

PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSFORMATION

BY MONGIWEKHAYA

In its deepest structure, then, the word 'transformation' means: to form the other side, to start creating where you are going....it is embedded in the Dutch word Hemel trans, where it means 'firmament'. One could say that in order to create the other side, one has to remake the firmament—no mere change of structure or exterior, but of the guiding essence.

Antjie Krog, pg. 126 A Change Of Tongue

The African greeting of 'I see you' and its response 'I see you too' has always held a fascination. It inspires the imagining of two strangers cresting a hill and discovering each other from a distance. Are they friend or foe? One cannot be sure, but to eliminate subterfuge the simple statement is shouted across the valley:

I See You!

And its response, ensures that no one can sneak up on the other. To greet requires that we meet. In the very least to greet is to set up a temporary truce. This play was written as a conversation between two generations in the hopes of starting a conversation.

Allow me to be frank. I am not the ideal of my father. I am a mixture of African heritage, an American childhood, movies, the internet. I am the triggered face of youth inheriting climate change, national debt, government corruption, rampant poverty, unemployment and so many other frightening realities. Sometimes I complain and ask how his generation got it so wrong. He looks at me, and simply says I have no idea what I'm talking about.

Every generation thinks they are superior to those who came before and is highly sceptical to the generation that comes after. I See You explore this concept of generational narcissism.

One of my favourite authors, Robert Greene spoke at an event called Talks at Google. He quotes an ancient Sumerian text:

Today's youth is evil, rotten godless and lazy. It will never be what youth used to be. And it will never be able to preserve our culture.

This generational distrust is as old as humanity itself. It creates a tension which results in defining the spirit of the times. The young fight for change and the old seeks to hold onto the way of the world as they understand it. It is natural for the

young to seek out new values, new fashions, new styles. And it should be expected that the old will see it as a type of perversion of the purity of the past.

This battle of stasis vs change is natural and shows us what is important in our culture. But sometimes the battle enters the physical realm in the form of activism, war on the social scale. *I See You* shows its personal nature in the contest of will between two people.

But why does this story devolve to such extraordinary violence? To understand this, one has to understand the context of South Africa and the elders who fought for this country's emancipation.

My father carries the pride of being born an African of the 20th century. It is a sense of having lived through a time of revolution, which saw his generation take back their country and begin the journey of nationhood.

The emancipation of Africa from the literal grip of an imperial Europe marked the end of a centuries long battle of a people against a higher power bred for war and conquest (yes Apartheid is European—how else are we to interpret the old public demarcation of space as 'for Europeans' and 'for Non-Europeans'). They celebrated Mandela, the world's greatest peacemaker and our president; they called themselves the rainbow nation, declared us children 'Born-Free'. Our parents had won! And their prize was their children get to make different choices.

But you don't win a centuries long fight and come away unscathed.

The West calls it PTSD. Those who suffer such affliction speak of a hyper sensitivity to the present, waiting for it to throw off its friendly disguise and reveal its true darker nature. The veteran cannot help but distrust the smile of his children. All of us have heard our parents talk about the good old days; profess to being keepers of the truth. They look upon the young and mutter how easy they have it. The young do not understand how tough it is out there. The young aren't voting for the right people, they're not taking life seriously, they play fast and loose with their cultural heritage, they're bad with money, they don't know what it is to struggle. Should they be trusted with the responsibility of freedom?

As a young South African my freedom was paid for well before I turned eighteen. It was paid for by my parents and grandparents who carry scars, some visible on their form, some hidden in their soul. They come as economic amputations, cultural knife wounds in the back, the crippled minds of a generation who know the cost of not having a decent education.

Youth, as glimpsed by its elders, is a story that comes from afar showing itself as either lovely to look at or a torment to endure. Your mother probably loves you unconditionally. The rest of them look at that bounce in your step with suspicion. They can sense something profoundly foreign disguised in the form of the everyday.

You're going to make choices they don't agree with. Monstrous Change in an ill-fitting sheep skin suit.

I never understood the true extent of the suffering of my parents and grandparent. Not until a small portion of it happened to me. A police officer arrested me. And in my arrogance of youth, I did not comply with his every wish. He discovered my lack of language, my educated disdain of his public office. So, he decided to teach me a lesson.

I don't know what it was to be Steve Biko. I was not there in Sharpsville 1976. I have never been to prison for more than a night. But I was tortured and my will was tested. It is a frightening thing to parcel out your courage in moments. The night feels like it will never end and there's always that part of you that talks about the merits of being a coward. And then you realize, this is a glimpse of what it was like for them.

Suppose the generation that came before suffered to an extent that cannot be expressed outside the realm of story and experience. Imagine this traumatized generation finds they are unable to settle into fulfilling life as law abiding citizens. Imagine their memory of childhood, the world they fought for, is not the world that came out of that struggle. Imagine being this older person meeting a young person and realizing you have nothing in common with them. Worse, its as if they have thrown away all the values and ideas you hold dear.

I See You is a story exploring the moment when the old man and the young boy sat down to talk in the dead of night. How do we come to an understanding? How do we move forward? The play asks if it is possible to do so as a creative act versus a destructive one.

To that effect I have asked trusted friends, some witnesses of my real encounter, others with thoughts on their personal experiences. I asked them to offer their voices in brief, to create a rounded picture of this time, this encounter between generations.

We need profound change. Now, more than ever, we all recognize that the old ways do not work anymore. It is the duty of the older generation to let go of power and responsibility with grace and a blessing. It is the duty of the young to be thankful for what was given to them. But sacrifices must once again be made. Preserve what you can, youth. But change what you must.