

Artist Proof Studio, Johannesburg, South Africa

New Voices in Johannesburg: Melody and/or Cacophony?



Darnisa Amante '06

Prologue: Welcome

From the side of the petite windows placed over the wings, the landscape of the country lying below was not only visible, but also quite exquisite: completely flat brown land with spurts of green and dust. Then, from the horizon, the city came into view and skyscrapers began to emerge. It is a city built upon the backs of miners and revolutionized over the past 10 years by a democratic fervor—and extreme desire for change from its former regime towards betterment. In a sense, it is a city that represents the gradual creation of a place where the slogan “proud to be South African,” does not seem both preposterous and hypocritical; rather it looks towards the prospect of progress and opportunity. A voice from the intercom above announced in English, Afrikaans, and Sestho: “Welcome, Welkom, Lebogega to Johannesburg.”

Looking at my reflection in the airplane window, I could not help but think about what lay before me. There I was, a black woman, 20 years old, from Brooklyn traveling to South Africa—a place that my ancestors are “said to hail from”—to work in a local organization aimed at black empowerment for nine weeks. I was going to Artist Proof Studio (APS) to work with not only well-known South African artist, Kim Berman, but also with Stompie Selibe, another artist and coexistence practitioner. But the stakes were high.

There were no protective walls of Brandeis University, and no reassuring talks from friends and professors. I was landing in Africa, truly alone and independent for the first time, with a clean/anonymous slate. No one knew of my past and my involvement in the Brandeis Black Student Organization, Student Union, or even the Ethics Center. There were no crowning achievements bearing my name. I could only be identified by the images that I portrayed, by the color of my skin, and by my relationships with others—*just* as Darnisa Amante.

Stepping off the plane in Johannesburg, the entire airport was abuzz with travelers milling about. Black hands could be

seen with different colored passports of red, green, and yellow, but none of those black hands held a blue passport embossed with gold eagles, none but mine. It suddenly seemed as if all the milling had stopped, people who had previously been dragging along suitcases and children, were looking in my direction, wondering why I, a black woman, had a U.S. passport. A passport of a country of opportunity, a country that they believed held all of the answers, answers that a South African passport could not provide. Needless to say, it made me uncomfortable. I didn't know how to respond. Unable to meet their questioning eyes, I simply picked up my own luggage and headed towards customs and the outer doors of the Johannesburg International Airport.

I: Johannesburg: I Live on the Other Side of Injustice

“You know, Darnisa, life is about a journey. And sometimes you never know where that journey is going to take you and why some roads take people one way and you another. But you always have to question it...”

- Stompie Selibe

“Gandhi Square! Next Stop Gandhi Square” could be heard from the man sitting in the driver's seat. He wore no uniform, the distinction between him and the other passengers was made only by his tight grip on the lever of the door. It's a firm grasp that clearly states that he's a cut above the rest. He makes the choices and no one can take that right from him. He can choose when and when not to announce the stops, and when to open the door that continually creaks and sometimes has to be closed manually by standing on the concave bottom step. It's a double-decker, plastered with adverts on the side proclaiming that you're only half human if you rape a woman, as well as selling Yebo Gogo cell phones, and Grandpa medicines for headaches. But those factors go unnoticed by many. This is a mandatory ride to and

from work, not one of observations. The bus whips to the right, everyone leans and I stumble into my seat.

It's a windy scenic tour, from the large houses, green landscapes and BMWs of Parktown North, [a suburb of Jo'burg], to the tall cement buildings and mini-taxis of downtown Gauteng [the former name of Jo'burg]. My vehicle of choice is a bus, and at times it almost seems as if the ride is just as tumultuous as the swirling dust clouds that surround the township of Soweto on the outer rim of the city. I am swept up by a bus that descends upon the corner of 3rd and 7th in Parktown, where I am staying, like dust settling on children's faces while at play. The bus swerves to the left and comes to an abrupt halt. "*This is the last stop,*" the driver says. The loud creak signifies that the doors are open. Stepping down, I'm immediately bum rushed by a score of people with briefcases, linens, baskets, and Colgate toothpaste. *Johannesburg*. The doors close quickly behind me and the bus pulls off, a phantom that disappears as quickly as dissipating dust.

The space left by the bus is quickly filled by dozens of black faces that give me customary glances, but nothing more. For the moment, I am just one of them: a black woman in Jo'burg trying to avoid the wintry gusts of wind, nothing more and nothing less. I tie my scarf tighter across my face, while more people glance in my direction. They do not question me, because the confused look on my face and the feelings of being uprooted are felt by scores of people walking amongst me. I'm lost and don't know in which direction to begin this quest, where to walk, and to whom to speak; my feelings are similar to their own. They've all gone through periods where they've felt displaced and alone with nowhere to turn. Maybe the bus and the dust clouds were partners in crime, both disappearing quickly and offering no help. One was just well camouflaged in a dirty cracked exterior, only five Rand for the ride of a lifetime.

"Well I was born in this place called Rooirgamtiesfontein but I didn't grow up there. Now I live in Soweto. We were forcefully removed from that place to a new place in the northwest province because that place was fertile and we had to make place for the Afrikaner farmers. I remember soldiers carrying big guns and I still remember the house we had. It was a big house and after we were displaced, we moved to a shack house. Can you imagine going from a 16-room house to a shack? I'm from a big family and we are 10 at home: six brothers and four sisters. Even now I sometimes don't have enough to pay five Rand for the bus. I take the

mini-taxis. I know that they are really crowded and a lot of times the drivers don't have licenses but I don't have a choice. You squeeze yourself through the doors because you have to. I've never even left from Gandhi Square, it doesn't go in my direction."

