

Intimate lives, interior places

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ABSTRACT

This is a meditative piece on intimacy, exposure, skin, opacity and relations between human and other-than-humans. It is a reflection in various registers on ways in which intimacy can be understood, drawing on a set of interleaving instances from theory, art and literature. It is an experiment with form which makes use of critical insights from academic inquiry, but which moves closer to ways in which we often think and feel, not always attended to by academic writing. It adopts a mode of writing which offers an imagined dialogue with the reader, as it invites the reader closer to the material being explored. Thus it invokes an intimacy of form intended to renew the search for ways of writing thought.

Keywords: Intimacy, selfhood, opacity, disentanglement, human-plant, other-than-human.

Intimate life, or intimacy, is never only about selfhood, self-exploration, or self-scrutiny. It always involves another – someone who, having been brought into the sphere of trust, can be talked to and is disposed to listening. It is always a matter of disposition and reciprocity.

At the same time, until recently, the sphere of the intimate only existed in relation to that which had to be guarded against, or concealed from the public. It was understood that the human subject did not need to reveal herself in her “natural state”. Public life and its dominant codes of decency required of her that she wear a mask, that she keep for herself and a trusted few her frailties, vulnerabilities and fantasies, especially those deemed embarrassing or shameful.

As a consequence, the intimate sphere was a space of relations that were off-limits because they dealt with inner experience and private life. Through the sharing of

secrets, of that which had to be concealed, a person became bound to some others while being protected from the world at large. An intimate sphere promised warmth, disclosure, saying what one really meant, the expression of vulnerability as a means of getting closer and closer, even a fusion of selves. Although social and cultural, the sphere of the intimate was nevertheless located on the outskirts of the public.

Such a highly-stylised understanding of intimacy has been dominant in Western philosophical traditions. The invocation of democracy posited the need to screen off personal identities and desires in order to pursue a disinterested common good through rational discourse. Here, intimacy has been both a cult object and an object of suspicion. During the twentieth century, it was embraced as an ideal, yet critiqued as the fulfillment of the dominant cultural ideology, a retreat from worldliness as well as a lazy accommodation to the strangeness of everyday life under late capitalism. A similar ambivalence has characterised modern South Africa in many respects, but with a number of different historical inflections. The denigration of the private was a crucial dimension of apartheid – and of the political struggle against it.

The writer and critic Njabulo Ndebele associates intimacy with having a home in the first place. In his essay “A home for intimacy” from 1996, he invokes the demolition of homes, forced removals to strange places, forms of temporary, makeshift living, and a shared experience of homelessness, shaped by loss and the desperate need to regain something, in the lives of black South Africans. All of this amounted to the ‘forced jettisoning not of the inner self’ but of the conditions for intimacy to flourish, he writes. In terms of political struggle, the finding of a home for intimacy became a matter of seeing home as ‘some concept belonging to some historic process, some sense of historic justice, assuming, on the day of liberation, the physical space of a country’. Building a home meant building a country. In 1996, he claimed that country by living in it for the first time without interruption (‘the fear of being stopped’) and challenge (‘the challenge to my existence’): ‘This is my newly found home; not a building with rooms but a country full of people, trees, mountains, rivers, factories, farms, mines, roads, the coastline, parliament, schools and universities, military bases, the museum, the art gallery’ (Ndebele 1996). Kerry Bystrom, reflecting on Ndebele’s essay in her own essay “Johannesburg interiors”, writes that while pouring one’s energies into building a free country is in many ways the culmination of a dream, Ndebele insists that it also ‘carries a risk of losing or perpetuating the loss of intimacy shaped within individual homes and families’ (Ndebele cited by Bystrom 2013:338). ‘Can there be any society without private lives, without homes where individuals can flourish through histories of intimacy?’, Ndebele (1996) asks, and then concludes: ‘Public intimacies do need private intimacies’.

And so begins a complexly patterned movement between exposure and concealment, between searching for connection and acknowledging distance in post-apartheid culture. For many artists, this has meant a drawing on racial and gendered identities and histories without sacrificing opacity or promising full access to the self. It has meant, too, the drawing of erotic life into the public, making sex ordinary, tracing occluded routes of desire.

