

*.this is for you.*  
by Julie Nxadi

Dada Khanyisa

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1 Davies Street London W1

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At first it's the 70s, presumably in a studio in Denmark. Johnny Dyani plucks base and calls melodically for uSomagwaza [the Xhosa forefather and figurehead for the passage into manhood], and a duty-bound and prideful chorus responds. And then quickly it's 2024: Dyani's tumbling fingers and deliberate dissonance lands and still resonate in a looping and incessant call to come of age. Outside, summer begins to untangle from spring, pushing Cape Town's stubborn winter further away each day. I'm in Dada Khanyisa's apartment-cum-art studio in Woodstock, and Dyani's call moves unencumbered through the pine floorboards of this pristine place. Not pristine as in, unsullied. Pristine as in – preserved. Considered. Kept and cared for. And caring in return – holding, raw, wounded, and willing wood. Chunks of timber with knuckles gnarled into its flesh that carve out narratives still too far from form for eyes like mine to imagine the theatre ahead.

Dada paces from one end of the apartment to the other, agitating for my comfort as she often does:

'A warm beverage?'

Yes, please.

Dada shuffles, jerks, and pivots as though the apartment is crowded with pensive jazz cats. She drifts absent mindedly, guided by a chanting Dyani, but is then snapped back by bellowing horns of passing taxis – blunt in their reminder that the day is nearing its end and she will soon need to fetch Ali (her boisterous Pit Bull and companion).

'Have you ever read Drawn in Colour – the book – by Noni Jabavu?'

I hadn't. I hadn't heard this version of Somagwaza that was booming beneath our feet either.

In the kitchen, Noni Jabavu is quickly taking vivid shape as Dada recounts her book. She's tickled and smiles

'She's a bit of a snob'

Jabavu, the first Black South African woman to publish books of memoir, and one of the first African women to pursue a career in literature, ends up playing an interesting role in the assembly of the universe I'm being introduced to on this visit. She becomes a kind of catacomb for a phantasmagoria of Black audacity. Because Dada can't resist hallucinating the details of the life of an unabashed Black South African woman. Just like she fixates on the details of women that are remembered as spoiled, antagonistic, and 'too self-assured'. She can't resist inviting *us* to do the same, and I can never help but to oblige. Because I think of Saidiya Hartman's use of archival materials to 'represent the every-day experience and restless character of life in the city' in a book she describes as 'informed by a different set of values

[that] recognizes the revolutionary ideals that animate ordinary lives' (2019)<sup>1</sup> and I remember how much this kind of shit appeals to me. This set of values that Dada shares with Saidiya is one of the things that has always drawn me to Dada's scenes. The revolutionary ideals that animate the ordinary.

Her studio walls are pinned with photographs - some personal, some researched, some from Bailey's African History Archive, some found on the literal street of Woodstock, some printed on paper, some taken in Joubert Park, some painted on canvas, and some chiselled in wood. There's a tactile fascination with the forgotten – an urgency to transfer disappeared moments in time into permanent accounts. There's a custodianship over faded and foggy photo albums and the reconfiguration of discarded context.

I've watched her hands – for years now.

Over those years, characters have risen from corrugated cardboard beneath the precarious razor of a box cutter's edge into entities that can hold and be held - literally. Perhaps there is something to be said about wood photographing time with its grain. Something about how Dada has chipped, chiselled, and filed away at the textures, blowing sawdust out of the paths of characters lumbering into now.

I'm pulled around the room by vignettes that remind me of piles of loose photographs I would find in my aunt's drawers as Dada fiddles and arranges this archive of colossal little memories: Pulling ears closer to their own faces - walking across the room with the dislocated jaw of someone who is either laughing or crying at some paradigm shifting provincial incident.

She trails ochre from one scene to the other. Meanwhile, living memories lie in old drawers like headline news in a local gazette: Risen from the miscellaneous. Saved in anonymity amongst bobbins, erasers, and old AAA batteries. These scenes seem to prove to me that time may be fickle but it's not fragile.

