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PRIORITY MAIL PROCESS LAB: AN EXPERIMENT IN MIGRANT DRAMATURGY

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This paper reflects on the dramaturgy of the Priority Mail Process Lab, a month-long virtual residency program called into existence during the Covid-19 pandemic. The lab aimed to facilitate an exchange of objects, ideas, and insights between Francophone and Anglophone African artists. The paper explores the artistic research practice behind the lab, focusing on the themes of migration, mobility, and the role of African women. It discusses the curatorial intentions of prioritizing process over production, the importance of care, and the political implications of rest and emancipation. The paper also delves into the concept of migrant dramaturgy and the experiences of Black migrant cultural production.

Introduction

In 2019, I was invited by the Africa 2020 Season Festival in France to participate in the curation of a programme of events that featured artists of different disciplines from across Africa. In response to this invitation, I, along with collaborator, Lindiwe Matshikiza, envisioned a month-long virtual residency programme which came to be called the Priority Mail Process Lab. This Lab was designed to enable a reflective, playful, and stimulating exchange of objects, ideas and insights between seven Francophone and Anglophone artists whose biographies and practices flow through the African continent. The Priority Mail Process Lab sought to facilitate a sharing of practice and place between artists who would not have been able to share physical space due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and for some of whom, the possibility of travel depended on the currency of their passports. The Lab's thematic orientation cohered around a long-standing artistic research interest of mine: the migration and mobility of African women. I have found that my artistic practice as a theatre maker has been a productive place to reflect on, work through and generate various meanings and manifestations of migration, mobility and movement. It has been and continues to be a place to rehearse various formations of community, a place for the design of processes that bring people together to bring something new into being. I have found that the processual nature of theatre and performance methods tends to be undervalued, when in fact it is on the floor, as it were, where the art of "how we meet and why it matters" (Parker 2018) is most rigorously practised.

This paper aims to reflect on the dramaturgy of the Priority Mail Process Lab as an example of artistic research practice. The exploration of theatre-making and dramaturgy as process of design and an art of gathering continues to ground my own practice as I work towards an articulation of what might be called a *migrant dramaturgy*. This ongoing project is based on 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 et al. 2017, 15). The project was not led from the outset by an explicit research question, but was guided by my creative research interests in how the intersections of race, gender and migration can critique present realities and imagine possible futures. This is an example of artistic research in which I attempt to extract the ideas and concepts *from* the work after the fact, rather than producing the concepts and ideas *in* the work as it is being made. The two processes are not necessarily distinct from each other, in the sense that my pre-existing interests generate particular creative tendencies that cohere around migration, race and gender and collaborative and interdisciplinary practice. As Georgelou et al. maintain,

> Even when one speaks of the way that practice and theory complement each other, this implies a pre-existing separation and subsequent coming together of the two; instead, the kind of work that we identify as dramaturgical takes place in thinking, doing, making, and writing, in a way that does not privilege either theoretical thinking or performance making as the site of dramaturgical practice, but rather exceeds and makes irrelevant such distinctions. (2017, 20)

This migrant dramaturgical practice that I am in search of refuses state-sponsored images of the migrant as homeless, desperate and nostalgic. Instead, while cognisant of the material realities of various migrant lives, I wish to leverage the emancipatory possibilities available when the concept of the migrant is connected to potential, disruption and boundlessness. It is from this perspective that the paper presents the Priority Mail Process Lab as a site of migrant dramaturgical practice.

Curatorial Intentions

Priority Mail was not focused on making things. In our curatorial intentions, Matshikiza and I were firm in our desire to not push the production of cultural goods. Precisely at the time when digital content was being demanded from artists in live performance spaces to validate their artistic existence, when the Covid-19 pandemic seemed to have decimated our already fragile industry, we wanted to focus on process. In the spirit of the correspondence and mail art movements (*Ray Johnson Estate*, n. d.), our intention was to (re)invest in experimental and experiential artistic encounters and connections that are slow, iterative, collaborative, and that occur across and between borders, disciplines and languages. As a particular configuration of artistic research, this creates a framework for a kind of dramaturgical practice. In the Priority Mail project, this framework also included a conscious need to make space for care amid the reigning carelessness of the pandemic, especially for those who are on the front line of providing care to others, doing work which has long been devalued. As members of the Care Collective attest,