Underwritten here is the other political life of intimacy: the coming close to the body of the enemy, the victim, in murder, crime or rape. Here, politics moves into the body, leaving its traces all over the face or body of a neighbour, a stranger, a young woman, a gay man. Is it that our understanding of intimacy itself has been too narrow? Does intimacy rely, in turn, on too narrow a definition of the human? Should we not also include within the scope of the human – or for that matter the intimate – the inhuman, the darkness to be found in the innermost recesses of the self, a force that drives acts of cruelty and a deep degradation of others? Here, intimacy is the unconstrained explosion at the core of the human. More than this, we must also think of intimacy with, and as, a form of energy within, the other-than-human, a manner of thought I return to further on.

The artist Penny Siopis (2014:261) recently described exhibiting her early, now famous work, *Melancholia* (1986) as like ‘crying in public’. It is a phrase that speaks powerfully to South Africa’s post-“truth and reconciliation” years. Yet, 30 years on, to evoke intimacy as a public act, one needs to pay attention to major shifts in the conditions of our age. What was once considered shameful or indecent is no longer so. The self, including its modes of secrecy, is increasingly enmeshed with things, as a kind of prosthetics. We live increasingly under conditions of almost total visibility: there are more apparatuses of surveillance and tracking, certainly, but there is also an increase in willing self-exposure. More and more, too, one enters the realm of the intimate as a pre-scripted figure, with the image as a surrogate. Surrogate intimacies emerge everywhere.

If intimacy has been indexed via two broad questions – of embodiment and of desire – it sometimes seems as if we now live in an era more often characterised by disembodiment. Visual images no longer seem to need any referent; technologies of the image are said to have eviscerated the real and to have liquidated reference. The technologies constituting subjectivity and intimacy shift radically, and in the shift to the digital, the embodied human being is gradually displaced by more abstract regimes of code and different standards of subjectivity and vision. Does intimacy increasingly play and perform along a set of surfaces? What kinds of interiors, or interiority, does it then presuppose, what sort of relationship to privacy – and to new publics? What

is the relationship between expressions, invocations and figurations of intimacy and contemporary rubrics of secrecy, transparency and opacity? These are some of the new considerations on the status of the self and on the changing conditions of intimacy that we need to undertake.

Secrets, transparency, opacity

One way of approaching the contemporary lives of intimacy is by considering what a culture deems private or secret at any given time. 'Even private secrets of the most intimate kind are inevitably linked at some level to sociality and to living in a world together with others', Don Kulick (2015:241-242) writes. 'Because secrets are social, they are also socially distributed. Some groups of people come to be expected to have few or no secrets; while other kinds or groups of people are expected or even required to have secrets'. The Cold War years were coloured by the McCarthyite insistence that gay men and lesbians were inherently and dangerously secretive, duplicitous, treacherous and threatening; in the era of Donald Trump and the alt-right, the same applies to Muslims. The desires and inner lives of adults with significant physical and/or intellectual disabilities, the focus of Kulick's research, are often regarded by non-disabled people as 'mysterious and perhaps inaccessible, implying a kind of invisibility and concealment that is fundamental to the notion of secrecy' (Kulick 2015:241-242).

Life in South Africa after apartheid has been characterised by the pouring out of what used to be concealed or repressed. Autobiographies, blogs, documentaries, radio talk shows, lurid exposés, love dramas and sex scandals: dramas of the body in public. What formerly remained confined to the bedroom and the kitchen has exploded into public culture. At the same time, there is a privatisation of what was previously a state project: urban segregation. Gated communities, secured shopping districts, and security walls attest to the paradoxes of desegregation and re-racialisation. Meanwhile, the demand for homes by those who do not have permanent and legally recognised private spaces to protect has intensified. The Johannesburg architect Sarah Calburn (2010:66) writes that urban dwellers are still 'both hiding and hidden from each other in the franchised, car-bound landscape, where the "public" is characterised as criminal simply because access is denied to everything except the leftover space'. We move continually 'between interior spaces, eyes wide shut' (Calburn 2010:66). Under such conditions, she asks, why not conceive of our cities as large interiors in which we are all welcome? If this were so, an urban space previously composed of impenetrable surfaces would become instead a string of openings or lounges. It would be an 'affective substrate' (Bystrom 2013:335) for an alternative urban vision, yielding or forcing open the closed city.

