

## "VULGAR, THE HALLMARK OF BLACK IDENTITY"

(A paper prepared by Xola Skosana for the June 16 Open Conversations Symposium at the Makukhanye Art Room)

### INTRODUCTION

It is my understanding that this talk is part of a series of open conversations aiming to explore and discover the importance of Black Art, Black Artists and Black Communities in the democratic South Africa. I wish to do the above, ie, the exploration and discovery of the importance of Black Art, Black Artist and Black Communities under the the theme, "vulgar, the hallmark of black identity"

I hope it's not unpardonable, but I am intending to hijack this conversation and reintroduce our story, the Black story in its crudest form. A form that will not only make us cringe in disbelief but resolve to commit ourselves afresh to the noblest cause of our lives, in the words of Fanon, that of "ending the world as we know it" It is my contention that the version of the black story making rounds has become too familiar and only serves to neutralize and domesticate us. Those who tell our story leave us who suffer the burden of being Black, docile.

If we agree that the primary charge we lay at the feet of the whole world is that black existence is the edifice upon which all else stands, if we agree that our impairment and brokenness as Black people is as a result of having been made the pedestal on which all else holds firm and solid, a weight so heavy that it renders every generation of Black people disfigured, then we must bare our soul, not to plead for sympathy but to demand justice for the crime committed against us.

It is said that the "pen is mightier than the sword" like many other things of profundity attributed to white people, these words are attributed to an English author, Edward Bulwer-Lytton. This is the contribution I also hope to make in my lifetime, to employ the most graphic of words and images that I can master, in any language that lends itself useful, to retell the story of our vulgarized existence. "Vulgar, the hallmark of Black identity and religion" is in fact my research topic for my doctoral studies with University of KwaZulu-Natal for when the day of reckoning has finally come, there will be no Natal in Azania.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In this paper, I'm indebted to thinkers and scholars such as Achille Mbembe, a philosopher, political theorist and public intellectual from Cameroon, in particular his paper on the Post Colony. Here Mbembe uses the words vulgar and grotesque to critic post colonial societies. Orlando Patterson, "Slavery and Social Death. Here is laid bare the intrusive manner by which a human is turned into a slave and the permanent mark of such violence. Not only does one forever live with general dishonor, alienation to self and vulnerability to violence, his or her

offspring is born an enemy within the dominant culture. Though I'm not fond of giving credit to whites, let me acknowledge David Chidester who is the professor of religious studies at UCT. He has documented the emergence of a science of comparative religion in Great Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century and its complex relations to the colonial situation in Southern Africa. I have found, in particular, the records of encounters of Europeans with "savage" cultures helpful. The disdain suffered by the indigenous people in these wary encounters is the same disdain suffered by Black people who inhabit the world today. And of course the great god himself, Bantu Biko, a man whose wisdom remains unmatched, to quote the words of a song by Amy Grant, or the book of Psalms "thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path" ( Ps 119:105)

#### A CASE STUDY OF A VULGARIZED EXISTENCE

As a way of beginning, and to drive the theme home, let us reflect on a story that has almost all the components of our inquiry, Black Art, Black Artist, Black Communities. The last part of it, Democratic South Africa, I must say I know not what that means. However it does make for an even intriguing and more relevant study, I will not delve into it in this paper other than to argue that post apartheid South Africa is an outpost of Western imperialism and now contested by aspiring imperialists from the East, some among us are hard at work, compelling us to choose sides. What I hope will be highlighted in the story is the vulgarized black existence, both the body and the spaces of human settlement we are subjected to.

The story will hopefully show the cumbersome representation of Blackness in the world, one that is seemingly incurable even beyond the notable successes of black people in areas of art, sport, academia and practically every human endeavor recorded in history.

