

CHAPTER 2

DRAMATURGICAL METHODS: MIGRANT ATTITUDES, WAYWARD ARCHIVES AND OTHER PROPOSALS FOR CREATIVE RESEARCH

By Mwenya B. Kabwe

INTRODUCTION

As an artist and scholar, my primary research interests revolve around notions of migration in and through Africa along the intersections of gender and race. Inspired by my own migrant biography, my theatre-making tends towards poetic, image-based work which makes expansive use of theatre materials and which explores movement and mobility dramaturgically. My MA thesis work, consisting of a mini dissertation and a thesis production, took the form of a site-specific 'choreopoem' titled *Afrocartography: traces of places and all points in between*. It was staged at the Scalabrini Centre in Cape Town and was set in a dreamlike realm where the characters of the Traveller, the Afropolitan, the Afrosettler and the Mapmaker met and mingled. As the character names suggest, the work centred strongly on issues of migration and this project went on to have several iterations that have been written about in a chapter titled "Mobility, migration and 'migritude' (Migritude, in *OED online*, 2023) in *Afrocartography: traces of places and all points in between*" (Kabwe, 2015b). I mention this MA thesis project here as my first PaR endeavour.

The research project that I will be discussing here is my PhD thesis titled *Theatres of migritude: towards a dramaturgy of African futures*. The research aims to contribute to the genre of black migrant cultural production called 'migritude', which developed largely in African diasporic literary circles and traces its evolution from the Negritude movement. The thesis sought to respond to the question, "what does it mean to have a migrant attitude for theatre and performance-making?" It explores an approach to thinking about how a relationship between migration and Africanfuturism can be put towards a dramaturgical practice mobilised in the direction of possibility, potential and a more hopeful future.

RESEARCH DESIGN

My PaR research design for a traditional dissertation included the analysis of five case studies in order to investigate what alternative understandings of African migrancy might exist in the spirit of a selection of theatre and performance works made by women whose biographies flow through the African continent. These texts were: *Migritude* (2010) by Shailja Patel, *Every Year, Every Day I am Walking* (Fleishman, Reznick & Yisa, 2012) by Magnet Theatre, *Moj of the Antarctic: An African Odyssey* (2011) by Mojisola Adebayo, *Afrogalactica*

Deep Space Scrolls (2015) by Kapwani Kiwanga and *Astronautus Afrikanus* (2015a) devised by a group of students at the University Currently Known as Rhodes, under my direction. The area of focus in terms of performance was on the compositional elements of these productions that are thematically and aesthetically concerned with migration, with the aim of developing a pliable dramaturgical framework for a migrant attitude.

My selection of texts to study was made from plays and productions that were familiar to me and that were about movement, mobility and migration in both direct and indirect ways. *Every Year Every, Day I am Walking*, for instance, is a play about a small family that is forced to leave an unnamed African country and travel to South Africa as refugees; *Moj of the Antarctic* is an epic time-travelling one-person play inspired by the real-life story of Ellen Craft who escaped enslavement by cross-dressing as a man; *Afrogalactica* is one in a series of performance lectures that casts African history speculatively into the future, and *Astronautus Afrikanus* was staged at the University Currently Known as Rhodes as the 2015 Fees Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall student protests were gaining momentum across South African universities. *Astronautus Afrikanus* was inspired by Edward Mukuka Nkoloso whose visionary dreams of Zambia's independence equated with Zambians being the first to land on the moon. *Migritude* was not only an autobiographical performance poem about the author's migratory lineage, but also provided the conceptual and theoretical basis for the study as a whole.

These plays vary widely in terms of genre, content and form, and they came together in my study only because I had selected them through a hunch that they each held a particular, yet-to-be-discovered key to unlocking what I was trying to articulate by the term 'migrant attitude' in the realm of theatre. At this stage, a number of research design questions needed to be addressed: (1) How was I to relate to these plays as a collection? (2) How was I to clarify for myself what I was analysing in each play? and, considering the response to the previous question, (3) How was I to approach the analysis of each play when there was variation in how I had accessed them and what kind of residue was still available for studying them?

