



Ben Ngobeni's cosmo-dramas of the Afrofuture

Dr Thabang Monoa
University of Johannesburg, South Africa
Email: tmonoa31@gmail.com
Orcid id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3895-6369>

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Abstract

The print series entitled *Bridge of the Spirits* (2017) by visual artist Ben Ngobeni is redolent with depictions of “the cosmos” or outer-space. In this series, the bull is a prominent motif as it is represented literally and in some works, indirectly. The bull, as we may know, is central to many cultural rituals in different African societies. Ngobeni's metaphorical use of this animal is resonant with Afrofuturist visual tropes that often employ space allegories. Yet it also invokes what jazz musician and Afrofuturist Sun Ra refers to as cosmo-drama. When coining this term, Sun Ra was alluding to the sense of otherworldliness he sought to achieve by staging cosmo-dramas, that is, spaces that were meant to “awaken their audiences to the greater potentials of another kind of life” (Youngquist, 2017:204). Cosmo-drama is here a fitting description of the type of themes engaged with in this body of work. This article is orientated around the notion of cosmo-drama to locate, on the one hand, the Afrofuturist proclivities in Ngobeni's work, which are found visually. On the other hand, it seeks to understand how these supposed Afrofuturist proclivities are informed by aspects of ancestry.

Key words: Afrofuturism; racial capitalism; social death; cosmic homelessness; agency.

Introduction

Bridge of the spirit aims to discuss the thin line between the physical and the spiritual, human and the divine, the alive and the ancestors, the worldly and the universal. I express ideas derived from spiritual teachings after the passing of my father who was my teacher, supporter and protector. In that way my work celebrates all men who are powerful and protective of women and children. Good men die early and that leads me to analyse the bridge of the spirits in different mythologies. The bull is a personification of men, a metaphor for polygamy, strength and power (Ngobeni, 2017).

You are both alive and proud or you are dead, and when you are dead, you can't care anyway. And your method of death can itself be a politicising thing...So if you can overcome your fear for death, which is a highly irrational thing, you know then you're on your way. – Steve Biko (1978: 173).

Here, in these epigraphs, we see how this body of work has a specific focus on themes centred on his father, whom he has much reverence for. His father is metaphorized as a spiritual entity in the form of a bull. In representing his father as a bull and spiritual being, Ngobeni attempts a visual engagement with the notion of death; in particular, the death of his father who committed suicide by hanging himself. He explains that his father's tragic death was a result of various forms of alienation he felt due to his dislocation from his family and his ancestral home as a result of being a migrant labourer. A question therefore beckons: what sort of



ancestor is Ngobeni's father if, according to some African cultural beliefs, such as those of the Vatsonga, a person is not fully integrated into the ancestral realm when they die by way of suicide? Guided by this inquiry, this article introduces the notion of cosmic homelessness, which here infers a space of in-betweenness that Ngobeni's father subsequently occupies – the space not of the living nor the dead.

It is widely understood that by death we refer to the permanent cessation of life. Yet this generic understanding of death does not account for the forms of death that are not only physical but also social. With this as the principal point of departure, some pertinent questions and propositions arise. In contexts such as South Africa, which are encumbered by fraught histories and colonial inheritances, how does one think through different forms of death such as suicide? Can one see them not as acts of surrender and weakness, but possibly also as acts of resistance? As Biko insists, one's way of dying can be a political gesture. Such a statement is to some degree polemical as it assumes that a person has the agency to determine how they die.

Though not outwardly concerned with thanatopolitics,¹ where an exhaustive study of death cultures would be in order, I am rather preoccupied with understanding particular contexts that intimate, inform and induce Black death in its social and literal understandings. Afropessimism, a meta-theoretical current within Black Studies that interrogates the logics and structures of Black social death, is a necessary lens for such an inquiry. The deployment of this framework, I insist, further enables one to explore facets of Blackness in relation to themes embedded in Afrofuturism. While Ngobeni does not, to my knowledge, identify as an Afrofuturist and nor does he situate this series within Afrofuturist aesthetics, my attempt here, however, is to do precisely that and think through issues concerning suicide as it emerges in his series. With this particular focus in mind, the intention is to give critical attention to the under-theorized work of Ngobeni and thereby contribute to a larger corpus of debates around the reimagining of Black identities in art history and visual culture.

In this body of work, which comprises etchings and lithographs, Ngobeni centralises his father's death, which came about through suicide. He visually imagines his father's transition into the afterlife by employing what I perceive to be Afrofuturist tropes that allude to the cosmos and/or outerspace.² His visual renditions invoke what Sun Ra refers to as "cosmo-drama". In devising this term, Sun Ra insinuates a sense of otherworldliness; one he sought to achieve by staging cosmo-dramas – spaces that are meant to "awaken their audiences to the greater potentials of another kind of life" (Youngquist, 2017:204).

My contention is that Ngobeni's cosmic, outerspace visual tropes may be interpreted as his response to his father's suicide. Furthermore, his allusions to ancestry may be interpreted as an attempt to rehabilitate his father's place as the respected patriarch of the family, despite his dying through suicide – a death often considered dishonourable. In a political sense, this act of suicide, I venture to suggest, is one that represents his father's desire to extract himself from the alienation that circumscribed his life and find freedom in the cosmos. Beyond the need to recuperate his father's image, Ngobeni attempts to revere his father – the patriarch who was the central figure of his family. As one discerns from the caption of this series, he attempts to "bridge" or teleport his father into the ancestral realm – a space that is here configured as the Afrofuture. And yet, his attempt to immerse his father in this realm is encumbered by the method of death his father chose. Building on Ngobeni's own understanding of the implications of his father's suicidal act, I posit that his father experiences

¹ In its broadest sense, thanatopolitics infers the study of the politics of death. In this article, I consider only a few aspects of death that may be political and social.