This story emerged in our locality, we look in the archives and find a Christiaan Barnard, a white cardiac surgeon who is said to have performed the world's first human to human heart transplantation in 1967. In his shadows we find a Hamilton Naki, a laboratory assistant with exceptional surgical skills, who took a leading role in organ transplant, transferring such skill, both to physicians and medical students alike. When the story of Christiaan Barnard broke, Mr Naki got relegated to the dustbin of history for almost 40 years until shortly after his retirement. Only then was he recognized for his contribution in the medical field, receiving an honorary degree in Msc ( Master of Science ) from the university of Cape Town in 2003, a face saving act it seems and a question of too little to late. I say so because Mr Naki was given the Bronze order of Maphungubwe by President Thabo Mbeki a year before already.

Vulgar is embodied and sensory, it is something that we see, taste or touch that nauseates us to our last nerve. Mr Naki was a victim of a vulgarized black existence who lived in the shadows of whiteness. Vulgar is the inescapable hallmark of black identity. What is ugly, repulsive and distorted, what lacks sophistication and good taste is now permanently black identity the world over. Not even Oprah can escape, Oprah or Mitchell Obama have been able to escape unscathed. Blacks have lived in bodies and subjected to spaces that have been systematically

vulgarized for far too long, such vulgar has now intricately and inescapably become one with us.

To be black in the world in the eyes of other is to be tasteless, unrefined, loud, overdone and over elaborate. It is to be impolite, ill-mannered, uncultured and low-minded. Black existence can be likened to someone giving off a fart, a natural and healthy emission of wind through the anus, but feel they have to apologize for it.

## VULGAR AS PROTEST

Loyiso Nkohlhla and Andile Lili the leaders of Se'sKhona, a protest movement in Khayelitsha, will forever be remembered for leading a poo throwing campaign. Who can forget the pictures of human waste strewn around the entrance at Cape Town International airport or the lady running for cover as human excreta was being thrown at the entrance of the provincial legislature? The picture of Cecil John Rhodes decorated in human feces by Chumani Maxhwele is etched in our collective memory. All these acts of courage and bravery have something to teach us about vulgar as protest, they remain the most creative and provocative forms of protest post 94. The naked bodies of black radical feminists blocking the entrance into Fees Must Fall exhibition room at UCT in 2016 successfully interrupted and ended what Mr Kasibe had put together as the archives of Rhodes Must Fall. Contesting the erasure of women in telling the story of RMF, they threw their naked bodies at the door, insisting, in a powerful symbolic gesture that their bodies don't matter and therefore visitors to the exhibition can jump over them and not be bothered. These acts have the ability to tame power and render it impotent.

In Achille Mbembe's words, even by the act of laughter and ridicule, (people) kidnap power and force it, as if by accident, to examine its own vulgarity..."

## WELCOME TO HELL-SA TOWNSHIPS

In some small way we have tried to kidnap power. For six years consecutively, we have walked the 11.5 Km from Gugulethu to Khayelitsha, under the the banner "Welcome To Hell-SA Townships, carrying the the crucifix in a performative way and as a symbol of vulgarized black existence. The biblical story, fictional or not, is the closest gruesome act of violence Black people wake up to in the Townships of South Africa, a daily near death experience. Mr Naki leaved in one of these rat-infested hellholes called LANGA, embodied its vulgar and its smell of death as he walked into the laboratory every day, while Christiaan Barnard could sleep peacefully in his fortified lilly white enclave, outside which Blacks like Mr Naki fed on garbage bins. How could anyone think of him any better or even acknowledge him for his genius when in his body he fully represented vulgarity?

## CONCLUSION

Was it not the vulgarized black existence that Biko sought to rescue Blacks from when he presented a counter narrative, contesting that "Black is Beautiful"? Biko said that which is

vulgar and obscene in the eyes of others, is in fact beautiful in our eyes. Biko taught us that if we are going to survive the insult on our bodies and the assault on the Black psyche, our vulgarized presence in the world must be a form of protest against and a refuge from the dominant culture. The role of Black Art, Black Artist in Black Communities is to discover the creative genius discovered by Biko in Black people, when he said Black is in fact beautiful in our eyes. Black Art in the heart of a Black Conscious Artist is a sacred spear to wage war against all forces that seek to dominate us. As Biko aptly put it, "By describing yourself as Black you have started on the road to emancipation, you have committed yourself to fight against all forces that seek to use your blackness as a stamp that marks you out as a subservient being"