

**Sofaya in Paint: Representations of Human Dignity in the Work of
Sekoto, Xaba and Mthethwa**

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degree of Master in Arts (Fine Art)**

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Abstract

The core of the study for this MA examines expressions and understandings of human dignity/*seriti*, in the work of Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993), Nhlanhla Xaba (1960-2003), Zwelethu Mthethwa (b.1960) and in my own paintings. As such, the study probes, analyses and questions the intentions, writings on and readings of these artists' work, as well as appropriate and build on their visual and representational languages. Underlying the research is the idea of black consciousness, and quest for an ideology of a more human and equal South Africa. The subject of my paintings evolves around *seriti* in Sofaya, an informal settlement in the northeast of Johannesburg, which is not located on official maps of the city. I set out this study with the argument, that all human beings retain *seriti* as a quality that bestows respectability and equality to them.

The practical component is comprised of paintings in oil. The work tries to capture a personal and spiritual quality that I call *seriti* through explorations of colour, paint mark, and texture. I am curious about the concept of *seriti* as seen through everyday experiences. I am moved by the imaginative ability of both Sekoto and Xaba's images that weave communal and socio-political narratives to portray, positively, people's capacity to outlive harsh and conflicting living conditions. As a result of these influences, I employ dynamic brushwork, poetic colours, and expressive forms in an attempt to portray the realities, agency, and the place of Sofaya.

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Fine Arts by research in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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INTRODUCTION



Figure 1 I took this photograph standing next to an open sewerage that passes through Sofaya, between Phomolong and uMthambeka, Ekurhuleni. 2014

Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected.

(The Bill of Rights, Article ten, second chapter, South African Constitution)

“Human dignity ... belongs to all in equal amounts and is inalienable,” states the Zurich born professor of economics Mark Lutz (1995:172). The equality of human dignity was Stephen Bantu Biko’s quest in writing during the early 1970s: “In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest possible gift – a more human face” (2004:108). Biko used the pseudonym Frank Talk during this time, writing his evocative articles that embraced Black Consciousness philosophy as a response to apartheid’s brutal onslaught on the psyche and lives of black people. Literary scholar and author Andries Walter Oliphant (2008) states that Biko’s ‘conceptualised theory of African culture’ grants all people the same worth irrespective of personal possessions, and the right to be treated equally without exploitation. Biko (2004) and Oliphant (2008), among others, serve to anchor notions of dignity in my research from a political and cultural point of view. During the early 1970s Black Consciousness was defined as a concept that attempted to “make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity” (Biko 2004: 31). The outward expression of the black pride was often interpreted in terms of the style of dress, like dashikis, afro-hairstyle, and sometimes-uncombed hair (Peterson 2006: 168). In the visual arts the depiction of black people’s daily life experiences within the township surroundings, “self-definition, knowledge and redemption” were common motifs for most (black) artists (Ibid: 179). Sekoto’s portrayal of places where he stayed such as Sophiatown, District Six and Eastwood during the first half of 1940s inspired a generation of younger artists such as Ephraim Ngatane, Durant Sihlali and David Mogano (associated with the Johannesburg Polly Street Art Centre, established in 1949) to start creating art that represented their everyday lives in the areas they were assigned to (Ibid: 163). This type of art was later termed ‘township art’ by (white) art historians and

reviewers such as Frances Verstraete (Ibid: 178). Later in the 1960s and early 1970s this became a 'standard' form of creative expression for most urban black artists, which a group of mostly younger Black Consciousness-inspired artists such as Dumile Feni, Julian Motau, Winston Saoli, Leonard Matsoso and Andrew Motjuaedi began to challenge as stereotyped portrayals of township people (Ibid.); artist Fikile Magadlela named it "self-pity art" (Ibid: 180).

The quest for human dignity continues, particularly for 'over million black people' who struggle in the socio-economic peripheries and informal settlements in South Africa today (Ziblim 2013: 1).¹ My research and practice as part of this Masters submission is informed by and based on one such settlement, Sofaya, a squatter camp that is situated on the margins of Midrand and Kempton Park. The place is not located on official maps yet it is located between the four-roomed houses of Umthambeka and Phomolong sections in the township of Thembisa where I live. I use Jacob Dlamini's (2009) narrative in *Native Nostalgia* to frame my investigation of Sofaya. Dlamini writes about the township of Katlehong, describing the dynamism and possibility of "attention to detail (the music, the colours, the sounds, the smells) "that gave it its distinct flavour" (2009:108). The author asserts that each township has its own unique essence, that which makes it different from other places (Ibid.). The paintings that are created as part of the research project are personal explorations of the daily lives of the people of the squatter camp, in all their nuances and different expressions.

The artists David Koloane and Sipho Mdanda state that due to inadequate housing, squatter settlements were already sprawling in the urban landscape during the 1950s (2004: 36). Both point out that today the number of these settlements, coupled with poverty, has reached a level of national crisis (Ibid.). Generally people living in informal settlements tend to be treated with little respect and are often stereotyped by the media as composed of an underclass of unskilled, impoverished and undereducated immigrant and migrant black people. These perceptions are further fuelled by claims that squatter settlements are a "source of crime and degeneracy" (Ibid.); newspaper articles such as Fhumulani Khumela's '*Copper thieves caught with the loot*' easily feed into these stereotypes;² documentaries such as *Hillbrow Kids* display notions of 'invisibility' that turn a group of children living on the streets into a spectacle,³ similar to a line of tourist postcards of the urban poor.⁴

The perception about people living in informal settlements is problematic as it only provides a limited view about the complexities of their lives and undermines their human value. In my research and time spent at Sofaya, it is evident that not all people and aspects about the

¹ The estimated number of people living in abject poverty in South Africa varies, but appears to be increasing. See official statistics, investigatory survey and indepth reports on poverty in South Africa online, including <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?cat=22>, <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-02-03-south-africa-where-12-million-live-in-extreme-poverty/>, [africacheck.org](http://www.africacheck.org), <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/63-of-young-sa-children-live-in-poverty-study-20160513>

² The article about five Lesotho nationals living in Devland squatter camp, southwest of Johannesburg, and arrested for allegedly stealing copper cables appeared in the *Sowetan*, a daily South African tabloid, on Tuesday, April 1, 2014.

³ The documentary is directed by Michael Hammon and Jacqeline Grger (1999), featuring the lives of street children in Johannesburg inner city and follows a boy named Vusi to a squatter camp in Daveyton, east of Johannesburg, during the early 1990s.

⁴ I refer to specific postcards displayed in stationary stores such as PNA stands, alongside pictures of wildlife or South African cityscapes, which show images of 'happy' and seemingly content black children, often dirty, against the background of a campfire and squatter camp.

squatter settlements are negative or worthless. My aim as part of this MA is to analyse claims that underlie representations of 'the poor.' It investigates for example declarations by artist Mthethwa against negative assumptions about people living in informal settlements as 'spaces infested with crime.' Mthethwa is outspoken about the respectability and dignity of people from squatter camps and his photographs, *Interiors (1995-2005)* are seen to record people's living spaces in ways that restore their pride and dignity (Dhlomo 1999: 75-79). Similarly, Sekoto's art has been seen to reflect the aspirations of 'his' (black) people (Manaka 1987; de Jager 1992). The South African writer and art critic Ivor Powell (1995) claims that Sekoto's depiction of his brother Bernard Sekoto engages with the sitter's psychology, depicting him as an intelligent and thinking person. With view to these statements, the theoretical component of my research examines not only narrations and interpretations of dignity, pride, and subjectivity, but also seek to unpack tropes and problems of representation in the artists' work, in literature, media, and critical writing. This serves as a continuous point of reflection and interrogation for my painting process.

Dignity is called *seriti* in Sepedi and means respect for all people as human beings. This means that all people are imbued with *seriti* as aura of respectability and equality, irrespective of personal standing within the hierarchy of life and society. I understand dignity as sense of pride and self-respect that is fundamental to all human beings. Both *seriti* and dignity are used interchangeably within the research to refer to what I perceive to be the basis of being human.

The core of the study revolves around expressions, understandings and representations of dignity, both in the series of my paintings and the work of selected artists who have had a strong influence on my work, and are considered part of South African art canon. I examine strategies of representations in the oeuvre of Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993), Nhlanhla Xaba (1960-2003), and Zwelethu Mthethwa (b.1960). The investigation includes Sekoto's paintings that were done between 1945-1947 in the township of Eastwood before it was destroyed by the apartheid government. The author of Sekoto's biography *I am an African*, Chabani Manganyi (1996), and the artist and curator Sipho Mdanda (2004a) declare that Sekoto's paintings of that time display the dignity of the people he portrayed. Xaba's paintings are discussed in detail, particularly his dense compositions built up with layers of acrylic and oil paint, and in his way of portraying people as dignified, angry, and serene individuals.⁵ Mthethwa's assertion of giving dignity to the people he photographs provides a further point of interrogation into modes of representation and the subject of *seriti*, as well as a conceptual beginning to the creation of my paintings. I survey the key arguments and interpretations put forward, which tend to either celebrate expressions of human dignity in the artists' work (and life), or critique their representations of black subjects (and life). For the close reading of Mthethwa's work, I draw on the art historians Annie Coombes (2003) and John Pepper (2009) who take the position that Mthethwa "aestheticizes" poverty. In contrast to the authors' claim, I am interested in Mthethwa's visual strategies in his photographs and pastels, such as the framing of his subjects, their poses, style of dress and his use of vivid colours. I also draw on biographical writings on the artists, specifically Sekoto (Barbara Lindop) as well as interviews and press coverage (Artthrob).

⁵ The artist built his compositions through layering of paint that often result in over-painted surfaces, and are characterised by detailed brush marks.

The research extends the engagement with the theme of 'the township' and experiences of black people in the work of the above-mentioned artists. I interrogate their visual modes, which speak to notions of *seriti* and which seek to shift perceptions about poor people; which question positivist stereotypes and enable a viewing process that makes dialogue possible, rather than settle us into a comfortable position of looking onto a pretty scene. Playwright Tshepo Mamatu speaks of representations of black people as poor, amusing, and simple folks within "the South African advertising world," which makes a point about the continuities of certain stereotypes (2006: 11). The study invites interpretations and reflections by the readers and viewers, which for me are related to the current dialogues, such as the recent platinum mines strike in the North West province that dragged on for five months and was referred to by some as a fight for human dignity (libcom.org).

As such, the written and practical component of this study aim to probe, analyse and question the intentions, writings and readings of the selected artists' work, as well as appropriate and build on their visual and representational languages. It explores how much the critics and my own readings allow me to work in a particular way while encountering the specific conditions of Sofaya, its residents, and their daily lives.

In summary, the research hopes to add to the existing body of creative and intellectual scholarship that deals with issues of dignity, especially of black people, as is apparent in Sekoto, Xaba and Mthethwa's art trajectory. This will therefore bring to attention critical representation of people living on the margins of society, much in our midst, today. It is primarily framed within the writings on human dignity as espoused by Biko's Black Consciousness. I am interested in Biko's (2004) concept of an equal and just society, which contrasted with apartheid's insistence on racialised distinctions between people, masked as 'good neighbourliness' by the former prime minister of the Republic, Hendrik Verwoerd (youtube.com); and Jacob Dlamini's (2009) memory of a specific way of life that was understood by everyone in his community, as told in *Native Nostalgia*. I look at Biko and Dlamini's views about what informs *seriti*, in order to work and experiment with the idea and experience in my paintings.

Biko's selection of writings that appeared in the South African Students Organisation's (SASO) newsletter between 1969-72 and Dlamini's memoirs that trace fragments of his childhood life under apartheid are also used in relation to writings by artists, critics and historians on the work of Sekoto, Xaba and Mthethwa. The artists' lives and their work are looked at in relation to training, employment, convictions, and the context of apartheid and post-apartheid. I contextualise the reception of their work, i.e. Williamson (2009), Pepper (2009), their praise, critique and interpretation at a particular time, with a specific agenda and political background. I draw on these texts for close readings of the artists' work in relation to representations of people and human dignity, using Stuart Hall's theories on representation to further discuss visual strategies employed by the artists, and myself. Jamaican-born cultural theorist, Hall (1997a) wrote extensively about systems of representation and their manipulation to create meaning. I partly focus on his reflections on '*trans-coding*' and the "shifting, unstable character of meaning" (Hall 1997b: 274). *Trans-coding* refers to the strategy of appropriating existing meaning to create new meaning (Ibid: 235). I draw on Hall's observations in my discussion of the work of Sekoto, Xaba, Mthethwa and the perceived dignity of their subjects, as well as how the artists' work has been written about.

Chapter 1 details worldwide, transcontinental, and national understandings of human dignity, as well as my understanding of the term. Steve Biko's Black Consciousness is contrasted with the Afro-American experiences of dignity during the Black Power era in the 1960s as groundwork for the following chapter, which analyses the chosen artworks and artists' context. *Chapter 2* looks at Gerard Sekoto (1913–1990), his life, and paintings in relation to the concept of dignity, while Nhlanhla Xaba (1960–2003) and Zwelethu Mthethwa (b.1960) are approached more as distant comparative artists. The chapter also introduces the concept of *trans-coding* as a framework through which the work is read. The last chapter discusses the series of paintings, *Sofaya in Paint*, which I produced as part of this research. The concept and question of *seriti* dominated my mind during the painting process in studio, and remained my point of departure in each work.

Chapter 1

Seriti and Human Dignity



Figure 2 This watercolour sketch captures three male figures in a solemn moment in Sofaya. 2014

The chapter sets out to explore perceptions of human dignity, referencing Biko's (2004) late 1960s and early 1970s' essays about the 'inferiority complex' of black people under the yoke of apartheid, urging them to define and accept who they are.⁶ I am specifically interested in his concept of an equal and just society, which confronted apartheid's insistence on racial distinctions between people. I am also interested in what I consider to be Jacob Dlamini's (2009) process of 'neutralization,' identified by Gresham M. Sykes and David Matza (1957) as coping mechanisms against stressful situations. I look at Dlamini's memoir, *Native Nostalgia* (2009) which relates a specific way of life that was 'understood by everyone' in his community of Katlehong, a township east of Johannesburg. The research addresses the definition and understanding of the term dignity on a personal, historical, national, and universal level. This includes how human dignity forms part of the cultural and social experiences inherent in daily life practices. These perceptions of human dignity anchor my observations of current South African life and particularly experiences of Sofaya.

Sofaya is situated on the margins between Midrand and Kempton Park. It is not acknowledged in statute books as a formal residential area nor is it located on official maps, yet over twelve thousand people live there with amenities that make 'normal' living impossible. Sparse communal, flea-ridden pit lavatories and illegal electricity connections characterise the approximately 400 households, which are home to black men, women, and children. The South African government's Department of Human Settlements' *Housing Development Agency Research Report* of 2012 identifies informal settlements as based on the following characteristics: "(a) Illegality and informality, (b) Inappropriate locations, (c) Restricted public and private sector investment, (d) Poverty and vulnerability and (e) Social stress," quoted in Ziblim (2013: 10). It is common to see groups of young and old people in Sofaya standing at street corners with pouches in hand, waiting to place bets on the game of numbers called *fafi*, or *Mo-China* as the people of Chinese descent generally run it. Bets are placed on chosen numbers that range from 1 to 36 and are given characters. *Fafi* has a runner who collects bets and money for the Chinese

⁶ Biko wrote the essays when political activity was minimal on the side of the oppressed black majority and their lives were dominated by fear of the system. I use Black Consciousness' conception of human dignity 22 years into the democratic rule to argue for its relevance amidst the oppression that is a result of lack of decent housing, poverty, and landlessness.

person who whispers the winning number back to the runner. The runner collects the winning prize on behalf of the winner. Most of *Mo-China* players are often the unemployed members of the community while those who manage to find employment generally work as domestic servants, gardeners, security guards, cleaners, and shop assistants in the nearby towns, suburbs, or the city. Although written during the mid-1970s, Biko's words, 22 years into the democratically elected government, are still relevant concerning most of those who live in the townships and informal settlements:

townships are placed long distances away from the working areas where [most] black people work, and the transport conditions are appalling, trains are overcrowded all the time, taxis that they use are overcrowded, the whole travelling situation is dangerous, and by the time a guy gets to work he [/she] has been really through a mill (2004: 112).

