



**Silence, and the Dynamising of African Creative Resistance**  
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This drum is one of the oldest surviving African-American objects. It was collected in the early 1700s in the Colony of Virginia, now part of the United States of America. It was acquired in or about 1735 by an Irish physician, Hans Sloane, the founder of the British Museum and a slave owner. Today, it sits within the British Museum collection, a collection of more than eight million objects that combine to tell a very particular story of Britain in relation to the world. This instrument was one of the very first objects identified and absorbed into the collection. And even as this drum was being collected and integrated in the British Museum, it seems to have acquired contested histories. Today, it is accepted by scholars to be an Akan drum, a West African object that was transported across the Atlantic from West Africa, and found its way to a Virginia tobacco plantation where it came into the possession of Hans Sloane, becoming one of the first objects in his collection. But there were other versions of its provenance that suggest that it was carved by an enslaved African American, that it is actually a very early replica of an Akan drum, or indeed, that it was actually made by a Native American.

What can be said indisputably about it, is that it is a beautiful object - about the size of a large adult human torso, its exterior wooden surfaces have been carved with simple decoration of textile-like stripes and chevrons. In its original Asante context, it would have been used, within a family of drums, as the central focus of formal ceremonies. An expert in drum communication would have used it to wrap an audience in sound and praises. The 1730's identification of this drum as a Native American object was in complete sympathy with other European enlightenment thought: Africa had little or no culture – so it was labelled by as an 'American Indian drum'. It was an identification that remained unchallenged until 1906 when an ethnographic curator at the British Museum decided to look again at that early '*American Indian drum*' and wrote a small addendum to the original catalogue entry, questioning the drum's recognized provenance, suggesting that this beautiful thing might indeed be African, or created by someone of African descent.

It took seventy years, and huge advances in dendrochronology, to confirm that the main body of the drum was carved from *cordia africana*, a tree native to West Africa. This is, was, an African drum, and we can now build a hypothesis of how this West African drum came to be found on a Virginia plantation. It is highly probable that the drum came to the Americas aboard a slave ship. Enslaved peoples were allowed no possessions. So perhaps it was a souvenir collected by one of the European ship's crew, or perhaps it was in the possession of a wealthy independent African who was travelling to the Caribbean or Europe. It may have been used as part of the appalling practice of 'dancing the slaves' – a horrendous tradition of enforced exercise that would take place on the decks of slave ships. All of this is conjecture, but we know that this drum, and other similar musical instruments, crossed the Atlantic, and perhaps more importantly, so did the techniques for making and playing them.

The maintenance of drumming and musical traditions represents a poignant form of defiance for enslaved peoples across the Americas, a conscious investment in cultural continuity in the face of

brutality, enslavement and colonialism – the skills of making, the perpetuation of musical tradition, the up-keep of African stories, the conservation of history and culture, and the preservation of material links to Africa became critical – and from *Santeria* to *Candomblé* we can see the rich results of the sacrifices made to hold on to African cultural practices. They drafted the musical instruments of colonialism, they used drums, fifes and penny whistles, they adopted the marching tempo and then subverted it, broke it, twisted and reconstructed it, building a new musical landscape of exchange and hybridization. And as they had been in Africa, musical conventions were a powerful galvanizing and unifying force.

And anyone who has heard this sort of drum played at close quarters will know its power to affect you.

Drums are the simplest of musical instruments. And that seeming simplicity is their wonder. When force is brought to bear upon a surface percussive energy is transmitted through the atmosphere to impact the tympanic membrane in the middle ear, - but then these drums surprise, hitting the listener with a secondary wave of sound, an energy that resonates up through the ground, rising up through the solar plexus to explode in your chest cavity. The effect is immediate and utterly intoxicating.

And when these aural explosions are combined and are arranged into passages, it is thrilling - it can feel like the purest analogue of being. Our bodies crave rhythms. Beats mirror the explosions in the deepest muscles of the heart. We relish their immutability, irreducibility, their energy. We know to anticipate the rise of an impending beat, we crave the sensation of the impact of a tone on the air, lament the collapse of sound when we are left in that very particular aural vacuum between beats as a tone gives way to an equally potent momentary silence. It is the most basic epistemological statement: there must after that beat, by logical necessity, be that space, in which the beat can be; - there must be silence – the chance to catch a breath, to regain our composure.

