

Darkness After Light: The Visual Portrait of Lefifi Tladi

Kolodi Doctor Senong

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Abstract

This creative studio research investigates the work of Lefifi Tladi (b. 1949). Its significance includes inserting Tladi into the historiography of South African visual art and intellectual life. My study is framed through the theories of Black Consciousness and Afrocentrism to engage portrait painting and biographical writing as a discursive mode into the visual arts discourse. My methodology foregrounds visual forms to interpret Tladi's first name, Lefifi, which implies darkness after light. Portrait painting is key in my research, exploring its potential as both a creative procedure and intellectual activity fusing attributes of likeness, realism, fiction, and imagination. I engage theories of biography by Chabani Manganyi, Hlonipha Mokoena, and Ciraj Rasool to articulate the dynamic and complex portrait of Tladi, who is a visual artist, poet, musician and activist. At the end, I produced a body of portrait paintings and an expansive written text to explore the portrait of Lefifi Tladi. This research attempted to render visible a portrait of Tladi as a creative thinker whose work is peppered with the spirit of Black Consciousness and Afrocentricity, and contributed to decoloniality.

Keywords: Afrocentric, apartheid, Black Consciousness, black experience, Lefifi Tladi, poetry, painting, portraiture

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other University.

Kolodi Senong



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Table Of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Declaration.....	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
List of Images of Various Artists’ Art Works	viii
List of Images Discussed Discussed in the Research	xii
Chapter 1: Introducing the Art, Poetry and Philosophy of Lefifi Tladi.....	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Portraiture as a Mode of Representation	2
1.2.1 Reclaiming the ‘lost sight’ of the New Africans	3
1.2.2 Rationale for the Portrait of Lefifi Tladi	4
1.2.3 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework.....	9
1.2.4 Methodology.....	14
1.2.5 Outline of Chapters	17
Chapter 2: A Biographical Tapestry of Lefifi Tladi.....	19
2.1 Theoretical Framework and Methodology on Biography and its Application.....	19
2.2 The Life Story of the Artist	19
2.3 Biographical Details of Lefifi Tladi.....	21
2.3.1 Tladi’s Intellect and Gramsci’s Notion of the ‘organic intellectual’	25
Chapter 3 “How Art Beholds the Elevated Senses” in Lefifi Tladi’s Eclectic Cultural Constructions.....	39
3.1 Art and the Human Senses	39
3.2 Visualising the Senses as Mark-Making	46
Chapter 4. The Visual Tapestry in Tladi’s ‘Ga Re Itshebeng’ and ‘Afrika’.....	55
4.1 Tladi in Poetry	55
4.2 Tladi’s ‘Ga Re Itshebeng’ and ‘Afrika’	57
4.3 Alternative Afrocentric Worldviews.....	64

Chapter 5 The Visual Portrait of Lefifi Tladi through the Creative Practice of Painting..... 73

5.1 Introduction 73

5.2 Painting as Research 74

5.2.1 Reflections on the Studio Processes..... 77

5.2.2 Images of My Studio Work 82

5.3 Conclusion: A Reflective Summary 96

Reference List 101

List of Images of Various Artists' Art Works

- Figure 1.** XHAKAZA, Dumisani, Themba Mkhize's CD cover of Tales from the South.xii
- Figure 2.** SEYMOUR, Kirsten, Selaelo Selota's CD cover of Painted Faces.....xii
- Figure 3.** NGOBENI, Blessing Blood Sucker: Julius Malema, 2012, mixed media. Private Collection (Source: <https://mg.co.za/article/2012-10-26-probing-the-dual-nature-of-dystopia>)....xii
- Figure 4.** BESTER, Willie, Homage to Steve Biko, 1992, mixed media. Private Collection (Source: <https://si.ngout.org/the-wind-will-blow-it-higher-biko/steve-biko-tribute-by-willie-bester-1992/>).xiii
- Figure 5.** BHENGU, Gerard, Ntombenhle, watercolour, 33.5 x 25cm. Private Collection (Source: http://www.artnet.com/artists/gerard-bhengu/ntombenhle-lnnauGbihWTR1_aXMjt4Ww2).xiii
- Figure 6.** PEMBA, George, Portrait of Mqhayi, a Xhosa Poet, 1939, sepia. University of Fort Hare De Beers Gallery (Source: <https://www.doi:10.1080/00043389.2005.11877041>)xiv
- Figure 7.** PEMBA, George, Es'kia Mphahlele, Date Unknown, oil on canvas, Dimensions Unknown. Private Collection (Source: Manganyi & Attwell).....xiv
- Figure 8.** SEKOTO, Gerard, Portrait of a Coloured School Teacher – Omar, 1943, oil on canvas. Private Collection (Source: the Gerard Sekoto Foundation).xv
- Figure 9.** SEKOTO, Gerard, Woman Sewing, Mary Dikeledi, 1946, oil on board, 44 x 38.5 cm. Private Collection (Source: the Gerard Sekoto Foundation).xv
- Figure 10.** SEKOTO, Gerard, Portrait of Miriam Makeba, 1960, ballpoint on paper, 15 x 10.5 cm. Private collection (Source: The Gerard Sekoto Collection).xvi
- Figure 11.** ONALOBU, Aina, Chief Dr. Sapara, oil on canvas, Date Unknown, No Dimensions.National Gallery of Art Nigeria (Source: books.google.co.za/books/about/Guidelines_for_Ethical_Visual_Research_M.html?id=o1qAoAEACAAJ&redir_esc=y). xvi

Figure 12. WILEY, Kehinde Barack Hussein Obama, 2018, oil on canvas 234.3 × 167.2 cm. Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery (Source: https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.2018.16). ...xvii

Figure 13. SHERALD, Amy, Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama, 2018, oil on linen, 213.36x 152.4 cm. Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery (Source: hyperallergic.com/432420/obama-portraits-history-african-american-portraiture/).xvii

Figure 13. TLADI, Lefifi, Hands of Motherhood, 1979, ink on paper. Private collection (Source: Oto la Dimo). xviii

Figure 14. TLADI, Lefifi, Impundulu – Firebird, 1979, ink on paper, 41 x 60 cm (Source: Oto la Dimo). xviii

Figure 15. TLADI, Lefifi, Seated Figure II, 1980, charcoal on paper, 152.5 x 74.7 cm, Private collection (Source: Otola Dimo). xix

Figure 16. TLADI, Lefifi, Mother and Self, 1980, charcoal on paper, 77.5 x 143 cm. Private collection (Source: Oto la Dimo). xix

Figure 17. TLADI, Lefifi, Three Figures, 1980, charcoal on paper, 75 x 180 cm. Private collection (Source: Oto la Dimo). xix

Figure 18. TLADI, Lefifi, Mood, 1983, oil on paper, 14.5 x 96.5 (Source: Oto la Dimo).....xx

Figure 19. TLADI, Lefifi, Hallelujah, 1989, coloured sand on board, 61 x 61 cm. Private collection (Source: Oto la Dimo). xx

Figure 20. TLADI, Lefifi, Xoi Memories, 1989, sand on coloured board, 61 x 61 cm. Private collection (Source: Oto la Dimo). xx

Figure 21. TLADI, Lefifi, Makgwai, 1989, coloured sand on board, 61 x 61 cm. Private collection (Source: Oto la Dimo). xxi

Figure 22. TLADI, Lefifi, Metaphor Symbol, 1990, oil on paper, 14.5 x 96.5 cm (Source: Oto la Dimo). xxi

Figure 23. TLADI, Lefifi, Alphabets of Fire – Series, 1994, ink on paper, 15.5 x 1.6 cm
(Source: Oto la Dimo). xxii

Figure 24. A catalogue cover of Tladi’s 1995 exhibition, Xedzedze, at the UNISA Art Gallery.
xxii

Figure 25. DA VINCI, Leonardo, Last Supper, 1495-1498, applied the golden ratio in the Last Supper (Source: <https://www.goldennumber.net/leonardo-da-vinci-golden-ratio-art/>).xxiii

Figure 26. DA VINCI, Leonardo, Mona Lisa, 1503-1606, shows the artist's exploration of the Fibonacci sequence (Source: <https://thefibonaccisequence.weebly.com/mona-lisa.html>).xxiii

Figure 27. A decorated Ndebele house in South Africa (Source: <https://elephant.art/reinventing-resistance-the-ndebele-tribes-geometric-wall-art/>).xxiv

Figure 28. Part of a mural with Ndebele designs (Source: https://www.google.com/search?q=ndebele+murals&tbm=isch&chips=q:ndebele+art,g_1:pattern:OfEXp6g1Q-E%3D&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj24qWP1j1AhUNCHcKHQevAzwQ4lYoAHoECAEQGw&biw=785&bih=451).xxiv

Figure 29. BRAQUE, Georges, Glass on a Table, 1910, oil on canvas, 34.9 x 38.7 cm. Private collection (Source: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/analytical-cubism>).xxiv

Figure 30. GRIS, Juan, the Sunblind, 1914, papier collé, 92 x 72 cm. Private Collection (Source: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gris-the-sunblind-n05747>).xxv

List of Kolodi Senong's Research Studio Images

SENONG, Kolodi, Stages of Bondage, 2021, mixed media on canvas, 140 x 80 cm (70 x 80 cm each, diptych).....	82
SENONG, Kolodi, Fifi le Legolo, 2019, oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm.....	83
SENONG, Kolodi, Charmza, 2019, oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm.	84
SENONG, Kolodi, Untitled, 2017, mixed media on paper, 150 x 107 cm.	85
SENONG, Kolodi, Poetry in Motion (2019,) oil on canvas, 75 x 100 cm.	85
SENONG, Kolodi, African Imaginary, 2018, oil on canvas, 92 x 92 cm.	86
SENONG, Kolodi, Red Justice, 2017, mixed media on paper, 165 x 116 cm.....	87
SENONG, Kolodi, Liberation What? (2020), oil on canvas, 77 x 67 cm.	88
SENONG, Kolodi, Tladi Reimagined in Pink (2019), mixed media on paper, 151 x 130 cm.	89
SENONG, Kolodi, The Seeing Eye, 2018, oil on canvas, 151 x 130 cm.....	90
SENONG, Kolodi, Pan African Imagination, 2017, mixed media on paper, 151 x 140 cm. ..	91
SENONG, Kolodi, Ke Lefifi as Well, 2021, oil on canvas, 100 x 75 cm.	92
SENONG, Kolodi, Ga Re Itshebeng, 2018, oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm.	93
SENONG, Kolodi, Tladi Reimagined in Pink, 2018, oil on canvas 120 x 120 cm.	94
SENONG, Kolodi, Maatla Monagano as Meditation, 2018, mixed media on paper, 155 x 135 cm.	95
SENONG, SENONG, Kolodi, 'mangwane o ilePitoria, 2020, oil o on canvas, 77 x 67 cm....	95
SENONG, Kolodi, Yellow Justice, 2017, mixed media on paper, 152 x 108 cm.	96

List of Images Discussed Discussed in the Research



Figure 1. XHAKAZA, Dumisani, Themba Mkhize's CD cover of Tales from the South.

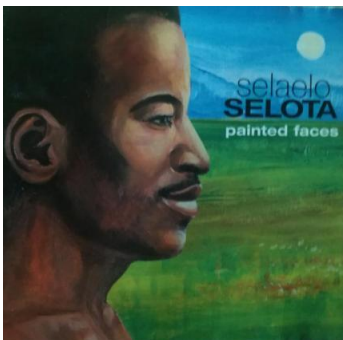


Figure 2. SEYMOUR, Kirsten, Selaelo Selota's CD cover of Painted Faces.



Figure 3. NGOBENI, Blessing Blood Sucker: Julius Malema, 2012, mixed media. Private Collection
(Source: <https://mg.co.za/article/2012-10-26-probing-the-dual-nature-of-dystopia>).



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Figure 6. PEMBA, George, Portrait of Mqhayi, a Xhosa Poet, 1939, sepia. University of Fort Hare De Beers Gallery
(Source: <https://www.doi:10.1080/00043389.2005.11877041>).

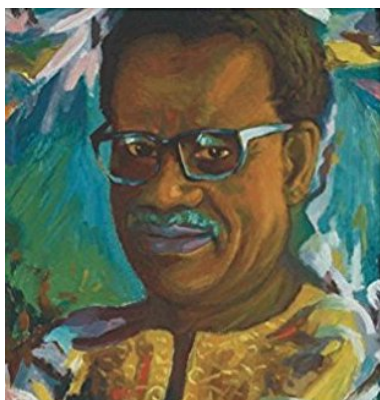


Figure 7. PEMBA, George, Es'kia Mphahlele, Date Unknown, oil on canvas, Dimensions Unknown. Private Collection
(Source: Manganyi & Attwell).



Figure 8. SEKOTO, Gerard, Portrait of a Coloured School Teacher – Omar, 1943, oil on canvas. Private Collection (Source: the Gerard Sekoto Foundation).



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Figure 10. SEKOTO, Gerard, Portrait of Miriam Makeba, 1960, ballpoint on paper, 15 x 10.5 cm. Private collection (Source: The Gerard Sekoto Collection).



Figure 11. ONALOBU, Aina, Chief Dr. Sapara, oil on canvas, Date Unknown, No Dimensions. National Gallery of Art Nigeria (Source: books.google.co.za/books/about/Guidelines_for_Ethical_Visual_Research_M.html?id=o1qAoAEACAAJ&redir_esc=y).



Figure 12. WILEY, Kehinde Barack Hussein Obama, 2018, oil on canvas 234.3 × 167.2 cm. Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery (Source: https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.2018.16).



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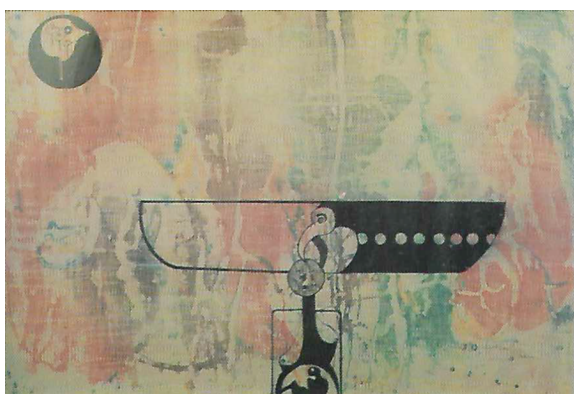


Figure 14. TLADI, Lefifi, Impundulu – Firebird, 1979, ink on paper, 41 x 60 cm (Source: Oto la Dimo).



Figure 15. TLADI, Lefifi, Seated Figure II, 1980, charcoal on paper, 152.5 x 74.7 cm, Private collection (Source: Otola Dimo).



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Figure 17. TLADI, Lefifi, Three Figures, 1980, charcoal on paper, 75 x 180 cm. Private collection (Source: Oto la Dimo).



Figure 18. TLADI, Lefifi, Mood, 1983, oil on paper, 14.5 x 96.5 (Source: Oto la Dimo).

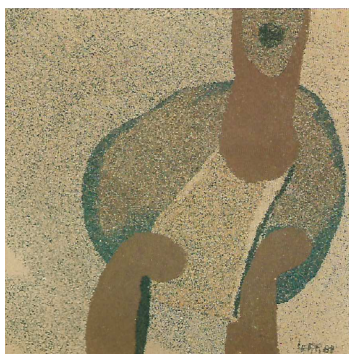


Figure 19. TLADI, Lefifi, Hallelujah, 1989, coloured sand on board, 61 x 61 cm. Private collection (Source: Oto la Dimo).



Figure 20. TLADI, Lefifi, Xoi Memories, 1989, sand on coloured board, 61 x 61 cm. Private collection (Source: Oto la Dimo).

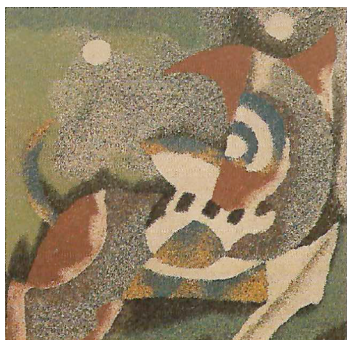


Figure 21. TLADI, Lefifi, Makgwai, 1989, coloured sand on board, 61 x 61 cm. Private collection (Source: Oto la Dimo).



Figure 22. TLADI, Lefifi, Metaphor Symbol, 1990, oil on paper, 14.5 x 96.5 cm (Source: Oto la Dimo).



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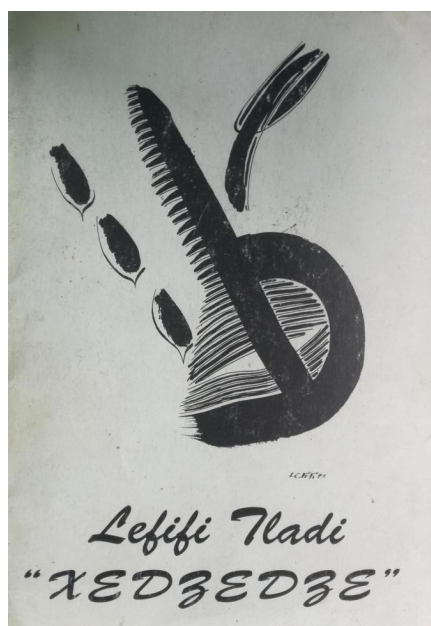


Figure 24. A catalogue cover of Tladi's 1995 exhibition, Xedzedze, at the UNISA Art Gallery.

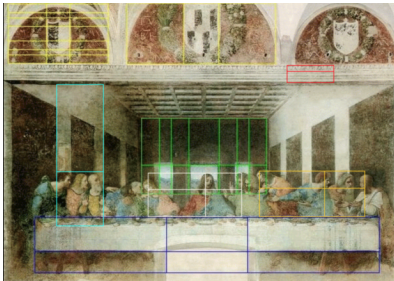


Figure 25. DA VINCI, Leonardo, Last Supper, 1495-1498, applied the golden ratio in the Last Supper (Source: <https://www.goldennumber.net/leonardo-da-vinci-golden-ratio-art/>).

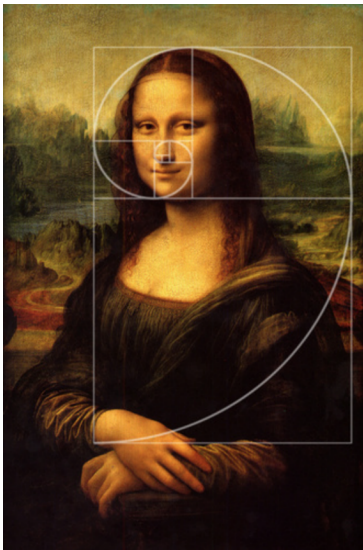


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Figure 27. A decorated Ndebele house in South Africa (Source: <https://elephant.art/reinventing-resistance-the-ndebele-tribes-geometric-wall-art/>).



Figure 28. Part of a mural with Ndebele designs (Source: https://www.google.com/search?q=ndebele+murals&tbm=isch&chips=q:ndebele+art,g_1:pattern:OfEXp6g1Q-E%3D&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj24qWP1j1AhUNCHcKHQevAzwQ4lYoAHoECAEQGw&biw=785&bih=451).



Figure 29. BRAQUE, Georges, Glass on a Table, 1910, oil on canvas, 34.9 x 38.7 cm. Private collection (Source: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/analytical-cubism>).



Figure 30. GRIS, Juan, the Sunblind, 1914, papier collé, 92 x 72 cm. Private Collection
(Source: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gris-the-sunblind-n05747>).

Chapter 1: Introducing The Art, Poetry And Philosophy Of Lefifi Tladi

1.1 Introduction

Portrait painting is the “admission that there is ‘someone’ out there worthy of identification and preservation” (Brilliant 1991: 14). My study pursues this “admission” by acknowledging that theorising through the embodied act of painting and writing allows for substantial and original contributions to several fields, including fine art and the history of art in South Africa. Thus, through the act of painting and writing, the thesis not only identifies and preserves but also investigates the unique intellectual and creative work of Lefifi Tladi (b. 1949), who made his mark in the South African cultural and political landscape since the 1970s. This period in the history of South Africa is characterised by the spirit of Black Consciousness as the core of the struggle for self-definition and self-determination. The study works with research perspectives of art history, visual culture and cultural studies that are implicated in post-colonial theory (D’Alleva 2005: 76-86). Nonetheless, it is approached through intersecting portrait painting and biographical writing as creative work, an approach that allows for an inquiry and knowledge production that broadens what in conventional and conservative scholarly research has been confined to only written accounts.¹ The physical act of painting and the construction of images does not merely complement but complicate my study's socio-historical and cultural perspectives, whose undertaking enables imaginative means to investigate the ideas and life of the multifaceted Tladi, a visual artist, poet, musician and activist.

Underscoring my study is visual and textual writing that inserts a black creative intellectual into white-dominated historiography of the South African visual arts and intellectual life. Between 1966 and the 1970s, Tladi was part of a collective of young people who formed a cultural group named De-Olympia, the band Dashiki and later a museum of contemporary black art to spread knowledge around communities estranged from themselves by colonial apartheid² (Hattingh & Mphakati 1998; Motlhabane & Kaganof 2005). As part of its initiative to awaken the repressed consciousness, the ideology of Black Consciousness spread knowledge and information about African history and culture whilst formulating a visual language, which Tladi claims was prematurely squashed by the

¹ Arguably, a creative practice approach to research and knowledge production is as important as an art historical approach – for example, see scholarly debates pursued in the collection of essays edited by Leora Farber (2010).

² Although more vicious and violent, apartheid became an institutionalised system of racial oppression extending the colonial project, which started in 1652 and regarded black people as lesser human beings.

1994 dispensation (Motlhabane et al. 2005). My research is concerned with this visual language, which I investigate with reference to the work of Richard Brilliant (1991) and Jean Borgatti (1990), both of whom demonstrate the significance of portraiture not only through conventional writing (books and essays) but also works of creative arts such as painting and curated exhibitions. These authors show how cultural conventions influence artistic interpretations of portraiture even though its objective may be the same. Yet, contemporary scholarly research cannot be limited to conventional forms but should allow for novel approaches that substantiate, broaden and add value to academic research. Thus, an intersection of portrait painting and biographical writing enables an effective combination of innovative and intellectual approaches feasible for researching and narrating a complex and versatile figure like Tladi.

Portraiture as a Mode of Representation

This study works with the understanding that portraiture, with or without regard to physiognomic likeness, attempts to capture the memory and project a vision of the depicted individual. It offers a profound, penetrating and enduring visual and textual impression; in this way, it bestows significance to and conserves the life of the depicted individual through the painted artwork and the written monograph – two texts that become accessible to various viewers and readers. In order to achieve this objective, I work with what Patricia Leavy (2009: 255) identifies as art's ability to arouse feelings through growing awareness and thinking, emotions with potency to spark debates and challenge stereotypes. Shearer West (2004: 14) argues that images are easily accessible to cross-cultural individuals in and outside the academy as an extension and expansion of textual narratives. Such understanding is in line with Nell Irvin Painter's (2004: 105) argument that when read critically, images offer more information and new dimensions about people, their culture and identity. This means visual images can reveal contextual and unplanned dimensions in one frame whilst expressing the artist's subjective viewpoint. Images are not simply an alternative source but another dimension and an indispensable option of making meaning and knowledge production, adding to complementing, challenging and expanding the often relied upon written words or textual narratives. In my study, meaning making and representation are carried out through a creative production of experimentation, exploration and investigation through the painting medium and manipulation of materials and visual properties such as composition, colour, scale and textures (Rose 2007: 13). Writing is not a reductive medium of explication but rather an indispensable component of meaning-making, representation, articulation, contextualisation and knowledge production. The outcome of my research, therefore, is a series of colourful portraits and a discursive text that, on the one hand, draw on the genre of portraiture in general and the tradition of South

African black portraiture in particular and, on the other hand, making use of intellectual writing on biography, Black Consciousness and Afrocentrism.

1.2.1 Reclaiming the 'lost sight' of the New Africans

Modelled as an intersection of visual and textual explorations, the study is informed by the need to reclaim what Hlonipha Mokoena (2015: 169) calls the 'lost sight' of the 19th and 20th-century black individuals who were generally the products of mission education. Although the people were conscious of the intrusion of an influential foreign way of existence, Ntongela Masilela (2013: xiv) claims that the people chose to adapt and locate themselves within an imposed though reconfigured and evolving modernity in Africa. Thus, Masilela (2011: 43) refers to them as New Africans whose intellectual, cultural and aesthetic trajectories persevered despite being "unexpectedly and violently terminated" by the apartheid forces during the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. These are urban Africans, among whom there are intellectuals, entrepreneurs, doctors, teachers, lawyers, nurses, social workers, artists, writers, political and religious leaders referred to by Mokoena (2015: 170) as the 'black interpreters' of black lives in the context of colonial apartheid.

Although the New Africans are said to have been cut in 1960, this study locates Tladi within their extended trajectories. I acknowledge that Tladi's life course transcends that of the New Africans through time, scholastic and sociopolitical experiences, but still, his dynamic, Afrocentric cultural outlook equates to the theoretical tendencies of the Black Interpreters. Understood in this context of localised impressions of modernity surpassing periodisation and politics, the study contributes to the re-establishment of the New Africans' lost vision through a monograph and portrait paintings whose various expressions, articulations and inflections are "mixed up with politics, personal allegiances and conflicting versions of history" (Lee 2005: 1). The portrait investigates visual elements such as text, colour and specific symbols to construct personalised narratives out of literal, abstract and imagined forms. Through visual and textual research, I engage Tladi as a historical and contemporary figure of importance, thus my experimental exploration of creative modes of portrait painting and biographical writing, reproduction, repetition and reconfiguration of motifs from his archive, especially paintings, poetry and photographs. Through these explorative portraits and noble textual research, the study contributes toward the reclamation of the lost, if not suppressed, the voice of New Africans in the historiography of South African visual art and intellectual life.

1.2.2 Rationale for the Portrait of Lefifi Tladi

The underpinning concern of my study is the exclusion and marginalisation of artists associated with Black Consciousness and pan-Africanist leanings from the historiography of South African art and intellectual discourses. This erasure or suppression could be attributed to what Tladi views as the battle between the radical reformers and the tolerant lot, which started in Gaborone, Botswana, in the late 1970s (Mabandu 2008: 16). The newly formed and African National Congress (ANC) - aligned Medu Art & Ensemble, which included graphic arts, photography and theatre, among others frustrated individuals such as Tladi who wished to remain free from political affiliation. Equally, Judy Seidman (2009: 88, 93) claims that Tladi dedicated himself to the ideals of Black Consciousness and had to quit Medu following the inclusion of white members during this time. Seidman's claim echoes Stanley Manong (2015: 107), a former uMkhonto weSizwe (MK)³ operative who insists that Tladi was among the South African exiles who became hostile towards the ANC in Botswana due to its non-racial policies. In his explanation of this contentious claim, Tladi asserts that working with individuals and liberation movements around emancipatory cultural activities was not contingent on joining them as card-carrying members. However, the exile conditions tended to subject vulnerable individuals to such party affiliation (L. Tladi, personal communication, March 12, 2018). It seems that Tladi is consciously misinterpreted as an artist appreciative of the principles of Black Consciousness, in particular, sharing Steve Biko's critical views toward white liberals in the 1970 essay, 'Black Souls in White Skins'.⁴ It is therefore advisable to read Tladi's stance within the (political) context that "black [people] do not need a go-between in this struggle for their own emancipation", and nor should their radical critique of white liberals be mistakenly reduced to being a racist firebrand (Biko 2004: 27).