The uneven dirt streets in Sofaya with puddles of dirty stinking water form part of a landscape, in which stray dogs, giant rats, and humans compete for space. *The Dynamics of Informal Settlements Upgrading in South Africa: Legislative and Policy Context, Problems, Tensions, and Contradictions*, a study conducted by Habitat for Humanity International, states: "Approximately 1.2 million households in South Africa currently live in informal settlements" (Ziblim 2013: 1). Generally, black people from across the broad spectrum of South Africa and neighbouring countries like Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi populate informal and squatter settlements such as Sofaya. These spaces are microcosms of Pan African, evolving communities.

Definitions of *Seriti*

Orlando Patterson's assertion in *In Slavery and Social Death* that "dignity ... is one of those human qualities that are most intensely felt and understood when they are absent" motivates my investigation into how dignity is claimed in a place like Sofaya (1982: 100). Looking at the wretched conditions of the place, it is apparent that its residents' sense of dignity is under assault. Winston Langley (2007) and Mark Lutz (1995) define human dignity as the ability for humans to make independent choices. Dlamini (2009) and Lutz (1995) insist that this sense of being human belongs to all persons in equal measures. It is this ability to make absolute choices that Dlamini remarks is a unique characteristic of people, that "even amid the depths of despair they do not lose their sense of being" (2009: 111).

Encarta World English Dictionary (1999) defines dignity as a (1) sense of pride and self-respect; (2) formality or seriousness of behaviour; (3) the condition of being worthy of respect, esteem or honour; (4) due respect shown to a rank or position; (5) high office, position or rank; (6) dignitary. The relation of high office, position, and rank to dignity is hierarchical: a person is dignified if he/she is in high office – president, ordained bishop, lawyer, doctor, etc. I am interested in the first and third definition of dignity as a sense of pride, self-respect, and the condition of being worthy of respect that is intrinsic to all human beings. In contrast to forms of dignity which are granted by external forces, I am interested in dignity as "the notion that people have equal worth, which gives them the right to live as autonomous beings not under the authority of another" (Atuahene 2014: 45).

Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Touré) and Charles V. Hamilton rightfully proclaim that negative living conditions promote “human indignity and the denial of respect” (1967: 29), while Antjie Krog identifies what she calls “potently dysfunctional mix” of conditions inherent in squatter camps (2009: 236). I maintain that these conditions do not negate but confront the dignity and value of people, what Robert Bone calls “an inner world that lies beyond the reach of insult or oppression” (1970: 28). Matome Rathete writes in his PhD thesis about the “essence of a human being,”

[which] is spiritual and because of its nature it is lasting. Because it is spiritual, it negates anything that is material. It exists independently of the owner. It does not matter whether a person is a cripple, a lunatic or even a thief, there is something that lives, that stirs within a person, that makes him/her human and this is *seriti*. It is the thing that forms the essentials of a human being. It is called *seriti*. All people have it (2007: 1).

Zurich born professor of economics Mark Lutz acknowledges that dignity is an undeniable human element that is part of all people (1995: 172). This absolute state of human dignity is also cited in article 1 of the *United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights* (un.org) which proclaims that: “[a]ll human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” The declaration was announced by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 to protect human rights universally. On the African continent, article 5 of the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights* (achpr.org) was set up in 1987, adopted in 1998 and its protocol coming into effect in 2005; the charter states that “[e]very individual shall have the right to the respect of the dignity inherent in a human being and to the recognition of his legal status. All forms of exploitation and degradation of man, particularly slavery, slave trade, torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment and treatment shall be prohibited.” The South African Constitution declares the equality of human beings in article ten of the second chapter, known as *The Bill of Rights*: “Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected” (sahistory.org.za). According to these proclamations, the concept of human dignity grants unconditional respect, equality, and value to all human beings. Although every person is imbued with dignity, evidently structures such as colonialism and later apartheid set up “a system of racialised privilege and power” which violated this state of being human (Alexander & Mngxitama 2011: 57). Conditions that perpetuate inequality today – evident in spaces such as Sofaya, which are mainly populated by black people, present a reality that renders the protection of human rights questionable.

Seriti can be understood as a considerate self-worth, personal and spiritual sphere, and part of every human being (Chirongoma, S, Manda, D.L. & Myeni, Z. quoted in Vellem, 2010). *Seriti* means that people have an inborn quality, which inherently renders them all sacred forms of life that deserve to be treated with deference and impartiality (Rathete 2007: 7). Treating people with respect is the basis of existence or *botho* in Sepedi, which means “to be a human being is to affirm one’s presence by recognizing the personhood of others” (Ramose 2002: 230). Mogobe Ramose contends that the dynamic process of becoming human involves “a humane, respectful, and polite attitude towards others” as an acknowledgement of one’s own sense of being (Ibid.). Following the logic that to be human implies recognition and knowledge of others as human, what conditions and rights need to be in place to ensure the kind, courteous and respectful treatment of each other? The disregard of *botho* in the history of racialised oppression and “its

legacies in the present,” the tolerance and normalisation of places such as Sofaya, pose daily challenges to the implementation of South Africa’s constitution (Alexander et al. 2011: 52).

Andile Mngxitama is one amongst many post-apartheid writers and voices who are critical of the current South African regime’s inability to achieve what Biko’s Black Consciousness aspired for: a country where black people, as the majority, set the agenda for reversing the relics of white racism. In *Black Power*, Carmichael et al. call racism “the predication of decisions and policies on considerations of race for the purpose of *subordinating* a racial group and maintaining control over that group” (1967: 3). The chronicles of conferring people the subservient status on ‘considerations of race’ in South Africa are well recorded, infamously beginning in 1652 when the Dutch East Indian Company established their so-called provision station at Table Bay, a process that began the ‘fleecing of people and their possessions’ (H. Jaffe cited in Terreblanche 2002: 153). In *A History of Inequality in South Africa: 1652-2002*, the historian Sampie Terreblanche narrates this past, describing how the colonial powers and white colonists created a “political and economic power structure that put them in a privileged and entrenched position, depriving indigenous people of the land, surface water, cattle” and reducing them “to different forms of unfree and exploitable labour” (2002: 6). Former president of the *Pan Africanist Congress of Azania* (PAC) Dr. Motsoko Pheko writes that land forfeiture resulted in “loss of sovereignty” for the black majority (xii: 1992).⁷ With the loss of independence black people became ‘socially dead’ entities - socially dead persons who did not have any identity outside that given them by their master (Patterson 1982: 38-39).⁸ The systematic, racist degradation of people for economic and political domination was taken a step further in 1948 when the Afrikaner dominated *National Party* went beyond the hypocrisy of the preceding political parties. The newly elected *National Party* formalised white supremacy through laws such as the 1950 *Population Registry Act*, the *Natives Act* of 1952, and the 1953 *Bantu Education Act* (Atuahene 2014: 4).⁹

Biko and Dignity

In 1976 Biko gave evidence during the *Black People’s Convention* (BPC) and *South African Students Organisation’s* (SASO) trial over their rally in Durban that supported *Frelimo* (Mozambique Liberation Movement) as government-in-waiting in Mozambique (2004: 110-113). He references two men to qualify his insistence that poor living conditions, poor pay and poor education, a result of the ‘racialised privilege and power,’ lead to feelings of low self-worth and respectability. The first man who Biko met in Durban works as driver for a dry-cleaning company. Recounting his regular day, the man wakes up at 4 in the morning, walks for some distance to catch the bus to work and comes back home at 9 in the evening, “too tired to do anything but to sleep in order to be in time for work again the next day.” The other man in the

⁷ Pheko asserts that using the name Azania for ‘the stolen land’ of black people by the European settler colonialists “represents decolonization and self-determination” on their part (1992: xiv).

⁸ Atuahene writes: “*Sub* persons are people who are dehumanized or infantilized, and thus denied recognition of their humanity or full mental capacity” (2014: 30). Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* opens up with an unnamed character who narrates his sub-human status: “When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me” (1952: 7). According to Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, colonialism relegated black people “to a subordinated, inferior status” while treating them as “lowly animal[s], not to be housed properly, or given adequate medical services, and by no means a decent education” (1967: 23).

⁹ The *Population Registry Act* demanded every South African to register their race; the *Natives Act* compelled every black person to carry passes; the *Bantu Education Act* decreed that black people receive a basic education that would enable them work as labourers (Atuahene 2014: 48).

Eastern Cape withstands daily insults from his white co-worker whom he assists in installing electric cables. The man tells Biko that he is not happy with the daily insults but cannot risk loosing his job by showing any dissent; he therefore bottles up his frustrations inside.

Over two decades into the democratic South Africa, lack of decent housing, landlessness, 'poor living conditions, poor pay, and poor education' still characterise the lives of the majority of black people. This state of affairs obviously undermines equality, which leads to reasonable demands that policies that are supposed to foster equal opportunities, quality education, and land redistribution laws¹⁰ need to be reviewed and changed so that people are accorded their full humanity. The tolerance of squatter camps today begs the question, how the *Bill of Rights* can ensure "[t]he post-apartheid state's attempts to facilitate dignity restoration...[of] blacks from their old status as sub persons to their new status as dignified members of the polity" (Atuahene 2004: 5).

Don Mattera proclaims that the current South Africa is rife with dynamisms which owe their origins to the 1950s' effects of white domination such as land grabs, bantu education and exposing black people to exploitable workforce (2009: xxii). Professor Atuahene (2014), author and novelist Peter Abrahams (2000) and Terreblanche (2002) assert that these effects of 'white domination' have their roots in 1652. Both the colonial and apartheid's mission of land deprivation through the many unjust and cruel laws set up structures, hierarchies, and 'forces', which can be seen to continue to affect present-day South Africa.¹¹

For me the impact of these violent (political, economic, cultural) systems of racial domination is most apparent across South Africa's townships and squatter camps, where poverty and 'subhuman conditions' gravely compromise pride and self-respect (Goniwe 2010:93).¹² It raises questions in terms of how *seriti*, understood to be beyond physical and material restraints, can be compromised by wretched conditions of squatter settlements. If we accept that *seriti* is an inborn, given human quality, can it be compromised externally?

¹⁰ The 'willing buyer/willing seller' model in the years after 1994, where white land owners were expected to voluntarily sell off 'their land' to the government, which had hoped to resettle the landless black majority had dismally failed as witnessed by the occupation of squatter camps by over 1million black people, 22 years into democracy. This failure is further confirmed by the current passing of another bill which makes it compulsory for government to pay an amount it deems market-related for land identified for appropriation. It is deeply concerning how in 2016 white people are still the majority land owners while over a million black people are landlessness and the government seem powerless to do anything about it.

¹¹ Statutes such as the *Land Act* of 1913 and later the *Natives Act* of 1952 deprived black people of economic freedom and turned them into cheap labour through systematic violence (Terreblanche 2002: 404). Chistopher Warnes maintains "colonial and apartheid practices are still very much with us in the postcolonial and postapartheid world" (2012: 331). Carmichael et al. write about 'institutional racism' in the 1960s in America, describing how "five hundred black babies die[d] each year because of the lack of proper food, shelter and medical facilities, and thousands more [were] destroyed and maimed physically, emotionally and intellectually because of conditions of poverty and discrimination" (1967: 4). The description resonates with South Africa today.

¹²Thembinkosi Goniwe (2010) contributed an essay titled: *Ideas and Reflections on "Super Boring"* for the catalogue of Wayne Barker's exhibition, *Super Boring*. Goniwe talks about the inequalities between white and black people in "the Cape."



Figure 3 I took this picture in the passageway that leads to one of the resident's (Andries) shack in Sofaya. 2014

Aurel Kolnai (1976) cautions that human dignity may be impaired or lost because of powers that are foreign to people's free will. He cites maltreatment, drunkenness, and accidents as detrimental to peoples' free will and harmful to their feelings of pride and self-respect. Frantz Fanon (cited in Langley, 2007) labels such powers, which force people to live in squalid environments, as an indirect violence against their human dignity. He writes that the trauma of this violence often subjects its recipients to general feelings of low self-worth (Ibid.). Sofaya is an example of the cursed attempt to live a 'normal' life in an abnormal environment. Lack of access to electricity forces people to use braziers as fuel for cooking or warming their dwellings during winter, candles as source of light or illegal electricity connections. Often the results are fires that destroy belongings, expose people to toxic carcinogenic fumes.

Towards the close of 1960s and the early 1970s, the Black Consciousness advocate Biko declared "[i]n time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest possible gift – a more human face" (2004: 108). His writings appeared during the brutal days of apartheid and endeavoured to instil a feeling of pride and self-worth in the being of the oppressed by encouraging "the process of self-definition, self-reliance and self-determination in all areas of the material, social and psychological aspects of their lives" (Peterson 2006: 166).

Biko's quest continues as South Africa is still divided into what the then deputy president Thabo Mbeki described in his 1998 deliberation at the opening of the National Assembly in Cape Town as 'two nations' - one white and rich and the other one poor and black (unisa.ac.za). Terreblanche elaborates on the same point, stating that:

The democratic government that assumed power in 1994 inherited a rather contradictory legacy. On the one hand, it inherited the most developed economy in Africa, with a modern physical and institutional infrastructure. On the other, it inherited major socio-economic problems, including high levels of unemployment; the abject poverty of 50 per cent of the population; sharp inequalities in the distribution of income, property, and opportunities; and high levels of crime and violence. What makes these problems pressing is the fact that it is mainly black South Africans – and particularly Africans – who are at their receiving end (2002: 4).

For literary scholar and author Walter Andries Oliphant, the quality to choose one's own actions lies at the basis of the 'theorisation of African culture' by Biko, whose rallying call was to "restore the intrinsic value of African culture to Africans; secondly, to present it as a basis for inter-African solidarity; thirdly, to critically unmask the pretensions of colonial culture" (2008: 217-218). Biko's intention according to Oliphant was a "theoretical intervention" that appealed to the agency of the oppressed reminding them of their culture and heritage, which pre-dates colonialism. Biko's (2004: 106) envisaged process of South Africa acquiring a human face bears similarities with Carmichael et al., writing on their envisaged 'solution' to the 'white supremacist dilemma' of America in the mid 20th century:

Reorientation means an emphasis on the dignity of man [and woman], not on the sanctity of property. It means the creation of a society where human misery and poverty are repugnant to that society, not an indication of laziness or lack of initiative ... To do this means to modernize-*indeed, to civilize*-this country (1967: 41).

Carmichael et al. (1967) talk of a process, which was meant to civilise America from its obsession with assets over poor (black) people. Here prominence is put on the value of each human being and the need to create a culture that is shocked by poverty (Ibid.). This course of reorientation is comparable to Biko's insistence on the equal value of each person, irrespective of material possessions (2004: 51). Giving South Africa a 'human face' entails, in terms of Black Consciousness, "a quest ... to humanize South Africa by liberating it from the inhuman social system of racial prejudice, human oppression, and exploitation, and replacing it with a new order of human quality" (Oliphant 2008: 214). Currently it seems impossible to attain this 'gift' of humanising South Africa; informal settlements and lack of housing are still identified with black people while "few blacks filter [...] through into the so-called bourgeoisie" (Biko 2004: 169). Mngxitama posits that the loss of land is more than a material dispossession that "resists demands for reparations" but a "part of the trajectory of the irreparable loss" which is the daily experience of (most) black people (2013: 10). He points that this loss is "more devastating because (black) people are condemned to encounter it every day" as they interact with the landscape (Ibid.).

