

Sawubona: Toward a theory of visual reciprocity

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I argue that the ubiquitous Southern African greeting, “sawubona” – loosely translated as “I/we see you”, from ukuBona, “to see” – offers a grounded, culturally specific framework for understanding visual relationships. Rather than treating Sawubona as a metaphor or just a social convention, I examine it as an embodied, relational, and performative mode of seeing, rooted in situated relational reciprocity, rather than juridical rights. I emphasise experience and relationality alongside political and representational dimensions. The discussion explores the significance of saying “sawubona” every day. It examines the spoken, gestural, and auditory dimensions of the greeting, as well as the idea that Sawubona can function as both a greeting and a reprimand. The practice of saying “sawubona” every day is discussed within established visual-cultural theories of looking and seeing, including in relation to visibility and countervisuality. It is then situated within the philosophy of Ubuntu. Sawubona is understood as an embodied, relational, and performative framework that enacts the ethics of Ubuntu, including recognition, presence, and relationality in the visual domain.

Keywords: Sawubona, visibility, Ubuntu, reciprocity, countervisuality, post-apartheid visual culture.

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Introduction

The greeting, “sawubona”, is performed multiple times a day in Southern Africa. “I see you – sister, brother, father, mother” circulates so frequently that it often slips into the mundane. Yet, when taken seriously, this everyday act of seeing and being seen reveals an intricate Southern African vernacular theory of looking and seeing. Far from being a mere social convention, Sawubona encodes a relational mode of looking that offers rigorous resources for thinking about images and visual culture.

Within global modernity, visibility – through maps, photographs, and classificatory images – has been central to slavery, colonial domination, and apartheid. These systems of power have long operated by structuring who is visible, how they are seen, and under what authority. Critical scholarship has exposed these hierarchical regimes of seeing and asked how one might look differently; how to encounter the Other without reproducing domination. Can everyday linguistic and relational practices perhaps intercept colonial visibility? Can they reframe how we approach images more broadly? In this article, I ask whether Southern African vernacular practices of seeing offer such an alternative. I argue that the Southern African greeting, “sawubona”, functions as a vernacular theory of visual reciprocity rooted in relational reciprocity rather than juridical rights. As a lived practice, the term enacts mutual recognition. It insists that to see another is to simultaneously acknowledge their presence and situate oneself within a shared relational field.

By framing seeing primarily as an ethical negotiation rather than a sovereign claim, Sawubona challenges dominant western theories of visibility. Read as an embodied, relational, and performative mode of seeing, Sawubona functions as a living theory of reciprocity, offering a decolonial framework for working with images. To support this reading, I begin by unpacking the linguistic, gestural, and philosophical dimensions of the greeting. I then situate the daily practice of saying “sawubona” within discussions of visibility and decolonial thought, highlighting how the practice diverges from juridical frameworks of rights. Finally, I place Sawubona within the relational ontology of Ubuntu. I therefore demonstrate how the greeting operationalises, but also pierces through, an ethics of reciprocal recognition in visual encounters shaped by colonial histories.

What it means to say “Sawubona”, every day

In isiZulu, people say “sawuBona” to greet each other. It loosely translates as “I/we (see) you” (sawu(Bona)), where uku(Bona) is “to (see)”.¹ A person entering an inhabited space is expected to acknowledge the presence of others already present by acknowledging sight of them:

“SawuBona [name of greeted]”. A person would typically say, “I/we see you”.
 “Yebo, sawuBona [name of greeter]”. Another would reply, “Yes, I/we see you”.
 “UNjani?” – “What state are you in, or how are you?”
 “NgiYaphila. Wena, uNjani?” – “I am alive/awake/without illness. What state are you in?”
 “NgiKhona”. It could also be answered, “I am present/am here”.
 “Nam’ngiyaPhila”. “I too am alive”, the greeter would reply.

There are also more playful variations that further emphasise recognition in the greetings. “Mehlo ‘maDala!” – “Old-eyes!” – is an affectionate salutation for someone not seen in a long time. In isiXhosa, it may be followed by “nguwe nyani lo?” – “Is this really you?” – as if identity resides in the eyes that endure across time. Unlike the singular “[ngi] yakuBona” (“[I] see you”), “sawubona” has a plural ring – “[we] see you”. This plural, if accepted, does not claim individual autonomy but the autonomy of the group. It affirms an individual’s ability to act as a member of the group, to see with the group, and to add to the group’s body of sight.