The power usurpation (by white liberal politics) within Medu is a stark reminder of what happened in 1955 after the adoption of the Freedom Charter when the seemingly multiracial Congress of the People in Kliptown, Soweto, declared, "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white" (BlackPast 2009). Peter Joyce claims that such opposition to "ANC's moderate stance, its commitment to peaceful change and its non-racial character" led to an opposing splinter group

³ Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) functioned as the forceful armed-wing of the ANC during the apartheid years but later found itself a partisan military veteran association often behind factional battles of the mother-body in the 21st century during the Jacob Zuma presidency of South Africa.

⁴ Biko (2004: 20-28) berates liberals for dictating the pace and attitude of the oppressed in their struggle for emancipation from racism.

(Joyce 2000: 134). Robert Sobukwe and similar minds formed part of this fragmented unit, the pan-Africanist Congress of Azania, a pro-black-African political organisation that would inform and shape Black Consciousness' political principles and values on the question of black-only membership. This argument is important as it underpins Tladi's political views and stance on the question of non-racialism and inclusion of whites in the Medu Art & Ensemble in Botswana.

Tladi further talks about how the white media validated certain artists whose art generally portrayed black people as poor, helpless and an illiterate lot by parading them as the avant-garde of the black arts (Hattingh et al. 1998: 45). On the other hand, those artists who produced alternative, assertive and empowering imagery were ignored, if not marginalised and thus excluded. Since its origin in the country, the Black Consciousness philosophy encouraged self-affirmation, self-determination, and self-love, which deliberately objected to and subverted the influence of the white liberal South African world. The priority of the movement was for black people to attain self-consciousness, whose objective was self-definition, self-assertiveness and self-determination, which was key in the struggle for freedom against apartheid conquest and manipulation by white liberals. Tladi's ideas, work and life embody and espouse these objectives of the Black Consciousness Movement⁵ articulated in the poem 'Ga Re Itshebeng', where he calls for intimate introspective interactions with his compatriots. Following the above arguments, it is possible to surmise that the black radicals were those thinkers, creatives and activists; they adhered to the ideals of Black Consciousness and pan-Africanism, while the tolerant, liberal lot shared the ANC's politics of multi/none-racialism.

Tladi was born and socialised in the cultural melting pot of Lady Selborne, northwest of Pretoria. Like many in various parts of South Africa, this black community was subjected to apartheid's forced removals. His cultural consciousness and activism owe much to his early life growing up in Lady Selborne. However, he was also shaped by his movements and contacts with similar-minded black creatives and thinkers in Pretoria, Johannesburg, Botswana and Sweden. Tladi has been a poet, performer and painter in the South African cultural scene since the late 1960s. He was one of the black youths implicated in the 1976 uprisings, and thus in its aftermath, he skipped bail for exile in Botswana. Before leaving South Africa, Tladi often exhibited, performed and hosted poetry and

⁵ Ian M. MacQueen (2018: 4) calls Black Consciousness Movement a variable occurrence of its time which "drew from diverse trajectories of ideas constituted in distinct spaces, ideas moulded to fit a purpose – to resuscitate black pride and to generate a renewed project of political empowerment". In order to advance the quest for black freedom, artists such as Tladi, Fikile Magadela (1952-2003) and Thami Mnyele (1948-1985) hosted workshops while exhibiting their work around the country's black townships and schools.

art workshops. He continued with these self-driven initiatives and practices abroad and when he returned to South Africa after 1997, having spent over three years in Botswana before settling in Sweden as a student in the early 1980s. It is dispiriting that he is hardly mentioned in South Africa's history of art, especially covering the period from the 1970s to date. Also, he is absent from the country's school curriculum, academic journal entries, edited volumes, monographs and various (seminal) publications such as Steven Sack's *The Neglected Traditions: Towards a New History of South African Art (1930-1988)* (1988), Gavin Young's *Art of the South African Townships* (1988), Sue Williamson's *Resistance Art in South Africa* (1989), Edward James de Jager's *Images of Man: Contemporary South African Art and Artists* (1992), Esmé Bernam's *Painting in South Africa* (1993), Sue Williamson and Ashraf Jamal's *Art in South Africa: The Future Present* (1996), Judy Seidman's *Red on Black: the Story of the South African Poster Movement* (2007), John Pepper's *Art and the End of Apartheid* (2009), Sue Williamson's *South African Art Now* (2009) and Mario Pissarra's (editor in chief of four volumes) *Visual Century: South African Art in Context* (2011).

The only publication featuring Tladi and his work during apartheid is *Echoes of African Art: A Century of Art in South Africa* (1987), where Matsemela Manaka (1987: 16) wrote that Tladi is among artists inspired by the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) to challenge the hegemony of European sensibilities on local aesthetics in the 1970s. In democratic South Africa, Tladi is discussed in Frieda Hattingh and Geoff Mphakati's (1998) catalogue for his and Motlhabane Mashiangwako's exhibition, *Oto la Dimo*, as well as in footnote number 6 of the *Thami Mnyele + Medu Art Ensemble Retrospective* catalogue, edited by Clive Kellner and Sergio-Albio Gonzalez (2009: 93), which was a companion to an exhibition of the same name at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2008. This footnote ironically speaks to why black individuals like him opted to quit Medu Art & Ensemble in 1979 as part of the Black Consciousness' self-inspiring and affirming strategy for liberation. With the fore-noted reference, it is, therefore, possible to establish the argument that Tladi's stance against the inclusion of white people in the Medu Art & Ensemble led to his invisibility within South Africa's post-1994 visual, textual and cultural space. Including him in a footnote cannot be accidental but a conscious act of burying him beneath the surface of visibility to erase him from the mainstreamed narrative of South African visual art and its creative activists. In publications in which he is meaningfully featured, Tladi rather enjoys a limited acknowledgement notable with a few mentions instead of substantiated arguments in literature such as the *Black Consciousness Reader* (Ndaba, Owen, et al. 2017: 237-238), Gwen Ansell's *Soweto*

Blues: Jazz, Popular Music & Politics in South Africa (2004: 285) and Shannen Hill's *Biko's Ghost: The Iconography of Black Consciousness* (2015: 21-23, 170, 183-184, 190).

The above argument demonstrates that Tladi's contribution to the South African visual arts history and cultural scene is unknown. Thus, he is relegated to the margins of insignificance, buried in an off-sight footnote – the consequence of which is aptly captured by Ralph Ellison's critical thoughts in *Invisible Man* (1965). My study undertakes to retrieve Tladi's contribution from the obscure sites in which his art, poetry and performance are hidden and disengaged; I am interested in rendering him visible and significant as a creative thinker and in so doing, make an intervention into the historiography of South African visual arts and cultural production.

One of the approaches I work with in pursuit of a corrective practice of visually and textually inscribing Tladi is to engage Charlotte Mullins' (2008: 7) claim that the act of painting allows artists to freely move between 'fact and fiction'. This spontaneous interchange, framed by Tladi's biography, poetry and art that are my data, probes how portrait painting provides answers to questions about what it means to think through the medium while expressing ideas as gestures and movements that manipulate the masses of colour (Elkins 2000: 1-5). My process draws from the tradition of black portraiture⁶ to investigate how portrait painting can represent and make visible forms of knowledge that writing alone cannot. Shantay Robinson (2022) writes that a contextualised narrative of contemporary black portraiture should help viewers gain the understanding and appreciation which acknowledge the humanity of the people. This can be seen in the images of portraits of local musicians such as the composer and pianist Themba Mkhize and the guitarist Selaelo Selota which appear as compact disc sleeves [Figures 1 & 2]. In the early 2000s, David Koloane (1938–2019) painted a portrait series that pays tribute to South Africa's musical greats such as Jonas Gwangwa, Abdullah Ibrahim, Sophie Mgcina, Hugh Masekela, Mackay Davashe and Allen Kwela, among others. Also, some paintings depict politicians, such as Julius Malema by Blessing Ngobeni (b. 1985) [Figure 3] and Steve Biko by Willie Bester (b. 1956) [Figure 4].⁷

⁶ Black portraiture refers to portraits in genres such as art, film and fashion where black creative individuals experiment with idealised representations; they are considered the markers of beauty throughout various parts of the world (Finley 2016: 6-7).

⁷ Also, there are several monographs about the lives of South African black visual artists such as Moses Tladi (Angela Read Lloyd, 2009), Gerard Sekoto (Chabani Manganyi, 1996), Ernest Mancoba (Elza Miles, 1994), George Pemba (Sarah Hudleston, 2003), Ephraim Ngatane (Rory Bester, 2009), Dan Rakgoathe (Donve Langhan, 2001), Noria Mabasa (Karen Press, 2003), Pat Mautloa (Andries Oliphant, 2003), Sandile Zulu (Colin Richards,

Furthermore, in a study combining biographical, historical and literary approaches, Mokoena (2011) pens a textual portrait of Magma Fuze to advance, retrieve and construct the 'lost voices of the New Africans'.⁸ Working with a psychological approach to fusing biography, history and socio-politics, Chabani Manganyi authored textual portraits of three black South African luminaries: Es'kia Mphahlele (1919-2008), Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993) and Dumile Feni (1942-1991). Masilela's (2014) series of literary essays also brings the subject of New Africans to the fore, outlining intellectual portraits of figures such as Mazisi Kunene, Ernest Mancoba (1904-2002), Es'kia Mphahlele and Njabulo Ndebele. I should register that these preceding portraits are textual in the conventional form of written text; thus, my study, although building on textual portrait form, it also invests in visual portraits in the form of paintings. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines a visual portrait as "a pictorial representation of a person usually showing the face". This type of representation strives to render the likeness of the represented face. Since I work with both written and visual forms in the research, I consider a portrait to be the combination of a series of paintings and literary texts dealing with phenomena of identity, biography and history of ideas. I combine visual and textual forms of portraits in a creative mode that writes Tladi as a relevant subject in the historical trajectory of New African intellectuals and Black Interpreters. However, I consider the extent to which Tladi is distinctively a Black Consciousness-orientated creative thinker and cultural activist.

My study of Tladi's portrait, it should be noted, is articulated in ways not limited to reproducing the exact image or characteristic of Tladi's life and work. Accurate reproduction or mimetic rendition of his portrait is intently negated in favour of a visual and textual character combining likeness, realism, fiction and imagination. In this instance, the term mimesis refers to its Greek philosophical origins, which evokes uncritical images of imitation and illustration hence my combination of various elements of portraiture. This creative synthesis of the compositional aspects of portrait painting and textual narratives goes beyond exactitude, albeit investigating and inspired by Tladi's intellectual and creative work, political insights and activism within a specific context and time. This creative synthesis of Tladi's visual portrait attempts to articulate, signify and represent the creative thinker as a complex, multi-layered and dynamic phenomenon expressive of a different experience of being in the world.

2005), Gladys Mgudlandlu (Elza Miles, 2002), David Koloane (Veronique Tadjo, 2002) and Helen Sebidi (Juliette Leeb-du Toit and Bronwyn Law-Viljoen, 2009).

⁸ Fuze is thought to be one of the first black converts to write a book in isiZulu, called *Abantu Abamnyama Lapa Bavela Ngakhona* (1922).

1.2.3 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

As an arrangement of a textual and visual portrait, my study builds on the conversation with a historical trajectory of black South African painters. Thus a short literature review of this historical discourse of portraiture is important. For example, among the early black South African painters exploring portraiture in their compositions is Gerard Bhengu (1910–1990). Bhengu was born at a Roman Catholic mission at Centecow (originally named Częstochowa), a place navigating the southern KwaZulu-Natal countryside of uMzimkhulu below the Drakensburg mountains (Kotze 2013: 88). He began sketching while a learner at the mission's First Church after its original building was transformed into a school following the erection of a new structure, the New Church (Church of the Sacred Heart) in 1913 (Kotze 2013: 90).

Some of his early watercolours and ink drawings date back to his teens in the mid-1920s and carry such awkward titles as *Young Zulu Woman*, *Portrait of a Smiling Inyanga* and *Portrait of a Young Man with Moustache and Side Burns, Wearing Circular Cross*. Although most of these detailed portraits show distinct qualities that set each one apart as representing unique individuals with personal names, the titles contrast markedly with their execution. As a result, the moralistic titles raise provocative and problematic questions regarding Bhengu's times, place and agency as a black creative thinker. Some of these questions might be compounded by the monochromatic watercolour profile depicting the head and shoulders portrait of a female with flowing singles braids titled *Ntombenhle* [Figure 5]. She is depicted maintaining communicative and friendly eye contact with the viewer. In contrast to the didactic titles, the subject of the portrait might be the female subject's real name or perhaps an endearment to her beautiful looks by those who know her. Characterised by a knowing, subtle smile concealing her teeth, this vertical composition portrays the woman adorned with a beaded white necklace and a leather apron hanging from the left shoulder. In line with the colonial project throughout the African continent and elsewhere, however, Bhengu's white mentors discouraged him from studying art formally as it was prejudicially thought to be detrimental to his natural talent (Oguibe 2004; Savory 1965).

Another pioneer is George Pemba (1912-2001), who was also denied access to formal art education because of the colour of his skin (Feinberg 2000: 21). Pemba was born in Hill's Kraal in Korsten, a village in the Eastern Cape. He went to school at Van der Kemp Mission Primary and then Paterson Secondary before qualifying as a teacher at Lovedale Teacher Training College. He briefly worked as a teacher before resigning to work as a full-time artist. Similar to Bhengu, Pemba's early

works date back to his pre-teens in the early 1920s, precisely “at the age of eight” (Couzens 1985: 250). His growing talent benefited from contact with the likes of Reverent Robert Shepherd at Lovedale College, Ethel Smyth at Fort Hare and Professor Austin Winter Moore at Rhodes University (Hudleston 2021: 12). Generally, Pemba’s social realist compositions are inspired by the daily black experiences of life under the yoke of racial segregation in both rural and urban settings, portrayed in watercolour and oil. It is noteworthy that most of these compositions are characterised by a sensitive articulation of the artist’s subject matter through a meticulous paint application process. This is evidenced in his artistic career spanning over 50 years, painting many portraits of black thinkers and New African intellectuals such as Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi, Herbert Ernest Dhlomo, Sol Thekisho Plaatje, John Knox Bokwe and Davidson Don Tengo Jabavu (1885-1959). Tim Couzens (1985) notes that during the mid-1940s, whilst visiting Doornfontein in Johannesburg, Pemba met and painted the portrait of the artist John Koenakeefe Mohlankana (1903-1985), commonly known as John Mohl.⁹ One of Pemba’s outstanding portraits is that of Mqhayi (1939) [Figure 6], the novelist, poet and dramatist, painted in oil on canvas. Although the painting shows Mqhayi dressed in African traditional clothing and two spears in his left hand, it represents him as part of the New African intellectuals and a modern man of letters whose eyes confidently look straight at the viewer. His expression is indicative of reciprocity between the painted subject and onlooker. The dignified sensibility and visual elegance with which Pemba painted Mqhayi is also evident in his notable portrait of the scholar, activist and humanist Professor Es’kia Mphahlele [Figure 7], a cosmopolitan who spent years teaching in various universities in Africa, Europe and the United States.¹⁰ In 1939, Pemba painted the portrait of Herbert Dhlomo, a playwright, poet and journalist with an eye for stories that privileged the advancement of black arts and culture as well as the equality for all races.¹¹

A contemporary of Pemba is Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993), “a studio artist who made different uses of the outdoors and the indoors” while painting only a few portraits of the famous and influential black thinkers in his lifetime (Manganyi 2016: 94). Sekoto was born on a German Lutheran mission station of Botshabelo in the present-day Mpumalanga where he started basic schooling, exploring

⁹ Mohlankana went to Tiger Kloof Training School near Vryburg. He painted the portrait of Botswana’s Kgosi Tshekedi in the mid-1930s (Couzens 1985: 252).

¹⁰ Chabani Manganyi used the portrait for the cover of *Bury Me at the Market Place: Es’kia Mphahlele and Company Letters 1943-2006* (2010).

¹¹ This portrait forms part of the cover of Tim Couzens’ biography of Herbert Dhlomo titled *The New African: A Study of the Life and Works of H. I. E. Dhlomo* (1985).

drawing and modelling in clay (Lindop 1988: 5, 6). He later trained as a teacher at Diocesan Training College's Anglican institution. Like Pemba, Sekoto briefly worked as a teacher before resigning to pursue art full-time. His figurative compositions in oil, watercolour and gouache express the mood of his subjects in Sophiatown, District 6, Eastwood, Senegal and Paris. Between 1942 and 1944, he spent more than two years in Cape Town's District Six, living in a house opposite the Roeland Street Jail, which inspired most of his Cape Town compositions (Peffer 2009; Lindop 1988). Among his paintings of the period is *Portrait of a Cape Coloured School Teacher – Omar* (1943) [Figure 8], treated in Sekoto's signature tones of blue, yellow and red ochre. Although Sekoto could not recall the man's surname during one of his correspondences with Barbara Lindop, the portrait was painted in District Six before the area was forcefully demolished. Sekoto portrays Omar as a self-assured individual whose non-threatening eye contact exudes human dignity through skilful modelling of light and dark tonal gradations. Omar looks like an ordinary professional who conducts himself with the seriousness required of a person in his class. Sekoto's depiction of the portrait gives it an element of weight and dynamism evocative of a living person, a trait captured in his eyes. In 1946, Sekoto was living with his family in Eastwood outside Pretoria, where he painted a full-length portrait of his sister-in-law, who was about to get married to his brother, titled *Woman Sewing, Mary Dikeledi* (1946) [Figure 9]. His use of natural reds and yellows on the portrait, ground and tree leaves gives the composition a sense of unity. *Woman Sewing, Mary Dikeledi* depicts a female figure sitting on a chair facing the viewer while sewing an off-white tablecloth with red, yellow and green lineal flower decorations. Reminiscent of photography, Sekoto's composition divides the picture plane into two equal horizontal halves, showing a black woman engaged in a particular past time expressive of her station in life. Mary Dikeledi is portrayed as involved in what was generally considered a woman's pastime and an obligatory part of her womanhood. Again, sewing formed part of ordinary working-class people's existence as buying clothes was generally a rare luxury afforded by few.

Unlike most of the portraits he created from live models, in 1960 and over a decade already staying in Paris, Sekoto made a ballpoint sketch of Miriam Makeba [Figure 10]. He deftly depicted the portrait with the help of a photographic reference, which appeared in *Time* magazine in February 1960 (Lindop 1988; Berrada 2013).¹² The drawing on paper captures the essence of the Grammy Award Winner's individual qualities, such as her characteristic smile with bleached, large teeth,

¹² Known as Mama Africa, Miriam Makeba left South Africa in 1959. She dedicated herself to anti-colonial activism through music and fundraising for liberation struggles in third-world countries after the apartheid government barred her from returning to her native country.

short hair and huge earrings. Subsequent to the ballpoint portrait, Sekoto painted *Woman's Head* in 1963, which depicts the head of an idealised black woman with an elongated neck in a headscarf through white, brown and blue tonal variations of oil paint. Her chiselled collarbone balances this vertical composition, characterised by uncompromising eyes that reflectively look outside the picture frame. This portrait seems like Sekoto's nostalgic interpretation of an "African maid ... with her large this-is-me eyes" in a foreign European city and uprooted from the country of his birth in Africa (Mphahlele 1984: 60-61). These visual properties might signify Sekoto's embrace of black beauty while suggesting his understanding of a typical woman and a cosmopolitan human being. Later in 1978, he used newspaper references to paint a huge canvas titled *Homage to Steve Biko*, the Black Consciousness exponent murdered by the apartheid police the previous year. Evocative of the stained-glass window characterised by cubes of different tones of primary colours, the composition depicts a seemingly mourning portrait of a female figure. She is painted facing the viewer, but her eyes avoid contact as she looks down on the ground, flanked by the representation of the dead martyr on the one side and a silhouette of a couple on the other. A monochromatic head of a seeming apartheid general swings above the couple. Sekoto rarely commented explicitly about illegal political activities and people in his art; yet, one can hypothetically construe that the death of Biko in detention rallied him into painting this giant canvas as a tribute to the fallen hero.

It is appropriate here to also factor other black African artists from outside South Africa, such as the Nigerian Aina Onabolu (1882-1963), who is said to have pioneered easel and portrait painting in West Africa at the dawn of the 1900s. Onabolu was born in the Ogun state but went to Caxton House School in Lagos for his primary schooling (Emeni 2015: 25). He later obtained a certificate in oil painting from St. John's Wood Art School in Britain and endeavoured to introduce formal visual arts education in Lagos (Emeni 2015: 26). Other than his stern appeal to the colonial government to help introduce mimetic painting to schools in Lagos, Onabolu favoured the adoption of this European realist tradition as a way of introducing Africa to the 19th-century project of modernity (Okeke-Agulu 2014: 57). Onabolu painted realistic portraits of the Lagos upper class with precision. Also, his mastery of profile figures in watercolour and oil paint put him at the forefront of modern Nigerian painting. Olu Oguibe (2004), in what he terms 'reverse appropriation', claims that Onabolu's realistic portraits of prominent Lagos individuals and colonial representatives were a continuation of the Ife Court art tradition instead of a thoughtless aping of the European methods of mimesis. Other writers, such as Onyema Emeni (2015) and Ifedioramma Dike (2012), claim that Onabolu's art is rooted in rigid Western academic formalism, as seen in the *Portrait of Lady Spencer Savage* (1906). Although looking static and rigid, the portrait represents an elegantly

dressed woman in a modern outfit. Also, the oil on canvas portrait of Chief Dr Sapara (1920) [Figure 11] in an expensive-looking robe, with a medallion on his chest while clutching a mammal's tail with a decorative handlebar in his right hand, looks convincing.

Similarly, the tradition of positive black self-representation is continued in the 2018 portraits of the former American President, Barack Obama (b. 1961) [Figure 12] and his wife the First Lady, Michelle Obama (b. 1964) [Figure 13] by the African American Kehinde Wiley (b. 1977) and Amy Sherald (b. 1973). Wiley was born to a Nigerian father and an African American mother in Los Angeles, California. He obtained his Bachelor of Arts in Fine Arts at the San Francisco Art Institute and Masters in Fine Arts from the Yale University School of Art. Wiley painted an impeccably dressed Barack Obama in a black suit and seated towards the edge of an expensive-looking wooden chair with crossed arms resting on his thighs. On the other hand, Sherald, from Columbus, Georgia, studied at Clark-Atlanta University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in painting. Sharply dressed,¹³ Michelle Obama is painted wearing a flowing, long white dress with colourful and decorative shapes. Steven Nelson (2018) asserts that the two portraits move beyond likeness to idealise what blackness in America can be.¹⁴ These paintings are imbued with subtle and nuanced historical, cultural and political sensibilities, noting the visual depiction of 'self-assured' and 'calm' black subjects existing in contexts in which black lives are constantly under stress, devalued and unappreciated. They are paintings that form part of an established tradition of black portraiture in the United States, but a tradition of visual portraits that have existed in twentieth-century South Africa¹⁵ and West Africa,¹⁶ as I have discussed above. The qualities of 'self-assured' and 'calm' black subjects of the portrait paintings are indicative of what I also argue about Black

¹³ Powell (2008: 4) writes that someone whose dress sense is sharp "evinces a keen sense of style".

¹⁴ Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) and Duke Ellington (1899-1974) are represented as self-assured, calm and fully dressed individuals when black people were generally photographed half-dressed and represented as indentured property to their owners (Painter 2004). Also, despite the long histories of racial domination and embarrassment, black people have always represented themselves dressed smartly to "claim their place among life's movers and shakers" (Powell 2008: xvi).

¹⁵ Currently, in South Africa, this tradition of portraiture is apparent in the Sanlam Portrait Award, the works of individual artists such as Marlene Dumas (b. 1953-), Zwelethu Mthethwa (b. 1960-), Richard Strydom (b. 1971), Zanele Muholi (b. 1972), Wim Botha (b. 1974), Mustafa Maluka (b. 1976), Thenjiwe Nkosi (b. 1980), Nelson Makamo (b. 1982), Anthea Pokroy (b. 1986) and Khehla Chepape Makgato (b. 1988), among others.

¹⁶ West African portraiture is generally characterised by "the conventions of posture, dress and expression" seen in the sculptures, photographs and paintings by the likes of Phillip Kwame Apagya (b. 1958), Ayabola Kekere-Ekun (b. 1993), Cheri Samba (b. 1956), Rafiy Okefolahan (b. 1979) and Richard Atugonza (b. 1994), among others (Borgatti 2013: 326).

Consciousness' politics and culture of self-definition, self-assertion and self-determination in the struggle for freedom during apartheid in South Africa.

My study follows the political and aesthetic sensibilities of contemporary black portraiture discussed above. I explore various portrait and biographic characteristics by creatively combining abstract, fictional and realistic forms. I do so through the framework of literary biography and fine art portraiture to re-imagine the traditional ways of doing research in higher education. Such a re-imagination reflects post-colonial creative modes through which I have sought to engage the subject of my study in foregrounding a theoretical and political appreciation of individual world cultures (Ghandi 1998: ix-x).

These post-colonial thoughts align with Richard Powell's (2008) assertion that the history of black people throughout the world and how they present themselves as subjects of portraiture often disturb the dominant paradigm of representation. My visual and textual research serves as an intervention that further challenges the dominant paradigm alluded to by Powell. Of note is also an understanding of portraiture as part of the human experience to represent the social status of important individuals, men and women of strength, who are considered role models in their communities (Borgatti 1990; West 2004). This understanding and the creative method I explore work with the idea that portrait artists undertake to uncover the uniqueness of each person they portray. One of the premises of portrait painting is to capture the unique personality, if not interiority, of the depicted individual and articulate such an interiority in relation to social roles and practices determined by socio-cultural and aesthetic conventions (Brilliant 1991; Borgatti & Brilliant 1990). At the heart of this premise is also a creative and intellectual interpretation of historical figures and moments. My study of Tladi explores such a premise through an innovative mode of meaning-making and knowledge production.