CENTRING DRAMATURGY

The subtitle of the thesis, *Towards a dramaturgy of African futures*, implied a hope that the various pieces of the project would lead to some kind of articulation of a particular dramaturgical process. The project worked with a broad understanding of dramaturgy as:

a particular process of work that is common to all artistic production (whether "experimental", "traditional", "new", or "old"), and that sheds light upon the ways in which encounters, work, and the creation inside (and possibly also outside) the artistic frame happen. (Georgelou, Protopapa & Theodoridou, 2017:15, parentheses in the original)

Among the many definitions of dramaturgy, I leaned towards those that resonate with my own particular approach to theatre-making and chose those that are more processual than structural, more collaborative than directorial, more intuitive than bound by rules, and those

that maintain a non-hierarchy of theatrical materials, where the written text, if it exists at all, is an element amongst many others. As the area of focus in terms of performance lay in the compositional elements of productions that are thematically and aesthetically concerned with migration, my intention was to engage with the dynamic, contextual and political dimensions of dramaturgical practice (Turner & Behrndt, 2007). This compositional focus was a helpful point of orientation that I returned to when I felt overwhelmed by all the possible access points to each play. Looking specifically at compositional elements meant that I could choose a compositional focus for each play which would usefully contain what I was looking at, even though what I was searching for was initially unclear.

Georgelou, Protopapa and Theodoridou, speak of “a dramaturgy of process’ in works that are oriented towards the construction of possibilities and not the establishment of clearly definable and repeatable schemas” (2017:12). This notion of a dramaturgy of process was very useful in this case. My interest was in the compositional logics of the works studied, but I was working with what was emerging as I looked more and more closely at each text rather than applying some kind of dramaturgical formula to them. Working dramaturgically, also helped to define my area of inquiry around an interest in how performance works come to be as a consequence of a particular process, and in this case a process that involved various notions, tropes and images of migration as expressed by women in dialogue with people, materials, media, bodies and space towards identifying an aesthetic overlap. My task was to isolate some of these dialogues occurring in each text to see how connections were being made between dynamic theatre-making elements to form an organic whole.

Another useful point of distinction for me – for thinking through a PaR framework and again to maintain a practice of dramaturgy as central to the exercise – was to recognise that although the case studies would be ‘analysed’ there was a useful distinction to note between ‘performance analysis’ and ‘dramaturgy’ even though they are often used interchangeably. Analysis implies a sense of taking apart or unravelling, while dramaturgy is linked to ideas of composition and implies a bringing together of parts to view them in relation to each other (Turner & Behrndt, 2007). This distinction speaks also to the method employed here of identifying specific elements in each production that were extracted and then woven together to create a new dramaturgical palette. The productions examined in the thesis used migration dramaturgically. That is, not only thematically and metaphorically, but in their particular compositional logic; in their relationship between the subject matter, the framing and the contexts in which they are created (Fleishman, 2015b). My central argument was that a dramaturgy of African futures extends these migrant compositional logics spatiotemporally into an elsewhere, taking the restlessness of migration to mean a constant seeking of what else is possible and more desirable.

CREATING AN ARCHIVE

While the plays varied widely, they were all plays made by women with a relationship to the African continent; they were thematically and/ or conceptually dealing with movement and mobility and I had had some kind of direct engagement with them, either by having read, seen or devised them or some combination of the three. This led me

towards more confidently claiming that the collection of case studies in fact constituted an archive of sorts. This was an experimental archive with political implications. What I had before me was an intuitive assembly of material and immaterial artefacts composed of wayward 'objects' which varied between productions that I had watched, to those that I had made, to play texts that I had read and video recordings that I had examined. The research design process therefore required a way of addressing these multiple forms of critical interpretation.

By gathering these case studies together, I had made a collection of things. I had constructed an archive and the process of writing the thesis involved extracting from the archive answers to illusive questions that I have about my own work, which are dramaturgical and poetic. This experimental archive that had been made for this particular creative research endeavour contained material traces of performances in the form of video recordings and published play texts as well as immaterial traces such as my own memory of watching some of the productions. This archive also included a production that I had devised, complicating my position as archivist in terms of being both internal and external to its contents.

