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***A Song of Uhuru and a Difficult Dance:  
Anawana Haloba's Sound Memories of TAZARA***

**Ruth Simbao**

In the opening scene of Anawana Haloba's animation video, *A Dragon King at Sleepy Pride Rock* (2016), a disembodied megaphone with an apparent life of its own dances in front of the Gate of Heavenly Peacemaking at Tiananmen Square in Beijing. A woman's voice declares:

People of this great country  
I am the mouthpiece of our Dragon King  
The invisible hand,  
The bringer of music to your ears

I bring you good news, the King of Pride Rock has fallen in the deepest slumber of all times.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of an 'invisible hand' holding a megaphone alludes to political power that is persuasive but safely hidden from view, and it was this scene of the video that caused Haloba's work to be censored at the 2017 Shanghai Biennale. As the video progresses, however, it becomes evident that power—or, more explicitly, the *abuse* of power that this animation nods towards—is not simplistically assigned to a particular person or group of people, and the King of Pride Rock, the lion, who has been 'hypnotised by kilos of gold bars' is implicated too.

An earlier version of *A Dragon King at Sleepy Pride Rock* was screened in 2016 at the Norwegian Sørlandets Kunstmuseum as part of Haloba's exhibition, *Every day is for the thief and one day is for the owner*. In the context of this exhibition, which featured a fictional African dictator in an imaginary African land, the portrayal of a leader hypnotised by gold suggests a corrupt government in Africa that ignores the needs of the people on the ground. It is during this deep slumber that an imposter sits on the lion's seat, bringing revolution nigh.

Haloba's reference to animals in this video—the lion, the dragon and the monkey—is inspired by George Orwell's *Animal Farm* as well as Chenjerai Hove's well known story about a monkey who climbed to the top of the tallest tree seeking applause from below. The animals on the ground roared with laughter, because the higher he climbed, the better their view became of his posterior from below. 'And so it is with power of any kind, political or otherwise', explains the late Zimbabwean novelist and cultural politician, who maintained that the best way to get rid of a dictator is to laugh at him or her. 'The higher one ascends the tree of power, the more the public have a chance to observe and scrutinise one's political and economic bottom.'<sup>2</sup>

Initially, a viewer might assume that the imposter in Haloba's video represents the Chinese, for the voice speaking through the megaphone at Tiananmen Square encourages her people to travel to Africa, as 'Loans and tools are all waiting for the brave'. In reading Haloba's work, though, it is critical not to interpret her imagery and her characters in facile ways that follow tirelessly rehearsed 'China–Africa' scenes and narratives. Just as the King of Pride Rock represents no particular African leader (and the very use of the title 'King of Pride Rock'

is a tongue-in-cheek reproach of Disney's flattened portrayals of Africa), the imposter, the monkey climbing the tree, could be *anyone* who ambitiously raises herself or himself above the people, seeking applause, power and praise.

Revolution is on the edge.

Sounds of chanting and *toyi-toying* float in the background as a man pores over the contents of a newspaper. What words does he read that might lead to songs of revolt? What stories are heard that incite calls for change? The woman's voice in the animation suggests that revolution is on the edge amidst the arrival of immigrants, and the statement, 'We would rather have immigrants than our trees vanish', implies a tension between flows of people and flows of goods. What is the tipping point? What are the layers? Who are the critical and the overlooked players?

Rather than document 'facts' in a journalistic way, Haloba nudges at meaning via song, poetry and dance. Yes, there are news articles about deforestation in Haloba's country of birth, Zambia, that position the Chinese thirst for timber as the leading cause of the drastically increased export of the *mukula* tree—also known as 'green gold'—that is prized for its suitability for the manufacture of rifle butts, furniture and medicine. But the story of Chinese people in Zambia, as in most places, is very complex, and media furores are often fuelled by interested parties, be they pocket-lining elites, friends-of-friends, or 'the West'.

There is a cry in one of the papers

They say the King of Pride Rock has been exposed, an imposter

A monkey sitting in the lion's seat.

As the chanting sound of protest rises, the single megaphone that appeared in the opening scene of the video multiplies and covers the entire screen. This burgeoning of protest reflects a current moment that is palpably felt in southern Africa as well as other parts of the world. While this particular moment is current and unique, it also summons memories of the past and, in Haloba's hands, memory is translated through sound. Music to your ears. A cry. A chant, a tune. A song sung by my people.