1.2.4 Methodology

Working with these preceding ideas, my explorative research approach combines a build-up of colour washes, signs and images, often in the form of painting, collage and graffiti, together with imaginative, expansive text. The process is influenced by the exploration and interpretation of Tladi's first name, Lefifi, which means the darkness that comes after the sunset (Mphakati et al. 2005); thus, the implied meaning in the first part of the title of this study. My painting and textual processes include experimenting with a narrative of dark and light tones through appropriating the

elements of biography and portraiture to portray expressive textual surfaces in oil, pastel, acrylic and collage. The following text, compositions, paint application and surface treatment form part of my final submission, whose character of creative work comprises two interdependent or inextricable components in the form of a series of visual portraits (an exhibition) and discursive writings (textual document) that articulates, frames, contextualise and explicate the study.

The ensuing investigation works with an appropriation of specific elements found in literary biography and visual portraiture that expediently frame my practice. Employing an arts-based research methodology as a particular extension of my qualitative study working with visual culture and cultural studies, the enquiry explores the art and textual making as an investigative vehicle, which not only appropriates but also constructs concepts that can be observable as both texts and images. My leaning is, however, towards images that are inherent with both creative and intellectual properties (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny 2014: 48; McNiff 2008: 29; Dallow 2003: 51). Factors such as history, culture and poetry influence my research. I explore them in the dissertation and paintings, which evolve through note-making and sketches that eventually manifest as coherent texts and compositions. This procedure was operative in my experimentation and refinements of the written text and painted images since the beginning of this study. My painting and writing processes investigate Tladi's biography, approaching it through a vivid palette and compositions that are shaped into a discursive text and a series of reflective portraits that should be read as a site of not only representation or signification but meaning-making and knowledge production (Rose 2007: 13). The research fashions a monograph intersecting written text and painterly form to probe the South African history of art by expanding, shifting and disrupting both the understanding and ways of conducting traditional research in higher education (Leavy 2009: 9; Sullivan 2008b: 80). This methodological orientation is appropriate for exploring Tladi's ideas and work that is rooted in the Black Consciousness' notion of emancipation from colonial apartheid thinking while foregrounding confidence, as "an ingredient required of anyone interested in revolutions or struggles for a better human experience" (Mabandu 2008: 16).¹⁷ According to Biko (2004: 53), "Black Consciousness is, in essence, the realisation by the black [people] of the need to rally together with [their] brothers around the cause of their operation – the blackness of their skin – and to operate as a group to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude". Biko asserts that Black Consciousness is the awareness by black people of the harmful implications borne

¹⁷ Similarly, in the United States, the Black Arts Movement experimented with certain African aesthetic elements such as design, composition and colour to address the aspirations of the oppressed (Douglas 1994: 160).

by their skin tone and how, as a group, they have the power to rid themselves of the negativity equated with it. Also, the philosophy provided the oppressed with an alternative pedagogy and consciousness to help them understand and decline the apartheid schemes of mind control through Bantu education, propaganda and police brutality (Pityana 2020: 402). Thanks to the philosophy of Black Consciousness, “reason, resistance and revolution” bestowed freedom to those South Africans across the colour spectrum who understood its tenets against white liberalism in the country (Turner 2008: 25).

A visual portrait of Tladi, as the by-line of this study’s title designates, involves a creative process that explores, analyses, appropriates, mobilises and juxtaposes black portraiture, mainly selected portraits by two New African painters, Sekoto and Pemba. These painters are studied with reference to theoretical insights of contemporary South African scholars such as Chabani Manganyi, Hlonipha Mokoena and Ciraj Rassool. In keeping with the spirit of the New African intellectuals, Sekoto and Pemba engaged subjects, forms and contexts that embraced African aesthetics through an appropriation of European agents, specifically modernist expressions (Masilela 2006: 348, 352). Fusing attributes of likeness, realism, fiction and imagination, the painters populated their canvases with portraits whose representational modes immortalised the people who reflectively interpreted and immensely contributed to the project of modernity in the colony, particularly in the course of modernisation of South Africa. These portraits speak to Hermione Lee’s (2005: 5) understanding that the tools of literary biography include “relics, legends and fragments” that writers use to stitch their stories together. In conversation with the portraits is my writing, which mirrors Manganyi’s scholarship, particularly his work on letters, interviews and stories that are told by both the person written about and those associated with them, to structure biographies which the author (1983: 4, 5; 2012: 2) prefers to call “life stories”. Both my painting and writing methods undertake to explore Mokoena’s (2015: 169, 183) claim that the realisation of Africa’s rebirth rests on the historical knowledge of the Black Interpreters.

The preceding informs my creative and critical practice, which investigates appropriation, instruments of biography and portraiture as text, symbols and signs accountable for a subjective, interpretive monograph and a painterly language. Graeme Sullivan (2008b: 82) claims that such qualitative methods, which I use to explore the suppressed histories that form part of the country’s memory bank, often lead to the creation of new knowledge and understanding. Through telephone interviews, I attempted to capture Tladi’s thought processes so that his voice forms part of my visual and textual narration. In addition, his documentary film *Giant Steps* (Mphakati et al. 2005),

including poetry, still and moving images, are factored. This material or data is sourced directly from Tladi and the libraries of Stellenbosch University, the University of Pretoria and the University of South Africa, including the Internet, YouTube, newspaper cuttings, magazines and exhibition catalogues. This assorted material is considered for the contents and modes of my study and its research processes. My undertaking follows how Pemba and a few contemporary literary scholars celebrate some significant black South African intellectuals in their work. I also built on the strategy used by Sekoto in the 1960 ballpoint Portrait of Miriam Makeba that influenced his decade-long series of female head portraits in oil and gouache.

This creative undertaking is consciously explained as I reflect on the studio moments in a journal kept at 9 Wolmarans Street in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. The fragments of this iterative documentation activity are inscribed in the thesis as part of annotating experimental pursuits and novel discoveries that should indicate the process and procedure in cultivating new knowledge and insights emanating from and extending the tradition of black South African portrait painting. My repetitive documentation references G. James Daichendt (2012: 85), who states that arts-based research and creativity are accompanied by the writing of a reflective journal that helps to interrogate decisions made during the process.

1.2.5 Outline of Chapters

Chapter 1 (introduction) articulates my research project's background information and rationale. It provides an overview of creative work, an inquiry and a knowledge production exercise. Besides documenting and reflecting on the studio process, the section discusses the literature and theoretical perspectives shaping particular South African trajectories of biography, visual biography and portrait painting.

Chapter 2 explores how the interrelatedness of Tladi's biography, intellectualism, creativity and (political) activism, particularly Afrocentricism, pan-Africanism and Black Consciousness, shape his worldview.

Chapter 3 engages Tladi's art of painting and drawing by identifying themes and subject matter that are examined in relation to the multitalented artist's creative, intellectual and activist inclinations. My inquiry is a critical understanding and interpretation of his work within a specific socio-political context.

Chapter 4 reflects on his poetry, particularly the two poems, 'Ga Re Itshebeng' and 'Afrika'. This chapter discusses the two poems as an illustration of his Afrocentric paradigm seeking to explore an alternative black South African view against racial bigotry.

Chapter 5 explicates my studio processes read through Tladi's art, poetry and worldview as the site of knowledge. The conclusion evaluates and summarises the research by probing areas for further investigation. It should be noted that these chapters making up the discursive writing component, emerge from the painting process. In return, they have informed me that the series of portrait paintings, the dissertation and the studio work is interdependently conversant.

The research about the political and cultural significance of Tladi is depicted through painting and textual narratives, which attempted to both intervene and contribute innovative ideas to fields such as fine art and the history of art in South Africa. My research follows an interdependent, experimental process of continuing Tladi's life to perpetuity while producing new knowledge informed by his life and work. My approach is driven by the need to continue the reclamation of memories of notable though neglected South African figures such as Tladi, whose outlook transcends party political affiliations whilst active in the cultural and political wrestling with colonial modernity in South Africa. The research is influenced by the international tradition of black portraiture of artists such as Anabolu, Pemba and Wiley, a tradition I explore through the lens of literary scholars such as Mokoena and Manganyi. These literary scholars foreground the next chapter, 'A Biographical Tapestry of Lefifi Tladi', which discusses Tladi's biography.

Chapter 2: A Biographical Tapestry of Lefifi Tladi

2.1 Theoretical Framework and Methodology on Biography and its Application

It is an extraordinary experience to live as though life were punishment for being black.

Ernest Cole (1967: 20)

You are either alive and proud or you are dead, and when you are dead, you can't care anyway.

Steven Biko (2004: 173)

This chapter explores the relatedness of Tladi's biography, intellectualism, creativity and (political) activism, particularly pan-Africanism, Afrocentrism and Black Consciousness, in shaping his worldview. My analysis of Tladi's life and ideas is pursued through synthesising the biographical strategies that Manganyi, Rassool and Mokoena employ to weave and reclaim memories of remarkable black individuals from the margins. Manganyi's clinical psychologist practice informed his methods in which he spends time listening to individuals who are the subjects of his biographies talk about their lives. His data is a combination of history gleaned from personal letters, interviews and stories about the biography subject as told by others. Rassool's (2004: 5) approach explores the theoretical and methodological aspects of biography, considering the portrait and biography as necessary subject matter for contributing to historical writing and producing new knowledge. As for Mokoena, it is rummaging through the archive to write about the people whose development intertwines with the advent of colonialism at the southern slope of Africa. These scholars approach biography from different angles, dependent on the individual needs and aims of the biographer. Working with the theoretical perspectives of these scholars, in this chapter, I study Tladi as a thinker who navigates the political and socio-cultural landscape using a complicated African consciousness philosophy.

2.2 The Life Story of the Artist

Manganyi's career as a clinical psychologist influences his approach to biography, which he prefers to call life writing. The life stories of creative thinkers such as Dumile Feni show Manganyi's investigative process and method (Dumile Feni: *The Beauty of the Line*, 2012), Gerard Sekoto (*A Black Man Called Sekoto*, 1996) and Es'kia Mphahlele (*Bury Me at the Market Place*, 1984 and

Exiles and Homecomings, 1983). His interview methods approach these biographies as a direct influence from his clinical psychology sessions, where he spends time listening to the biography subject and talking about his life. The writing fuses biography and history, and socio-politics, all informed by personal letters, interviews and stories told by the person written about and those associated with him (Manganyi 1983: 4-5; 2012: 2). Manganyi's text draws from the historical context considering both the private and public lives of his subjects (Manganyi 1983: 3-4). Unlike his other biographies, in writing *Dumile Feni: The Beauty of the Line*, Manganyi worked with various writers who contributed comments, statements, reflections and essays he edited in order to construct a coherent narrative. But Sean O'Toole (2008: 70071) claims the *Dumile Feni* biography is "a really poor document that lapses into hagiography". In his defence, Manganyi (2016: 96) insists he "felt less prepared academically" to start working on the biography of Feni fifteen years after his death in 1990. In contrast, his earlier biographies included direct interaction with both his subjects, Mphahlele and Sekoto. As a result, in *Dumile Feni: The Beauty of the Line*, he asked various authors to remember the deceased subject, Dumile Feni (1942–1990); in this way, he solicited a variety of narratives and perspectives that resulted in wide-ranging essays, which interpreted Feni's personhood.

In contrast to the psycho-life-histories of Manganyi, Rassool's doctoral thesis attempts to go beyond a reliance on empirical data as its primary source. Rassool (2004: 5) approaches the biography of Isaac Bangani Tabata as the production of history and simultaneously a new form of knowledge. This biographical approach emphasises the importance of investigating the theoretical and methodological demands that form part of thinking, researching and writing the biography with reference to influences of cultural and historical factors. One of Rassool's important analytic approaches to biography is the consideration of image-making as a crucial creative strategy, which can be used to transcend the dependence on the archive and the biography subject as the primary focus (Rassool 2004: 14).¹⁸

Mokoena (2015: 169) writes about reclaiming what she calls the 'lost sight' of the 19th and 20th-century black individuals who were generally the products of mission education. Her book, *Magema Fuze: The Making of a Kholwa Intellectual*, studies Fuze's ground-breaking book, *Abantu*

¹⁸ Rassool (1999: 10) points to Bogumil Jewsiewicki's exhibition, *A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art* at the Museum of African Art in New York City to demonstrate art's ability to link the past to the present through image production. Jewsiewicki curated a group exhibition of 55 paintings, which explored the various stages of Patrice Lumumba's life.

Abamnyama Lapa Bavela Ngakona (1922),¹⁹ including his letters, petitions and articles in newspapers such as *Ilanga Lase Natal*, the now-defunct *Inkanyiso Yase Natal* and *Ipepa lo Hlanga* published from the second half of the 1800s (Mokoena 2015: 169). My research situates Tladi within the discourse of life writing in a similar vein explored by Manganyi in his biographical work. This approach allows Tladi, as the biography subject, to recount his experiences first-hand. Also, the process focuses on his development through the people, events and places to which he connected along his life journey (Williams 2012: 398). These encounters form the context of Tladi's consciousness, which I analyse against personal and professional motivations and choices. Such a probe "enters the realm of psychology" as it allows me to penetrate his inside view or interiority (Rollyson 2008: 252). By analysing Tladi's development in interacting with various people, events and places, I insert him into the country's socio-cultural history. For William McKinley Runyan (1982: 57, 201), such a psychological approach in the study of biography is psychobiography, which is informed by its actors' social and historical context. Alan C. Elms (1994: 4) shares this understanding of psychobiography in considering "a biography that makes substantial use of psychological theory and knowledge". These theories of biographic approaches underscore my research, especially employed to balance the memories of Tladi against what other people say about him and the archive.

This way of gathering data combines Rassool's approach to biography, particularly the investigation of its form and theory, alongside Mokoena's method of mining the archive. Following these authors, my ideal strategy in studying the 'Biographical Tapestry of Lefifi Tladi' in this chapter blends psychobiography, the archive and analysis of biography as a subject matter. Manganyi's (1973: 40) assertion about a way of "being-black-in-the-world", seen in how people interact with their environment, other people and the self, inspires my framework. I articulate Tladi's biography within this distinctive way of being-black-in-the-world and framed by South Africa's socio-political and historical context.

2.3 Biographical Details of Lefifi Tladi

Ernest Levi Tsoloane Kole's (1940-1990) epigraph at the opening of this chapter, which expresses the aberration of being black, fits snugly with the life of Tladi. Tladi is the firstborn in a family of

¹⁹ The book delineates the epic and historical origins of the Zulu nation (Masilela 2013: 191).

five siblings, including Antoinette, Felix (deceased), Audrey and Colin. Tladi was born on 4 January 1949, less than a year after the National Party seized political power as a government that instituted the vicious apartheid system in South Africa. His place of birth at the corner of Thuli and Le Fleur Streets in the cultural melting pot of Lady Selbourne, was made of a community located West of Pretoria in Gauteng, South Africa. Before its inhumane forced removal, this multicultural township, 10 kilometres to the northwest of the Pretoria city centre, occupied the site of the present-day suburb of Suideberg (Kgari-Masondo 2008: 70). Tladi was born in a double-storied house at Ga-Motlhe where his parents rented two rooms from the family of the late composer, bassist and actor, Ernest Mogotsi Motlhe (1941-2011) (L. Tladi, personal communication, 20 May, 2020).²⁰ As narrated by Tladi, his family later moved to rent a house at the corner of Hector and Bambatha Streets in the same township as Lady Selborne (L. Tladi, personal communication, 20 May, 2020). His mother, Nomazizi Tladi, was a nurse and his father, Hosea Tladi, a senior traffic officer²¹ under “the exclusively all-white” City Council of Pretoria (CCP) before he established himself as a successful entrepreneur in Lady Selbourne (Mojapelo 2009: 215, 217).

Tladi was seven years old in 1956 when he started primary school at Khuzwayo-Nkomo in Lady Selbourne. Marking this period is the National Party government’s overhaul and dilution of the education of black people (Manganyi 2016: 14) through the imposed Bantu Education Act in 1953. For better high school education, in 1964, Tladi’s parents sent him to a Roman Catholic boarding school known as Pax High School outside Pietersburg (now Polokwane). Initiated in 1928 by the world-renowned religious organisation Brothers for Charity, this school for boys in Ga-Mashashane obeyed strict Roman Catholic doctrine such as morning and evening prayers, baptism, holy communion and confirmation, among others. At the time Tladi was schooling at Pax, in Lady Selbourne, black people experienced the government’s normalised processes of spatial segregation and forced removals that “uprooted, reshuffled and resettled” the community according to ethnic groups (Tabata 1959: 17). Owing to such inhumane draconian policies legislating forced removals,

²⁰ The jazzman, Ernest Mogotsi Motlhe, is also known for performing alongside the likes of Lefifi’s uncle, Gabriel Tladi, Busi Mhlongo and Thandi Klaasen before he went to exile in the United Kingdom in 1972. In London, he began writing film and television music scores while performing with greats such as Courtney Pine, Julian Bahula, and Chris McGregor as well as appearing in movies and documentaries. Motlhe returned to South Africa in 1991, continued performing and teaching music at institutions such as the Tshwane University of Technology and Mmabana Cultural Centre before succumbing to diabetes in 2011 (Kotlolo 2011).

²¹ During apartheid, nursing counted among the few well-paying and respectable professions open to black people (Horwitz 2009: 16). Generally, the communities around Gauteng townships held the black police and traffic officers in high regard for keeping local gangs at bay (as reported by the World newspaper from 1947) until they (police) started killing the young people in Soweto during the 1976 uprisings (Kynoch 2003).

black people's disorientation, including the young Tladi's family continued through involuntary movements out of and away from the suburbs and cities to townships such as Ga-Rankuwa, Atteridgeville, Umlazi, Mamelodi, Soweto, Nyanga, Kwa-Thema, Langa and KwaMashu.

Tladi was an opinionated young person who was never shy about expressing his thoughts and feelings. Thus, his outspokenness led to his expulsion during his second year at Pax High School. The dismissal followed what he says is the foolishness of boyhood that could be read as early signs and qualities of his will to speak out his thoughts and feelings. Also, it shows a will that later would be shaped by his association with Geoff Mphakati, Dashiki and the Black Consciousness Movement. After expulsion in 1965, he returned home and continued his studies at Ga-Rankuwa's Top Secondary School. Unlike the mission-inspired Pax High School, Top Secondary School fell directly under the aegis of the Bantu Education, whose purpose was training the so-called non-white people to become subservient and thus servants to whites in South Africa (Cole 1967: 96). The conditions in these schools were generally characterised by overcrowding in classrooms, shortages of teachers who were often incompetent and poorly paid, expensive school fees, books and uniforms for a people whose economic activities suffered from suppression (Mzamane 1981: 7-8). Despite the poisonous Bantu Education, Tladi's political consciousness was cultivated and on the rise. He recalls how, during this time, he gained confidence as a competent public speaker through "showing off of one's abilities with the English language," a competence aided by studying the book *Student's Companion* (L. Tladi, personal communication, 12 June, 2019). At Top Secondary, he constantly used "grand, eloquent words" during their debating sessions (L. Tladi, personal communication, 12 June, 2019). Tladi developed an interest in reading and memorising the work of the old British poets such as William Shakespeare (1564-1616), William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), who formed part of the school curriculum.

Owing to challenging circumstances that made black life a living nightmare, in 1966, Tladi dropped out of Top Secondary School just a few months into completing Form 3 (currently referred to as Grade 10). Around this time, his family was among the last black communities to be forcefully moved from Lady Selbourne to start a new life in Mamelodi. Before settling down and orientating themselves, they were moved again to Ga-Rankuwa Zone 3 (Mojapelo 2009: 217). It is on record that in October 1968, the City Council of Pretoria forcefully removed the last 39 families from Lady Selborne (Mojapelo 2009: 222). This erratic forced movement of black families and communities from one place to another have had disorientating, disintegrating and destabilising effects on social, cultural and educational practices in South Africa. Referring to the disorientation, Kopano Ratele

(2019: 45) writes that this way of experiencing being-black-in-the world severely “affects the voice, thinking, emotion, knowledge and experience itself”. This black suffering was intentional, designed and engineered by the apartheid regime and its white voters, who benefitted from the oppression, exploitation and degeneration of black life in South Africa (Manganyi 1973: 99-103). Tladi’s conduct, which led to his expulsion from Pax High School and dropping out of Top Secondary School, should be viewed in this socially engineered black torment by the apartheid regime; equally so are his political, cultural and artistic consciousness and activism. The latter argument is regarding the making of black revolutionary figures who resisted, fought and transgressed oppressive and exploitative practices of the “hegemonic” apartheid regime (Farred 2003: 10).

Thus, amid brutal apartheid, there emerged in black townships radical spaces and activism. These spaces prepared individuals espousing political and cultural consciousness that would benefit the likes of Tladi. One of them was “a huge black detribalised apparition” (Addison 1974) named Geoff Matlharene Mphakati, a man who, in addition to his job as a messenger for the Brocken Hagen and Louw Quantity Surveyors, assumed the role of coordinating black artists, musicians and writers around the Pretoria region (L. Tladi, personal interview, 13 January, 2019). Mphakati was a friend of Tladi’s uncle, Gabriel Tladi and this friendship facilitated Lefifi’s interaction with Mphakati. Another friend brought to Gabriel Tladi’s attention that his nephew showed disinterest in formal schooling and Mphakati took Lefifi’s predicament seriously (L. Tladi, personal interview, 13 January, 2019). Mphakati’s role is important to underscore here, as it alerts to the critical and attentive black minds who embraced the mission wage war against the dehumanising of black lives by the apartheid regime. Such black minds are politically, socially, culturally and educationally awake regarding the wellness and advancement or disempowerment of young and old black men and women in the township. Mphakati became one of these vernacular intellectuals who pursued “new possibilities for subaltern articulation” by making it his life mission to help artists (Farred 2003: 13). Thus, the impossibility of many black people to survive, succeed and rise above the entrapment of the township life should not be reductively viewed as their weak ability and by extension their failure. Biko (2004: 61) reminded the Conference of Black Ministers of Religion at the Ecumenical Lay Training Centre, south of Pietermaritzburg in 1972 that:

Stern-faced ministers stand on pulpits every Sunday to heap loads of blame on black people in townships for their thieving, house-breaking, stabbing, murdering, adultery, etc. No one ever attempts to relate all these vices to poverty, unemployment, over-crowding, lack of schooling and migratory labour.

It is an engineered and disabling impossibility; hence, I read Tladi's dismissal and the subsequent dropping out of school within the framework of apartheid in disorienting the lived experiences of young black South Africans. As a socially engineered experience, this mode of experiencing the world built not only a negative self-image of the black body but also the inferiority of the black psyche through propaganda, violence and the promulgation of unjust laws over the years (Manganyi 1973: 51-52).²² Tladi's coming into the world coincided with the formalisation of such a vile setup, the racial polarisation of South Africa through government policies. Thus, I maintain that Tladi's self-image as part of the oppressed became confused and disorientated. His experience of life under the yoke of enforced racial oppression and its attendant difficulties proved very alienating.²³

In *Being-Black-in-the-World*, Manganyi (1973: 18) recommends Black Consciousness as a positive knowledge for the pounded black body and psyche within a formalised white supremacist atmosphere. Manganyi's (2004: 53) recommendation rhymes with Biko's argument that "we cannot be conscious of ourselves and yet remain in bondage". Black Consciousness encouraged self-knowledge, awareness and acknowledgement of the oppressed as a progressive reaction towards experiencing the world while black (Ratele 2019: 11). It counters the mental slavery and feelings of social death²⁴ experienced by the oppressed as a result of more than 300 years of the violent and conscious onslaught.

2.3.1 Tladi's Intellect and Gramsci's Notion of the 'organic intellectual'²⁵

In 1966, Mphakati and his wife, Maokaneng Mphakati, welcomed the impulsive teenager into their home in Mamelodi West, ZB3 Section. Tladi praises and regards Mphakati as a guru who mentored and challenged him intellectually (L. Tladi, personal communication, 12 March, 2018). Mphakati introduced the young Tladi to poetry, music and literature of African artists from the continent and

²² Among others, 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 primary education enabling them to work as unskilled labourers (Atuahene 2014: 48).

²³ Similarly, over a decade earlier, Ernest Kole (1967: 192) wanted to be a medical doctor when he started school but the introduction of Bantu Education in 1954 led to him dropping out of basic school at age 15.

²⁴ Social death may refer to a lack of identity outside that given by the master. This sense of sub-humanity, invisibility (Patterson 1982: 38-9; Atuahene 2014: 30; Ellison 1952: 7) and "a subordinated, inferior status" was reserved for black people, who were regarded as animals (Carmichael & Hamilton 1967: 23).

²⁵ Organic intellectuals create knowledge and culture within their social groups as a way of introducing new ways of doing things (Hoare & Nowell Smith 1971: 1-23).

the diaspora.²⁶ Tladi was exposed to a feat which revolutionised his worldview that year and for many more years to come in his life. Mphakati's library consisted of South Africa's mostly banned literature and music, educating about the ideas and philosophies of pan-Africanism,²⁷ particularly blackness. It included encyclopaedias about jazz, poetry, painting and biographies of musicians, artists and poets. Reaping the fruits of the intensive labour of reading Mphakati's books, Tladi's critical and poetic consciousness developed markedly and speedily. Similar to how he handled British poetry at school, Tladi made it his duty to start memorising and reciting the poems. He insists that learning and performing the work of the older, mature and established poets such as Don Mattera, Keorapetse Kgotsile and Mazisi Kunene helped him to understand his own poetry (L. Tladi, personal communication, 12 January, 2019). In addition to intensifying his consciousness about the role of the arts in society's development, Tladi's time at the Mphakatis cultivated his hunger for reflective writing, which envisioned the world beyond the confines of apartheid.

In 1966, Tladi co-founded the arty youth club, De Olympia, which ran impromptu cultural activities, such as indigenous games, music, dance and poetry performances at local primary schools. Members of the club included Anthony Molongoana Mokou (b. 1955), Morris Matsobane Legoabe (b. 1949) and Matsemela Isaac Nkoana (b. 1948). As a photographer, Legoabe became instrumental in documenting black artists and musicians, including their artworks and performances, with the idea of compiling a photographic book. De Olympia's activities led to Mamsy Motsepe, a local social worker offering the young men the use of a four-roomed house in Ga-Rankuwa Zone 5 in 1969 (L. Tladi, personal communication, 23 March, 2019). Tladi and friends later demolished the inside walls of the house, turning it into a clubhouse and cultural centre that became a space in which they lived communally and pursued pan-African oriented socialistic practices, principles and values. His father, Hosea, bought him an assortment of musical instruments, such as the African drums, a guitar and the piccolo he shared with his friends at the clubhouse. Consequently, a band

²⁶ Tladi became exposed to names such as James Matthews, Don Mattera, Oswald Mtshali, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Miles Davies, Amiri Baraka, Langstone Hughes, David Diop, Amilca Cabral, Okot P' Bitek, James Baldwin, Richard Wright and Eldridge Cleaver.

