

The white saviour supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives rewards in the evening.

The banality of evil transmutes into the banality of sentimentality. The world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm.

This world exists simply to satisfy the needs—including, importantly, the sentimental needs—of white people and Oprah.

The White Saviour Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.

I deeply respect American sentimentality, the way one respects a wounded hippo. You must keep an eye on it, for you know it is deadly.¹

On March 5, 2012, social media began blowing up in response to a short documentary about Joseph Kony, a Ugandan war criminal and the head of the Lord's Resistance Army, a militia group that was guilty of conscripting children as soldiers. *Kony 2012* was the first video that could truly be described as viral (receiving upwards of 30 million views per day when it was initially released), and in short order a host of celebrities—including luminaries George Clooney, Angelina Jolie, Oprah Winfrey, Taylor Swift, Justin Bieber, and Kim Kardashian, among many others—signed on to the (white) filmmaker's campaign to track down the fugitive Kony and bring him to justice. Though it inspired a tidal wave of new-born 'clicktivists'—online activists who were not involved in on-the-ground organising or sustained engagement with the issue beyond their expression of digital outrage—the video was criticised by a wide range of scholars and NGOs working on the African continent. According to these critics, *Kony 2012* was guilty of over-simplifying the hugely complex dynamics by means of which child soldiers are recruited and exploited, instead putting forward a series of digestible soundbites for easy consumption by western viewers, most of whom were likely unable to identify Uganda on a map. The stripped-down account offered by the viral footage portrayed Kony as the singular perpetrator of a range of violent human rights abuses, without acknowledging the historical and structural conditions underlying these abuses, conditions that stemmed largely from the West's devastating colonial exploitation of the region. In focusing so much attention on a single evil African war-lord, social media commentators were conveniently and selectively forgetting the West's own crimes against humanity, and instead doubling down on a racist narrative in which Africa was (yet again) framed as a dark continent that needed to be saved from itself. It was in this context that the Nigerian-American novelist Teju Cole sent out a series of tweets that, in the pliniest but most devastating terms, described what he refers to as the 'White-Saviour Industrial Complex.' The brilliance of Cole's formulation was the collision of two seemingly unrelated terms. The first is a long-standing trope in Western thought—the white

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Duduzile Dlamini on the set of *TIDK*, Cape Town, October 2017

THE PROBLEM OF WHITENESS

saviour complex' (known historically as 'the white man's burden')—a belief that since whites were civilisationally more advanced, they had a moral obligation to serve humanity by rescuing darker-skinned people from their own ignorance and savagery. The second is the concept of the military industrial complex. With this deft word play, Cole underlines the way in which a particular form of white supremacy continues to serve two simultaneous needs: satisfying the egos of even the most liberal-minded white people that they have the answers to the world's problems, and voraciously amassing capital. If that capital took the form of captured land, people and economic profit during the era of colonisation and the slave trade, it has persisted in multiple ways since—as money, yes, but also as cultural capital: brutal policies in the morning, charities in the afternoon, rewards in the evening. Never has "wanting to make the world a better place" come under such well-learned scrutiny.

'Whiteness' is, by design, a concept meant to fly under the radar of consciousness. It dis-simulates; it pretends it is not there. Too often, when white people speak of race, they are speaking of people who have been marked as 'other'—meaning other than white. But as thinkers including W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Theodore W. Allen, Ruth Frankenberg, Toni Morrison, Maurice Berger, Nell Irvin Painter and others have argued over the course of more than a century, the idea of whiteness—and of white people—is not a given. Like any other racial category, whiteness has little to do with biology or phenotype and everything to do with culture and power.² Thanks to colonialism, white supremacy has been the West's most successful export. But to acknowledge that whiteness is a construct, does nothing in and of itself to diminish the violence (symbolic and real) perpetrated in its name; only by laying bare the mechanisms by which it stealthily asserts itself—as Cole did in his pithy tweetstorm—can we come to comprehend its damaging effects.

In the body of work she has made since the mid-1990s, Candice Breitz has repeatedly taken on the problem of whiteness—of its constant (if subterranean) presence, its lack of self-awareness, the way it carries its privilege—in short, the problem of the white-saviour industrial complex. She does so from an especially fraught position. As a white South African woman who came of age at the moment that state-imposed apartheid was being dismantled, she has witnessed the uneasy and slow process of disvestment from white supremacy in her home country, even as she continues to benefit from the privileges afforded by whiteness. As an artist whose recent work has taken up political urgencies such as the global refugee crisis and the rights of sex workers, she could easily be accused of occupying the role of white saviour herself. She makes herself vulnerable to this charge willingly; it seems to me, in order to do something crucial: namely, to reveal the mechanisms of the West's media-driven and typically craven myopia when it comes to regarding the lives of others, and to lay bare the mostly hidden and often violent workings of white privilege.

MAKING THE WHITE GAZE VISIBLE

In the wake of the historic elections that took place in South Africa in 1994—the first in which Black South Africans were permitted to vote, marking an official end to apartheid—Breitz

- (1) Teju Cole, 'The White-Saviour Industrial Complex,' *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2012.
 (2) See for example, W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater* (1920); James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963); Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race* (1994, 1997); Maurice Berger, *White Lies: Race and the Myths of Whiteness* (1993); Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (2010); Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (1993); Tom Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992).