While the megaphone is associated with protest, revolution and the notion of megaphone diplomacy in numerous contexts, it is a particularly charged symbol in the context of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Some propaganda posters produced in the People's Republic of China in the 1960s and 1970s portrayed members of the Red Guard handing out leaflets and expounding revolutionary principles through megaphones. The 1967 Red Guard exhibition at the National Art Museum of China, *Long Live the Victory of Chairman Mao's Revolutionary Line*, exhibited over 16 000 artworks, including the series of clay sculptures, *Paeon to the Red Guards* (1966), produced by a group of teachers, students, workers and liberation soldiers.<sup>3</sup> The Socialist Realist sculptures portrayed Mao's Red Guards as 'path-breakers' who used actions and props such as megaphones to denounce the 'four olds' (Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits and Old Ideas) and espouse the 'four news'.<sup>4</sup>

In his animation DVD titled *Opera* (2006), Chinese artist Wu Junyong reveals how the physical shape of the megaphone can be read as an inverse of the dunce cap or tall conical hat that anti-revolutionaries were forced to wear as public humiliation. Just as Wu Junyong's animated theatre of the inversions and perversions of politics and power reveals complex 'layers of seeing'<sup>5</sup>, Haloba's video opens up the space for counter-narratives as she *dances*

*with*—rather than documents—potentially incongruent ideas about Chinese presence in a Zambian context.

Zambia occupies a very particular position in the discourse of Africa's relationship with China, as it boasts one of the earliest twentieth century friendships with China on the African continent, but also displayed some of the most explicitly anti-Chinese sentiment forty years later. The narrative of Michael Sata's use of sinophobic language in his run-up to the 2006 general elections in Zambia is well known, but when he eventually came to power in 2011 he dropped the name-calling (such as 'bogus Chinese "infestors"'<sup>6</sup>) and became a more 'compliant partner for Beijing'.<sup>7</sup> The *Al Jazeera* documentary titled *King Cobra and the Dragon* demonstrates the complex and at times contradictory 'China-Zambia' story, revealing that for many Chinese people their investment in Zambia is meaningful and long term. As the documentary demonstrates, contrary to accusations about local job loss, some Chinese investors choose to hire Zambian rather than Chinese workers, and they are generally a lot less elitist than Western investors.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the imposter sitting in the King's seat, then, is not Chinese after all. Or not *clearly* Chinese. Not *only* Chinese.

The woman's voice in Haloba's video suddenly puts an end to amplified sound. 'Stop', she pleads. 'Let's go to the beginning'.

A piece of paper, scrunched up in a ball, begins to fall down against the plain backdrop of the screen. This falling ball of paper, followed by another, and another, could be read as the previous screenshot of the animation (the portrayal of multiple megaphones) that has been crumpled up, as if to allow for the rewriting of this video script. Alternatively, it could be read as scrunched up newspapers that once carried loaded versions of the 'China-Zambia' story.

Humming can be heard as the balls of paper fall, and the rhythmic sound of a train starts to rise. A tune. A memory of sound.

The humming recalls the song, 'Great Beijing we sing for you, you are the hearts of all nations', that was sung by Zambian and Tanzanian train drivers who worked on the TAZARA railroad. The almost 2 000 km long TAZARA Railway, also known as TanZam, the Great Uhuru or Freedom Railway, the People's Railway, Tanzan Tielu or the Rainbow of Friendship,<sup>9</sup> was designed and built between 1966 and 1976 and was funded by an interest-free loan of 988 million Yuan provided by the Chinese government. This project, which became an 'international poster child for East-South cooperation and socialist ideals at the height of the Cold War',<sup>10</sup> is held up as the first example of Chinese aid to Africa.

The fact that Zambia, which gained independence in 1964, was considered to be in a critical geo-strategic position played a role in the conceptualisation of the TAZARA. The railway line, with an inland endpoint at Kapiri Mposhi, would be able to link Zambia's valuable copper mines to the Dar es Salaam port at a time when expectations of industrial modernity were at a peak.<sup>11</sup> Zambia was also, however, a 'dangerously exposed host state in the liberation struggle in southern Africa',<sup>12</sup> and Zambia's president, Kenneth Kaunda, aspired to create links with the outside world in order to delink from the South and 'escape machinations of white regimes in the region'<sup>13</sup> that controlled strategic roads and ports.