²⁷ Although a set definition seems vague (King 1973: xiv; Esedebe 1994: 3;), Okechukwu Mezu (1965: 16) writes that pan-Africanism is a philosophy, which transcends economics, politics, and culture by advantaging unity of purpose at the expense of individual wishes of the people of African descent. On the other hand, Olisanwuche Esedebe (1994: 5) writes that it is a cultural and political experience of the people of African ancestry. The primary emphasis of this idea lies in its quest for unity, self-reliance and solidarity among Africans from around the world. Pan-Africanism foregrounds knowledge and pride in African history, heritage and culture to bestow dignity while countering oppression, inferiority complex and racial segregation among black people.

called The Malombo Jazz Messengers was formed in 1969 and renamed Dashiki in 1971, “a Black music group whose creativity” is described by Mafika Gwala (1973: 108) as a cultural act that “draws from the rich beauty of African music.”²⁸ Its compositions combined music and poetry. With the powerful effect of African drums, the sounds of Dashiki reflected the ceremonial, consciousness-inducing music of malopo, an indigenous sound inflected with modern sonic qualities usually attributed to ritual practices of traditional healing and spirituality. The live performances of malopo combined African drums with western instruments to form complex and hybrid radical musical compositions. The members included Tladi on the African drums, Gilbert Tebogo Mabale on flute and saxophone, Mokou Rantobeng on vibraphone, with Laurence Mampya Moloisi replacing Fanyana Malesela on guitar in 1971. Members of Dashiki comprehended the importance of working as a unit, if not a collective, to advance black pride and African dignity, profundity and cultural eloquence. In the spirit of pan-Africanism²⁹ and Black Consciousness,³⁰ the collective often worked with painters, poets, musicians and actors to produce a tapestry of multi-layered representations, performances and displays.

Tladi’s intellect and consciousness grew exponentially as a consequence of the conversations of Dashiki’s youth club and activities that led to the idea of establishing a museum of African arts. The year was 1970, when the Dashiki Art Museum, dominated by Tladi’s paintings on the walls, was inaugurated and became an open workspace for local young people. It was a space for planning and hosting cultural activities such as art and poetry workshops, exhibitions and African drumming sessions. With the help of Mphakati and the backing of the Black Consciousness’s Culture

²⁸ Phillip Tabane, Abey Cindi and Julian Bahula originated the concept of the *malombo* music, which fused traditional African drums with modern instruments. The music is an offshoot from the Vhavenda and Bapedi’s way of life. The idea of *malopo* or *malombo* seems to have inspired several South African creative individuals to foreground African forms in their aesthetics. Dashiki refers to a colourful, loosely fitting shirt, which originated in West Africa. Generally, men and women with pan-Africanist worldviews wear it while others don it to assert their blackness.

²⁹ Okechukwu Mezu (1965: 16) writes that pan-Africanism is a philosophy, which transcends economics, politics and culture by advantaging unity of purpose at the expense of individual wishes of the people of African descent. On the other hand, Esedebe (1994: 5) writes that it is a cultural and political experience of the people of African ancestry. The primary emphasis of this idea lies in its quest for unity, self-reliance and solidarity among Africans from around the world. Pan-Africanism foregrounds knowledge and pride in African history, heritage and culture to bestow dignity while countering oppression, inferiority complex and racial segregation among black people.

³⁰ In the summer of 1971, Biko (2004: 53) defined Black Consciousness as “the realisation by black [people] of the need to rally together with [their] brothers [and sisters] around the course of their operation – the blackness of their skin – and operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude”. Here Biko managed to dissect one of the primary reasons, the realisation of how one’s skin colour mobilised the student activists to find ways of liberating themselves from the source of their oppression.

Committee (CUL-COM), some of these activities were showcased at black schools and universities, such as the University of the North, known as Turfloop in Limpopo and the former University College of Zululand in Ongoye near Empangeni, KwaZulu-Natal North Coast. During these developments, Tladi cultivated a habit of collecting works of black artists and thus the museum's walls boosted paintings and drawings by the likes of Isaac Nkoana (b. 1948), Winston Saoli (1950-1995), Percy Sedumedi (1950-2007), Vukasihambe Mkhumbuza (b. 1951) and Fikile Magadlela (1952-2003), among others. The Dashiki Art Museum became an intellectual space in the middle of Ga-Rankuwa; it brought black artists from neighbouring communities and distant locations of Johannesburg and Soweto to its cultural site to learn about the diversity of contemporary black art, civilisation and politics.

In 1971, Nkoana became an indispensable museum member who began teaching painting and sculpture to anyone who showed interest. Nkoana's seeming endless knowledge earned him the title of being referred to as Sir Ike. The technical advancement of individuals such as Magadlela, Nkoana and Mkhumbuza influenced and won them admiration and respect from their colleagues at the museum (Hattingh & Mphakati 1998: 52-53). These young artists, according to Tladi, became the envy of their peers as they advanced their creative craft, especially painting with oils on canvas and board, which were of high quality and expensive materials that the poor and working classes could not afford. In other words, the museum became a space of black ambitions, the pursuit of creative innovation and excellence.

As an avid reader, Tladi's curiosity sent him to the Van Schaik Bookshop at Church Street in the Pretoria city centre. This visit was informed by the hunger and drive for creative and intellectual advancements that were key principles in the activities of Dashiki. These principles were collectively shared even though individual artists tailored them according to the specificities of their interests and art. Under the guidance of Mphakati, Tladi and friends requested a list of the banned books in the country from the manager of Van Schaik Bookshop. Their rationale for requesting a list of banned books was pitched under the pretext of wanting to know these books so they could stay clear from breaking the law because of ignorance. The inventory of banned titles and authors helped Tladi and his friends to locate the books at the University of South Africa's (Unisa) Research Library,³¹ especially if the bookshop did not have some of the banned books. The young men

³¹ Publications such as Walter Rodney's *How Europe Under-Developed Africa* (1972), Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967), Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Kwameh Nkrumah's *Neo-colonialism: Last Stages of Imperialism* (1965).

contacted Fourie Matlala, a cleaner at the Unisa library, who helped them find and access some of the books. In gaining access to literature considered dangerous and censored by the apartheid regimes, Tladi and friends were on a political mission, but one premised on conscientising and decolonising the mind (Nkrumah 1964 & Fanon 1967). They were increasingly intent on politically conscious books, making the Dashiki Art Museum a politicised cultural space boasting an impressive library of African literature by black writers worldwide. This literature helped the young men to understand the position of black people in the world, as they gauged the importance of self-definition, self-assertion and self-determination necessary for challenging the perception of black inferiority, which was gaining a despicable status of normality at the time.

The advancement of the Dashiki club and its museum took place in the context in which Mphakati's house in Mamelodi West continued to be a hive of creativity and intellectual exchange between artists, musicians and poets. These black spaces ran parallel activities that contributed to the development of black creatives. Yet, Mphakati's house remained a frequent attraction to individual talents such as Nkoana, Clive Zithulele Ncapai (b. 1946), Moss Mogale and Don Laka (b. 1958). These black creatives found abandoned inspiration and courage to paint, rehearse, read and engage in stimulating conversations.³² Also, Mphakati enjoyed hosting informal jazz listening sessions at his house, where Tladi and other young artists participated in lengthy discussions about music and freedom. These socio-cultural interactions are best articulated in the essay, *Some African Cultural Aspects*, where Biko (2004: 50) argues how the expressive quality of jazz music by Africans became a part of the culture:

[Jazz] is fast becoming our modern culture. A culture of defiance, self-assertion and group pride and solidarity. This is a culture that emanates from a situation of common experience of oppression. Just as it now finds expression in our music and our dress, it will spread to other aspects. This is a new and modern black culture to which we have given a major contribution. This is the modern black culture that is responsible for the restoration of our faith in ourselves and therefore offers hope in the direction we are taking from here.

Mphakati encouraged the many young people who frequented his house to explore while grasping the value of the arts in constructing a positive identity. Through his resourcefulness and love for jazz, literature and art, Mphakati spearheaded efforts that saw the first sponsored group exhibition of black artists in 1972 at the United States embassy auditorium in Pretoria and Johannesburg

³² Artists such as Cyril Khumalo (b. 1950), Motlhabane Mashiangwako (1945-2010), Dikobe Martins (b. 1956), Ezrom Legae (1938-1999), Mike Mmutle (b. 1948) and David Phoshoko (b. 1945) had also frequented the Mphakati household at some stage in their careers.

(Brougham-Cook 1984: 286). The same year he initiated the Pretoria Jazz Appreciation Society, whose sessions featured art exhibitions and book readings. These meetings introduced cutting-edge, avant-garde jazz music to the local scene. This scene was soon to be augmented by international music, art and literature. Such developments occurred in 1973 when Jim Baker (1935-2001) became the first African-American to be assigned to Pretoria as a commercial and economic expert at the United States embassy (Mwakikagole 2015: 234). Baker introduced African-American music, literature and art to those who frequented his private home in the white suburbs. He introduced Tladi and colleagues to the poetry and music of the Last Poets, whose influence revolutionised Dashiki's approach to poetry (Hattingh et al. 1998: 10). Noteworthy, Mphakati continued promoting local black artists through exhibitions, but this time at various homes of the American, Australian and Canadian diplomats (Hattingh et al. 1998: 10).

During this time, some student activists of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) contacted members of Dashiki. It was in anticipation of the SASO's week-long third General Students' Council of 2-9 July 1972 at St. Peter's Seminary in Hammanskraal. As per custom, the student activists "attempted to relate to as many groups in the community as possible" and hence established connections with the grassroots (SASO 1972: 10).³³ Individuals such as Mandla Langa (b. 1950), Steve Biko (1946-1977), Onkgopotse Tiro (1945-1974) and Pandelani Nefolovhodwe (b. 1947) visited members of Dashiki in Ga-Rankuwa (L. Tladi, personal communication, May 18, 2018). SASO appreciated Dashiki's foregrounding of the arts blending politics and culture to foster a positive black identity; consequently, the Dashiki members were invited to host a group exhibition at the conference.³⁴ Tladi claims to have gifted the visiting SASO members with about 16 books, a gesture which established and cemented their long-term relationship, particularly with the poet Mandla Langa (L. Tladi, personal communication, 12 March, 2018).

SASO started a cultural wing known as the Cultural Committee (CUL-COM), which coordinated the dissemination of politically insightful content through artist groups in South Africa's black

³³ SASO was formed in 1968 when a group of black university students broke away from the multiracial yet white-dominated National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). These student activists went on to develop a liberation worldview in 1971 at the University of Natal Black Section SASO Policy Manifesto, called Black Consciousness to challenge the damaging effects of psychological and physical oppression in South Africa (Mangena 1989: 11-12).

³⁴ SASO's strategy of spreading Black Consciousness ideology included the adoption of the word black to replace the derogatory non-white. The activists also took to experimenting with developmental, and literacy projects, which fostered self-reliance in the black communities around the country (Mamphela 1991).

communities. As with Black Consciousness, CUL-COM contracted black-only cultural groupings whose productions encouraged physical and psychological emancipation from racial oppression and exploitation. Groups such as Dashiki, Music Drama and Literature Institute (Mdali), Black Arts Studios, Mihloti, Batsumi, Theatre Council of Natal (TECON), Serpent Players and Malapanetharo used to perform at events and rallies organised by SASO (Hill 2015: 21). These cultural groups or collectives staged theatre, music and visual arts shows to black communities, black high school learners and black university colleges³⁵ to raise critical consciousness. In 1971, Tladi met Biko, then honorary president of the Black Consciousness Movement, in a consciousness-raising gathering in Ga-Rankuwa prior to SASO's gathering at St. Peter's Seminary in Hammanskraal. The two men spent three days with little sleep, discussing the importance of arts and culture in raising awareness among the oppressed (Dontsa 1990: 230). Tladi also developed a rapport with visual artist Fikile Magadlela (1952-2003) after meeting him at another CUL-COM-initiated arts event in Soweto's Mofolo Hall in 1972, admiring his imaginative, competent and large-scale drawings and sensible poetry (Hattingh et al. 1998: 183). Tladi credits Magadlela along with Nkoana for shaping his artistic and political worldview. Magadlela returned to Ga-Rankuwa with Tladi the same day they met in Soweto (Hattingh et al. 1998: 183). Tladi introduced Magadlela to the Mphakatis and some of the artists in Mamelodi West. In turn, Magadlela assisted Tladi in introducing to Mamelodi West the likes of Thami Mnye (1948-1985), Winston Saoli (1950-1995) and Ben Martins (b. 1956) (Hill 2018: 201).

Dashiki's live performances featured Tladi wearing a dashiki while strumming the African drums with his uncombed hair and a long chin beard. This image earned him the nickname Jomo after Kenya's post-independence leader and president, Jomo Kenyatta, who had a similar goatee beard (Addison 1974). Although Tladi started as a drummer, he later stopped and focused solely on poetry and painting. This might have happened after one of his exchanges with Mphakati about the quality of the art in the scene. The mentor suggested that Tladi start painting the type of compositions he wished to see, as if to anticipate Toni Morrison's 1981 Ohio Arts Council comment: "If you find a book you really want to read but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it" (Brown 1981: 106). Mphakati's suggestion seems to have stoked in Tladi a comprehension of the maintenance of systems using images and signs. This realisation might have encouraged him to investigate aesthetics in his terms along with a particular mode of spontaneous expression

³⁵ These black and ethnically divided institutions, established in 1960, and known as 'bush colleges', followed apartheid's dictates of creating a mistrust among the oppressed for the continuation of the evil regime (Biko 2004: 6).

suggestive of the Black Consciousness thinking and sensibility (Hill 2015: 183-4). Hill (2015: 23) claims that these forms encapsulating the Black Consciousness worldview include the freedom to create as one sees fit and as “an exercise in self-determination”. In order to add a different twist to Hill’s assertion, I maintain that Tladi’s artistic forms stem from his willingness to engage through experimentation with pan-African and Afrocentric modes of articulation he amassed from the music and the literature he read at Mphakati’s and Dashiki’s libraries, including other sources at his disposal.

Considering the proliferation of what became known as township art in the 1960s and 1970s, Tladi began to experiment with aesthetics, which attempted to fashion an alternative black experience transcending apartheid. This period followed years of political repression, culminating in the Sharpeville massacre of 21 March 1960, a mass killing of unarmed marchers organised by the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in protest against the *dompas*.³⁶ Several anti-apartheid activists who participated in similar March protests around the country were imprisoned. Another political blow to the black revolutionary struggle against the apartheid regime was the sentencing to life imprisonment of eight of the ten ANC leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Elias Motsoaledi at the Rivonia Treason Trial in 1964. This imprisonment was followed by the banning of political activities and political organisations in South Africa, and thus the subsequent mass exodus of politicians, activists, artists, writers and musicians into exile. As a result, general feelings of fear, poverty and vulnerability characterised the period as politics proved a dangerous undertaking. In contrast to the political drabness of the 1960s, a massive wave of cultural reawakening and heightened political awareness started showing towards the end of the 1960s, ignited by SASO politics and the birth of the Black Consciousness Movement. The politics of both SASO and the Black Consciousness Movement, including underground and grassroots organisations, agitated the 1970s and gave impetus to the 1976 student uprisings (Peterson 2006: 161). Although not studying at any formal institution at the time, Tladi was an active participant not only in the emergent socio-cultural and political melting pot but in the 1976 student

³⁶ The term means dumb pass and names an identity reference book issued to black people over 16 years old. Its purpose was to control their movements as they were compelled to it everywhere and all time they travelled in South Africa, especially in urban areas. Without the *dompas* black people risked imminent arrest and penalty under the Pass Laws Act of 1952. Writing in *On Your Own*, Musibudi Mangena (1989: 1) asserts that to get his *dompas* in 1965, “a benevolent conspiracy woven by some relatives” led swapping from Tzaneen (his original birthplace) to Pretoria as this would determine where he “would be allowed to stay, work and in some cases what kind of work you do and therefore the size of your income”.

revolution, whose national scale was affected by SASO and the Black Consciousness Movement, thus his arrest and detention.

Tladi was part of the intellectual think tank moulding an assertive and positive black self-image out of a confusing socio-political landscape. The brutality and harassment of security police towards these conscious black activists, cultural producers, artists and community workers began to mount in the systematic efforts to counter, repress, silence and kill the political and cultural initiatives by SASO, the Black Consciousness Movement and grassroots organisations in the 1970s. In 1974 the apartheid powers abruptly halted and closed the operations of the Dashiki Art Museum and hence in 1975, Dashiki folded its operations, and vibraphonist Mokou, subsequently skipped to Botswana. Subsequent to exploring cultural activism, Tladi, together with Bushy Tsokotlo Sepeng, Tebogo Mabale and Kanakana Matsena, started the short-lived The Poets to keep the teaching and learning momentum going on at home (L. Tladi, personal communication, 10 February, 2019). The Soweto 1976 student uprising and its repercussions, however, put a stop to the new group's contributions to the local cultural landscape.

It should be noted that prior to its disbandment, Dashiki worked with local schools as part of its 'conscientisation'³⁷ programme while enjoying a close relationship with most student leaders. It is no wonder that following closely on 16 June 1976, youth revolutions that started in Soweto before spreading to other townships around the country, Pretoria also began to burn. For his part, Tladi took to the burning of local schools, buses and beer halls³⁸ as part of the young people's rebellion against the white apartheid government. Singled out as both "agitator and inciter" (Zungu 1976), he was arrested and charged with public violence and the destruction of property on 18 June 1976. Tladi became an obvious target to the security police owing to his hard-hitting poetry (Addison 1974). Also, his involvement in the growth of Black Consciousness thinking became apparent through initiatives such as the De Olympia, Dashiki and Dashiki Art Museum. These community-

³⁷ In pursuit of unifying black people in and outside South Africa's learning institutions during the early 1970s, SASO approached Anne Hope to train them in the methods of community development and revolutionised by the Brazilian Paulo Freire (Buthelezi 1991: 122). This approach, called conscientisation seemed perfect because of its community-centeredness and the ability to accord the psychologically oppressed self-reliance and agency. Also, conscientisation promoted dialogue and reflection among the stakeholders (Mzamane 1991: 130).

³⁸ The apartheid government had strategically placed beer halls inside most townships to enable black people easy access to what they mistakenly perceived as traditional beer at affordable prices. This concoction seems addictive and poisonous because its imbibers end up with a foul, sour smell and a phuzi-face (bloated and puffy face), rendering them social outcasts.

orientated empowerment activities went against apartheid's dictates that were adamant in encouraging black ignorance, passivity, complacency and complicity through violent impositions of forced draconian laws, brutal punishment and cruel detention without trial.

Tladi was in detention with comrades for about three months and when they were released from prison on R300.00 bail each, some decided to skip the country. The "instructing attorney" (Mbanjwa 1975: 88), Shun Shetty, informed them that their charge of public violence and arson was changed to the crime of sabotage (Siluma 2016) which carried a minimum sentence of 18 years behind bars. This latter charge forced Tladi to leave for Botswana amid the growing popularity of Dashiki in the local South African showbiz and his talent as a promising painter was getting recognition (Shuenyane 1983: 99). Owing to its proximity to Gauteng and its Frontline State³⁹ status, Botswana gave refuge to many South African artists, activists and politicians such as Bessie Head in 1964, Onkgopotse Tiro in 1973 and Tladi's fellow Dashiki member, Rantobeng Mokou in 1975. Tladi narrates how, with Israel Sesoko, as young men, they took advantage of the availability of a minibus belonging to Dashiki's flautist, Gilbert Mabale and his wife Debs Matshoba (L. Tladi, personal communication, 15 April, 2018). Mabale and Matshoba agreed to drive Tladi and Sesoko towards the Botswana border in Zeerust and from there, they walked across the border into Botswana. Upon entering Botswana, they immediately reported to the nearest police station, which resulted in them spending about a month in prison pending proper documentation by the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR). They later received refugee statuses and the accompanying monthly subsidy of 10 Pula (L. Tladi, personal communication, 15 April, 2018).⁴⁰

Tladi stayed with other refugees in Botswana at Bontleng, a low-income housing district south of Gaborone. He formed the Dashiki Art Ensemble with Mokou and other exiled South African artists, which merged with various cultural groups to form the Tuka Cultural Unit (L. Tladi, personal communication, 3 June, 2018). The unit fell under the leadership of the ANC. Tuka is a corruption of the Afrikaans word *toeka*, which means extended time ago and seemly a nostalgic reflection on life in South Africa (Hattingh et al. 1998: 15). During its lifespan, Tuka ran cultural workshops,

³⁹ This group of southern African countries including Mozambique, Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and from 1980, Zimbabwe united to help the oppressed South Africans' fight against apartheid. This collective of countries later formed the Southern African Development Coordination Conference "to reduce economic dependence on South Africa and promote regional co-operation" (Bernstein 1994: xxix).

⁴⁰ The Botswanian Pula is the currency equivalent to the South African Rand.

slide shows and lectures at the National Museum and Art Gallery and local schools in Gaborone. These cultural activities included African drumming and art exhibitions across the two countries.

Mphakati continued with his role as coordinator by transporting artworks across the South African and Botswana border during this time (L. Tladi, personal communication, 20 March, 2019). His efforts were to help with organising exhibitions at the National Museum and Art Gallery in Gaborone. He also brought some books and slides that Tladi left behind in Ga-Rankuwa in 1976 (L. Tladi, personal communication, 20 March, 2019). In 1977, the ANC sponsored Tuka to participate in the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos, Ibadan and Kaduna in Nigeria (L. Tladi, personal communication, 10 June, 2018). The festival took place from 15 January to 12 February amid domestic challenges in Nigeria, under the military headship of Lieutenant General Olusegun Obasanjo (Moore 2016: 112). Tladi formed part of a group of artists that included Ben Arnold (b. 1942), Mandla Langa, Phumlani Rampholo and Molefe Pheto, who attended the pan-African cultural festival. His first trip to Europe happened the same year when he accompanied Kalushi Drake Koka and the Azanian Dancers and Singers to perform in London. In 1979, Mphakati coordinated the inclusion of Pretoria artists such as Rebeiro, Harry Moyaga (b. 1945) and Mokou with those exiled in Botswana such as Johannes Malatji (b. 1952), Tito Phake (b. 1951) and Tladi under the umbrella of Tuka in a travelling exhibition to Sweden and sponsored by the Swedish International Development Aid (SIDA) (Hattingh et al. 1998: 15-16). Later in 1980 and 1981, the exhibition travelled to the Netherlands and Germany, respectively (Hattingh et al. 1998: 15-16).

In 1980 Tladi held his first solo exhibition of monochromatic paintings, washes and drawings titled *Mosima Motlhaela Thupa* at the National Museum and Art Gallery in Gaborone. A chance meeting with a Swedish diplomat and art teacher during this exhibition led to a fruitful conversation about art and education. Their exchange resulted in Tladi receiving a lucrative scholarship from the Lutheran World Foundation. Receiving 9000 kronor⁴¹ a month, in July 1980, Tladi went on to study Fine Arts and History of Art at the Gerlesborgsskolan (Gerlesborgsskolan School of Fine Art) in Stockholm, Sweden, until 1986. The school boasts three branches, one in the village of Gerlesborg in the west of Sweden, another in the centre of Stockholm and the third in Provence, France. At Gerlesborgsskolan, perceptual studies dominated the first six months of art training, as the centre encouraged students to observe and understand while interpreting what they saw. This new training

⁴¹ This Swedish currency is the equivalent of the South African Rand.

helped Tladi to begin appreciating the technical aspects of artmaking, particularly visual elements such as line, light and form (Hattingh et al. 1998: 56). Fast sketching and drawing from live models and still life followed in the second part of the academic year. In 1981, during his second year, Tladi started with intensive studies in colour theory (L. Tladi, personal communication, 4 February, 2020). The same year he came across the newly established communal open studio of the African American painter, Harvey Tristan Cropper (1931-2012), who was a native of Harlem in New York City but had moved to Sweden in 1981.

Tladi was introduced to Cropper by Jackie Mazibuko, a South African freedom fighter who arrived in Sweden in the 1970s (Hedlund 2015). As a refugee from South Africa, in 1981, Tladi was allowed to study painting, drawing, graphic art and art history at Cropper's studio for free to supplement his studies at Gerlesborgsskolan. He claims to have learnt much from this communal space of a black American artist and teacher than he did at Gerlesborgsskolan. He regards Cropper as his guru and mentor. Tladi credits Cropper for introducing him to the humorous disposition to life, creativity and extensive letter-writing accompanied by sketches and the word game of Scrabble (L. Tladi, personal communication, 4 February, 2020). Cropper conducted art classes from his studio in Stockholm, welcoming musicians, poets and artists from various backgrounds in a similar fashion as Mphakati did during the mid-1960s in South Africa. In 1990, when Tladi had his own studio in Stockholm, he left Cropper's studio.

After he completed his studies at Gerlesborgsskolan in 1986 and whilst attending Cropper's studio between 1981 and 1990, Tladi held a few temporary cleaning jobs at local laboratories. Tladi's primary tasks in the laboratories included washing test tubes with alcohol to pay for his living expenses and supplementary art classes (L. Tladi, personal communication, 12 April, 2019). During this time, he continued to work on his poetry and painting until he could sustain himself as a full-time artist; he also continued to work part-time to help sporadically supplement his livelihood and art materials. Throughout the years, Tladi has exhibited his art across major European cities in countries such as Sweden, Germany, Brussels, Amsterdam and Norway, among others. At this point, his artistic methods showed evidence of reliance on the preparatory sketches that seem to have preceded his often-colourful, pastel oil paintings, dominated by the prevalence of white tint. Tladi boasts about mastering the so-called African colours he engaged as a visual critique highlighting the evils of apartheid he articulated with a compelling visual language. The artist benefitted from his studies at Gerlesborgsskolan and Cropper's studio and his self-learning, trial and error with friends and acquaintances during his formative years in South Africa and Botswana.

These formative learning and experiences at Mphakati's home, Dashiki club and Dashiki Art Museum, among others, can neither be underestimated nor overshadowed by his formal education in Sweden, precisely because they remain the foundational skills and familiarities that partly characterised Tladi as an organic and vernacular creative thinker and cultural producer able to translate experiences of the marginalised (Farred 2003: 11). Even the profound influence of Mphakati remains operative, noting that Tladi is grateful to Mphakati for encouraging him to collect over 800 books on jazz and diverse titles with pan-Africanist and Afrocentric perspectives. This literature continued to mould his identity and thoughts while opening his eyes to the profound depth of the African continent.