—Paul Molete

Mini-taxis whiz by again, as I begin walking through the circular-shaped square, the once-white color of the taxis now unrecognizable. Legs and hands are pressed up against the window but their owners cannot be seen. However, the taxi is heading in the direction that I need to walk: three blocks down Pritchard and seven up President Street. Glancing up, first at the sign for Pritchard Street, the walk seems inviting enough. Along the way I pass numerous music stores playing Kwato music, an interesting mix of traditional music and rap in Zulu, Sesotho and English. Heads are bobbing in the street and children in their school clothes—blue, red, and green plaids—are running behind mini taxi's and waving two fingers in the air; in a way making an absurd-looking peace gesture. The buses are never an option, only the taxi rank.

However, the gesture has absolutely nothing to do with peace signs or the hippie movement of the 1960's. It instead simply denotes the direction of travel. One finger for Soweto and two for the city. My fingers are lying at my side; not only do I not know the signs, but I, myself, am not going anywhere. A funeral parlor to the right halts my movement. There's a kneeling stone figure in the window lying against cold marble. The words above the headstone exclaim that this particular store has the cheapest rates in the neighborhood. In fact, it proves to be one of many parlors along the route. The heads around me are still bobbing, as if 48 years under apartheid has left people unfazed.

The walk always seems to be quick, even though it takes 25 minutes. The order of objects on the street is compelling. The

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Jo'burg public library across the street from Standard Autobank, human excrement alongside the building and then an immense glistening figure in the horizon. Suddenly, I see that there is glass everywhere but my feet keep moving like nothing has changed, mimicking the movement of others around me. The panes are reflecting everything within the nearest one block radius, including the newly finished Nelson Mandela Bridge. It's the Stock Exchange, the crowning achievement of progress, a wave of the future for the new South Africa. There's excrement alongside this building as well. I continue walking.

However, the landscape has changed yet again. Here there are cultural factories: dance, theatre, and in the distance, the bus factory owned by Beautiful Things, the home of APS. This is the studio where I've been assigned. I take a moment to whisper to myself about the image upon me: a large parking lot with overhanging shutters of aluminum and greenery. An inner utopia of local art works with huge APS signs next to an advert proclaiming Beautiful Things; a true declaration of the achievement. The studio is located in the back of the Bus Factory, contributing to the existing arty ambience created by Beautiful Things—the showcase crafts from all over South Africa.

Walking into the studio, I am overcome by the absurdity of the colors that somehow seem to be in sync and work with each other: reds, oranges, and grays. Such a warm surrounding to encompass the true meaning of a place that not only houses black youth in order to ensure them equal opportunities, but was also built out of the ashes of the post apartheid regime. It is a space that houses more than 100 artists, a place that is as welcoming as it is beautiful.

The heads around me begin to turn. My voice wasn't low enough. When I open my mouth, though I am a black woman in a predominantly black area, all of the heads turn. People become perplexed. I looked like them, yet my voice was different. The eyes of those around me, like those in the airport, are questioning and wondering what exactly I'm doing in their part of town and why I'm not on the same route as many of the other "tourists." How could I explain that I was a student from Brandeis University doing coexistence work on an internship? Why did I of all people have the choice to determine a different path for myself? On one hand, I was an outsider. Yet, they still accepted me with open arms. According to them, a black woman always had a place in their open arms, an idea that I will explore later. They did not care about what university I went to but rather chose to view me as an insider, giving me access to cultural practices otherwise denied to "tourists." I was at APS and regardless of being an outsider, I was made privy to its surrounding, its beautiful interior and its orange colored walls.

The studio occupants turn around on their stools with their aprons slightly lagging by a few seconds. I had entered the studio during lunch. They continue eating fat cakes with liver. Siphso, a second-year student, offers me some of his,

"Take the fat cake like this, fold it like a bun and place the liver in the middle" he says.

I am welcomed. Some, like Thembekka a 20-year-old student, were even smiling at my American accent. As the rest turned away from me to finish their food, I hear people behind me saying "Swabona": Hello and Welcome. They are Thulani, Nelson, and Siphso [who had offered food earlier], all young black artists who were only two or three years older than my 20 years. They told me how they'd come to the studio and integrated me into the world that is APS.

"I was tired of staying at home. I went to town and I did some job interviews and when I got there, the queue was too long, and then I started walking around town and looking around. And then I found this place, APS, and I asked them what they did and they told me about it and I was so excited. They told me when to come back for my interviews and then later I got accepted and now I'm here. I was accepted for my art."

To me art is a form of expression, not only can you express yourself but you can heal yourself as well. A lot of us need some healing. By healing yourself you're also healing the next person that sees your artwork. I see art as a powerful way of expression and as a way that can change man's perception and man's belief and things like that. It can still serve that purpose even now. I see art as being a little bit closer to being God. You're becoming a creator, and art to me is that you're given the responsibility to be a creator and a limited God."

-Thulani

I was not alone anymore...

II. Artist Proof Studio In-Depth: Breaking Away from Apartheid

"Things are not always the way they seem, there is something always under the surface. It was kind of like that during apartheid. People would be so afraid to ask questions because they knew that asking questions would bring harm upon them. The people in the generation before me couldn't talk about what was really bothering them because if they did they might not make it to the next day. You could be arrested in the middle of the night. To them worrying about such nonsense would only lead to trouble. And by nonsense I mean asking questions and wanting legit answers. Many of us have stopped questioning, but it doesn't mean that we aren't searching for answers..."