Kaunda initially approached Britain for financial assistance to build the railway, and Julius Nyerere appealed to the USA, but both Western nations refused. According to the North China News Agency, the USA 'spread fallacies that ... "Africans are too backward to master technology," [in order] to prevent the African countries from developing communications and transport, particularly railways'.<sup>14</sup> Kaunda and Nyerere were also denied aid from the Soviet Union,<sup>15</sup> creating a ripe situation for Zambian and Tanzanian links with China, which at the time was emerging from a crisis in terms of relations with the Soviet Union, and simultaneously rejecting Western dominance.

During a key period of national liberations and resistance to capitalist hegemony, Mao Zedong Thought resonated 'with the aspirations that accompanied decolonization in [what was known at the time as] the Third World'.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to Western societies, Chinese and African societies tended to view globalisation 'not as internal development but as alien hegemony', and alternatives that bypassed the West created the 'possibility of entering the global history not as its object but as an independent subject'.<sup>17</sup>

In Haloba's animation video, balls of scrunched up paper continue to rain from above as a now-softer version of the woman's voice reminisces:

There is a song sung by my people of men and women that  
Came from the Far East years ago, many years ago  
To toil in our Savannah lands ... they sing of how the foreigners  
Carried heavy metals, side by side with our fathers they danced  
To the songs of solidarity

They did not come to harvest all our endangered trees  
They did not come to enslave my people

One of Haloba's early source images for this project was a 1971 Chinese propaganda poster that explicitly references the building of the TAZARA. In this poster, *Serve the revolutionary people of the world*, a robust Chinese worker is portrayed singlehandedly carrying an enormous railway sleeper on his shoulder.<sup>18</sup> The building of the TAZARA was an arduous task that was carried out by 45 000 African workers and 15 000 Chinese workers at a time when China itself was considered to be an underdeveloped country in need of financial assistance.

In Haloba's work, the voice speaking through the megaphone invokes this friendship of the past that was manifested in the building of the TAZARA:

Do not be troubled, this is no uncharted water  
This is the land of friendship, your forefathers  
Have once gone before you, they swam the muddy  
Clays and sunbathed in the sun

As Jamie Monson points out, the Chinese character that was used to refer to friendship (*zhanyou*) can be interpreted as 'comrade-in-arms', painting an image of 'committed soldiers in the global battle against imperialism, colonialism and hegemonism represented by the USA and the Soviet Union'.<sup>19</sup> Chinese propaganda posters were viewed as the 'fruit of "Mao Zedong Thought" on Literature and the Arts', and the poster art form is 'filled with militancy [zhandouxing] and mass character [qunzhongxing] that directly serves politics, production, the workers, peasants and soldiers'.<sup>20</sup> The 'worker/peasant/soldier triad' was particularly prevalent in art of the late Cultural Revolution. This triad reflected not only the subject of the art, but often the identity of the artists as well, further creating a sense of camaraderie that 'reaches sideways',<sup>21</sup> rather than the top-down form of overreaching typical of the failed Western model of providing aid to Africa.

How can we interpret Haloba's strategy of harking back to this sideways reach, this narrative of friendship and this song of *uhuru*?

There is a song sung by my people of men and women that  
Came from the Far East years ago, many years ago  
To toil in our Savannah lands, it says if you rub dry cob  
On rail line you will hear stories of their loved ones, the songs  
The poetry

They did not eat in the houses of greedy men  
They did not grab land or business

They danced side by side with our fathers, a song of solidarity  
A song of freedom, a difficult dance sleeper after sleeper

What does a retelling of this story of solidarity mean for a contemporary moment? Resist capitalism. Fight Western imperialism. Counteract hegemonic orders. Delink from outside pressure in order to serve local needs. Create independent, self-generated links from the *inside* out. What value do these principles that drew Zambia, Tanzania and the People's Republic of China together in the 1960s have today, at a time when we feel revolution at the edge in revived calls for decoloniality? What words do we use? What songs? What poems? Who asks whom for a dance?

Active. China extends a hand to ask for a dance.

Passive. Africa accepts the dance.

While European and American politicians continue to be extraordinarily unsophisticated and ignorant in their penning of the 'China–Africa' account,<sup>22</sup> how can nuanced stories develop from within? How can Africans maintain a foothold in global history as independent subjects, rather than become objects of 'China–Africa' reports recounted from beyond?