In South Africa, 1990 dawned with the unbanning of political parties, the release of political prisoners and the return of exiles. The period between 1990 to 1993 witnessed debilitating political violence "between IFP [Inkatha Freedom Party] and ANC supporters", Zulus against Xhosas in the hostels and the government-built four-roomed township houses before the historic 1994 national elections, which ushered in the first democratically elected black president (Naki 2017: 164-168). This political violence and the suspicious authenticity of the political changes that took place from the early to mid-1990s in South Africa seem to have induced a sense of critical cynicism in Tladi. I am referring to cynicism which seems to have discouraged him from packing his bags and returning home for good. Considering his pre-exile personal, educational and cultural experiences and Black Consciousness politics, he might have struggled to reconcile the official collapse of apartheid with the freedom hype that characterised the popular narrative of democratic South Africa. Although he missed the spectacle of the Johannesburg Africus Biennale in 1995, Tladi was content with attending the opening reception of his two-men-show with Magadla at the Unisa Art Gallery on 18 May before he quickly returned to Sweden. Titled Xedzedze, the exhibition was curated by Mphakati, whose objective was to re-introduce Tladi to the field of visual arts and cultural production and his country of birth after nineteen years in exile.

I contend that Black Consciousness is an extension of pan-Africanism which started in Manchester, United States, during the second half of the 1700s before it subsequently spread to Africa and other parts of the world (Adebajo 2020: 25). Writing in *The Pan-African Pantheon: Prophets, Poets, and Philosophies*, Adekeye Adebajo (2020) argues the ideology of pan-Africanism developed as a reaction against the spread of white supremacy, trans-Atlantic slave trade and imperialism. In the same breath, the philosophy of Black Consciousness discussed in my research developed during the late 1960s among South African students at black university campuses as an anti-oppression

force and black unity against white oppression. This consciousness stressed the primacy of mental freedom, intricately intertwined with African consciousness. Both ideologies share similarities in their appeal to Africa's heritage, self-reliance and solidarity against colonial conquest, opposing and subverting black inferiority. Black Consciousness drew from these ideas of the all-encompassing pan-Africanism expounded through music and literature, generally banned in South Africa.⁴²

Tladi immersed himself in these prohibited works at the Mphakati household from the second half of 1960. Insightful music and literature, together with his informative discussions with Mphakati, impacted his consciousness and personality in the political sense of being-black-in-the-world. His exposure to a particular kind of literature while growing up has given him a universal perspective and an appreciation of Africa and the diaspora. He uses this experience to reimagine blackness beyond the confines of imperialism, colonialism and apartheid by foregrounding his forms on the consciousness of the African continent. Tladi's freedom to create poetry while painting without limitations mirrors the essence of Black Consciousness. Together with like-minded individuals, he developed a way of life influenced by what Biko (2004: 44-46) terms African cultural concepts such as communalism, cooperation and joint human action. Tladi and his youthful colleagues understood their mission as messengers and cultural workers for the common good. Art was one of the means toward achieving this necessary human good. His creative work and cultural activism have been a search for the language to express and communicate this message, which I discuss in the following chapter.

⁴² The sayings and writings about the universal black experience, solidarity and pride by leaders and intellectual revolutionaries such as Edward Blyden, George Padmore, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, Amílcar Cabral, Sedar Senghor and Kwame Nkrumah among others suffered from censorship in South Africa.

Chapter 3 “How Art Beholds the Elevated Senses” in Lefifi Tladi’s Eclectic Cultural Constructions

3.1 Art and the Human Senses

In the previous chapter, I investigated Tladi’s biography, covering his childhood, education, activism and cultural influences. Employing the framework of Afrocentrism as one of the branches of pan-Africanism and one of Tladi’s theoretical frameworks, in this chapter, I engage the artist’s eclectic cultural constructions inherent in his creative expressions, played out in his body of paintings and drawings. My interest in Tladi’s visual arts advances the research thesis on his biography, which is fertile with resources and metaphors of alternative worlds manifesting through cultural production and political engagement. Tladi’s life evokes images of what Robert Farris Thompson (1984: xiii-xiv) calls “the flash of the spirit” of the African people’s ability to create streams of thoughtful visions, which are intimately entwined with the continent’s diverse cultural streams. As a result, Tladi’s art, poetry and political activism explore memories of Africa’s ancient civilisations and worldviews to mediate contemporary black existence in South Africa. Experiments with intricate word formations, patterns and universal freedoms inform some of his cultural productions and political engagement as a thinker.

My exploration in this chapter threads the influences of various Afrocentric imaginations that privilege the African worldview as its centre. I have organised my analysis of Tladi’s art around specific themes, subject matter and forms that constitute the meaning and aesthetic of his work fashioned through a visual vocabulary that communicates an understanding of the artist’s lived reality. For a complex understanding of Tladi’s work, I have sought to undertake a critical interpretation of his art within a particular context privileging personal freedoms, Afrocentric worldview and political persuasion. I explore his aesthetics, which probe beyond the vagaries of African consciousness as “a common pool of ... tribal ways of life that can be said to make up an African way of life” (Mphahlele 1972: 174-175). My explorations embrace Eski’a Mphahlele’s (1998: 4) criticism of Negritude⁴³ as a dynamic Afrocentric phenomenon, which Steven Howes insists is a “fundamentally racist attitude to intellectual inquiry” believed to be exploring the presence of alternative ways of being in the world. While the two authors scorn the idea of a black African personality emanating from a particular way of experiencing the world as a fallacy, my

⁴³ Negritude is a theoretical frame developed by Caribbean and African Francophone intellectuals and politicians exiled in Paris during the 1930s who raised Black Consciousness sentiments among Africans worldwide.

critical interpretation is guided by Tladi's philosophical statement, 'How Art Beholds the Elevated Senses', which forms part of this chapter's title. This statement is taken from a public lecture, 'How Art Beholds the Elevated Senses: An Applied Conversation with Lefifi Tladi', hosted by the Arts South Africa Initiative (ASAI) at the University of Cape Town in 2016. In that lecture, Tladi made an oral presentation on the role that artists are expected to play in society regarding the manifestation of a perceived South African aesthetic.

Here the multifaceted artist touches on controversial subjects such as art, politics and nationhood, particularly what came to be mockingly known as township art about work produced by black artists such as David Mogano (1932-2000), Durant Sihlali (1935-2004) and Ephraim Ngatane (1938-1971) since the 1960s. This type of art may be regarded as the visual depiction of the external experiences of life around the South African townships in the form of social realism. John Pepper (2009: 194) refers to this art, particularly that of Sihlali, as the artist's "implicit forms of resistance to apartheid policy" by acknowledging the permanent presence of the black body in the urban landscape. Sihlali's vibrant watercolours and later oil compositions painted between the 1960s and 1970s portray images of township dwellers participating in ordinary daily activities such as children playing in the street, women cooking in the open and people chatting in front of dilapidated houses. During the late 1930s to mid-1940s, Sekoto painted similar scenes that depicted black people living uncomfortably in urban Johannesburg, Cape Town and Pretoria. Presently, most of these artworks serve as archives of specific moments in the history of South Africa. Some depict spaces that have been destroyed by apartheid's alienating project intent on manufacturing 'bastardised' cultures (Biko 2004: 51). Living within the same communities, the two artists managed to successfully portray lives that, in general, suffered the destruction of their senses under apartheid's abhorrent project. South Africa was separated into cultural enclaves in the so-called independent states known as Bantustans and the various underdeveloped townships to promote ethnic alienation. Tladi's creative output consciously strives to impact the battered senses of the oppressed, representing them as the antidote to what the apartheid architects christened separate development (Pelzer 1966: 4).

On the other hand, the artist talks boldly about his art's ability to enlighten consciousness, raising the senses of the spectator to a higher level through the exploration of colour, texture and vibrant forms (Hattingh et al. 1998: 45). This perceived inflated plane of consciousness seems similar to Jacob Dlamini's (2009:108) writing about experiencing individual South African townships through the senses of touch, smell, sight and hearing to identify its distinct flavours as separate residential spaces. Regarding the discourse on senses, Tladi speaks of human hair as the sixth sense

(L. Tladi, personal communication, 10 January, 2021), a reflexive feeling found in a psycho-physiological process known as piloerection.⁴⁴ The artist insists that uncomfortable, eerie spaces often raise the hair of the persons inhabiting them at a particular time, indicating the presence of danger perceived through this sixth sense (L. Tladi, personal communication, 10 January, 2021). His extensive compositions mobilise all the senses to raise the spectators' consciousness within their surroundings. Thus, both in Ga-Rankuwa and later Stockholm, the artist found himself among a particular brand of creativity and cultural practitioners who tirelessly worked to refute imperialism's attempt at overhauling the senses of the colonised to voluntarily participate in the violent attack on their humanity (Césaire 1969: 7). As part of contesting this voluntary self-dehumanisation, Tladi (L. Tladi, personal communication, June 12, 2020) argues forcefully against township art as a parochial aesthetic. Although home to many talented people, Tladi maintains that townships are parasitic, racist structures established for black people who provide cheap labour to an economy that constantly excludes them. In order to counter the energy-sapping effects of these spaces, Tladi partly puts the responsibility of reshaping the fragmented, debauched South African identity on artists. According to Tladi (L. Tladi, personal communication, March 10, 2018), artists are known for their ability to experiment with symbols, language and sounds that can create amalgamated, definite national forms which transcend the township aesthetic. Tladi's creative interventions show a knack for thinking beyond the spatially segregated and structured South African land. His organic (Freire 1993) vernacular (Farred 2003) intellectualism strives to surpass the man-made mental boundaries and schisms associated with the townships as detrimental spaces to the human senses. Exploited as a rhetorical device to blunt the senses, Tladi explores fragments of precolonial African knowledge systems as the primary source of his organic intellectual creativity.

Of note is that the multifaceted artist developed as an organic intellectual who began his informal education under the tutelage of Mphakati in 1966 after dropping out of Tops High in Ga-Rankuwa. The literature and experiences that shaped him at Mphakati's informal though radical learning space became the basis from and on which to think through life beyond the depressing and divisive South African landscape (Farred 2003). In particular, the poetry he started exploring during this period attempted to embolden the oppressed and their agency while appealing to the life experiences and wisdom necessary for transcending colonial apartheid's imposition on the African continent.

⁴⁴ The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines piloerection as the "erection or bristling of hairs due to the involuntary contraction of small muscles at the base of hair follicles that occurs as a reflexive response of the sympathetic nervous system especially to cold, shock, or fright".

Once in Stockholm, Tladi's formal studies at Gerlesborgsskolan, as well as the time he spent at Harvey Tristan Cropper's studio in the early 1980s, exposed him to the European and American creative traditions such as Abstract Expressionism, which found an affinity with his creative processes and intellectual quest. Abstract Expressionism generally designates a group of artists who produced art in New York during the 1940s following World War II. A fertile ground for their inventiveness grew from the conditions created by the war as the artists attempted to express and articulate the restlessness of the period (Ferrier & Le Pichon 1999: 938). Although their methods and upbringing varied, as some migrated from Europe, the artists' inclinations toward nonrepresentational forms became the common thread and defining aesthetics of Abstract Expressionism. Except for African-American artist Norman Lewis (1909-1979), this group of (mostly) white males such as Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), Willem De Kooning (1904-1997) and Mark Rothko (1903-1970) painted compositions characterised by the improvisational use of non-conventional materials and techniques. They also worked with chaotic and often unfinished surfaces (Shapiro & Shapiro 1990: 1). Their works of art generated new visual forms responding to the contemporary contexts while rejecting the pre-war era's inherited social and historical influences.

Therefore, Tladi's novel painterly language developed from his struggle to express individual inner impulses through a spontaneous, subjective process reminiscent of Abstract Expressionism's nonrepresentational forms. Often ambiguous and stylised, the artist's monochromatic and rhythmical body of work comprises ink, oil and sand compositions characterised by irregular patterns of thick, thin and faint lines in titles such as *Xhoi Memories* (1989), *Eng* (1993) and *Xhosa Visions* (2019). Generally, his ink drawings from the 1980s show off uncluttered traces of lines suggestive of fabric textures, which form dynamic patterns on the image surface in contrast to his oil paintings. A creative strategy branded by improvisation is observable in some of these artworks that employ minimal, meandering lines while leaving certain areas of the surface untouched. In particular, his work of the 1990s shows off strict contrasts of light and dark spaces without the transitional greys that later show up in his compositions of the 2000s. Conversely, Tladi's oil compositions on canvas portray poetic, brilliant tints of complex arrangements of vivid shapes across the entire picture surface as brush and palette knife marks of varying tonal values. A noticeable difference between his monochromatic ink drawings and vivid soft paintings on canvas is an expression of rich textural renderings of dynamic tonal modifications. The compositions show visual inclinations toward Abstract Expressionism's knack for improvisation, expressive lines and abstract forms mediated through energetic patterns evocative of Afrocentric ways of experiencing the world. Tladi interprets his worldview through these forms and patterns peppered with

Afrocentric sensibilities interpreted as patterns reminiscent of the basic Abstract Expressionist paradigm.

Molefi Kete Asante (2003: 2) intimates that Afrocentrism is “a model of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values and perspectives predominate” and challenges the perpetuation of global racism. For Alan Wieder (1997: 180), Afrocentrism involves the inclusion of a comprehensive range “of African and African-American history and culture in the school curriculum” to form part of the American education system. Equally, this complex and dynamic paradigm places the African imagination and experience at the core of its adherents’ worldview. The philosophy, according to Stephen Howe (1998: 5), is simplistic as a questionable “cultural or psychological phenom rather than an intellectual or pedagogic one”. For my theoretical use, I consider Afrocentrism an affirmative way of thinking that foregrounds Africa as the hub of existence for its actors. It is an empowering way of being African in the world and an alternative way to the Eurocentric mode of being in the world. The critical discourse of Afrocentrism forcefully interrupts the dominant, linear aesthetics of Eurocentrism as the seemingly appealing orbit from which other worldviews rotate. Tladi’s art is steep in this critical discourse, apparently following what Chinweizu Ibekwe (1975: 299) calls “giving primacy to the African experience, past and present”, an Afrocentric-oriented process grappling with a particular visual language able to give form to his experiences. Tladi uses the abstract language of patterns, marks and codes to explore various totems representative of the essence of the African identity while freely probing worldviews beyond the margins of the prearranged township environs intended to detain black existence (L. Tladi, personal communication, March 12, 2018). His Afrocentric orientation is nothing but Black Consciousness in another register, hence his Afro-oriented mark-making system that probes a sense of nostalgic African vistas through unique symbols conversant with Tladi’s contemporary experiences as a black person.

Tladi’s creative work flows within an Abstract Expressionist and Afrocentric mode, argues Shannon Hill. Hill (2015: 23, 184) also claims his “self-expression” of spontaneity, nonrepresentational thinking and communicative forms speak to the Black Consciousness sensibility. Tladi’s aesthetics developed as a thoughtful challenge against the restrictive creation of art which addresses itself to the confines of the township spaces, and yet, it is an essential fragment of the dynamic conversation with blackness across the globe (Hill 2018: 202). These observations (of free, dynamic expression) should be seen with reference to Mphakati’s influential nurturing of Tladi and other artists who frequented his Mamelodi West home. Mphakati’s home became a safe

space which allowed the artists to absorb rarely censored and valuable ways of seeing the world through literature and conversations rendered illegal in South Africa (Hill 2015: 21). Adding to Mphakathi's nurturing are conversations Tladi and his fellow artists had with the Black Consciousness activists Biko, Langa, Mamphela Ramphele and Strinivasa Moodley outside and on black university campuses. Such formative nurturing and conversations remain resonant throughout Tladi's maturing life as an artist, poet and activist; thus, I contend that Hill's simplistic views on Black Consciousness disregard the influence of Mphakathi as the think-tank at the root core of Tladi's thinking. Owing to Mphakathi's empowering impact on the intellectually starved young people, I feel Hill seems unappreciative of the complex distinctions of the painter and poet's agency as a thinking being reflective of his black material environment. The willingness to thoroughly research, read and study extensively about various African writers, artists and collectives, including the lived reality of black Africans, has been crucial in Tladi's art. Such is the timbre that informs his excavation and synthesis of forms conversant to his lived experiences as a black South African at home and in exile. The creative practices and visual forms that Tladi explore in giving birth to his idiosyncratic aesthetics and expressive symbols stem from the likes of Kwame Nkrumah's seminal *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for De-Colonization* (1970), the Khoi, and the San compositions on cave walls, the thoughtful, improvisational, consciousness-shifting sounds of Charles Mingus, Phillip Tabane and Malombo. Hill (2018: 202) is on point to say that the artist's compositions found an affinity with forms, signs and symbols emanating from the African continent's expressions as an extended communication with blackness.

An important point to remember is that Tladi worked within a collective of kindred spirits whose creative influences stemmed from related black African sources. Living in South Africa, Tladi worked within a community of artists whose compositions followed a particular African primitive aesthetics. These artists are Sidney Kumalo (1935-1988), Ezrom Legae (1938-1999) and later Dumile Feni (1942-1991) (Peffer 2009: 50). Consciously looking beyond their surroundings for inspiring compositions, these artists transcended the social realism of the 1960s township art characterised by abjection. Poverty became the predominant and all-encompassing thematic content of the township art phenomenon as "apartheid oppression" was a daily, lived black experience (Pityana 2020: 401). Working among other artists with similar Afrocentric worldviews, Tladi's aesthetics from the 1970s followed the African sensibilities as a challenge against the depressing 'self-pity art' with its depictions of the physical realities of life in the black townships (Magadlela 1980: 25). Tladi acknowledges the influence on his worldview of contemporaries such as Nkoana,

Saoli and Mashiangwako as well as the prolific and intellectual Sudanese Ibrahim El-Salahi (b. 1930).

Tladi became familiar with El-Salahi's art in Botswana but met him in Sweden in the 1980s (L. Tladi, personal communication, 15 March, 2020). As an artist, Tladi learned much from the cosmopolitan Sudanese creative thinker, particularly the imaginative configuration of spatial and organisational properties El-Salahi mastered in creating visual images. The inimitable paintings and drawings of El-Salahi display a proficient rendition of figurative and abstract forms, especially in tackling positive and negative shapes within the pictorial frame of an artwork. These visual qualities are most evident in El-Salahi's 1950 to 1970s compositions that exhibit an adept craft in commanding line, patterns and sombre colours to facilitate the translation of Arabic, African and western signs into a distinct visual language (Hassan 2010: 12). Take El-Salahi's deft, square-formatted *The Last Sound* (1964), which comprises a limited palette of earthy red colours and off whites, the Islamic text, circles and half circles. Observed in this work is an exploration of sound through manipulating positive and negative spaces in melancholic colours. And this painting benefitted Tladi's ink work, especially musical titles such as *Song for the Sunflower* (1980), *Meta 4 Rhythms for a Liberation Dance* (1993) and *Krakatoa's Song* (2019). Tladi's experiments with symbols placing Afrocentric perspectives at the fore find affinity with El-Salahi's pan-African worldview explored in his philosophical paintings. Thus, Tladi's work participates in the explorative discourses and practices of pan-Africanism both on the African continent and the African diaspora, at the root core of his compositions in an unrelenting search to simultaneously capture and dispatch an Afrocentric imaginary.

The complexity of Afrocentrism is worth noting here, especially its intellectual reference to a middle-class African American discourse (Gocking 1993: 44). As a proposal for an Afrocentric curriculum, its discourse inserts the African narrative into the educational curriculum of the United States (Chowdhury 1997: 42). This discourse raises questions about the relevance of Afrocentrism to black Africans such as Tladi who claims its mantle as his framework. I argue that through foregrounding consciousness as a positive affirmation of the agency of the black body, Afrocentrism becomes a universal pan-African instrument of Black Consciousness (Asante 2003: 36). As Asante (2003: 4) contends, the diversities of black people speak "to the same rhythms of the universe, the same cosmological sensibilities, the same general historical reality". In this regard, an Afrocentric perspective might have originated in the United States and spread throughout the African diaspora, but its tenets point to the African continent as the centre of (the world of) its

progeny, and thus Afrocentricity should be arguably viewed as a “universal African consciousness” and an awareness about Africans’ collective history (Asante 2003: 34).

Furthermore, Afrocentric-inspired aesthetics consider form, feeling and time to originate from the relationship between thoughts and self, the historical, cultural and mythological awareness of the African continent (Asante 2003: 106-107). This means that artists’ understanding of Africa in all its nuances follows a particular aesthetic, which embraces the continent as the primary source of inspiration through multiple experiences. Thus, it is not surprising that Tladi’s adoption of the Afrocentric perspective is similar to that of the Chicago-based African-American artists, who in 1968 initiated the collective African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AfriCOBRA). Operating within the realm of the Black Arts Movement aligned to the American civil rights movement of the 1960s, the group initially started as Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists (Cobra) and immediately changed its name to AfriCOBRA. Like Tladi’s Afrocentric paradigm, members of AfriCOBRA went looking to the African continent for inspiration, meaning, identity and value. The collective reclaimed the relevant semblance of roots and black power as a mode of Black Consciousness through written text, visual forms and symbols, the purpose being an appeal to the sensibilities of Africa in their artistic compositions (Taylor 2019: 3-4). AfriCOBRA made a conscious decision to explore aesthetics infused with images of the day-to-day experiences of black people while espousing what they perceived as their African roots through colour, text or signs (Ellsworth 2009: 22, 23, 27). On the other side, Tladi’s exposure to banned literature at the Mphakati’s in the 1960s helped to align his thinking with various anti-imperial movements such as AfriCOBRA, artistic and cultural movements inclined towards political activism. From this Afrocentric politics of art and culture, Tladi’s trajectory should be understood and engaged, particularly his search for and adoption of a creative language adorned with Afrocentric subtleties expressed as images and poetic verses that appeal to the human senses.

3.2 Visualising the Senses as Mark-Making

In 1980, while living in Gaborone’s Bontleng, Tladi held his first solo exhibition, *Mosima Motlhaela Thupa*, at the National Museum and Art Gallery. He showed 41 small artworks on paper, most of which he produced in the late 1970s. Tladi conceptualised the exhibition in Setswana to suggest the futility of crying over spilt milk, what reads as an unmeasurable, bottomless pit of no return. *Mosima motlhaela thupa se ileng se a be se ile, lesilo ke moselatedi* is a Setswana proverb denoting acceptance of the loss of something valuable. A contrary view on this acknowledgement

of forfeiture might also be pointing to the living beings who are socially dead due to foregrounding material over spiritual upliftment or generally insensitive due to oppression. The argument I am making here is that a bottomless pit might symbolise physical or spiritual death. The former leads to non-existence from the physical world of the living, while the latter renders its victims enslaved people to the vagaries of material want or its fulfilment.

These drawings on paper are lyrical in treatment, showing off brush marks in linear and tonal compositions of diverse configurations that range from the human figure and animals to flowers and machine guns. Most artworks dispense a visual effect of temperature, borne out of a subdued scale of earthy colours evoking solemn feelings that people tend to experience around the start of a dry winter. Tladi's chosen palette of primaries and tertiary browns tinged with black lend the compositions a touch of nostalgia and longing. Take, for example, the vertically rendered *Hands of Motherhood* (1979) [Figure 13] with its yellow ochre and brown concentrated surface. In this work, Tladi depicted a yellowish-brown background whose monotony is interrupted by splashes of navy, green and red towards the edge on the right side of the work. This gloomy painting portrays a look-like figure gazing outside the picture frame toward the red, green and navy network of colours. This brown-tinted and eccentric figure without limbs extends vertically across the picture surface through abstracted marks lending the composition a poetic sentiment. Similar to how he approaches his poetry through wordplay, such as palindromes and homonyms,⁴⁵ Tladi cleanses the wet paper surface with a soft cloth to remove touches of paint over the image to reveal daubs of whiteness underneath. The approach adds to the tonal scale and symphony of light to dark, and vice versa, and imbues the composition with a sombre mood. This imagery seems to express a whimsical verse asserting the "consciousness of work and the power within a working community" (Tladi 1980: note 39 in the catalogue, *Mosima Motlhaela Thupa*). One of the symbols appearing on the picture surface behind the figure's head looks like a bird, which appears in another ink composition titled *Impundulu – Thunder bird* (1979) [Figure 14].

The impundulu is an immortal South African mythological bird of prey and a hereditary possession of witches. This black and white bird, the size of a fully-grown human being, is thought to possess lightning on its wings and beak. It is also known to have unmeasurable magical powers, such as the ability to strike enemies of its beholder with lightning. The impundulu is said to possess the power

⁴⁵ Tladi took pains to explain to his audience the beauty and dynamics of the indigenous languages by providing this example, "go fahla mafahla a mafahla a mafahla a mafahlafahla" (Mphakati et al. 2005).

to cause irreparable harm to its victims, irrespective of distance and location where they are anywhere around the world. About this horizontal, tight composition, Tladi (1980) talks about “the importance of protecting pregnant women against the thunderbird”. Often, the Afrocentric-inspired artist equates women with the endangered African continent in need of protection from impending, annihilating danger. Worse still, Tladi calls for protecting the pregnant African continent from witches planning to harm her. The impundulu’s notoriety is also expressed in one of Brenda Fassie’s hit songs of the same name. Fassie likens an abusive man to the thunder bird and decries how she let herself fall in love with impundulu, a fool who seemingly lacks respect.⁴⁶

In the background of the impundulu image are mythological creatures conveyed by the negative white spaces of the paper that intermingle with shades of red and blue. The creatures are fantastic in their mysteriousness; hence they add curious probing into the symbolism and bewilderment of the composition. Like a logo design, the flat part of the composition is divided by the lightning bird in the centre, a portion carefully depicted in solid horizontal and vertical black lines for emphasis as the focal point of attention. Such division of the picture plane into two parts is reminiscent of the Chinese visual symbol understood as the philosophy of yin and yang, to imply the mutual opposite forces of good and evil. Tladi’s composition in *Impundulu* is characterised by similar approaches he explored in *Hands of Motherhood*, showing what looks like a bird’s head defined by minimal lines.

Tladi has a raw though sensitive and dexterous ability in handling line in his drawings. This artistic quality is apparent in the series of charcoal figure drawings aptly titled *Seated Figure II* (1980) [Figure 15], *Mother and Self* (1980) [Figure 16] and *Three Figures* (1980) [Figure 17]. These drawings combine observational and intuitive approaches, demonstrating the creative ability of the artist’s organic though perceptive eye before receiving formal art training at the Gerlesborgsskolan School of Fine Art and tutorial lessons at Harvey Tristan Cropper’s Studio in Sweden. A closer study of the work’s scale may point to the politics of space between apartheid South Africa and independent Botswana. The generous size of his drawings in exile would seem to owe to Botswana as a country free from socially engineered space which oppressed and restrained the artist and his people. The gagging reality of black life in South Africa at the time was in stark contrast to the neighbouring African countries. Although Tladi stayed as a refuge in the unassuming vicinity of

⁴⁶ Brenda Fassie’s socially-conscious lyrics dominated the South African music scene during the 1980s until her untimely death in 2004. The song *Impundulu* is taken from her 1999 fourteenth studio album, *Nomakanjani*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGsg29Sx0xQ> (Fassie 1999)

Bontleng in Gaborone, the Botswana location arguably, afforded Tladi the liberty to think outside of the constraining box of apartheid engineering. Thus, he could also venture freely in exploring and experimenting with contents, forms of pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness and Afrocentrism in his art and poetry.

