

OGUTU MURAYA

I Am Multitudes

In July 2019, something snapped in the Kenyan performance artist Ogotu Muraya, who was living in Amsterdam at the time. He decided to stop applying for European visas and return to Nairobi. His decision was motivated by a desire to 'go beyond Europe', to free his imagination, to transcend internal limits rather than merely trying to cross physical borders. In this text, he tells us how he intends to continue his artistic practice and maintain his presence – but strictly on his own terms.

ZEITGEIST

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On freeing the imagination from the confines imposed by a biased system

For a long time, I have been preoccupied with the following statements:

- Binyavanga Wainaina’s ‘I want to live a life of a free imagination.’
- Makuka Nkoloso’s ‘Some people think I’m crazy but I’ll be laughing the day I plant Zambia’s flag on the moon.’
- Sirleaf Johnson’s ‘The size of your dreams must always exceed your current capacity to achieve them.’
- James Baldwin’s ‘You don’t have to prove yourself to anyone.’
- Ruha Benjamin’s ‘Remember to imagine and craft the worlds you cannot live without, just as you dismantle the ones you cannot live within.’

One of the reasons I am fascinated by these statements is that I am seeking to find the threshold where reality ends and dreams begin, the edge where physics dissolves into metaphysics, the border where logic yields to fantasy. When I find this threshold, I want to cross it and enter the world of the imaginary – a world where it is perfectly okay to hold unrealistic expectations without being labelled a lunatic, idealistic, and, worse still, naive. In my mind I have a clear intention for this quest for the fantastical. I want to know if the movement from self-preservation to self-transcendence is possible.

In his video essays Binyavanga makes a case for why we must free our imagination – his vision was to create an ecosystem where one’s imagination did not depend on some figure allowing it to exist, in other words: one where you don’t have to excuse your existence. Until recently I did not know anything about Edward Makuka Nkoloso and now my mind is hooked by his grand vision. Unfortunately, the way I found out about him was through a satirical video that ridiculed Nkoloso’s dreams of joining the space race in the 1960s and beating the US and Russia by sending the first Afronauts into deep space. Most reports on Nkoloso at the time focused disproportionately on the unrealistic nature of his dream going as far as calling him outrageous.

It is the combination of Binyavanga’s call, and Nkoloso’s ambitions that led me to wonder what the former president of Liberia meant when she said, ‘If your dreams do not scare you, they are not big enough.’ What would it take to be able to follow the call of the raconteur to suspend your disbeliefs, to have poetic faith? While living in Amsterdam I completely forgot to imagine and craft the worlds I cannot live without; I was too busy focusing on pointing out what doesn’t work in the worlds I lived in and I totally forgot to imagine and craft.

Self-preservation instincts are often weaponised against dreamers, for dreamers seek to disrupt, dismantle, and decompose the status quo. I used to be an impractical dreamer full of illusions of grandeur and I loved it. But slowly I was brought back to earth with its concrete contours. I was brought back by using an effective device, simple and sophisticated – the so-called ‘victim consciousness’. You see, I don’t think that I really knew that I was black, marginalised, isolated, and deprived until I moved to Amsterdam. The victim consciousness is self-perpetuating, and how can people dream when they are too busy surviving, preoccupied by self-preservation instincts? Can the mind

really keep up with Ruha Benjamin's prompt call to imagine and craft the worlds we cannot live without, while at the same time dismantling the worlds we cannot live within? With her powerful statement Ruha is trying to help us unlearn the presumption that there is a sequence of events where a revolution happens and then from the ashes a new world is built.

Anyone who has ever earnestly tried to break a bad habit knows very well that if you have no alternative habit to replace your old habit, if you do not visualise, emotionalise, and act upon that alternative, the likelihood that you will fall back into your old habit is extremely high. Could this be why revolutions do not always translate into transformation? This could explain why the euphoria of colonial liberation movements was short-lived. What would have happened if we did not make declarations of independence but rather declarations of interdependence? What is the relationship between dependence, independence, and interdependence? James Ferguson notes, 'Dependence on others has often figured, in liberal thought, as the opposite of freedom. But the political anthropology of southern Africa has long recognised relations of social dependence as the very foundation of polities and persons alike.' The possibility of collective intimacy, our ability to expand our circles of compassion beyond humans to include all living and non-living matter exists in the imaginary.