As a greeting, “sawubona” initiates a negotiation of power when a new element that threatens the stability of an already established order enters a shared space through its presence. UkuBona, as proposed here, accepts disruption as inherent to the encounter. This power negotiation aims to foster a politics of trust. “UkuBona” in the way of greeting is something that cannot be given, taken, or lost. It can be enacted or not. Choosing to greet or not is in this way an exercise of power. It either reifies presence or renders those present inconsequential. The greeting, “sawubona”, is not only spoken, but also performed. In some contexts, one meets the other’s eyes directly; in others, direct eye contact is avoided. Some contexts may require a handshake, others an embrace, and others a gesture of submission. These variations of recognition across regions and cultural contexts show that recognition is embodied and negotiated relationally rather than being fixed and formulaic.

UkuBona, in the languages of Southern Africa, is not merely about the perceived image, but is multisensory, encompassing a particular auditory dimension. It is well known in a Xhosa context that the anxieties of a fearful child sent into darkness to go and get this, that, or the next thing in the vicinity of the home can be soothed by hearing a familiar voice call out, “ndi yaku Bona!” – “I see you!”. To be heard by the body in the darkness. It extends the concept of seeing to include an auditory impression. In this exercise, an auditory impression replaces and/or acts in place of the perceived image. In this case, it is the audible voice – without the visible image – that does the seeing, so that the ability of the body to hear that they are seen renders the person in the darkness as real and autonomous, just as the perceived image of that body would. Here, invisible presence and a connection to life are reified through the ability to hear. The body’s ability to hear that it is seen, even when it is not perceived by sight, is enough of an affirmation of sight

and, by default, presence and reality. A widely held notion in seTswana suggests that one cannot be greeted enough. Greetings between the same people may thus occur multiple times a day, reaffirming that recognition is not a single act but an ongoing relational practice.

This acknowledgement of sight and enquiry into the states of being is taken very seriously, even on a seemingly inconsequential one-to-one level. At a grocery store, for instance, if a customer enters the presence of a teller and says nothing by way of greeting but immediately dives into an interaction of business, it is not uncommon for the teller to cuttingly retort, “Sawubona sisi” (“sister”), “bhuti” (“brother”), “mta’na’mi” (“my child”), or whatever appropriate noun is needed for an added level of politeness. The added politeness functions as a phatic expression that highlights the offender’s inhumanity.

The retort or reprimand version of “sawubona” is not a non-combative greeting like the first, but a reprimand or a curse. Layered in this reprimand or curse is the affirmation: “I am alive”. By jumping into business with a person before an acknowledgement of their state of being, the customer, in this case, reduces the teller to an instrument – equivalent to the till itself. As a reprimand, Sawubona disrupts this self-enclosure, or self-seeing, by exposing the already-present presence and asserting, “I witness your self-centring in this shared space”. The reprimand thus interrupts the illusion of solitary existence and declares: “you do not exist alone here because I see you”. In seeing the other person seeing themselves, two realities are secured at once. One affirms one’s own position as an alive, witnessing subject while simultaneously affirming the other as an alive, perceiving and acting self.

The phrase “akangiBoni” – “she/he does not see me” – is common in Southern Africa and signals more than oversight; it names a denial of dignity. It says “they do not see me, do not respect me, or do not encounter me” with an appropriate level of gravitas. Not seeing someone is understood as a refusal not only of their being, but also of the being of those who walk with them. Within this context, self-seeing, ukuziBona, becomes problematic when it replaces relational co-creation with self-ordering vision – when one projects one’s image onto the world rather than participating in shared recognition.

To say “sawubona” is therefore not just to look at someone, but to see them. The performance of greeting is structured with the understanding that there are instances in which one may look and still withhold acknowledgement. It intervenes by distinguishing perception from recognition. This intervention exposes the social, political, and relational consequences of looking but not seeing.

When exercised fully, Sawubona is not just about seeing someone, but about being someone. How the greeting is coded exposes how it moves from recognition to ontology.

The question “uNjani?” – “what state of being are you in?” – differs from the English “how are you?”. “uNjani” is not a question about mood but about existence itself. The response “ngiyaPhila” (“I am alive; I have awakened”) affirms aliveness and a state of being awake in the face of the possibility of death. This is arguably because those who are asleep (in eternal sleep) are understood in this context as still with us. Within Southern African traditions that acknowledge the continued presence of ancestors, aliveness is not assumed but affirmed: “I am alive; I have awakened”. Greetings such as “Thokoza” in isiZulu or “Camagu” in isiXhosa extend recognition toward this ancestral realm, situating the living within an intergenerational field of acknowledgement. To respond is to participate in that lineage and to continue creating it.

At its core, the greeting “sawubona” is structured by reciprocity. Through this mutuality, individuals cultivate a sense of belonging, trust, and communal cohesion. It also distinguishes between those who greet and those who do not, offering multiple relational ways to affirm personhood and social existence. Whether recognition is reciprocal or absent, Sawubona offers a practice through which one’s presence is socially affirmed. As a greeting, “sawubona” affirms, “I see you”; as reprimand, it asserts, “I see you even as you do not see me”. This capacity to move between affirmation and reprimand, between the seen and the unseen, is what makes the greeting particularly significant for visual-cultural analysis.