By titling his work in Setswana, Tladi was advancing the Afro-centric consciousness and aesthetics. This undertaking is evident even when he provides lyrical verses instead of accompanying his work with titles, as in *Mosima Motlhaela Thupa*. The verses are expressive notes explicating the poetics of his visual themes and forms. Interestingly, these texts read like a poetic intervention suggesting some mystic existences and imaginative worlds. Here is one example: “Spirits of today: the traditional man who has to translate traditional beliefs into a modern society to give our culture the dynamics of development and make our past to fulfil our future” (Tladi 1980). As if retrieving its cultural politics from the archive of Chinweizu (1975: 187), the preceding quote evokes images of a particular African way of experiencing the world. This African way needs to be translated into contemporary realities. Tladi talks about infusing these traditional African ways of being in the world into scenes of modernity, conscious of the continent’s tussle with colonialism. Generally, these documented illuminations express idealised pan-African language forms amid the artist’s psychological remnants of life in apartheid South Africa. Similar to how El Salahi synthesises various influences to birth culturally multi-layered compositions, Tladi’s knowledge of black Africa and its diaspora informs his art. Explaining his paintings, washes and drawings, Tladi writes: “these art pieces are single voice, echoing from the future, the need to liberate the senses so that man can have sense” (Tladi 1980). The artist adopts these various aesthetic interventions to illuminate a future where the dulled senses are restored for a freer human experience.

During his third year at Gerlesborgsskolan, Tladi painted *Mood* (1983) [Figure 18]. The painting comes across as a reflective interpretation of the sunny though the cooler climate of his new northern hemisphere landscape (Bernstein 1994). It is a vertical composition, using tones of murky navy, burnt sienna and yellow ochre around the whiteness of the picture plane in the centre to create a robust tension. A methodical arrangement of cool and calmer colours next to gentle tones allows the composition an unpredictable, distinct approach to visual storytelling through signs and symbols. Tladi manipulates these visual characteristics to express black experiences as well as forward artistic representations that, in the words of Margo Crawford (2018: 48) could be “reclaimed as a strategy of decolonising the mind” through “strategic abstraction”. Underpinned by these strategies, Tladi’s painting, *Mood*, captures a serene disposition through an ensemble of warm

and cool colours forming symbolic colour fields. The composition combines vertical and horizontal lines, whose rendition in primary colours and mediated by black and white shapes discharge a reflective sense of calmness. A closer and longer look at the painting brings about its concern with mood, a visual sensation evocative of the sounds of the wind expressing a moody disposition around the picture plane. The mood is somewhat reminiscent of sound improvisations by the likes of Phillip Tabane, John Coltrane and Miles Davis, sound improvisations that are reflectively alluring to the listening ears. Tladi achieves this mood by spreading the colours and lines in a visual effect that simulates a sense of optimistic melancholy.

In another series, *Hallelujah* (1989) [Figure 19], *Xhoi Memories* (1989) [Figure 20] and *Makgwai* (1989) [Figure 21], Tladi takes the use of cool and warm-coloured patterns a step further by experimenting with tinted sand. Consider *Makgwai*, a work which depicts a flat, semi-abstracted dog turning back its head to look at its colourful tale as if to admire or remind itself about how it looks. This decorative canine in burnt sienna, blue, yellow ochre and white is reminiscent of animal engravings registered on rock shelters by the San and Khoi artists around parts of Botswana and South Africa. Tladi's composition is characterised by its textured surface simulating rough caves. He employs the combination of distinct shapes such as the triangle, square and rectangle across the surface of the composition to arouse memories of open and free landscapes.

El Salahi's forceful expedition with the alphabet is apparent in some of Tladi's compositions, such as *Metaphor Symbols* (1990) [Figure 22] and *Alphabets of Fire* (1994) [Figure 23]. The former is distinguished by the general use of broad-brush marks in contrast to the thin ones found in the latter. These ink compositions on paper are made of subtle earthy colours utilising both positive and negative spaces to augment the works' narrative strategy, which expresses Tladi's painterly language. Tladi uses metaphor to foreground the various forms created as shapes, colours and tones in the various compositions expressed as abstracted narratives. The *Metaphor Symbols* is a work utilising thick limited and interlocking lines to create meditative forms nostalgic of some ancient writing styles. This abstract work is mediated by Tladi's Afrocentric conversations with the likes of Asante's philosophical arguments, El Salahi's imaginative use of Arabic letters evidencing ancient culture of letters or writing, which reads with reference to Biko's (2004: 44-51) argument about cultural concepts in *I Write What I Like*.

Tladi mixes black, red and yellow inks to create a symphony of brown and natural green tonal scales. A circle often appearing in El Salahi's philosophic compositions proves to be Tladi's

characteristic symbol, which he juxtaposes with other vibrant shapes to create an individual visual language. In contrast, the *Alphabets of Fire* work depicts a busy play of different marks adept at creating a graphic idiom that expresses energetic, warm and sunny feelings. Tladi uses similar colour schemes as in *Metaphor Symbols* yet with a different temperature owing to the expert overuse of the paint medium. A connection of thin and vibrant black lines, the *Alphabets of Fire* series is dominated by warm tones of yellows, greens and browns animated with a rich mental attitude. Colour and form express Tladi's alphabets as symbols indicating an alternative way of being and seeing the world outside Eurocentrism. His ability to manipulate colour while alternating both positive and negative shapes (subtly contaminated with abstract symbols) is taken a notch further to raise questions of national importance as alphabets communicative in Sesotho. Tladi's alphabets appear as marks within the picture plane and evoke memories of symbols transcending the Roman letter. Tristan Cropper (1984: 14) defines Tladi's ideological mission through cultural productions:

[The] search for ethic norms, the revitalisation of ancient forms, not as a mere source for commercial speculation, propaganda or esthetic decoration, but as a serious process of healing and restoring those links in the chain of tradition that have been broken, buried and mangled by centuries of colonialism with its aftermath of doubt and self- mistrust.

The search for ethical norms and revitalisation of ancient forms is key in Tladi's artistic trajectory, one which he explores as a tool helping to reconstruct "the harm done to the senses" by colonial-apartheid (Tladi 1984: 15). His artistic quest is a continual search for innovative idioms and reflective metaphors to attain a critical black African consciousness. These idioms and metaphors find their forms through colour, line, and shape, whose imaginative rendition approximates the actual mission of wrestling with lived experiences in contemporary society. Tladi's artistic trajectory is what Barney Pityana (2020: 393-394) phrases as "a critical insight into the human condition".

A body of artworks evidencing Tladi's artistic quest, one characterised by idiomatic compositions and metaphoric representations exploring consciousness, was exhibited for the first time in democratic South Africa in 1995. It was part of a two-man show entitled *Xedzedze* [Figure 24] at the UniSA Art Gallery in Pretoria. Tladi shared the space with a former Black Consciousness compatriot and contemporary, Magadlela. *Xedzedze* is xiTsonga for a whirlwind, a tumultuous natural gale storm created by heating instabilities. The physical manifestation of these volatilities

results in tidal waves of vertical dust particles that can be seen snaking through the landscape. A whirlwind alludes to rapid, violent and circular funnel-shaped movements, which might also be used in reference to a person's emotions and feelings at a given time. Besides its destructive nature, particularly around the poor black South African communities, the whirlwind is immersed in deep mythical belief systems. This natural occurrence is often thought to be a wandering and restless snake causing material damage where it hits. In his interpretation of the phenomenon xedzedze, Tladi exhibited a body of small ink and brush drawings on variously textured paper indicative of the dynamism of the whirlwind's round and round movement. Punctuated by swirling lines of various sizes and anecdotal graceful movements, this body of artworks interprets the contradictions of 1990s South Africa as organised chaos represented by the idea of a tornado. During this period, the country reeled from a near-civil war situation amid the excitement of legalising political activity after many years of repression and censorship maintained through savage policing. In order to engage the predicaments of that particular moment in South Africa, Tladi began toying with the idea of Xedzedze as near-abstract, black and white drawings whose metaphoric imagery was bursting with forceful energy.

He executed the monochromatic ink drawings from a studio in Stockholm when South Africa, on the other side of the Atlantic, experienced the torturous process of a negotiated settlement at Kempton Park. Large-scale political killings marked this period in the country's history when black people maimed each other at will as political rivals. Later, Nelson Mandela emerged as the first democratically elected president after ANC's landslide victory during the national elections in 1994. Mandela became known for his Madiba⁴⁷ jive, a distinct dance move involving the swaying of the upper body towards the sides while moving to the beat of the sound, followed by bent arms at the elbows with clenched palms and a broad, wide smile showing off his teeth. It was a time that witnessed a spirit of euphoria sweeping through the country whilst the new head of state was spearheading the pacification of the oppressed through the short-lived, condescending reconciliation gospel and rainbowism.⁴⁸ Xedxedxe developed amid these contradictions as an exhibition concept within the context of a changing South Africa, a country licking its wounds from the scourge of state-sponsored racial segregation and violence against the black body tinged with sensibilities of ethnic rivalry. The exhibition became a reasonable interpretation of the organised

⁴⁷ As a result of his cult following, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela's clan name Madiba often replaced his actual name during conversations and speeches as a sign of reverence.

⁴⁸ Under the presidency of Nelson Mandela, South Africa became the rainbow nation in reference to its multiple races, cultures, and ethnic groups thought of as "the worst metaphor" (Alexander 2001: 486).

chaos of that moment. In it, Tladi presented works illuminating the contradictions of a country grappling with the transition from apartheid to democracy. His body of small, monochrome drawings calls to mind the beauty and grace of a physical dance movement provoked by the sounds of inimitable musical instruments. Tladi interprets the encounter with xedzedze in ink on paper, expressing his views through straight, jagged, curved, thick and thin lines that give meaning to shapes and forms. He improvises the dance movements and sounds of musical instruments through the repetition of uniform and firm brush marks. The resulting compositions elicit memories of the gyrating and majestic black bodies lost in a movement to the echoes of the kora, mbira and balafo. Tladi's language was the visual marks and expressive signs that translated vibrations and dynamic movements of the kwassa kwassa, umxhentso and adumu.

These movements are notable in his semi-abstract *Elegance* (1992), an ink drawing portraying what looks like a stylised figure of a female dancer divided into tonal units of purple, green and blue framed by vivid oranges in the background. The dynamism of snaking lines may suggest a sense of movement, which shape the patterned, colourful figure reminiscent of a ballerina with outstretched hands. Yet, unlike the typical professional dancers with lean, chiselled bodies, this off-centre figure in Tladi's *Elegance* is voluptuous in her fluent arabesque and thus seems to suggest the opposite of "a negative profile of blackness" (wa Thiong'o 2012: 40); or perhaps it challenges the negative stereotypes associated with the lean ballerina as the body norm for dancers (Robertson et al. 2000: 177).

Of note, in concluding this chapter, is Tladi's conscious use of language to express various senses, as also evident in the exhibitions *Monkgo wa Mothalo* (2011), *Lentswe* (2013), and *Mphophole* (2015). Tladi speaks through Setswana in these exhibitions, considering *Lentswe* means a word or voice, *Monkgo wa Mothalo* implies the scent of a line, while *Mphophole* is an appeal to be touched and caressed. The deliberate use of Setswana words and expressions brings to visual representation the significance of pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness and Afrocentrism in Tladi's artistic quest and trajectory. For Tladi, artists are primarily responsible for nurturing their culture, language and aesthetics; they are the custodians of the elevated senses inherent in art. His understanding of art and culture, including creative and intellectual thinking processes, owes allegiance to the literature and music that became part of his life and profession, not to mention transactions he appreciated with fellow writers, artists and cultural activists from around the world.

Tladi chose expressive abstraction as a visual language and creative procedure for innovative imagery to articulate his worldview. From the mid-1960s and 1970s in South Africa to the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s in Sweden, Tladi has been perfecting his ability to manipulate the visual elements of form, tone and line to explore the human senses of touch, smell, sight, sound, taste and the emotionally-charged piloerection. He amalgamates these senses with intuition as an extension of his poetic reflections. These poetic reflections are often conceptualised in Xitsonga and Setswana expressions, such as Xedzedze and Mosima Motlhaela Thupa, to metaphorically enrich and locate his works and exhibitions within the African context. *How Art Beholds the Elevated Senses* is indicative of Tladi's philosophy on aesthetics explored in eclectic compositions. This philosophy is Afrocentric in view of life and reflected in his paintings and drawings, whose premise aims at impacting the human senses as the elements expectant with self-determination.

Chapter 4. The Visual Tapestry in Tladi's 'Ga Re Itshebeng' and 'Afrika'

Arise black man
Arise and denote thyself
(Peter Tosh 1971)

4.1 Tladi in Poetry

Self-definition and self-determination underline the above lyrics from Peter Tosh's passionate, melancholic, pan-African plea: *Arise Black Man*.⁴⁹ Through his radical reggae music, Tosh encourages black people worldwide to look within while believing in their abilities as existent beings. With memories of slavery and plantations still intact in the Jamaican psyche, Tosh asserts the visibility of blackness. This assertion is because of the destructive extent to which racial deprivation and exploitation lead to the general feelings of low self-worth in the black masses (Brodber 1985: 56). Profoundly, self-assertion and self-determination are the antitheses of low self-worth. They empower and encourage the victims of systematic racial prejudice to rise and affirm themselves in what Manganyi (2019) theorises as *being-black-in-the-world*. Tosh's *Arise Black Man* cultivates emancipatory agency by appealing to black people's consciousness. His lyrics call for radical actions against the physical and mental impoverishment imposed by European countries that hunted, plundered and reigned supreme over the rest of the world since 1415 (Ibekwe 1975: 3).

Following the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism and then apartheid in South Africa, black people were considered "subhuman, uncivilised, savages" whose humanity experienced decades of physical and psychological pounding (Atuahene 2014: 33). Characterised by demonic and violent abuse of the body, these years of hammering resulted in an uprooted, confused and self-loathing lot lacking any semblance of self-respect and mutual regard from peers across the world. For example, in November 2021, a Spanish newspaper published a racist cartoon depicting brown-skinned viruses with thick pink lips on a boat with the South African flag heading to Europe (Asher 2021). Reflecting the general sentiments of most western countries' perception of the omicron variant of the coronavirus that causes Covid-19 originated in southern Africa, the Spanish cartoonist followed the hasty imposition of travel bans from these countries. Mokgweetsi Masisi, the president of Botswana, lambasted European countries for their ill-informed and unfair banning orders as "a

⁴⁹ Peter Tosh wrote the song *Arise Blackman* in 1971, released in 1988 under the compilation, *Joe Gibbs and Friends - The Reggae Train 1968-1971*.

manifestation of neo-imperialist thinking” because Africa is weak, poor and “unable to respond in equal measure” (Asher 2021). Masisi engages a neo-imperialism integral to the prolonging anti-black racism to which Tosh responded in the 1960s by penning *Arise Black Man* in 1971.

Tladi is one of the creative thinkers that felt Tosh’s activation call. Through artistic and poetic activism, Tladi ensured to arise as a black man by cultivating a spiritual and conscious awakening. Evidence of this awakening permeates Tladi’s penetrating poetry, which linguistically interrupts any semblance of normalcy within post-1994 South Africa, where black people remain marginalised. True to Afrocentric ways of seeing the world, some of Tladi’s poems explore the intricacies of Sepedi and Setswana, considering them as black experiences not limited to southern Africa. In this chapter, I investigate the intricacies of the black experience in Tladi’s selected poems that envision worlds that are pan-African, Afrocentric and Black Conscious in orientation. The poetry registers mutually exclusive experiences represented as symbols and signs that transcend the miserable existence of black subjectivity (Ratele 2019: 11). Tladi poetry resonates with his visual arts that advance the Afrocentric paradigms I have discussed in the previous chapters. In this chapter, I explore how Tladi weaves proverbs and idioms to craft a vocabulary with which he challenges the neo-imperialist manifestations in South Africa. This poetic practice grants Tladi, a “former ’80s struggle poet”, a platform to experiment with colourful, intense word-pictures (Ansell 2004: 285).

In order to understand Tladi’s pan-Africanism, I equate his verse to that of the Martiniquais Aimé Césaire, particularly the latter’s lengthy ‘Return to My Native Land’ (Césaire 2014). Césaire’s epic poem, first published in 1939, mixes up unique metaphors and registers to express the vagaries of black African being under the yoke of colonialism. Similarly, Tladi is motivated by a firm, textual articulation devoid of fear for wordplay demonstrated in Césaire’s poem. Tladi’s rhymes arrange words in ways that open their meanings while simultaneously creating dramatic imagery. His words are loaded: they speak in lyrical tongues that render them delicate and assert the complexity, richness and beauty of African languages in personal narrative experiences and socio-political issues of society dogged by unrelenting colonialism. The profundity of Tladi’s poems is their intimate attributes and dedications that are never confined to political protests or social commentaries. They venture into humane relations with benevolent connotations. Take his use of anagrams and palindromes to pay homage to the men and women he holds in high regard, especially artists of his generation, such as Saoli, Zim Ngqawana and Makeba, as examples. Tladi has

delivered this homage through performing poems such as ‘Ga Re Itshebeng’ (1982) and ‘Afrika’ (1992), originally written in Sweden and performed in cities like Stockholm, London, Rondebosch and Johannesburg.

4.2 Tladi’s ‘Ga Re Itshebeng’ and ‘Afrika’

Ga Re Itshebeng

Nako gape gape
Lefatsheng le sele
E timellwa ke seemo
E fetole bana ba mmu ditshuwana
Ditshuwana di elang nokeng
Di namelang dithaba
Di itseng mehlala ya ditlou tona
Di kgannwang ke makolwana
A maoto a sa hlabiweng ke mebetlwa
E hlotsisang ba godisitsweng
Bonolong ba Rramphashane
Di dirilweng ka matlalo
A dinkwe tsa masega
Mme ba se na le lerothodi
La madi a botala ba diapara-nkwe
Di itseng modumo wa tlou
E tshwerwe ke leino
Modumo o utullang
Medu ya tse tseiwang
Ke phefo tse tshesane
Di ilang boteng ba mohlaba
Le metlhaba e fepang ba medu e melelelelele
E anyang nokeng di elang
Magageng a boteng
Kutu di robileng naka la tshukudu tse tshweu leswafe
Di itirang o ka re di a re utlwisisa
Ge re itsheba ka maleme
A laletseng lelayeta
Le lwatsang leloba la Lwetse
Leloba le phaphamisang
Diphala ka diphilana
Diphilana di tuntuletsang ba ditshela
Ka ngwana tshela

A rwelerwele maru a tlišang lethabo
Le fetogang maswabi a matsutsuba
Magareng a bawo
Ba sa kgaoganeng hloogo ya tsie
Ba bokgopo bo fetolang
Maleme a sa butswang
Bo ntwa-dumela
E sa laeleng
E agang mo e sa amogelwang
E senollwang ke sekuntwana
Sa naka le fetogileng koko
Ya makgwakgwa a matlalo a digopane
Kgetse-meraba e tletseng ditsheletshele
Di mphaka magareng a rona
Re sa hlolang re itse gore re iketseng
Ke re maru a thibile naledi
Tsa basupatsela bo montsamaisa-bosigo
Ba banepa dinaledi
Ba timellane le bo makoba-pula
Bakganni ba maru a boimaimaima
A fetotseng masigo a rona
Mosima o montsho leratadimeng
Leratadimeng le megogedigedi
E timang mmila wa ditoro
Di maloba a sa tshwariweng ke mokgotlwane
O alafiwang ke mesunkwana
Wa tse tshelang ka kwano ga nako ya leso
Le yang kwa le kwa
O ka re thakadu tshankaneng
Ke sona se ke re bagaetsho
Ga re itshebeng
Bagaetsho ke re
Ga re itshebeng
Pele re ya lekgotleng
La kopano ya mebalabala ya melatlatladi
Lebaleng le tlo re balabadisang
Mobobolo o motelletelle
Ka gobane ga re itshebe
Moitshebo wa badupi ba dupang bokamoso
Bo senollang ba rekisitseng

Maloba maloba a maloba
Maloba a sa tshwariweng ke mokgotlwana
E notlollang dinotlolo di notlollang
Kgoro tsa mo re itshebang
Sepelo-pelong
Bagaetsho ke nako
Ya go itsheba sefsha
Se arabang
Lepatata le goeletsang
Naga mphe batho!
Ke re naga mphe batho
Ke re naga mphe batho

Afrika

Go ala dibodu
Ke go goka manong
Tseba tsebo yabo reyatseba ba rona
Baapeyi ba maswika
Ba apeya ka moro wa diphiri
Bjale lemoga gore
Bao ba goletseng motseng
Wa dipudi di maleme matala
Ba hlola bodiidi ge ba ala
Meroko ya bohloa
Lapeng la ngwana kgosi ya ngaka
Go fepa manong
A tswang thabeng tsa sefelo
Ka ngwana ngaka
Ke go apesa ngwedi motjeka
Ke go apola maru
Go fisha ke letsatsi
Tadi e amusa
Go fetsa ke diboko
Pele manong a fihla
Bjale ngwana ditalama
Se boloke marapo ame
Mpeng ya diphiri
Bao ba jwewago ke diboko
Ba pokela dihlapi
Nnwana ngwanaka

Anya mahlale a bo
Rrakgolokgolo
Mpeng ya sechaba
O tle o kgone go atlega
Gobane bao ba ikgagolago
Dipopelo tsa setso sa bone
Ba itshila popelo
Ba fetse ba timeletswe
Ke setso sa bone
Gare a mashaba a ditshaba
Re kwa mekgosi ya bone
Ka meriti
Le ba hlabetse ga ba le orelle
Mahlale a ja mong
Ka meno a matelele
Afrika
Ka mantswe a
Ke ipapola sefapanong
Sa lerato la gago
Gomme ke nyaka
Gore o lemoge gore
Nako ke ya badimo feela
Le ge e le gore
Re bana ba badimo
Ke nnete
Feela nnete ke gore
Ga re bana ba badimo
Ba dimakatso
Re ka tswa bana ba phefo
Ka Mokibelo wa phoka
Ra fetsa re ntshana
Sa inong ka manala a kgwale
Go dia bjalo
Ke go bofa
Marokgwe
Ka papareishene
Lepanta la motshene
Wa makgowa

In 'Ga Re Itshebeng' and 'Afrika', Tladi utilises the first-person narrative, assigning the poet a position that enables him to observe the actions, thoughts and feelings of all the characters he has made the subject of his poems. Opening the scene with the image of barefooted orphans herding elephants, 'Ga Re Itshebeng' paints a dull, foggy and action-oriented landscape taking place in strange soil. In the recorded version, this is a spoken mental representation accompanied by the haunting sounds of the conch, the spiral seashell augmenting the mystical feel of loneliness in the disorienting scenery peopled by the narrator's compatriots.⁵⁰ In 'Afrika', Tladi paints cautionary, optimistic imagery of natives in a particularised land, natives who are encouraged to anchor themselves in the wisdom of their indigenous knowledge systems. Recorded in 1992 in Stockholm, the version of the poem I am discussing here is sprinkled with English lines and accompanied by the sounds of Brus Trio, comprising the bassist Ulf Åkerhelm, pianist Arne Forsén and drummer Gilbert Matthews.⁵¹

'Ga Re Itshebeng' features a narrator claiming a contorted time that turns black people into parentless children who survive by feeding off the land. This claim relates to a sense of time that, when read with reference to the global Black Consciousness argued by Margo Crawford and Salah Hassan (2018: 4), emits instability whilst turning natives into orphans. Yet, there is a sense of encouragement in this discourse, especially when the orphans understand the geography of the land well and thus can interpret its natural blooms. The point I am making is that flowers growing from this land's soil raise antelopes and orphaned children who interpret the ways of the big elephants during the jubilant summer seasons. These moments also carry clouds that bring joy to the orphans and sadness to the warlords who struggle to break bread. The poem's imagery invokes the land and its natural blossoms to appeal to the importance of indigenous life and the acquisition of indigenous knowledge systems, which are also articulated in 'Afrika'.

In 'Afrika', Tladi paints an image of rotten carcasses lying down. It is a metaphoric image of ravaging vultures from Europe and Asia into the African shores (Adebajo 2020: 17). In order to survive this onslaught from the all-conquering foreign forces disfiguring Africa, a call is motivated to acquire the indigenous knowledge of African forebears. It is a warning to Africa about those who

⁵⁰ In 'Ga Re Itshebeng', Lefifi Tladi continues the Black Consciousness call for intimate talks among black people to gain a better understanding of themselves, (<https://vimeo.com/169914625>). (Dast Quartet 1982).

⁵¹ In 1992 Lefifi Tladi contributed the lyrics of 'Afrika' to the jazz sounds of the Swedish group, Brus Trio in a track called Gunjoh, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-IJRN6XkUY&t=51s>). (Brus Trio 1992).

look down on the her indigenous knowledge. These individuals who look down on Africa's indigenous awareness often end up placing the information into the belly of the scavenging hyenas. Nuancedly inscribed in the poem is the narrator's love for Africa, as a self-crucifixion related to her gods responsible for reasserting Africa's sedentary lifestyle. Exploits in farming characterise this reading (Diop 1989: 35). Yet, unlike these supreme beings, the speaker acknowledges his lack of powers from the deities to manifest miracles as he finds himself parent-less in foreign lands.

Tladi finished writing 'Ga Re Itshebeng' in 1981 while in Stockholm, just a few months before the official launch of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in Cape Town, South Africa. He came to Sweden when the country's "national policy" foregrounded the absorption of immigrants. At the time, the anti-apartheid UDF mobilised forces to pressure the apartheid regime in South Africa (Bydler 2003). 'Ga Re Itshebeng' reads like Tladi's immediate interpretation of racial attitudes in Sweden and his native South Africa, where whiteness as "a trope of domination" seemed to determine the course of the struggle against oppression (West 2005: 385). I base my assertion on the short poetic verse from the album, *Tribute to Nomazizi* (1981) titled 'Racism Has No Colour'. In the poem, Tladi talks about an experience in Sweden when he tried to help a blind Swede find his way from an underground substation. Oozing with racist spite, the blind man replied disdainfully to Tladi, "I don't need your help nigger" (Tladi 1983). Shown here is how Tladi's poetry is generally tinged with the theme of racism as part of his daily reality. Again, during the multiparty political round-table negotiations in Kempton Park in the 1990s, while couch surfing in Sweden, Tladi penned 'Afrika' to lament what might be considered the lack of appreciation and understanding of the African indigenous knowledge systems. During this time, Europe, including Sweden, began experiencing instability due to the rise in racialism as push back against the encroaching wave of refugees and immigrants from outside the continent (Pred 2000: 3). In the poem, Afrika is urged to nourish herself with the traditional knowledge, weaved in idioms and proverbs perceived to be therapeutic and repellent against advances from those fostering bad intentions towards her.