² During my interview with Ben Ngobeni, he expressed a discomfort with his father's actual name being used in my study. Although I did not inquire further, I suspect that this may be attributed to his seeking to retain his father's dignity in consideration of how he died, or his observing cultural protocols around naming and talking about deceased people.



what I frame as cosmic homelessness. Modeled along John Szwed's (1997) thoughts regarding Blacks seeking to transcend "space loneliness", this notion is attributable to those who are living but dead – it infers the inhabitation of a liminal site: an in-between space, which results from no longer being part of the material world but also not being fully integrated into the ancestral realm. This state of in-betweenness is perhaps most visible in the two notable works from this series that I discuss: *Spirit with the Body Attached* (**Figure 3**) and *And Behold It Was Doors* (**Figure 4**).

Ben Ngobeni: a brief biography

As a way to understand some of the dense themes that emerge in this series, some background of both the artist and of his father is here warranted. Born in 1982 in Mozambique, five years after the Mozambican Civil War began in 1977, Ngobeni's family relocated to South Africa to avoid the political turmoil of their home country. They moved to Madadeni Village, in the Nkomazi West Region in Mpumalanga. Ngobeni stayed in the village until after his matriculation in 2001. In 2003, he moved to Westonaria in Gauteng, where he stayed with his father who, after years of working for South Deep Gold mine in Mpumalanga, was then working for a construction company named Mine Mechanisation and Equipment (MM&E) Construction. Ngobeni would get a full sense of the debilitating conditions in mine work, with which his father was familiar, when he laboured on two other mines from 2004 to 2007. At this point in his life, his art practice was not fully formed. The turn in his life to becoming a fully-fledged artist happened in 2009 when he enrolled at the Katlehong Arts Centre, which provided tutelage for Ngobeni in its division known as the Tsebo Visual Art School.³ After studying and practising there for a few years, he went on to join the well-known Artist Proof Studio (APS)⁴ where he completed his diploma in 2016.

And yet, equally compelling is the context of Ngobeni's father who forms an integral part of this series. He was born in 1941 in the village of Ngwatuva, in the province of Gaza in Mozambique, where he spent much of his childhood. In 1958 he began working by sewing for Portuguese settlers and did this privately as well. During the early 1960s he began travelling to and working in Johannesburg on mines as a migrant labourer. At the time, South Africa, Johannesburg in particular, was the regional hub of industrialisation. The apartheid government, led then by Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, continued employing cheap migrant labour from neighbouring countries. This had begun during the first discoveries of gold, and the gold rush in the late 19th century where migrant labour was deployed to intensify industrialisation. Ngobeni's father was part of a cohort of labourers from Mozambique who would feed and be fed by South Africa's burgeoning industrial sector.

Although someone who had abundant wealth in the form of cattle and other livestock at his ancestral home in Ngwatuva, Ngobeni's father lived a severely constricted life in the urban areas where he worked. The other telling issue that affected him was the dislocation from his ancestral home and familiar sources of sustenance, such as his livestock, which he gradually lost due to his then frequent sojourns in South Africa, until he returned permanently to his family. These circumstances were to have a profound effect on his life, and it became apparent once he retired that he harboured severe forms of bodily and psychic exhaustion. His internalised angst defamiliarised him from himself and his family (Ngobeni, 2017: [sp]). For

³ Ngobeni lives and has a studio in Katlehong, a township located not far from Johannesburg.

⁴ Artist Proof Studio's is a (urban) community organisation located in Johannesburg that focuses on different aspects of printmaking, which include community engagement, training, sales, production, and art education. It was established by scholar and activist Kim Berman and visual artist Nhlanhla Xaba in 1991.



Ngobeni, seeing his father's gradual decline was difficult, but nothing could have prepared him and his family for his father's suicide.

From what was a haunting scene, Ngobeni remembers hearing his sister's urgent screams, as she was the first to discover that their father had taken his own life. Responding to her cries, Ngobeni entered his father's room and saw his lifeless body hanging from the ceiling. He was equally shocked by an incoherently written letter left by his father, which explained that he owed a considerable amount of money to a neighbour and that his family should immediately make amends to the neighbour. Ngobeni recalls his father's closing sentiments from the letter, expressing his despair at "being tired of life" (Ngobeni, 2017: [sp]). This context informs Ngobeni's thought-provoking body of work.

Ngobeni's series of prints was positively received, judging by the social media attention it garnered at the time of the opening of the exhibition, but a critical and scholarly engagement with the series has so far been nonexistent. This can probably be attributed to the fact that at my initial encounter with it, Ngobeni's work was relatively unknown in the mainstream South African art market. Not only does a scholarly consideration of Ngobeni's work expand the canon of Black artistic production in South African art history, but it further creates opportunity to locate the works within the realm of Afrofuturism, which will hopefully offer new insights into the different ways in which Black subjectivities are thematised in South African contemporary art. While Ngobeni's work has received no scholarly attention it resonates with and draws upon a rich tradition of printmaking in South Africa. As observed in this series, Ngobeni has an affinity for lithography and etching. Through these techniques, viewers can observe not only his treatment of form(s) and his overall thematic concerns, but also a continuity of these aspects in relation to works by luminaries such as, for instance, Azaria Mbatha.⁵ Ngobeni's prints are embedded in that printmaking tradition, as he works monochromatically and is visually concerned with ancestral themes in a way that relates to how Mbatha invokes religious themes in order to make political commentary, as discussed by Philippa Hobbs and Elizabeth Rankin (1998).