Situating Sawubona within theories of looking and seeing

Visual culture scholarship has long examined the relationship between seeing, being seen, and power. Across philosophy, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory, perception is understood as being shaped by social and historical relations that determine recognition and belonging. Seeing here is optical but also epistemological and ethical, and concerns how subjects become intelligible within shared worlds. The gaze is thus not just perceptual but also a social and political relation. This inquiry within visual-cultural studies is especially urgent given the violence of global modernity – slavery, colonialism, and apartheid – which was enacted and justified through visual regimes. These regimes organised the world hierarchically, producing hyper-visibility for some and erasure or dehumanisation for others, and their legacies persist in postcolonial contexts. This section situates Sawubona within these debates and asks what forms of recognition become possible if we do not begin from claims to visibility but from relational encounters instead. Sawubona proposes that seeing is not an individual act but something already shared and enacted within relations of presence.

In influential western theories of the gaze, recognition is often framed through relations of seeing and being seen. Jean-Paul Sartre (1956 [1943]) and Jacques Lacan (1977 [1949]) both locate subject formation in this dynamic. For Sartre (1956 [1943]:252-271), the encounter with another consciousness produces self-awareness as both subject and object, as the self becomes an object-for-others within the Other's gaze. Subjectivity is formed through a reversible structure of looking in which subject and object are relationally constituted. Lacan (1977 [1949]) similarly situates subject formation in the 'mirror stage' (Lacan 1977 [1949]:1), where coherence arises through misrecognition. In both accounts, relation is central but unstable, shaped by alienation, objectification, and misrecognition. Across these theories, subject formation is understood as fundamentally relational and often treated as broadly universal. Subjects are assumed to enter comparable conditions of seeing and being seen, even where recognition is unstable or conflictual. This presumes a shared common space of recognition within which subjectivity is formed and negotiated.

Frantz Fanon (1967 [1952]) decisively ruptures this assumption of a shared space, showing instead that structures of seeing and being seen are not universally generative of subjectivity. Fanon (1967 [1952]) uses colonialism as his key case study. Writing from the French colonial world shaped by Martinique, France, and Algeria, Fanon (1967 [1952]) demonstrates in *Black skin, white masks* that the Black subject is never encountered neutrally but is always already overdetermined by race. The Black subject is seen as Black before it is seen as a person. Recognition, Fanon (1967 [1952]) concludes, is therefore neither neutral nor mutual.

For Fanon (1967 [1952]), the colonial gaze is not an intersubjective moment, but a historical structure that precedes perception itself. It fixes the Black subject within racial categories that limit agency and selfhood. Unlike Sartre's (1956 [1943]) reversible relation, the colonial gaze is hierarchical, positioning the Black subject as an object before any reciprocal encounter can occur. Perception is therefore shaped by history before social interaction takes place, and that subjectivity under colonialism in particular is racialised rather than universal. Seeing is not simply relational but produced through historically embedded structures of race, a claim that underpins later theories of visibility and representation.

In apartheid South Africa, Steve Biko (1978) similarly shows that racial domination operates through perception as much as through law and institutions; under apartheid, Black subjects are already read through hierarchical racial categories, collapsing the presumed reciprocity of the gaze. Biko's (1978) key contribution is his emphasis on Consciousness: the ability of Black subjects to recognise and resist the internalisation of how they are seen. Black Consciousness is therefore both political and perceptual, intervening in how perception itself is structured through everyday relations of seeing.

bell hooks (1996[1992]:197) extends this critique through the oppositional gaze. Marginalised subjects here not only experience regimes of visibility but also develop practices of looking back. The gaze becomes a site of struggle over meaning, authority, and reality.

Across Black radical thought (such as that of Fanon, Biko and hooks), what emerges is a shared interruption of reciprocity: the assumption of mutual recognition collapses under racialised and gendered power. This raises a central question: if reciprocity breaks down under domination, what forms of recognition remain possible? This is where “sawubona” becomes theoretically significant.

The constructed asymmetries identified by Fanon, Biko, and hooks do not arise by accident. They are historically produced through broader systems of knowledge and representation. Edward Said’s (2003[1978]; 1993) work helps explain how these asymmetries are produced. While foundational texts, such as *Orientalism* (2003[1978]) and later works such as *Culture and imperialism* (1994[1993]), are often understood primarily as critiques of textual and cultural representation, they also provide important foundations for thinking about visibility and recognition. Said (2003[1978], 1993) demonstrates through them how power shapes what can be known and represented, and also what can be made visible and under what conditions.

