Exhibition Review

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Guernicas – A Commentary on the South African Condition Review of Post-apartheid Guernica (10 October 2021 – 30 January 2022)

Introduction

Late last year, I went to the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) – a space that I had never visited prior to going to see Sharlene Khan and Mokgabudi Amos Letsoalo's *Post-apartheid Guernica* (10 October 2021 – 30 January 2022). Getting into the space was both interesting and overwhelming, as the JAG is situated in a very busy part of Johannesburg – one that is teeming with life, people who are trying to get by with the little means they have, and a palpability of the disenfranchisement that is abided owing to the history of our country. I refer to the geographical location of the JAG, owing to the commentary that the work of the artists is making on the conditions of life in post-apartheid South Africa. What the reader who is familiar with the decolonial tradition will note are the implications that the exhibition had for the context that defines the gallery space where it was curated and displayed. In the first instance, there is a sense that even as things have changed for the majority, with respect to our participation in the socio-political decision making of the country through universal franchise, there continues to be despair and hopelessness for the majority who would like to claim South Africa as home. It is here that I might be inclined to agree with Lewis Gordon's misdiagnosis of "homelessness", which he defines as not being geographic. He (Gordon 2021:8) says 'It is temporal, even where one is geographically in one's home. The African…struggles paradoxically, as do the African Diaspora, with being temporally homeless at home'. To say that I am inclined to agree with Gordon heeds the fact that I disagree with him, on the premise of language, but Khan and Letsoalo's commentary points to the political conditions of possibility that exist such that some could/would claim to be homeless at home.

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I do not wish, however, to come across as arrogant and disaffected, in the sense that I realise that the claim of hopelessness/(homelessness) can be refuted through an inquiry into whose vantage point we use for analysis. Those who enjoy comfort, privilege and security would claim certain spaces are defined by destitution owing to their positionality. We arrive at the diagnosis of destitution owing to the reality that the lives of the majority have not changed, or – better put – the majority seem to be eking out an existence at the edge of the promised land that was the hope of democratic South Africa. To this extent, the exhibition made a chilling commentary that brings to vivid reality Tendayi Sithole's claim in *The black register* (2020), when he writes of the anti-Black world that must be destroyed.

Moreover, the exhibition brought to bear the expendability of Black life, owing to the decisions that the democratic regimes of South Africa have made and how they have impacted the lives of the majority. This assertion finds its grounding in the thinking of Ali A. Mazrui (1978:13) when he says, '…unfortunately very few educated Africans are even aware that they are also in cultural bondage. All educated Africans… are still cultural captives of the [w]est'. Though bold, the claim can be made that the African National Congress (ANC) government(s) have been solely interested in preserving the life of those who were the beneficiaries of apartheid. Simply, what the exhibition – *Post-apartheid Guernica* – demonstrated, with chilling effect, is the expendability of Black life in South Africa. Inadvertently, the work challenged the claim that the reader finds in Mahmood Mamdani's (2021:17) book, *Neither settler nor native: The making and unmaking of permanent minorities*, when he suggests that 'by taking the political approach, South Africans reconfigured perpetrators and victims – alongside beneficiaries and bystanders – as something altogether new: survivors. All groups were survivors of apartheid, with a place at the table after its violence'. Khan and Lestsoalo (2021) demonstrated that this is not the case; the lives of Whiteness are comfortably ensconced in the comfort and privilege that was created through the sole preserve of the economy and its fruits for their gain and beneficiation. This is not to dismiss the idealistic thinking in Mamdani's (2021) writing. Put in another way, what the reader finds in the work is the reality that while this is an ideal and admirable objective, it is abrogated by the cheapening of Black life owing to the violence that is meted out by the state against Black lives, daily; a matter that the reader finds in both Khan and Letsoalo's (2021) work and in Dumile Feni's *African Guernica* (1967) of the previous century. It is for these reasons that I (Kumalo 2018), propose the concept of Umdlakazi as that which could potentially give us a response to the South African condition. The challenge with this concept is its uses and inherent alignment to violence or – better stated – retributive conceptions of justice that express atonement for injustices committed in the past.

The attentive reader will note that I am framing both Guernicas as texts that are to be read in relation to the context that they reflect. This is deliberate in that I seek to draw our attention to the reality that the artists are highlighting in their compositions. While *African Guernica* (1967) was dedicated to thinking through the condition of Black life under a repressive and totalitarian government – and I use the concept of totalitarianism as developed, analysed and understood by Hannah Arendt ([1951] 2017), in *The origins of totalitarianism – Post-apartheid Guernica* (2021) thinks through the conditions of Black life under democracy. To this effect, the artist note to the work reads as follows:

> *Post-apartheid Guernica* (2014-2021) explores themes of violence and oppression by security forces. It primarily references the Marikana massacre of 44 miners by the South African Police Service on the 16th of August 2012 during protests for increased wages. Not since the days of apartheid has South Africa witnessed such a public slaughter of civilians engaged in social protests, but this was a culmination of many different incidents where black lives are wasted by the police force.