Moving away from the broad brushstrokes of China as the active partner and Africa as the passive partner, literature, poetry, song, and the visual arts enable us to imagine, to notice and to further seek acts of agency, feats of resistance, and moments of resonance that might appear from multiple sides, both within and beyond the state. Existing cases of resistance demonstrate that there are 'emerging sites in which these inequalities are being contested within African societies, and not in straightforwardly "anti-Chinese" ways'.<sup>23</sup>

The nuance of poetry moves beyond the simplicity of 'them' and 'us'. Towards the end of *A Dragon King at Sleepy Pride Rock*, Haloba probes her viewers to expect the possibility of a new, unrehearsed script; an alternative ending to the trajectory of the dominant 'China–Zambia' tale:

They have not made a song about you.

The ones to sing it are not yet born.

While the 'you' in this poem is deliberately unclear, and the 'ones' to sing this new song have not yet been born, by drawing from the words of Chandrashekhara Prasad, Haloba implies that this new song of *uhuru* is still impacted by our own renditions today. Prasad, who was a student leader at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi and who was killed in

1997, urged fellow students to remember that 'The future generations will hold us accountable.... They will hold all of us accountable'.<sup>24</sup>

What are our acts of resistance? How far can a small act of resistance reach?

I read the journey of Anawana Haloba's animated video, *A Dragon King at Sleepy Pride Rock*, as a small act of resistance; an act of resistance that is complex and powerful in its refusal to simplistically take sides. When her video was censored at the recent Shanghai Biennale, a facile response would have been for Haloba to withdraw from the exhibition and take her personal narrative of being censored to the media. Such an easily-sensationalised story would have been devoured by the Western media, raising Haloba's name in the Western-driven discourse of biennialisation.<sup>25</sup> But whose account would it have been? Would Haloba have been presented as a subject, or the mere object of another's tale?

Rather than withdraw from the exhibition, Haloba displayed her installation (a row of dried corn placed upon a raised piece of metal railway line) without the animation video. Instead of being silenced, though, she resisted with poetry, insisting on finding a new way to narrate a story of her own.

Just days before the opening of the 2017 Shanghai Biennale, Haloba wrote a poem, *The Rain Will Come*, which replaced the video:

The sun heats our journey  
the path shimmers into mirage.

Meerkats marvel at the fall of an elephant,  
waddling like penguins, they observe  
the squabbles of hyenas and vultures  
who have not yet heard the elephant's falling thud.

I am silenced by thunder as I walk upright  
my legs feel the weight of my body's stance.

Who has heard the cry of a snail—the impoverished dog  
that swims with its salivating tongue,  
has its' bark muted by constant drooling.

The journey ahead is the path left behind.  
I have traced the route through the standing cobs.

The handsome steel seat hand-in-hand, newly wed,  
freshly minted secrets to share for eternity

The mirage breaks into glistening labyrinths.  
Now, the rain will come.  
The snails are out and about, amok in anticipation.

Now, the rain will come.  
Now, the rain will come.

Through this poem, Haloba wrote her own experience of the Shanghai Biennale into her deeper history of Chinese engagement with her Zambian people. Still attempting to process and understand the implications of this history, she displayed a willingness to listen, a willingness to put her own ear to the rail.

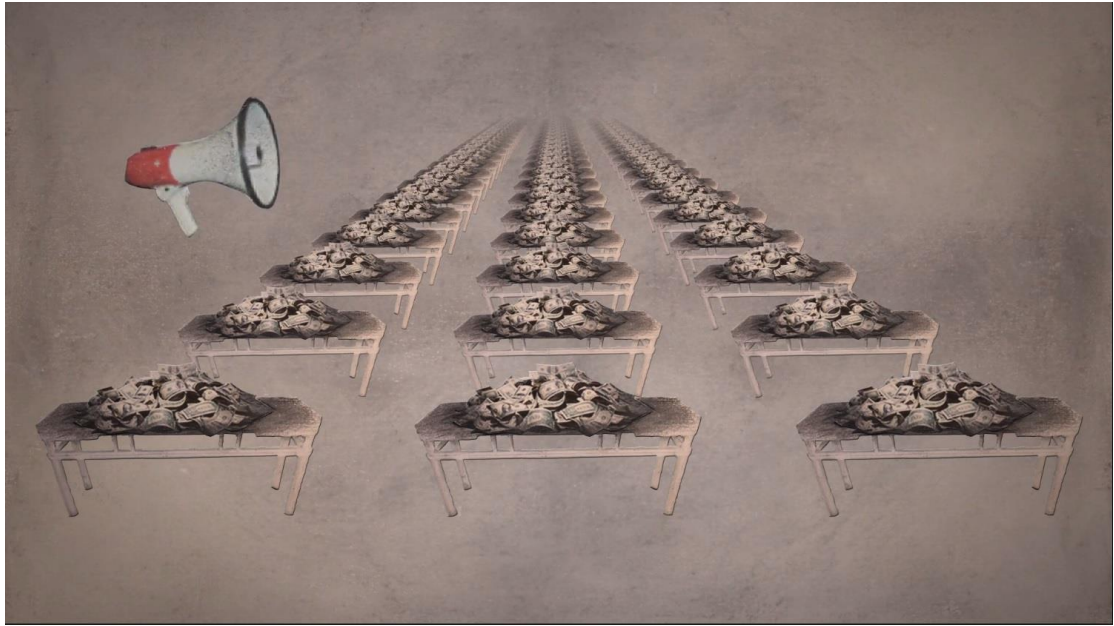
What are our acts of resistance? Whose ears does a small act of resistance reach?