Said’s (2003[1978]) **Orientalism** launched and sustained a cultural project that would explore, in addition to its military might, the ‘West’s’ cultural domination through what Said saw as its creation of the ‘Other’ – how European culture gained its strength and power by setting itself off against the Other (Said 2003[1978]:xii-xiv). Said insisted throughout his career that the “Orient” was a term like the “West” without any ontological stability but made up of human effort that included the identification and affirmation of the Other (Said 2003[1978]:xii). Colonial power, in this account, operates not only through governance but through systems of knowledge that organise perception itself. The “Orient” is not simply described; western narratives make it visible through representational frameworks that determine how peoples, places, and cultures could be seen, understood, and governed. In this sense, Said’s (2003[1978]) work anticipated many of the concerns that would later become central to visual culture studies, particularly the relationship between representation, visibility, knowledge, and power. His critique of Orientalism showed how cultural representations do not merely reflect existing realities but actively produce systems of meaning through which difference is understood and governed.

The publication of Said’s *Orientalism* and Steve Biko’s *I write what I like* in 1978 is striking not simply as coincidence, but as an indication of a broader global moment in which regimes of seeing and being seen were actively contested. Although both thinkers

emerged from distinct geopolitical locations – Said, a Palestinian-American intellectual writing from within the Palestinian/Arab diaspora in the United States, shaped by western academic institutions, and Biko, writing from within the lived conditions of apartheid South Africa as a Black man – they foreground how systems of vision structure relations of power. In different but related ways, they expose how seeing is never neutral but organised through racialised and colonial frameworks that determine who becomes visible, how they are seen, and under what terms recognition is granted or withheld. Said's (2003 [1978]) critique in *Orientalism* demonstrates how the "Orient" is produced as an object of western knowledge through unequal regimes of representation and perception, while Biko's Black Consciousness thought refuses the internalisation of a gaze that renders Blackness inferior and objectified under apartheid.

Read together, Said's (2003 [1978]) *Orientalism* and Biko's (1978) *I write what I like* gesture towards a broader global entanglement of racialised visual regimes. They compel observers not to see colonial and apartheid systems of power as isolated formations but as interconnected structures of domination. Within this framework, the struggles of apartheid South Africa, French colonialism, Black oppression in the Americas, Palestine, and the wider Arab world from which Said draws much of his analysis, are connected not through identical histories but through shared conditions in which recognition, representation, and visibility are organised through unequal relations of power. The ability to see and be seen on one's own terms remains continually contested across these different historical and geographical contexts.

Read in relation to visual culture studies, Said's (2003 [1978]) critique extends beyond questions of misrepresentation and highlights how visibility itself is organised through structures of power. In the 2003 [1978] preface to *Orientalism*, Said (2003 [1978]:xiv) writes,

My argument is that history is made by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and rewritten, always with various silences and elisions, always with shapes imposed and disfigurements tolerated, so that 'our' East, 'our' Orient become 'ours' to possess ... I should say again that I have no 'real' Orient to argue for.

In this sense, *Orientalism* was not about recovering an authentic truth but about exposing the politics of exteriority embedded in representation as well as finding agency. Said (2003[1978]; 1993) conceived the critique expressed in *Orientalism* and in *Culture and imperialism* as an ongoing intellectual project that he would not complete alone. He envisioned his study as a volume of many, encouraging other writers to write about other orients, and so they would.

In anticipation of these multiple expansions of *Orientalism*, Said (2003[1978]:24) suggested that,

Perhaps the most important task of all would be to undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism, to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian or non-repressive and non-manipulative perspective.

This concern remains significant because it shifts attention from the critique of domination towards the possibility of alternative forms of encounter and recognition. It raises questions about what non-dominating forms of seeing might look like and how relations of recognition might be organised beyond the asymmetries inherited from colonial modernity. *Orientalism*, as a cultural project, has had an extensive afterlife, generating sustained debate across disciplines, including history, politics, ethnography, and psychology.²

Within this broader conversation, Nicholas Mirzoeff's (2011; 2016) work is especially useful in visual culture studies.³ Mirzoeff extends many of the concerns raised by Said into the visual domain by shifting attention from representation to the organisation of perception itself. For Mirzoeff (2011; 2016), visibility is not simply vision. Rather, it refers to the authoritative organisation of what can be seen, who may see, and under what conditions recognition becomes possible. In this sense, visibility names a historical ordering of the gaze. Mirzoeff (2011) identifies plantation slavery, imperialism, and the military-industrial complex as three major complexes of visibility through which power naturalises itself while rendering alternative ways of seeing illegible.

Where Fanon (1967 [1952]) and Biko (1978) theorise the phenomenological violence of the racialised gaze, Mirzoeff (2011) reframes this asymmetry at the level of historical systems and offers a counterhistory of their violence. Mirzoeff (2011) describes resistance to imposed regimes of vision as countervisuality: practices that challenge authorised ways of seeing and assert alternative forms of visibility and interpretation. Countervisuality emerges wherever people refuse the terms under which they are seen and governed. Mirzoeff (2011) tracks a steady flow of claims that oppose the visual orders imposed by each complex, arguing that such systems ultimately depend upon their sovereign authority to look and, in doing so, to organise the world.