As Hobbs and Rankin (1998:68) explain, Mbatha's employment of the linocut technique was purposeful. Linocuts enabled dramatic contrasts of black and white, and thus offered aesthetic possibilities for pursuing the "Africanisation of Biblical subject matter". This comes across in iconic works such as *David and Goliath* (1963) where Mbatha's use of black and white serves to descriptively and/or ideologically 'Africanise' the image, as it were. This deliberateness is in part a visual commentary and a political statement about Blackness. In Mbatha's depiction of David, born of the Israelites, as a Black subject, and conversely Goliath, the Philistine, as a white subject, he cunningly subverts colonially entrenched stereotypes of Blackness, whilst unsettling the association of whiteness⁶ with pristineness and morality. For Hobbs and Rankin (1998:67), "this choice of white to represent the enemy Philistines and the evil King Herod implies a calculated 'African ideology', reversing the clichéd and, in the context of Africa, offensive European metaphor that associates white with good and Black with evil."⁷

⁵ In comparing the stylistic similarities between Ngobeni and Mbatha, it is important to recall they use two disparate processes in printmaking: Mbatha was well known for his linocuts and Ngobeni's series here mainly consists of lithographs.

⁶ Throughout this article, this term (whiteness) is written in lowercase as a way to, at least in a symbolic sense, nullify the normative powers associated with white identity. By contrast, the term Blackness and Black, as used in this article, is written in uppercase as a means to ascribe notions of agency and autonomy to Black subjecthood.

⁷ In her doctoral thesis, Lize van Robbroeck (2006) argues that such interpretations, which centralise binaries such as African/European, while in the same vein speaking of an 'African ideology' as though there is a singular, monolithic one, are locatable within a particular canon of art writing in South Africa – a canon steeped in a European episteme that might be seen to be problematic.

I foreground this briefly to show how such engagement in the medium of printmaking has a notable history in South African art, and to link Ngobeni's approach to his art making with this history. There are some continuities in how Mbatha explored particular themes with a certain iconographical register. Unlike Mbatha, however, Ngobeni is seemingly less invested in biblical themes; rather, his work is dominated by ancestral themes.⁸ From the outset, one observes ancestral and mythological tropes along with iconographical continuities that are evident in his other works from this series such as *Divine Union on Sacred Ground* (**Figure 1**) and *Behold the Kingdom of Heaven is Within You* (**Figure 2**). I also want to highlight similarities evident in the formal qualities and his treatment of space in particular.

A work such as *Divine Union on Sacred Ground* has a noteworthy compositional clarity. In this work, Ngobeni creates a sense of perspective, seen through columns that lead the eye to a central point where two bulls depicted in monochromatic tones are positioned closely together, asymmetrically, as if they resemble two humans engaged in a form of embrace. The title of the work certainly echoes this pictorial suggestion, but it also insinuates what can perhaps be understood to be Ngobeni's conceptually unresolved engagement with issues of gender, which come into focus with his repeated mentioning and reverence for a patriarchal presence – his father.



Figure 1. Ben Ngobeni, *Divine Union on Sacred Ground*, 2017, Lithography, 29cm x 23cm (Photograph courtesy of the artist).

Behold the Kingdom of Heaven is Within You is a visually powerful composition that depicts a pastoral terrain with an open road and mountains in the background. Such a rendering of a

⁸ By this, I am not suggesting that religious and ancestral themes cannot intersect or overlap in artistic bodies of work.

bucolic piece of land would typically show animals roaming it; however, in this instance, Ngobeni attained a sense of animal presence on this land by placing what seem to be cattle footprints that pervade the sky. There is something to probe about the peculiarity of this composition. Ngobeni complicates this composition by displacing animal footprints in the sky (or the heavens) as opposed to the land where they should logically be. His gesture can be interpreted as his attempt to relay his father's transition into the non-material world, more specifically, the land of his ancestors.



Figure 2. Ben Ngobeni, *Behold the Kingdom of Heaven is Within You*, 2017, Lithography. 49.5cm x 35, 4 cm (Photograph courtesy of the artist).

The cultural and political aspects of Black death

From the cultural purview of the Vatsonga, that of Ngobeni's father, suicide is an amoral act treated with contempt. It is believed that it prevents a natural transition into the afterlife. This means that Ngobeni's father cannot be fully integrated into the ancestral realm and cannot assume his rightful role as an ancestor who can then be an overseer for his family that still occupies the material world. Ngobeni (2018: [sp]) determines his father's spirit as "being trapped nowhere", which insinuates that it is dwelling in a liminal space between the material and non-material worlds. However, there arises a more ethical question in Ngobeni's interrogation of his father's suicide – the act in itself. It is worth stressing that suicide can easily be considered a cowardly or selfish act. Such an opinion finds resonance in Ngobeni's father's case, since he was a central figure in his family unit who, by inducing his own death, in some sense recused himself from what may be conventionally understood to be his "rightful" responsibility as the centre of the family. But let us further politicise the circumstances that induced his alienation by locating them within the discourse of social death. Part of my purpose here is to argue how the death of Ngobeni's father was also informed by a profound loss of personal and social identity.



