

Gymnasium, At a Time Like This

Mwenya B Kabwe

The Traveller has arrived at the edge of the world. She sits here with her feet dangling into the abyss and hears the Mapmaker's voice – a story from The Black Place of Fables.

'My Truth and Your Truth were in a race,' the Mapmaker begins. 'A friendly competition one picnic-fine Sunday afternoon, just for laughs and a bit of exercise really. The crowd lined the way and brought padkos and cool drink. The whistle blew and My Truth and Your Truth were off ...'

- i. From 240 confirmed cases of coronavirus in South Africa, to the official declaration of a state of disaster, to the prohibition of gatherings of over 100 people, to an all-out nationwide lockdown for at least 21 days under police and military watch and confirmed cases at over 1 000, time has become unhinged from its usual markers of places to go and things to do. Displaced by anxious concerns for family, friends, elderly neighbours, the survival of small businesses, casual workers and freelancers. Daily life has been radically renegotiated. While some exhale in the relative pause, others choke, and many more hold their breath.

- ii. I had the distinct pleasure of visiting Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi's studio a few times before movement was restricted and then prohibited for all but the essential, and was struck by seeing my own reflection. Funny to come home to oneself in someone's studio, in their workplace, to be an unwitting Traveller led by an unseen Mapmaker to a place of safety.
- iii. What does the *Gymnasium* series give us at a time like this, a time of such massive upheaval? A time when global vocabulary has taken on pandemic dimensions: flatten the curve, self-isolation, domestic transmissions, quarantine, social distancing, contagion period, Zoom, essential services, stockpiling, risk profile, test kits, personal protective equipment, super spreaders ... A time when the number of public witnesses to our lives has shrunk to immediate family, or just the neighbours, or no one at all.
- iv. The clean, clear lines and storied images of young Black women in the *Gymnasium* series is a kind of refuge, a shelter from the noise, both internal and external. A point of focus in the chaos of feelings, news updates, rising death tolls and unsolicited advice. Nkosi's clarity of thinking is sustaining, fulfilling.
- v. What stokes the anxiety of the moment besides the probability of contracting coronavirus is a deep knowing of the sociologies of disaster in this part of the world. A knowing that uneven health distribution is racialised, and *Gymnasium* sharpens this lens on this moment in history. Nkosi tells us that when we are talking about race, we are never just talking about race. When we are talking about infectious diseases, we are actually talking about the biological expression of social inequality.

Mapmaker: We chatted, Your Truth and My Truth, all the way up to that first corner, and we agreed to wait for each other on the home stretch and guarantee a draw – first prizes for both My Truth and Your Truth.

- vi. Nkosi attends to the Black female body with care, grace, elegance. 'I feel like their auntie,' she said once. This is not only a reparative gesture. The story of Covid-19 seems epic, ominous even, as it daily unfolds - a distinct character in the long story of contagious viruses. Nkosi has a conspicuous concern for what stories we tell, who does the telling, and the consequences of these decisions. She deals with the ones that do not and will not get told - not the stories of centre stage, but the ones of anticipation, of rehearsal, of preparation, of failure - the midsentence, not the final exclamation mark. Each painting a snapshot of insight into the less glamorous moments of performance, the trials and errors, the pre-set, while also smoothly indicating larger implications. Nkosi asks us to consider what happens when the pressure to perform is diminished, when the performance of Blackness is refocused to imagining the occupation of the spaces we want to inhabit. A simultaneous critique and proposition. To give Black bodies our full attention at a time when they are precariously placed on the health care hierarchy is as sobering as it is promising.
- vii. The images in *Gymnasium* do not suggest transparency. Faces without features slide away from social realism to deny us a false sense of knowing, understanding, empathising through the eyes, the expression on the face. We are not so easily known. We work, we try, we fail and succeed, excel and defy expectations, all this under scrutiny, harsh and unequal. These featureless faces also somehow sharpen our ability to recognise uniqueness. Drawn in to find a more intimate connection, we are required before these paintings to do more than glance, more than gaze. In Nkosi's video, the identities, capabilities are held, suspended, and this presence of possibility is mesmerising; I would dare to say, transformative. Such a deep relief to be denied the public spectacle of the Black female body.
- viii. *Gymnasium* reminds us that the performance is always so much briefer than the time leading up to it. The preparation, the nerves, the steadying and readying, the rehearsal, the group dynamics, the practice, the physical strength, the invisible support team, the fortitude to continue past disappointment, past injury, past fleeting moments of success.