In this context, Mirzoeff (2011) develops his influential notion of the right to look. Mirzoeff (2011) proposes that more than the headline revolutions of history, it is through a steady stream of right-claims that huge complexes of order are brought to their knees. This is because such complexes are built on their sovereign right to look and, in doing so, order the world. Mirzoeff names the claiming of a right not given by a sovereign power as the claiming of 'the right to look'. Mirzoeff (2011:1) develops this claim as an active decolonial way of challenging a policed version of history, one in which we are told to move along because there is nothing to see. Except, Mirzoeff (2011) insists, the police know there is something to see, and so do we. In *How to see the world*, Mirzoeff (2016:10) returns

to this point through the image of the traffic jam, observing that moving along may be sensible in traffic, but ‘if it’s a question of how to see history as a whole, then surely we should be looking’. The right to look therefore becomes both a political and epistemological challenge to visual authority.

Underlying this project is a broader methodological concern regarding how visual culture might engage histories of domination without reproducing them. As Mirzoeff (2011:xv) notes,

I may be wrong, of course, but the use of the visual archive to ‘speak’ for and about subaltern histories of this kind, as opposed to simply being illustrative of them, seems to be an important methodological question.

This concern resonates strongly with what Said (2003[1978]:24) saw as *Orientalism*’s most important task: ‘to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian or non-repressive and non-manipulative perspective’. Across these interventions, the central concern is not just what is seen, but who has the authority to produce meaning through acts of seeing.

While Mirzoeff (2011; 2016) offers a very useful framework for confronting visual authority, his response remains centred on visibility and countervisual resistance and is articulated through the language of rights. Visibility and countervisibility are unstable in contexts like Southern Africa because they depend on identifying a dominant order of seeing and an opposed practice of resistance to it. In the Southern African context, this boundary becomes difficult to fix because historical regimes of power are not cleanly separable into distinct visual “systems” with clear beginnings and ends. Precolonial, colonial, apartheid, and post-apartheid formations overlap, persist, and reappear in uneven ways. As a result, one cannot reliably locate a stable visual regime to oppose. If the dominant visual order is historically layered, fragmented, and continuous rather than singular, then: what counts as visibility becomes unclear and what counts as countervisual resistance also becomes harder to isolate. This instability compromises Mirzoeff’s framework as we try to work out which acts are visibility and which are countervisibility.

Such categorisation leaves little space for collaboration or collaborators in shared histories. The largely Black Southern African story, which contains remainders of a long past that precedes, pierces into and collides with imperialism, is thus proverbially relegated to the position of the counter story. This stance on Southern Africa’s history as a history of protest, unfortunately, reproduces the dichotomies it is trying to move away from.

Beyond hesitation about reproducing imperial dichotomies, reliance on a juridical vocabulary presents another difficulty. From a South African perspective, in adopting

Mirzoeff's (2011; 2016) decolonial theoretical and methodological framework for seeing the world, I remain reluctant to claim "the right to look". As Mirzoeff (2011:241) himself asks: 'How can a right to look framed in the language of Western colonial jurisprudence be sustained as a place of the decolonised?' If rights presuppose possession, external authority, and institutional recognition, what alternative political form might recognition take? What forms of seeing become possible when visibility is understood not only as a site of struggle, but also as a condition of relationship? It is here that I turn to the relational practice of the greeting "sawubona", which offers a different conceptual possibility.

From claims of visibility to relational recognition: The politics of ukuBona

Read through the lens of relational practice, ukuBona and ukuBonwa – seeing and being seen – unfold into a theory of recognition grounded in ethical reciprocity. Saying "sawubona" every day enacts the idea that the relationship itself has authority, is an entity in and of itself, means something, and balances an order of the world. The greeting is not secondary to social order but helps produce the conditions that sustain it.

As a greeting, "sawubona" affirms mutual presence: "I/we see you". As a reprimand, it marks a failure of recognition and seeks to repair that failure by reasserting the necessity of mutual visibility. In both cases, the utterance is not merely descriptive but enacted, performed, practised. The everyday repetition of "sawubona" thus enacts what Achille Mbembe (2021) describes as the need to think humanity beyond the epistemic and ontological constraints of colonial logics. The practice offers this alternative because it did not emerge from colonial epistemologies, yet has persisted despite them. Sawubona does not emerge as a corrective to colonial ways of knowing and being regarding representation, but persists within and beyond those structures, continuing to organise relational life in ways that exceed the juridical and representational frameworks through which modern subjectivity is often understood.