> After all, the archetypal neoliberal subject is the entrepreneurial individual whose only relationship to other people is competitive self-enhancement. And the dominant model of social organisation that has emerged is one of competition rather than co-operation. Neoliberalism, in other words, has neither an effective practice of, nor vocabulary for, care. (Chatzidakis et al. 2020, 4)

In seeking to build a practice and vocabulary of care we were driven not necessarily by a notion of care as "the work people do when directly looking after the physical and emotional needs of others – critical and urgent as this dimension of care remains," but "'Care' as a social capacity … actively involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life" (Chatzidakis et al. 2020, 5). The foregrounding of care in the curation of this virtual residency, involving analogue exchange across geographic borders, facilitated what might be called a diasporic creative practice of care. In conjunction with the slow, iterative, collaborative, experimental, experiential and non-product orientation of Priority Mail, the project starts to instantiate a way of working that has political implications. In her recent book, *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto* (2022), theologian and founder of the Nap Ministry,[1] Tricia Hersey, makes a compelling argument for rest as an act of self-preservation and of refusal to submit one's body to labour in the service of capitalism. She describes Rest as Resistance as a "political movement rooted in care and justice" (Hersey 2022, 8) and frames rest as a practice of emancipation from legacies of exhaustion, as a subversive disruption to white supremacy, and as a radical care practice that resists the machine-level pace of grind culture[2] (Hersey, 2022). By insisting on a process-based project, with no specific outcome, Priority Mail was intuitively centring one of the formative ideas of the Rest is Resistance Movement, namely that "our worth is not connected to how much we produce" (Hersey 2022, 11). This idea resonates not only with working artists but also with (black) women whose physical and emotional labour is often unacknowledged at worst and poorly compensated at best. As noted simply by Hersey, "The world is so addicted to the constant labour of Black women" (2022, 167) and "[t]here is no vision or model of a Black woman to be free from the exploitation of her emotional, physical, and spiritual labour" (2022, 168). In her book, rest is also framed as an opportunity for "invention, imagination and restoration" (Hersey 2022, 161), as a reclaiming of what Hersey calls *DreamSpace*, and as a practice that goes beyond literally napping to include any number of ways one might craft moments of rest and care into one's life, which allow one to simply be, to daydream, to unplug, to be quiet and to slow down, alone and in community. I would argue with Hersey, who is also a performance artist, that these are liberatory ideas in the context of women artists in the African diasporas.

Avtah Brah's conception of diaspora as "an interpretive frame for analysing the economic, political and cultural modalities of historically specific forms of migrancy" (1996, 15), is useful here. In the context of the Priority Mail project, Brent Hayes Edwards also has a useful general formulation of diaspora in relation to Africa, as "a term … to express the links and commonalities among groups of African descent throughout the world" (2001, 45). An expanded notion of African diaspora is deployed here, diaspora being an inclusive term referring both to communities of particular African nationalities living in African countries besides those of their birth and to the wider diaspora resulting from those communities being dispersed from Africa into the rest of the world.

The artists participating in Priority Mail, who included Matshikiza and myself, were based in Accra, Kinshasa, Paris, Berlin, Johannesburg, Cape Town and Amsterdam, and our individual biographies troubled easy notions of origin, belonging, family and home. During the virtual residency, many of us also cautiously travelled elsewhere for work or family, or both. The residency was formed around the following invitation: for each artist to send a package of creative prompts that speak to their place and their practice to someone else in the group; for these packages to come together within the flow of the artist's daily life, the constituent items to be gathered, assembled, foraged, found, picked, sampled or made, rather than purchased. The residency was in this way based upon a gentle, spacious, process-based enquiry into each other's migrant lives. Along with the making, sending and receiving of packages, we agreed to a loosely facilitated weekly online gathering and to keep a shared residency diary and process archive in the form of a WhatsApp group. This would enable us to remain in tangential conversion through the sharing of texts, images, audio and video notes, including communally tracking the parcels that may or may not have experienced smooth passage to their intended destinations. The residual material from the package exchanges, edited selections of our virtual meetings, and selections of the residency diary were carefully selected, edited and documented by multi-disciplinary artist Nicola Pilkington on a dedicated page on the Africa 2020 Season magazine website.[3]