Frank Wilderson (in Nsele, 2020: [sp]) insists that: “capitalism, as a paradigm, needs obedient workers. Social death, as a paradigm, needs the ritualistic spectacles of mutilated and murdered Black flesh.” I want to engage this loaded assertion by considering what happens when, within the hierarchies of power, Black bodies come into contact with capital(ism). I frame this consideration with the intention of entangling social death with the serious issue of racial capitalism, which, I propose, is relevant for a more complex reading of the alienation that encircles Ngobeni’s father’s suicide. His alienation, I suggest, has some particularity to Black male subjects for it is they who, under apartheid repression, were mostly compelled to work in highly labour intensive industries such as mining and construction. Paying close attention to this detail inspires reflection of the Black body being reduced to a state of objecthood under the tyranny of capitalism. Fred Moten (2003) has been attentive to this thematic, which explicitly concerns itself with the intersection between a Marxist conception of Black subjectivity and how its labour is continuously extracted for capital. Canonically, it is the work of philosopher Cedric Robinson who bridges the gap between Marx’s theorisations on capital and labour and how they relate to Black bodies.

In *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983), Robinson not only studies the trajectory of Marxist ideology in the west, but also critiques Marxist elucidations of history and the ways in which forms of Black resistance within class insurgencies are erased and rendered insignificant. This is echoed by Kehinde Andrews (2018: 183) who, while rightly observing that “class is the central, underlying antagonism in Marxism”, states that “Marxism’s central problem is the relegation of the question of racism.” This highlights Robinson’s important contribution to Marxist discourse but, more crucially here, it edifies my own discussion of Ngobeni’s father whose social death, I propose, was partly induced by his status as a racialised Black labourer. I delve deeper into this thematic by considering classical Marxist discourse where labourers become alienated by and entangled within capital circulation.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (2008) have isolated the tension between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat at the centre of their critique of capitalism. By these terms, they infer modern capitalists who control the means of production and modern wage-labourers who, not having the means to produce, are compelled to sell their labour instead (Marx and Engels, 2008:33, 34). For Marx and Engels (2008:33), modern industrial societies are defined by this class antagonism that exists between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and is composed of explicit, unequal relations of exploitation. In determining the uneven relations between these two entities, Marx and Engels (2008:34) further address the resultant forms of alienation that result from this antagonism.

Alienation is a term that has notable significance in Marxist discourse. It is understood essentially to denote a state where one feels estranged from one’s self, meaningless and worthless (Iqbal Shar, 2015:43). For the proletariat, much of their alienation emerges from not having control over their labour and not owning what they produce. Thus, for Marx and Engels, alienation is as much a material process as a psychic one. Muhammed Iqbal Shar (2015:48) elaborates further and posits that proletariats, who put much of their effort towards serving a capitalist system yet get slight dividends in return, become estranged from themselves, their work and other human beings.

In their consideration of the alienation that the proletariat endures in the production and circulation of capital, Marx and Engels (2008:55) have not discarded the importance of (actual) wages and how they compound alienation. As they assert, “the average price of wage labour is the minimum wage, i.e., that quantum of the means of subsistence which is absolutely requisite to keep in bare existence as a labourer” (Marx and Engels, 2008:55). Apart from alienation, what is worth appreciating in this remark is the hand-to-mouth existence it forces on the alienated proletariat. This may relate to Ngobeni’s father who, according to the note he left behind, committed suicide due to owing someone large sums of money. His was decidedly



what Marx and Engels determine to be a “bare existence”. This speaks directly to his status as a labourer serving a capitalist system that extracts his labour to a point of alienation – a form of alienation that would have bred in him sentiments of meaninglessness and worthlessness.

My brief exploration of Marx and Engels’ thoughts aids an understanding of how the labourer who serves a modern, industrial economy (such as South Africa’s) is embroiled in a matrix of unequal relations where alienation is unidirectionally channelled towards them. This classical Marxist perspective is effective in offering a diagnosis of the European context, which is the focus for Marx and Engels, who assert that this alienation is “a spectre [that] is haunting Europe” (Marx and Engels 2008:31). It is clear that their analysis did not take cogniscence of colonised territories such as in Africa – which has its own complexities around modern industries. Fundamental to this analysis is that Marxist rubric for interrogating class antagonisms, as Andrews (2018:183) identifies, falls short in addressing the racial dimensions of this thematic. I insist that race is unavoidably implicated in this discussion for two reasons: firstly, Ngobeni’s father was a Black labourer and, secondly, he worked in a racially stratified industrial sector in South Africa, doing both mine and construction work. This requires that we consider Robinson’s unique perspective which critiques Marx and Engels’ work and allows for more explicit connections with themes of slavery, which can also be viewed within the ambit of Afrofuturist discourses. Equally important for me in deploying Robinson is the relevance his work has to aspects of social death – a notion that I argue clarifies Ngobeni’s father’s resultant alienation. The jazz musician Hugh Masekela speaks about the plight of estranged Black labourers. In the lyrics of his song, indeed a sonic monument, *Stimela* (The Coal Train) (1974 [1994]),⁹ Masekela laments:

There is a train that comes from Namibia and Malawi
There is a train that comes from Zambia and Zimbabwe
There is a train that comes from Angola and Mozambique
From Lesotho, from Botswana, from Swaziland
From all the hinterlands of Southern and Central Africa
This train carries young and old, African men
Who are conscripted to come and work on contract
In the gold and mineral mines of Johannesburg
And its surrounding metropolis, sixteen hours or more a day
For almost no pay
Deep, deep, deep down in the belly of the earth
When they are digging and drilling that shiny mighty evasive stone
Or when they dish that mish mesh mush food
Into their iron plates with the iron shank
Or when they sit in their stinking, funky, filthy
Flea-ridden barracks and hostels
They think about the loved ones they may never see again
Because they might have already been forcibly removed
From where they last left them
Or wantonly murdered in the dead of night
By roving, marauding gangs of no particular origin
We are told
They think about their lands, and their herds
That were taken away from them
With the gun, and the bomb, and the teargas, the Gatling and the cannon