Emmah and Duzulzile Dlamini (left) and Tendoneo (right) on the set of *ZLDR*, Cape Town, October 2017

travelled to Chicago to begin graduate studies in art history. Packed in her suitcase was a collection of tourist postcards—pseudo-ethnographic images of bare-breasted Black women in traditional costume, posed by their white photographers so that they appear to be innocently, happily and unselfconsciously taking part in the easy labours of daily life (cooking, carrying water, selling their beadwork, and so on). While the pictures on these postcards were taken with colour film and are contemporary in feel (notwithstanding the timelessness ease their subjects seem to embody), this genre dates back to the earliest uses of photography under colonialism, offering comforting images of docile natives intended for pleasurable reception by (white) people back home in the European metropolises. Such images of untroubled cultures (as represented by the tribal clothing, bodily adornments and rural lives of the women pictured) convinced Western viewers that colonialism was not oppressive at all, but rather a boon to the 'primitive,' almost childlike, people depicted.³

In other words, though these images ostensibly depict Black women, their real subject is whiteness; and the racist desires, fantasies and expressions of violence that have defined white settler culture. The postcards trade on what Cole identifies as white sentimentality ('the big emotional experience that validates privilege') by offering feel-good images of Black South Africans whose daily lives were, in reality, severely delimited by an inhumane and insufferable regime. It is precisely this deeper level of meaning that Breitz grapples with in her manipulation of this source material in the *Ghost Series* (1994–1996). In order to lay bare the postcards' ideological underpinnings, Breitz doubles down on them, rendering starkly apparent the structural violence that might otherwise remain invisible to many. Applying correction fluid (better known as 'Tipp-Ex' in Germany and South Africa, or 'Wite-Out' in the US), she 'erases' a set of visual codes that are emblematic of the workings of the white gaze, leaving only the eyes, mouths, and an occasional bodily contour untouched. The fantasy of Blackness that is anchored in the racist imaginary is replaced here by facticity—by the conceptual *and* material presence of whiteness.

It's no coincidence that Breitz turns to this particular medium, as opposed to white paint or a more refined substance, to effect this intervention. Back in the days before computers (which is, for many of us, actually not that long ago), correction fluid was largely used by typists and secretaries, which is to say that the medium was largely used by white women. In choosing Tipp-Ex to re-write these images, Breitz alludes to the participation of white women in the production of racist discourse, not only as passive beneficiaries of the privileges attaching to whiteness, but also as active agents in upholding white beauty standards via the denigration of black bodies.⁴ The fact that, when hung on a gallery wall, the whited-out bodies read as cut-outs—continuous, that is, with the gallery's architecture and with the institutional power that space confers—points to the ways such discourses are perpetuated by cultural institutions, as well.

When the *Ghost Series* was first produced, though it was shown widely outside her home country (including at the Studio Museum in Harlem), it received a less-than-warm reception in South Africa, notes Zoe Whitley, "in particular from black women artists who felt the work



- (3) The Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. holds an archive of such postcards. Their website is an excellent resource for understanding these artefacts in the context of European colonial adventures.
 (4) In her work, *Profile* (2017), Breitz addresses the discomfort (and indeed impossibility) of representing South Africa at the Venice Biennale as a white artist. One of the autobiographical statements included in *Profile's* script is, "I'm as white as Tipp-Ex." The observation ties correction fluid back to the female body

(Breitz's specifically), as well as pointing to an earlier moment in the artist's career, when the problematic of speaking for/through Black bodies were first considered.

merely replicated unjust power dynamics where cultural erasure could be enacted upon the black (female) body."⁵ This is perhaps not surprising: the line between attacking a representation of a body and attacking a body itself can be exceedingly thin. Breitz's violent response to the *racism* underlying the images had rendered the *figuras* not just ghost-like, as the title of the series suggests, but clownish and terrifying, skeletal and zombie-like, utterly abject (despite the freakish persistence of their smiles).⁶ Rather than responding defensively to her critics, Breitz acknowledged and absorbed their objections. When she returns in her practice to the subject of the insistent and uncomfortable presence of whiteness at the centre of media depictions of Black life, she quite pointedly (and even absurdly) centres her own body as a representative and enactor of this phenomenon.

SHE'S SO EXTRA

Extra (2011), a single-channel video installation and series of photographs, was made in the context of a lively debate concerning the role of white people in post-apartheid South Africa. 'The Whiteness Debate' (as it became known) began to unfold in the country's newspapers in 2011, and remains highly relevant a decade later. The debate was sparked by an essay written by the philosopher Samantha Vice, which appeared in an academic journal in 2010. Vice reflected on the question of how she could and/or should engage in contemporary political discourse as a white South African, given the overbearing and indeed oppressive power that has been, and continues to be, wielded by white South Africans, long after the official demise of apartheid.⁷ Rather than calling for a complete withdrawal or retreat of white South Africans from public life, Vice advocated for the cultivation of a respectful silence, a position of listening rather than speaking. In an article that appeared in the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper in July 2011, author Eusebius McKaiser praised Vice's ethical stance, commenting that, 'South African whites are so unconsciously habituated into an uncritical white way of being that they fail even to acknowledge how being white continues to represent massive social capital.'⁸ The response was a flurry of opinion pieces and letters to the editor, in which a slew of white commentators took umbrage at the suggestion that they should privilege the speech of those who have historically been silenced, condemning the idea as a form of 'reverse racism'.