ASSEMBLING AN ARCHIVE AS METHOD

Drawing together the material for your research and considering it as an archive. Video recordings, play texts, props, set, memories of watching live productions – all these and more – can be considered objects in your own personal research archive to be treated with the same kind of curiosity and reverence as you would an official archive in a museum or library.

To claim that the collection of case studies formed an archive was to enter a politically contested arena in relation to what has been and continues to be worth remembering, in what ways and by whom. To claim that my memory and experience of live performance works, their video recordings and also their play texts and my own work, can constitute an archive was also to challenge prevailing definitions of archives as composed only of physical artefacts. In the context of my project, this manner of archiving pointed to how stories of migration are embodied, and embodied by women, across the African diaspora, which, as Holly A. Smith notes, is about "[...] the ways historically marginalized communities are not often present in written archives, from benign neglect to intentional erasure" (Belle et al, 2020:19). The intention of this project then, was to make visible, not only certain subjects, but also certain ways of knowing. It was both an intervention and a response. It was a position that was not set apart from that which I was studying (Fleishman, 2009).

In the theatre the issue of remains for archival purposes is complex. For Rebecca Schneider, the theatre resists 'remaining' according to the logic of the archive as

traditionally known, but in fact recomposes its remains while refusing to conform to a certain status of object, and therefore “remains differently” (2001:101). To claim to have made an archive was to argue that live performance is “beyond capture”), as Fleishman (2015a:1) notes in his piece of the same name, to the extent that performance remains while threatening the terms of captivity dictated by the archive (Schneider, 2001). Diana Taylor’s work also reminds us that the debates about the ephemerality of performance are profoundly political, as she asks: “Whose memories, traditions, and claims to history disappear if performance practices lack the staying power to transmit vital knowledge?” (2003:5). These are the same archival logics that make determinations about the value of some bodies (of knowledge) while rendering others as discardable.

At the levels of both content and form then, the archive constructed for the thesis project operated to make visible that which has been deemed invisible and unvaluable (Belle et al., 2020), challenging narratives of the erasure and disappearance of black migrant bodies as well as marking the ways in which the performing arts necessarily expand notions of archive. My immersion in the very archive that I was studying was also to counter the traditional Western anthropological gaze of ‘us’ (on the outside) studying “them” on the inside. I share in Diana Taylor’s investment in performance studies as deriving “less from what it is than what it allows us to *do*” (Taylor, 2003:16, italics in the original). In this case, including my own work in the circulation of knowledge about performance studies allowed me to engage in a decolonial practice that takes the performing arts “seriously as a system of learning, storing and transmitting knowledge” (Taylor, 2003:16), necessarily expanding what we mean by knowledge in the first place. This archive is a “collection of subjectivities” (Belle et al., 2020:20) including my own, and it produces its own prompts for how to engage with it. This notion of being prompted became an important aspect of the method, which will be expanded upon in the section to follow.

My proximity to this archive conformed with creative research practices in which artist-academic hybrids (Lam, 2020) work with their own artistry all the time. In the art-making practice of theatre and performance there is an understanding that the work is somehow bigger than the makers; it is already excessively articulate and when it is released into the world for an audience, the makers relinquish any last measures of control over it. It can then be approached anew as an ‘object’ by the same makers who ushered it into being, from a perspective that is both inside and outside. This version of archival work aims to be capacious, decentralised, accessible and experimental in the sense of not knowing what will emerge from its exploration (Belle et al., 2020). This archive is not one that is relegated to a specific time and place and is more akin to a field of currents that cross geography and history.

The theatre does not let us down by ‘disappearing’. It changes mode, it becomes stealthier, but the ideas that it has put into the world cannot be retracted, they cannot be disappeared. There is no doubt a curation of materials and a concentration of energies at the performance event itself, but my contention is that this moment sits on a continuum of collecting, spreading, cohering, expanding and exploding of ideas that remains unfinished. In this case, my proximity to this project’s archive was to acknowledge that the performance work that I had made and included in the archive exists separately from

me to a significant extent, and in a swirl of already existing ideas about Africa, migration, women and futurism. To reiterate, this was not a physical archive. It was an intuitive assembly of material and immaterial artefacts composed of materials that were entirely too wayward to be housed in a physical archive.