- Stompie Selibe

The greatest impacts on a community are often those that spawn from history. Sometimes, it is hard to discern what aspects will have the most effect on a community. At times it is the backlash to oppression, and other times it is the sheer desire for change that acts as a catalyst for the greatest stirrings within a group of individuals. APS exists as a conglomeration of both of these ideals.

Founded in 1991 by Kim Berman and Nhlanhla Xaba, APS is a community based printmaking studio that is located in the Newtown Cultural Precinct of Johannesburg. APS offers an intensive training program in printmaking, and organizes meetings and exchanges between its artists and international printmakers. It is also involved in art-related poverty relief and AIDS awareness projects throughout South Africa's nine provinces. However, while APS strives to empower its artists through printmaking, it also provides an opportunity for artists to take control of their own careers. APS coordinates various job creation programs for young artists involving professional internships, or contract commissions for silkscreen cards, hand-made paper, graphic design and other products.

It is this devotion to job creation and black empowerment that has resulted in APS emerging as a community institution built upon anti-apartheid sentiments. Founded three years before the end of apartheid, both Berman and Xaba felt that it was important for a place to exist where race was not a factor, but rather where artistic talent surpassed all ideas of racism. As many explained to me throughout the internship, art has no race.

"When you talk about empowerment, I realize that for a human to be empowered they need to be supported, APS provides that. Growing up I had support as a child but I felt like I didn't have enough support for the really important things in my life. The art that you can create brings peace to your inner soul. Art brings questions about how to deal with issues like racism. Some of us didn't know why things happened like discrimination but it wasn't something that I aimed to entertain. It was something that was often evoked in the space because it is something that is never discussed. It opens up the possibilities of who you are and where you're coming from. We could question our families and our past through art at APS."

- Stompie Selibe

With the help of workshops run by Stompie Selibe and the continual creation of art by students, the studio over the past 12 years has combated the ideology of an oppressive regime. It is absurd not to consider that Apartheid, which remained in place for over three decades, has not only succeeded in tarnishing the history of race relations in the country, but has also succeeded in stigmatizing its black peoples. The Apartheid era was focused on locking black South Africans into societal "norms," silencing them, and fostering the idea that black progress was not true progress.

In a sense, Apartheid embedded the idea that white was right and anything black needed to be segregated for the greater protection of the white minority. It's ultimately this idea that APS challenges on a continual basis by running Paper Prayer campaigns for AIDS awareness, engaging in community art projects, and selling students' works within the studio's Nhlanhla Xaba gallery in the studio. All of this is done to embody the image of the new South African -a person that is not focused on racism and discrimination but rather tries to overcome discrimination by looking toward the future and democracy.

Students are given the opportunity and responsibility to take part in all phases of their exhibitions, including design, installation, and pricing.

APS also builds upon the positive movement towards social change that developed among activists under apartheid. The use of visual arts presents a forum for members of the studio to work side by side with former enemies [some groups from their own townships] in exercising their creativity and talents.¹ Rather than constantly focusing on the negative, artists come to the studio and engage in a variety of art techniques. APS offers opportunities and tuition for a range of printmaking techniques including etching, silkscreen, relief printing, photographic processes, papermaking, and lithography. These various tools provide ways for artists to break out of conventional roles and bring something back to their communities. This cyclical process of learning and teaching is vital to the APS community. Not only does it allow older artists to influence younger artists, but it also allows artists to take what they've learned about empowerment and racism, and bring it to their communities outside of the studio in the townships to help break down the tensions that still exist.

"I deal with social issues in my prints and things that we face everyday, like abuse and fatherhood, things that our neighbors are gossiping about and the headline news that you read everyday. It is about that and things that I have experienced and the problems that I am facing everyday. And some of the problems in fact are things I can't solve. I'm not trying to solve everything but I'm just accepting some of the things that we cannot solve. Not to say if I die today I'll be a happy man, because I still have to express more. There are still a lot of colors that I have to put there in my print. Then I can die knowing that I can share with the whole world or my country what I needed to say; it would be something else for the next generation. So I have to try every day to clean up all the mess, and to open new doors for the next upcoming artists, and I know that I'm not going to stray."

- Nelson Makamo

Every day the young artists, like Nelson, come from around the townships, some as far as two hours, in order to partake in the printmaking process. Nelson, who is a second year student, creates prints that not only depict family scenes but also ultimately evoke his family and ancestors. The images that he creates, as he states, are there to set an example for the next artist that is coming after him. While he does many prints in the studio, he also does many drawings. Each scene is a plea to those young black men that are "succumbing" to temptations that cause HIV and can lead to death. His contribution to the community is simply a plea to remain safe, and for men to be good fathers to their children.

However, the studio represents so much more than lithograms, prints and woodcuttings. As Nelson and others suggest it serves more as a familial unit. It fosters an atmosphere for artists like Siphon, and Thulani to create without the fear of

retaliation from anyone. This is one predominate reason why APS, since its beginning in the early 1990's, has been a symbol of family, support, and most importantly a representative of the new South Africa. Everyone has an equal opportunity to achieve his or her goals. APS simply provides the medium: art.

Through linoleum cuts (linels) which involves cutting an image into linoleum and then inking it, as well as woodcutting, black men and women are in a sense "re-voicing" themselves. Because at some point someone has to talk, someone has to speak about the injustices so that the next generation will not be held under the same tight constraints. Someone has to do a woodcut that can impact the community, and spread the idea that change is possible.