Extra evolved on the set of the massively popular primetime soap, *Generations*, the brainchild of the Black writer and television producer Mfundi Vundla. Domestic television has a complicated history in South Africa: the apartheid regime resisted its introduction into South African homes until 1976, wary of the potential risk of introducing images of racial mixing and even racial equality to a restive population. When the South African Broadcasting Corporation was finally established in 1976, SABC programming was tightly controlled by the state, and strictly designed to cater to white South Africans in a linguistically-segregated country, with all content offered in either English or Afrikaans (specifically excluding the nine indigenous languages spoken by black South Africans). After the 1994 elections, the ANC established a new agenda for the SABC, which included offering a broader range of programming to include all eleven South African languages, and encouraging shows that would enable Black South Africans to imagine

(5) Zoë Whitley cited on the website of Tate Modern. Accessible at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/works/breiztzpost-series-04-15153> (last retrieved 01/30/2020).

(6) For a recent account of this genre of postcards that attempts "to recover the authorship of some of the African women and men who participated in these photographic encounters," see Christraud M. Geary, *Postcards from Africa. Photographers of the Colonial Era*, exh. cat. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2019).

(7) Samantha Vice, 'How Do I Live in This Strange Planet?', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2010), pp. 323-342. See also Muselele Ngejwa, 'Voice of White Silence,' *Mail & Guardian*, October 11, 2011. For a thorough account of 'The Whiteness Debate' and its implications for reading Breitz's

Extra, see Sean O'Toole, 'An Unmistakably White Question Mark,' in *Candice Breitz: Extra!*, ed. Sean O'Toole (Johannesburg: Standard Bank Gallery, 2012), and Kerr Houston, 'Candice Breitz's *Extra*,' *Maz-*

Journal of Contemporary Art, 32 (Spring 2013): pp. 50-61.

(8) Eusebius McKaiser, 'Confronting Whiteness,' *Mail & Guardian*, July 1, 2011. Accessible at: <http://mg.co.za/article/2011-07-01-confronting-whiteness> (last retrieved 01/30/2020).

White Question Mark, in *Candice Breitz: Extra!*, ed. Sean O'Toole (Johannesburg: Standard Bank Gallery, 2012), and Kerr Houston, 'Candice Breitz's *Extra*,' *Maz-*

themselves as part of a yet-to-emerge middle class, a dream that had been all but impossible before apartheid's fall. *Generations*, with its almost entirely Black cast, scripts written in up to five different African languages, and a cadre of Black writers backed by a Black producer, was one of the first shows to materialise from these guidelines, and remained the most popular television show in South Africa for over two decades, as well as being widely viewed in other African countries.⁹

Breiztz asked Vundla if she could work with his cast and crew to shoot a series of scenes on the set of *Generations*, and he gamely agreed. After weeks spent observing the dynamics of the set and getting to know the cast and crew, Breiztz began filming. After the actors had finished their takes for the actual show, they would do them once again—this time, with Breitz's own extremely white body obnoxiously in view. The actors were asked to continue their performances as if they could not see or perceive her. The filmed scenes were then spliced together in a single-channel video. The results are strange and funny and pointed. Occasionally Breiztz shows up in the background of the modern, stylised sets as a silent observer of the action or even as a bit player (looking on with concern from the background, or stocking items on a shelf in a store, for example). At other times, she is hilariously present—sitting cross-legged in the middle of a table while a high-powered business meeting goes on around her, popping her naked legs (with toes polished to a bright red) between two actors involved in an intimate conversation, piggybacking a male actor as he engages in a lover's tiff with his interlocutor, and so on. Her disembodied hand is draped over the shoulder of a character, Cousin Itt-style, in one scene; her decapitated head sits, Brancusi-like, on a kitchen counter in another. Her presence is at times menacing, at times absurd, but always somewhat clueless, as if she doesn't realise how superfluous her company is in this aspirational Black world, as if she is oblivious to her failure to integrate herself into these scenes and, by implication, into the 'new South Africa' writ large.

"The challenge," Breiztz has said, "was to play the role of an absent presence or a present absence, an extra who is at the same time a very visible and pale sore thumb, a glaringly white question mark."¹⁰ She is 'extra' in this piece in many senses—not simply as a minor player on a film set, nor only as an unnecessary surplus, but also, in the American slang sense (per the Urban Dictionary), as someone "trying too hard, over the top, excessive, a little dramatic, doing more than what the situation calls for." By farcically reiterating the very question that was at the time being anxiously posed by outraged white people in their letters to the *Mail & Guardian*—"What is to become of me if political discourse in South Africa now shifts to privilege Blackness, or even merely stops centring whiteness?"—she exposes the ridiculousness of the formulation; whiteness, even in a post-apartheid society, is not at all at risk of disappearing. In fact, it will likely always get in the way.