WA(O)NDERING AS METHOD

As the objects in the archive varied from productions that I have watched, to those that I had made, to play texts that I had read and video recordings that I had examined, there were multiple forms of critical interpretation that had to be engaged with, including watching, reading, looking (Fensham, 2009) and making. Through each of these interpretive modes, the focus was to wa(o)nder through and with the works, not knowing what this would yield, but allowing this wa(o)ndering to shape and determine my evolving route, prompted by what the archive collection was providing. This wayfaring through the amorphous archival terrain, was guided by Tim Ingold's rule of thumb (after Deleuze and Guattari)⁵ to "follow the materials" (Ingold, 2011:213, italics in the original).

Both theatre and migrants are characterised by non-arrival, by defying finality or fixedness and, as unstable entities, they are well suited to each other. I therefore essentially determined that an archive made of wayward artefacts about wayward subjects required a wayward approach. This following of materials was done by isolating an interaction at play between some of the theatrical materials in each work that could be read through a migrant lens. These readings reflected and responded to the working formulation of migritude for theatre-making by building a migrant attitude. And it is the application of this migrant attitude that I am calling a dramaturgy of African futures. Each of the case studies had a particular way of 'thinking' about migration, an artistic point of view, a stance, a mood, an approach, an orientation, an interpretation, a feeling, a disposition – an *attitude* if you will. A migrant attitude to be more precise, and a formulation inspired by Shailja Patel's autobiographical performance poem, *Migritude* (2010).

In operation here are two definitions of the word 'attitude': "a settled way of thinking or feeling about something" and "a position of the body indicating a particular mental state" ("Attitude", 2023). The first part of this definition pointed to the project as a process of arriving at a way of thinking and/or feeling through looking at the work of others, making, writing and researching. The second part of the definition pointed to the particularity of theatre-making as an embodied practice, shifting positions of the body in relation to other materials that suggest not only a mental state but also an emotional and political one.

In Patel's *Migritude* (2010), she explicates a migrant attitude that is about a critical mode of being in the world that signals to uneven relations of power, the endurance of colonial socialisation in Africa and a particular orientation to history and geopolitics from a migrant perspective that centres on the enactments of empire on the bodies of women. It is a theatre of migration (Cox, 2014) that is concerned with transnational and intercultural politics. It is from this point of departure that I have taken the term 'migritude' to mean

5 Deleuze & Guattari, 1987:409.

'migrant attitude', and have assumed that this attitude comes in a multitude of forms (as attitudes do), and have extracted a series of conceptual positions, if you will, by looking for where and how else this attitude is expressed in the other case studies. Each of these productions was understood as a complex web of elements and their migrant attitudes emerged from identifying where some of these elements connect and interact. These attitudes were aesthetic, "ideological, compositional, philosophical and socio-political" (Turner & Behrndt, 2007:33).

This formulation of a migrant attitude takes its lead from Nelson Maldonado-Torres's work on Frantz Fanon. He makes a valuable distinction between attitude and method in relation to the decolonial turn in psychology, towards what he calls a decolonial attitude (2017), stating that,

The idea of method as a guarantor of truth and knowledge in the sciences emerged from a certain confidence about the capacities of the cognitive subject and the status of the object, method being that which allows the subject to produce and secure true knowledge about the object— that is, objective knowledge. (2017:442)

Maldonado-Torres goes on to explain how Fanon's approach to attitude sought to counter "Western methodic knowledge [which] acquired normative status and led to the rejection or subordination of other forms of knowing" (2017:433). For Maldonado-Torres, and in opposition to claims of objective knowledge, Fanon's work approaches attitude as no less than "the dimension of the subject by virtue of which the subject can seek to challenge [established] knowledge, power, and being" (Maldonado-Torres 2017:434). The primacy of attitude over method then marks not only a decolonial turn in psychology, psychiatry and the human sciences, but also applies more generally in areas of knowledge, power and being (Maldonado-Torres, 2017). Fanon's philosophical approach to attitude is not only a matter of opting for subjective intention or purpose over structural condition, but it is also relevant in the foundational role that attitudes play in relation to 'being': to the human experiences of embodiment, intersubjective contact, time and space (Maldonado-Torres, 2017).