Black Migrant Cultural Production

At the time of the residency in 2020, the global moment had thrown into sharp relief issues of physical distance, social inequality, and the complexities of product- and content-driven economies, which afforded us the opportunity to think about migration from the perspective of movement and not stasis. The Lab aimed to leverage the moment as an opportunity for artists in Francophone and Anglophone Africa to be more easily connected, while critically engaging with the historical reasons why they typically were not. The undercurrent guiding our discussions during our weekly gatherings was our personal experience of migration as women with complex relationships to the African continent. According to Emma Cox,

> a migrant can be a person who leaves one home and makes another, or one with multiple homes, or none, or a person who eschews geographical fixity altogether. Migrants can be individuals, families or political communities. They may move by choice or by compulsion. They may be made welcome or shunned. And each of these contingencies can bleed into another. (2014, 7)

A foundational premise of the migrant dramaturgy that Priority Mail was attempting to put into practice is that the societal vantage point of those who might be identified as, and who might self-identify as diasporans in the form of migrants, nomads, travellers, outcasts, exiles and outsiders is a useful one for being able to see and describe with "detail, texture and meaning … themes that are both specific to their diasporic

experience and common to the human condition" (Abebe 2019, 56). This vantage point feeds into the notion of what might be called diasporic artistic practice, meaning any form of intentional creative expression through various mediums that facilitates the exploration and expression of diasporic identifications without the need to make discoveries or conclusions (Abebe 2019).

The residency as a whole explored how the processes of sending and receiving, sharing and gifting of the physical artistic prompts stand in for the relocation and dislocation of people and objects at the heart of migratory inquiry. My own approach to migratory inquiry is largely through a deployment of Vijay Prashad's description of Shailja Patel's autobiographical performance poem titled *Migritude* (2010) as "a philosophical meditation on what it means to live within the concept of Migrant" (Prashad 2010, iv). In her poem, Patel foregrounds racialised and gendered intersections of migrant life and inaugurates an anticolonial, philosophical meditation on contemporary experiences of African migration.

Patel's *Migritude* (2010) is my entry point into the genre of black migrant cultural production. I recall reading it in one sitting, strongly identifying with this poetic playtext that wove personal memory and family history together with political history and – similar to my own migrant biography – traversed Africa, North America and Europe. I was struck by the visceral, activist poetic voice that was at once rage-filled, compassionate, sorrowful, ironic, defiant, lyrical and celebratory. It was the first creative work that I had come across that hit so many nuanced emotional registers in response to moving through the world as an African woman migrant. It was a pivotal moment for me of feeling located and recognised and it reminded me that my negotiations of local/foreigner, citizen/migrant, national/alien were not mine alone. In her work, Patel confronts us directly, insisting upon our disappointment if not outright horror at the fact that we continue to be haunted by the ghosts of empire, the costs of which are borne daily as embodied experiences. *Migritude* engages with what it means to be African as a paradox of encounters characterised by threat, abuse, defensiveness, misunderstanding and fear, on the one hand, and collaboration, expansion, alliance and synergy on the other. The sharing of how these paradoxical encounters manifested individually for the Priority Mail artists was among the most resonant experiences of the residency.

Migrancy, as a particular category of diasporic subjectivity, brings borders into focus, and the fluid borders of the real and the imaginary are the organic territory of theatre and performance. Movement across, through and within this field of struggle, described variably as a crossing, an escape or a negotiation (Kobialka 1999), marks not only the thematic interests of Priority Mail, but also begins to provide a vocabulary for a migrant dramaturgical practice in "a discipline in which the materiality of borders and border crossings is a physical, immanent threshold" (Kobialka 1999, 4). While the Priority Mail Process Lab could not *per se* be described as a piece of theatre or performance, I would argue that the methods of theatre and performance in creating an intentional gathering of people in artistic collaboration were very much at play in this project.

Akona Nkenkana echoes Maria Lugones (2008) in her call "to enact critique of racialized, colonial and capitalist heterosexualist gender oppression as a lived transformation of the social" (Nkenkana 2015, 41). A migrant dramaturgy indeed seeks to enact such a critique from the point of view of African migrant women. Leveraging this intersectional perspective towards a "transformation of the social" means taking an active interest in challenging or at least complicating the discourse about African migration that is dominated by states and civil society, a narrative in which migrants have figured as an inconvenience if not a threat, but a problem, nevertheless, to be dealt with in various strategic ways. The larger political project of a migrant dramaturgy is to engage in this transformation of the social and is guided by an understanding of performance-making as a socially engaged public practice.