The Marxist intonations in Masekela’s poem are laid bare in his realistic portrayal of the various intersecting issues affecting Black labourers. He gives a vivid representation of the psychic

⁹ *Stimela* is an iconic song that relates the injustices of the migratory labour system that affected mine workers amongst others. It was first recorded in Masekela’s 1974 album *I Am Not Afraid* then recorded again in his 1994 album *Hope*.



and physical burdens that Black labourers endure in their pursuit of the income that sustains them and their families from whom they have been estranged. He conveys the toil of working on a mine, digging hard for raw materials they were likely to never own. Masekela provides a persuasive image of Black labourers that are not only economically disenfranchised, but also yearn for their sources of sustenance in “their lands and their herds” at their homes. In this phrase, he highlights how the worker leaves the lands of his home, which are associated with that which is sustaining, to work in the debilitating, clustered confines of the city, where death is never distant and where there is the constant threat of violence. While the Marxist inferences in this song are solid, so are the racial dynamics implicit in it. Robinson (1983) insists that the modern Black labourer is, in fact, a modern slave. This, however, is not to be casually compared, given the historical specificity of the transatlantic slave trade (or the Middle-Passage). But by the comparison, metaphorical and perhaps polemical, Robinson seeks to highlight the levels of structural and social oppression produced by racial as well as class antagonisms within the labour market.

This assertion is partly founded on the understanding that, although slavery has long been abolished and outlawed, the exploitation of Black labour continues with similar underpinnings. Alongside this, Robinson’s (1983:9) great departure from Marx lies in the contention that labour for the Black subject is circumscribed by dehumanisation. While Marxist discourse acknowledges that the labourer has little or no value, the Black slave endures a particular form of dehumanisation that operates within the boundaries of racial capitalism. If the term racial capitalism infers the systematic phenomenon of deriving social and economic value from a person’s racial identity (Leong, 2013: [sp]), then it can be ascertained that it is extractive, destructive and dehumanising.

On the one hand, there is the material harm that racial capitalism inflicts on the Black body, and on the other the psychic agony that it breeds in Black subjects. Both these aspects are applicable to Ngobeni’s father who, after many years of working in different mines and construction companies, where his labour was extracted and exploited, felt dehumanised. His dehumanisation finds representation in his letter to his family that suggested that he killed himself as a result of feeling incompetent in regard to providing for them. Besides connoting a particular sense of Black suffering, both these aspects represent forms of social death – a notion that infers an alienated, socially dead person (Patterson, 1982:5). Within the lexicon of slavery, Patterson (1982:39) defines this form of social death as intrusive: it involves the (often) violent uprooting of a person from their community – making him or her a desocialised and depersonalised subject who has no sense of ancestral anchorage. In such instances, the slave suffers from a profound sense of natal alienation. Thus similar to how slaves were uprooted from the African continent, and experienced a deadness of a kind (Patterson, 1982:5), Ngobeni’s father, I argue, experienced this kind of social death as a result of being dislocated from his ancestral home.

In contrast to this form of social death, is a different configuration that Patterson thinks of as extrusive social death. In this representation,

The dominant image of the slave was that of an insider who had fallen, one who ceased to belong and had been expelled from normal participation in the community because of a failure to meet certain minimal legal or socio-economic norms of behaviour (Patterson, 1982:41).

Extrusive social death is also applicable to Ngobeni’s father. This is predicated on his status as a migrant labourer who became a naturalised South African working in the country’s industrial sector. And yet, despite his achieving a newfound identity as a South African, the nature of apartheid legislature, as I have explained, reduced him to a person without civil rights just as it did to Black peoples born in South Africa. In Bogue’s (2010:30) formulation, this inscribes a double death where, alongside social death, the



racialised Black body experiences a civil death premised on racist laws, statutes and customs. Nonetheless, my conjecture remains that, as he integrated into South Africa, Ngobeni's father, as a result of his position as a Black labourer, was assimilated into an economic system that extracted his labour yet still left him destitute. As Patterson (1982:44) explains, this kind of social death intimates an "internal exile" – a person deprived of having a claim to a community and, I would add, a stake in the prevalent economic order.

Two substantive points are necessary to consolidate this discussion. Firstly, in relation to the idea of social death, it is worthwhile recalling the diagnoses offered by Jared Sexton (2011) and Anthony Bogues (2012) who in their respective works stress how Black life is essentially circumscribed by death. This illustrates the predicament of Ngobeni's father and how, though he was alive in material terms, his identity was, as I have argued, that of a socially dead person. Bogues (2012:36) assigns the oxymoronic term "living corpse" to represent the subjecthood of a socially deadened person. My second point is formed around the enunciative capacity of a socially dead person – that is, one who lacks capacity to assert agency. By this I contend that the choice by Ngobeni's father to take his own life can be viewed as an act of resistance as opposed to one of surrender. Wilderson puts a finer point to this in saying that,

[T]he positionality of the slave makes a demand that is in excess of the demand made by the positionality of the worker. The worker demands that productivity be fair and democratic...In contrast, the slave demands that production stop, without recourse to its ultimate democratisation. Work is not an organic principle for the slave (Wilderson, 2017:73).