In the post-apartheid state the reach of Black Consciousness seems limited by its call for black people to come together around their blackness to "operate as a group to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude", even as the freedom of movement and association are now guaranteed by the constitution (Biko 2004: 101). In my view this mobility is conditioned and hence curtailed by structural racism¹³ which tends to normalise poverty and landlessness.

Dlamini and Coping Mechanisms Under Apartheid

In his memoir Dlamini describes many instances in which people retain their 'sense of being' despite the oppression of apartheid (2009: 13). His record captures personal memories of growing up during the 1970s and 1980s in Katshele. He draws attention to his approach in a lengthy introduction that asks what it means "for a black South African to remember life under

¹³ Structural racism refers to the entrenched attitudes, actions and practices within different structures, hierarchies, and forces, that regulate daily lives and generally disadvantage most of the previously oppressed South Africans who are still trapped in the townships and squatter camps. See footnote 8, p. 15.

apartheid with fondness,” as there were also happy moments in the township during the time (Ibid.). The author talks about the “moral economy of material exchange and obligation in which families lent one another money and exchanged food and items such as gardening tools” (2009: 99). In these exchanges gardening tools could be called by their names, but monies owed could not be directly asked for as that would devalue a person’s worth and thus dehumanise them (Ibid.). He describes how his mother would send him to neighbours to ask for the ‘parcel’ instead of asking straightforwardly for the money that she loaned them.

Dlamini’s (2009) descriptions of ‘acts of retaining a sense of being despite apartheid’s oppression’ could be compared with Lawrence Levine’s (2007) writing about 18th and 19th century slavery in America in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. Levine claims that often “slaves were forced by their circumstances to create their own practical set of values and norms of behaviour” whose function included “the expression of repressed feelings,” and “search for ways out of the system” of slavery (Ibid: 123-132). In Levine’s words slavery made the slaves “idealists who created a sacred universe which promised change and triumph, allowed them to reach back to relive the victories of the past, and drew them into the rich future where the justice and goodness that had been experienced before would exist again” (ibid.).¹⁴ These tactics or imaginative strategies can be related to Gresham M. Sykes and David Matza’s interpretation of how certain behaviours are neutralised and qualified as ‘rational’ (1957: 667).¹⁵ Dlamini (2009) narrates how the people of Katlehong would express smaller gestures such as ‘lending one another money, exchanging food and items such as gardening tools,’ which would be understood and practiced amongst (most) members of the community. Lending each other various items is a form of *botho*, which indicates that the borrower acknowledges and is aware that his/her fellow human being can help them out. Generally the people who continue to suffer the effects of political and economic deprivation are more reliant on *botho* as coping mechanism. These gestures could be understood as a means to neutralise and rationalise one’s situation and surrounds.

Sophiatown, Sofaya, and Claiming *Seriti*

In comparison to the cosmopolitan and multiracial ‘slum area’ of Sophiatown of the 1950s, Don Mattera recounts that each week most of its residents led lives of vice “until the early hours of magical Sunday” which was the “[t]ime for cleansing; time for Jesus as men, women and their children marched to church to be made whole of their sinning and debauchery” (2009: 84). In 2004, the Anglican community minister David Goodhew wrote about the period of Sophiatown that “a sense of human worth” amid the poverty of the place was bestowed by the people’s resolve to partake in religion, education, law and order, perceived to make their abject life bearable (2004: 92). Goodhew claims that religion granted people a chance for a “decent burial” while education offered them hope for “greater opportunities to acquire wealth and status”

¹⁴ The condition of slavery forced the slaves whose humanity was reduced to below that of animals, to re-create a ‘reality and experience’ outside their miserable daily living forced servitude. Similarly during the 1700s, slaves in the Cape colonies often resorted to setting fire to their masters’ homes as a form of protest against their cruel treatment (Ulrich 2011: 167). It should be noted that I am not generalising systems of oppression across different times and contexts, but looking at echoes, similarities of the ways the victims responded to their conditions.

¹⁵ Biko wrote about how black people were forced to ‘adapt’ to disgraceful living conditions during apartheid, which formed part of their daily lives. People “adapt in the sense that you cannot continue to live in a state of conflict with yourself” but this does not mean that disgraceful conditions become acceptable to people (2004: 128). This could be understood as a process of rationalising and neutralising circumstances.

(Ibid.). Rather, the people's hopes were shattered the minute their access to land was curtailed through the application of draconian laws, abnormal labour conditions, and inferior education system (Atuahene (2014); Abrahams (2000); and Terreblanche (2002)). Goodhew (2004) focuses his lens superficially on what he perceives as actions that could grant the people of Sophiatown dignity, avoiding the real cause of their dehumanisation.

Sophiatown became well known for its cultural life, which was generally roused and dominated by gangsters, American jazz music and cinema. It has been a subject of many books, music and films. Most black writers, politicians and musicians of the 1950s made Sophiatown their home until the apartheid government demolished the suburb, starting in 1955. The residents tried in vain to fight against their relocation to locations outside the city. Sophiatown was renamed Triomf (triumph in Afrikaans), and renamed Sophiatown in the post apartheid period (sahistory.org.za).

To my knowledge, most people in Sofaya are aware that the place was established through 'illegal' land occupation during the first half of the 1990s - Junior Ngubeni initiated the place.¹⁶ Similarities between the two places are found in the residents' readiness to fight against their removal. Although the original Sophiatown was destroyed, Sofaya the squatter camp withstood the post-apartheid government's attempt to demolish it. Since its inception as a community the area has generally been built with zinc and recycled material.

Researcher Steffen Jensen writes in *Gangs, Politics & Dignity of Cape Town* about the search of the working class 'coloured' communities of the Cape Flats for dignity amidst their 'miserable poverty' (2008: 9, 10). He asserts that human dignity is what some of the poor people can hold onto as something that the establishment (the police, gangs, officialdom and security guards) "cannot take away from [them], the ontological core of the self" (Ibid.). To demonstrate his point, Jensen illustrates the story of a woman who is humiliated by a welfare official and maintains her dignity while leaving the office. The author claims that the woman's preservation of her "[d]ignity only became an issue in the moment of humiliation" (Ibid.). This means, according to the author, "domination ... hands down dignity to the poor and the marginalized in the form of humiliation" (Ibid.). Jensen intimates that the poor and marginalised 'coloured' people of Cape Town townships hold on to their sense of self to navigate through life and its challenges. He further argues that this appreciation of self "is lodged in a number of practices aimed at keeping one's head up and retaining an irreducible pride and sense of humanity," such as when parents protect and care for their families, young people channelling their energies into different sporting codes while others choose violent or religious lifestyles that grant them reputation within their communities (Ibid.). These acts of 'retaining a sense of self' point to the process of 'neutralization' discussed earlier. The seemingly ethnographic reading of what Jensen (2008) calls Cape Town 'coloured' township residents grappling with human dignity is problematic. He matter-of-factly paints a romantic picture of the 'poor but happy' people who heroically maintain their lives under wretched conditions.

¹⁶ It is a common practice that homeless individuals who organise themselves often occupy empty lands to initiate squatter camps. At times extensions of townships develop from such 'illegal' land occupations, often referred to as 'mzabalazo' or 'baepe' – those who struggle for land ownership.

Activist and Deputy President of *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, the South African shack dwellers' movement, Lindela Figlan (2012) states that people's sense of self is lodged within certain practices that give them sense of pride. In 24 October 2012 Figlan presented the article *South Africa: The Politics of Human Dignity* at the Anarchist Bookfair in London, where he posited that members of *Abahlali baseMjondolo* find a sense of pride and self-respect in working together to resist their oppression, a result of lack of access to land and adequate housing. Similar to Ramose's understanding of *botho* as consciousness of others' presence, Figlan (2012) claims that people cannot be complete human beings in isolation from others; persons need to be recognised as such to be able to acknowledge others in return (2002: 231).

Abahlali baseMjondolo's view of human dignity in the post-apartheid South Africa shares similar traits with Biko's interpretation of the idea during apartheid repression. Biko (2004) paints a bleak picture of legalised racism where people attempted to neutralise their shameful living conditions through various actions that made life tolerable. He points to Black Consciousness' pursuit to arouse the agency of the oppressed, while Figlan (2012) talks about the shack dwellers' acknowledgement of their *seriti* by working together, endeavoring to access decent shelter and land in post-apartheid South Africa. The movement is dominant in KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape provinces where they are often at odds with local municipalities. Its press statement of 26 September 2014, titled *Another Abahlali baseMjondolo Comrade has Just Been Assassinated*, alert to how its members face daily government-initiated acts of intimidation,¹⁷ police beatings and killings as a result of their activism (libcom.org). Their February 16, 2016 press statement reads thus:

We live in life threatening conditions every day. We die in the fires, from disease, drugs and crime. Our children die from diarrhoea. Our neighbours die because the roads next to the settlements are not made safe for pedestrians. The economy excludes us. The development of the cities excludes us. We are denied access to land, electricity, water, housing, education and work. We are also denied the right to participate in the discussions about the future of our society and in decision making about our lives and communities (The Struggle).

The extract outlines how lives of the people who live in squatter camps are a daily struggle for survival. *Abahlali baseMjondolo* gain a sense of respect, where "the value of [their] lives is affirmed" from working together shoulder to shoulder as a community of like-minded people (Ibid.). The collective is sustained by individual members' contribution towards advancing their daily struggle to access resources while looking after their welfare.

Seriti refers to spiritual pride, and an innermost state of grace that forms part of every individual human being. The act of acknowledging that all people own *seriti* implies that everyone deserves to be treated with respect and equality - this is called *botho*: the acknowledgement of the humanity of others. Although apartheid and colonialism accorded black people a subhuman status in their own land, Biko and the Black Consciousness exponents insisted that dignity is something that all people, including the oppressed, possess. For

¹⁷ According to the author of the book *South Africa's Brave New World: the Beloved Country Since the End of Apartheid*, Richard William Johnson, groups such as *Abahlali baseMjondolo* mobilise communities against poor service delivery, resulting in tougher government retributions such as torture (2009: 541).

Atuahene (2014) dignity is the 'notion that people have equal worth.' Different authors acknowledge this understanding of dignity as something that is possessed by all, which is also included in the *United Nations' Human Rights Commission*, the *African Union*, and South Africa's *Bill of Rights*, i.e. we own *the right* to dignity. Although these bodies declare the need to respect people's dignity, everyday struggles of the poor, structural violence, gender violence, informal housing, exploitative labour conditions, landlessness, etc. challenge the very principle of human dignity. And yet, I concur with Rathete's (2007) account of *seriti* as a spiritual quality that is part of every person.

In Sofaya, a slum area of about twelve thousand black inhabitants, which is characterised by illegal electricity connections, communal pit toilets, and taps, dignity is not guaranteed by circumstance. Irrespective of the despicable living conditions of the place, families live there, facing daily battles to maintain their sense of *seriti*. These experiences can be compared to the instances that Dlamini (2009) writes about, of Katlehong during the 1970s and 1980s where the people managed to retain their 'sense of being' despite the oppression of apartheid. Holding onto a sense of self by protecting and raising children, dressing, playing *fafi* and going to church - I argue that this is but coping mechanisms, which help the people to negotiate their lives and endure the miserable living conditions.

The dire conditions of spaces like Sofaya can be linked to South Africa's history of land dispossessions, which negated *seriti* to its citizens, particularly black people. The effects of this legacy of a racialised, segregated, economically empowered and disempowered society can be recognised in the post-apartheid landscape where the majority of the poor are black people who live in squatter camps. Dr. Pheko (1992) insists that the landless black people are the direct victims of colonialism, which resulted in their "loss of sovereignty." The dispossession also resulted in 'political and economic power structures, hierarchies, and forces', which are well engrained in the contemporary state.

The seeming tolerance of the state of inequality cripples Biko's dream and ideal of a South Africa that despises poverty and racism. Oliphant (2008) talks about Biko's 'theorisation of African culture' during the 1970s, determined to 'recondition the essential worth of African culture to the oppressed black people.' The aim was to revive the 'socially dead' multitudes, while also appealing to their sense of being and dynamic culture albeit of complex relationships, human ambition, and pain for many years before the advent of colonialism.¹⁸

In the next chapter I will discuss how artists such as Sekoto, Xaba, and Mthethwa respectively represent black people's experiences of a spatial landscape. The chapter will look into how the artists represent perceptions of *seriti* in their work. I introduce the concept of *trans-coding* as a vehicle through which the work is analysed.

¹⁸ Biko (2004) reminded his readers that black people had their own systems, which governed their lives for many years before the onset of colonialism.

Chapter 2

Comparative Readings of *Seriti* in the Works of Gerard Sekoto, Nhlanhla Xaba and Zwelethu Mthethwa

The ensuing chapter investigates questions about perceptions of *seriti* in the work of the three South African artists, Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993), Nhlanhla Xaba (1960-2003), and Zwelethu Mthethwa (b.1960). I explore selected paintings by Sekoto, which are designated as the *Eastwood Period* (1945-1947). Works of the late artist Xaba are briefly discussed in comparison to Sekoto's work, particularly his painterly technique of built up layers of acrylic and oil paint, his portrayal of figures and township spaces. Mthethwa's assertion of giving dignity to the people he photographs provides a further point of interrogation into modes of representation, interpretation and the subject of *seriti*. I look into selected images by Mthethwa from the series *Interiors* (1995 – 2005), also as part of the conceptual framework for my own work. The chapter seeks to investigate concerns with forms of representations appropriated to create or imbue a sense of *seriti* in the work of the three artists.

Hall (1997) wrote extensively about the history and systems of representation as well as how these schemes are often manipulated to create meaning. Hall looks at the system of challenging stereotypes in representation, termed *trans-coding*, which he borrows from the Russian linguist and critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895 – 1975) (1997a: 235). Bakhtin suggests that when two or more people converse, the meaning of what they are talking about is maintained through their two-way interchange, which is influenced by socio-historical and economic-cultural conditions (Ibid.). This means that in a dialogue, the act of responding is key to understanding what is been said and in this way both acts of replying and understanding are “dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other” (Bakhtin 1981: 282). This “shifting, unstable character of meaning” means that no individual person or groups of neither people nor institutions have monopoly over meaning (Hall 1997a: 274). What is uttered in one place will often have a different meaning at another; representation is hence predicated on ‘unstable rhetoric.’ The complexities of the social, humanist, spiritual, as well as political dimensions of *seriti*, discussed in the first chapter, question the basis of representation – how do we understand the conventions of representations of dignity since meaning cannot be fixed?

Sekoto and his Influences

Several authors and art critics claim that Sekoto interprets the spaces and people that he interacted with along the journeys of his life in a dignified manner.¹⁹ I think that Sekoto's paintings are often an amalgam of appropriated ideas, and themes of his times about the experiences of black people within their designated residences as well as tropes of representation. His subject matter includes daily life experiences such as people reading books, friends interacting or men riding on bicycles. The artist's birth at a German Lutheran Christian Mission Station in Botshabelo, Mpumalanga province, coincided with the passing of the *Natives Land Act*. It should be borne in mind that Sekoto was born when the independence of black people was being eroded lawfully. The Nigerian-born writer and curator, Okwui Enwezor points

¹⁹ It should be borne in mind that the experiences and work of artists such as Sekoto are predominantly written by white authors.

to how “the act changed the terms of ownership of land, shifting it permanently, and irrevocably into the hands of white ownership” (2009: 115). Different sections of the white population united under their European ancestry to form the Union of South Africa, just over two years before Sekoto was born. In the process, black people were viewed as a problem, which needed to be solved.²⁰ The act, which was implemented after several commissions throughout the years since 1652, formed an instrumental part in exploiting, alienating, and degrading black people (Reid 2013: 119). Until the age of seven, Sekoto was taught by his father Andreas, a trained schoolteacher who later became the preacher at a new mission-station in Wonderhoek, also in the vicinity of Botshabelo (Lindop 1995: 12). Historically, Sekoto was born when black people’s lives were characterised by struggles and confrontations with an encroaching, expanding white supremacist power structure. Mission stations formed part of structures that were the primary institutions where black people received Western education from the 1800s until the 1950s when the Department of Bantu Education was introduced (Rankin & Miles 1992: 34). Most of the mission-educated black people accepted the new system and trends of development offered by the settler colonials, which encouraged English and Scottish value systems in terms of conduct and articulation (Araeen 2014: 8). Tim Couzens claims that the aim of this new education system was to invent “a new class” of black people (1985: 353). Generally these ‘new class’ of black people such as Sefako Makgatho (1861-1951), Isaac Tabata (1909-1990) and Robert Sobukwe (1924-1978) were all graduates of missionary education who showed an aptitude to adapt to the changing landscape.²¹ Sekoto’s education rendered him part of this ‘new class’ of black people whose education was considered a stepping-stone towards progress and equality with Europeans (Ansell 2004: 9; Couzens 1985: 272).