And the drummers from this part of West Africa, really know what they are doing - they know that silence, in its varied creative forms, is important. In much traditional African music, the lacuna, the skip in a beat, or momentary silence is significant, not just as a mechanical break in the sound, but because of what it can uniquely invoke for the listener. In many of the most celebrated African drumming traditions, silence is not seen as the field upon which sound is placed – silence is an equal and active component of overall composition. What can be suggested by the quality of momentary quiet is deeply considered and highly valued.

Some African drummers have taken that idea of active-silence to its extraordinary conclusion. They have learned to collude with the silence and interference between the multiple rhythms of drums, to collaborate with that alter-rhythm, to entice it from the aural shadows, finessing and focusing patterns of particular sounds. Even though no single drummer controls these rhythms, this distinct field of resonance is said to have a dynamic and responsive quality all of its own. It has been called the inside rhythm, a ghostly musical presence that seems to be manifest within musical space and silences.

The mechanics and history of the inside rhythm are somewhat mysterious, but the politics of this silence sits, for me, at the nexus of significant cultural phenomena connected to omitted histories, lost narrative and marginalisation. Silence, loss and omission in African history are powerful things. Foucault wrote memorably about the relationship between power and knowledge, about how the label of madness had been used to systematically to silence the poor, well people of African descent have had to deal with a similarly pervasive and destructive concoction of labels that have been used to malign and silence us. Indeed, for many people of African descent who suffered through enslavement and colonialism, the

destruction and confiscation of drums became a powerful analogue for their own loss of voice, of culture, of story

The history of our silence is painful to navigate. Perhaps one of the most poignant passages of these drum histories occurred not far from where Hans Sloane acquired this drum in Virginia. In 1739, in South Carolina, drums were the critical ingredient in enabling the Stono Rebellion from coming within a hair's breadth of overthrowing the plantation management. The majority of the men and women who worked on the land adjacent to the Stono River were ethnically South West African, and they shared knowledge of the similar drum languages and cultural practices. After a sustained period of appalling abuse these communities simply snapped, and on the 10<sup>th</sup> September 1739, they drummed a call to arms. When the drumming ceased and the dust had settled, forty African Americans and twenty Euro-Americans had lost their lives. This and similar rebellions prompted the colony, and many others across the Americas, to outlaw drums and drumming. Hans Sloane, founder of the British Museum and who owned substantial plantations in Jamaica, later wrote how the African men and women forced to work on his land in Jamaica '*Formerly .... were allowed the use of Trumpets after their fashion, and Drums made of a piece of a hollow Tree, covered on one end with any green Skin... But ... it was thought too much inciting them to Rebellion, and so they were prohibited by the Customs of the Island.*'<sup>1</sup> The drum had been declared a weapon of war, a thing to fear – its music, its messages, ammunition for dissent and rebellion – music, African culture, history had become an incendiary thing.

The impacts of banning and systematically denigrating cultural expression were profound. Derek Walcott would perhaps capture what that meant most affectingly, when in his poem, *The Sea is History*, he began – with an un-nerving question that he directs at people of African descent '*Where is your tribal memory?*', '*where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?*' And it ends with the devastating final line, that our history now lies, '*In that gray vault. The Sea. The sea Has locked them up. The Sea is history.*

It is a lament, a strike at the loss, the eradication of a history and of a culture. Something that was made most palpable in the colonial administration's banning of the most palpable symbol of historical narrative, the drum.

The drum was dangerous. It was occasionally forced underground, becoming tainted and compromised. But that only served to charge it with even greater importance. Traditions that had survived the middle passage, along with new and hybrid cultural conventions felt even more vulnerable, and they understandably became all the more cherished because of it. But, whilst people were prepared to go to great lengths to protect their heritage, brutal administrations were utterly uncompromising in enforcing their drum bans and restricting cultural freedoms. One can understand how the poet Derek Walcott would have looked back and felt that his history had been systematically eradicated by these processes. But something else was also happening, music had acquired a latent political manifesto. Part of Walcott's genius was in identifying how the archaeology of loss and omission had become a fertile reservoir of inspiration in itself. The once silent rage of these discrete cultures had found a unifying vent, a mechanism through which to consciously, creatively express and disseminate their feelings. A Pan-African, Diasporic inside-rhythm that resonated with both historic pain and future possibility was triggered. Over the course of the nineteenth century and in the build up to the American Civil War that silence, that vacuum was gradually filled by the output of new political visionaries. They sought to build

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica*. 1707 xlviii-xlix, lii

new alliances and connections, to borrow from New World radicalism and reconnect American Africans with their African history.

