1994: 141). A further reading of Bhabha's *writing the nation* identifies a process of "splitting"¹⁰ that is needed to be able to "inscribe the ambivalent and chiasmatic intersections of time and place that constitute the problematic 'modern' experience of the Western nation" (ibid.). The attempted identification of South Africa in terms of a "homogeneous and horizontal view associated with a nation's imagined community" surfaces the "double and split" time of Bhabha's national representation which can never articulate its "representative authority in the visual synchrony of the sign" (1994:142). Complications arise when discussing the authenticity of a sign (of Africa), since associations of Africa, and in this case of South Africa, adhere to concepts that cast Africa's position in problematic relationships with the West, as "the attached twin" or "shadow state" (Ferguson 2006: 17, cited in Makhubu 2009: 55).

In his artwork, Hlobo presents various challenges to the singular constructions of Africa. Hlobo's references discuss notions of African-ness by "questioning the luggage of its past, the negative discourse about Africa, the marginal position of tradition, and confines of sexuality" (O'Toole 2008). In the article titled *Phalluses, saddles and South Africa: handmade costumes and the Xhosa language*, O'Toole presents Hlobo's assertions about his work:

'Most people I know say my work is so not black,' quips Hlobo, who has forged his own unique aesthetic. On not being representative, Hlobo simply states: 'I quite enjoy that, because I am somehow celebrating all my heritages: my African heritage, my colonial heritage, all those things personal to me – the language I speak, my Xhosa' (O'Toole 2008).

In this essay I will briefly explore three ways in which Hlobo challenges and confronts the clichés and the artificiality of the constructs of, broadly speaking, 'Africa', through his use of language, through his choice of materiality and medium, and through his performance.

HLOBO: LANGUAGE AS METAPHOR & SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION:

Many of Hlobo's sculptures and performances use Xhosa titles and reference particular ambiguities that exist within the language, for example, *Kwatsityw'iziko* means "crossing the hearth" and yet refers, most literally, to sex; the title of a paper work *Igaz'lam* means "my blood", and the title of a large chair, *Ndimnandindindodwa*, literally translates as "to get excited all alone," which also refers to masturbation. The nuances within the titles reflect both the literal translations and their inferred

⁹ See Kondo (1997), Niessien (2003), Ross (2008) and Rovine (2009: 133-135) in terms of these definitions in of tradition and modernity in fashion and dress practices

¹⁰ This 'split' is also referred to as the twin or double time. The notion of Africa is regularly positioned in complex relationships with the West in terms of the double, twin or split

meanings or innuendos. In an interview with Hlobo, Joost Bosland¹¹ investigates the symbiotic relationship between Hlobo's artworks and their titles, which has turned "language into sculpture", claiming that as his "international visibility increases, so does the international presence of [the language] Xhosa" (Bosland 2008). In response to Hlobo's use of Xhosa titles (his first language) given to his sculptures, performances and drawings, O'Toole challenges what has usually been interpreted in terms of "alienating and confrontational" on South Africa's predominantly white art audience (2008: 34). O'Toole considers Ngungi wa Thiongo's 1981 statement that "[t]he choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe" (ibid.). Although Hlobo's work is "pitched at a white art world" in which Xhosa is not comprehended, Hlobo maintains that engagement with his work forces those who don't speak the language to become curious about it. Hlobo further explains:

I look at the formal qualities of the grammar, the words, and take my meaning from there. I'll pronounce it, listen to its sounds. But also it helps me with my larger project, to explore my identity. To me it is a good point to start from, or to dwell on. It is a very rich language; it has many proverbs, metaphors (Bosland 2008).