Some of the works that have had the largest impact on the community are the collages that were created after a fire that struck APS in of March 2003. They represent the true reconciliation of a community. Everyone came together in order to reestablish bonds that had been broken by the fire and also rallied together to ensure that APS would stand in the future [which will be discussed more in depth in chapter 3]. Because for these artists, APS is not just a studio, it is a future.

"The support that I've gotten from friends, family and teachers builds me every day and it teaches me to wake up. So every day to me is a challenge because I don't know what is going to happen. I don't know what I'm going to do but by the end of the day I can tell you what happened in that day but that's as far as it goes. And that is my work now. There will be a time when I'll be battling with a canvas and having to express what I did the whole day in colors, pencils and charcoal until I have to stop. And it is only then that I can go to bed. But today I can see that I am busy polishing my future and it isn't shiny yet but it's about to shine."

- Sipho

Though many of these issues may seem large and convoluted, it is important to understand them to see the true benefits that Artist Proof represents. Through workshops held with Stompie Selibe, like *Ubuntu*—which is a South African concept of family and humility—men and women are given an

opportunity to speak about what they feel and how things have affected them. They are being given agency through their voices, and it is ultimately the voices of the artist that have built the foundation for the studio.

Their voices permeate throughout APS's orange and red walls and can be found in all of the student's work. Many within the space of the studio are happy to share their stories,

and are eager to move beyond the parameters that have been set by society. APS continues to foster this desire every day, and each day it helps in the struggle of breaking the realm of silence and bringing internal issues to the forefront using the artist's works. For APS, the use of voices in its work is key.

"Before I started doing this fellowship, I wasn't aware that I was in the process of dealing with reconciling with what you have and the environment that you're staying. Honestly, I never saw myself as someone who could inspire and transform things but I realized that when you have passion, faith and hope you're always working on what you believe. You can be able to learn to believe to have faith and hope that something will work out."

- Stompie Selibe

However, many problems exist today as residual effects of the apartheid regime that APS has not been able to completely combat. For instance, many communities and peoples continue to live their lives like marionettes with their strings being pulled by outward societal forces. Apartheid has left an undeniable mark on the people, and particularly on its youth and their families. People are afraid to confront their families with relevant and current issues, and there is even a stigma surrounding being a male artist. A perfect example of this can be seen in many of the youth who, like Sipho, are discouraged by their communities from asking questions and voicing their concerns.

"I think that my family doesn't care what I do, they only care about when I arrive home late or don't come home at all. I'm male artist and they don't even understand what printmaking is. How can I explain inking and printing presses to people who don't really know how to read? They don't question anything else. We've been hurt too much by apartheid. You just begin to ignore things and then it doesn't hurt anymore. I've inherited the same thing from my parents and what my family did. Now, I don't care anymore. I don't feel pain anymore. I just don't talk about it around them."

- Sipho Mzedkandaba

Instead of outwardly voicing their protests, much of the anger that exists is left to brew just under the surface. While APS has helped in combating this issue, many black youths still feel that they have been silenced and that they do not possess the power to stand up and protest what they feel is unjust as individuals. They instead choose to look toward powerful leaders like Nelson Mandela to vicariously live out their struggles, and to solve their conflicts. This method, unfortunately, has not been as effective as many of the artists would have hoped. Men and women are both encouraged to know their pasts so that they might not repeat the same mistakes and calamity in the future; a concept that is not so far off from U.S. culture.

However, one must also first realize that silence plays a large role in South African culture. The men, when presented

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with difficult situations, must hide their tears: an emotional silencing. When a woman is abused, she must remain silent for fear of being hurt again. In an effort to counter these feelings, APS has set up a comfortable atmosphere that provides a forum for these issues to be discussed not only through art but through workshops such as Men as Partner, which deals with the stigma surrounding being a male artist as well as Paper Prayers, which are workshops that promote HIV prevention. APS strives to reconcile communities and to bring them together, but sometimes the coexistence rhetoric is simply not applicable.

Diane Francis has said that the use of art not only creates positive personal relationships but can also contribute to the constructive handling of conflict². However, while positive relationships have sprung up in the studio, the result has not been an explicit healing among black and white communities but rather an increased sentiment of unity among the black population of the studio. While artists come together every day, there is a striking disproportion of black and white artists. Actually, during my stay at APS, there was only one white artist who was a third- and final-year student. The only other white individuals coming into the studio are those that work there as staff, and people that come into the studio wishing to purchase art from the students.

As a result of this racial distribution, Kim Berman promotes the complete control of artists of their work aside from class assignments. Each artist is in control of how his or her work is displayed, the price range, and the location of their work within the Nhlanhla Xaba gallery. Potential customers enter the studio and are greeted by Cara Walters, the studio manager, or Marjorie Maleka, a third-year student who is also in charge of sales. Once the decision has been made on which picture will be bought, the artist is contacted and will often times have discussions with the patron about the meaning of the work.

While exhibiting many elements of coexistence such as the use of visual arts to bring people within the studio together and providing a means to “break the silence,” APS is one of a few institutions that are being used in the new South Africa to assuage Apartheid sentiments. APS, along with other programs, is located within the new cultural district of downtown Jo’burg-Newton. Since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which promoted the use of voices after the fall of apartheid, institutions have sprung up in order to promote this goal.