Perhaps that's what I find so affecting about this object, that implicit feeling of lasting mourning, of lingering narrative loss, that sense of acknowledging ominous omission that is an integral part of much of our thinking about Africa. Our story, our perspective so often ignored, marginalized, forgotten – here symbolized by such fragile, but enduring beauty.

I can almost hear Walcott asking, '*Where is your tribal memory?*', '*where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?*' And the final devastating final line of the *Sea is History*, that our history now lies, '*In that gray vault. The Sea. The sea Has locked them up. The Sea is history.*'

And yet – as compelling, as pervasive as this view of history is – in a very meaningful way our story, against considerable odds, our contribution survives, .... Thrives, thrills – is in my mind the great human narrative.

It was in Africa after all, that humanity first defined itself in terms of narrative, and over millennia Africans have tested that paradigm through their invention and imagination... And we are gathered to celebrate those brave, glorious, creative stars who have led the charge in telling our story, from our perspective, who have turned the lens back to ask questions, and to shine a light into long dark corners.

And we must robustly challenge the notion that Africa's story is somehow lost in a fog, that it only remains as part of a fading pre-history, think about the magnificent medieval African cultures – Great Zimbabwe, which dominated the great gold trade routes that fueled the opulent coastal Swahili Sultanates and through them the cultures of the Indian Ocean, or the emperors of Ethiopia who presided over a vast region that boasts the longest continuous tradition of Christianity with a formidable trans-continental ecumenical influence – or the magnificent cultures of the Sahara.

Even if we don't know this chapter of history – this is a culture that we probably know something of, this after all is one of the most famous images of a medieval personality. This is Emperor Mansa Musa. In the early 14<sup>th</sup> century Mansa Musa ascended the throne of the Mali empire bounded by the Sahara on one side and the Atlantic on the other leaving him scant options for expansion.

But to merely be a loved Emperor was not enough, he had all the power, money and territory he could feasibly administer. He would have to find his own frontiers to traverse, to define a new paradigm by which to measure success. Mansa Musa didn't just want wealth and power, he wanted, something even more prestigious - he sought knowledge. And he pursued it with the focus and dedication of a general waging a major campaign.

In 1324, twelve or so years after becoming Emperor, sixty thousand people left the Mali empire with Mansa Musa on one of the greatest Haj journeys ever conceived. Most would walk every hard mile to Mecca. 8000 were soldiers, 12,000 were personal staff, some were members of his court, but most were ordinary citizens – and along with them travelled 80 camels each bearing 300 lbs. of gold. And every night when they stopped, it was said to be like a whole town decamping in the desert.

After completing his pilgrimage, he stayed to meet some of the great Islamic scholars and invited a number of these intellectuals, and a group who claimed to be descendants of the prophet, to return with him. Amongst them was one of the greatest poets and architects of the age, Abu Al Sahili, a man who had learned his trade under the formidable Berber architects of Granada.

As much as being a pilgrimage, it was also a statement to the world about the wealth, ambition and intellectual culture of an African state. The news of his journey created waves that would reverberate

across the Middle-East and Europe. Fifty years later, Abraham Cresques, the cartographer, would immortalize Mansa Musa, holding a gold nugget, at the center the great Catalan Atlas made for Charles V. It is an image of a particular kind of African wisdom and wealth that would become a point of inspiration for European artists for centuries to come.

When he got home, Mansa Musa engaged his architect, Abu Sahili, to construct a spectacular palace and the Great Mosque, for his new Timbuktu. Over the next decade, the Sankoré and the Great Mosques, and the buildings around and between them, developed the most comprehensive and important African archive since the Library of Alexandria. \*At its peak Timbuktu could accommodate 25,000 students, many from beyond the region, some from beyond the continent and it housed perhaps as many as 800,000 manuscripts. The city was a match for the most respected universities in Europe. And around these key Madrassas grew up an ecology of private libraries, publishers and booksellers, some of whom became hugely wealthy.