The imbalance of value placed on the stage performance seems incomprehensible. *Gymnasium* calmly rebalances, suggesting that these in fact are the formative moments - the build-up and the aftermath. The work is a meditation on both.

Mapmaker: Then My Truth grew wings and floated up to get a better view of the land, glinting in the sun on this fine day. Your Truth stayed close to the ground and grew big and loud and spectacular, and children were mesmerised as you whirled and turned and shone your shiny truth to blind the spectators. My Truth watched Your Truth from above, making sure we were still neck and neck. My Truth glided unobstructed among the trees and a few who were not distracted by Your Truth's performance watched mine, tracked My Truth's journey, faces turned up to catch the sun.

- ix. Nkosi leads us into a world of uncertainty and possibility and leaves us there with our nostalgia for a past that perhaps never was. A nostalgia for pictures of young Black girlhood that would have secured our confidence firmly to our physical image in all its variety.
- x. *Gymnasium* is a resonant vibration in the current opening in time - a pulsing outward that expands the opening so that all of us can fit in it and face a reckoning with our ideological/biological proximities to whiteness. *Gymnasium* subtly maps an arc of social change, from the early history of gymnastics as a tool for white propaganda to Simone Biles as the current exemplar of peak performance vitality. Nkosi asks us what it means for this strange world to be occupied by Blackness, by 'the people of the global majority', as she would say.* As a metaphor for performing one's life, gymnastics and its accompanying vocabulary provide operative images. Who would not want to fly away after their composition errors deducted the connection value from the execution of their illegal skills? Or rip, grip, split, straddle, kip, tuck, vault and mount an elite mental block?

* Here Nkosi is quoting Dr Kamilah Majied.

- xi. Much like the image titled *Champion*, Nkosi's history of elegant, unoccupied abstract architectural paintings turns its back on any expectations that a Black artist should make images of Black people. An obvious point that nevertheless contradicts the workings of an art market. Nkosi admits to 'a tentative relationship with [her] own voice' as a result. In these minimalist formalist pieces, she plays a game to see 'how little information is needed to make something legible'. The journey from geometry to architecture, with the insertion of a figure, is a 'proposition that gives in to racial politics where a connection to a certain level of cultural identity is drawn and found. White artists are never spoken about in that way.' In this case, what does it mean for an artist to perform or not perform their Blackness? In response, the *Gymnasium* series asserts a right not only to exist in spaces but to define them for ourselves.

Mapmaker: I saw the home stretch, the last leg, the finish line tape, and thought perhaps that you had forgotten our agreement to win together, because Your Truth did not look about to see where My Truth was. My Truth tried to get Your Truth's attention, but Your Truth flashed, whirled and bulldozed your way onwards, kicking up dust that blocked the view, clouded the sky so that My Truth was hidden from most.

My Truth sped ahead so as not to choke, and noticed a few upturned faces waving and cheering in My Truth's direction, as the massive form of Your Truth blundered over the finish line and broke the tape to thunderous applause from the crowd, who did not see that My Truth had actually crossed a few moments earlier.

The few that witnessed My Truth's victory winked and waved and invited My Truth down to celebrate, but Your Truth had stolen the show. The few who saw My Truth cross the finish line first and the many who witnessed Your Truth bound to the end have never quite seen eye to eye since.

My Truth and Your Truth, they went their separate ways after that. And they often wonder how all this could have come to pass from a simple race, a friendly competition one picnic-fine Sunday afternoon, just for laughs and a bit of exercise really.

* Radical Sharing is a term Nkosi explicates in her chapter of the same title in *African Futures: Thinking about the Future in Word and Image*, edited by Lien Heidenreich-Seleme and Sean O'Toole (Bielefeld: Kerber Culture, 2016), 255-273.

xii. Disaster reminds us that life is uncertain, surprising, and Nkosi has said that making this show in this moment is about 'giving people ways of thinking about the future'. This orientation asks how we will fall together this time and refuse the logic that some lives don't matter. How we will guarantee this time that from the current global health emergency we will, as a species, learn the lessons of safe, sustainable cohabitation. Nkosi has led the way before, maintaining that the notion of Radical Sharing,* when *your* successes are literally *my* successes and vice versa, is the 'way to envision new possibilities for human community'. It is this commitment to potential that pervades *Gymnasium*. Potential as in aspiration, yes, but also a deep belief in what should be true, imagining beyond the current moment to see what must be. As Nkosi would say, 'insisting on our own survival to live the future now'.