What Wilderson helps illuminate is that, within the logics of (racial) capitalism, the Black subject does not possess the status of a worker but instead that of a slave seeking to extract himself or herself from the conditions that define their dehumanisation. The radicality of the suicidal act by Ngobeni's father perhaps lies in how he wanted to halt the continuation of his dehumanisation by removing himself from the conditions that produced it. This proposition is, however, troubled by the fact that Ngobeni's father was at home and had retired at the time of his death. But this should not remove the possibility of thinking about his trauma as enduring and perhaps even more debilitating when considering that, once home, he was confronted with the physical and psychic remnants of his years as a labourer. In other words, the residue of his trauma could not be temporally fixed in his years of labour: rather, his trauma assumed a timelessness that warranted a meaningful and indeed radical response. Perhaps this makes understandable his 'choice' to end his life since, as we discern from Dominick La Capra (2001:66), one of the core symptoms of historical trauma is a repeated reliving of certain events and experiences, even though one might be distant from them. As I see it, this makes understandable Ngobeni's decision to render his father as dwelling in the cosmos – the ethereal space supposedly devoid of trauma. By framing his suicidal act in this manner, I am locating it in some of the themes embedded in the transatlantic slave trade, which Afrofuturism employs exhaustively as a site of interrogation. In this instance the sentiments of Olaudah Equiano (1996: 26), the enslaved African and later abolitionist, assume relevance as he explains that on slave ships, Africans would jump off into the sea – "preferring death over a life of misery (sic)." My contention is that the response by Ngobeni's father is fundamentally rooted in the same premise: the preference of death over different kinds of agony. This reifies Biko's insistence that one's method of dying can unavoidably be political.

The Bull/Cow – the animal, the icon

It is noteworthy how in this body of work Ngobeni's treatment of this animal as an icon unfolds. What is noteworthy is how he thinks of the animal as part of the family unit, which is something that is fairly common in some Nguni cultures. In this sense, the cow's centrality to the family



or rather it being a family member finds resonance. Uhuru Phalafala (in Bongela, *et al* 2016: [sp]) captures this accurately in stating that, “the cow’s function is to connect, to bridge, to invoke. Cows exist in a liminal space between the human and the divine, the physical and the spiritual, the alive and the ancestors, the worldly and the universal.” The manner in which Phalafala details this is for me characteristic of and resonant with an important facet of Afrofuturism – the engagement with the divine and the relationship between the material and the supernatural or the other-worldly. Having noted the socio-cultural significance of this animal, equally important and worth considering is how this icon is deployed in various modalities of representation such as music and/or literature. My attempt is to consider this animal/icon through the logics of resistance as it forms part of my attempt to locate aspects of agency in Ngobeni’s body of work. As such, foregrounding some precedents of this is useful for my own contextualisation of his work.

A noteworthy example is the arts journalist Percy Mabandu’s canonical book, *Yakhal’Inkomo: Portrait of a Jazz Classic* (2016). In this text, he not only reflects on the centrality of the cow to Black social and cultural life, but he thinks through the bull as an ideal metaphor and icon that relates the racial indignities that affect Black life. The text is in fact a compelling examination of the jazz musician, Winston “Mankunku” Ngozi’s classical song, *Yakhal’Inkomo* (1968), which literally means the cry of a bull. As Mabandu explains, the song is a furtive condemnation of the violence of the material and symbolic forms of violence that were instituted by the apartheid government onto the Black masses. Thus *Yakhal’inkomo* is Ngozi’s alchemic summoning of a certain kind of power – it signifies Black people’s cry of racial injustices.

Mabandu details how the tenor saxophonist’s blowing in the song is translatable to that of a bellowing bull. He finds complexity in how Ngozi transmutes the sound of this animal into a sonic speech of sorts. For Mabandu, the metonymous nature of how the sounds of the saxophone and the cow relate to one another proves to be generative for thinking about the racial subjugation that has historically and contemporaneously affected Black life in South Africa. In his own words, Mabandu asserts that:

The bellowing bull is at once Mankunku, whose sax bellows with all the weight of all the suffering he witnesses in the world – the suffering of his people. The bellowing bull is also all Black people whose collective cry bears testament to their condition under the heel of white supremacist oppression. The sound of Mankunku’s saxophone carries a melodic register of all their pain, despair and hope for a kind of deliverance (Mabandu, 2016:36).

Mabandu solemnly describes the musical instrument’s ability to convey the rather sensitive feelings of angst felt by the Black masses. For him, it is the materiality of the sound that the saxophone produces that facilitates a projected sense of deliverance. As he states, “the saxophone is arguably the closest instrument to the human voice thanks to its sheer vastness and expressive rage. Just like the human voice, the saxophone is able to sound deeply sad and infectiously high and happy” (Mabandu, 2016:37). With these words, Mabandu ascribes speech to the instrument. This assertion is worth observing as one may argue that speech is fundamental to the endeavours of racially subjugated peoples. In fact, it echoes Moten’s (2003:1) telling remark that “the history of Blackness is testament the fact that objects can and do resist.” Certainly, then, the logics of resistance in *Yakhal’inkomo* are predicated on this premise.

The work *Spirit with Body Attached* (**Figure 3**) is one of the noteworthy examples from this series that solicits such a reading. The highlight of the composition is a muscular bull centred prominently in the middle with small planets orbiting it, and, though this imagery, Ngobeni reasserts his intention to venerate his father. When looking at his line work around the figure of the bull, and thinking about how in some way it invokes the kind of sound waves one imagines saturate *Yakhal’Inkomo* – the bellowing song of insurgence – there is a sense that

he attempts to convey a magisterial being of a kind. Further noting how his rendering of this bull suggests a sense of mass, Ngobeni could be proposing that this bull, his father, is in motion – a suggestion made more comprehensible by its lifted hoofs. To be sure, this representation has historical relevance as it echoes how cattle have been regarded as the province of Nguni cultures. Yet even so, this bull is in outerspace and can thus be said to be moving on ethereal ground.