This was just a single of perhaps as many as a dozen significant African Medieval cultures that were showing similar inventiveness and innovation – each looked beyond the continent without fear. This model of a beneficent, wise ruler celebrated in the Catalan Atlas would become a model for fledgling medieval cultures in Europe. But more than that – Africa set the intellectual agenda, it inspired innovation and ways of thinking, and no one questioned that.

The meaningful arrival of armed Europeans in Africa a century later was to change so much...

This pendant mask was created in the early sixteenth century for a Nigerian King or Oba named Esigie. It was made in honor of his mother Idia. It is carved with incredible skill from ivory – the material that would attract Portuguese traders down the West African coast, bringing with them copper and coral. It is a fascinating, but brief period - when African rulers saw Europeans as their vassals, as their servants, - here they were threaded through the monarch's hair like trade beads or currency. As the Catalan Atlas illustrated, these cultures were fully aware of Europe and Europeans, and saw them initially as minimal threats.

Within two generations, Europeans had established a permanent presence on the West African Coast. As we know, settlements, protectorates, imbalanced trade deals, bad strategic alliances and then colonialism would follow and would combine to devastate the continent – hundreds of thousands forcibly enslaved, millions killed in wars and resistance struggles, the systematic reconfiguration of economies to benefit Europe, the undermining and dissolution of indigenous cultural infrastructure, and to assuage the guilt of the colonists, and the investment in appalling racist theory and narrative that would contaminate intellectual culture for generations. But this wholesale denigration of a people and the attempted destruction of their culture – had an unlikely outcome: a weaponization of identity, a politicization of perspective. It changed not just how Africans saw themselves and judged the world - the view from the periphery, from the margins became an important part of global political discourse – and that conception of the world would become airborne, ambient, important.

This is William Hogarth's A Rakes Progress. Painted in London in 1732, it tells a story that the people of 18<sup>th</sup> century London might be gossiping about any day of the week, the story of a young man who inherits a fortune from his miserly father and thinks that money's going to buy him love, power, happiness. We somehow know this isn't going to end well.

In the second scene Tom is caught teetering between two worlds, behind him the roughness and honesty of the street, ahead the affected world of fashionable society.

This is the critical scene... Night has fallen – the lamp has been discarded – the die is cast, - Tom is drunk in a brothel. There are patterns that flow across the painting, leading your gaze the fake caress that disguises the pickpocketing seems to repeat the Chinese trader almost throttling the very innocent looking prostitute. And at the back the African maid, critical to this narrative - she smiles knowingly at the innocent shock of the young girl at the door, a girl. These ripples of narrative across the canvas, flow left and right, right and left. But they are also designed to puncture the canvas and pull us in. The man next to the innocent girl holds a candle mirror shiny pewter dish. Illuminates the scene, and in the gloom, we can make out a reflection, wait... it is us; we are part of this, we are culpable. For Hogarth, the African figure, as they would become for Hegel has stepped out of the shadows to take up a critical role as the personification of the meta – or counternarrative. The view from the periphery is after all the clearest of all - they are context, judge, arbiter.

This is Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* one of the most important paintings ever created. It captures another brothel - It sits at the opposite end of the Enlightenment looking back at the Hogarth, same themes, similar visual complexity – and both have narrative catalysed by Africa. One of the many things that the Hogarth shares with Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* is the casting of Africa as part of a visual mechanism that breaks the fourth wall, pulling the viewer into a complicit relationship. Hogarth as Picasso entwines us in the difficult narrative, in its corruption, sleaziness and prejudice – we know that with each narrative the drama, the repercussions are not over, we know that we are not immune.

Picasso seems to have worked across the canvas from left to right. The figures completed in late 1907 bear many clues which point to his new-found fascination in African art. This painting is often seen as being at the gateway to abstraction, yet the rendering of the African masks in the painting are so accurate that they could be portraits.