Intimacy, secrets, privacy, a sense of interiority, the interiors of a home each exist in relation to surfaces, exteriors; they operate as opacities in relation to transparencies. What can a surface do or be, Anne Cheng (2009) asks, when it is not just a cover? Siopis (2010:462), in her movement from an exploration of trauma or wound as a figuration of depth, to a new painterly attention to skin surface, writes that a 'certain depthlessness' is a key to the production of the new. Skin itself is an ever more complex embodiment of the relationship between our interior and exterior lives. We think of the skin, Rachel Hurst writes, as revealing our interiors regardless of our wishes. We also adhere to a notion that our skins fail to reveal the entirety of our being. 'Skin is a remarkably vulnerable yet often an opaque obstacle between the self and the world. It fails to consistently conceal or disclose the interior life' (Hurst 2015:151).

In the cosmetic surgery patient, as with the body builder and the self-lacerator, we see aspects of what Steven Connor (2004) has called a 'skin mirror'. A "skin mirror", Hurst (2015:156) elaborates, embodies the fantasy of 'an exterior without an interior through the seamlessness and rigidity of its surface'. The self-lacerator makes an intentional mark. Both this figure and the cosmetic surgery patient share a desire to 're-establish their psychical containers as intact' through the intentional breaking through, and reparation of, their skins (Hurst 2015:156). Others, including Claudia Benthien (2003) and Virginia Blum (2003), have argued that an earlier understanding of the body as a house has been replaced over the course of the last two centuries by the idea of the body as a dress. Instead of skin as a window-orifice, we think of skin as a permeable site of exchange. Cosmetic surgery makes use of both: for example, the repair and maintenance of the skin-house could be compared to middle-class ideals of respectability through the upkeep and repair of one's property (Hurst 2015:178). The skin-as-house metaphor marks the subject as separate from others through walls and barriers, whereas the skin as dress metaphor marks the subject as separate from others through individuality and expression of identity through appearance. Both metaphors hold 'pure exteriority as an ideal to be achieved' (Hurst 2015:175).

In the realm of psychodermatology, psychic distress is no longer conceptualised at the level of interiority, but is exteriorised onto the skin's surface. The dermal, like the photographic, Hurst and others have shown, each, and together, fantasise dramatic personal change through transforming the body's surface. The intractability of the body is disavowed and becomes a source of personal frustration and personal failure. In thinking about cosmetic surgery, photography and skin, we can think through the implications of surface imagination for contemporary conceptualisations of embodiment (see Hurst 2015:187-188).

Notions of skin, especially within contexts of late market capitalism, as a surface, a screen or a slate, the desire of the self to be an object, co-exist with more narrative-based

formations – what Connor (2004:90) refers to as an ‘archipelago of meaning, experience and memory’: the earliest interface through which we encounter otherness, and difference, a reading by others at the point of exchange and connection between our interior psychic lives and our exterior social world.

We might think about intimacy, intimate archives and autobiographical acts, then, in relation to notions of the secret and the private, but also via imaginations of surface and underneath, interior and exterior. A third set of indices for thought about the contemporary lives of intimacy, or intimate exposures, relate to notions of transparency and opacity. Édouard Glissant, in his essay entitled “For opacity” asks: what would it mean to demand the right to opacity? What about ‘those times when the topicality of the question of differences (the right to difference) has been exhausted’? He goes on to say that the theory of difference is invaluable because it has allowed us to struggle against ‘reductive thought’, but that difference itself can still contrive to reduce things to the ‘Transparent’ (Glissant 1997:92).

Glissant opposes a ‘transfer into transparency’, arguing that respect for mutual forms of opacity seals the impossibility of being Other, making it impossible to reduce anyone ‘to a truth he would not have generated on his own’. The opaque ‘is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced’ (Glissant 1997:96). Opacity, writes Elvira Dyangani Ose (2015:169), reflecting on Glissant, refers to the possibility that every individual be plural and mutable. In that respect, she considers, we are in one way or another single islands in an all-encompassing world, a ‘meta-archipelago, centreless and boundaryless’. Here she recalls Umberto Eco’s (2015) notion of the ‘open work’, which he refers to variously as a field of possibilities, a series of sequential permutations, a complex structural polyphony, susceptibility to many readings while not impinging on its specificity, and an exposure of the work to the maximum possible openings versus closing it into context. Eco invokes a work’s ‘broken surfaces’, and the important thing is to prevent a single sense from imposing itself at the very outset of the receptive process (see Eco 2015:70). For Ose, Glissant’s poetics of relation is a poetics of the open work.