At seventeen, he went to Diocesan Training College (Setotolwane College), an Anglican mission in Grace Dieu near Polokwane, to train as a teacher; his education included “rudimentary art instruction” (Lindop 1995: 12). In *The Role of the Missions in Art Education in South Africa*,²² the art historians Elizabeth Rankin and Elza Miles call the college “an enclave of Christian colonial culture” under the care of people who were “well-equipped in the arts” (1992: 35). Sekoto’s training at the college seems to have added to his vocabulary, the basics of drawing, composition, and design, which became useful in his later career as artist. After qualifying as teacher, he taught for four years at Khaiso Secondary School in Polokwane before he quit in 1938 to pursue art fulltime (Lindop 1995: 12). In 1939 he went to live with his cousins in Sophiatown and was introduced to what the art historian John Pepper calls “progressive white artists and gallerists in Johannesburg,” such as Alexis Preller (1911-1975), Judith Gluckman (1915-1961), the New Group and Gainsborough Galleries (2009: 3). Art historian Lizze van Robbroek states that Sekoto is among “the first generation of modern black artists in South Africa” that responded to social conditions in his work (2011: 115). During this time, the South African landscape was already divided into blacks-only areas such as Eastwood in Tshwane

²⁰ Since the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck there were always plans and commissions afoot to distribute the South African land equitably (in favour of Europeans) until the *Natives Land Act* was introduced in 1913 to settle this ‘problem’. Sol Plaatje writes in response to the act in the book *Native Life in South Africa*, that black people were to be “tolerated only as servants” (1982: 416).

²¹ Makgatho was a former schoolteacher, entrepreneur, and founder of one of the forerunners to the African National Congress (ANC), the Transvaal Native Congress and also presided over the ANC as its president from 1917 to 1924. Tabata was the founder and theoretician of the Non-European Unity Movement, later renamed Unity Movement of South Africa, who wrote extensively about the history of black people’s revolts against white domination. Sobukwe is the mastermind behind the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania. These individuals went beyond the limiting popular narratives of how black people were supposed to live under colonialism and apartheid.

²² The original version of the article was presented as a paper at the Conference of the South African Association of Art Historians at the University of Natal, Durban, in 1989 (Rankin et al. 1992: 47).

(formerly Pretoria), Payneville in Ekurhuleni (formerly East Rand) and Evaton in Sedibeng (formerly Vaal Triangle) amongst others. Sekoto's art needs to be understood within this racist context of perceived and enforced inferiority of black people, and "Western education, which devalued indigenous African culture in favour of European ideas and ways of life" (Singletary 2002: 219).²³

Sekoto spent 1942 to 1944 at District Six in Cape Town, the well-known mixed-race township that was later demolished as part of apartheid's process of social engineering. Sekoto participated in the artistic life of Cape Town, painting and exhibiting with local artists. Among the painters and writers that he met were George Pemba (1912- 2001) and Peter Clarke (1929 – 2014) (Rankin 2011: 105). Pepper contends that during this time, Sekoto's paintings of the people that he encountered at District Six were interpreted "in a positive light, with an angle of vision that was usually at eye level or from the back, but never evasive" (2009: 4). According to Pepper (2009), Sekoto's depictions acknowledged his subject's humanity as he did not look at them from a vantage point above but represented them as fellow humans. The author further claims that Sekoto represented his figures tactfully from behind; a fact that for Mary Corrigan (2006) shows that Sekoto denied the uniqueness of his subjects. She further remarks, "[n]either the compositions nor the manner in which the men are rendered captures any particular mood" as "Sekoto seems to be an uninvolved observer of the world around him" (Ibid.). Most of the artist's paintings were done from sketches that he did on the spot as he captured people who were busy with their daily tasks. He would make quick line drawings of people who were not aware that they were being sketched and later painted canvases that gave "distinct personalities to his subjects, most of whose faces were unseen, character emerging simply by the curve of a woman's stationary hip, the attitude of her leg, the angle of her head" (Matshikiza 2004: 39). Sekoto's education, regarded as privileged during the time, did not set him apart from other black people as the laws of the country forced him to live amongst his own.

Painting in Eastwood

In 1940 his mother remarried Paulus Jiyane, a friend of her deceased husband who died in 1936 (Miles 1997: 81). The newly-weds, together with Jiyane's son, Sekoto's brother Bernard and his fiancé Mary Dikeledi whom he was about to wed, moved to 124 5th street Eastwood, a derelict blacks-only slum outside the city of Pretoria (Spiro 1989: 35 – 38). The township was later bulldozed and people forcefully relocated to newly created townships such as Mamelodi, Atteridgeville and Ga-Rankuwa outside the city. Sekoto left Cape Town in 1945 to join his family at Eastwood, in anticipation of Bernard's wedding (Ibid.). Lesley Spiro asserts that at Eastwood Sekoto attempted to capture the atmosphere and psychology of the people he portrayed in his paintings (Ibid.). This 'unique feeling' is discernable in *The Proud Father* (fig. 4), a painting that depicts the artist's brother Bernard holding his daughter Manakedi in his gentle, protective embrace (Lindop 1988: 26).

Powell conjectures that Sekoto's depiction of his sibling engages with the sitter's psychology, characterising him as an intelligent, and thinking person (1995: 264). Bernard is shown sitting

²³ Singletary wrote about artist Bruce Onobrekpeya in *Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Art* and how Britain colonised Nigeria at the beginning of the 20th century.

on a chair, casually with one leg on top of the other, while enveloping Manakedi with his right arm. The daughter appears content within the embrace of her father. Both figures' wide shiny eyes look straight at the viewer. The neatly dressed male figure in maroon jacket, blue trousers, and black leather shoes divides the picture surface into two formal triangles. There is a white porcelain teacup and what looks like a book on top of the blue-grey table to the right side of the two figures. A calendar on the wall completes what may be interpreted to be Sekoto's spirited portrayal of his brother and her girl child.



Figure 4 SEKOTO, Gerard, *The Proud Father* (1946-7) oil on canvas/board 59 x 44 cm Private Collection

For me, the difference between the two figures, one of childhood inexperience and the other of an adult who is aware of the dynamics of his surroundings, lends the canvas an unstable air of longing. The painting juxtaposes a limited palette of naturalistic earths, blues, and crimsons with Bernard's twinkling eyes. The details of the different elements of the painting, such as Bernard's navy trousers, shoes, and the table are rendered with easy, careful tonal modelling to give the painting an air of light. Although the work was done in the late 1940s, I easily relate to its tonal variations of vibrant and unusual colour usage, which veers towards abstraction. The painting's emotional atmosphere, revealed by the figures' contrasting wide bright eyes, gives it an aura of respectability – I would consider this to be Sekoto's *trans-coding* of the scene. The contextual background of the artist as part of the so-called 'new class' and knowledge of the dynamics of his environment should help to guide our understanding of the canvas. The work portrays a neatly dressed black man in a stylish, rich velvet jacket with combed hair and immaculate moustache, his daughter proudly on the lap. Sekoto painted this intimate moment with great sensitivity, interpreting it without altering the setting. The strong rich colours that

define the representation of the subjects hold the artist's understanding of his surroundings in a complex and dignified manner.

Manganyi claims that goodwill existed among the people of Eastwood (2004: 42-43). He insists that while most residents knew each other, white supremacist violence "overshadowed any differences that existed amongst" them (Ibid.). Considering how the 'new class' of black people of the artist's time understood their value, *The Proud Father* can easily be read as Sekoto's resistance to ways of representing black people as 'inferior.' The painting appropriates forms that were part and parcel of the contemporary 1940s South Africa to represent subjects whose humanity was in question. The café type chair and table, smart European attire, book and cup all allude to acts of embracing the concept of the 'new African.'

Peffer argues that Sekoto's subject matter included "private lives of the literate, black Christian petite bourgeoisie," a clear influence from his missionary upbringing (2009: 4). I agree with the art historian's reading that the artist's worldview was informed by exposure to the missionary way of life through education and going to church, which influenced his choice of subject matter later as artist. Peffer's (2009) assertions of missionary influence on Sekoto's subject matter may be seen in the meditative and quite painting, *Young Man Reading* (fig. 5).

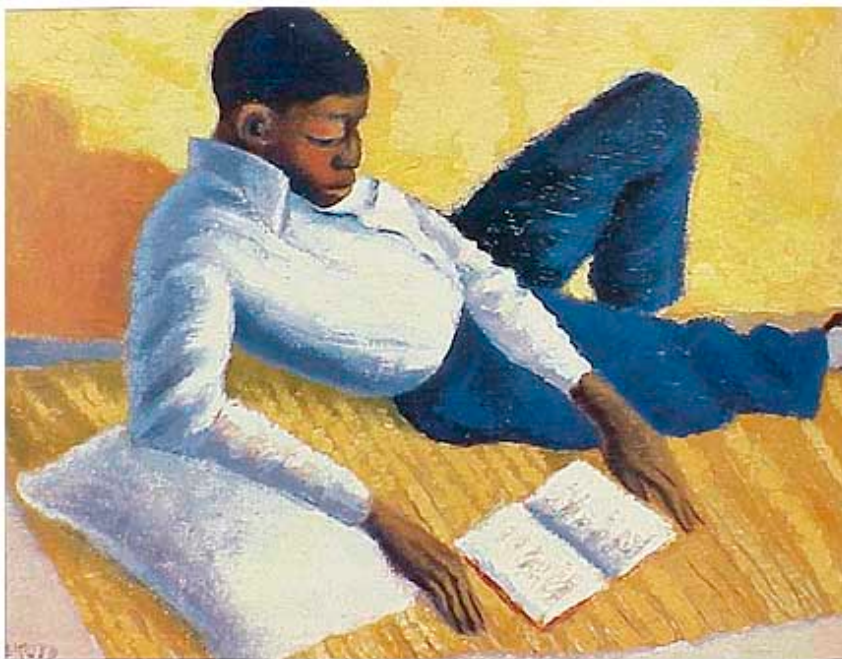


Figure 5 SEKOTO, Gerard, *Young Man Reading* (1946-7) oil on canvas 24,5 x 35 cm Private Collection

The painting portrays a reclining male figure leaning with one hand on a grass mat. The resting young man is dressed in snowy shirt and navy slacks, his posture emphasises the horizontal orientation of the painting. His hands lay next to each other, diagonal to the body, while framing the book in front of him. The dynamic composition consists of triangles, squares and rectangles, a result of the figure's pose: right elbow on the tilted pillow, bent left knee against the background, foot hidden behind the right stretched leg; the grass mat cuts diagonally across the bottom edges of the painting and behind the pillow. The work is characterised by the contrasting dark and light tones of yellow ochre, orange, white, and blue paint, which render the

space uncluttered and a mood of calmness. Here Sekoto adopts symbols, which are normally identified with both the European and African continents. The young man is dressed carefully in European garments of his time, shirt tucked in his trousers, enjoying a read while resting on the grass mat. Peffer claims that Sekoto's 'modern subject matter' is a testament against the perception that the new class of black individuals was either tribal country people or urban slum dwellers (2009: 6). It should be remembered that Sekoto and his generation, particularly the 'new class,' in accordance with the concept of *seriti*, affirmed themselves to be capable human beings who enjoyed equal status with Europeans.²⁴ The painting can be interpreted as the artist's embrace of the changing ways of life that included literature, Christianity and acknowledgement of the Western culture as part of a new identity. Similar to *The Proud Father*, *Young Man Reading* captures an intimate moment that involves what may be termed an everyday, ordinary past time of the 'new class.' Also, the portrait seems to have developed from a sketch that the artist did of the young man who appears lost in the words of the book.



Figure 6 SEKOTO, Gerard, *Bernard – the Artist's Brother* oil on board 50 x 39, 5 Private Collection

This 'theme' is explored further in *Bernard – the Artist's Brother* (fig. 6), which captures the artist's sibling sitting on a chair while reading the newspaper. The sitter's right hand is holding the upper part of the paper while his left balances it at the bottom. Sekoto used a palette knife to highlight and create a textured surface of masses of paint to shape tones of the figure's bleached shirt, which is contrasted to low-keyed brushstrokes of the faded newspaper. Elza Miles argues that this method of paint application started from his childhood when he modelled clay oxen, humans, and animals at Wonderhoek as an attempt to make his creations look 'more

²⁴ Sekoto later left South Africa on an exit permit to Paris with the hope of settling in a less oppressive and racially prejudiced environment.

aesthetically pleasing' (1997: 77). The painting is dominated by Sekoto's distinct use of blue, dark, and light tonal contrasts, seen on the figure's facial expression, clothes, hands, and the ground. The man's sense of *seriti* may be read from his posture and involvement in reading the paper, considered one of the symbols of education and class. The artist seems to have appropriated the act of reading to assert the civility of his black subject. Considering the period at which the work was painted, *Bernard – the Artist's Brother* appears a revolutionary affirmation against the perceived inferiority of black people. The canvas looks like a study from one of the many sketches that Sekoto made of the people around his surroundings in Eastwood.

Sekoto and his Contemporaries

Some of Sekoto's contemporaries included painters such as John Mohlankana (1903 – 1985), Moses Tladi (1906 – 1969), Ernest Mancoba (1910 – 2002), and George Pemba (1931-2001). Pemba's family lived in a brick house when the majority of black people lived in mud or zinc houses in Korsten, Port Elizabeth (Lee 2006: 4). Donovan Lee writes that his father Titus worked at Cuthberts shoe store and was also a preacher (Ibid.). Like most of his contemporaries Pemba trained as teacher at Lovedale Teacher Training College in Alice and taught at Wesleyan Mission School in King Williamstown where he resigned in 1938 to pursue art full time (Feinberg 1996: 20). Similar to Sekoto, Van Robbroeck adds that Pemba's background, which included training at mission schools and attending church, makes him part "of a small but influential African middle class" (2011: 115). The same logic applies to some of his contemporaries. Van Robbroeck maintains that although Pemba's education placed him within the bourgeoisie, his living among the urban black people exposed him to the poverty and squalor prevalent in the townships (Ibid.). This exposed Pemba and his contemporaries to the daily experiences of being black in a racist South Africa, forcing awareness that Couzens calls "a culture struggling in poverty and against poverty" (1985: xiii).²⁵ He studied watercolour for four months at Rhodes University in the Eastern Cape (Feinberg 1996: 23).

Powell describes how in his quest to dignify black people, Pemba painted a series of distinguished individuals such as politicians, writers and doctors, foregrounding their individuality and psyche (1995: 264). However, in canvases such as *At the Clinic* (fig. 7) Pemba captures the drama of life at a health centre for black people – one of several paintings that represent the theme of the clinic. The work shows a standing female nurse in sun-bleached white dress and nurse's cap, holding an injection needle in the right hand while her outstretched left hand holds the hand of a crying baby. The wailing baby in red is portrayed sitting on the lap of its mother whose facial expression appears disturbed as she looks into the distance. Next is a woman dressed in orange blouse and dark skirt, the left hand holding her head as she looks towards the child, perhaps in sympathy with the weeping youngster. The head of an older man whose face bears a strained expression with painted white beard appears amongst the two women. In the background, between nurse and the woman in orange is a

²⁵ Pemba lived most of his life in the township of Korsten in the Eastern Cape, with "no running water or sewerage removal, and suffered two outbreaks of bubonic plague in his life time (1918 and 1938)" (van Robbroeck 2011: 115).