I've always felt that the key to this picture is the two figures omitted from the final version - two figures who have left the room, stepped outside the frame to gaze back at the women of Avignon. The Medical student and the sailor, originally in the sketches for the painting, are now looking back, over our, the viewers shoulders, at the women of Avignon. Once you are aware of their presence, or even the lack of it, the women of Avignon take on another guise. Why a sailor and a medical student, well, this is a bordello, a brothel. The men are here for a reason and so are the women. Why are we here? why is Picasso here? We are all here to look, and ultimately like the medical student and the sailor, to judge. For the medical student, who has had a day of corpses, the women are animate mannequins, served up for his delectation. For the sailor on shore leave, they are warm substitutes for someone he has left at home. So, who are they for, us? Well perhaps like the others, it's not that it doesn't matter who they are, it's that it can't matter, we daren't care. With this in mind the coy demureness of the central figures is obviously fake, but now the righthand figures are even more interesting, the wanton exotic availability, the potential for something unusual. And the visual vehicle for that exotic sexual potential is Africa.

These works that bookend enlightenment, the most aggressive period of colonialism, The Hogarth created in enlightenment's fledgling decades, the Picasso its visual full stop, but each play on the same themes, both are set in similar theatres of disrepute, they both make us feel somehow more than involved, we are responsible and both play on the same awkward placement of the African figure at the edge. They are in part essays in identity in which the African figure is a blank space upon which the

alter-narrative is caste. But in being outside they are perfectly placed, to caste judgement back. Here painting does more than just describe – it is seeking our engagement in building a manifesto, it is demanding not just that we change, but that we are active in making change. As had played out in the writing about the Haiti revolution, in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic – the African’s plight transcended ethnicity. This was the moment when the pull from the periphery began to wrench the mainstream off its axis.

And whilst Europeans caste this role upon the Black figure – African artists had already rung out their own clarion call, they saw the canvas, the musical score, the blank page as a surrogate battlefield, the place where they could wage a proxy coup, wreak glorious revolution, timeless revenge - and condemn their colonisers and appeasers to be judged for eternity. Africa’s writers, artists musicians would conduct a beautiful campaign against colonialism, dissecting the administrators’ cowardice, condemning their vanity and greed – and laying bare their racism for posterity to judge. And their culture, their identity, the constellation of things that intellectual Europe seemed to desperate to negate, to destroy - became the defiant beacon around which a new kind of dissent could coalesce.

Here, a Bembe artist captures one of the many early European traders who travelled to the interior of the French Congo in the initial decades of colonial engagement – carved from a single block of wood, it is the work of a master. Though made for the European market, it is not a flattering piece, it is tragic and comic – the porters are lost, the European drunk or dying, they stop – the confused man at the front points ahead, the bemused man at the back gazes after him, the European was never in charge, always a dead weight, a passenger – in his lap a rifle, and between his legs a sleeping dog – everything about him suggests torpor, redundancy, malaise, inaction. All are tied together and condemned by fate. It might be funny, but the older porter appears to weep.

Art is singularly effective at capturing the impact of imperialism on ordinary individuals’ lives. In colonies like Nigeria, it was ordinary citizens people that had to deal with the most aggressive manifestations of the colonial administration. That more personal, and less immediately apparent history of real Nigerian people during the colonial period, was the focus of the life’s work of carver, Thomas Ona Odulate.

Thomas Ona carvings offer us a window into a world of clashing sociologies and imploding systems. We can see the erosion of traditional ways of life, and diminishment of old and once respected hierarchies. And in the place of the conventional societal anchors, we witness the rise of a somewhat confused western-educated African middle-class. Ona, like William Hogarth, allows us to chuckle at the ambient pretensions and suppressed fears, barely hidden is a fondness for a group making the best of tumultuous times. The artist’s main focus of attention are the Europeans, especially the colonial civil servants – they are tragi-comic figures, we might want to laugh, but was so often somehow it does not feel the appropriate reaction. Ona, the social historian that he was, seems to intuit that impending change that will humble them all.

These Asafo flags capture a moment of change, as a tightening of European control across Africa began to have real impact, creating wealth for some but denying the vast majority the trading opportunities and security that they, and their ancestors, had long relied upon. With the founding of the Gold Coast Protectorate there were a small number of local dignitaries who found themselves granted with extraordinary power. When the 1<sup>st</sup> world war began, Nana Ofori Atta, (the most passionate, West African advocate of empire) demonstrated his loyalty to Britain by offering financial inducements to young men of a fighting age, to encourage their enlistment. And he did not stop there, he went on to very publicly donate £1,500 to fund the purchase of a reconnaissance plane that flew over enemy lines.