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To transcend the self is an act of solving and resolving the diametrical oppositions present in lived reality. For me the most present and persistent of these oppositions is the victim consciousness – a reactive state of naming and blaming, a hypervigilance to always look out for how others treat me, a denial of responsibility, and a contraction pulling away and turning inward, feeling slighted, ignored, and burdened. With such a state of mind it's impossible to declare interdependence, to engage in any mode of cooperation, to enter symbiotic relationships. The imaginary is polarised, locked in an unequal competition for survival. The imaginary knows only fight, flight or freeze. Paul Stamets, a renowned mycologist, talks about the ecology of consciousness – that evolutionary biology, to its detriment, ignored the role of symbiosis in nature, that we are not just creatures competing for survival. In fact, cooperation is what nature seeks to conserve and consolidate. Yet my conditioning presents a different reality where cooperation is not privileged, where division is foregrounded, where the winner takes all, where the illusion of separation is strong, where binary has a high utilitarian value – and it's so difficult to believe in alternative reports about the nature of reality.

To override these ideas of competition over cooperation, to step out of unequal competition that produces victims, perpetrators, and beneficiaries, I desire to cross into the fantastical. While there, I really want to contemplate the implications of adopting a view of reality where I am one with everything, even with those qualities that I do not want associated with my self-concept. It is my opinion that there is a vital force contained in this desire, but is it really practical? Can it function both as a metaphysical concept and a practical

guide to life's challenges? Is it possible to re-associate memory, to form novel associations where other is me and I am other, regardless of state, status, set, and setting? I am seduced by the possibilities present in the imaginary and this is not an act of escape. The interpretation of the imaginary as a space for escaping reality is limited and underutilises that most powerful realm. If cooperation is what nature seeks to conserve and consolidate, then it is possible to imagine and craft a community of common destiny, of common good, of healing rather than wounding. Where it is possible to both manifest the self and transcend the self – to be one and multitudes all at the same time. This is possible without characterising it as crazy, naive and idealistic.

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It's been eight months since I stopped travelling to Europe. In that period my work was presented in Basel, Berlin, Munich, and Amsterdam and I was part of a collaboration that premiered in Ghent and was presented in Antwerp. In all these situations the work went on without my physical presence and on the condition that the following statement be read to the public:

Good evening. My name is Ogutu Muraya. I unfortunately cannot be physically present with you this evening. Let me try to briefly contextualise this absence. There is no easy way of doing this without seeming self-righteous or morally superior. So, let me emphasise that my decision is not to say that I am a better person. Or throw shade or shame on anyone who is brave enough to stay with the visa trouble. I decided to no longer apply for EU visas. It became too difficult for me to convince myself to go through with this periodic process of justifying my existence in order to gain temporary approval from a system that is undeniably discriminatory. A system whose biases and filters disproportionately affect people of colour. Of course, this decision has consequences for my work and mobility as an artist and a person. And my absence tonight is one of the many costs I have to pay. But my absence tonight is also a protest. A visa on arrival should be a basic right for all. It really is not unreasonable to ask for equal opportunity. Not aid, not pity, not sympathy, but equal opportunity – unrestrained by artificial barriers, prejudices, and preferences. And as long as this is not the case, I will look for strategies to be present without confirming a system I am opposed to. My mind is clear but my body is stuck in this timeline – a timeline where the greater “we” continues to allow the unnecessary deaths of people trying to cross real and abstract borders – however they manifest.