How else could we characterise opacity as artistic form? The London-based Otolith Group produced a film entitled *Nervus Rerum* (the nerve of things, in Latin), in 2008 that directly references Glissant’s notion of opacity. The Otolith Trilogy is known for its exploration of the critical potential of the “essay film” – a ‘distinctive mixture of documentary and dramatic imagery accompanied by poetic, historical and often autobiographical narration that works to disrupt clear boundaries between fact and fiction, subjectivity and objectivity and the real and the imaginary’, writes TJ Demos

(2009). *Nervus Rerum* takes as its subject the Jenin refugee camp in the Palestinian Occupied Territories. It confronts the problem of the representability of a people confined to a geographical enclave by a longstanding military occupation. Demos shows how the essay film brings visibility to the camp without positioning the camp's Palestinians as transparent subjects of a documentary exposé. Avoiding anthropological insights and cultural access to Jenin's inhabitants, the film, Demos writes, is ruled by the right to opacity. It takes us to the 'conundrum of representing Palestine'. The camera glides about as if 'undistracted and unconcerned by individual figures, people ignore the camera, eyes of the camp's figures and the viewers never meet', never become a site of mutual recognition (Demos 2009:114). The film, Kodwa Eshun of the Otolith Group says, does not give up on intimating the psychic and spatial conditions inside the camp, relaying the horror of enclosure that permeates the camp's ambience by offering an 'intimacy without transparency'. It constructs 'an opacity that seeks to prevent the viewer from producing knowledge from images' (Eshun cited by Demos 2009:19).

Opacity as form, then, could be approached through the notion of the open work, conceptualised by Eco, elaborated upon by Ose and others, or through the idea of non-representation. One might further ask whether Eco's open work is so open that it is closed; and one might consider that the refusal to represent difference in an economy that produces a form of depoliticised transparency reaches its end point in the impossibility of the image. Consider South African photographer Michael Subotzky's (2017) reflections on a recent show of his photographs, in conversation with Lwandile Fikeni: 'In *Retinal Shift* I smashed my own photographs. In retrospect, by doing this, I put my own violent feelings into the photographs themselves because I was frustrated that my images of violence could be put on a gallery wall and consumed for their beauty'. Subotzky finally disavows photography as a practice with which he can continue: 'I have come out completely from the world of making photographs' (his new work is a fictional film). Elsewhere in the interview (2017), he says, 'I feel like I have lost faith in photography, or at least I have lost interest in practicing it myself'.

If the poetics of relation offers a way in to thinking with opacity, and enables us to elaborate a set of analytical pathways in relation to transparency, difference, form and intimacy, I turn in the next section to recent debates in South Africa, partly in the wake of decolonisation movements, about the poetics and politics of *non-relation*.

The refusal of reciprocity

Investigating what Lisa Lowe (2015:18) calls the ‘political economy of intimacies’, a recent collection of essays published in South Africa explores race and friendship. The essays in the book map the overlapping genealogies of liberal colonialism, discourses of affection and the bonds of intimate ties as they relate to settler colonial governance, the codifying of racial difference, white supremacy and anti-blackness. Rather than assume that cultural entanglement necessarily disrupts or diminishes difference, the editors, Shannon Walsh and Jon Soske, are interested in the inverse: how intimacies expressed through friendship produce and structure difference. In examining friendship, *Ties that bind: Race and the politics of friendship in South Africa* (2016) engages with emerging critiques of non-racialism, an idea often treated as uniquely South African; with critiques of solidarity, and with a *politics of refusal* – that is, ‘the ethical and political rejection of the gift of friendship, a refusal that includes rejecting what is deemed good, rational and sensible by a given social order’ (Walsh & Soske 2016:5).

Although committed ultimately to the possibility of friendship across race, authors featured in this book draw energy and analytic edge from a widespread rejection of relationality infusing student movements and calls for decolonisation in South Africa. Drawing on Afropessimist lines of thought, the editors argue that thinking about white supremacy and anti-blackness requires that we ‘confront a relationality that exceeds the language of relation: the constitutive violence of settler civil society works to render full, ethical reciprocity between white and black – that is, friendship in the classic, Aristotelian sense – impossible in advance’ (Walsh & Soske 2016:18).

