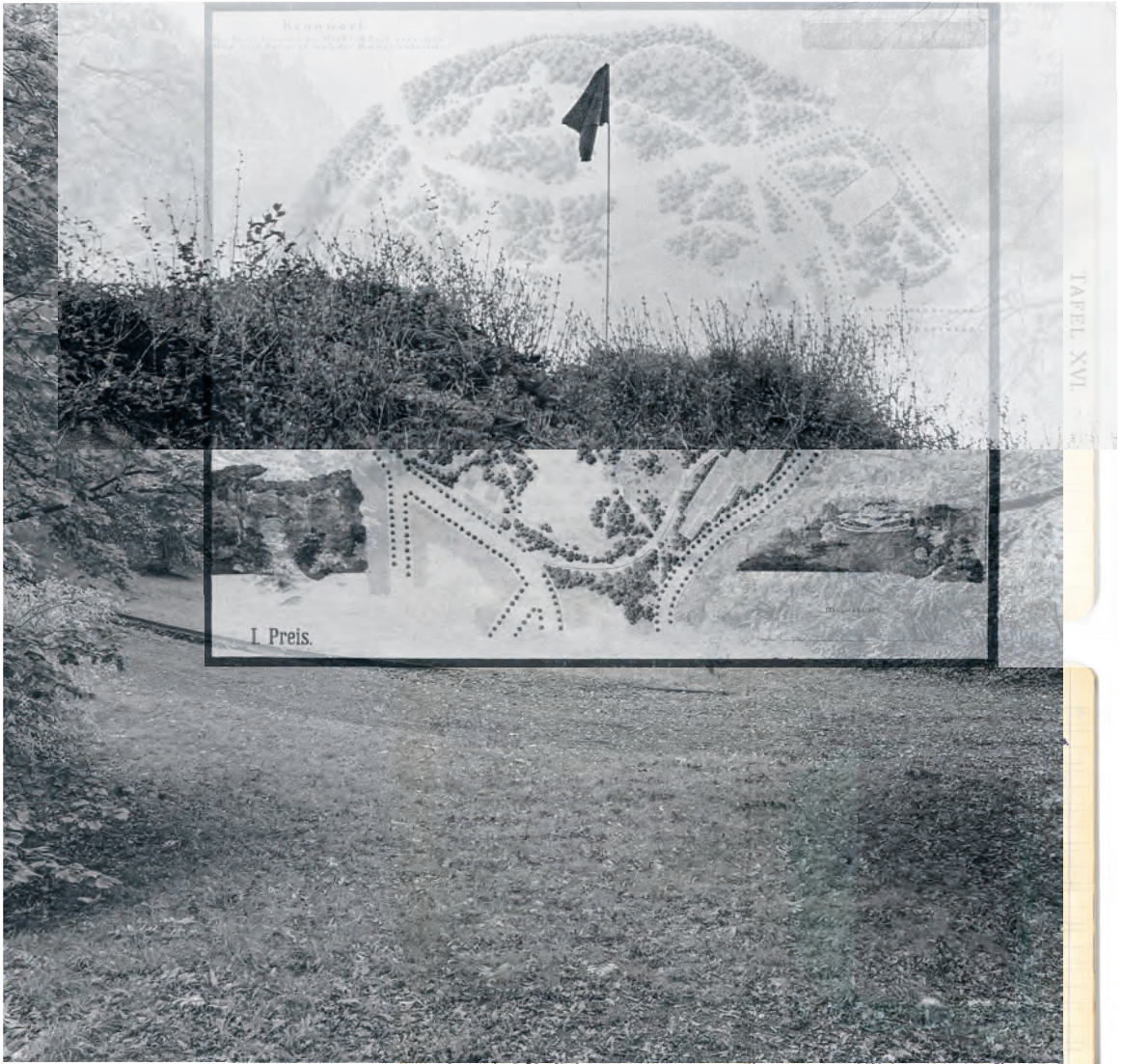


PREPOSITION OF PLACE



TAFEL XVI

meet in these monuments.

as a metaphor for the damaged and desecrated monuments.

MASIXOLE NCEVU

SENSE OF SPACE



x form

The drawings are part of the fabric of the park, learning from nature - a personal expression, not to the scale and character of the park.

The drawings are part of the fabric of the park, learning from nature - a personal expression, not to the scale and character of the park.

In the Park – Prepositions of Place

If you're inside the park,
then at the park and in the park
would both be correct,
but they have different emphasis.

At the park emphasises
just the act of being at the park;
in the park emphasises
that you are at one place inside the park,
as opposed to many other places
inside the park.