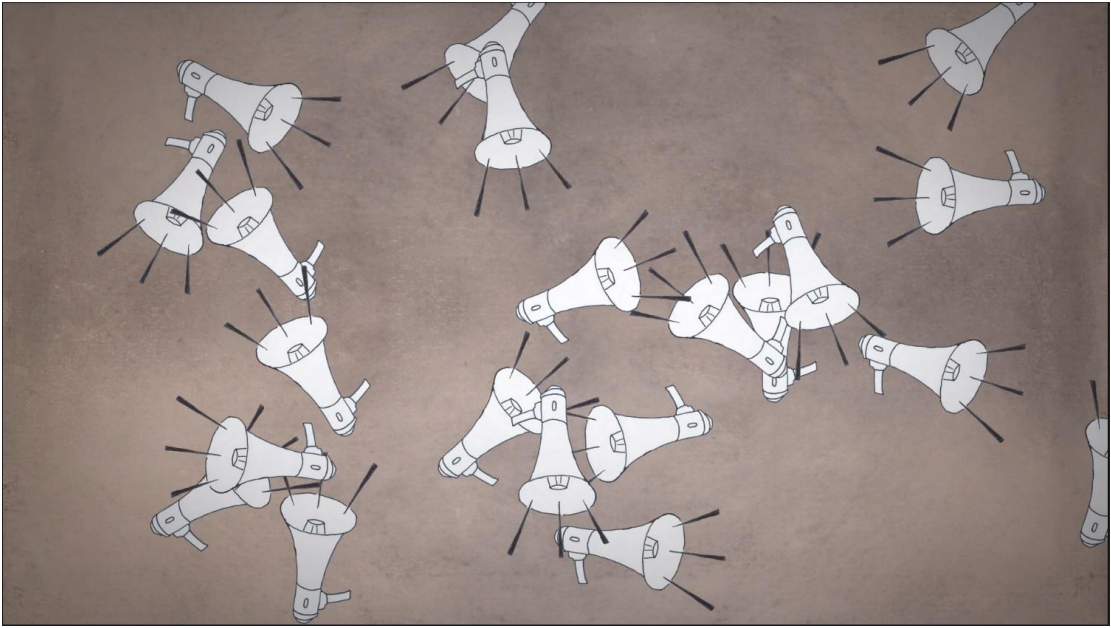
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**Images:** Anawana Haloba, *A Dragon King at Sleepy Pride Rock*, 2016, Video/Animation Installation. Courtesy of the Artist. © Anawana Haloba













Thank you to Anawana Haloba for generously discussing her work with me during a series of email conversations in January 2016 and April 2017.

<sup>1</sup> This text (and the text formatted as such below) is taken from the voice-over of Haloba's animated video, *A Dragon King at Sleepy Pride Rock* (2016). I have woven sections of the voice-over into my text, and do not relay the voice-over in full or in the exact order as it appears in the video.

<sup>2</sup> 'Chenjerai Hove: Novelist forced into exile from his native Zimbabwe who sought in his work to give a voice to the voiceless of Africa' by Trevor Grundy, *Independent*, Wednesday 22 July 2015.  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/news/chenjerai-hove-novelist-forced-into-exile-from-his-native-zimbabwe-who-sought-in-his-work-to-give-a-10405936.html>

<sup>3</sup> Winnie Tsang, 2014, 'Creating National Narrative: The Red Guard Art Exhibitions and the National Exhibitions in the Chinese Cultural Revolution 1966 – 1976', *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture* 3(1): 123.