SPEAKING FOR OTHERS

If *Extra* was born of observing white South Africans express a desire to continue speaking out of self-interest in a political landscape where they (falsely) believed themselves at risk of being

(9) In a fascinating conversation between Breiztz and Vundla, the latter gives a detailed account of the race politics that subtended the transformation of television as a medium in the transition to the post-apartheid era.

(10) Quoted in Natalie Watermeyer, 'Invading the Vitrine,' *Classified* (Johannesburg: February 2012), p. 31.



Detail from *Extra #7*, 2011

marginalised or even erased, *Love Story* (2016) takes on white liberals wanting to speak on behalf of others—a shift, in other words, from critiquing the discourse of white victimhood to critiquing the discourse of the white saviour. It does so through the lens of one of the most urgent geopolitical crises of our times—the virtually unprecedented displacement of people and other pressure of war, famine, economic privation, environmental disaster, political oppression and other forms of violence (68.5 million, according to the UN, more than 25 million of whom are classified as refugees).

Love Story is installed across two rooms: a larger, darkened cinematic space is followed by a second more intimate room.¹¹ In the first space, one is confronted with a large-scale projection that alternates between shots of Hollywood stars Julianne Moore and Alec Baldwin, each shown in a director's chair against a greenscreen backdrop on a set revealing the accoutrements of a film shoot—lights, reflectors, overhead mics. The actors speak directly to the camera in a disarmingly intimate, almost confessional manner. But as becomes increasingly clear over the course of the tightly edited, seventy-three-minute montage, the words coming out of their mouths—filled with short, disorienting allusions to terrible realities—are not their own. Rather, these fragments are borrowed from six individuals who have been forced to migrate, often to flee oppression and abuse, undertaking harrowing journeys across borders and into countries that more often than not received them with hostility. Baldwin and Moore, voluntarily ceding Hollywood's tools-of-the-trade (costumes, makeup, assumed accents, props and scenery), nonetheless manage to convey the distinguishing characteristics of each subject via gestures, posture, idiosyncratic movements and vocal rhythms. Beyond these aspects of the actors' craft, only the subtle use of personal accessories (a brooch, a bracelet, sunglasses, etc.) allows us to identify which of the refugees is speaking at any given moment (see p. 126).

In the second space, which can only be accessed via the first, six flatscreen monitors show the original interviews from which the stories performed by Moore and Baldwin are drawn. Here one can hear first-hand from the asylum seekers: Shabeena Francis Saveri, a South Asian transgender woman; Luis Nava Molerio, a Venezuelan dissident who refused to shy away from criticizing Hugo Chávez; Farah Abdi Mohamied, a Somali atheist; Mamy Maloba Langa, a Congolese woman who was the victim of unimaginable sexual violence as a consequence of her husband's changing political fortunes; José Maria João, an Angolan man who was exploited as a child soldier; and Sarah Ezzat Mardini, a competitive swimmer who made the perilous Mediterranean crossing to escape Syria's civil war. The source interviews were conducted in Cape Town, Berlin and New York, the cities where the interviewees have sought refuge. Each of the interviewees was filmed in a space similar to the greenscreen environment we saw in the previous room. When Moore and Baldwin appeared on that pared-down set, it had the air of being 'industry standard', simply a fact of filmmaking. But occupied by people who have been violently dislocated, it takes on a different meaning altogether. Greenscreen is, in technical terms, a provisional backdrop, a placeholder for scenery that will be inserted after filming is over—it is a form of cinematic placelessness that echoes the interviewees' condition of geographic precarity, a metaphor for forced migration itself.¹²

(11) The description that follows draws upon my 2018 review of the installation of *Love Story* at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts (originally published in *4Columns*). Accessible at: <https://www.4columns.org/d-souza-aruna/candice-breitz> (last retrieved 01/30/2020).

(12) See Emily Watlington's review of *Love Story* in *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 7, 2018.



Mamy Maloba Langa (left) and José Maria João (right) on the set of *Love Story*, Cape Town, December 2015

(13) Gregory Allan Howard (interviewee), "Print the Legend: Writing the Screenplay for *Harriet*," *Focus Features*, November 1, 2019. Accessible at: https://www.focusfeatures.com/article/interview-screenwriter_gregory-allen-howard (last retrieved 01/30/2020).

(14) Aruna D'Souza, "Candice Breitz," *4Columns*, September 7, 2018. Accessible at: <https://4columns.org/d-souza-aruna/candice-breitz> (last retrieved 01/30/2020).