At the park treats the park
simply as a location
without regard to being inside it
or outside it.
In the park specifically means
the interior of the park.

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This book attempts to explore how people locate themselves vis-à-vis others, objects, and things within a time-space continuum. Furthermore, it contextually sheds light on the correlation between meanings as they are embedded in space on the one hand and a sense of place on the other. In this book, the preposition of place means taking a closer examination at the relations between objects and things through the lens of meaning as it reconfigures movements and interactions in time and space. The relations between entities/objects/things offer bi-directional insights into orientations as they are impacted by emotional, perceptual, and preferential states of worlding, among other attributes that direct people's positioning within contexts.

The project *Prepositions of Place*, which emerges as the central focus of this book, follows and attends to questions of how people, structures, and landscapes spatially affect one another. What relations and meanings emerge and submerge within space – be it natural or artificial? In the process, visual signs, the (re-)emergence of infrastructures, and contextual forms of speech reshape the building blocks for place-making. Through the lens of artistic work, the project metaphorically and figuratively expresses how sensorial experiences of sight, touch, and hearing coalesce and combine to orient individuals in space and time. The relation of individuals through the space-time continuum also generates external stimuli to contrive and build an immersive spatial experience. Through this book, I allude to how space fosters and interacts with the social fabric, reflecting on the spatial immersion and essence of being human. By accessing individual senses, emotions, and thoughts, as well as spaces – in this case, the park – it inspires and transforms concepts of place. Probing the photographs alone cannot capture these prepositions as they do not exist in a physical form, but rather encompass and hold together entities in space. The accompanying texts in this publication will help to draw out the hidden prepositions.

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Ukuhamba ukubona: to go is to see
Nosipho Mngomezulu

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When considering Masixole Ncevu's body of work *Prepositions of Place*, the isiZulu idiom, "ukuhamba, ukubona" comes to mind, meaning "to go is to see (or understand)". In isiZulu, the prefix uku- is used to indicate that an action is being performed or is in progress. Movement is central to this work on space and place, in which Masixole Ncevu invites us to linger on prepositions. "Ukuhamba, ukubona" suggests that movement is not just a means of seeing, but a central condition of knowing – an unfolding relation between bodies, places, and the narratives we generate about these relations – in order to understand.

This isiZulu idiom could have easily been an adage of Western 17th century travelogues, which were the intellectual precursors to what would become the discipline of anthropology in the late 19th century. In both traditions, the politics of looking calls to attention the power dynamics implicated in the ethnographic gaze. The invocation to go *there*, to encounter the *other*, placed the almost-always colonial explorer (later anthropologist) in the authoritative position of rendering peoples of distant regions legible to audiences back home. Both travelogues and the discipline of anthropology were historically intertwined with colonialism, even as the latter continues to challenge the epistemic and colonial logics of the discipline's colonial foundations.

Under such conditions, looking/seeing was never innocent, calling to mind the oft-quoted Caesarean dictum *veni, vidi, vici*: to arrive to an elsewhere, to see the place and its peoples, and to conquer them. This imperialist imperative, coupled with the ethnographic gaze towards *the other*, continues to haunt the discipline, enlisting a series of epistemic turns and intellectual movements. For those who have been the historical objects of the imperialist gaze, this epistemic labour has entailed not only a refusal of conquest, but also a recognition that it is possible to engage in regimes of looking and witnessing without rendering the subjects of our gaze objects of conquest. I wish, then, to read Masixole Ncevu's work as an enquiry into the locus of his enunciation, rather than as yet another epistemic turn – a rejoinder to asymmetries of power that frames itself as disciplinary correction.

In this brief introduction, I ask: what does it mean for Masixole Ncevu, a young South African-born artist who has made a home in Germany, to undertake artistic ethnographic work in Plauen. Let's take for instance the series of film stills reproduced on pages 279–293 of this book. In a park in Plauen, two benches anchor the scene, seemingly awaiting a body to occupy them. I bear witness to a naked body captured in motion. Masixole Ncevu's gait cuts through the frame, carrying a full-size black flag over his left shoulder. The winding path of the desolate park loops back on itself, but Masixole Ncevu's stride remains unwavering. His gaze – though unseen – pulls forward, a trajectory of intent. Will he sit on the benches, accepting the grace of rest they offer? I cannot see his face, so I try to listen to the image instead (Campt, 2017). The cold wind does not speak, but the fabric of the flag murmurs in its own register as it hangs downcast. This is no triumphant Apollo-landing scene, no planting of a flag to stake claim over a foreign land. The grass – perhaps wet and numbing – meets the soles of his bare feet, his movement across the land refuses hesitation. What I hear, for certain, is my own heart, its rhythm uneasy. This arrhythmia is not just mine – it is an inheritance, the echo of generations schooled in caution, saying "*basop: watch out, take care*".