Sawubona functions similarly to Mirzoeff's (2011; 2016) idea of the "right to look", but with an important difference. Both ideas engage the question of who has the authority to see, and both link seeing to power. However, where Mirzoeff (2011; 2016) frames the "right to look" as a form of resistance, a claim articulated against powerful forces and structures that regulate visibility, Sawubona operates as a relational everyday practice that does not externalise authority but distributes it within the encounter itself. The reprimand form of "sawubona" does not simply resist exclusion from visibility. Instead, it exposes the relational breakdown that occurs when recognition is withheld.

Mirzoeff's (2011; 2016) notion of the "right to look" emerges in dialogue with a history of political thought in which seeing is linked to autonomy, agency, and emancipation. His formulation also echoes strands of Civil Rights thought, particularly WEB Du Bois's (1902) defence of the right to intellectual cultivation, in which education and knowledge become practices of freedom rather than instruments of domination. The "right to look" presupposes a relation in which recognition is negotiated in relation to external structures of authority that organise visibility and determine who may appear as a political subject. Sawubona offers a different configuration. It does not begin with exclusion but with co-presence; it does not begin with protest but with negotiation. The distinction is subtle but significant: where the "right to look" is structured around the politics of assertion against authority, "sawubona" is structured around the ethics of sustaining relation.

As greeting first and reprimand second, the practice of Sawubona assumes disruption is inevitable and seeks to transform it into trust. Useful post-apartheid ways of seeing must not only attend to forms of resistance, but also to the encounters that follow struggle. As someone born into post-apartheid South Africa, at the tail end of an era defined by outright protest and resistance, I am interested in the forms of encounter that not only protest but also consider repair. The reimagining that follows the struggle is most urgent to the world I occupy. In post-apartheid, it becomes apparent that the oppressed must also always simultaneously consider modes of relation that repair, recalibrate, and reimagine shared worlds. As unfortunate as this is or may seem, it follows the logic of the reprimand form of the greeting "sawubona". Here, the dehumanised subject is compelled to secure their own humanity and, in doing so, inevitably secures the humanity of the other. Considering what it means to say "sawubona" post-apartheid is a way of taking the political forms that emerge after the rain seriously.

The right to look seeks to position itself from the perspective of those upon whom power is exercised – it tries to see from the space of the other. It, however, retains a structure of exteriority. The subject claims visibility from a position analytically distinct from the histories it invokes. Mirzoeff's (2011:xv) own methodological caution – his acknowledgement that speaking 'for and about' subaltern histories risks reproducing interpretive distance – suggests that this exteriority is difficult to escape. The subject who claims the right to look nevertheless remains analytically distinct from the histories invoked. The other remains unknown. Some scholars (see Visker 1999; Hook 2005) have suggested that the Other is unknowable.

Those who greet with "sawubona" do not approach one another as exterior to the other. The greeting is not directed toward a distant Other but toward those who share a world. I do not stand outside the histories I engage; I am implicated within them. Thus, I am still compelled to think about Said's (2003:xiv) conundrum of making: "our" East, "our"

Orient becomes “ours” to possess and direct’. To reject exteriority is not to claim transparent access to the Other, but to acknowledge one’s implication within shared histories of encounter. If Mirzoeff’s project is taken to its fullest extent, it highlights a degeneration of trust in authority. If no one can trust the authority handling a car accident, then everyone has the right to protest. Of course, a theory of protest, particularly within and toward the global western world, is both timely and necessary.

Mirzoeff (2016:10) himself acknowledges the ‘traffic jams’ that proliferating claims may produce, insisting they are worthwhile when history is at stake. In South Africa, this analogy is not just satirical; it is very often literal. And from the lived experience of a world full of traffic jams, alternatives are always pressing. More than the potential traffic jams caused by the degeneration of trust in authority, there is clearly a disjuncture between claiming ‘the right to look’ (Mirzoeff 2011:1) and asking ‘how to see the world’ once that right has been claimed (Mirzoeff 2016:1). It is within this disjuncture that I locate Sawubona. Used both as a greeting and as a reprimand, it offers a way of thinking about recognition not only as resistance to exclusion but as the ongoing work of sustaining relation.

Where Mirzoeff (2011, 2016) asks how subjects can claim visibility within or against structures of power, Sawubona asks how relational worlds are sustained through continuous acts of recognition. The emphasis moves from resistance to co-constitution, from assertion to maintenance, and from exteriority to implication. This is significant in post-apartheid contexts, where regimes of visibility and invisibility are not merely historical but ongoing. In such contexts, the question is not only how to resist imposed ways of seeing, but how to reconstruct relational worlds in which recognition does not require continual antagonistic assertion. The interest here is therefore not in abandoning the critical force of countervisuality, but in situating it alongside practices of relation that do not begin from exclusion or opposition.