In early June 2019, this one evening sheltered from a severe thunderstorm, I sat at the dining table with papers spread out all over it. The houseboat that I was in, located at the edge where Amsterdam meets Badhoevedorp, rocked with increasing vigour, battered by the strong winds and heavy rainfall. In this state I snapped. The papers in front of me were part of a periodic game that demanded I prove my value, the quality of my contribution, the status of my wealth, and confirm my good conduct – in short, prove that I was not a liability but a productive temporary resident. As long as I engaged, collaborated, and complied with these demands I was promised social mobility in the form of a plastic card that would allow me to move freely within fortress Europe. I snapped because I no longer wanted to prove my value. I snapped because I had allowed this game to overwhelm my imagination. I snapped because I had allowed this game to produce within me a deep anger, resentment, and contempt for my newfound status. Sitting at that dining table I resolved to cancel my re-application for a Dutch residency permit and return to Nairobi. At that table a muffled voice inside my head whispered: sleep on it, and if you feel the same tomorrow then you know what you must do.

My resolve remained intact though at times it was shaken. But in this whole process of exiting the Schengen system I made one error: I announced my decision as a political boycott – hence the statement above. This was an error because the decision was not political but spiritual. I left Europe because my imagination had become sour. My expectations had turned into bitter blue ruins. I was fast losing the ability to dream. The future with its plural potentiality had become narrow and shallow. While there, I was acutely aware that my consciousness was caught up in a dense shrub with thick long thorns. I was stuck inside some kind of blackthorn bush with its flowers in clusters of two or three. Stuck and suspended in its stiff, wide-angled branches. In that state of suspension, I had one overwhelming desire: to free my imagination. To liberate my consciousness from always contemplating and articulating what was wrong. I was fed up with the images reflected back at me, images of structural inequalities, intergenerational trauma, and historical injustices. Surely there must be other patterns, sequences, and combinations that did not always position me as a victim.

When the world talks about culture, understand this: It is not talking about culture; it is talking about power. The difference between the African cultures, which have vanished, and the European cultures, which are decaying, is that Europe had the power. And that is the only difference. It is not that Europe was civilized and Africans were not. That's a lie.

– James Baldwin (Baldwin 1963)

For a long time, I was taught and in turn came to believe that we lost the great colonial wars because we were inferior to white people, and it has taken me a long time to realise it had nothing to do with inferiority. Baldwin's statement on the relationship between culture and power took a while to land. I am now digesting this perspective and wondering: what if we lost the colonial wars because we privileged ecological knowledge over technological knowledge? What if we lost the colonial wars because our imaginations did not privilege the idea of human beings as being the centre of the world? What if we lost the colonial wars because we privileged the philosophy of 'I am because we are' and not 'I think therefore I am'? What if we lost the colonial wars because 'for us the vital life force of God was contained in every living and non-living thing. In our customs humans did not have dominion over the earth, but rather, they were caretakers of the Earth' (Wangari 2006)? As the renowned environmentalist Wangari Maathai writes:

Sadly, these beliefs have now virtually died away. They were dying even as I was born. Many people accepted the missionaries' worldview, and within two generations they lost respect for their beliefs and traditions – which became primitive and backward. Hallowed landscapes lost their sacredness and were exploited as the local people became insensitive to the destruction, accepting it as a sign of progress – moving forward into a modern world.

One way of interpreting Baldwin's statement on power is that the Europeans were powerful and we were not. What if this is wrong – what if it had nothing to do with power but rather the privileging of a misguided power relation over any other relational patterns? Could the current migration crisis be catalysed by a modern version of Wangari's statement, that living in Europe is 'a sign of progress – moving forward into a modern world'?