I am looking out for what dangers may befall him and though I see none in the image, I know better than to believe in *terra nullius*. My quickening pulse dictates the darting of my vision, drawing finally to the forest ahead of him. Where are you going? How long till you get there?

Speaking to Masixole Ncevu about the process of making these images, I learn of the profound dislocation and disorientation of being subject to a suspicious gaze as he moves through various sites in Germany. His hyper-visibility as a Black man in this small European town is not dissimilar to Fanon's encounters with being rendered a *negro* in the bustling metropole of Paris. Like many Black artists, he is aware that his body is not only available to be gazed upon, but can and does enact an oppositional ethnographic gaze. Masixole Ncevu's work invites the audience to pay close attention to our own orientations. After all, prepositions direct words. As Michelle Wright argues in *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (2015), "we are 'Black in time'". The preposition *in* being the operative word. Wright's work underscores that Blackness is temporally and spatially contingent, meaning that "one's Blackness is contextual, subject to volatile change depending upon the time and place in which Blackness manifests" (Bey and Sakkelarides, 2016, p. 38). Blackness, then, is not a question of what and whom, but rather a question of where and when. As I read Masixole Ncevu's work from Johannesburg, South Africa, I want to index two important moves he makes precisely by foregrounding prepositions, which hinge on (1) temporal and (2) spatial contingency in the making of difference.

The work of Gupta and Ferguson (1992) considers the process through which difference is produced through a territorialisation of imaginaries from the social sciences, including the ethnographic gaze. This territorialisation occludes critical reflections on temporality and space even as these frames lay the very foundations for the invocation of difference. The denial of shared temporality shows up in the failure of a gaze to see phenotypical diversity as a denial of coevalness, instead locking those deemed lesser *others* into a by-gone time (Fabian, 1983). Similarly, methodological nationalism trains the gaze to treat nations as *apriori* to narratives, assuming nationally-bounded societies to be naturally given entities of study, and thus taking "national discourses, agendas, loyalties and histories for granted, without problematising them or making them an object of an analysis in its own right" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002, p. 304). Viewed in this context, Masixole Ncevu's work stages an intervention to not take space and time for granted.

Gupta and Ferguson read cultural difference as "produced and maintained in a field of power relations in a world always already spatially interconnected" (1992, p. 19). Difference then can be thought of as a product of a shared historical process (albeit hierarchical) that differentiates the world as it connects it (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992). To put it another way, it is not that we labour under pre-existing differences; rather, we live under sets of relations that produce difference as a value judgement. These systems of interpretation thus separate us exactly at the point of encounter. The conditions of possibility for Masixole Ncevu to make work in and around Plauen may be different from the routes other residents and ethnographers and artists take, but make no mistake, their histories and various locations are connected.

Masixole Ncevu does not allow his body to become a convenient shorthand for smuggling in all manner of assumptive logics about difference. Rather, his work offers us an invitation to look again. Literally leaving his touch on the images he creates, he is not out-of-sight, but rather invites us to look anew at what comes into view when we take embodiment, space, and viewing seriously. Putting his naked body on the line, he does away with the façade of the disembodied, omniscient observer. As the creator and author of these images, Masixole Ncevu traverses the discursive debris of disarticulation (Musila, 2017). According to Christopher Pinney, "the photograph becomes the site of a struggle for historical articulation" (2004: 8). Masixole Ncevu places his work at the centre of such contestations, daring us to keep looking: not just to gaze, but to attempt to understand.

His oppositional gaze (hooks, 2003) refuses an interpolation into tired tropes around African art and African artists. Although this body of work may engage his body (alongside encounters with space, time, objects, and people), it is ultimately not about his body or the nebulous term *identity*. Nor is his body an easy site onto which we (including me) can project meaning.

What Masixole Ncevu manages to do with this body of work, especially through his meditations on material culture, is to foreground concrete, material manifestations of real political and historical choices: how race, gender and empire intersect in these material artefacts. Pay attention, then, to the moves he makes by placing emplacement next to everyday material culture and embodiment. What at once could be read as still or inert becomes teeming with action, movement, life: a veritable living cartography of ongoing negotiations with a history of place in the present.