xiii. As a spatial intervention, there is such reassurance in straight lines, in angles. The unhurried layers of solid colour, meditative and satisfying. The calm of pastel and beautifully rendered figures, easy on the eyes. *Gymnasium* disrupts quietly. It meets any feelings of inertia in the face of adversity with movement, with underlying turbulence. A robust response to historical inequality, *Gymnasium* (re)inserts a story of Truth into the mix, not to vie for attention but to exist, to be seen and considered equally alongside.

** This is Ernst Bloch's formulation of utopian thinking.

xiv. Nkosi's investment in both a critique of the past and pointing towards something better is a timely model of utopian thinking - to engage power *and* imagine change.** *Gymnasium* radiates into space and time to peer and ponder across the long continuum of history in all its directions, to present us with an opportunity to renavigate, a chance to alter the co-ordinates for the rest of the journey. In that early visit to Nkosi's studio I felt

re-membered. Parts that had fallen off became reattached, parts I had hardly registered the absence of.

The Traveller listens for the next chapter of the story but there is none. She peers over the edge of the world, in the direction of the Mapmaker's voice. Reaching deep into a place where all-the-good-sense-to-do-it-right hovers next to the-energy-to-try-again, she pulls out a handful of the last seeds and plants them in a circle around her, right there at the edge of the world. Time lapses and great trees rise up all around her.

Satisfied, she checks the clock, counts the stars and repacks, discarding unused values. She conjures up possibility from the map in the palm of her hand.

Traveller: Soaring above parched earth, the Mapmaker and I marvel at the many shapes of brown, some more black, others more white. Soft, delicate browns, mud browns that swallow memories, and golden browns abrasive and hollow. Broken by families of snake rivers under wisps of cloud, like the daytime view from a 747. The Mapmaker silently points down to the place we will land, a patchwork of perfect puzzle pieces with mutating sides. Arriving on the outskirts of the outskirts of nowhere in particular, the Mapmaker closes my eyes, and in a moment of tenderness initiates a dance, close and eternally forgiving. Mouth slightly open in surrender, she places a key on my tongue and as it disintegrates into a tingle of sensations, I bow my head and fall further into the red of the earth.

- xv. In the ecology of disease, we are implicated and found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt of disrupting ecosystems, altering landscapes and maintaining generally damaging behaviour. How economies will be resuscitated in the post-coronavirus world is unknown at this point. What is known is that the virus does not stop to ask people for their

documentation, if they have sufficient affordable water with which to regularly wash their hands for 20 seconds, if they continue to have regular work which guarantees their financial stability or if their living conditions make social distancing an even remotely realistic possibility.

- xvi. As Covid-19 enters the library of zoonotic viruses, we have the opportunity to transform the social. A political imperative, in fact, to imagine a different future, and Nkosi's *Gymnasium* provides a table around which to sit, dare to look each other squarely in the eye, and together, as Nkosi has said, 'make manifest a world that does not yet exist'. The opportunity is before us to write a different story to remember, one that insists on the concrete possibility of another way of being. She says, 'I am painting a Black world and I want to find myself in it. I want to see all of us there.'
- xvii. We are participants in the story of the *Gymnasium* series, standing before ourselves and each other to perform, to demonstrate, to prove, for approval. We slide between roles and occupy them simultaneously: audience, performer, the assessed, the assessor, the witnessed and the witness, the valued and the evaluator, the Mapmaker and the Traveller.

Traveller: Making a moment of negotiating the distance between two new selves, I hold a silent prayer delicately between my thumb and forefinger and slowly open my eyes. Floating all around us as weightless as clouds are possible futures. Some vanish and others attach to bare skin for a moment before blending in to form a distinct patch of enchanted homeplace. It will vanish over time. What is a place, after all, but an idea, a hope, an imagined possibility?

Mwenya B Kabwe is a Zambian-born theatre-maker, facilitator of creative processes and performance studies scholar. Her creative practice is focused on immersive and site-specific performance work, live art, experimental collaborations across artistic disciplines and reimagining African futures. She is based in Johannesburg.