Figure 7 PEMBA, George, *At the Clinic* (1979) oil on canvas 35 x 54 cm Private Collection

female figure, her head partly wrapped in a scarf. Her striking facial expression, with eyes closed, suggests enormous discomfort. Pemba's dynamic composition places the different figures in an uneven picture plane to suggest the constricted movement in the peopled space. The work renders a seemingly ordinary scene in the lives of black people who were (and are) often seen overcrowded waiting for depleted public health services. It shows Pemba's detailed scrutiny of expressions in the faces of the depicted people. Powell (1995) writes how Pemba's work explores the dignity that is bestowed on individuals who occupy distinguished positions in life such as in *At the Clinic*. A cursory look at the artist's oeuvre shows that he also recorded, with great intensity, the daily life experiences of ordinary black people amid segregation as seen in *In the Bus* (fig. 8).



Figure 8 PEMBA, George *In the Bus* (1974) oil on canvas/board 49,5 x 74 cm Private Collection

The painting shows a group of children, male and female adults crowded across the picture surface, inside a bus. The left hand side is dominated by six seated figures in contrast to a single male figure on the right. The dreariness of the seated figures is agitated by a standing female figure that is holding a child in the passageway. The painting is characterised by two triangular

shapes, each occupied by four figures on the right and two on the left. The source of the composition's liveliness stems from the individual figures, which are captivated in their actions, such as the old man who is depicted smoking his pipe, next to a youngster who appears lost in own thoughts. Behind them, in red shirt and navy headscarf, is the figure of a woman preoccupied with her basket of fruits. The standing woman with the baby seems surprised by the youngster with fruit in hand while the seated woman on the right appears calm and meditative. The contrasting and juxtaposition of the upper light tones with darker ultramarine blue on the bottom of the composition adds to the drama. Similar to *At the Clinic*, Pemba narrates the experiences of a group of black people who are involved in the acts and theatrics that form part of their lives - expressive brush marks mark the painting's content. Here a sense of *seriti* and agency may be discerned from the people's individuality, seen from their varied facial expressions. I personally identify with the portrayed figures, the intimacy, and intensity of their shared experiences.²⁶

Mdanda implies that painters such as Pemba and Sekoto, gave their human subjects an appearance of pride and self-respect, in stark contrast to colonial artists like Thomas Baines' (1820-1875) "surveying of landscape as conquered territory or recording strange and exotic anthropological specimens" (2004a: 191). This reading contrasts with the writings of Julliett Leeb-du Toit (2011) and Esmé Berman (1993) who critique Sekoto and Pemba's choice of subject matter. The authors claim that the two painters avoided depicting the poverty and hardships that was a result of racial discrimination. Leeb-du Toit insists that the two painters' canvases are "picturesque, a palliative for white patronage base" and avoided to depict the degrading poverty of their subjects (2011: 193). Berman describes Sekoto's vivid paintings as those "that seldom emphasise the hardships of his subjects" (1993: 113). The authors intimate that both Sekoto and Pemba avoided head-on confrontation with issues that bedevilled them as black people. They also claim that by choosing to focus on the positive experiences of their subjects, the two artists wanted to appease their white patrons. Pemba's painting, *Terror* (1991) easily challenges such reading. In my view, the painters depicted lives of black people, as they understood it and claimed it with all its nuances. Generally the artworks can be read as self-portraits of the painters' experiences, which the art historians can only interpret from a distance. Considering that both Sekoto and Pemba left their professions as schoolteachers²⁷ to pursue art full time, I argue that their paintings are deeply invested with feelings of empathy and the dignity towards their subject matter. Also, the painters' commitment to their art was an acknowledgement of personal, intellectual possibility to portray black people in a positive light, as fully-fledged and capable human beings. In the editorial of *Inkundla ya Bantu*²⁸ Sekoto is described as an artist who:

has consistently refused to see the African as a picturesque creature. To him, the acquisition of more skill has meant that he must paint with deeper feeling for and active sympathy with that African whose soul is daily being crushed and bruised in his own Africa (Saturday 10 September 1949).

²⁶ Pemba's paintings share some of the subject matter and intensity as Ernest Cole's (1940 - 1990) documentary photographs and Santu Mofokeng's (b. 1956) images, capturing the everyday experiences and spiritual richness of the life of black people albeit oppressed.

²⁷ Teaching was a profession with a "fairly high social status" during this period (Couzens, 1985: 13).

²⁸ The editor, Jordan Nkush Ngubane (1917-1985) congratulated the apartheid government for including the work of Gerard Sekoto in an exhibition of art from across Africa that was exhibited in America in 1949.

The two painters understood their lives within the context of a racist South Africa that regarded black people as inferior beings. Their portrayals are a close reflection of how they understood themselves as people with a full sense of who they were. Their canvases are not a fantasy or distortion of the lives of black people, but an interpretation of how they experienced life in the townships.

Nhlanhla Xaba and the Post-Apartheid Dilemma

During the early 1970s Biko predicted that if the post-apartheid state will have “a mere change of face of those in governing positions,” exclusive of rearranging the country’s economic strategy, black people would continue to be disadvantaged (2004: 169). Biko’s prediction appears to have become a reality in the post-apartheid South Africa where wealth, and land, is concentrated (generally) in the hands of white people and a few black people.²⁹ Currently, sights of heavy-handed policing are often witnessed around the country to quell service delivery protests where mostly black people are the instigators and participants.³⁰

The painter, sculptor and printmaker Nhlanhla Xaba (1960-2003), was born the same year in which the apartheid police gunned down 69 people who were part of the anti-pass marches³¹ at Sharpeville, a township outside Vereeniging. The South African author and 1991 Nobel Prize recipient Nadine Gordimer describes Xaba’s birthplace of Payneville as “a black ghetto segregated outside the gold mining town” north of Springs (2006: 24). Businessman Muzi Khuzwayo remembers that the people of Payneville used public toilets because the houses did not have toilets. He writes that some people “had to walk a quarter of a kilometer to find the nearest toilet” (2007: 26). Since 1951, the residents of Payneville were removed to the newly established township of Kwa Thema, 4 kilometers outside the town of Springs or to rural areas (Ibid: 23).³²

At Kwa Thema, an accidental meeting with the artist and textile designer Madi Phala (1955-2007) provided Xaba with his initial access to the world of visual arts (Arnold 1998: 3). He “lived and worked” with Phala as artist between 1976 and 1979 (Ibid.). Xaba’s quest to acquire art education took him to Rorke’s Drift in KwaZulu Natal and Funda Centre in Soweto, where he met the playwright, writer, and poet, Matsemela Manaka (1956 - 1998) (Mdanda 2004b: 414). Manaka awakened Xaba’s political awareness, which later fashioned his occupation as artist and teacher (Ibid.). This consciousness is seen through his involvement with various community art initiatives such as Khula Udweba, Alexandra Art Centre, Open Window, Othandweni Orphanage,

²⁹ This is based on my own experience and observations that contrast sharply with the official 2011 statistics’ claim that “black South Africans dominated property ownership by value, at 57%” (mg.co.za).

³⁰ The most violent incident occurred on August 16, 2012 in Marikana where 34 miners were shot and killed by the South African Police Services in reaction to the protest against their exploitative payment. It was later revealed that some of the senior leaders of the ruling party, including Cyril Ramaphosa, are shareholders in the Lonmin, a company that owns the mine.

³¹ These peaceful demonstrations, spearheaded by the *Pan-Africanist Congress of Azania* were spread throughout selected areas around the country as part of the mass mobilisation processes against the South African minority white rule.

³² During apartheid’s forced removals, those black people who did not own property in the urban areas were generally shipped to the rural areas while most of those who owned property were housed in government-owned houses in the townships.

Independent Visual Arts and Craft Academy (VACA), Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA) and Funda Community College, among others.

Mdanda asserts that Xaba's grandfather who was a builder taught him persistence and precision - qualities, which became apparent in his complex compositions of build up layers of paint (Ibid.). His subject matter revolves around post-apartheid experiences of black people in both rural and urban settings. The artist states that his paintings and prints often reveal "a great deal of overworking" (Ibid.). His canvases show off loose and spontaneous brush marks that reflect the process and complexities of life, as can be seen on the canvas *At Home I* (fig. 9) (Arnold 1998: 4).



Figure 9 XABA, Nhlanhla, *At Home I* oil and acrylic on Canvas 86.5 x 122 cm Private Collection

The painting captures the intimacy of a typical township interior, particularly the informal zinc structures and other dwellings made of discarded found materials. The horizontal composition is divided into two large squares that divide the painting into equal halves. Crumpled curtains, which flow from the roof against what seems like a precast concrete wall on the right and a brazier in the middle, break the uniformity of the composition. The naked figure of a child holding a bath towel is seen standing on a pedestal on the left side of the painting. Xaba's palette and thick paint application with loose brush strokes lend the canvas a sense of toil by people who inhabit the space. The texture that is created by the contrasting of palette knife and brush strokes draws attention to the surface of the painting. *At Home I* shows an ambiguous relationship between the exterior and interior, perhaps because the dwelling is made up of recycled material, the primary use of which might have changed to suit its new purpose as a residential area. The painting shows Xaba's complex compositional methods of breaking up the logic of the work by bringing discordant elements together. The image reveals his sensitivity to poor people's awareness about hygienic practices, a tribute to the survival of the human spirit amid harsh living conditions. The work might be read as commentary on sanitation and the need for warmth (suggested by the red-hot brazier, which also takes on a menacing tone). Xaba appropriates symbols of everyday objects such as the brazier, concrete walling, and curtains to construct the representation of experiences of people living in poor conditions, a matter that

places urgency on their sense of *seriti* as a daily task. The painting is composed of disparate objects, which are generally used for purposes other than as building material for abodes. Considering the period at which it was painted, the work seems to be pointing to questions about the meaning of freedom. Xaba's huge and thickly layered painting contrasts to Sekoto's small colourful canvases. Although the scene is not easily grasped, *At Home I* presents the sense and space of a domestic interior that I easily identify with.

In the triptych, *Past, Present and Future* (fig. 10), Xaba raises questions of structural racism amid the dichotomy of rural and urban black South Africa. The artist offers his take on the subject of displacement, migration and urbanisation of black people in Southern Africa, which calls up the lyrics of Hugh Masekela's 1974 hit song *Stimela* (Coal Train):

There is a train that comes from Namibia and Malawi ... From all the hinterland of Southern and Central Africa. This train carries young and old, African men who are conscripted to come and work on contract in the golden mines of Johannesburg and its surrounding metropolis.



Figure 10 XABA, Nhlanhla, *Past, Present and Future* oil on Canvas 117 x 229 cm (Triptych) Private Collection

Many of the black people who were enlisted to work in the gold mines of Johannesburg migrated from South Africa's rural areas and neighbouring countries. Some ended up staying permanently around the city's boundaries and townships, which were established specifically for black people as pools of cheap labour for the benefit of the country's economy. Xaba counts Masekela among the musicians whose "social and political message" had direct influence on his often-complex compositions (Arnold 1998: 7). In the painting Xaba seems to be suggesting that a balanced and enriched life for black people is a result of their sense of identity, heritage and tradition, supposedly embraced in rural Africa. The artist contrasts this observation with the confusion that is often found in the margins of South African urban centres. The first panel represents what may be called a stereotypical representation of Africa with its mysterious past, and symbolised by what looks like masks. The famous *Domba*, a bass drum-accompanied initiation dance that is normally performed by Venda maidens dominates the middle piece. A monotonous township scene with "its realities of squatter settlements" characterised by dull colours and silhouetted figures outlines the left panel (Arnold 1998: 10). The painting represents a thick atmosphere - reminiscent of multiple families occupying the same space amid the lack of municipal services such as refuse removals. The right and middle panes look like the artist's suggestive return to ancient Africa with its distinct ways of life. Xaba seems to

insinuate that rural areas are spaces where a connection to the past can still be found. He compares the disparities between this 'Africa', depicted in vivid browns, reds, yellows, and greens, with the wretchedness of life in the urban peripheries, characterised by thick smog and a dull atmosphere. The lapse of time between the two extremes of life is mediated by the presence of rural life, as custodian of inherited African customs. The intimation may be that people's sense of *seriti* is often the result of their ability to trace their roots. This brings to mind Khuzwayo's narrative about how apartheid made life difficult for the people of Payneville where both young and old were forced to share limited space (2007: 26). Xaba constricts time to comment about post-apartheid and the influence of racism on the urban landscape. In contrast to Sekoto's interpretations of particular areas, *Past, Present and Future* seems to suggest ways of going beyond the poverty and squalor that characterise squatter camps by focusing our attention to identity and heritage as antidote to dislocation.



Figure 11 XABA, Nhlanhla, *Culture Clashes* (1994) oil and acrylic on board, 113 x 78 cm Private collection

The theme of the negative influences of racism on the urban poor is taken a step further in *Culture Clashes* (fig. 11). The painting shows figures that are moving towards different directions in the murky foreground of what looks like a township environment. The gloomy forefront is outlined by Xaba's characteristic free brush strokes. A colourful floating mask on the upper right hand corner seems to keep watch over the people below while the picture frame on the left cuts the balcony of what looks like a shop. The painting's execution involves the skilful construction of patches of light and dark tones to unify discordant and incoherent scenes into a single surface of the canvas. Juxtaposed primary colours lend the painting an uneasy tension, which may suggest the uncertainty of life in the margins of urbanity. The painting sets up

dramatic movement of the seemingly vague figures, dynamic brushstrokes, and the stationary structures in the background. Here a sense of *seriti* may be suggested by the figures' agency as seen through their purposeful movements to different directions. The work combines multiple planes to compress time and space that may imply life experiences which contrasting human dimensions inform. *Culture Clashes* appropriates ordinary human forms, symbols such as masks and abodes, to comment on the inextricable relationship between people, time, and space. These forms seem Xaba's immediate experiences of life in the margins of the urban centres of South Africa. The work was executed around the time when South Africa's democracy was in its infancy, yet it is still relevant today. The clash of cultures characterise lives of most black people who come from other parts of the country and immigrants from across the continent who make the squatter settlements in the urban margins their home. The composition raises questions about the prospect of migration and the future dichotomy of rural/urban space.

The 43-year-old painter's life was cut short tragically when fire burnt down the communal printmaking studio, Artist Proof Studio in Newtown.³³ Although it is not clear what really happened, it is suspected that an electric fault caused the fire that denied South Africa and the world further development of Xaba's originality and vision. His thinking was steeped in the teachings of Black Consciousness and the concept of skills transfer to black youth (Mdanda 2004b: 414). Xaba was studying for a Fine Arts degree through the University of South Africa when he met his untimely death.

Zwelethu Mthethwa and Representations of *Seriti*

The Durban-born Zwelethu Mthethwa (b. 1960) received a Masters Fine Arts degree from Rochester Institute of Technology, New York in 1989. Against all odds, Mthethwa obtained a fine arts diploma from the University of Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Art in 1984 (Peffer 2009: 263). His initial contact with art came through the South African Race Relations' Abangani Open School from 1979 to 1980, under the tutelage of two former Rorke's Drift graduates, Charles Nkosi and Joe Ndhlovu (Dhlomo 1999: 66–69). The portfolio that he built at Abangani, together with his tutors' association with Jules Van der Vyfer, their former principal at Rorke's Drift who later became a printmaking lecturer at Michaelis, helped Mthethwa to gain admission to the university at Cape Town in 1981 (Ibid.). The artist is proficient in photography, drawing, and painting.