In fact, before the creation of APS, Market Theater, and the dance factory [which houses many cultural shows], many white businessmen and patrons were afraid to travel beyond the Standard Bank. There was a fear that to travel beyond that point would increase the risk of being mugged. So in that respect, APS and the other arts programs have been successful in bringing black and white people together. Now, it is not uncommon to see white foreigners and natives walking along President Street

to the Beautiful Thing’s Bus Factory or across the street the South African Museum without constantly questioning the black individuals around them.

While such efforts have been made beyond the studio’s wall, APS is still susceptible to outside elements that cannot be controlled by workshops and art. These elements threaten to destroy its quest for giving voice and empowerment; this is a problem that coexistence practitioners could not fix. APS was threatened by an element that had nothing to do with apartheid and could not be cured through Ubuntu workshops with Stompie Selibe-a fire. The fire had everything do with testing the Artist Proof community’s true strength and unity.

III. Out of the Ashes, a Community is Rebuilt: The Healing Begins

“The studio is a shell. It’s harder on the outside and more fragile on the inside.”

- Sipho

In the early morning of March 9, 2003, Kim Berman woke up to an alarming telephone call that held double heartache for her and Nhlanhla’s beloved studio. During the night, a fire had struck. Not only had it burned down the studio, but it had also claimed the life of Nhlanhla Xaba, her friend, cohort, and co-founder. But that was not the worst part of the news.

All of the artwork of over 100 artists, which had taken 10 years to make and to display, was gone. Only fragments of what had been were left, burnt linels and printing presses. The artists had to come together. The institution that they had referred to as their home for so long was gone, and the only thing that could be done was to take each fragment and place them together in a collage to commemorate Nhlanhla’s work and life.

Several collages of all of the remaining work had to be made in order to show that their studio was not lost forever. The result was a series of collages within the studio and a mural at the entrance of the studio, and images created from prints by Xaba on the interior doors. Even the security fencing on the staircase and above the walls of the studio is fashioned from collages [each named Conflict, Negotiation, and Peace] of the burnt remains found in the original studio. The process of making art and art therapy was instrumental in the healing of the inner APS community, and of the tensions that existed as a result of the fire amongst groups in the studio, and most importantly in reestablishing the role of APS in the community at large.

“I never recovered until I made a print. I had to deal with the fire the best way I could and the only way I could was to come up with an art piece that would take away my rage. I had to come to peace about the whole situation and I dedicated the piece to him (Nhlanhla). It was about the journey from the beginning: when I first came here, the journey I took every day, the journey from when I was born to

now, the financial struggles I went through and it was about everything he taught me.”

- Trevor

The creation of the collages signified what an important role APS played and still plays in the community. The collages encouraged students to keep working, and went on public display for the surrounding community to see. People from the larger community were able to see the resilience of the studio, and ultimately see that it would not give up on its goals and aspirations.

“We made a collage out of burnt prints and it was interesting. It was regeneration and a reproduction of what was burnt into something new. It was like rebuilding the studio and it played a big role in our lives. Then we started working together and it meant there is always someone for you and that we are here for someone, and there is someone there to support me. And that’s how I felt, I would depend on people for security and thoughts and quite a lot of stuff. And that’s when the collaboration occurred, because we were all in one crisis and the only way to rebuild the studio was to work together.”

- Trevor

Not only did the collages bring artists together, but they also produced a long term unexpected effect. The experiences led to increased feelings of a family-like atmosphere and the banding together of artists to protect their “home”. It was this sentiment that I viewed when I entered the walls of APS. It gave me the chance to see the effects of the healing process up close. When you enter the studio, the first things that you notice are the collages that grace the walls. Each one represents a memory, and a piece of art that was created by present day and former members of the studio. Up close, you can see each piece was placed together. Some of the pieces of the collage are black with tar, and others seem unscathed by the flames that overcame the studio.

Walking into the studio was an incredibly moving experience for me every day. Each collage is crafted so well, you can’t help but appreciate it. Each one portrays togetherness and simply reiterates what can happen when coexistence work is effective. Everyone came together for one cause besides the hardships that were happening in the studio in order to reconcile as a group, and I found that incredibly powerful.

Throughout my summer at APS, I was able to witness and observe many instances of the community coming together. After such a devastating event, the solidarity of the community was amazing. However, all of this healing did not just come about from the creation of the collages, but also grew out of many art therapy workshops. The main goal of these workshops is to give the artists an opportunity to express their pain, and their sorrow through artwork. This, however, would not be the first time that I would be able to glimpse into the inner workings of South African history and the studio.

Not only was I working at APS, but I also traveled the countryside visiting Phumani Paper sites. Phumani Paper, also founded by Kim Berman, is a poverty relief program aimed at increasing the economic prosperity of over 150 women in the nine provinces of South Africa. Many of those instances that occurred during my summer happened outside of the studio, in trips to the townships, particularly in Wintervelt.

IV. An Outsider’s Perspective

Loading ourselves into the van, the doors shut behind us without a sound from the passengers or the usually squeaky doors. This was a moment of awe. A mini-bus, which usually squeezes in 20 people, was a little less than half-full with only nine passengers aboard. The taxi, still maintaining its white factory color, had not yet been caked with the dust that generally accompanies most mini taxis in Jo’burg. It was a clear indication that our object of the day was neither to venture within the inner ring of Jo’burg nor to provide assuring images for people familiar with the turf. Instead, we were going beyond the reaches of the city, in the company of white Americans: a documentary crew whose main objective was to capture the essence of Phumani Paper and the workers at its site in Wintervelt. The taxi had to be perfect in order to symbolize the changes that had occurred in the city since the end of apartheid in 1994. The Stock Exchange’s shiny surface glimmered from the right side...strained race relations were “a thing of the past.”