It truly was a world war, yet its African story is often forgotten – At the start of World War One, the whole of Africa, except Ethiopia and Liberia, was under European rule, and Great Britain and France controlled the two largest colonial empires. They would draw on them extensively for both human and material resources. Even by conservative estimates, well over 4 million people of colour were mobilized into the European and American armies, some of the first shots fired were in West Africa, the first big Naval battle in East Africa, hundreds of thousands of Africans fought and many made the ultimate sacrifice, it was Africans upon whose literal backs that the war was won. Some two million African workers, soldiers and porters lost their lives on battlegrounds in Africa and abroad, fighting for the interests of those who were jockeying for place in the scramble for Africa. When the war was over, Ofori Atta accepted a knighthood and a cane, topped with a silver bi-plane, as a gift from the British Government. Like a number of other traditional leaders, Ofori Atta, accepted his place on the Gold Coast legislative council, arguing that the new colony was a good thing - potentially a model of indirect rule, an opportunity to embrace new trading and educational opportunities, to build an African industrial giant and transform not just his life, but the lives of the ordinary people of the Colony.

Stretched for raw materials and manpower at the turn of the Second World War, Britain needed more than just the cooperation of its colonial allies, it needed Africans to make sacrifices, perhaps even the ultimate sacrifice for Empire. And that plea for sacrifice from Britain offered Africans real leverage in their long-term pursuit for greater political self-determination and economic freedom.

These panels show Hausa soldiers who were deployed at many of the African fronts, and who also saw service in Burma. In his autobiography, the Mau Mau General, Waruhui Itote, vividly recalled his time in the Burmese trenches, 'among the shells and bullets there had been no pride, no air of superiority from our European comrades-in-arms. We drank the same tea, used the same water and lavatories, and shared the same jokes. There were no racial insults, no references to 'niggers', 'baboons' and so on. The white heat of battle ... only left our common humanity'. He recounted a conversation with a white comrade who asked him bluntly, 'I don't understand you Africans who are out here fighting. What do you think you are fighting for? .... At least if I die in this war ... I know it will be for my country. But if you're killed here, what will your country have gained?'

After the celebrations of VE day, it was a question that echoed across the British Empire and beyond – what had Africans really gained? Many African soldiers returned with expectations that the freedoms they had fought for, and the equality they had been afforded in the trenches would be soon replicated across the colonies. Sadly, for the most part they were wrong. Their battles were not over. Change at home would also have to be hard fought. Even though certain African colonies saw rapid change, many did not. Even within the army, most African soldiers were denied the opportunity to progress beyond the ranks, and for those like Waruhui Itote, who grew increasingly frustrated by colonial injustices and intransigence, they would eventually find themselves deploying military skills learned in the British army against the forces of Empire.

Independence offered African artists a chance to make their issues resonate globally and to some extent it is that same set of humbling issues that continue to inflect much of the very best of African contemporary practice. Artists began to shift their focus from depicting the world around them, to challenging how the world saw them. With independence came a new language, a new geography for thinking about African culture. Nkrumah famously re-orientating his new nation Ghana, proclaiming that we face neither *East nor West, We face Forward – the Future!* Not toward communism or capitalism

but toward their own destiny – and to achieve that Africans saw their challenge as gaining control of critical historical and prescient narratives – but also of the future.

In his 1997 painting, *What Future for Our Art?* Congolese artist Chéri Samba re-charts art history adopting, Picasso - as Picasso once used African art as an icon of something exotic and latently threatening. Samba depicts himself and Pablo Picasso seated at separate tables. The white text written above the scene questions the future of ‘our art’ in a world where artists are oppressed and also where, in order to gain international recognition in the art world, African Artists, first have to be accepted in the West. The statement closes with the question, ‘Isn’t the museum of modern art racist????’ It is a punch in the face to the very people who might be first in line to acquire it.

In the African library, Yinka Shonibare challenges that Enlightenment notion of Africa being a place without history, without innovation head on, whilst alluding to those great libraries like Timbuktu - wrapping us in African intellectual tradition.

And here, in Hassan Musa, *Great American Nude – Osama Bin Laden* reclines coquettishly on an American flag, a flag whose states are made up of Harley Davidsons. His body is borrowed from Boucher’s painting of King Louis XV’s mistress, Madame de Pompadour. It’s uncompromising perspective on American foreign policy - and just another reminder of the depth and scope of rage, of the chasm in interpretation of events, but also a reminder of what it can be like when as Picasso you use the iconography of other cultures to serve your own purposes.