In contrast to the projection in the first room of the installation, which is about the length of a feature film, each of the original interviews in the second room runs three to four hours, making it impossible to experience all of them in their entirety without returning to the museum over the course of multiple days. Before entering the second room, we may have been seduced into thinking we could grasp the plights of refugees, thanks to the efforts of two very talented actors and some extremely effective filmmaking technique. But in the face of these unpolished first-person accounts—accounts that are infinitely more interesting, particular and textured than any fictional portrayal, no matter how virtuosic—we are confronted by how little we actually know, and how easily we have been taken in by the spectacle of it all. (Perhaps the title of the piece should have tipped us off, making reference as it does to that bit of 1970s cinematic ur-schmalz starring Ryan O'Neal and Ali MacGraw, a film that jerked a thousand tears out of us, that made us 'feel' despite its clichés, its too-predictable storyline, its manufactured emotions.)

It is no coincidence that the two actors at the heart of this manoeuvre are white, and that the stories they voice are predominantly those of people of colour. *Love Story* is, at its core, about the mechanisms through which political consciousness of issues like the contemporary refugee crisis is generated. One of those mechanisms (one that is all too familiar in the entertainment industry) is that of 'whitewashing', whereby stories that properly belong to people of colour are rendered 'relatable'—worthy of our empathy and care, available for our psychic identification—by casting white actors or centring white characters. The practice is most often justified as an attempt to garner 'mainstream appeal'—in other words, the attention of white audiences, who are presumed not to care about people who do not look like them. Though examples abound, one in particular stands out in its audacity and cynicism: in a recent interview, Gregory Allan Howard, screenwriter of the film *Harriet*, revealed that when he first started to shop around the idea for a movie about the Black anti-slavery activist in the early 1990s, a studio executive suggested casting Julia Roberts as Harriet Tubman.¹³

As we listen to the excerpted interview fragments that the white actors ventriloquise in *Love Story*, Breitz constantly draws our attention to the dubious operations of whitewashing, such as when Moore-as-Saveri, the South Asian woman, says, "Some of the most pressing social issues of our times came into the limelight only after Hollywood actors and actresses performed certain roles" or when Moore-as-Langa, the Congolese woman, remarks that, "People don't even, you know, care about us, they would never put us on a movie screen and talk about us." To see the actors mouthing, by turn, the refugees' admissions that they don't really know who Moore and Baldwin are, declaring their hope that the world will listen if famous people tell their stories, expressing their belief in the power of celebrity to advance political causes, revealing their star-struckness (or—in the case of the Venezuelan academic and political dissident, Luis Nava Molerio—railing against the Hollywoodisation of the public sphere and our mindless manipulation by movie stars) is hilarious and poignant, heart-wrenching and cringe-inducing all at once.¹⁴

In speaking about *Love Story*, Breitz is realistic about the tendency of privileged white audiences to respond more readily to stars who look (and sound) like themselves: "It's naïve

and unproductive to assume that you can automatically get people to sit down and spend time ingesting and reflecting on complex stories that are completely removed from their experience. Especially in an attention economy in which we're increasingly socialised into a fast-forward relationship with endless streams of information."¹⁵ This is not to say that she is sanguine about such internalised bias—the structure of *Love Story* forces us to confront our own capacities (or lack thereof) for paying attention within a visual economy that is constantly trying to solicit our gaze. Nor does Breitz pretend that she is not herself a beneficiary of the privileges that undergird her audience's often unconscious favouring of whiteness in their consumption of the world of media and images. As Zoë Whitley recounts, in her excellent essay on the installation:

In an interview in Johannesburg, Breitz pre-emptively asks me with characteristic candour, asking, "Who am I, a white South African woman, to speak on behalf of anyone else?" It's disarming. But it's also honest: She's posing the question not so as to avoid it, but in order to confront it. What price does white privilege exact? What price does silence exact in the face of fear, oppression and injustice experienced by others? Why are the lives of some valued more than those of others, eliciting more pathos in the face of suffering? To whose cries do we collectively respond?¹⁶

WHO AM I TO SPEAK?

Love Story received its most prominent outing at the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017, where Breitz was invited to exhibit the work in the South African pavilion, alongside an installation by Mohan Modisakeng. Her ambivalence about representing an overwhelmingly Black country (as a white artist) was channelled into a piece she produced as she prepared for the biennale, titled *Profile*. Featuring ten South African artists "who could equally have been selected to represent the country in Venice"—Ighsaan Adams, Roger Bailen, Steven Cohen, Gabriëlle Goliath, Dean Hutton, Banele Khoza, Gerald Machona, Buhlebezwe Siwani, Chuma Sopotela and Sue Williamson—*Profile* can, according to Breitz, be read as a sort of footnote to *Love Story*, one that broaches the artist's recurring question: "Who am I, a white South African woman, to speak on behalf of anyone else?"