Thus, they argue for the ‘unavoidable centrality of a relation of non-relation’ in thinking through the politics of friendship in South Africa (Walsh & Soske 2016:18). On the cover of the book is this image by the South African artist Mohau Modisakeng (Figure 1).

Of this image Walsh and Soske (2016:308) write: ‘we see the image as one of release, letting go perhaps of the structuring force of racialised categories. Letting go of “blackness” that is both part and not part of the body’. This reading of the image seems to contain contradictory imperatives, one of an embrace that is an embrace of the self and not of another; a second which is about exiting racialised categories which could open a pathway to an entanglement with other bodies. The poetics of non-relation comes back to the problematic of re-asserting, while also letting go, of race. Authors in the book dramatise this complex conundrum, as they think with a notion of non-relation as a form of gaining access to a deeper self, while finding it hard to forego the promise of friendship beyond race as a proposition.



FIGURE **Nº 1**



Mohau Modisakeng, *Inzilo 1* (2013). Inkjet print on Epson Hot Press Natural. 112.5 x 150.2cm.
All efforts to secure copyright permission for this image were made.

It is usually taken that art or literature and friendship extend the possibility of immersion into another consciousness (a wager that the Humanities at large has relied upon). Both are forms, as Stacy Hardy puts it in her contribution to the book, in which we find the power, in language, to 'inhabit, perceive and recreate a shared world'. Having always felt herself to be alone in the world, she considers how literature offers an aloneness that undermines aloneness: 'a portrait of loneliness leaves us less alone' (Hardy 2016:50). This then is the relationship between friendship and reading that she speculates upon. But her hopes for friendship on the basis of a love for art, for literature, and as writers, are undercut by Hardy's contribution to the book in the form of a failed interview with her ostensible friend and colleague, writer and poet Lesego Rampolokeng. In her account of their email exchanges, many of which she quotes, 'he sees no inherent affinity between art and friendship. My questions about artistic relationships as a form of friendship via inspiration, affiliation or collaboration go unanswered' (Hardy 2016:58). Nor is he prepared to directly engage any of the personal relationships that were seminal to him, to his writing, his existence, to his coming to consciousness. 'We all know artists exploit artists', he says wryly, calling up a litany of failed friendships, betrayed dreams, the disappointed expectations and fraught alliances of community drawn together under economic and political or interpersonal stresses (Rampolokeng cited by Hardy 2016:58).

One could consider how more widely in South African non-fiction, the elaboration of non-relation or the refusal of reciprocity in the face of desired intimacy (at least on the part of one of the people involved, usually the white person) is dramatised. In Jonny Steinberg's non-fiction work *A man of good hope* (2014), what begins as a point of connection through a search for interiority ends with a renewed sense of difference and disentanglement. The book centres on the story of Asad Abdullah, but also on the relationship between Steinberg and Abdullah. At eight-years-old, at the beginning of the 1990s, Asad fled civil war in Mogadishu. Asad's story traverses state collapse in Somalia, clan loyalties, statelessness and undocumented international travel, chauvinistic nationalism and xenophobia. Starting to make a decent living in Addis, he puts USD1200 in his pocket and heads for South Africa. He arrives in 2008, the year of crushing xenophobic violence. Asad agrees to talk to Steinberg – but only in a car parked on a curb in Cape Town Mitchell's Plain where he can watch in the rear-view mirror.

As Asad talks, he looks in the mirror to see who is coming. While his internal eye peers into his childhood, which he is relating to Steinberg, the 'eyes on either side of his nose scan the street'. On Asad's shoulders rests 'the incessant burden of dodging his own murder' (Steinberg 2014:xv). Steinberg (2014:xvi) begins to feel Asad's fear '[a]s if it is a virus', he writes, 'as if it jumped off him and sank into my skin and is now coursing through my veins'. This becomes in the writer's mind a point of connection between

them: 'his fear crossed a boundary and inhabited me. I saw what he saw and felt what he felt. It was a gift. In that moment he gave me the ink with which I have written this book' (Steinberg 2014:293).

Steinberg spends more time than he does in earlier books trying to think about how to tell Asad's story, how to garner its meaning, and about the act of writing itself. He attempts to read Asad's interior life – with often relatively little expressed interiority on Asad's part to go on. His self-consciousness extends to this caution in his preface: 'I have not found a way of writing the books I do without exercising power' (Steinberg 2014:xiv).