Our desire was to create thoughtful, artistic – and therefore social – engagement at an intimate level, between a handful of people who were largely unknown to each other who could co-create a shared space for exploration and unfolding. Through the exchange of stories, ideas and objects we hoped to facilitate a care-full, curious, playful and provocative environment in which the artists could engage with complex and contentious experiences of migration as a contribution to black migrant cultural production.

A migrant dramaturgy seeks to use some of the aesthetic features of contemporary black, migrant cultural production. As noted by Vanita Reddy (2020), these include defining Africa by movement, linking the concept of migrant with the concept of colonial history and the diasporic refusal of return. It includes Veejay Prashad's (2010) and Thomas Nail's (2015) contentions that the migrant is central to a project of social re-imagining, as well as Mark Fleishman's (2015) notion of a dramaturgy of displacement, where movement and migration form a core part of both the form and content of artistic work.

The field of migration studies tends to be dominated by numerical categories and faceless mapping of the movements of people, often for the purpose of attempting to assert some measure of control. The cultures of surveillance, suspicion and profiling that inform most immigration discourse are challenged by the personal and inter-subjective encounters characteristic of projects such as Priority Mail. Such projects counter the way in which African migration has been reported in the media since the early 1990s, where stories of undifferentiated mass movement and group identity are favoured over individual thoughts, sentiments and experiences (Canut and Sow 2014). Assisted by immigration policies, particular kinds of press coverage and the humanitarian/development industry, associations of hardship and trauma predominate when African migrants are represented, spoken for and about. We generally feature as disturbances in the lives of the settled, local citizens. It is in providing a platform for some of these very *individual thoughts, sentiments and experiences* that Priority Mail sought to make an intervention in the discourse. A secondary intervention engages with the male bias in migration studies, which by and large understand female migrants as accompanying their male migrant spouses. The work to counteract this bias has led to an increased focus on the interactions of gender and mobility and what has been termed the "feminisation of migration" by South African scholar Amanda Gouws (Gouws, 2010).

Priority Mail Reflections

The Priority Mail Process Lab was the first in what we hope will be a recurring correspondence-based, virtual, group residency, with a carefully selected group of artists situated in various parts of Africa and the diaspora. Initially constructed in response to the restrictions accompanying the Covid-19 pandemic and its complex impact on artists in these geographic locations, the process of designing and facilitating the residency incorporated several curatorial features that lend themselves towards a migrant dramaturgical framework. In retrospect, my co-curator and I knew that we wanted to invite artists who had a focus on process within their general practice; who we felt would be open to a group process of exchange; who each had some kind of connection to the continent, whether immediate or more distant; and who collectively represented both anglophone and francophone regions of the African diaspora, importantly including diasporas within Africa. We considered people we knew whose work was interdisciplinary, experimental and who would be keen to play. In other words, we were interested in generous practitioners with expansive art practices that defied definition, and who would be interested in creating a shared experience of safety and care. We set about creating the group, making use of our

multilingual capabilities, and were graced with the participation of Elsa M'bala, Floy Krouchi, Simnikiwe Buhlungu, Orakle Ngoy, and Elisabeth Efua Sutherland. We requested that our hosts at the National Theatre of Brittany not participate in our online gatherings, which helped to create the intimacy that marked our time together. A deep and inspiring reciprocity was established, as each of us shared often difficult experiences of navigating the world as black African women. Through the exchange of packages, we were able to engage in honest conversations about migration without our bodies being on the line, for a change. We shared in the pleasures, discomforts, joys and injustices of living in places that we may not have been born in, of moving through the world at that particular time, and any time in which African passports and immigration control create criminals out of people merely trying to move freely. We cried and laughed and were elated and saddened in each other's virtual company, united by a desire to make and share and thus create closeness. The Priority Mail project became a remarkably rich process of collective learning, thinking, questioning, reflecting, sharing and acknowledging our individual and shared artistic heritage. What was celebrated was what the migrant artist is thinking/feeling/confronting between projects, between meetings, between destinations, between responsibilities, and this feature of in-betweenness marks a prominent element of a migrant dramaturgy. The Priority Mail Process Lab was an invitation for artists to show up as they were, without professional posturing, and we hope that it was the first of many opportunities for creative collaboration across borders between exiles, migrants, movers, and refusers.