What am I looking for, then? I initially thought I wanted to see as Masixole Ncevu sees, but now I think I want to follow him into the interstices of a preposition: *to*. Perhaps to go with Masixole Ncevu is to see that which is reaching out, hoping that we will return with new ways of looking.

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Where do some of these paths lead?

It seems like I am in an open ground but
the way ahead seems blocked, I can not
be sure what the future holds, there looks
to be danger and confusion in front of me
or is the danger behind me and am I looking back?

Is the open ground dangerous?
Perhaps the trees, people, and
structures offer safety and shelter.

Do I carry on or turn back?
Which direction do I take next?

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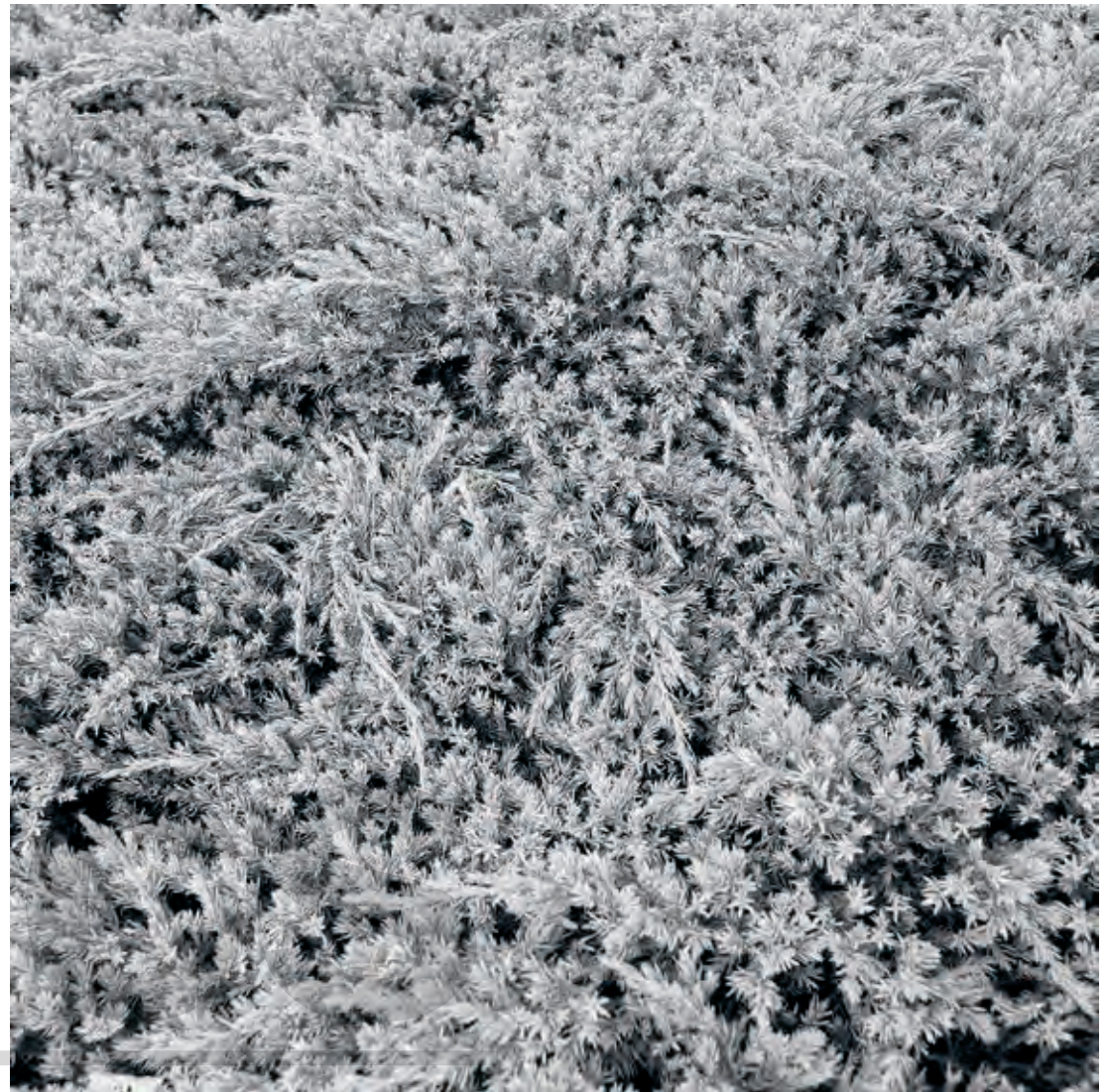


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We go inside first, decide what kind of world
we want to experience and then project that world outside
making it the truth as we experience it.