Ultimately, the significance of Sawubona lies in its refusal to separate seeing from being-with. It suggests that visibility is not merely a field of struggle over representation, but a continuous ethical negotiation through which relational worlds are made and remade. In doing so, it does not replace existing theories of visibility; instead, it extends them by introducing a mode of recognition in which authority is not external to relation, but emerges through it.

Ubuntu and relational ways of looking and seeing

From a Southern African philosophical perspective, ukuBona and the greeting “sawubona” sit within the framework of Ubuntu, which understands human existence as inherently

relational. Ubuntu is foundationally described as a philosophy of community and a lived ontology of being-with-others (Samkange & Samkange 1980; Ramose 1999). Contemporary scholarship continues to develop this relational account, grounding identity formation in processes of mutual recognition, thus reinforcing the idea that personhood emerges dialogically.

Zakes Mda reflects on the dilemma of writing one's enemy with compassion, first in the essay "Justify the enemy" (2008), later in *Justify the enemy: Becoming human in South Africa* (2018). Mda (2008; 2018) argues that to "justify" the enemy is not to excuse oppression but to understand the psychological motivations of those we oppose. To see them. Mda (2008; 2018) links this ethical practice of understanding directly to Ubuntu, arguing that our humanity is constituted through our relations with others. Mda (2008) writes:

It was not difficult to find humanity in those I found politically or morally reprehensible. When we black children of South Africa were growing up, we were taught by our parents, but especially by our grandparents, that we were not fully human until someone made us human. Humanity, our elders believed, was not something you were born with. Rather, it was endowed by other people. You were therefore a person because of other people. They called this philosophy *ubuntu* in the Nguni languages and *botho* in the Sotho languages. And how do others endow you with humanity? By giving you bounties of compassion and generosity.

Mda (2008) continues, 'As a beneficiary of *ubuntu* you had to make others into people, too, by showering them with compassion and generosity'.

Ubuntu, in this account, is not a static, abstract, ethical principle but an ongoing relational practice in which personhood is continually constituted through encounter. It is through recognising the humanity of others – including those with whom we disagree or who refuse to recognise us – that our own humanity is realised. In this sense, even encounters marked by conflict or estrangement need not foreclose our shared humanity; they may also become occasions through which it is affirmed.

Saying "sawubona", literally "I/we see you", is more than a ritual or a social convention. To say "sawubona" is an act of seeing that produces a shared reality and, therefore, life itself. The greeting is performative rather than merely descriptive: it does not simply acknowledge the relationship, but actively participates in bringing it into being. Seeing, in this sense, exceeds the visual. It is simultaneously spoken, heard, embodied, and returned. The reprimand form of "sawubona" functions as a phatic interruption, marking a breakdown of Ubuntu-based relationality. The reprimand is therefore restorative, re-situating the other within a disrupted relational field. The idea of acting with "ubuNtu" in the ways of "abaNtu" – humanly, with the love and care that generate life itself – shows

up in everyday interactions, as in the situation at the till described earlier. It also shows up in everyday sayings, like the well-known and deeply theorised “umuNtu ngumuNtu ngabaNtu”: “a person is a person through people”. And “iZandla ziyaGezana”.

“iZandla ziyaGezana” is a fascinating idiom that foregrounds reciprocity in postcolonial and decolonial contexts. English translations of this idiom usually settle on the recognised proverb “one hand washes the other”, or “two hands wash each other” to acknowledge the plurality of hands insinuated by the “i” in “iZandla”. The more literal and arguably more accurate “hands wash each other” sounds awkward in English and, without context, very abstract. It can be argued that the familiar proverb “one hand washes the other” works because it pictures two specific hands – the hands of one body in relation to each other. “iZandla ziyaGezana”, like the accurate “hands wash each other”, is, however, open-ended. The two hands of one body are implied but not specified, nor is who those hands belong to. This open-endedness is arguably the power of the idiom in relation to Ubuntu and the practice of greeting with “sawubona” – “I/we see you”. Rather than “you scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours”, the idiom suggests distributed reciprocity and not exchange. The doing is mutual and simultaneous; its participants are open-ended, always plural but potentially infinite. Like Sawubona, the idiom does not begin from autonomous individuals entering into a relationship; it assumes relation as the condition from which personhood and action already emerge.

Framing visual encounters through ukuBona operationalises Ubuntu within the analysis of images and visual culture. The greeting “sawubona” importantly offers an alternative mode of looking, being, and seeing attentive to those frequently rendered marginal or invisible. In this way, it exemplifies how indigenous ontologies can expand interpretive frameworks in visual-cultural studies.