The breaking of the point of connection between the two men comes through the revelation of difference (Steinberg 2014:313). This breaking point has two features. One is to do with 'the relationship to the unknown' that each man has. The second, not unrelated point, centres on their attitude to death. Steinberg reflects towards the end of the book on Asad's relentless desire to keep moving. For Asad, deeply immersed in ancestral clan politics and traumas, 'to have lived a fully human life is to have altered radically the course of his family's history'. This must entail plunging into the unknown. 'I have come to understand', Steinberg (2014:313) writes reluctantly, 'that Asad and I are very different. He is prepared to court death in ways that I am not'.

As for Asad, he explicitly does not want to be too self-reflexive, or to see his life laid out before him. What he wants to see, are those moments when the trajectory of his life in which he is viciously thrown about, is nonetheless shaped by his own decisions. Or this is what Steinberg sees him wanting. This he reads as a very powerful agency made possible by curtailed self-knowledge. He extrapolates further by writing:

I have spent the last couple of years memorializing his life. But there is no intrinsic value in remembering. He has in fact just told me that he cannot afford to take in the sweep of his life. To remember in this way is crippling. It is better for him I think to see his past as a series of sparks or flashes, a selection of moments when he was the one who decided what would happen next (Steinberg 2014:326).

One of the recurring motifs in *Ties that bind* takes the form of an anecdote: James Baldwin talking about the breakdown of his friendship with the white writer Norman Mailer, says: 'there is a difference between Norman and myself in that I think he still imagines that he has something to save, whereas I have never had anything to lose' (Baldwin cited by Wilderson 2010:172). Invoking this anecdote among others, Frank Wilderson, key figure in Afropessimistic discourse, says in an interview with Shannon Walsh, that ultimately it is only the white person, in such exchanges, or literary friendships,

who can ‘put on the garment of affiliation or relationality’. He goes on: ‘so you’re dealing with two people who have friendship attitudes towards each other, but one person has no capacity for relationality. And the other person has all the capacity for relationality’ (Wilderson cited by Walsh 2010:76). Such a position derives strongly from race analytics in the United States (US), but is a discourse that has emerged increasingly in South Africa in recent years, and is to be found in the writings of Hortense Spillers and Saadiya Hartman, as well as Jared Sexton.

In the current moment, relations of antagonism between terms such as literary friendship and the politics of refusal; entanglement and non-relation; non-racialism and Afro-pessimism are growing apace. It is possible that in each case, we must now look to the second term in order to identify the conditions of change and the production of the new. Does this amount to the shock of the new, via the resurgence, at least in part, of anachronism? As apparently outdated ideas about race rise again, repetition becomes the occurrence of the old but in new forms and in different registers. Racism too takes on old forms in new languages, and the afterlives of colonial power still linger. In the politics and poetics of non-relation considered above, there is a resurgence of antagonism as a mode of critique, a forceful politics of negativity which works to sharpen contradictions, and to undercut an earlier model which invokes a less confrontational mode of inquiry built around terms such as “conflict” or the elaboration, analytically, of “complexity”.

In a related but distinctive vein, the need for a renewal of critical thought that is widely called for in cultural theory has to do with mapping emerging forms of human life in an age of radical climate change and technological advancement. One of the interesting questions we need to ask, as I intimated early on in this article, is how we might think of “intimate lives, interior places” in relation to these radically shifting conditions, shaped by an increasingly entrenched, pervasive and invasive neoliberal capitalism. In the section below I consider human-plant relations as a means of grasping how we might rethink the human through an analytic lens which focuses on the *other than human*.

My plants are my lovers

In an essay on gardens and gardeners in the small Mozambican town of Inhambane, Julie Archambault (2016:1) writes about palm-leaf fences that conceal bougainvillea, hibiscus, crotons, impatiens, aloes and other succulent plants, and how gardeners in the area tell her that they grow plants ‘because plants are beautiful, to embellish the yard’. She thinks of Jack Goody’s (1993) observation that there were no flowers in Africa. Plants, she writes, inspire deeply romantic commentaries that speak of

‘authenticity and attachment’. In fact, gardeners articulate their engagement with plants as guided by an overriding principle: the love of plants (*o amor das plantas*). They also construct their human-plant relations as markedly different from their interpersonal relationships. Unlike intimate relationships between lovers and relatives, which are seen as tainted by ulterior motives, she perceives from her ethnographic work, human-plant relations are understood as far more authentic (Archambault 2016:1).