Figure 3. Ben Ngobeni, *Spirit With the Body Attached*, 2017, Etching. 35.4 cm x 49,5cm (Photograph by the artist).

That Ngobeni chooses to illustrate this bull, his father, in the cosmos is worth seriously reflecting on. In a sense, it appeals to the mythographer, Credo Mutwa's (1996:123) declarative remark that "one of the least-known facts about the black people of South Africa is that they possessed amazing knowledge of the Cosmos, the Solar System, and even dimensions' unknown to man". The knowledge Mutwa speaks of is suggested in this composition in the way in which Ngobeni inserts his father in the cosmos as though he is in his natural habitat. As outerspace invocations are characteristically prominent in Afrofuturist imaginings, Ngobeni's rendition of his father as dwelling grandly in the cosmos is important to consider along an important question: why are the cosmos important for Black subjects? Sun Ra provides the necessary, albeit mythological, responses to these inquiries. Through his exhaustive critique of the racial violence that circumscribes Black life, Sun Ra offered some potent declarations that explain the importance of the cosmos. He insisted, for instance, that "space is the place where better living becomes possible..." (Sun Ra in Youngquist, 2016:141). His concern with such a statement, as I have detailed earlier, is designating the cosmos as the ideal, fictive location where Black subjecthood can exist. In Sun Ra's Afrofuturist lexicon, space is (furthermore) a psychic site where racially subjugated peoples can reimagine, attain and enact their freedom. He suggested as such in claiming that: "Freedom exists, then, but not in this world" (Sun Ra in Youngquist, 2016:211). This point, that planet Earth is inherently inhospitable for Black peoples who should instead seek solace in the cosmos, is one he stresses recurrently. Ngobeni's rendition of his father in *Spirit with Body Attached* (**Figure 3**), I would argue, is imbedded within the similar logics as Sun Ra's Afrofuturist sentiments on the importance of the cosmos for Black peoples.

There is a sense that Ngobeni extracts an Afrofuturist visual vocabulary of the cosmos to insinuate a fictive site where his deceased father now dwells. The racial violence that Sun Ra alludes to, which he desired African Americans to be ameliorated from, is not so distant from the racial marginalisation that I argue Ngobeni's father endured in South Africa as a migrant labourer. His placement in the cosmos by Ngobeni is due to his death, which was caused by enduring forms of alienation that augured a different kind of life in a different place – the Afrofuture. If by the term “cosmo-drama”, Sun Ra (in Youngquist, 2016:204) initiates the “awakening of audiences to the greater potentials of another kind of life”, then one can view Ngobeni's assimilation of his father in the cosmos as an attempt to conceive of an alternative understanding of his father's Blackness. I am suggesting here that Ngobeni is reimagining his father's subjecthood as no longer immersed in and circumscribed by Black suffering but instead ameliorated from it. By this logic, then, “Blackness becomes space” (Sun Ra in Youngquist, 2016:192), yet it a space that is orientated around the reimagining of the Black subject as limitless and uninhibited. Following the far-sighted thoughts of Sun Ra, the Black body that henceforth dwells in the cosmos is referred to by scholars Reynaldo Anderson and John Jennings (2018:22), as the astro-Black body – a subjective and assertive Black body that embraces the possibilities of living as a boundless subject. While this reading of *Spirit with Body Attached* (**Figure 3**) may have some degree of coherence, it prefaces an important complexity in Ngobeni's work, which is concerned with the nature of his father's death. This complexity is especially apparent in the final work under discussion in this article *And Behold It Was Doors* (**Figure 4**).

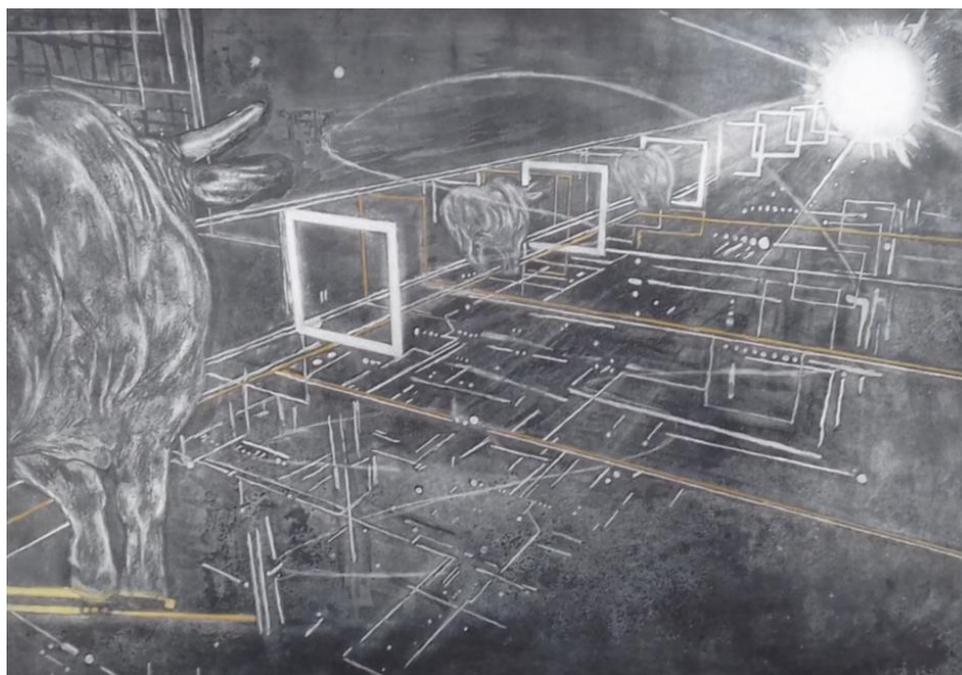


Figure 4. Ben Ngobeni, *And Behold It Was Doors*, 2017, Etching. 49.4cm x 66.4cm (Photograph by the artist).