Conclusion

The Southern African greeting “sawubona” offers a culturally specific lens for understanding how recognition operates in visual encounters. It is more than just saying “hello”. It says “I/we see you”; it says “I am alive, I am awake, I woke up today” – against the possibility of death. It honours the presence of the visible and invisible. It reminds the person seeing and the one being seen of this connection. Its conceptual richness lies in how it expands the scope of seeing beyond the visual. In the auditory impression of ukuBona, hearing performs the function of sight. Presence here is secured, not by the visible image, but by relational acknowledgement. Sawubona is also instructive in how it can function as both a greeting and a reprimand. In both cases, it affirms one’s own position as a living, witnessing subject while also affirming the other as a living, perceiving, and acting self.

In its insistence that seeing is relational, Sawubona implicates the viewer in a shared historical responsibility. Sawubona as greeting and as reprimand reveals seeing as culturally mediated rather than neutral or universal. It emphasises who is seeing, from which history, and from which embodied position that seeing takes place. As an approach, it resists abstraction by grounding visual encounters in place, language, and lived relations. Its theorisation brings these particularities of knowledge and linguistic practices into dialogue with contemporary visual-cultural theory.

South Africa here offers more than contextual difference in visual culture studies; it offers vernacular epistemologies of seeing that resist the displacement of foundational critiques of power. Said (1978, 1993) needs little translation for a post-apartheid South Africa. In the case of Mirzoeff (2011, 2016), South Africa understands protest culture. It has had, and continues to have, an active and vibrant protest culture. In South Africa, visibility and power are not theoretical but very obviously historically lived and structurally ongoing. Apartheid's regimes of surveillance, classification and spatial control make mere spectatorship unviable. Moreover, the proximity of liberation history makes it difficult to aestheticise resistance without consequence. People know from their lived personal family histories that protest is not beautiful, that death is a real stake, and that some forms of life are like death itself.

We must therefore continue to search for our Africa, understanding images, and seeing itself, as political forces. We must insist that hands wash each other, that "um'Ntu, ngum'Ntu" through "abaBantu". We must greet one another as isiNtu has recommended – "sawuBona" – and respond "miVukile". Even when these greetings are not returned, we must still say, "I see you. I am alive. I am awake, I woke up", affirming a relational form of personhood grounded in ethical mutual recognition.

Even in the "soft life", as we aspire to eat cheese and sit on green grass 'under the shade of the sun'⁴ watching our cattle multiply, or in attempts to redefine ourselves beyond "iMbokodo", the spectres of apartheid persist in South Africa, alongside other apartheid formations globally. Here, visibility and power remain visibly intertwined. Images have functioned – and continue to function – as instruments of governance and control, most clearly in the country's enduring spatial divisions. To practice Sawubona within this context is not symbolic; it is a political act that demands resistance, not as an aesthetic gesture, but as a lived practice.

Notes

1. I temporarily write sawu(Bona) and uku(Bona) to foreground the shared verb root -bona ("see"), making visible the linguistic structure of the words: sawu- ("we"), uku- ("to"), and their common verb root -bona ("see"). This capitalisation is not a standard orthographic convention but is used as a visual aid for the reader. Throughout the remainder of the article, I return to the standard spelling of "sawubona" but retain this convention for other morphologically related words in isiXhosa, isiZulu, and seTswana where it serves the same explanatory purpose.
2. In the African and European contexts in which I work, scholars such as Valentin-Yves Mudimbe (1988), Mahmood Mamdani (2012), Jean and John Comaroff (1991), and Achille Mbembe (2021) extended Said's (2003[1978]) concerns by demonstrating *how* colonial systems of knowledge produced the very categories they claimed merely to describe. Whether through the invention of Africa, systems of indirect rule, ethnographic classification, or regimes of visibility, their work reveals how colonial powers organised both knowledge and perception, shaping who could appear, under what terms, and within which frameworks of recognition.
3. This article engages closely with Mirzoeff not because other influential voices within visual culture scholarship are absent from consideration. Scholars such as WJT Mitchell (1994), Stuart Hall(1992), Gillian Rose(2016), Brenda Schmammann(2013), and historians Carolyn Hamilton and Nessa Leibhammer (2016) have each shaped – and continue to shape – contemporary understandings of representation, spectatorship, visual meaning, and the politics of visual archives. Mirzoeff is foregrounded because his work offers one of the most sustained attempts to theorise visuality as a structured field of power, authority, and resistance. His work is therefore treated here not as an exhaustive account of visual theory, but as a productive point of departure through which broader debates concerning the gaze, representation, recognition, and visual authority can be brought into dialogue.
4. I translate Brown Dash's (2004) hit song *Phants' Komthunzi Welanga* here as "Under the shade of thhe sun." The phrase can be literally translated as "under the shadow of the sun"; however, as it is usually used, "phansi komThunzi weLanga" evokes an idiomatic sense of shade beneath the sun rather than the shadow it casts. This rendering draws on the song's evocation of joy, community, and everyday resilience.

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