When Kenneth, a gardener in Inhambane, tells her ‘My plants are my lovers’, Archambault (2016:3) reflects that human-plant relations are what gardeners wish their relationships with people could be. ‘They inspire novel templates for intimacy’. And this in turn is based on ‘a refusal of the commodification of plants themselves’. It is thus an affective response and a stance in favour of authenticity that Archambault calls ‘authenticity above ground’. In the visible world of ornamental plants, ‘things are what they seem. Or at least, things are closer to what they seem’ (Archambault 2016:3).

To think through human-plant relations, Archambault engages with the growing post-humanist literature on multispecies ethnography and questions it raises about human exceptionalism. She draws this into her wider interest in affective encounters, in the transformative potential of everyday engagement with the material world. She does this work by actively suspending – in an echo of Glissant’s impassioned defense of opacity – the desire to explicate the other. The new materialist ontological turn within which she situates her work calls for an exploration into the literal rather than the metaphorical, and a rethinking of alterity by encouraging us to consider the possibility of other worlds, and therefore to move beyond the more classic recognition of other world views (Archambault 2016:3).

When he described his plants as his lovers, Archambault (2016:9) considers, Kenneth meant that his plants ‘commanded the same sort of time, attention and affection that lovers normally would. The plants in turn, loved him back through beauty and growth’. In other words, his plants were quite literally his lovers. Plants were ‘autobiographical, as particular plants ‘became associated with specific events in a person’s life such as a move or the beginning of a new friendship (Degnen 2009 cited by Archambault 2016:9). Plants mapped out time and became repositories of social relations. When Kenneth describes his plants as his lovers, he also meant it ‘as a critique of the politics of love and intimacy in a post-socialist, postwar economy marred by deceit and growing inequality’. Human-plant relations are not only experienced and constructed in contrast to commodified forms of intimacies. They also, in turn, offer a template for new interpersonal intimacies. The love of plants is also productive of new social relations among fellow gardeners that are themselves modeled on human-plant relations (see Archambault 2016:12).

An anthropology of affective encounters focuses on the transformative potential of 'everyday engagement with the material world, with moving things and other-than-human beings, to explore what it entails, or might entail, to be human' (Archambault 2016:17). She writes as an anthropologist who still retains the importance of an anthropocentric view. In other words, she is interested in maintaining a focus on the constitution of "the social" as such, as in the production of new kinds of social relations among gardeners that the love of plants produces. If we turn to an artwork by Kenyan artist Jim Chuchu, or a woodcut by William Kentridge (Figure 2) as I do below, we see that the human body itself changes form, to become plant inflected. This suggests a different order of intimacy between plant and human, while still offering an implicit critique of and reinvention of the social order of the present.

Chuchu is an openly gay photographer and filmmaker living in Kenya, where homosexuality is illegal. His photographs imagine a pre-Christian, pre-Islamic Kenya that is, he has said in interviews, far removed from the experience of his own generation. Chuchu takes black and white photographs and draws in pencil or watercolour on his original shot, then digitally scans the original photograph and digitally manipulates it. The result, writes Michael Upchurch (2015), is a collage-like world that is primal and sophisticated. As a gay man, he is rejected by mainstream religions in his country. He says he is interested in discovering spiritual alternatives; he explores histories that predate patriarchal, homophobic colonial religious systems. Left with the embrace of the present, or the ability to take comfort in the past, he 'remixes a new past', writes Jen Graves (2015). 'I am interested in moves to reshape blackness ... a blackness not afraid to exist in another world', he says. And: 'I don't think when we see our skin we see light', Chuchu says, 'light associated with black bodies is still a political project in 2015' (Chuchu cited by Graves 2015). When his work was shown in 2014 at the Dakar Biennale, the exhibit was shut down by the authorities for being detrimental to 'our morality and our laws' (cited by Graves 2015).