Makhubu identifies Hlobo's use of language as a significant role in the validation of "African-ness" and as a claiming of identity since English has dominated indigenous languages officially, as much as Western ideologies have dominated South African urban identity constructs (2009: 18). Makhubu argues that O'Toole's suggestion implies that Hlobo's use of Xhosa titles in "a white art world" is a form of transgression, proposing that it may be that Hlobo "underscores the disparity of language itself where attempts to understand Xhosa are not made within 'the white art worlds', yet Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho speakers make efforts to comprehend English"¹² (ibid.). Hlobo's use of language imbues his sculptures and performances with narrative meanings and surrounds them with his personal mythology, yet simultaneously it confronts and challenges the hegemonic context of art practices in both a local and a global world.

HLOBO: STITCHING TRADITIONS:

Inner tyre tubing, rubber and pink ribbon, cords, ties, and metaphors of stitching, suturing and seams, play a significant role in Hlobo's sculptures and the costumes he uses in his performances (O'Toole 2008). Hlobo employs this tension between distinctly masculine materials, and feminine attributes, blurring the distinctions and differences, to confront the artificial construct of gender and the normative, performative social rules and expectations, whether Western or traditional. Makhubu claims that the signifiers of masculinity and femininity are emphasised to such an extent in works like *Umthubi* (2006), *Unojubalala* (2006) and *Chitha* (2006), that the original meanings are often deferred, and even ruptured or exploded (2009: 45). In *Umthubi* (2006), the combination of the inner rubber tube and wooden stakes in contrast to the pink ribbon creates a difference, that when used together, "suspend the meanings ... between the original meaning and the present altered meanings" (ibid.).

¹¹ The interview as a form of art criticism has become ubiquitous over the past two decades. The return of the artist's voice is laudable in general, but is specifically appropriate for an artist like Hlobo. This interview took place on the occasion of *Kwatsityw'iziko*, Nicholas Hlobo's second exhibition at Michael Stevenson in Cape Town, April 2008

¹² English has been seen as the common language of communication between the different socio-linguistic groups in South Africa, and acts as a means to avoid tribalism based on which indigenous language is favoured (Makhubu 2009):

A number of South African artists have used “evidence of material richness [which] continue where crafts, traditions and modernist abstraction meet: ... Nicholas Hlobo’s suture-like stitched pieces are based on Zulu needlework” (Cotter 2008 as cited in Makhubu 2009: 40). Makhubu claims that the problematic that African artists continue to be subjected to analyses and descriptions that compare them to the “genius” of Modernism and the “craft” in Zulu needlework and that Hlobo’s work is like suture and “Zulu”, yet there is no such thing as “Zulu needlework” and Hlobo is not Zulu (ibid.). African artists often face the problem of being placed on a scale that measures them against European traditions and cultural production. This act of *stitching* addresses various issues around gendered practices of handcraft, distinctive production divisions between local art and global production, and moreover, stitching as a tangible act of making, creating or recycling that which is discarded, destroyed or fallen apart.

HLOBO: A DIFFERENT GENDERED SPECTACLE:

Finally, key to Hlobo’s work is the conflict presented in the ‘authentic’ African-ness of the rituals, traditions and language/titles used, coupled with the obvious, and at times extreme, expressions of homosexuality. Makhubu’s key research focus in her thesis highlights these “representations of sexuality” in the work of Hlobo, but also of Zanele Muholi¹³, to provide an analysis of the visual language used by these artists that “subverts the notion that homosexuality is un-African” (Makhubu 2009: ii). The notion of spirituality, ritual and religion in Hlobo’s work is represented as part of this hybrid identity where these principles of belief are drawn from different sources including those of assumed essential “traditional” African beliefs (Makhubu 2009: 47). Yet, Hlobo is openly gay, in his persona and in his work. This radically confronts and contradicts the African stereotype. Moreover, Hlobo maintains being gay equally depends on an acknowledgement of gay social groups, gay events, gay languages and modes of dress and, therefore, its “authenticity of identity is also temporary and similarly alludes to an assumption of illusory truth” (Perryer 2006: 22). Hlobo’s work complicates the ideologies of gender, sexuality and identity.