Pulling away from the studio, I glanced to my left at Kgagelo, a woman who worked at APS in an embroidery project called Ikageng. She had been working in the studio for the past 10 years. Her expression was similar to my own, a sense of slight bewilderment with the change of the scenery. At every instant, she couldn’t help but mention to me that every year her “little” town of Gauteng changed,

“Everything looks different each time I see it,” she said. “Some places look so better much better each time I see them. But the bad places, they just get more bad. I wish you could have seen it five years ago. I can even describe what it was then. Everything was torn down and dirty and it was just so different. I think a lot of these changes come with progress. You know we got the World Cup in 2010!”

We were leaving the usual noisiness and hectic nature of the bus factory to go to a project in Wintervelt that was specifically designed for women who had either been abused or were HIV positive. It was an all too familiar problem that Kgagelo didn’t fail to mention to me, in a whisper, during our ride from Jo’burg, through Pretoria and Shosunguwe (the town bordering Wintervelt). In this region, only an hour from the city, one could see shanty homes falling over. Sometimes they had neither doors nor roofs. As Kgagelo leaned over me, she mentioned once again in a hushed voice,

“There is no support for us out here.”

As we drove by in our shiny white mini-taxi, heads on the street in all three regions turned. Children ran alongside the cars, screaming hello to all the white faces in the van, ignoring the blacks in the back. The white hands, in return, reached out the windows waving hello in return. But behind the children, black adults stood in the background, unwavering in their stance, staring at the new white mini-taxi with six white occupants and three black ones. The kids kept running towards the car. The adults simply turned around, beckoning their children to follow them. We kept moving toward Wintervelt. Kgagelo turned to me again, unable to contain her feelings.

“You know Darnisa, I love coming to Wintervelt. Since the last time we were here two weeks ago, I have been dreaming of all those beautiful bags that I saw sitting on the table at the Embroidery Project. Do you remember those bags from last time?! I asked my husband for two weeks to save up some money for me to buy that bag. It has taken me so long to finally have money of my own and now I can buy a bag and I’m going to do just that.”

We’d arrived. Dust swirled everywhere around the Wintervelt school/mission that held both the Phumani Paper and embroidery projects. The school was composed of an old brick church and seven rectangular blocks attached to each other in a zigzag pattern. For the past 10 minutes before arriving at the school/mission, we had not see any paved road, just a vast desert-like region with children walking alongside the patted down dirt with no shoes and colorful plaid school uniforms and lunch pails. Dust was blowing everywhere, and I couldn’t help but be reminded of my first time in Gauteng. The children’s faces were covered with dirt.

We got out of the car and walked to the embroidery project in one of the seven rectangular buildings. As soon, as we opened the door, the first things that could be seen were tables upon tables of embroidered bags, tablecloths, pillowcases and aprons. Kgagelo greeted all of the women in the room with “Dumelas” and began the activities for the day, which included debriefing the women on the presence of the video cameras. After that, the activities simply began. The documentary crew walked into the room during a workshop with their equipment, and all eyes quickly diverted from Kgagelo and myself to an all-white crew. Their walking was followed by more stares. People greeted Kgagelo and myself with Dumelas in Sestho, as is custom when new people walk into the room, and the crew with “Hello.”

As the day wore on, Kgagelo moved closer and closer toward the bags on the table to her left. For the past two weeks, since our last visit to Wintervelt, Kgagelo had been describing to me how badly she wanted an embroidered bag. It was at that point that I decided that I would get a bag for Kgagelo as a late birthday present and as a sign of my extreme gratitude for “showing me the ropes” around Jo’burg. Kgagelo couldn’t contain herself any longer. She began picking up each bag almost as if it held ounces of gold and diamonds, carefully placing one atop the other.

The bag that eventually struck her fancy was black and dotted with pictures of golden giraffes and elephants. It was quite exquisite. When she picked up that bag, she seemed like the happiest person on Earth, as she proclaimed,

“It’s exactly what I wanted. I have never seen a bag more beautiful than this one.”

It was one of those moments where it is hard for someone to completely describe what it is that they want but when they finally find it there’s no question, no shadow of a doubt that they’ve found what they were looking for. That was the look that Kgagelo had on her face and it remained there for the rest of the afternoon. Her face was locked in an eternal smile.

While other people were looking at bags, Kgagelo gently placed her bag aside to ensure that it remained within her reach, and to ensure that it wouldn’t get out of her sight and be taken away. She handed the bag over to me, asking me to pay for her, and told me that she would pay me back the next morning, as soon as she saw me. I knew that she was trustworthy and didn’t doubt for a second that my money would be returned. However, I had no intentions of asking for it back, but I hadn’t let her know that as of yet. I paid for the bag, and the film crew continued shooting.

When shooting was finished, one of the crewmembers, whom I will call Martha, walked to the side of the room containing the embroidered bags and expressed that she wanted a bag as well. Kgagelo heard this and walked over to the table. While Kgagelo did not mention that she was nervous about someone taking her bag, the look was written all over her face. She kept glancing between Martha and her bag on the adjacent table.

Martha continued searching until she spotted “the perfect bag.” Her perfect bag was a black handbag dotted with golden giraffes and elephants: Kgagelo’s bag. Martha began walking over to Kgagelo’s bag. I cannot begin to describe the disappointment and anger that was building up inside me. The bag had been purchased already! Martha had been describing all day how her home was filled with items from this particular project. She mentioned how her three-month-old twins slept with Wintervelt embroidered pillows every night and how she carried their embroidered handbags whenever possible. She was insistent upon adding one more to the collection.