He stopped taking photographs when he returned to South Africa in 1989 because, he claims: "I didn't want to be a photojournalist. I wanted to be a fine arts photographer, but I wasn't making enough money to keep my photography alive. So I stopped taking photographs" (Bester 1998: 82). As a result, Mthethwa focused on vivid pastels, which are said to have shown signs of breaking away from the formulaic art identified with urban black expression to "individual creative style" (Koloane & Mdanda 2005: 38).³⁴ *Sacrificial Goat* (1993) (fig. 12) is among his earlier works. The pastel drawing employs bold, saturated colours, which show the artist's understanding of his chosen medium. He claims that this descriptive method of working is an influence from his mother's practice of story telling (Dhlomo 1999: 70).

³³ Artist Proof Studio serves as training ground for (mostly) young artists in the city centre of Johannesburg, while professional artists are also provided space to produce work.

³⁴ These pastels could be seen to be based on another kind of convention which creates its own formula.



Figure 12 MTHETHWA, Zwelethu, *Sacrificial Goat* (1993) Chalk pastel on cotton paper 71 x 101 cm Private collection

The drawing depicts half-length portrait of a man dressed in mint green jacket, offset against a bright blue jersey, and carrying a live goat at the back of his shoulders. A female figure enters the picture frame to the right of the man who occupies the larger part of the drawing. His face is carefully rendered, with saturated black hair, beard, and rosy-tinted lips. The rose tones are picked up in the background shack dwellings, the even peach colour of the ground, and the woman's red head wrap, which reveals the front of her black hair. Enwezor argues that the work is among Mthethwa's "politically ambiguous ... [and] romantic depiction of black social existence" (2009: 101). The author's sense of political vagueness and idealism may stem from Mthethwa's fascination with the setting of his colourful characters, which seem devoid of the familiar signs usually associated with the black South African experience of desolation. Enwezor claims that the artist's bright 'chocolaty' pastels, often "common to postcards of exotic places," approximate to what he calls 'idealistic representation' of the black experience (Ibid.). The work seems to rely on representations that are often linked with ethnic groupings in South Africa, which can be associated with the female figure that resembles a Zulu maiden. For me, Mthethwa appears to be suggesting that culture, through the depiction of the bearded man with a live goat on his shoulders, is intertwined with *seriti*. A goat is often related to rituals that form part of (most) black people's culture. The artist chose to combine symbols of culture and the divisive ethnic leanings to underpin his garish pastel with heroic proportions. The work brings to the fore questions around identity, what makes us human, and the right to occupy space of one's choice. Ethnicity became a major determining factor during the 1990s when South Africa was attempting to rid itself of its apartheid past to birth a democratic dispensation, enthusiastically named 'the rainbow nation.'

In 1996 Mthethwa started to earn enough money from his pastels to be able to finance the colour photography project *Interiors* (1995 – 2005), which he is well known for (Bester 1998: 82). He states "colour is a dignifying vehicle" that re-establishes the existence of its subjects "as people with proper names and proper places" (Enwezor 2009: 102). Alex Dodd (2010) asserts that the artist's photographs show how, even under challenging economic conditions, people's ability to choose remains intact, demonstrated by the poses of his subjects, their style of dress and how they decorate their dwellings. Mthethwa is outspoken about the respectability and dignity of people from squatter camps and his photographs, particularly the series titled *Interiors* (1995 – 2005), is seen to record their living spaces in ways that restore pride and dignity (Dhlomo 1999: 75-79).

Enwezor discusses Mthethwa's use of colour to represent his subjects in the present, even if their spaces are characterised by destitution, in juxtaposition to the black and white photography's tendency to suspend its subjects in 'antiquity' (2009: 104). As discussed in the preceding chapter, colonialism and apartheid's process of land grabs conferred to black people a subhuman status of socially 'dead entities.' I concur with Enwezor that Mthethwa's use of

colour in his photographs is emancipatory, considering his experiences of life under apartheid South Africa (Ibid: 104-105). The author qualifies his interpretation by reminding us of how apartheid laws forbade black people to reside in the city and how Mthethwa needed to get permission from the Minister of Education to enable him to study art at the University of Cape Town (Ibid.). Mthethwa's use of photography to depict poor black people from squatter camps compliments his stated aim of according them dignity. Although the scenes are arranged prior to the photographing, it is difficult to ignore the mocking symbols of poverty that fills the images that show modest interiors. I chose Mthethwa's photographs from his *Interiors (1995 - 2005)* series as the beginning of my own research process because of his primary reasons for taking them.

Interiors (1995 - 2005) is a series of large scale and colourful photographs of portraits of black people within their wobbly abodes in squatter camps such as Crossroads in Cape Town. The dwellings are made of found material like plastic, timber, paper and metallic objects, with most of the inside walls decorated with newspapers, posters from magazines, advertising billboards as well as Masonite boards; the floors are polished or covered with linoleum 'carpets.' Generally, the homes are characterised by insufficiency: shiny aluminium pots, clothes on hangers lining the wall and beds standing on bricks to create storage underneath, yet the "dwellings are ... sanctuaries from the difficult life of labour the occupants live" (Enwezor 2009: 115). Mthethwa depicts the homeowners' agency, seen in the way they decorate and give their space individual touch.



Figure 13 MTHETHWA, Zwelethu, *Untitled*, from the series *Interiors (1995-2005)* Chromogenic print mounted on plexiglass, Private collection

For example in the photograph *Untitled* (fig. 13) above, the reclining female figure is dressed in black, hat and jersey with yellow stripes, denims and barefoot. The figure occupies the bottom part of the image, with her feet next to the edge of the picture frame. The background is the wall of the interior and consists of painted sky blue cardboards. The uniformity of the wall is interrupted by a piece of white curtain that hangs above the figure's head on the right corner, a bunch of clothing, which includes a leather jacket. An electric cable on the roof complements a laptop charger on the bed.

Similar to other photographs from this series, the female figure is mindful that she is being photographed and looks straight at the camera. Comparable to theatre where actors stage their

performances with props and stage settings, an appropriation of negative connotations could be read from the room which is arranged prior the shooting process (Dhlomo 1999: 75-76). Mthethwa claims that this way of presenting the photographs allow the people an opportunity to collaborate in the course of their depiction (Ibid.). The photograph is characterised by the calmness of most of what appears within the picture frame and the seriousness of the subject. The woman's direct gaze at the viewer is challenging, and affects how the space, her body, and *seriti* are perceived.

Another photograph from the series, *Untitled* (fig. 14) shows two bare-footed male youngsters who also look straight at the viewer. The older one is sitting on a wooden stool while his hands rest on the knees. The younger stands with his left hand resting on the right shoulder of the seated teen.



Figure 14 MTHETHWA, Zwelethu, *Untitled* from the series *Interiors* (1995-2005) Chromogenic print mounted on plexiglas Private collection

The wallpaper behind them is made up of magazine covers of publications such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Sarie*. On the left various aluminium pots and a blue cooking gas cylinder rest on the table that is covered in basic pink plastic wrapper, partly to conceal the storage below. On the left towards the edge of the picture frame, four aluminium pots are neatly assembled on a stand welded for the purpose while the floor is covered with patterned linoleum. The light that emanates from the right of the composition casts shadows that divide the carpet into several tonal values. The plastic that covers the table casts dark shadows towards the bottom corner on the left, which is cut by the triangular shape of a cupboard at the edge of the photograph. Responding to Isolde Brielmaier's enquiry about the importance of not labelling the images of his series "*Untitled*," Mthethwa claims:

Giving the first name and last name of the person can also be somewhat misleading, particularly in South Africa, as some people change their names because of perceived social and political pressures. In many cultures in Africa, when it comes to identifying a person, one does not look at the person themselves but rather how they fit into their larger community structure. Even in an oral storytelling situation, the basic narrative is

told by the narrator but the story is embellished by the listeners - the larger collective. By calling my works, "untitled," I was trying to offer the basic narrative and then allow the viewer to embellish the story with their own experiences and place the people who they are looking at within an environment which they can relate to (2009: 94).

Mthethwa asks the spectator to consciously *trans-code* the images when he leaves gaps, avoiding titles for his photographs so that the subject is not fixed. Enwezor points to his assumption that it was up to him, "as a sort of white knight," to give back dignity to poor black people (2009: 102-103). Art historian Annie Coombes states that Mthethwa's series may be misinterpreted as making poverty look appealing (2003: 190). The author acknowledges that the artist's use of intense colours and "the compositional focus on the individuals in their own space allows an element of agency" (Ibid.). Yet, Mthethwa's vivid images of interior dwellings of people on the outskirts of Cape Town are marked by their extreme poverty, which is exposed by what Enwezor interprets as the "stiff, uncomfortable, nervous" look of his subjects and their sparsely furnished dwellings (2009: 107). In my view, the photographs' setting portrays a moody, but also gentle, and peaceful atmosphere that is marked by physical signs of material aspiration and carefully decorated interiors. The photographer seems to be consciously presenting images that most of us choose to ignore in daily life. These staged colourful prints might be Mthethwa's alternate response to what Leeb-du Toit (2011) and Berman (1993) accuse Sekoto and Pemba of. The images are generally characterised by intense colour, and calmness, which the photographer may be using as a ploy to minimise the harshness of the visible signs of poverty. His deliberate assertion that colour photography might restore the *seriti* of poor black people from "the status of news items: victims rather than persons, specimens instead of individuals," is important (Enwezor 2009: 104).

The chapter attempted to discuss how the three artists used painting and photography to investigate questions and concerns around the concept of *seriti*. I revisited *trans-coding* as the lens through which selected artworks were analysed: the painterly language and content of Sekoto, Pemba, and Xaba was looked at in the context of their lives and artistic careers, and the conventions and representational codes they employed.

I attempted to show how Sekoto's interpretations of space and people were part of the ideas and themes of his times, especially experiences of black people within their designated residential areas. Sekoto and his contemporaries are the 'products' of the oft-racist mission stations, which made them to believe that their lives will be free of racial segregation once they assimilated. His subject matter includes intimate moments of black people dressed in European clothes and seemingly comfortable with their tasks at hand. Most of his works were a result of his multiple sketches of people around where he stayed. The work of his contemporary Pemba captures expressions of people he encountered. Although the artists were born before racial segregation was entrenched lawfully, their work is a reminder that the malady of racial segregation preceded apartheid. I identify with their work, which portrays experiences of being black in South Africa. The artists' representations reflect juxtapositions of black people within the landscape that promoted racial segregation and with how the people, particularly the 'new class' perceived themselves.

In 1960 it was illegal for a black person to go anywhere without the hated identity document known as 'dompas.' Born in the year of the Sharpeville massacre, Xaba produced paintings, and

prints, that are commentaries of life of black people on the margins of urban centres as well as rural settings. His work generally condenses space and time to raise questions about freedom, the complexities, and the challenges of *seriti* within the democratic dispensation.

Although a good painter, Mthethwa chose to work with colour photography to assert what he calls poor black people's sense of dignity, particularly his series titled *Interiors (1995 – 2005)*. These photographs capture people within their makeshift living spaces in townships and squatter camps, who look boldly at the camera. His photographs are characterised by calmness and the seriousness of the subject. Mthethwa's noble goal of 'dignifying poor black people' through colour photography may be compromised by recent allegations that he assaulted a young black woman, Nokuphila Kumalo, to death.³⁵ The accusations lend weight to those critics who question the artist's patriarchal and heroic assumption to 'give back' dignity to poor, black people in colour photographs. The charges gravely question Mthethwa's honesty, integrity, and dignity as a person. Still, his work can be seen to portray the *seriti* of those photographed, their sense of self-respect and agency that is revealed by his pointed depiction of the individuals and their homes.

³⁵ Sean O'Toole's Zwelethu Mthethwa: Scandal in Bohemia - Mail & Guardian, Aug 23, 2013.

Chapter 3

Interpretations of Sofaya in Paint



Figure 15 This watercolour sketch of Sofaya shows the rental apartments of Friendshiptown in the background. 2014

The chapter addresses the practical component by articulating the research process, my intentions, and method. It aims to critically examine and explicate the body of paintings that were made in the process, in relation to the daily life experiences in Sofaya and the notion of dignity. The paintings are inspired by what Njabulo Ndebele considers in his essay, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, an “ordinary problem” that “constitutes the active social consciousness of most people” (2006: 49). Sofaya, the place, everyday challenges and its residents, provide the content of the paintings, as much as my own role as artist. The chapter seeks to investigate how the works of Sekoto and Xaba have impacted on my painterly language and perception, and how I see myself in relation to these artists and representations of *seriti* - an attempt to conceive of Biko’s agenda and commitment to a task of humanising South Africa.

My intention in working on the paintings has been to consciously go beyond obvious representations of poor living conditions and squalor, defined by lack of sanitation, housing, water supply, electricity, access to education, health care, unemployment, etc. Underlying this research is the question, how one embraces oneself within a context like Sofaya, as an individual and part of a community. The research draws on Dlamini’s (2009) anecdotal and reflective writing style, and his descriptions of the ‘distinct flavour’ of Kathlehong, of coping strategies during the times of apartheid oppression. The paintings in this way aim to engage with the specific experiences, moments, aspirations and encounters within the community of Sofaya and myself in current, post-apartheid South Africa. My culture and that of the people of Sofaya are intertwined through first-hand experience of being fixed and judged as poor, black persons who reside on the margins of major towns.

The subject matter in my paintings is defined by the relationship between human figures, space, and time, by colour and the materiality of paint. Ordinary objects such as paraffin stoves, washbasins, pots, wire, and the muddy soil are inextricably intertwined as “part of manifold

lived experience” of the people who live in the area (Sheringham 2007: 141). Generally, these inexpensive objects, which can be seen to be “in tension with history,” form part of the activities that for me are directly linked with people’s dignity (Ibid.). Ndebele speaks of “honest renderings of the subjective experience” in the rediscovery of the ordinary because:

even under the most oppressive of conditions, people are always trying and struggling to maintain a semblance of normal order. They will attempt to apply tradition and custom to manage their [day-to-day] family problems: they will resort to socially acquired behaviour patterns to eke out a means of subsistence. They apply systems of values that they know. Often those values will undergo changes under certain pressing conditions. The transformation of those values constitutes the essential drama in the lives of ordinary people (2006: 48-49).

Ndebele wrote the essay in the 1980s, urging artists and writers to look beyond popular images of struggles against apartheid. He asserts that ordinary people’s daily activities form part of their experiences, a source that should inspire countless works of artistic creation. According to Ndebele (2006), the imperative is upon artists to find expressions that transcend spectacular representations; this has informed my interest in how to work with figures, space, and objects of Sofaya.

As “the mundane itself might be defined differently according to each artist,” I used a camera and a notepad to record and collect images, sketches and reflections for over 12 months in Sofaya (Banes 1993: 116). There are people I went to primary school with whom I frequently visited, conversing about the dynamics of life and the concept of *seriti*. I would often photograph randomly throughout the space, without regard to the subject matter, neither composition nor any preconceived ideas about the visual data. I jotted down notes about my perceptions of the kinds of smell, sound, and colours that I experienced. The photographs and written notes that I compiled functioned as “intermediary between first-hand observation and work in the studio” (Coke 1972: 300). The material stimulated ideas in the process of painting, framed by my inquiry and interest in assertions of dignity. To develop the paintings, I had to reflect on and often change them, a process that involved discussions of the work with fellow artists and people I connected with in Sofaya.