Tladi conceived 'Ga Re Itshebeng' as an extension of Black Consciousness thinking, inspiring black people worldwide to realise their agency and potential as rational thinking beings. In the poem, he merges Sesotho sayings to conceive the humanness of a people whose feelings of self-worth need constant reawakening. Referring to 'Ga Re Itshebeng' as the gathering and "whispering together" (Achebe 1959: 105) to discuss important matters, Tladi insists that "beauty doesn't lie in the eye of the beholder but is beheld by the elevated senses" of those conversant in the language and its proverbs (L. Tladi, personal communication, March 2, 2022). In order to fully understand the

nuances and dynamics of the poetry, readers need to appreciate and value the language of its delivery. Also, understanding the language facilitates a worthwhile dialogue among the concerned individuals.

Similar to what Tosh articulates in *Arise Black Man*, 'Ga Re Itshebeng' stresses the importance of unity of purpose reflected in the poem's appeal for intimate dialogue in conquering feelings of low self-esteem, intimated at the start of this chapter. In the poem, Tladi encourages bagagabo and his compatriots to huddle together and discuss the anti-black conditions that estrange them from each other and the environment. Through anecdotal language, the poet underscores this internal conflict and alienating effect on the psyche through a disruptive and dichotomous belief system identified as the northern and southern theory, which I discuss below (Diop 1989). Concerning this sense of estrangement, Biko (2004: 110-111) intimates that its victims tend to reject their identity while detesting themselves (Ratele 2019: 64-65) as a state of being I investigated in another poem, 'Afrika'. One example of this self-rejection and self-hate is suggested in the first line of 'Afrika' about how these conditions often lead to the commitment of deadly compromises (the laying down of rotten carcasses). Africa is encouraged to attain the wisdom that already exists within the African indigenous knowledge systems through a tone laced with nostalgic, mythological melancholia. Featured in the Swedish Brus Trio album, *Aim*, Tladi performs the poem in a track called 'Gunjoh', combining the Sesotho⁵² vernaculars of Setswana and Sepedi. In the recording, these dialects are tinged with English recitals and complemented by the drums, piano and bass to accentuate the poem's bittersweet, wistful yearning. The poetic features I am engaging in 'Ga Re Itshebeng' and 'Afrika' are vital to understanding the meaning and mood of Tladi's two poems, as they are expressively enunciated through his Afrocentric vocabulary.

This Afrocentric vocabulary is at odds with any English translations encapsulating the poems' profound and rich imagery charted. The weaving of idiosyncratic proverbs and idioms in Sepedi and Setswana create visual vistas for viewing African thoughts, experiences and aspirations in poetic words, an imaginative grammar through which Tladi is asserting the presence of independent ways of living in harmony with the environment. In Tladi's (2013) words, one reads that the work is "my own meditative, understanding and analysis of how I see things". Implied here is that Tladi created poetry as a way of processing personal ideas and thoughts meant for the ears and eyes of those able to comprehend the imagery. With this explanation, one discerns the centrality of his

⁵² Sotho means brown and the prefix -se means of as signification that Sesotho is then of the brown people.

African language in creating worlds, as in the case he has consciously and deliberately chosen a combination of Setswana and Sepedi. These indigenous languages evidence unique registers conversant with his realities as a black African.

4.3 Alternative Afrocentric Worldviews

Tladi's creative methods call forth *Kgwetenketša*, the hit musical composed by the South African band, Tlokwe Sehume. This composition finds an explanation in Cheikh Anta Diop's (1989: 11) theory of the northern and southern cradle, which argues the power relations between Europe and Africa. *Kgwetenketša* laments the power dynamics experienced between the meeting of worldviews where the disoriented black Africans are said to ape ways of the conqueror. If one considers "cradle...is a metaphor for [a socio-cultural] environment", *Kgwetenketša* labels the "zones of confluence" when two ideologies find themselves forced to coexist in a single space where the black body is often vulnerable, alienated and at the receiving end of unfair treatment (Allen 2009: 817). Tlokwe Sehume's *Kgwetenketša* probes the contrasting ideologies amid the self-importance of the northern cradle, which is mainly communicated through English and other European languages. Through his theory, Diop (1989: 177) posits that the environment from each cradle influences the lives of those living in it, witnessed as aggression and racism synonymous with Europe's ways of survival and inherent in its migratory nature.

Simultaneously, *Kgwetenketša* enunciates how some black South Africans struggle to express themselves in their mother tongue while they are fluent in the European languages, specifically English; hence *kgwetenketša* as an act of simulation.⁵³ The preceding argument recalls Frantz Fanon's (2008: 8) commentary on how language often requires an understanding of its grammar and appreciation of its culture. Following Fanon, I approach 'Ga Re Itshebeng' and 'Afrika' conscious of Tladi's Afrocentric vocabulary that prioritises indigenous languages and black dialects. The approach focuses on mining and engaging the poems, which also narrate the poet's biography that my study centres.

'Ga Re Itshebeng' focuses on how 'time in a foreign land loses its balance and turns the natives into orphans'. Listening to Tladi narrating the poem in the recording, I discern a protesting voice

⁵³ Tlokwe Sehume's live version of *Kgwetenketša* lays bare the power dynamics deposited in various languages, (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nUL48o3fcU&list=OLAK5uy_mAUtgzuGMm-HTrsBqlkpHuW1iHJX9_dbo). (Sehume, T. 2003).

expressing a sense of critical discontent about the infiltrating foreign forces that impose an out-of-sync time frame alienating the natives from their daily, social and cultural existence. Characterising life in a foreign land are often strange ways of living that render the immigrant population a confused lot within the social landscape. Worse, the immigrants are subject to the disorientating alienation of being-black-in-the-world without parents and family but alone, lost and wondering strangers in a foreign land. One of the underscoring themes of this stanza alludes to Tladi's experience in Europe, where his 'time' in Sweden as an African and a black artist was symptomatic of the 'losses' of 'balance and turns' of the foreign native into homelessness, like 'orphans' without their parental culture, language and community. Tladi's 'Ga Re Itshebeng' reads as part of the "cultural campaigns for self-determination and respect for black and brown cultural practices denigrated, appropriated, or dismissed from official history by European colonial powers" (Farred 2003: 6). Like the aesthetic of self-empowerment and assertion found in 'Ga Re Itshebeng', 'Afrika' foregrounds Black Consciousness to reflect on the misappropriation of time and space. Both time and space are metaphoric in a picture image portraying vultures from some disaster-ravaged foreign lands. These birds of prey are generally known as the messengers of death because they circle a dying animal and later feed on its rotting flesh. In 'Afrika', Tladi's metaphoric reference to vultures from some disaster-ravaged foreign lands provokes memories of Europe's experiences of violent invasions, wars and hunger for about 1000 after the fall of the Roman empire in 476 AD, relieved in the two world wars in the 1900s (Hemenway 2008: 70-71). So-called explorers Portugal and Spain pioneered this vulture spirit when they started invading and kidnapping lands and people outside Europe. These European explorers were desperate for economic emancipation and riches after experiencing severe disasters in their native lands (Ibekwe 1975: 3-4). The spirit of Black Consciousness developed as a part of the counterforce in global pan-African anti-imperialism, whose primary objectives have been to liberate the oppressed and exploited from the vicious stranglehold of European vultures (Manganyi 2016: 65). There was the Negritude in West Africa, Black Power and Civil Rights movements in the United States all encouraging the reflective introspection embedded in the indigenous knowledge systems.

Following on the intimate reflections operative in 'Ga Re Itshebeng', 'Afrika' cautions against the undervaluing of the African subject's capabilities due to ignorance and the perversity of a narrow understanding of the foundations of African knowledge systems. In the poem, as the narrator recites, one learns about this obliviousness, which is the imputes of the powerful and cold-hearted alien powers, the European forces, hellbent on enriching themselves at the expense of the indigenous Africans. This violent imperial intrusion into the indigenous

populations is a stark reminder of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), a narrative about how the arrival of the missionaries in Okonkwo's Ibo land, the surrounding towns and villages led to the division of the native communities (Achebe 1958: 124). In the creative works of Achebe and Tladi, one is enlightened about the devastating self-mutilation and perpetuation of poverty in colonised Africa; colonial devastation is demonstrated by the complicity of those aboriginals collaborating in helping the defilers of the continent's natural and human resources.

Tladi throws caution on the dangers of neglecting one's agency, the fate of being a human subject untuned to the cultural knowledge of African Consciencism (Nkrumah 1970) and Black Consciousness (Biko 2004). Such politics of consciousness permeate Tladi's poem; thus, 'Afrika' reminds Africans about the criticality of ignorance, neglect and confidence. It also draws attention to the subjectivity and agency of the African self. Also intimated in the first stanza of 'Ga Re Itshebeng', Africa raises a serious concern about how the lack of confidence is akin to an open invitation to the callous vultures from Europe.

The problem regarding this lack of confidence corresponds with the contents of Ibekwe's (2006) public lecture delivered at the Agip Recital Hall in Lagos. In that lecture, Chinweizu argues how the consequences of this lack of confidence have led to the near initial extermination of the black African race. Ibekwe (2006: 15-21) also discusses how the Arab invasion of the northern parts of the continent for 700 centuries was followed by Europe's urge to consolidate their conquest through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and then apartheid. This near annihilation of black Africa, backed by the European mercenaries known as explorers, has significantly contributed to the detrimental destination of Africa's ignorance, a disconcerting point expressed in Tladi's 'Afrika'. In the form of a simile, the poem likens Africa's unending generosity to unconsciously permitting Europe, the all-consuming vultures, free reign to her shores. In return, these conquering foreign forces began their merciless disfigurement of the continent beyond recognition with expert help from some of the natives. It seems that logically, this process of uprooting Africa became manageable thanks to her cursed dark skin, whose visual 'appearance' subjected black people to what Fanon construed as "over-determined from without" (Tladi 2008: 87).

The poem counteracts the neo-colonial domination and humiliation of the black body. It foregrounds the attainment of indigenous knowledge systems articulated by sages such as John Hendrik Clarke, Cheikh Anta Diop and Helen Sebidi, among others. Regarded as the true scholars

of the history of the African continent with the empowering knowledge of wisdom, these wise ones are compared to the stingy chef de partie whose food takes forever on the cooking stove (Brus Trio 1992). Complimented by the wailing upright bass in the recording, Tladi introduces these sages in fantastic imagery. He portrays them as mystics who cook with “unsophisticated and simple” and the cheapest ingredients (Biko 2004: 45). Based on these lines, cheap cooking ingredients might point to what is wrongfully perceived as less valuable. Perhaps reminding the viewer about the extant wisdom inherent in Africa, often taken for granted as of less value and generally ignored in South Africa’s zone of confluence, ‘Afrika’ points to the source of true knowledge.⁵⁴ A seemingly dehydrated voice warns about the consequences of adaptation to foreign tongues. It narrates the extreme cases of poverty as “signs of individual or group mental illness or self-negation” (Welsing 1991: 53). Generally, this failure to appreciate the existence of indigenous knowledge systems often leads to instances of an identity crisis and generational poverty.

This lack of appreciation generally defines the narrator and his compatriots through instances of what I consider identity crisis and generational poverty. Those who occupy the bottom half of poverty scales in South Africa, and by extension the world, are large pockets of black people whom the poem refers to as orphans. These orphans generally struggle to relate to their history and ancestry, seen in the general disregard of African scholarship’s “quest for self-definition” around the continent’s institutions of higher learning (Wiredu 2004: 1). Often an exception than a rule, such Afrocentric authors as the likes of Diop, Walter Rodney and Marcus Garvey are studied within the subtle and sometimes hostile environment of negative critique against affirming claims of African knowledge systems. Generally, these scholars intentionally explore the continent’s relationship to world civilisations amid the experienced proliferation of doubt, ignorance and the will to survive the persistent poverty of the black body.

Characterised by rich and symbolic imagery, the narrator of ‘Afrika’ likens her black body to a child adorned with fake pearls as borrowed means of value and a false sense of beauty. Addressed in a singular term, this confused and uprooted body is “alienated from itself as a source and producer of knowledge” (Wa Thiongo 2012: 41), yet it desperately attempts to compensate for its perceived lack of stature. Tladi paints a deep abstract and surrealistic graphic image representing the black body as fishing bait with a rapid twist of syllogism with detailed brush strokes. Observed here is

⁵⁴ Professor Lwazi Lushaba defines and discusses decolonisation, (<https://youtu.be/xestqqmz600>). (Lushaba 2020).

the baited fish feeding from the rotten dead body “of this child-like people” (Atuahene 2014: 33). These are wandering in a spooky situation that transposes them into maggots. Human beings in their infant stages, children need the care and supervision from adults to help them negotiate their daily survival in the world. These children live such an empty, harsh and materially wanting life (Retele 2019: 71). Their fate requires constant attention from adults while flowing like a river against the insurmountable tight imperialist confluence zone. In ‘Afrika’, Tladi paints a contrasting diverse quality of the African knowledge systems to those emanating from Eurasia, with the former presented as the antidote to the wretchedness of the native’s life.

Skilfully contrasting the space occupied by his actors, in ‘Ga Re Itshebeng’, Tladi paints a parched and emasculated landscape overshadowed by armoured vehicles, aptly interpreted by the anti-apartheid struggle song, ‘Mellow Yellow’.⁵⁵ In this composition of a few broad lines, black people are portrayed ably to understand the trails of these army vehicles driven by soldiers with guns. Depicted as young men whose feet repel thorns, the poem points to the stark contrast between white supremacy and the unarmed, vulnerable black people whom Tladi encourages to a conference. Semantically, this juxtaposition marks a ploy to express the psychology of the northern and southern cradle, the zone of confluence within the topography of individual black bodies (Diop 1989: 47). Still, ‘Ga Re Itshebeng’ points to the agency of the people to navigate this poisonous and unstable terrain.

The viewer appreciates the imagery of figures who look like commoners deprived of their extra-sensory abilities. These are figures steeped in poverty and confused identity. A state likened to the social death encountered by enslaved people who find themselves at the bottom rung of humanity, depicted in a composition dominated by a vast, open landscape (Patterson 1982: 38-39). Yet, the portrayed figures show the agency to comprehend the various meanings from the sounds of the sorrowful mourns created in the distorted space. ‘Ga Re Itshebeng’ was written in the 1980s when Sweden’s immigration policies were turning “into the cruelties of pronounced housing segregation, extreme labour-market discrimination, almost total (de facto) social apartheid and frequently encountered bureaucratic paternalism” (Pred 2000: xii). Newly arrived in Stockholm, Tladi used ‘Ga Re Itshebeng’ as part of his arsenal to interpret this new landscape in the northern cradle. As an outsider, he was forced to rethink his identity and destiny.

⁵⁵ ‘Mellow Yellow’ forms part of South Africa’s rich legacy of struggle songs which used to embolden activists against the apartheid might, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2b1Hr2sCgNE>). (African Cream Freedom Choir 2017).

An assertion about how the black way of experiencing the world affects dialogue and relations to the body, time and space, the stanza shows a composition populated by figures who are seen imbibing water from a particular flowing river (Manganyi 2019: 49-54). Manganyi (2019: 49-54) insists that since culture refers to how human beings mediate the world, there are many ways of being in the world as illustrated by the figures who are re-imagined as drinking water. Following Tladi's poem, I contend that being-black-in-the-world exposes the body to a distinct set of experiences through language, time and place. 'Ga Re Itshebeng' encourages black people to explore the rich heritage stored in their languages.

Here Tladi uses homonyms to strategically knit suggestive mental images juxtaposed by strife in the comforting November seasons, called *ngwana tshale* in both Setswana and Sepedi or the graceful, quick-running African antelope. In black Africa, some clans point to the antelope with its long legs and horns as a totem symbol of "the idea of a biological relation between man and beast" (Diop 1974: 135). This stanza creates cubist mental imagery where *tshale* could refer to strife, November or the antelope as an animal some black African clans associate with as part of their existence. This imagery depicts the children of the contentious, those nursing grudges, antelopes and the agents of imperialism making amends following the clouds bringing the joys of the summer seasons while foregoing greed and lust for power.

Now Tladi paints what I consider a fantastic image featuring individual figures who look like flesh-eating vultures, generally known as the messengers of death. In this grotesque composition, the human-like birds are depicted carrying heavy bags on their shoulders amid what looks like clouds often manipulated by astronomers who turn black lives into black holes. A black hole is a dense space of massive gravity in the universe, which can retain light particles after a star runs out of energy and collapses inside itself (Hawking 1976: 191). It is generally held that running into contact with a black hole means death due to its heavy gravitational pull, a process evocative of how the black body turns into nothingness (Ellison 1952) upon contact in South Africa between 1652 to 1994 with "extended colonialism" (Terreblanche 2002: 3).

What happens when the atmosphere is imbued with hostile forces that control the material existence of black Africans by extinguishing their dreams? Through the skilful mobilisation of personification to create drama-filled imagery, Tladi likens these dreams to flowers resistant to common colds. I contend such flowers represent the existential struggle experienced by the black majority in South

Africa, a nation-state I consider the zone of confluence where “structural disenfranchisement” reign supreme (Farred 203: 18). This part of the poem suggests a therapeutic purification rite necessary to help re-establish the lost physical and psychological wholesomeness of a people battered by colonial-apartheid violence. Tladi insists that various sections of the country’s population, the former political prisoners, exiles and those who remained within the country’s borders pre-1994, have all experienced years of the brutal assault on their humanity and therefore need to be purified (L. Tladi, personal communication, 1 June, 2020).

Thinking through these purification rites evokes memories of Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution of the 1960s for South Africa to emulate in birthing what Tladi calls “a united national consciousness programme to rid ourselves of the scourge of racism and tribalism” (L. Tladi, personal communication, 20 May 2020). Pulling strings in the background, Mao strove to amalgamate China under the umbrella of Marxist-Leninism, spearheaded by the youthful Red Guards, who killed and maimed people at will (Short 1999: 538-583). During this time, the public destruction of symbols and people thought to be representing the past and western civilisation, such as cultural monuments, street names and rich people, before the unruly mass meetings became the norm across urban China. Similarly, Tladi’s poem calls for a united South Africa free from the pretence and manipulation of the so-called rainbow nation amid the colonial-apartheid relics found in the names of Kruger National Park, Johannesburg and Hendrik Verwoerd Tunnels, among others. Violence and anarchy aside, South Africa needs a cultural revolution based on justice and equality, which acknowledges “the unequal distribution of political, economic and ideological power” from 1652 to date (Terreblanche 2002: xv). The economically, politically and ideologically poor black people pace around like a frustrated, caged bear.

Prophetic of the 1991 epochal Convention for Democratic South Africa (CODESA), which marked the official break from legal apartheid, and in the spirit of the Black Consciousness, ‘Ga Re Itshebeng’ appeals for exhaustive conferencing among black people. Tladi uses personification, homophones and homonyms by evoking memories of the wailing kudu horn and phalafala to emphasise the importance of his outcry.⁵⁶ In the black African sense of experiencing the world, phalafala concerns the invocation of community gatherings where important matters are debated.

⁵⁶ Depending on the particular sound of the phalafala, members of certain communities in parts of South Africa know the horn summons them to a meeting in the royal kraal, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOIoYTpSEQw&t=75s>). (Makotopong Sound Studios 2019).

This hopeless scenario is compounded by extreme poverty as the by-product of the continent's plundering of its human and natural resources. 'Ga Re Itshebeng' asserts that logically, once poverty becomes second nature and generational like it currently is, the unmentionable is normalised. This normalisation is seen in how Africa and her people look like the unprotected centre of royalty who is famished, underdeveloped and confused by the infiltration of foreign and powerful knowledge systems from the north. The poem uses rich image-laden language to encourage consciousness about her sorry state of desperation and therefore make amends. Interestingly, both 'Afrika' and 'Ga Re Itshebeng' encourage black people to acquire knowledge of the continent to counter her scourge of hopelessness. Acquiring cultural knowledge is the "ultimate backbone of a people, the immune system of a society" and leads to countless blessings in the long run (Ibekwe 2005: 51). Concurring with Chinweuzi's assertion about the importance of the indigenous knowledge system, Tladi encourages the foregrounding of the black African experience. Indigenous knowledge is essential in informing daily living. These poems paint an Afrocentric worldview as all-embracing, empowering self-knowledge that emanates from 'the black experience' (Manganyi 2017: 1).

Of note here is also how the poems expound symbolic words that are expressive of love for the African continent. The poems speak "in a language inscribed with the history of their disenfranchisement, and subjugation" (Farred 2003: 24). Despite achieving the impossible in the quest to show this self-professed adoration of Africa, Tladi, the narrator paints a mental picture showing how colonial-apartheid altered the realm of time and space. Expressed as meditative words bordering on the personal since "apartheid was in truth a messy and inefficient system of political rule and social control that needed collaborators to function", the poet and painter chose exile to share sensitive secrets with the system's death squads (Dlamini 2016: 774). Apartheid was nothing but the claws of the quail or a scalpel in a delicate medical procedure, not to mention the apartheid police using venomous violence to excavate grave secrets from opponents who often turned into collaborators.

In conclusion, 'Ga Re Itshebeng' and 'Afrika' raise pertinent and uncomfortable questions concerning the mental state of black Africa and her people. Sounding alarm bells to his slumbering community, Tladi uses imaginative and dramatic language to arouse images of landscapes populated with diverse wild animals, maggots and humans. The poet bemoans those ignorant black people who are represented as orphans in dire need of knowledge emanating from the African continent. Tladi points a stern warning finger at those enabling foreign powers who continue

conquering, plundering and corrupting Africa. Similar warnings are expressed in 'Ga Re Itshebeng'. In this poem, Tladi not only decries the state of the defeated mind of black Africans who find themselves victims of exploitation and humiliation at the hands of national groups as predators. He also calls for understanding black selves as equals and people with enabling agency among other nations. Through weaving metaphors and proverbs, Tladi utilises poetry to encourage self-consciousness and self-definition to affirm ways of experiencing the world while black.

Chapter 5 The Visual Portrait of Lefifi Tladi through the Creative Practice of Painting

Violence is initiated by those who oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognise others as persons – not by those who are oppressed, exploited, and unrecognised.

(Paulo Freire 2017: 29)

5.1 Introduction

The ensuing chapter explicates my studio practice and its theoretical meditations, which are integral to the broader study I have titled 'The Visual Portrait of Lefifi Tladi'. Tladi's art, poetry and cultural activism inform the creative process of my probing and reflective studio practice. My undertaking follows his use of particular colours, unique symbols and experimental forms of abstract patterns, natural colours and the complexities of language. I do not just investigate but also appropriate Tladi's intertwined ideas about the life and experience of black Africans in the social context called by Zakiyyah Jackson (2020) an anti-black world. The contents, forms and techniques of Tladi's extensive paintings and drawings adopt a multi-layered approach, which explores expressive visual languages characteristic of the Fibonacci number sequence, Matebele (Ndebele) palette, Synthetic Cubism and Abstract Expressionism (Tladi, personal communication, 10 September 2018). My creative process amalgamates some of these aesthetics developed by Tladi.

The Fibonacci number sequence is a mathematical formula that uses the Hindu-Arab numerals named after its discoverer, Leonardo Fibonacci (1170-1250). This Italian master mathematician studied in Algeria, where his father held an ambassadorial position in the seaport city of Bejaïa at the close of the 12th century (Hemingway 2008: 71, 80). An important addition to the Golden Ratio,⁵⁷ the number sequence appears in various forms of existence, such as in nature, coding theory and architecture, to achieve symmetry. As a compositional stratagem to determine a particular sequence, the method entails tallying the total number of its two previous phenomena appearing in some of Tladi's artworks [Figures 25 & 26].

In order to advance my visual language and aesthetic inquiry, I studied Tladi's compositions that work with the Fibonacci progression of numerals as marks combined with elements of the Matebele palette. Informing my interest in the Matebele palette is research dating back to the 1940s in South

⁵⁷ The Golden Ratio is also known as the Divine Proportion. This mathematical ratio appears in nature but can also be applied in aesthetics to create a sense of harmony and proportion (Gross 2015).

Africa's Eastern Transvaal (today's Mpumalanga), where it was common to see the appropriation of the flat, geometric southern Matebele mural designs, which included vivid acrylic paint colours of yellows, reds, blues, pinks and greens symbolising various aspects in the lives of various families (Schneider 1985: 60). These are 'markers of women identity' expressed through colour, motifs and decoration, which initially developed as abstract designs delineated with strong black outlines to adorn homesteads using natural earthen pigments (Marschall 2002: 42). Later on commercial brushes and chicken feathers were introduced in the common practice now fashioned by Esther Mahlangu's (b. 1935) canvases that combine traditional and modern influences (Bell-Robets & Bell-Robets 2015: 67-68). In some of her works, Mahlangu includes figures that become additional features to the traditional Ndebele motifs; she has also introduced new pigments to help set her apart from other kindred painters (Bell-Robets & Bell-Robets 2015: 67-68). There is, however, a sense of nostalgia about what has become the Ndebele ethnic art, as if desiring to retain its function for the social identity of the Ndzundza Matebele surrounded by both BaPedi and Batswana ethnic groups in the 1870s (Schneider 1985: 66).

Tladi's art taps into this art and the cultural history of Matebele, by exploring mark-making on flat surfaces to reflect fragments of the design elements that he combines with aesthetic features of Synthetic Cubism [see Figures 27 & 28]. From Synthetic Cubism, Tladi exploits the experiments of breaking up forms and intersecting disjointed elements on a flat surface, the progression of the palette, simplification of shapes and portrayal of the subject matter from various angles (Robbins 1988: 278). When these approaches and techniques are fused with the aesthetic qualities of El-Salahi, they birth a unique visual language and creative register in Tladi's art. Furthermore, Tladi uses his unique innovations to advance his driving discourse of pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness and Afrocentrism to articulate the experience of what Manganyi calls being-black-in-the-world.