In the face of a colonial attitude with "its constant questioning of the full humanity of the colonized" (Maldonado-Torres, 2017:439), a decolonial attitude towards knowledge and being is fundamentally political and ethical. Maldonado-Torres makes the point that attitudes are also connected to action, "prepar[ing] subjects to act or not act, as well as to act or react in particular ways, including in the task of producing knowledge" (2017:434). This formative conception of a decolonial attitude which is not only political and ethical, but epistemological and aesthetic as well (Maldonado-Torres, 2017), provided me with firm grounding for conceptualising a migrant attitude in the service of reading and making performance works that are marked by "boundary crossings" (Davies, 1994:4) and have an emancipatory agenda.

DISCOVERIES

The migrant attitude in *Migritude* is unapologetic about the precarities that mark migrant lives and centralises the global historical processes that are always at play in relation to

discussions about African migrants and their movement patterns. In *Every year, every day*, I identified an attitude of vitality towards objects. This contributing thread to a migrant attitude places the movement of subject and object in new fluid configurations that gesture towards freedom. This attitude towards freedom is one that attempts to share principles of equality and justice with non-human players (Fleishman, 2015b).

In *Moj of the Antarctic: an African Odyssey*, the migrant attitude is tactical and strategic, regarding the politics of race and gender using passing as a means of gaining acceptance into social groups other than one's own. It is the attitude of a trickster, who is both seen and unseen, enabling shifts in social position and between public and private identities.

In *Afrogalactica: Deep Space Scrolls*, Kapwani Kiwanga creates a connection between events in Africa's history and an otherworldly African future. Hers is a migrant attitude that expands time and space, opening up not only a spatiotemporal continuum on which to (re)read African history, but also a portal through which to reclaim and reinvent that history through a futuristic lens.

The production *Astronautus Afrikanus* sought to make a critical spatial intervention into an institutional site's colonial history and context at a time that was ripe for the reimagining of institutional culture. This piece of the migrant attitude centres around physical space as pliable and possessing transformative potential which is activated by an audience with mobile agency.

CONCLUSION

A dramaturgy of African futures is conceived as both a reading practice and a making practice and maintains that these practices of creative research are not separate, but sees processes of making, thinking, understanding, imagining, recognising and writing as what Paul Carter calls "material thinking". He contends that "If research implies finding something that was not there before, it ought to be obvious that it involves imagination" (2004:7). This is a reading and making practice which challenges the authority and coherence of dominant migrant narratives and contributes to a kind of clarifying, to a making conscious the fluid bounds of my theatre-making territory. It coheres with doing dramaturgy as a "conversation preparing for and infecting a coming conversation, namely with an audience" (Georgelou, Protopapa & Theodoridou, 2017:143), in this case an audience that will read the thesis and a future audience that will receive the productions to come. In Carter's words: "If it is claimed that what is found was always there (and merely lost), still an act of creative remembering occurs" (2004:7, parenthesis in original). My hope is that while this "creative remembering" has value for me as an artist, it also contributes to an already rich range of dramaturgical avenues for other artists.

I contend that an individual's dramaturgical practice is influenced by how they read the political present, and using migrants and migration as an avenue through which to do this, is altered if migrants are imagined as carriers of potentiality, as mobilisers of a future vision and as a way to meditate on the impossible.