The artist statement, for those who are familiar with the militarisation of police services in the country – which is not merely a South African problem, but rather a global one – highlights the challenges of what is intended by the notion of cheapened Black life (what Khan and Lestoalo call the wasting of life) owing to a capitalist orientation that sees Blackness/Indigeneity as nothing but a means to an end, with respect to cheap labour. In my own work, I conceptualise this cheapening of Black life as an "ontological derision". This cheapening of Black life is also witnessed in the case of what the South African polity saw with the unjustifiable murder of civilians at the hands of the South African National Defence Forces (SANDF), on the premise of protection and stemming the high rise of the Coronavirus under emergency security measures that were reminiscent of the States of Emergency in the country in the 1980s.

What Khan and Lestoalo (2021) and Feni (1967) showcase, are the adverse effects of violence and oppression on the psyche of the oppressed. What is most fascinating about the aptness of Khan and Lestoalo's play on the tradition of Guernica, as we find it in Feni's work, is how they reveal the ways in which democracy constantly betrays those that it claims to be working to liberate. In simple terms, Khan and Letsoalo (2021) substantiate Letta Mbulu's ([1993] 1996) claim when she says 'Akukho mehluko kulelizwe – Qhawula Amakhamandela'. The scariest aspect, however, is that in heeding this claim and in liberating ourselves from the shackles of slavery, bondage, and oppression, the Black/Indigene are always murdered for

demanding that they be treated like human beings. The demand for ontological recognition – which would signal a move away from derision – is what leads to the death and murder of the Black/Indigenous being in this country, owing to the fact that even the educated Black is a victim of western cultural enslavement, as detailed by Mazrui (1978) in his *Political values and the educated class in Africa*. It is the visual representation of this reality that the reader found in Khan and Letsoalo's exhibition, the brutal, unapologetic, and murderous nature of a democratic government that claims to be working on behalf of the majority who have always been denied their humanity; a reality that led Sithole (2020) to the conclusion that this world cannot be salvaged but must rather be destroyed.

The destruction, to which Sithole refers, can be undertaken using concepts and tools such as Umdlakazi, insofar as such tools move away from the captivity of western modernity and cultural enslavement. Moreover, such a move would answer the question that the reader finds in the exhibition, which considers the reality of Black life being considered as having an ontological legitimacy that is to be reckoned with.

As the reader walks into the exhibition, one is greeted by a screening that depicts a series of events that embody and demonstrate this murderous attitude of a government that claims to be working with and for the people. The audio that accompanies this screening is triggering, in its uses of struggle songs and chants that the reader will be familiar with, if ever they have witnessed – first-hand – the public service delivery protests that increased since the current administration took office. Embedded into this audio is the sound of gunfire, unabated and unapologetic, which is itself denotative of the cheapened nature of Black life, even to Blackness/Indigeneity itself.

Khan and Letsoalo (2021) invite us to consider a series of questions, resultantly. In the first instance, has the colonial process of Black hate – an anti-Black world – so effectively taken root, even among Blackfolk, that we are so easily ready to murder even our own people? Secondarily, if the answer to the previous question is answered in the affirmative, the subsidiary question should inquire into the possibilities and futility of the objective of decolonisation, be it political, epistemic, or conceptual. To put the question in a different way, if the political conditions of possibility still give us the ability to create works of a Guernica nature, what is the possibility of arriving at a point of Uhuru, or will we forever, and perpetually be stuck in the shackles that led Mbulu ([1993]/1996) to claim, 'Not Yet Uhuru'?

These two questions are undergirded and foregrounded by a moving phallic-footed figure that the reader encounters on the running screen on display in the exhibition.

Here, Khan and Letsoalo (2021) draw the reader's attention to an ongoing commentary that we find in the works of prominent and consistent feminists who have critiqued the force of phallic power, culminating in two salient treatises, in other words, *Rape: A South African nightmare* (2016) and *Female fear factory* (2021), both of which are penned by a respectable and prominent feminist scholar – Pumla Dineo Gqola. The claim that these works are a salient contribution is predicated on their sentinel posture, with their author having been constant in her critique of the challenges of a colonial condition that gives rise to insecure masculinities that culminate in violence as a mode of securing their power and authority. As a parting question, one that is inspired by both Gqola (2016 & 2021) and Khan and Letsoalo (2021), I am curious about what a focus on our nightmare means for the possibilities of imagining and willing new futures through the process of a dream? If the nation is captured and tormented by the nightmare that is constitutive of our reality, is there a possibility for us to stop and imagine, dream up, what our world could potentially look like?

The critical respondent to my questions will say that for us to understand the world that we want – in order for us to dream – we must first and primarily confront the inner recesses of ourselves that we are most frightened by/of. In such a confrontation, we may be able to rise out of that reality with the ability to see and imagine the world anew. The only way to countenance such a response would be in the reply that in our psycho-social political endeavour to confront the evil that we have become, we ought to be weary not to lose ourselves in such a process. We must be weary to keep a light that will guide us back to ourselves in the process of interrogating ourselves. Moreover, it is the duty – or less presumptuously – the function of the artist, as both writer and art practitioner, to help us simple fools with the capacity to dream up new possibilities. In such a recommendation, Khan and Letsoalo's (2021) Post-apartheid Guernica attends to such a demand, as we – fools – make it of our artists. In confronting us with the violence that defines our world(s), and in inspiring such questions, Khan and Letsoala press us to dream – to create new possibilities as we are dissatisfied with/by the realities that we encounter of ourselves. It is for this reason that I commend the courage of the artists in putting together such an insightful and incisive exhibition. In my assessment, it was an entryway into the thing we are in need of as we attempt to piece back our lives and dream up new possibilities.

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