5.2 Painting as Research

Tladi's approach to creativity informs my artistic process in the studio. I consider his creative approach "as a shadowy domain where everything bears the marks of the singular obsession" of my study (Elkins 2000: 141). My visual portrait of Lefifi Tladi entails a series of paintings on multiple canvases, paintings that are a visual theorisation of portraiture on the surface. I experimented with tea bags, torn paper and gel medium with pigments. This creative method of developing simplified though rich and dense surfaces to develop portraiture, I consider an intersectional inquiry, to

articulate the visual juncture where aesthetic and political representation meet or cross. It is the purpose of blurring or puzzling space, which speaks to a sense of confusion I found fascinating in creatively subjecting myself to a spontaneous process of built-up rich surfaces, deliberating on exploiting the canvas surface as a site of meaning-making and knowledge production. This creative site is not limited to the surface of the canvas; it also concerns the studio space as the context in which I pursue conceptual and physical experimentation resulting in visual representations manifest through the painting medium. The resultant paintings are in the genre of portraiture, which I use as the known and visible phenomenon enabling the exploration of the unknown. I do so by exploiting paint's materiality (and immateriality). Here the paint is treated in the sense Penny Siopis (2014: 55) considers to be material and as a distinct physical entity transcending its function as a medium able to interpret objects as images.

My painting process engaged the experiences I sensed in the studio. I explored colour and shapes to create visual narratives. Also, I manipulated the paint in ways that produced various identifiable and abstract forms, with the latter veering towards what Siopis (2014: 140) describes as "formlessness". The dynamism of these myriad influences overwhelmed my portraits as spontaneous and simple compositions demonstrating traits of African-inspired sensibilities. Following Tladi's art, I sought to create a forceful language expressive of an alternative paradigm transcending colonial-apartheid thinking through a portrait painting process simulating the visual characteristics identifiable with my material realities. Through portrait painting, which exploited the use of particular colours, and unique textures informed by experimentation, I attempted to express the life experiences of black Africans and their relationship to the world. The processes were influenced by studies of how Tladi employs the richness of Sesotho in his experiments with proverbs and idioms, particularly the innovative manner he weaves them to stretch the imagination and shift perceptions. My portraits benefitted from Tladi's creative approach as I produced compositions that amalgamated various tangible references and immaterial elements. This method of merging seemingly unrelated bodies takes on a language evoking an alternative existential model where the life of Tladi occupies the centre stage.

Through the combination of dry and wet media on paper, I stretched and complicated the use of colour and texture on the picture plane. The resultant compositions became interpretations of Tladi's perceived place in the South African cultural landscape as a poet, activist and painter. I took

his attempted interruption of the narrative of South Africa's current rainbow nation seriously⁵⁸ by intermittently scribbling word texts on some compositions. These works on paper compressed time and space while exploring Tladi's period in South Africa before exiling to Botswana and then to Sweden to avoid detention by the apartheid regime. Some drawings investigate Tladi's exhibitions and performances at political rallies; others concern him hosting poetry and art workshops around various parts of South Africa. I consciously painted what seemed like flat colours in the background of these portraits to insinuate the manufactured cultural narrative of post-1994. These matte colours are suggestive images of nullification of undesirable cultural and political views of Black Consciousness in South Africa's history, views that Tladi advocated throughout his art, poetry and activism. Through thorough experimentation with the chosen media, I consciously strove to reveal the physical qualities of line, colour and texture on the various surfaces. My painting strategy allowed me room to grapple with the abstract representation of the apparent "squatterisation of millions of people", the ill-information and inaccurate historiography promoted in the post-1994 rainbow narrative in South Africa (Terreblanche 2012: 102). These interventions are my creative strategies to visually engage and interrupt the seeming disregard for the existential experiences of individuals. These are "the voices from below or the margins" I have sought through portraiture (Farred 2003: 10). The time spent in the studio helped me appreciate the primacy of experimentation in conceiving the paintings through improvising with various non-traditional art materials. I added some of these materials to build rich surfaces while investigating ideas around hypocrisy and double standards. My studio moments included the constant wrestling with compositions, feelings and investigations that concern the existence of marginalised communities dominating my mind.

My actions in the studio attempted to challenge South Africa's popular socio-political discourse by appealing to Tladi's poetry, which I contend alters the perception of reality through the use of imaginative, rich and drama-filled language. These compositions relied on the poet's wordplay, which evokes in me images of Afrocentric views that underscore his 1980 exhibition at Gaborone's National Art Gallery and the two exhibitions at Unisa Art Gallery in 1995 and 1998. After the unfinished process of modernity in South Africa, as suggested by Mokoena and Masilela, my research illuminates the life of Tladi within the brutally frozen trajectory of the New Africans

⁵⁸⁵⁸ The term rainbow nation was made famous by two South African Noble laureates Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela to describe the mirage of post-1994. The idea of a rainbow nation lulled the oppressed South Africans into believing in the fallacy of a united country while downplaying its race relations, poverty, and the resultant psychological damage from colonial-apartheid.

through portraiture. It should be remembered that my research combines creative writing with experimental image-making inspired by Tladi's playful, Afrocentric thought processes. One of the emerging themes from the studio process simulated the creation of portraits whose contents embody my lived reality as an act of self-knowledge (Frere 2017: 81).

I should also note how Mphakati subjected the young Tladi to an avalanche of Afrocentric literature. He immersed himself in the likes of James Baldwin, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Frantz Fanon during the second half of the 1960s as part of his informal education (Hill 2015: 21). The exposure to black intellectuals and creatives was a positive force that emboldened Tladi's self-belief. Understanding blackness and Afrocentric concepts and philosophies fostered the humanisation of African epistemology. This orientated Tladi into the alternative knowledge systems to colonial-apartheid machinations. His ability to absorb knowledge shared by Africans from outside his country of birth enforced the belief of an alternative way of relating to the dialectical relationship of his mind and body, proceeding through the dialogue of objects, time and space. Such is a psycho-philosophical understanding theorised by Manganyi (2019: 54) as being-black-in-the-world. This understanding propelled Tladi to continually search for more sensible ways of experiencing being in the world as a black person.

Thus, in this research, I have mobilised the multitalented artist's creative concepts as the theoretical framework illuminating my extensive experiments with portraiture. Although charged with creative possibilities, the process of portrait painting and repetition of the same subject proves thought-provoking and challenging. Giving each portrait an individual character has been imperative to visually express some moments in the creative and intellectual life of Tladi. Through my studio process, I constantly undertook to understand the meaning of the painting as a language that enables an awareness of the elements of art behind Tladi's compositions.

5.2.1 Reflections on the Studio Processes

This section that explains creative practice relied on the journal entries which formed part of my studio process prior, during and after each painting session I undertook from 2017 to the completion of this study in 2021. My approach to these records follows what Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel (2000: 14) identify as ways employed by various artists to register "thoughts on studio, techniques, artistic purposes, the creative process, and philosophical content". Generally, my journal writing process registers the studio experiences as workshopping moments of scholarly

occupation, which include thoughts and ideas embracing the time I spent in the space. I sought to record as many feelings as possible and thoughts around the language of painting together with Tladi's poetry during each moment I spent in the studio. I read and listened to the poetry and looked at his artworks not just for inspiration but for crucial cues, ingredients and directions for my paintings, whose thesis crafted a visual portrait of an artist, poet, intellectual and activist. This creative process was crucial to the theoretical framework and methodology of this study I articulated in the introductory chapter. My studio process combines the physical act of painting, listening to poetry and reflecting inside the journal as part of conceptualising Tladi's scholarship. In this spontaneous process, I grappled with the construction of images laden with socio-historical and cultural sensibilities, which started as the groundwork for the portraits. These processes amalgamate painting, collage and graffiti elements, which I combine with the conceptual tenets of biography and portraiture in oil, pastel and acrylic to create tactile rich surfaces.

Informed by Tladi's ideas on aesthetics, history and culture, my initial studio analyses include trials with dyes, acrylic and charcoal studies against monochromatic washes and black oil pastels on paper. Primarily exploiting washes, my processes strove for the rhythmic interplay of build-up layers of mixed media against dynamic, probing lines. I explored methods aimed at teasing interpretive visions of consciousness as "empowerment in the language of Black Consciousness" (Pityana 2020: 401) by superimposing found objects to complicate the two-dimensional surfaces. These creative processes were necessary to search for visual forms and valuable techniques that register marks as expressing ideas or signification of thoughts. Through experimentation, I undertook an approach combining various visual elements, such as tone, colour and texture, to explore compositions as sites representing knowledge. My methods appropriated Tladi's reading of language, visuals and sound by manipulating paint as an extension of form and ideas.

Following Sekoto's portrait of Makeba that informed his series of portraits in the 1960s, I investigated portraiture as an entry into Tladi's world and psyche. My portrait compositions, thus, emerged and were shaped into representational visuals that exude "a rare, unfiltered view into the rape, crime, slang" of most black lives in South Africa (Mthembu 2018: 119). The creative process moved slowly as I tended to revisit the various compositions time and time again, employing a kind of chorus that is repeated until a particular pattern starts emerging and stabilising the painting surface. This painting procedure was a form of researching and discovering the subject contents and visual forms constituting the painting as a (composed) visual representation. In the process, I also explored randomness, improvisation and spontaneity tactics to wrestle with expressive lines

and flat colour swatches that steadily graduated into tonal gradations mirroring the research process. My experiments embraced the delicate process of layering the paint using (mostly) brushes until an image protracted while striving to balance the various visual elements across the surface. This process was framed by the ambient sounds of Tladi's poetry in the background as I consciously let the lyrics saturate my compositions while I dialogued and collaborated with the materials (Bolt 2010: 30).

My creative practice in the studio mirror is what James Elkins (2000: 3) dubbed thinking through the medium of paint as a language discoursing diverse ideas. I appropriated this painterly language to investigate compositions on flat surfaces and wrestle with effective ways of engaging the life and ideas of Tladi. Thus, this language of painting is useful in developing creative application of the physical materials of paint on canvas and paper and conveys forms embodying abstracted surfaces (Robertson & McDaniel 2000: 5-7). The subsequent portraits blend scraps of the artist's life through the narrative exploration of the physicality of the compositions as spaces of knowledge by manipulating the paint medium, symbols and marks. I painted surfaces whose rich textures enable the creation of a particular meaning, expanding the idea that black people share a special relationship with animals as totems (Diop 1974: 134-135). In the studio, I wrestled with fusing this concept of plant and animal symbols to consciously develop abstracted creations forming surfaces from which the portraits originated. This methodology enables the theorisation of portraiture as the agent of (visual) biography through manipulating art elements to investigate Tladi's character. My process fuses the creation of "black subjecthood on its own terms" through rich tactile surfaces, which I mediate with found objects and paint to elicit psychologically charged compositions (Arabindan-Kesson 2016: 76). I use this methodology as an attempt to establish contexts and depth for the portraits that consider the psychology and physicality of the paint medium. I exploited the paint using thin glazes that I slowly built through paint layers combined with thickened blobs to create densely over-painted forms, shapes and textures that eventually characterise the portraits.

This studio process appropriates formal art elements "as points, lines, shapes, colours, values, textures, and volumes". In so doing, I augmented them with Afrocentric forms like plant and animal patterns as the bedrock of my compositions (Robertson et al. 2000: 7). With this approach, I foregrounded flattened icons that are associated with the African continent give my compositions an Afrocentric orientation. In order to have a more profound sense of Tladi's experience and vision, I painted portraits whilst listening to the sounds of his poetry. Therefore, I felt his company in the studio and was inspired to imagine his complex world through a rendition of marks, textures and

colours. This creative rendition is synaesthesia, which implies associating what many people might find unrelated and irrelevant to each other; for example, a person can hear sounds in a particular colour or vice versa (Finlay 2002: 217). Similarly, I attempted to connect my use of colour to the sounds of Tladi's poetry in the studio. Through rich colours, I slowly build the compositions' physicality within the picture planes while inserting historical, political and personal narratives as found objects and images to help insert the South African context into my interpretations. My working methods simulate the act of physically attacking the painting surface with pigments until it is firmly saturated with paint in an atmosphere permeated by the ambient sounds of poetry as context, base and conceptual framework. Tladi's portraits struggled to develop from these uneven surfaces that are the products of my engagement with the studio's materials, methods, tools and ideas (Bolt 2010: 30).

My creative studio strategy includes transferring sketches onto large-scale surfaces on which I grappled with the creation of portraits and their accomplishment as refined paintings. The process was informed by the initial portrait drawings in my sketchbook. On these large painting surfaces, I summoned the paint's versatility in exploring its ability to create surfaces with a tactile sensibility as intrinsic mixed-media renderings that surpassed form. At this stage of investigating the characteristics of the paint, the focus was primarily on building surfaces that encapsulate abstracted elements evocative of totems that should read as markers of identity. I synaesthetically appropriate extracts from Tladi's poetry, patterns and colours to inform the tactile quality of my compositions and develop them into a visual language suggestive of the poet's experiences.

The initial activities in the studio as "a place where intellectual activity takes place" included wrestling with Tladi's physiognomy through mark-making in a sketchbook, where I undertook to excavate his intellect through drawing (Marshall 2010). These drawings became spontaneous and loose as I exploited various art elements such as line, texture and tonal values through a process defined by improvisation and freedom. Most of the sketches served an exploratory function as I searched for points of entry into the personage of Tladi through the line and transparent black washes on paper. My sketchbook is generally dominated by pencil, charcoal and black oil pastel depictions for a monochromatic investigative process. I prefer sketching in pencil, charcoal and pen as these mediums allow me to make quick marks on the drawing surface, which I often follow with tonal variations of thick, wet black or brown washes.

These studio experiments inside the sketchbook started by exploring Tladi's portrait through a rigorous process, simplifying his likeness into basic monochromatic shapes. I followed these portrait sketches by directly copying his paintings and drawings from exhibition catalogues and exploring their visual effects in watercolour. I then combined this character of the medium with black lines and patterns I had already created. I also superimposed extracts from Tladi's poem over my drawings to expand the visual experiments in the search for a particular creative language. 'Ga Re Itshebeng' and 'Afrika' are poems that emerged as a constant recurrence forming iterative patterns of anecdotal scribbling over my sketches. As part of my data collection, this way, I embarked on a routine that enabled an understanding and thinking through Tladi's various forms, use of colour and line against the background of imaginative world poetry, documentary and interviews.

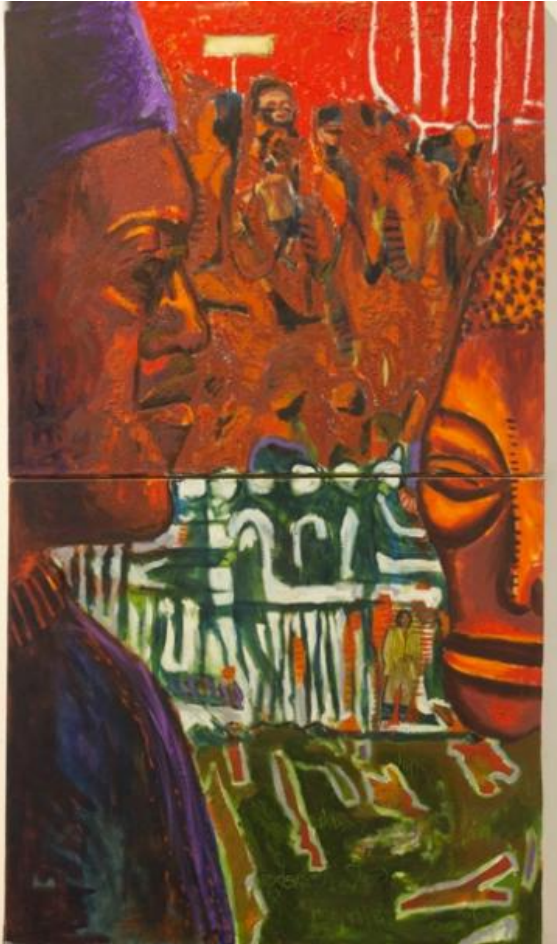
My creative process appropriates Tladi's visual language in shaping these investigative portraits while foregrounding the work's surface treatment. Most of these portraits are characterised by the physicality of their surfaces that I slowly build through marks and paint application to create dense layers. I insert found objects on the surfaces using a palette knife to create marks to heighten the variability of these spaces of activity. After depicting a few unfinished portraits, I realised the evolution of monotonous repetitive portraits engaging the materiality of the paint. Other than including some of his poetic lyrical content to construct the portraits, I follow his use of vivid yet subdued palette, meandering line work, as well as organic compositions to birth my expressive forms.

Generally, my artistic intervention in the studio explored the unstructured overview of armatures mapping out the intended compositions as outlines of random, slowly built-up layers of thin paint. These evocative lines and tonal variations of abstract forms develop as part of the creative process to suggest individual compositions. These studio processes simulated the rummaging of the electric light switch in the dark, where the sketches of Tladi's paintings function as the light shining to illuminate my activities.

My studio process amalgamated various influences to narrate the life of Tladi through visual experiments visually. This process focused on external stimuli while exploring various media characteristics, particularly paint, to stretch its ability and plasticity. Ultimately, I created portrait paintings that evoke memories pregnant with Afrocentric sensibilities through the combination of text, colour and signs on textured surfaces.

5.2.2 List of Kolodi Senong's Research Studio Images

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SENONG, Kolodi, Stages of Bondage, 2021, mixed media on canvas, 140 x 80 cm (70 x 80 cm each, diptych).



SENONG, Kolodi, Fifi le Legolo, 2019, oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm.



SENONG, Kolodi, Charmza, 2019, oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm.



SENONG, Kolodi, Untitled, 2017, mixed media on paper, 150 x 107 cm.



SENONG, Kolodi, Poetry in Motion (2019,) oil on canvas, 75 x 100 cm.



SENONG, Kolodi, African Imaginary, 2018, oil on canvas, 92 x 92 cm.



SENONG, Kolodi, Red Justice, 2017, mixed media on paper, 165 x 116 cm.



SENONG, Kolodi, Liberation What? (2020), oil on canvas, 77 x 67 cm.



SENONG, Kolodi, Tladi Reimagined in Pink (2019), mixed media on paper, 151 x 130 cm.



SENONG, Kolodi, The Seeing Eye, 2018, oil on canvas, 151 x 130 cm.



SENONG, Kolodi, Pan African Imagination, 2017, mixed media on paper, 151 x 140 cm.



SENONG, Kolodi, Ke Lefifi as Well, 2021, oil on canvas, 100 x 75 cm.



SENONG, Kolodi, Ga Re Itshebeng, 2018, oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm.



SENONG, Kolodi, Tladi Reimagined in Pink, 2018, oil on canvas 120 x 120 cm.



SENONG, Kolodi, Apartheid Reimagined, 2021, mixed media on canvas, 77 x 67 cm.



SENONG, Kolodi, Maatla Monagano as Meditation, 2018, mixed media on paper, 155 x 135 cm.



SENONG, SENONG, Kolodi, 'mangwane o ilePitoria, 2020, oil o on canvas, 77 x 67 cm.



SENONG, Kolodi, Yellow Justice, 2017, mixed media on paper, 152 x 108 cm.

5.3 Conclusion: A Reflective Summary

In the study, *Darkness after Light: The Visual Portrait of Lefifi Tladi*, I have pursued the significance of Tladi through portrait painting and discursive writing, which allowed for an original contribution to fields such as fine art and the history of art in South Africa. My studio practice explored his intellectual and creative work characterised by the spirit of Black Consciousness and Afrocentricity in research perspectives of art history, visual culture and cultural studies approached through portrait painting and biographical writing. This creative work enriched my inquiry and knowledge production by broadening the conventional academic research confined to written accounts whilst marginalising the physical act of painting and the construction of images as scholarly modes of research and knowledge production. My research benefitted from the biographical theories of Manganyi, Rassool and Mokoena that consist of psychobiography, historical biography and cultural biography through foraging in the archive. These scholars

approach biography from various angles to develop theoretical perspectives that enable my research to instigate and complicate Tladi's creative work and intellectual life.

Tladi argues that artists must develop a particular South African aesthetic devoid of the township as the only reference source. He deliberates extensively against the type of social realism which foregrounded the dilapidated structures, musicians and poverty-stricken figures. Sekoto is one of the pioneers of art, which captured the historical sites in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Cape Town. The art was subsequently perfected by painters such as Ngatane, Sihlali and Mogano, who captured Johannesburg and Soweto. Most of these paintings are important historical archives depicting some of the spaces which suffered from the forced change. As a counter-strategy to this type of art portraying the township, Tladi creates semi-abstract compositions that he claims appeal to the human senses. His art details Afrocentric signs and symbols, while his revolutionary poetry foregrounds the African continent through an appeal to language. Tladi's Sesotho poetry experiments with colourful and dramatic imagery, which points to his pan-African, Black Consciousness and Afrocentric thought processes. I equate his verse to Aimé Césaire, particularly his lengthy epic poem 'Return to My Native Land'. Tladi is able to break down words in ways that open up their meanings while creating loaded imagery. In my research, I explored two of his dynamic, expressive poems, 'Ga Re Itshebeng' and 'Afrika', to articulate the political and cultural aura of the pan-African and Black Consciousness worlds I strove to depict in my portraits.

Investigating Tladi's Afrocentric poetry, visual art and cultural activism helped me to create compositions that combine aesthetics and politics. I appropriated his use of earthy colours and abstract patterns that give rise to a dynamic language which informed my painting of evocative portraits. My studio process studied his visual language and compositional strategies inspired by the Fibonacci number sequence, Matebele palette and Synthetic Cubism. In my portrait explorations, I combined these strategies with his material experiences from Lady Selbourne, Pax High School and Ga-Rankuwa.

In the four years of my studio research, I studied the creative life of Tladi through the creation of practical work and writing. Thus, I have come to appreciate the suppressed and alternative histories of the South African visual art and intellectual life apparent in figures such as Tladi. Through this research, it became evident how the life of Tladi entwines subtle racism that assimilates people into its mould to help it mutate. Tladi is one of those individuals who have proven to foreground alternative ways of experiencing the world while black to the detriment of his recognition, appraisal, respect and reward. He joins the likes of Marcus Garvey, Robert Sobukwe and Cheikh Anta Diop,

whose worldviews have been vehemently demonised and whose African perspectives have been marginalised and somewhat erased, if not murdered, to maintain the status quo.

Tladi is one of those important South Africans who played their part in emboldening black people in the 1970s when apartheid had the upper hand. The story of his life and political and cultural activities embody a particular section of black South Africans who refused to be silenced by apartheid's savagery. Studying Tladi means understanding the hidden history of South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s and how his life connects to the history of black excellence since time immemorial. Tladi found himself among the people who managed to initiate empowerment projects, specifically tailor-made for their needs, when the government of the day made it impossibly difficult for black people to think for themselves. These projects were an extension of his visual art practice, the sensibilities of which went against what was generally considered good art, while his poetry appealed to the agency of blackness on its terms.

Tladi's philosophical ideas, political activism and initiatives feed into his way of life as a black African born into the toxic landscape characterised by racial domination. Growing up in apartheid South Africa, Tladi benefitted from meeting the culturally and politically conscious Mphakati. This meeting proved life-changing for Tladi, whose paradigm about life and blackness was exposed to new vistas when he started various cultural groups. His political awareness concerning the state of being black in apartheid South Africa emboldened him to seek ways of awakening his country folk's consciousness to acknowledge their agency.

This research challenges the problematic trend of growing scholarship, which attempts to distort Tladi's aesthetics and the philosophy of Black Consciousness by a subtle misrepresentation of South Africa's discourse. As a result, the study exposes the fault lines emerging within the country's contemporary landscape by presenting an alternative research biography of the multitalented artist and, by extension, Black Consciousness. This parody of mishaps follows how black South Africans inherited a culture of poverty, material want and racial domination, which resulted in artists such as Tladi embracing alternative worldviews as ways of life. Tladi's paradigm and ideas are stimulated by the sensibilities of black Africa and its people, using language and art as inalienable inheritance and anchorage. Unfortunately, bigotry and racial superiority led to the relegation of vernacular languages and philosophies people used in navigating their socio-cultural existence. Moments of existential deception resulting from the consequences of colonial apartheid's unaddressed legacy continue to impact black lives in South Africa.

The 2012 South African Police Services' ruthless massacre of miners in Marikana is one testimony of the lingering legacy of colonial apartheid in a democratic dispensation. This tragic event is captured by Aryan Kaganof's explorative biopic, titled *the Night is Coming: A Threnody for the Victims of Marikana*. Black lamentation regarding this massacre is heard in the opening of the biopic, expressed with Tladi's impressive poem, 'Ga Re Itshebeng', displaying the process leading up to the insensitive murder of the defenceless miners at the hands of the armed police with automatic rifles and bulletproof vests. Kaganof's interpretation of the motion picture with scenes of brutality follows strange subtitles that narrate something different and apposite to what the poem articulates. A stark reminder that *di itirang o ka re di a re utlwisisa ge re itsheba ka maleme a laletseng lelayeta le lwatsang leloba la lwetse* (pretending to understand when one speaks in mother tongues) and *di mphaka magareng a rona re sa hlolang re itse gore re iketseng* (annoyingly forcing themselves among us). These subtitles carry a different meaning from the accompanying verse and might be misleading to people who rely on them to understand the poem. A similar case is in the book titled *Biko's Ghost*, where Hill (2015: 45) asserts that, in the 1980s, Black Consciousness "created the conditions in which white activists would listen" to its message of liberation with dire consequences. In the current dispensation, the interpretation of Black Consciousness is dominated by the heirs of structural inequalities, heirs whose roots point to the colonial invasion of South Africa since 1652. The inherited mentality and practices of discrimination and privilege enable these heirs to appropriate at will while portraying Tladi as a passionate, creative individual seemingly oblivious of the racial schism forming part of his conscious reality as a black African, as shown by the two poems I discussed in the previous chapter.

Also, due to the constraint of time, resources, and scope of such postgraduate studies, my research barely covers Tladi's extensive practice. Although I acknowledge his entire life, my primary research focuses on his pre-1976 material reality and analyses, some of the art and poetry he produced in exile, away from his country of birth. The analysis covers the period between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s. In this regard, my research should be construed as a snapshot of understanding the first part of the artist's enterprising life and work instead of an exhaustive study. To some extent, my conclusions run counter to the popular account of South Africa's Eurocentric worldview with its associated education system. These nasty standards of conduct result from the simplifying of European daily life experiences into the practices of the world through the nuanced deviousness of neo-imperialism (Wa Thiong'o 1993: 43). Often, such condescending Eurocentric worldviews disparage through ignoring the existence of knowledge systems from other parts of the world such as Africa, Latin America and Asia. As a result, it is only logical that in the 21st century,

African modes of knowing to look to the continent as its centre of knowledge. Foregrounding local stories and material experiences similar to Tladi's assumes ownership of the African history and culture and bodes well for the reawakening of the continent. Based on my analysis of the multitalented artist's scholarship, 21st-century South Africa needs to foreground knowledge systems from around the continent. Going further, it might be essential to investigate and give due respect to those African creatives mirroring local contexts and experiences without apology. The domination of these Black Consciousness and Afrocentric worldviews requires prioritisation as a matter of urgency to give black South Africans a sense of belonging and being in this anti-black world.

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