The artists appear on camera responding candidly to a series of census-like questions: "What is your gender? What is your race? What is your class? What is your sexual preference? Who was your mother? Where were you born? What is your religion?" Some respond to the questions directly, while others offer answers that are playful, evasive or provocative. One—Siwani, a Black woman—asked Breitz to provide her own answers to the scripted questions. Siwani delivers Breitz's answers on set wearing a T-shirt borrowed from Breitz, thereby ventriloquising Breitz's biography no less than Moore and Baldwin did the stories of their displaced subjects in *Love Story*. In the final edit, the three single-channel videos that comprise *Profile* play on the slippages between ideas of presentation, representation and misrepresentation; Breitz (who never appears on camera) becomes an impossible subject in the face of the sheer multiplicity of identities narrated in her name:



Chuma Sopotela on the set of *Profile*, Cape Town, February 2017

- (15) Josie Tharddeus-Johns, Candice Breitz: Too Long, Didn't Read', *Elephant Magazine*, Spring 2018, p. 160.
 (16) Zoë Whitley, 'Oh Oh Love: Candice Breitz's Monologues for Troubled Times', in *Candice Breitz + Mohan Modisakeng*, eds. Lucy MacGarry, Bronwyn Law-Viljoen (Venice: Exhibition Catalogue, South African Pavilion, 2017), p. 72.

My name is Candice Breitz. I am what could be called 'South African.' I was born in New York City in 1950. I live in Pretoria. My father was a con artist and a thug. My mother is a rock. My name is Candice Breitz... I am an artist... My ancestors were both slaves and masters... My mother would love for me to say right now that I love Jesus! I don't really have true religious beliefs... So, I love Jesus with all of my heart! My religion is soaked in blood... Ah shit! I present... South Africa! Hmm... hello, like! I misrepresent South Africa... My name is Candice Breitz: I'm an artist... I'm a feminist. I was born in the poisonous womb of the patriarchy. Of course, I'm a man... what else? I rely on my instincts... I am a boy who loves pink! In terms of class, I'm not quite sure where I fit in... I am middle class and privileged... Probably middle class at the moment, but I certainly started out as lower working class. My mother tongue is English... To be more global, I decided that English should be my mother tongue... And I wish I spoke Xhosa... I speak with my body! Race... I'm black... I'm as white as Tipp-Ex... I'm Black! I'm as white as the Grammys... I'm black! I'm as white as the Academy Awards... Black... black, black! Seriously... fuck white people! My name is Candice Breitz... I'm Miss South Africa. I have represented South Africa... This white body cannot represent South Africa. I'm Candice Breitz, and I approve this message!

PRESENTATION/REPRESENTATION/MISREPRESENTATION

There is irony, to say the least, in the fact that one of the points of origin for Breitz's 13-channel video installation, *ZLDR* (2017), was a moment in which the white artist found herself in the unavoidable but uncomfortable position of speaking directly on behalf of Black women colleagues.

In November 2016, the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town opened an exhibition titled *Our Lady*, whose purpose—according to its three white, female curators—was "to challenge the age-old visual perception of the female form as an idealised, mythical and sexual object—a notion perpetuated through media and often reinforcing unequal gender relationships."¹⁷ It was the most prominent exhibition thematising questions of gender that the National Gallery had hosted to date. Bizarrely, of the twenty-seven artists included on the checklist, all but seven were men. Of the men represented, only a single artist was Black. That artist, the photographer Zwelethu Mhethwa, was at the time in the fourth year of a trial for the brutal murder of Nokuphila Kumalo, a 23-year-old woman who had made her living as a sex worker on the streets of Cape Town. (He was eventually found guilty of the crime in March 2017.)

The activist group, Sex Workers Education & Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT)—which had just launched a campaign titled #SayHerName, to draw attention to the extreme violence faced by sex workers—began protesting the National Gallery's perverse decision to include Mhethwa in *Our Lady*. In concert with SWEAT's efforts, the six living female-identified or non-binary artists in the exhibition—Bridget Baker, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Khanyisile Mbongwa, Deborah Poynton, Tracey Rose and Penny Slops—began coordinating with Breitz and others to register their fierce objections, and to demand that their work be removed from the exhibition.¹⁸



SWEAT protests in memory of Nokuphila Kumalo, Cape Town, December 2016

- (17) The quotation is from the exhibition's press release.

- (18) Because *Our Lady* was drawn from existing collections, none of the artists were necessarily willing participants in the exhibition to begin with; it should be noted.

The group planned to present a letter of protest at a public meeting hosted by the museum on 15 December 2016. However, for a variety of reasons—including professional obligations, childbirth, and illness—none of the withdrawing artists were able to attend, so they deputised Breitz to deliver the letter on their behalf. The problem of her own whiteness weighed heavily on Breitz, one might surmise, given a preface remark that she made at the gathering:

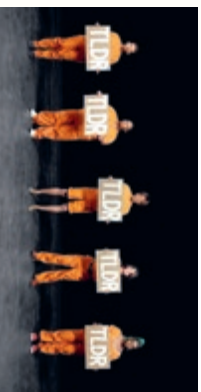
It is not comfortable for me to read this particular letter, in this particular context, at this particular moment in time. The letter focuses on a strong belief that is shared by all of the women who have signed it; the belief that far more public space and public representation needs to be afforded to the voices of women of colour. So, it is odd and awkward to have a white woman reading the letter to you. In an ideal scenario, this letter would not be read to you by a white voice; and certainly not by one like mine, which exudes privilege. White voices continue to take up too much space in our public sphere.