My desire to reconnect with the imaginary is very much linked to what I term 'The Call to Unestablish'. The political dilemmas in the contemporary world demand us to engage in four key practices as summed up by Professor Boaventura de Sousa Santos: democratise, decolonise, decommodify, and depatriarchalise. At the core of these practices, in my opinion, is a call on us to unlearn, to unhabit, to re-associate, to rewire and re-order our lived realities, imaginations, perceptions and perspectives – indeed to unestablish ourselves. I am interested in this call to unestablish – as individuals, as a collective, as institutions, as a society, and so on. I want to explore what this means to unestablish, what labour does it demand of us, what are the processes involved,

where are the points of resistance, doubt, discontent, and disconnection? This practice is not easy in reality – so I exit reality and enter the imaginary, where I can construct simulations and try them out, build and rebuild new relational patterns, before trying them out in real life. But there is a huge catch – an imaginary coupled with a victim consciousness can conjure simulations full of monsters, arcane creatures, and incomprehensible distresses. I was slow to understand that song – ‘Weeping’.⁰¹

I knew a man who lived in fear
 It was huge, it was angry,
 It was drawing near
 Behind his house a secret place
 Was the shadow of the demon
 He could never face

Does the West suffer from a victim consciousness – in which the rest of the world is out to get them, simulating fears and disturbances, projecting monstrosity on others, bubbling with subterranean perturbations?

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I made the decision to leave Europe as an exercise in unestablishing myself. In doing so, I began a process of releasing myself from a darkness that was troubled with two of the devil’s most compelling hypotheses:

- Nihilism: if nothing matters then why bother doing anything?
- Suicide: if you can’t be bothered to do anything then why continue to live?

The patterns, sequences, and combinations that I had adopted in the five years living, studying, and working in Europe had led me into a thorny, stuck and sticky situation where I was incapable of becoming the good African diaspora – complying with the system, working twice as hard, sending remittances to uplift my immediate family. Instead I had become withdrawn, resentful, anxious, and depressed. It was an error to announce my decision as a political boycott. Even if I could persuade myself that it was being political, I was also aware that the decision was a solo act, a self-directed action in opposition to a worsening systemic inequality. Such a boycott has no visible effects outside my personal reality – it’s not only hubris but has failure embedded within its logic.

In my exile back home, I started to make sense of Binyavanga Wainaina’s ‘I want to live a life of a free imagination’ (Wainaina 2014), Makuka Nkoloso’s ‘Some people think I’m crazy but I’ll be laughing the day I plant Zambia’s flag on the moon’ (Serpell 2017), Sirleaf Johnson’s ‘The size of your dreams must always exceed your current capacity to achieve them’ (Sirleaf Johnson 2011), James Baldwin’s ‘You don’t have to prove yourself to anyone’ (Baldwin 1963), and Ruha Benjamin’s ‘Remember to imagine and craft the worlds you

⁰¹ An anti-apartheid protest song written by Dan Heymann. Performed by Ladysmith Black Mambazo | Joseph Shabalala | Josh Groban & Vusi Mahlasela.

cannot live without, just as you dismantle the ones you cannot live within'. My preoccupation with these statements allows me to begin a quest – a long and difficult search for something important – for me a quest to free my imagination, to reconnect with a sense of wonder. In the words of Rebecca Elson, to wilfully accept to honour my 'responsibility to awe' (Elson 2018).

In the end I am emboldened by my decision to limit my travels to Europe, not because it's a means of resisting the visa system but because it's a path to transcend Europe's self-limiting beliefs and imaginations: to go beyond Europe. It is not to say that I will never travel to the EU, it is to say that I will return on my own terms, having reclaimed my agency. I will be released from the tyranny of having to prove myself to anyone.

Addendum

I never thought, in my lifetime, I would witness travel restrictions and borders being closed for western nationals in Europe and the Americas. The Covid-19 pandemic has proven otherwise. Kenya joined the many countries putting travel advisories and restrictions in place and closing borders. This text was a reflection on the implications of my decision in June 2019 to boycott the Schengen visa system – the many travel restrictions imposed on non-Europeans at a time when there were no major global health and safety concerns. The pandemic has shifted and overturned and overwhelmed a lot, and its long-term implications are still unknown. I guess now more than ever, it is important to reflect on why certain restrictions are imposed on certain people, and for what purpose. We are in an extreme situation that calls upon us to question a lot of things that would have otherwise been taken for granted.

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