The whole scene played out in slow motion, as I watched her walking toward that bag. Coupled simultaneously with that slow motion walking were Kgagelo’s eyes, watching her as well.

Martha reached for the bag and simply help it up with glee and exclaimed

“Here it is, I’ve found it. Okay, I’m going to take this one now. I cannot believe it was just sitting here like this.”

Can you hear the scales creaking? I thought race relations were “a thing of the past.” Martha didn’t question to whom the bag belonged, but simply made the assumption that it was hers to acquire. I watched and waited. The hardest part of this encounter was to avoid inserting myself into this situation. By

throwing myself into that encounter it would have been simply expressing the common American need to become involved and to help others “empower themselves.” It’s a need to take pity upon those whom we’ve deemed less fortunate. In a sense, we must come to their aid like a globalized Robin Hood who has expanded his reach beyond Nottingham Forest. This was Kgagelo’s moment and I wanted to see what would happen.

Here was a woman who grew up under the apartheid era, but was as strong a woman as they come. She turned to Martha and simply said:

“Well that’s my bag but if you want it you can have it, I didn’t really want it that much so take it.”

My mouth was absolutely agape. She didn’t want it that much?! Without even questioning that hurt look on Kgagelo’s face, Martha turned around and asked whom she would have to pay.

I couldn’t wait anymore. I had to intervene. If there was not going to be justice, I had to at least make sure she paid me the money for the bag. I couldn’t undo the situation that I had just seen but I was going to make sure that she paid me my money back. For Kgagelo it was no problem because the gesture had been sincere, but for Martha I couldn’t let her pay twice for a bag that was already owned. She had to pay me back, but of course it didn’t change the circumstances. I figured that by telling her that I had paid for the bag, she would realize the mistake that she had made. The bag did have an owner and was not simply dwelling on a corner table as a result of misplacement. She did understand eventually, but that didn’t stop her from adding another cultural piece to her growing collection.

When I turned toward Kgagelo to see what her reaction was to the situation, she had already placed a smile upon her face. She’d done what so many of the artists at the studio do; she’d hid her pain from anyone to see. Though it might have been deceiving to those around us who had not witnessed the interaction, I knew she was upset about letting that bag go. She had masked her discomfort. She was looking down at all the other bags at that table and I asked her if she wanted to get another bag. She just looked up at me and said,

“No that was the only one I wanted and I don’t see anything else I like. I gave it to her because she really wanted it. You know it’s not polite to be rude to white people like that. And plus she’s a foreigner, and the World Cup is in 2010, how would that look?”

The scales had completely fallen off their counterbalance.

Reflecting back on that situation, I realized that there were a lot of interesting power dynamics coming into play in that session. I began wonder why I wanted, almost needed to purchase the bag for Kgagelo and why Martha never questioned the ownership of the item. I think at the time we were acting on different parts of the same concept. I do not blame Martha for taking the bag nor do I want to express pity for Kgagelo because that is not my point. My point is to think about the

two different views taken by the Americans in the room. At that time we both had an agenda, whether it was known or not. In fact we both had the same agenda, which was to purchase a bag, she for herself and me for both Kgagelo and myself. But of all the people in the room to get upset it seemed almost arrogant and self-righteous for it to be me. However, it took me two months to realize that. If Kgagelo let Martha have the bag, then it was no place for me to be angry, but still to this day it angers me. I think we have to seriously consider the effects of the years that studying “third-world” countries and developing nations is having on our psyches. While I think that aid is important, and I am not condemning it, I think it is important to consider this idea of making drastic changes to a community or a person that doesn’t necessarily ask for help. Though I must make a distinction between standing up for justice and offering help. In that situation, I believe that I was offering help but it was to no avail. The assumption that someone needs your assistance or help is almost as arrogant as throwing a coin into a man’s cup of coffee, because you’ve made the assumption that he’s a beggar. I’m working on the fact that here, as a black American woman, I am on the other side of injustice.

This was not the only instance where I felt like I was in an awkward situation. Being a black American woman in South Africa was definitely an experience that I can never forget. There were many instances where I became the center of attention not because of the things that I was contributing to conversation, but rather because of the sound of my voice. People were simply intrigued. It was hard for many of them to understand that I was a black woman from the States that had no familial ties to South Africa or a name that “meant nothing”. Many black South Africans possess names that hold significance and are reflections of their ancestry. For instance, Sipho’s name means “gift of God.” It was not uncommon for me to be questioned on a continual basis,

“How can you, Darnisa, have a name that is so beautiful that means absolutely nothing? Do you not know where you come from or who your people are?”

It was a difficult position for me. All of my life, I’ve grown up in a family that stresses the importance of knowing who you are and identifying with the black community, for solidarity and strength. But the roles, in Africa, were different. I had no tribe with which to identify or any culturally significant name. How could I tell them that my name, that was so beautiful, was simply a conglomeration of Darlene and Lisa; something that my grandmother created as a middle name for my mother. It didn’t mean anything except for the significance that I gave it. My name represented everything that I had been through, the trials and tribulations of one individual from Brooklyn, N.Y. and not Brooklyn, Pretoria where many of them assumed I was from.

“How can you be from Brooklyn, you don’t sound like you’re from P.E. [the abbreviation for Pretoria].”

I had to tell them.