In the aftermath of the public meeting, Breitz entered into a long-term conversation with the largely (but not exclusively) Black SWEAT community about a possible collaboration, a dialogue which—over a period of eighteen months—resulted in *TLDK*. The questions they posed for themselves were vexing but urgent: how might a collaboration draw on both SWEAT's lived experience as sex work activists and Breitz's storytelling skills, to amplify the pressing issues facing the sex work community and to gain support for the decriminalisation and de-stigmatisation of sex work?

As a first step, Breitz filmed a series of documentary-style interviews, with minimal intervention, featuring ten sex workers chosen by SWEAT to represent a variety of back grounds, genders and racial groups: Zoe Black, Connie, Duduzile Dlamini, Emma, Gabbi, Regina High, Jenny, Jovi, Tendlovwe and Nosipho 'Provocative' Vidima. The initial goal was to provide the organisation with the beginnings of an archive, and perhaps a starting point for future activism. After consulting with the group's advocacy team to better understand the priorities and sensitivities of the collective, Breitz set up her camera. In the resulting twelve hours of footage, her subjects speak of the various circumstances that put them on the path towards sex work, the dangers of their labour (including rape, imprisonment, attempted murder, and so on), and also—importantly—of their agency and even joy in their profession.

Later on, during the final stretch of pre-production, Breitz and SWEAT members participated in a series of workshops in order to discuss their overlapping goals and the information they might want to communicate to an international, privileged and largely white audience (knowing that the work would be shown in the context of art exhibitions).

The title of the resulting work, *TLDK*, is internet jargon for 'too long; didn't read'—an acronym often thrown into online conversation as a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of our shrinking attention spans within today's image economy. After passing through a large antechamber, in which one can view the original, uncut interviews on ten life-sized, wall-mounted monitors, one enters a darkened gallery. The projection—a three-part panorama—depicts a pre-teen boy at the centre, flanked on either side by the SWEAT members whose interviews appear in the



antechamber. The SWEAT contingent wears orange costumes—the group's signature colour and (perhaps not coincidentally) the colour of the uniforms issued to people incarcerated in South African prisons.

Our attention is drawn, by design, to that pre-teen boy. He is named Xanny Stevens. Breitz met Xanny at the December meeting at the South African National Gallery; he had accompanied his activist mother to the meeting, and impressed the public gathering with his short, empathetic and preternaturally eloquent statement of solidarity. He became, for the artist, an ideal narrator for the piece: she has referred to him as 'utopian,' which I take to mean, in part, 'unlocatable' (utopia means no-place), perhaps because of his gender and racial ambiguity, his suspension between boyhood and manhood, and so on. This ambiguity is in part what makes Xanny an ideal screen onto which viewers might project themselves—another way to say, in Hollywood terms, 'relatable.' Over the course of an hour, he acts as our charismatic, accessible guide through the complexity of the issues surrounding the lives of sex workers.

But even more than that, Xanny is our guide through the thickets of our own ignorance, an ignorance that is compounded, for many, by white privilege. The script he delivers—for all his enlightened intelligence, the words are clearly not his own—focuses on the question of how we centre the voices of some over others, especially around the issue of sex work. He begins with a story—a morality tale, as it were—about a painfully real media debacle, one that made it even harder than usual for the voices of sex workers to be heard. In 2015, Amnesty International announced its intentions to start campaigning for countries to decriminalise consensual sex work so that sex workers would be likelier to receive protection from authorities, get proper medical treatment when required and report cases of exploitation, child abuse and human trafficking. Despite Amnesty's years-long research (conducted by experts in the field, in consultation with sex work advocacy groups), a cadre of celebrities—including Anne Hathaway, Kate Winslet, Lena Dunham, Lisa Kudrow, Charlize Theron, Claire Danes, Meryl Streep, Emma Thompson, Kyra Sedgwick and Carey Mulligan (among many others)—came out in full force to condemn the push for decriminalisation.

At the core of *TLDK*, then, is a critique of star power, and of the very real damage that was done to an international human rights campaign due to the interference of a lobby of influential but ignorant white feminists who were able, given their outsized media platforms, to take up far too much space in a debate that they were barely qualified to comment upon. Xanny's cautionary tale, which pits Hollywood glitterati against the sex work industry, reads like a textbook case, if ever there was one, of Teju Cole's 'white-savior industrial complex':

The anti-sex-work-brigade realised they needed some celebrities to help them sell their campaign. They somehow managed to get a bunch of really famous people to sign their petition against Amnesty. With so many flashy celebs stepping forward to grandstand, the debate hit mainstream headlines faster than you can say 'intersectionality.'

Humanitarian Hollywood was coming out to champion the rights of 'poor prostitutes'! Movie stars Meryl Streep and Charlize Theron were going to teach Amnesty International

Left and right: Xanny Stevens and members of the SWEAT community on the set of *TLDK*, Cape Town, October 2017



a ring or two about human rights! Claire Danes, Lisa Kudrow, Carey Mulligan and Anne Hathaway thought that Amnesty was making a ‘serious mistake’! From the majestic heights of entertainment, Kate Winslet and Kyra Sedgwick and Emma Thompson wanted you to know that sex work is not kosher. Wham bam, the story went viral. Social media exploded!