This is further by Hlobo through his performances that “render him other, effectively highlighting both the existence and the invisibility of black gay identities particularly in traditionalist contexts” claims Makhubu (2009: 69). Hlobo’s “otherness” is based on his race and his sexuality, which he accentuates in his performances through the props that he uses: the bright colours, the distinct tactility of his materials, his costumes, and often, unusual bodily appendages. Hlobo becomes “an abnormality through his performance” in order to highlight the “mechanism of othering” (Perryer 2006:23). These performances highlight Hlobo’s difference, especially where the distinction between himself as a spectator and his presence as a spectacle is blurred (Makhubu 2009: 98).

NOTIONS OF AFRICA AS CONCLUSIONS:

In his artwork, Hlobo therefore presents various different hypotheses around the material cultures and codes that reference Africa, African-ness, and an African identity. These re-constructions of complex, ambiguous and shifting definitions of identity are knotted, stitched and strutted by Hlobo in an attempt to challenge so-

¹³ Zanele Muholi’s well known photographic works confront the notion of Black lesbian identities, and seek to publicise the injustices imposed upon homosexual individuals in order to demonstrate the weight of that crisis in South Africa

called normative ideas of Africa. Sarah Nuttall observed that new stylisations of the self, embedded in cultures of the body, “represent one of the most decisive shifts of the post-apartheid era” (2004: 449). Nuttall continues:

... the resultant mix of meaning and intentionality, of interpretation and legibility is chaotic and complex, defying easy readings in terms of race, culture or political identity. The patterns are promiscuous and conflicting, mutating readily, combining in a heady blend of past, present and future which is at once a reflection of lived experience, historical memory and memory-making and of as yet unrequited aspiration. In contrast to the dominant sense of belonging arising from shared oppression and shared political aspiration that characterised resistance politics in the pre-liberation period, contemporary South African fashion which is consciously looking to South Africa’s political history for inspiration, offers the possibility of identity through consumption (Nuttall 2004: 449).

Hlobo continually explores these alternatives of indistinct or ambiguous states of identity through a form of a ‘dressed body’ in his sculptures and performances, claiming that identity should not have to be a choice between inside and outside, but rather an ability to have affiliations with different groups in different places and the ability to enter and exit those groups (O’Toole 2008). In most of his work, Hlobo investigates sex, gender, sexuality and culture, and draws from different cultural and art practice traditions as “an amalgamation of gendered tools and practices that reveal the complexity of the influences of shifting knowledge systems and ideological structures” (Makhubu 2009: 109). Hlobo unseats power as the property of one individual or one group of people, through the dissolution of fixed meanings and the confrontation of ideological signs in his work.

In considering the signs of Africa in this essay, Baudrillard's idea of simulation, where we find the keys to this world, describes the ‘liberation’ of the signs from their referents. The ‘signs’ or visual codes of Africa referenced and applied in the work Nicholas Hlobo, Black Coffee, Yinka Shonibare and Junya Watanabe begin to approach Baudrillard’s “vanishing point of meaning”, signs that could equally be inverted or declared as explosions of meaning (Hegarty 2004: 49-51). Signs from any place in the world have become open to even further combinations, variations and subversions, the moment they are mediated. Jacques Ranciere in *The Future of the Image*, asserts that, notions of “fragmentation, interval, cutting, collage and montage, all readily taken as criteria of artistic modernity, can assume highly diverse (even opposed) meanings” as the signs or codes are no longer bound to a distinct reference (2007: 55). Shonibare refers to a multi-cultural hybridity in his work; Watanabe’s collection references a momentary excursion into place (with its associated aesthetic, narrative, and signs/codes of identity); and Black Coffee whose hybrid installations and constructions create new, layered abstract identities reflecting the transformations of a postcolonial South Africa. Hlobo as African confronts the limitations of concepts of bordered or marginal identities, presenting a cultural hybridity that emerges as “witness to the dance of signs” (Raetzsch 2003). As Ranciere suggests, this new sensitivity to signs and traces, testifies a far more common history and common world than one we think of as divided, different and distinct (2007: 67).

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