Initially I made sketches to work out compositions for my paintings but soon realised that Sofaya is a result of the basic need to shelter and is characterised by uncertainty and impermanence. The informal zinc and wooden dwellings and built structures are assembled and fill up the area unsystematically. My painting process of composing directly on the canvas echoed these methods of constructing and this resulted in the use of intense colour ranges, uneven textural landscapes, layering of interiors, objects, and figure studies. I was also interested in the dullness of Sofaya, its boredom, and suffering. The research and paintings are approached from an interpretive paradigm, which “aims at interpreting ... or understanding human behaviour, rather than explaining or predicting it” (Babbie & Mouton 2001: 643). In other words I interpreted the concept of *seriti* in Sofaya through interactive, recording and reflective processes, in the form of photographs, sketches, and notes that mediated experiences, observations, and perspectives, which were further translated and consolidated on canvas.

The process of developing the paintings stands in direct dialogue with the concept and representation of *seriti* as discussed in the works of Biko (2004), Dlamini (2009), Sekoto, Xaba, and Mthethwa. Informed by how Dlamini frames *Native Nostalgia*, Sofaya is explored beyond “its economic function,” taking into account details of its environment (2009: 105). The paintings experiment with Sekoto and Xabas’ painterly language, especially their composition, expressive quality of thick, layered paint, and the use of colour which attempts to make “visible what is already there, not hidden but lying on the surface,” as attempted in *Swart Gevaar* (fig. 16) (Sheringham 2007: 147).



Figure 16 SENONG, Kolodi *Swart Gevaar* acrylic and oil on canvas (diptych), 1, 89 x 1, 37 cm

Even though the painting process was often spontaneous, the composition was motivated by the primary idea of *seriti*. The work is not a representation of Sofaya but a dialogue with it. It was inspired by how time and space are used within the depressed environment of Sofaya, by placing disparate objects, fence, table and figures in a singular picture plane, made up of two canvases. The left section is comprised of a washbasin, a wall that forms part of the dwelling structure, superimposed by wires and a pair of white half-length sneakers on a rooftop, or table, at the bottom of the canvas. The use of various tenors of browns and reds in conjunction with palette knife, create contrasting textures that dominate the canvas.

The work’s title alludes to the fear that is often accompanied by exposure to groups of young black people, especially men who, through lack of access to educational opportunities, experience poverty. Such assemblies of individuals are easily stereotyped as threatening, criminal, and suspect. I was interested in painting the black figures in *Swart Gevaar* as facing life within the space that is void of economic prospects to allow for decent living. My sketches and photographs functioned as starting blocks, which were altered along the creative journey as it



Figure 17 I took this photograph in Sofaya, it influenced *the painting Swart Gevaar*. 2014

was conditioned by the mood and language of the paint in the studio. I start most of the paintings with a reference, which I quickly loose as the painting develops. As soon the whole canvas is covered in paint, I start responding to what appears on the painting surface.

In the Ghetto: Exercise by Numbers (fig. 18) is influenced by the reality of my experiences of Sofaya. The left side of the image portrays three female figures that take part in an imagined exercise routine. A male figure in a dirty white shirt, grey trousers, and matching shoes, looks disoriented, with animal like eyes, as he stands in the foreground. This figure with ill-defined features stares searchingly towards the viewer as if to invite him/her to his world.

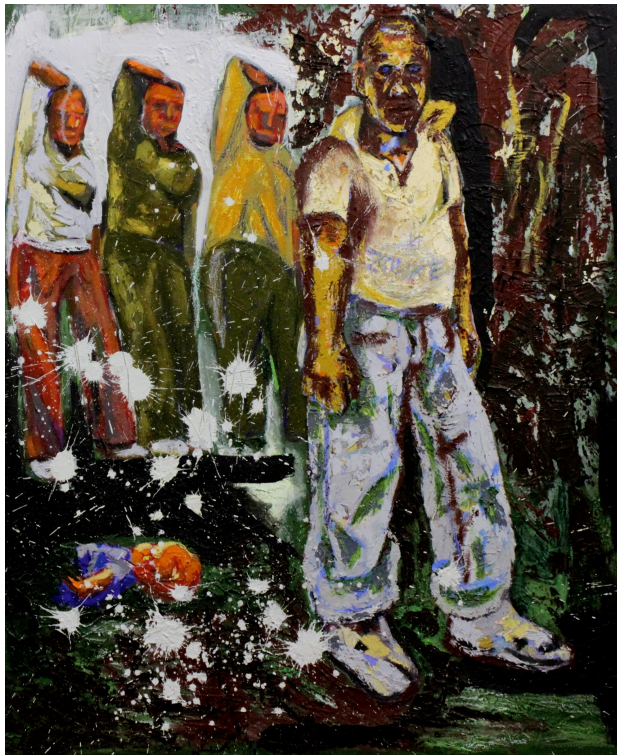


Figure 18 SENONG, Kolodi *In the Ghetto: Exercise by Numbers* acrylic and oil on canvas, 91, 5 x 76 cm

There are no basic amenities in Sofaya that are conducive to normal living, yet it is home to more than twelve thousand human beings. This compromised sense of living penetrates the claustrophobic mood of the place (Goniwe 2010; Carmichael 1967). The painting presents an

undefined space, made up of thick paint in palette knife and brush marks, splatters, creating a flat, agitated surface, which I relate to a film still from a horror movie. The slanted figures and degraded 'landscape' recall what Frantz Fanon (cited in Langley, 2007) rightly labelled an indirect violence against human dignity. He writes that the violence often subjects its recipients to general feelings of low self-worth (Ibid.). The painting is influenced by Sekoto's method of repetition in composing his figures as well as the characteristic of his colour scheme of yellows, greys, blues, and environmental greens.³⁶ It is different to the direct gaze that characterise the subjects in the photographs of Mthethwa that look straight at the viewer.



Figure 19 SENONG, Kolodi *The Structure that Binds His Story: Stimela*, oil on canvas 121 x 121 cm

The Structure that Binds His Story: Stimela (fig. 19) is an exploration of our human interconnectedness. The bottom right hand corner of the painting portrays an electric hot plate, a pot, and mass-produced cheap plastic plates. A bread bin and a sugar container are rested on top of the semblance of a microwave oven, cut by the edge of the canvas on the left. The figure on the left is dressed in white, his face a sickly blue, wearing a small, icy coloured sun hat. Towards the centre of the composition, what looks like a satellite dish and an electric plug occupies the heart of the middle ground. The background shows a silhouette of skyscrapers in the far distance and superimposed scarlet outlines over the combination of off-white and sky-blue paint.

³⁶ Sekoto's repeated use of specific colours can be found in many of his local contemporaries like Mohlankana, and Pemba but also in the work of South African white 'modernist' artists such as Irma Stern, and Pierneef who were familiar with European painting conventions and whose work was publically exhibited in South Africa at the time.



Figure 20 Detail of *The Structure that Binds His Story*: Stimela

The multi-directional lines of Xaba's work *At Home II* inspired the composition. Painted lines meander lazily to diverse directions, competing with assorted shapes of unequal sizes. I was interested in the way space is occupied and compacted, and how the human figure seems to be part of the objects, but also alone or alienated. The visible energy of Sofaya and its people contrasts with the place's signs of poverty. In the composition I explored the combination of uncontrolled brush marks with broad areas of flat colour and a limited palette of cool colours to call up these contrasts. The ability of people to creatively forge ahead with life irrespective of the burdensome and violent conditions of poverty asserts their agency as persons. My way of painting was an attempt to interpret the current experience of the people while departing from how Sekoto and Xaba dealt with issues of their day through their work. The title of the painting is inspired by the racist and economic structures that keep (black) people in poverty, a theme that is revisited in *Biko's Children Apprehend the Trap that is Trapping Them* (fig. 21).

The painting shows a full-length portrait of a young dreadlocked black man 'seated' comfortably on an undefined space. On the left hand side behind the figure in stripped sweater, ochre pants and white sneakers stands a mobile container. Live chickens are seen feeding in a trough inside the structure, while a newspaper titled *Zonke* is lying on the ground to the right. The newspaper title, loosely translated as 'the spirit of togetherness,' may (ironically) allude to the camaraderie that is often the hallmark of people who are conscious of the implications of their blackness, but also questions the notion of 'togetherness.' The awareness informed the title of the work; young people are often aware of the source of their entrapment yet struggle to break away from constraints – the chickens in the cage can be read symbolically here.



Figure 21 SENONG, Kolodi Biko's *Children Apprehend the Trap that is Trapping Them*, oil on canvas 121 x 121 cm

The work is a result of my long conversations with the people that I often talk to during my visits to Sofaya. The chats often led to our understanding of the concept of black consciousness, and the need for the disadvantaged to realise their empowered agency as people. This is often realised through self-help initiatives such as cultural clubs, stokvels, education, and entrepreneurial drives. *Biko's Children Apprehend the Trap that is Trapping Them* appropriates and builds on Sekoto's visual and representational language through the mishmash of loose

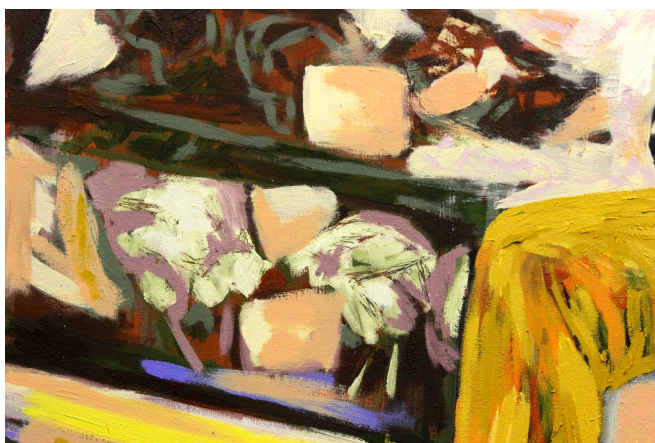


Figure 22 Detail of Biko's *Children Apprehend the Trap that is Trapping Them*

paint application. The painting is marked by the textural surface, a search for the sentimental mood and sounds of Sofaya, and a search for my own readings of the concept of *seriti* in the work of Sekoto. The brush strokes scatter unevenly across the surface of the canvas while darker tones of browns and lines suggest depth.



Figure 23 SENONG, Kolodi *There's Nothing Concrete Behind the Gate You Know* oil on canvas, 145 x 84 cm

There's Nothing Concrete Behind the Gate You Know (fig. 23) contrasts to the visual sound and noise of *Biko's Children Apprehend the Trap that is Trapping Them*. The painting is influenced by the fear of the unknown, and the security that is afforded by one's own home, which the owner can lock up to prevent invasion by outsiders. The sense of security is porous – the gates or fence feel rickety; muddy greys and ochres dominate, calling up the cold melancholic feeling of hopelessness that results from destitution.

The painting explores how Xaba depicts objects in his work, particularly the colour schemes of his thickly painted *At Home I*. The artist smudges paint on the canvas with a sense of abandonment that creates uncontrolled textures, which speak about the mood of the depicted objects. The work is characterised by a cautious usage of limited palette. *There's Nothing Concrete Behind the Gate You Know* presents a brightly painted ginger pot on top of a hot plate and a gate or fence in the middle ground, while the background is defined by thickly layered, muted grey paint. Shapes and flatness reduce the canvas into an asymmetrical structure, with little sense of depth. Some of the objects are rendered thickly with a palette knife as well as thin dripping paint that run over the painting surface.

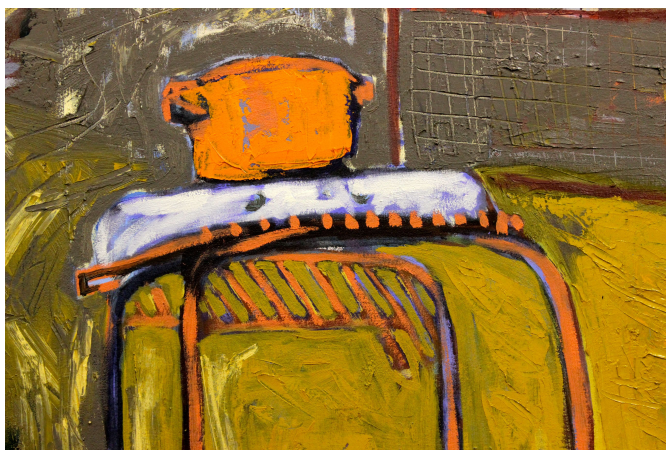


Figure 24 Detail of *There's Nothing Concrete Behind the Gate You Know*

I use colour as communicative tool to express my interpretation of or search for *seriti* while laying the paint abusively in flat and more violent brush marks. Thick layers of paint conceal what lies below the picture surface, inspired by the smell and sounds of Sofaya. The use of muted colours is an acknowledgement of the influence of, and departure from Sekoto, with the introduction of Xaba as intermediary to my own way of painting.

The diptych, *Less than Half the Story of the 342 Years Has Been Told* (fig. 25) is divided into three panels. The left pane depicts a fusion of recycled materials that are often the building blocks in squatter camps. The foreground shows a muddy earth of different orange, umbre and ochre tones and marks while the sky is painted with layers of muted pink.



Figure 25 SENONG, Kolodi *Less than Half the Story of the 342 Years Has Been Told* oil on canvas (triptych), 325 x 121 cm

The middle pane zooms closer into the representation of a ghetto, with some bright orange train compartments floating above. Warning signs of a speed hump occupy both the left and middle panels at the bottom of the picture plane. Such symbols are often a result of meetings between local communities that sign petitions to their local municipality. The humps serve to slow down speeding motorcars while they simultaneously implicate the officialdom that acknowledges the existence of the people whom they seem oblivious to their living conditions. Open sewerage, which also functions as a dumping site pass through the space where children are often playing nearby. The third panel on the right represents the profile of a male figure dressed in blue, in the process of opening the tailgate of his white sedan. The car appears better maintained and larger than the informal homes. Colour is used symbolically, to capture the mood of *seriti* emotionally. My working methods veer off any attempts to realistically paint the details of the place while trying to confront the violence and contradictions of its poverty. In this way my interpretations are entirely subjective.

The title of the painting is derived from the number of years since Jan Van Riebeeck landed in what became Cape Town to the first democratic elections, which gave birth to a new world of possibilities for the previously and presently³⁷ oppressed people. It questions the logic behind the persistent poverty levels. *Less than Half the Story of the 342 Years Has Been Told* resembles a storyboard that narrates the space sequentially through the manipulation of paint. Implied is the question how to attain *seriti* within the landscape that is dominated by poverty. *Mokoko: the Betrayal of Man* (fig. 27) visually probes this question through the exploration of the qualities of oil paint.

³⁷ Apartheid as law might have been removed from the law books in 1994 but still people are oppressed by inhumane living conditions that are the remnants of the 350 years of white domination in South Africa.



Figure 26 Detail of *Less than Half the Story of the 342 Years Has Been Told*

The canvas portrays paraffin stove on top of a squeaky orange table in the middle of the composition. A white container that serves to boil water for various purposes sits on the stove's left plate, while a smaller blue food container is seen on the right. An abnormally huge rooster floats in an undefined space behind the central objects towards the left of the composition. The background is a hollowness of thick sombre, dirty browns, which seem to conceal the terrain of the painting surface where touches of red, violet, and blue tones appear irregularly.