Kentridge's woodcut of a suited man, much like his protagonist figure Soho Eckstein, the megalomaniac mining boss who appears in many of his short films, now sports not a human head or face at all, but a planthead. One may speculate on the nature of his fate, and imagine this to be a commentary in part on, variously, his not quite humanity in the face of the apartheid-inspired dispossession his selfhood and business empire is founded on; his unraveling, politically and psychically, away from the safe and stolid container of a strictly human body, as his world implodes; or, just perhaps, a form of reinvention of self that begins to take hold as his suitedness comes to mean nothing – the plant is metaphorically, one feels, a signifier of a different kind of growth towards an unknown form of self. Framing this image from an Anthropocenic view, in which the resources of a sustainable planet are at stake and the earth is vulnerable

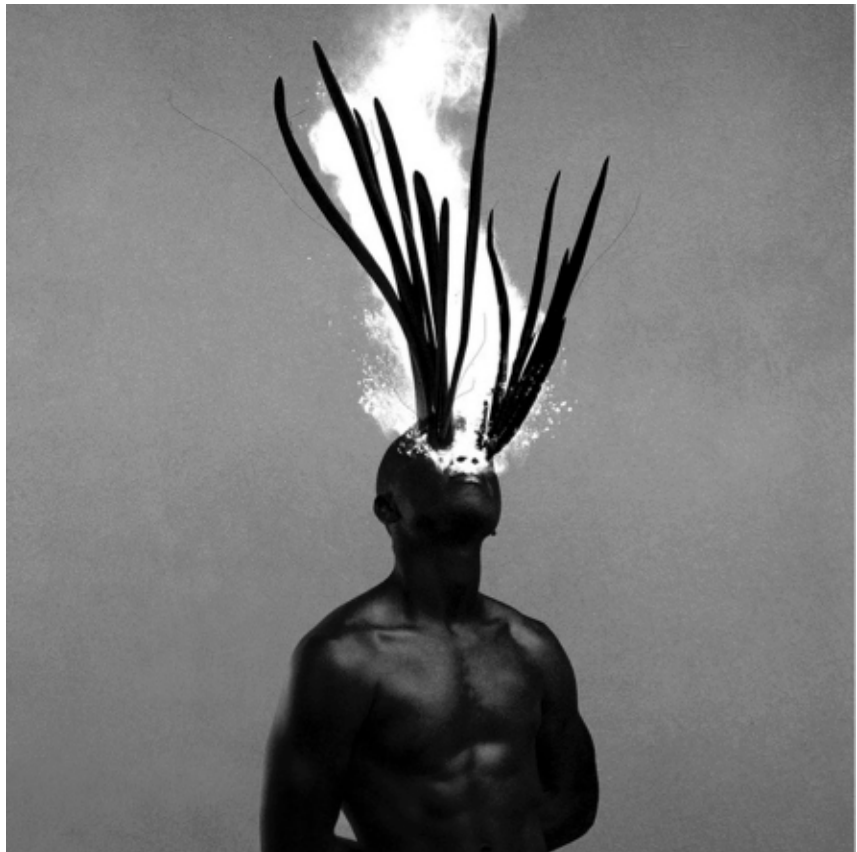


FIGURE **Nº 2**



Jim Chuchu, *Pagans VIII*, 2014. Archival digital print. 100 x 100 cm. All efforts to secure copyright permissions for this image were made.

to human destruction, Eckstein's embodiment of a capitalist ethos that ruins the earth is now implicated in the continuing possibility of plant life, and newly vulnerable to other life forms with which he shares the trembling planet. Ultimately, for the purposes of this article, the replacement of the central stem of the nervous system, the seat of interiority, the mind as such, with a plant, opens numerous windows for thought and analysis, in multiple registers from humour to satire, and the literal to the metaphorical. Here, perhaps is an image that is not so much about surrogate intimacies lost in a world of social media, but a differently inflected suggestion of a re-imagined more than human self re-routed through plantlike form.



FIGURE **Nº 3**



William Kentridge, *Walking Man*, 2000. Linocut in tableau. 248 x 101.5 cm. (Edition of 24 on paper, edition of 4 on canvas). All efforts to secure copyright permission for this image were made.

Conclusion

I have intended to suggest, in all of the above, an array of registers within which we might read the intimate, the interior, the self-reflexive, both in and beyond South Africa today. I have sought to identify emerging registers of cultural analysis that take us into the contemporary moment. Thinking through questions of intimacy and interiority from the vantage point of South African cultural production opens research in this terrain to new contestations, and extends the reach that such a rubric poses. Literature and art, text and image, offer condensed forms and operations, pathways of thought in the work of deciphering our present.

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