<sup>4</sup> Wang Mingxian, 2008, 'The Red Guards' Fine Arts Campaign' in *Art and China's Revolution* edited by Melissa Chiu and Zheng Shengtian. New York: Asia Society with Yale University Press, p196.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Simbao, 2012, *Making Way: Contemporary Art from South Africa and China*. Grahamstown: ViPAA, 38.

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Brautigam, 2009, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p151. As Brautigam points out, many journalists who sensationalised Sata's anti-Chinese rhetoric during the 2006 elections failed to mention that, in addition to his promise to get rid of bogus Chinese 'infestors', Sata promised to recognise Taiwan.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Sata: Obituary, *The Telegraph*, 29 October 2014.  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/11195960/Michael-Sata-obituary.html>

<sup>8</sup> This documentary was produced by Scott Corben and Solange Chatelard as part of *Al Jazeera's* 'People and Power' programme.

<sup>9</sup> This was a name used for the railway in a volume of poems published in China about the TAZARA. See Jamie Monson, 2006, 'Defending the People's Railway in the Era of Liberalization: Tazara in Southern Tanzania', *Journal of International African Institute* 76 (1), p118.

<sup>10</sup> Monson, p114.

<sup>11</sup> See James Ferguson, 1999, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Anglin cited in Ian Taylor, 'The Evolution of Zambia's Relations with China', *Africa Insight* 28(1/2), p47.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> 'Africa's progress in transportation, communications reported', North China News Agency (NCNA) broadcast, 1 August 1975, cited in Monson, p118.

<sup>15</sup> Wei Song, 2015, 'Seeking New Allies in Africa: China's Policy towards Africa during the Cold War as Reflected in the Construction of the Tanzania–Zambia Railway', *Journal of Modern Chinese History* 9(1), p48.

<sup>16</sup> Arif Dirlik, 2014, 'Mao Zedong Thought and the Third World/Global South', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 16(2), p234.

<sup>17</sup> Dirlik, p236.



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<sup>18</sup> Designer: Tianjin tielu fenju zhigong yeyu san jiehe chuangzuo zu. Publisher: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe. Size: 77x53 cm. <https://chinese-posters.net/posters/e39-614.php>. Accessed January 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Monson, p119

<sup>20</sup> Kuiyi Shen, 'Propaganda Posters in China' in *Chinese Posters* edited by Stefan R. Landsberger and Marien van der Heijden. New York: Prestel, p8.

<sup>21</sup> In my work, I refer to 'reaching sideways' as South–South engagement that does not look 'upwards' to the theories, methodologies and institutions of the North, as well as nonhierarchical ways of learning in educational and other contexts that emphasise reciprocal, horizontal learning. (My understanding of global South or global North is not limited to physical coordinates, but reflects a situational understanding of geography). See Ruth Simbao in dialogue with William B. Miko, Eyitayo Tolulope Ijisakin, Romuald Tchibozo, Masimba Hwati, Kristin NG-Yang, Patrick Mudekerezwa, Aidah Nalubowa, Genevieve Hyacinthe, Lee-Roy Jason, Eman Abdou, Rehema Chachage, Amanda Tumusiime, Suzana Sousa, and Fadzai Muchemwa, 2017, 'Reaching Sideways, Writing *Our Ways*: The Orientation of the Discourse of the Arts of Africa', *African Arts* 50(2), pp10–29.

<sup>22</sup> Eric Olander, 'China: Africa's Partner or Predator?' *The China Africa Project* podcast, 27 February 2017. <http://www.chinaafricaproject.com/podcast-china-africa-partner-predator-matt-ferchen/>.

<sup>23</sup> Giles Mohan and Ben Lampert, 2013, 'Negotiating China: Reinserting African Agency into China-Africa Relations', *African Affairs* 112(446), p110.

<sup>24</sup> Krishna Kant, 2017, 'The Gun That Killed JNU's Chandrashekhara 20 Years Ago Was "Secular"', *The Wire*. <https://thewire.in/120575/gun-killed-jnu-chandrashekhara-secular/>

<sup>25</sup> See Ruth Simbao, 2015, 'What "Global Art" and Current (Re)Turns Fail to See: A Modest Counter-Narrative of "Not-Another-Biennial"', *Image and Text* 25, pp239–263.