The result was a renaming process. Mbali, one of the students at the studio, mentioned that my name sounded like the Xhosa name Xoliswe. From that moment on, many people began to call me Xoliswe and everything else returned to normal. No one continued to question my ancestry because they'd in a sense created a history for me by giving me a new South Africa name.

The name Xoliswe meant "forgiveness." I was left speechless. It was a true honor to be renamed, but I still felt that the name Xoliswe did not represent who I am. Only the name Darnisa could do that. I did not go to Africa to discover who I was or my own identity, yet one can't help but question years of slavery and the true status of black Americans in the states. The black community has gone adrift. There is not one factor that can link us together, except for hip-hop music, which is not a true indicator of a people. Hip-Hop is not specific to the black community but is quite far reaching. In South Africa, everyone's name can tell a history. Siphso Mzedkandaba (Xhosa), Nelson Makamo (Sestho), Thulani Mbasa (Sestho); the first and last names alone were indicators of tribes, language, and people. All you had to do was write your name down, and people could begin to tell you years of history. I couldn't do that.

Later, it was soon "discovered" that my own name, Darnisa, was an actual word in one of the 11 official languages of South Africa. It meant Hurry Up. After that was discovered, everyone except for Mbali stopped calling me Xoliswe. Darnisa was now sufficient. My whole name in translation meant Hurry Up Lover [Darnisa Amante]. The beautiful name now held significance. Everyone became convinced that my ancestors might have come from South Africa, and they became even more welcoming.

Every day, I received lessons in Sestho, in order to learn how to properly pronounce words. Often times, white South Africans would come in and try to speak to the artists in Zulu or Sestho. Sometimes, when I thought no one was within hearing range, I would repeat after some of the white natives to learn more words and vocabulary. There was always someone from the studio, who heard me,

"No Darnisa, you don't say it like that. They are pronouncing it wrong but we aren't going to tell them that. They're white, it just would not be right. But you, you are one of us. You have to learn how to say it correctly because you might offend someone. And you're South African now, and you definitely don't want to insult your elders."

However, with my "new status" came a dual obligation. On one hand, I was a newly incorporated South African who was accepted by the community within the studio, but on the other hand I was still American. I could never, nor did I want to mask, who I am. My American citizenship is a part of me, regardless of my name meaning "Hurry Up" in Shangan. It was something that couldn't escape me. Every time I walked into a shop and said anything, people would turn around and immediately begin to ask questions.

As an American, people believed that I had the wealth to sustain them and the power to carry their voices and their stories beyond the South African borders and across the Atlantic. While I could not explain that as a student I did not have the income to support them, I have tried to live to the "obligation" of carrying their voices and their stories.

V. Contemplatives Thoughts: Looking toward the Future

Throughout my summer at APS, I came across many instances where I was able to witness coexistence work up close. By spending time in Artist Proof Studio, as well as outside of its orange colored walls in the townships, I was able to see that apartheid has left an undeniable mark on the black communities of South Africa. Artist Proof, under the supervision of Kim Berman, is doing an amazing job at combating the ideas of black inferiority by promoting empowerment and agency. But there is still a long way to go.

Invisible and visible structures exist that separate black and white communities. Regardless of how many art therapy workshops are performed, the fact that so much segregation still exists is going to take years to be rid of. It has been said, "South Africa is still too traumatized to really look at its past- you are still trying to figure out whether you have survived it, and whether you are going to make it." And I believe that this statement is not only valid but highlights one of the obstacles that groups in South Africa have to overcome. They must overcome their violent and segregationist history under apartheid, to look toward the future and to become the country where "proud to be South African" does not seem both preposterous and hypocritical, but rather looks toward the prospect of progress and opportunity.

However, South Africa cannot be a true representation of democracy without the voices of its population playing a large role. Many voices still exist within the society; voices within the studio, within the community at large, and even within this paper. In the studio, individuals try to get their voices across, but that goal is not always successful. In order to achieve this, many blacks have given others, like me, the opportunity to express their voices for them.

While APS has workshops that succeed in bringing voice to the artists, there are still things that cannot be expressed through prints or inks. Instead, artists engage in conversations with others in hopes that their stories will be heard. They hope that their stories and voices will be taken beyond the parameters of the studio and put into text by engaging in oral histories. It is also important to note that the existence of one organization cannot eradicate years of silencing and oppression. A cycle has to exist. Numerous organizations must create individuals that are willing to express how they feel and then be able to bring this idea back to their communities.

This re-voicing process begins with stressing the idea that everyone's opinion is important regardless of color or race. Kim Berman, who is white, has tried for years to stress this importance as well. But she, however, has to walk a fine line.

Because of her status as white woman, Berman has to be certain that when criticism, like discussing assignments or the layout of a student project, is given, it is done for the advantage of the students. Racism sentiments of black vs. white still run deep, and the voice of a white woman still remains an incredibly influential one.

Throughout the summer, I learned most importantly that my voice also plays a key role. As a black American in South Africa, there are certain obligations that are expected of you, either to provide help for people or to bring ideas overseas. However, you cannot make promises that you can't fulfill. I have tried throughout this work to give voice to individuals who have remained silent for so long. There are simply things, as stated earlier, that cannot be said through prints or woodcuts. They have to be transmitted to another person, to understand their importance and for the healing process to truly begin.

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Notes

¹ Minow & Chayes. *Imagine Coexistence: Restoring Humanity After Violent Ethnic Conflict*. Massachusetts: Jossey-Bass Publications, 2003.

² Francis, Diane. *People, Peace and Power: Conflict Transformation in Action*. London: Pluto Press, 2002.