In this composition, Ngobeni depicts his father, the bull, moving towards the shining light of the sun, which can metaphorically be read as a transitioning towards the ancestral realm. Yet in the composition, the bull is seen passing through squares in the fore and middle ground, however this bull never quite reaches the sun or the imagined ancestral realm. Ngobeni's mindful use of perspective and exclusion of the cow in the background near the sun serve to perhaps suggest and reiterate the held belief that until his family performs the required rituals of atonement for the unnatural suicide, the bull, his father, shall remain in transition, in limbo,



or more specifically, in the space of the living-dead – those no longer living in the material world yet not fully integrated in the spiritual realm. Throughout this entire this series, this work proves to be the zenith of Ngobeni's reimagining of his father's transition into the afterlife – I find it to be a referent to the notion of the idea of cosmic homelessness. Unlike in the prior work where the bull is centrally placed and rendered as kind of valiant figure in the cosmos, here the visual narration of the bull redirects us to one of the underlying issues in Ngobeni's critique: due to the nature of his death, his father cannot be fully integrated into the ancestral realm. Thus, while I argue that Ngobeni's father finds home in the cosmos, where, as Sun Ra (2016:141) insists, "better living becomes possible", I am also aware that very probability of him attaining a better life is troubled by his suicidal death.

The importance of this work (**Figure 4**) hence lies in this detail – how it invites further reflection on the idea of Ngobeni's father being cosmically homeless. And what it means for him to search for some kind of anchorage and ontological presence, which, as we discern from his alienation and his suicide, he failed to attain in the material world. Having presumably taken his life in order to ameliorate himself from his (Black) suffering on Earth, does the fact that he is then cosmically homeless render his death futile? This salient question encompasses the subtle complexities that underlie this body of work and more pertinently in my reading of it because though suicidal death might have been a desired choice by Ngobeni's father, his resultant cosmic homelessness is not. I would nonetheless argue that his homelessness does not disqualify his desire to ameliorate himself from his alienation on earth and seek an alternative, utopian reality in which to live – thereby exercising his agency.

This predicament, the cosmic homelessness of his father, is one which Ngobeni (2020: [sp]) understands can be remedied through ancestral litanies and cultural procedures that are aimed at appeasing their forefathers. However, I would also add that Ngobeni's visual reimagining of his father's journey, as we see in *Behold It Was Doors* (**Figure 4**), is also an attempt to reconcile this problem in how it insinuates a yearning for him to dwell in the utopian realm of his ancestors. Perhaps aspects of agency can be found in this too. I suggest here that in some respects, Ngobeni's visual effort appeals to Afrofuturist proclivities for hope where imagination enables one to suspend reality and take solace in gesturing towards that which is imagined. With this purview, I would read Ngobeni's visual narration of his father's movement towards the sun in this composition (**Figure 4**) as a suggestion of the latter's hope towards attaining state of being/existence that has less or no suffering. This is not to suggest that Afrofuturism operates with a naivety where it discounts all fragments of reality. Rather, it is to emphasise what may be thought to be a kind of "Black persistence", which insinuates a paradoxical capacity for Black subjecthood to still pursue freedom through self-realisation – as it is understood in the Black Consciousness lexicon – despite the impediments that make it impossible to do so.

Conclusion

Noteworthy is the manner in which Ngobeni engages with his father's death; he repetitively uses cattle to offer a metaphorical representation of his father – a Black man afflicted by various forms of alienation. Evidently, this icon has symbolic utility for Ngobeni as he deploys it to reimagine an alternative existence for his father in another reality as seen in the work *Spirit with Body Attached* (**Figure 3**). Yet, as I have explored in this article, Ngobeni's depiction of his father as dwelling in the cosmos is not free of tension as we observe in the last work *And Behold it was Doors* (**Figure 4**), where the possibility of his father being cosmically homeless is visually explored.

Yet the fundamental question that I explore in this article is how can we think of suicidal death as form of deliverance? I have attempted to examine this problematic through Ngobeni's series *Bridge of the Spirits* (2017), which offers a rich set of questions and propositions around



notions of death in relation to Black subjecthood. To this end, a classical Marxist framework, which I have employed, helps illuminate how Ngobeni's father, as a labourer, was immersed in alienating conditions that resulted from his economic positionality. Yet while this framework addresses this detail, it does not stress the racialised nature of his alienation. On this particular issue, my concern has been showing that the alienation that Ngobeni's father endured is fundamentally one embedded in dehumanisation – a dehumanisation that resulted in the radical act of self-annihilation. If this act of suicide was a prerequisite for attaining some kind of deliverance, then Ngobeni's visual translation of this act, his visual imagining of his father's journey into the ancestral realm, suggests an attempt to depict his father's sense of agency.

This proposition, I admit, is not only unsettling in its logic but is also to a large degree contentious. Having taken his life as a result of being affected by alienating economic conditions that may have affected his self-conception as the archetypical "provider" of his family, one is not dismissive of the fact that Ngobeni's father may have, in turn, left his family even more destitute. In some way, this foregrounds the pertinence of Afrofuturism as being an aesthetic that critically examines the Black condition and pursues radical imaginings of different kinds of Black existence, which I argue Ngobeni does in this series. My purpose has been to read this artists' visual examination of his father's suicide as indeed an act of self-assertion – an expression of an agentic character.

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