That was a conceptual conceit shared by Chris Ofili in his *Madonna* – the artist does the unthinkable to another icon that is traditionally cherished, and again, in the very way that African art is so often denigrated, through inappropriate contextualization. as Picasso once sexualized, fetishized African art – here Ofili turns a Christian symbol of purity into an icon of sleaze.

And then there is El Anatsui: - cloth is important in Africa, beyond obvious utility -there is no other material that has had such intimate relationship with West African families, becoming the enduring material link, between people and the most important moments of their ancestors’ lives. The very fragility and portability of fabric has served as a physical metaphor for the frailty of the family narrative. El Anatsui great cloth sculptures used that rich history to address Walcott’s idea Africa might have lost its narrative- by reminding us the continent invested narrative into material culture itself and had been doing so for millennia

For each of these artists the implicit focus of attention are the legacies of colonialism, how Africans are seen and see themselves. They each want to push back, to develop a new kind of narrative, to like Hogarth impact you, touch you, affect you. And, perhaps because of these powerful areas of focus, this art has moved to become some the most sought after in the contemporary art market.

African culture is special – this is not just evidenced in the skill of the artists, in the historical span and uniqueness of its cultural heritage, and there is undoubtedly a very particular quality to the cultural transmission that occurs through trauma. That acculturated trauma is something that Derek Walcott evoked very affectingly in *The Sea is History*. Walcott perhaps understandably saw the Atlantic as a vacuum that had swallowed our narrative past whole. Whilst that is an evocative image, we must also accept that enslaved and colonized peoples also fought tenaciously and unrelentingly to preserve what they could of their cultural heritage and to capture a record of their own experiences. And today these works have become visual beacons that speak to our time, that speak for so many of us as the world

wrestles with old inequalities. But they have added to that tradition with a body of new work, that has become the most potent articulation of change.

Visit the great global art fairs of Europe, or the US and you will see it - a magnetically spellbinding generation of African artists resetting the global narrative with Africa at its centre, with African classical art finding its rightful place at the heart of curatorial narratives.

This is our time - the magnificent creative centrifugal force of African creativity is pulling once dominant cultures into an African orbit. I chose to tell this story of resistance, challenge and triumph through the work of African visual artists, we could have charted similar paths through music or architecture, through film or literature, or indeed a range of areas of creativity. If you don't believe me – look at the sources of inspiration for the biggest global cultural phenomenon – where does Jay-Z sample his most radical rifts and rhythms, where does Beyoncé borrow her dance steps, Hollywood look for its Marvel super-heroes, Fashion borrow its most vivid textiles? Africa is cool, Africa is exploding with ideas and talent - and that energy has percolated out beyond the trendy to reset the mainstream. Those ideas, perspectives that were once marginal have become accepted, they have quietly imperialized popular culture, over-run the battlements of high art to hold sway at the heart of the establishment. The Hegelian dialectic has reached a ragged end-game, the black pawn has cornered the white queen. If you are in Cape Town visit Zeitz MOCAA, or the Norval foundation, and you will probably be as awed and excited as I was – particularly when viewed in the context of a new generation of world class spaces being delivered and planned across the continent.

I just want to finish by saying, I recently attended a TED Global conference at which experts in a variety of critical disciplines, from genetics to engineering gathered, these are people pushing the very boundaries of human understanding – they were invited to postulate upon the future. The only things that all the speakers shared beyond their energy and optimism was that they were African, that they worked in Africa and were leaders in their field. I came away inspired and concerned. The African continent will be increasingly part of our thinking, and yet we teach our children so little about it, and perhaps more tragically we seem to care so little. It might be that the future of global economics will force us to care more, but I would argue that we should simply do so because it is the right thing to do – we owe it as much to ourselves as to the continent to learn more, to listen more, to try to understand more. I don't think it would require a great imaginative leap to envisage a time when Africa might be the global intellectual hub – driving the economies of its allies and neighbors, catalyzing the culture and intellectual development of many more, its intellectuals accepted as global thought leaders, its business community directing the world economy.

That is far from being a dream – after all, that description of a possible African future is also a perfect description of a corroborable African past...

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