In one photograph Dada imagines what portraits a photographer in Joubert Park must have taken back in the 2000s when Phaswana Mpe wrote chest caving tragedies about aloof young lovers in Hilbrow trying to get by in Thabo Mbeki's South Africa. Here the lovers, Sammy and Boipelo, pose: A new Nokia 5110 on Sammy's hip, a Thabo Mbeki T-Shirt with his mouth torn off<sup>2</sup> to crop Boipelo's top, and no fear of the world despite its bared gums.

In a flash I lock eyes with a distraught woman just after midnight at a busy bar, mascara cascading down her cheeks as she swims through indistinct chatter. Missing a nail, missing an eyelash, missing a friend, and facing the night. I think about Noni:

I wonder if she ever lost her composure or were her garments *always* tapered? Did she always wear a watch with its face on the soft side of her wrist? Would she suffocate you in a huff of patchouli and rose and enchantment when she left you? Did she smoke cigarettes and throw her head back when she laughed? Would she get wine drunk and fly into an academic rage or roll her eyes at the pontificating tweed jackets around her?

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1 Hartman, S. (2019). *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. W.W. Norton & Company.

2 At the time of his presidency, Thabo Mbeki was heavily criticized for his HIV/AIDS denialism.

I don't realise it at first, but I've been staring down at a figure whose glasses hover just off of his dark wood face. He's carved with concern and stoicism so subtle and precise that I imagine the work between the chisel, the wood, and the hands that carved him was something akin to reiki. On the figure's desk a headline announces the murder of Tengo

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Wood is flesh, flesh is history. History is perspective, perspective is narrative. Narrative is coercion. Coercion is propaganda. Propaganda, privilege. And privilege is a must have aesthetic. The dusky sepia tones beckon back to the archive, and Dada reveals that she had found portraits of photo journalists who would test shoot on each other before turning the lens on the world. The character and his tweed have probably swarmed with a Black, working-class murmur, tunnelling through the concrete inner city of Johannesburg to find this news on his desk. I wonder if his window overlooking Park Station may have caught a glimpse of murmurs I flew in through these same streets in the late 2000s, carried away in the winds of wanting.

Ria watches quietly as history unfolds. Dada admits that Ria has been in the making since 2020 after a rewatch of Yizo-Yizo season 3. A single moment of onscreen confrontation frozen in time and watching over this studio like a bird of paradise in a glass box. Ria stares sternly as smoke dances before her face. Below her, cousins in 'waphela kanjalo umuzi wabadala' teeter between a nice and emotional time. Their twisted bodies and contorted expressions remind me that this scene was once a funeral and with a few strokes became a celebration. Dada has spoken about Peter Howson: about 'Yesterday's Hero' (1986 – 87) and 'The Sublime and the Ridiculous' (1989). About bodies. About involuntary twists, twitches, and switches. She has marvelled at the lingering impact of vicious labour on moments of liberation and the ritual of pulling at the same muscle, sinew, and bone – making ourselves dance. Squeezing fatty grey matter between our fingers to forget about the slow surprise of swelling fibres, fraying humanity, and involuntary vulnerability. Nonetheless we do it. Nonetheless we do it in style: The professional. The public. The perception. For better or for worse, we – the new adults - laugh until we cry. Uphela kanjalo umuzi wabadala.

Car horns and piano keys overlay to score big and small cityscapes as they collide at my feet. I'm back in Woodstock. I've smoked and seen too much. On the ride home the city veins into incidents that course with history but calcify into banality - ideals animating in the ordinary and what not.

I wonder if lovers at Babbi's on Bree Street know that their ancestors walk arm in arm in Hillbrow. I think of Ria, watching the city turn colour and her counterpart 70 years ago doing the same – I wonder if they could catch a glimpse of each other across time.

'I used ochre in each of these paintings' I take this to mean we are all from the same time.