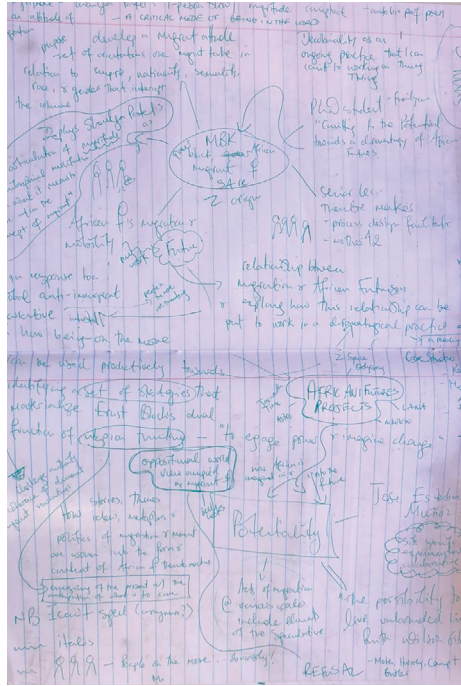


Figure 2.1: A page from PhD research notebook.
Photograph by Wwenya Kabwe.

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES

Adebayo, M. 2011. *Moj of the Antarctic: an African odyssey*. In *Mojisola Adebayo: plays one*. London: Oberon Books. 19-64.

'Attitude, n.'. *OED online*. 2023. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available: <http://www.oed.com> [2023, June 30].

Belle, L.V., Khan, Z., Smith, H.A. & Singh, J. 2020. Experimentations with the archive: a roundtable conversation. *Feminist Review* 125(1):17-37. DOI:10.1177/0141778920931878.

Carter, P. 2004. *Material thinking: the theory and practice of creative research*. Carlton, Australia: Melbourne University Press.

Cox, E. 2014. *Theatre and migration*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Davies, C.B. 1994. *Black women, writing and identity: migrations of the subject*. London: Routledge.

Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. 1987. *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Fensham, R. 2009. *To watch theatre: essays on genre and corporeality*. Bruxelles: P.I.E. Peter Lang.

Fleishman, M. 2009. Knowing performance: performance as knowledge paradigm for Africa. *South African Theatre Journal*. 23(1):116-136. DOI:10.1080/10137548.2009.9687905.

- Fleishman, M. 2015a. Beyond capture: the indifference of performance as research. (Unpublished).
- Fleishman, M. 2015b. Dramaturges of displacement in the Magnet Theatre Migration Project. In *Performing migrancy and mobility in Africa: Cape of flows*. M. Fleishman, Ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 12-36.
- Fleishman, M., Reznick, J. & Yisa, F. 2012. Every year, every day I am walking. In *The Magnet Theatre 'migration' plays*. J. Reznick and others, Ed. Mowbray: Junkets.
- Georgelou, K., Protopapa, E. & Theodoridou, D. 2017. *The practice of dramaturgy: working on actions in performance*. Amsterdam: Valiz.
- Ingold, T. 2011. *Being alive: essays on movement, knowledge and description*. London: Routledge.
- Kabwe, M.B. 2015a. *Astronautus Afrikanus* [Performance]. Makhanda, South Africa: Rhodes University Main Theatre.
- Kabwe, M.B. 2015b. Mobility, migration and 'migritude' in Afrocartography: traces of places and all points in between. In *Performing migrancy and mobility in Africa: Cape of flows*. M. Fleishman, Ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 125-148.
- Kapwani Kiwanga. 2015. *Afrogalactia: deep space scrolls* [Performance]. Johannesburg: Goethe Insitut.
- Lam, A. 2020. Hybrids, identity and knowledge boundaries: creative artists between academic and practitioner communities. *Human Relations (New York)*. 73(6):837-863. DOI:10.1177/0018726719846259.
- Maldonado-Torres, N. 2017. Frantz Fanon and the decolonial turn in psychology: from modern/ colonial methods to the decolonial attitude. *South African Journal of Psychology*. 47(4):432-441. DOI:10.1177/0081246317737918.
- 'Migritude, n.'. *OED online*. 2023. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available: <http://www.oed.com> [2023, June 30].
- Patel, S. 2010. *Migritude*. New York: Kaya Press.
- Schneider, R. 2001. Performance remains. *Performance Research*. 6(2):100-108. DOI:10.1080/13528165.2001.10871792.
- Taylor, D. 2003. *The archive and the repertoire: performing cultural memory in the Americas*. North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Turner, C. & Behrndt, S. 2007. *Dramaturgy and performance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.