Vogue editor-in-chief Anna Wintour was not going to let Amnesty get away with it! Neither was old school feminist, Gloria Steinem! Even Lena Dunham jumped into the fray. I know, right! Lena, Girls’ Dunham!

Don’t Judge me for asking, but how could so many privileged white feminists be so uninformed?

They wanted to do the right thing, I suppose. But you have to wonder whether this dazzling list of signatories ever really sat down to read the Amnesty proposal?

[When Hollywood stars started to throw in their two cents, sex workers and their advocates shuddered. How could *their* testimony possibly remain audible above the vital opinions of Kate Winslet and friends? Talk about a titanic power disparity....

Xanny’s account of the controversy is self-consciously peppered with internet speak (OMG! TMI! IDK! WTF!) and intercut with manipulated samples from pop songs that refer to sex work (Rihanna, Donna Summer, Tina Turner, and so on), attention-grabbing memes, flashes of YouTube videos and other internet flotsam and jetsam. The sex workers to Xanny’s left and right function as a Greek chorus, bringing his words to life and rounding out their meaning. They sing Zulu and Xhosa protest songs derived from their activist practice, and they dance. They brandish a series of props: protest posters drawn from SWEAT’s archives, oversized emoji faces and ‘white privilege’ masks’ (depicting ten of the white celebrities who signed onto the anti-sex work campaign). Most poignant among their props, are the #SayHerName posters, which are carried by a grim reaper figure wearing a white skull mask, and which bear details of the lives and deaths of murdered compatriots. The poster remembering Nokuphila Kumalo (to whom *TLDR* is dedicated) reads, “My name was Nokuphila Kumalo. I was a sex worker. I was 23 years old. I was found beaten to death. Zwelethu Mthethwa has been convicted of my murder” (see illustration, p. 35).

As in *Love Story* and *Profile*, Breitz’s off-camera presence is registered insistently throughout the sixty-minute projection. She appears at the very start of the work, in her role as director, reading lines (essentially the brief for the project as a whole) to Xanny, who squats next to her: “How could *their* testimony—the testimony of the sex workers, in other words—how could *their* testimony possibly remain audible above the vital opinions of Kate Winslet and friends?” Breitz’s fleeting on-screen appearances are an acknowledgement of sorts—a postmodern, self-referential nod to the conditions of production, but also a recognition that no matter how much she attempts to cede her platform to others, to act as an ally and to focus attention elsewhere, her whiteness cannot but be meddling and determinative.



Left and right: Members of the SWEAT community on the set of *TLDR*, Cape Town, October 2017



Ultimately, for all the dedication to collaborative praxis, the white woman is directing the show. Breitz knows this, and is willing to lean into the implications that arise from the situation. Speaking of *TLDR*, she insists that: “You can’t wash away white privilege. It needs to be constantly addressed and deconstructed. You can try to use it against itself by extending some of the visibility that attaches to whiteness to issues and communities that are generally denied broader visibility.”¹⁹ She speaks of wanting to avoid being one of an increasingly familiar species—“privileged artists stepping into marginal communities without any consideration of how their privilege shifts the dynamics of the dialogue with their subject,” concluding that: “In the end, the big question for an artist like myself—privileged, white, middle class—is how and whether one can be an ally, how and whether it might be possible to engage embodied experience without simply interfering from a perspective of entitlement, like the Hollywood actresses in *TLDR*, self-appointed white saviours who swoop down to rescue ‘the poor prostitutes,’ without stopping to wonder whether ‘the poor prostitutes’ actually want or need to be rescued.”²⁰

That the artist may indeed have sidestepped—even fleetingly—the almost unavoidable pitfalls that occur when (white) privilege tries to engage a precarious community like SWEAT, is signalled after the credits roll. Unusually, those credits appear not at the end of the hour-long projection, but about two thirds of the way through, marking the point at which Breitz stops directing and cedes the stage to her cast. The finale was unplanned and unexpected, as the artist explains: “The structure of the work broke down and the story gave way to a joyous celebration of community, which was clearly complete without my involvement as a director.”²¹ Over the final twenty minutes of *TLDR*, we watch as the sex work activists vacate their assigned marks and abandon the highly structured choreography of the piece to spontaneously perform a melody of protest songs, their faces now turned away from the camera and towards each other. Most poignantly, the medley includes a re-tooled version of South Africa’s post-apartheid national anthem, its words modified to communicate the challenges faced by the sex work community. Sung in Xhosa and Zulu, the lyrics speak of struggle, strength and endurance: of trauma and of healing. It is here, at least momentarily, that it becomes clear that while Breitz got the camera rolling, these activists ended up speaking in their own language, on their own terms, and to each other as much as to the world.



(19) Quoted in *Elephant Magazine*, Spring 2018, p. 163.
 (20) *Ibid.*, p. 165.
 (21) *Ibid.*, p. 165.