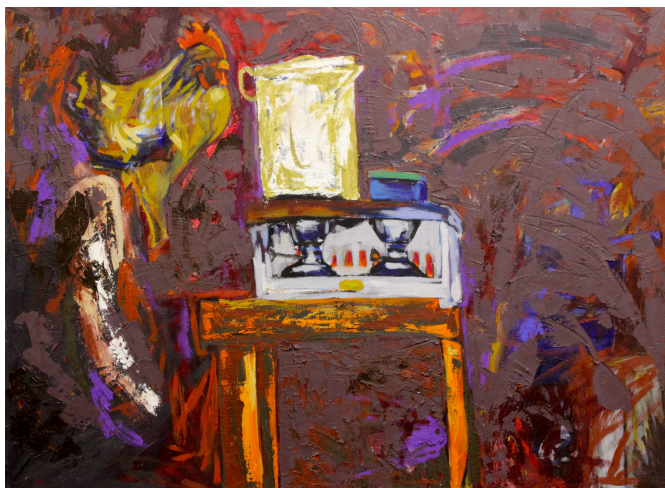


Figure 27 SENONG, Kolodi Mokoko: *the Betrayal of Man*, oil on canvas 115 x 845 cm

Both Pemba and Sekoto's handling of objects with simplicity inspire the work. The intention in doing the painting was to depict ordinary objects, which denote homeliness, with the same simplicity. Yet the subject of *seriti* and betrayal dominated the painting process with different ideas flooding my mind. I am used to seeing discarded left over food items often used as bait to lure unsuspecting fowl to be slaughtered for consumption. During this moment of uncertainty when the bird's focus is directed at the left over foods, water is boiled simultaneously so that as soon as chicken is caught and killed its feathers are removed. Boiling water is poured all over the feathers to quickly pluck them out. The title of the work has overtones of the biblical theme of the betrayal of the Christ for thirty pieces of silver coins by his friend, Judas. Here I force connotations with the notion that the ruling African National Congress sold South Africa's liberation from white supremacist regime to the powerful economic multinationals and "American pressure groups," in exchange for a seat next to their feeding table (Terblanche

2012: 68-69). The handling of objects after Sekoto, Pemba, and Xaba is explored in the smaller canvases, *Under the Lock and Key* (fig. 28) and the environmental green-dominated *Pramastofu* (fig. 29) respectively.

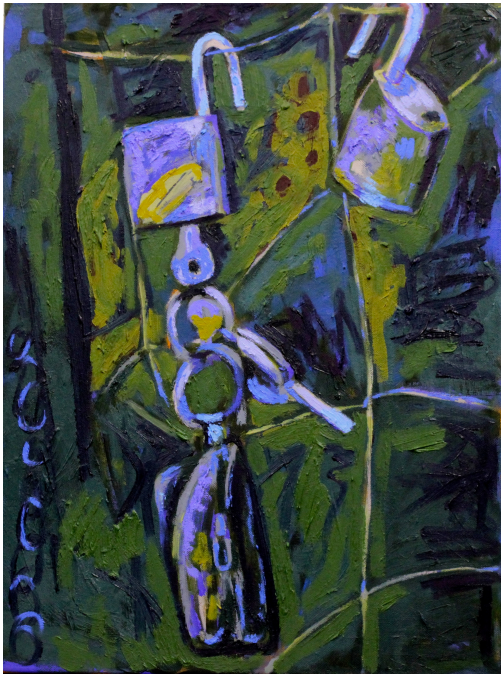


Figure 28 SENONG, Kolodi *Under the Lock and Key*, oil on canvas 61 x 46 cm



Figure 29 SENONG, Kolodi *Pramastofu*, oil on canvas 51 x 51 cm

The approach to the painting process was informed by how the residents of Sofaya try to make their offensive dwellings as comfortable as they possibly could. The process was dominated by over-painting in order to balance the composition. The image combines contrasting elements on an equal picture plane.



Figure 30 SENONG, Kolodi *Naga ya Fsa: Msawawa*, oil on canvas 84 x 76 cm

Similarly, the over-painted *Naga ya Fsa: Msawawa* (fig. 30) is a reference to the harsh living conditions synonymous with informal settlements where media reports about wild grazing fires are a constant. The canvas depicts a close-up of brightly coloured squatter camp that is enveloped by a black fog on the upper part of the composition. Satellite dishes are installed on some of the dwellings. One of these dishes show the insignificant proportion of a figure that is dressed in white, seen walking away from the viewer in the middle of the foreground. Satellite dishes that are installed on several of the informal buildings grant the work a feeling of contemporariness notwithstanding the glaring signs of poverty. The title of the painting combines Medu's title track to their debut album, *Naga ya Fsa* (The land is in flames), with *Msawawa*, a squatter camp in Kya Sand, Randburg, where in 2015 fire gutted down over 800 of the informal structures. The colourful *Phindile* (fig. 31) depicts the interior of an informal dwelling before the wild fires synonymous with squatter camps. Its symbolic use of colour and texture is my attempt at evoking *seriti* of the place of Sofaya.



Figure 31 SENONG, Kolodi, Phindile, oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm

The combination of dense paint application and loud, unnatural colouring in *Borikiriki: After the Fire* (fig. 32) results in a dull domestic scene of squalor. Squatter camps are a stark reminder of apartheid's initiated migrant labour system – in contemporary South Africa this is compounded by social and economic factors that are transnational. Ashwin Desai writes that migrant workers occupy most of the squatter camps within the country (quoted in Terreblanche 2012: 140). For me the squatter camps symbolise post-apartheid government's failure to turn around colonial-apartheid structures that keep black people oppressed. The painting relies on painterly 'accidents' as compositional props. This way of painting brings to mind the arduous and inventive process of assembling different found objects to construct a liveable shack. Wild fires are often the uncontrollable phenomenon that diminishes the hard work in a short space of time.

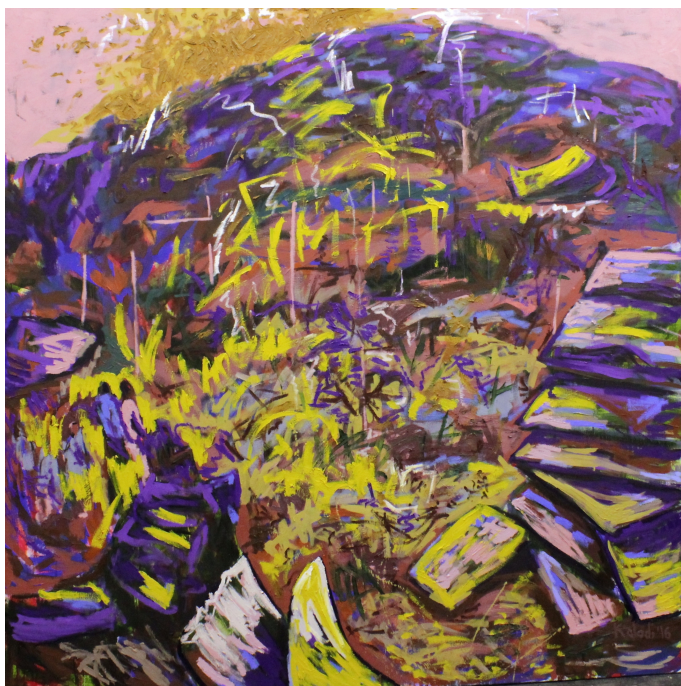


Figure 32 SENONG, Kolodi, Borikiriki: *After the Fire*, oil on canvas 150 x 150 cm

The spacious and muddy surface of *The Life that I know: the Black Story* (fig. 33) is a sarcastic rendition of the fringes of the urban landscape.



Figure 33 SENONG, Kolodi *The Life that I know: the Black Story*, acrylic and oil on canvas (diptych) 189 x 150 cm

The canvas shows a row of constructed informal dwellings and an old automobile, which is slightly covered to protect it against the heat and sun. The replica of a stuffed toy leopard or panther occupies the foreground on the bottom right hand corner of the composition. The animal lies on a bed painted in daubs of natural green oil colour. The middle ground is dominated by one of the basic signs of neglect, the dusty and gloomy dirt streets of squatter camps.

I attempted to depict the ordinariness of Sofaya, “the concept of the everyday ... like an amoeba, [whose] nature and shape vary [...] according to the content it absorbs and surrounds” through emphasis on the materiality of the paint, particularly its texture (1998: 69-70). Generally, the depicted objects look dehydrated, dreamlike, and haunted; as if human beings cannot inhabit the landscape, yet it is home to thousands of people. Individuals may live under horrible and undignified conditions in the informal settlements, which diminish their sense of self-worth and self-respect, but for me their being remains intact. My initial idea was to create work that revolves around expressions, understandings, and representations of dignity. I came to appreciate the complexity of painting the notion and reality of *seriti*, which refuses specificity. My understanding of dignity is that all human beings possess it irrespective of their standing in life. I try to reflect on these moods in the portraits *An Ambitious Beggar* (fig. 34) and *She is the Gold and You the Mine* (fig. 35).



Figure 34 SENONG, Kolodi *An Ambitious Beggar*, oil on canvas 150 x 150 cm



Figure 35 SENONG, Kolodi *She is the Gold and You the Mine*, oil on canvas 150 x 150 cm

The work is influenced by the music of Peter Tosh and the poetry of Lefifi Tladi about the agency of the downtrodden. The artists' creative interventions help me negotiate the process of *trans-coding* in my work, opening it up to go beyond realistic depictions but developing my own 'codes' – of colour, mark, texture and composition.

The paintings represent combinations of ordinary objects that form part of poor people's daily life experiences. These images are explored through the framework of *seriti*, resulting in textured picture surfaces that attempt to interpret the distinct quality of Sofaya. The work challenges stereotypical perceptions that treat people from squatter camps with contempt. Generally the subject matter includes intertwined relationships of figures, space and time with objects such as paraffin stoves, washbasins and pots, with the aim to evoke the psychology of the place and residents.

My unsystematic painting procedures of composing directly on the canvas partly follow the methods of how Sofaya is constructed, how squatter camps are erased and re-built. The vibrant painting surfaces follow the thread and concept of *seriti*. Generally, the over-painted and thickly layered canvases engage themes of anger, frustration, and poverty as direct and 'indirect' violence against human dignity (Fanon cited in Langley, 2007). My paintings are a response, an interpretation, to the distressing 'reality' of persistent poverty that is generally the experience of black people across South Africa's squatter settlements. It is an attempt at depicting and understanding the *seriti* of people, in unspectacular ways, whose life is dominated by material lack, and want. In this I feel close, and at a distance, to Sofaya. Technological gadgets such as satellite dishes, microwave ovens, and cars form part of the painted spaces - they 'decorate' the landscape of Sofaya as signs of aspiration, and consumption. Lives of the people whose humanity and self-respect is under constant battering in the squatter camps are ultimately an indication of the failings of the democratic state to deal with structural racism and economic equality that render the quality of the lives of most black people inferior.

CONCLUSION

Seriti refers to a natural superior, spiritual pride, and innermost condition that is part of every human being. Different authors and institutions whose primary function is to safeguard human rights, including the *United Nations' Human Rights Commission*, the *African Union* and South Africa's *Bill of Rights*, acknowledge this understanding of dignity as something that is possessed by all (Atuahene, 2014; Rathete, 2007; Biko, 2004). Although these bodies are seen to be encouraging the need to respect people's dignity, their ineffectiveness to remedy man-made conditions that violate equality, access to housing and sanitation, education, and ownership are evident in the many informal settlements in South Africa, including Sofaya.

The adverse living conditions in squatter camps compromise pride and dignity of its residents. In resistance to apartheid and colonialism, which enforced a subhuman status to black people, Black Consciousness philosophy maintained that dignity is something that every human being possessed. Dlamini's (2009) instances of Katlehong during the 1970s and 1980s where residents managed to retain their 'sense of being' through enacting acts of *botho* to cultivate their sense of *seriti*, despite the oppression of apartheid, speaks to this resistance. Jensen (2008) observes that the underprivileged 'coloured' people of Cape Town townships hold on to their sense of self to navigate through life and its challenges, such as when parents protect and care for their families, young people channelling their energies into different sporting codes while others choose violent or religious lifestyles that grant them reputation within their communities. I argue that these examples are coping mechanisms that help individuals to negotiate their lives and discontent (Biko, 2004; Sykes & Matza, 1957).

The dire conditions of spaces like Sofaya are the remnants of South Africa's racist economic history of land dispossessions, which failed to acknowledge that every person is endowed with *seriti* and thus need to be treated with *botho*. This destructive man-made living condition of squatter settlements and the denial of access to land are tantamount to refusing the people freedom, a human rights issue that the democratic government seems powerless to resolve (Pheko 1992). The superficial tolerance of naked inequality of South Africans along racial lines, where blacks are the suffering majority, renders Biko's dream of a country that is shocked by poverty a fiction. The research attempted to show how artists like Sekoto, Xaba and Mthethwa investigate questions and concerns around this concept.

Sekoto's interpretations of space and people were part of the ideas and themes of his times, especially experiences of black people within their designated residential areas. Sekoto and his contemporaries were the products of the often-racist mission stations, which made them to believe that their lives would be free of racial segregation once they assimilated into European culture and value systems. The artists' subject matter included intimate moments of black people in the segregated townships, dressed in European clothes and seemingly comfortable with their tasks at hand. The work of Sekoto's contemporary Pemba captures expressions of ordinary people that he encountered throughout his life. Although the artists were born before racial segregation was entrenched lawfully, their work is a reminder that the malady of racial segregation preceded apartheid. I strongly identify with their works, which portray experiences that are generally identified with being black in South Africa. The artists' representations reflect juxtapositions of how black people, particularly the 'new class,' perceived themselves within a

racially segregated and classist landscape. The work was not the artists' aspirations of lives of black people in the future, but a representation of how they understood their lives to be.

Xaba was born the year in which the police butchered black people in Sharpeville in 1960. Most of his paintings are commentaries of the life of black people on the margins of urban centres, as well as rural settings during the early period of the democratic governance. Xaba's work generally aggregates space and time to raise questions about freedom and the meaning of *seriti* within the post-apartheid dispensation. His contemporary, Mthethwa took photographs that brought to the fore questions of identity and what makes us human with the right to occupy space of one's choice. Mthethwa chose colour photography to assert what he called poor black people's sense of dignity, particularly in his *Interiors (1995 – 2005)* series. These photographs captured people within their makeshift living spaces of squatter camps and characterised by calmness and the seriousness of the subjects. Mthethwa's 'noble' goal of dignifying poor black people through his work is compromised for many by allegations that he assaulted and killed a young black woman. The accusations give credibility to the artist's critics who question his heroic assumptions to restore dignity to poor black people and the stylised aesthetics of his images.

The selected artists' lives and their work were looked at in relation to training, employment, convictions, the context of apartheid and post-apartheid. The conception that asserts human beings' *seriti*, which inherently renders them all sacred forms of life that deserve to be treated with respect and equality is evident in Mthethwa's colour photographs. The vivid images remain assertive against negative assumptions about people living in informal settlements, as 'spaces infested with crime.' I also contextualised the reception of Sekoto and Pemba's work, i.e. Williamson (2009), Peffer (2009) and other writers, developing their praise, critique and interpretation. I drew on these texts for close readings of the artists' work in relation to representations of people and human dignity, using Stuart Hall's theories on representation to discuss visual strategies employed by the artists, and myself.

My paintings represent combinations of ordinary objects that form part of people's daily life experiences in the informal settlement of Sofaya. They explore the notion of *trans-coding* and *seriti*, resulting in textured image surfaces that attempt to interpret the place and life of Sofaya. The work aims to confront opinions that treat people from squatter camps with contempt - figures, space objects such as paraffin stoves, washbasins and pots are composited in the paintings to reveal the attitude of the people and their setting. Compositions are not planned, but echoed the haphazard constructions I witnessed in Sofaya. Painting methods include intense layering, saturation of colours, reduction of picture planes and thick paint application - which picks up directly on the themes of anger, frustration, poverty, and *seriti*. The work is a response to the 'realities' of persistent poverty, experienced by black people across South Africa's Sofayas, an attempt to depict and understand "the impossible way of being in the world for blacks" whose lives are mostly dominated by lack of ownership, education, employment and decent housing (Mngxitama 2013:10).

The ability of poor black people to traverse the sorry conditions of poverty is an assertion of their sense of *seriti*. It is my hope that the research adds to the existing body of creative and intellectual scholarship that deals with issues of dignity, especially of black people, as is apparent in Sekoto, Xaba and Mthethwa's art trajectory. The research is primarily framed

within the writings about the concept of an equal and just society. It insists that not all people and aspects about the squatter settlements are negative or worthless, but that this cannot be sustained.

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