The inclusion of a WhatsApp group as a way of collectively keeping a kind of residency diary allowed for more casual exchanges in the artists' own time, but also proved to be a useful method of updating each other about the status of our shared activities, sharing resources and communicating the questions that would be discussed in the weekly online sessions. Many of the topics of discussion arose organically out of questions or materials shared in the group chat. The WhatsApp group also provided a mechanism for sharing and tracking each other's travels during the residency period. This was a phenomenon perhaps unique to this time, when one's physical location was both constricted and yet amorphous and where one's participation in an artistic residency did not depend on one's being in the same physical location for its duration.

The main activity of posting materials to one other in the group provided much joy and occasions for playfulness, while also initiating further conversation about the nature of travel between various territories, the notion of giving and receiving inherent in the collaborative process, and the creative possibilities in recognising, projecting or imparting something of value to a virtual stranger. In another contribution to a migrant dramaturgy, Priority Mail enabled us to see what alternative understandings of African migrancy existed between us, understandings that are not pathologised in narratives of displacement, homelessness and identity crisis. Galvanised by each other's stories and histories, it was a truly wonderful pleasure to receive a present from someone who had taken great care in putting together a package to share pieces of themselves with another person.

As can be imagined, the politics of border crossings, which in many ways were embodied in the life stories of all the artists, played out through the sending and receiving of the packages. In some cases, the journey of the packages from sender to receiver was undisrupted, as was the case with packages from Europe to Africa, and in others, the packages were held up, opened, repacked with some items withheld, and only released when additional funds had been paid, as was the case with packages from Africa to Europe. My package from Cape Town to Elsa in Berlin, for example, was opened, searched, some items were removed, and it was withheld until payment was made for the release of what remained of my gift. When the customs duty was not paid on time, my second package to Elsa was returned to me. The package I

received from Floy in Paris, on the other hand, arrived at my door intact within days of being posted. Collectively tracking the journeys of all the packages became an intimate way to share and reflect on our migrant histories and the ongoing implications of oppressive border control practices (for black and brown people in particular). It was important not only that this collective tracking process was documented, but that great care be taken to share moments, glimpses and highlights of our time together, in order to protect the integrity of the 'safe' space that we had co-created.

Nicola Pilkington fulfilled the role and profile of the archivist – the person responsible for collating the digital material, and editing our conversations for public consumption, and this role proved to be essential for the external sharing of the residue of our process. Including the person in charge of such documentation in the online sessions as an observer meant that Pilkington had an inside view of what was being shared and was mindful of moments of sensitivity. We created this role specifically for a person with an established reputation for careful, perceptive, and creative collaborative skills, as well as strong technical capabilities. In the resultant edited videos that were made available to the public, the directness of the gaze and conversational intimacy that was present in the recorded virtual gatherings translate into an intimate and direct experience for the viewer. This was a fascinating discovery that came about specifically because the sessions had been kept closed and private, with the understanding that they would be edited and then collectively reviewed before being uploaded on the website. This was achieved through the atmosphere of trust and openness that had been established through our artist selection, facilitation style, as well as the professionalism of and trust placed in the archivist to appropriately represent extracts of our exchanges without breaching confidentiality and without aiming towards some kind of polished finalised product for public consumption. The aim was to share some parts of the documentation with an online audience as an extension of the project to have migrant life witnessed rather than pathologised.

Conclusion

Migrants are inherently transnational. Leveraging the expansive solidarities of migrant women, the way local struggles extend into other regions by way of their multiple belongings, means adopting a dramaturgical method that reflects complex ties to places, avoiding myopic views of particular localities and complicating easy attachments to terms such as local/global, citizen/migrant and personal/political. A migrant dramaturgy is based on all there is to learn from not being at home in the world, from the restriction of possibilities to what can be learned from staying in places in which we are not entirely welcome. We learn about worlds in which we are not accommodated, which do not expect us to be there; and using the resources of our particulars to challenge the universal, we generate knowledge (Ahmed 2017). Through the creative acts of generosity facilitated by the Priority Mail Process Lab, we mobilised what might be called a migrant attitude, a migritude if you will, towards art making and life, where migritude is understood as a genre of black migrant cultural production. This is an attitude that gives permission to rest and receive while contemplating in community the various refusals that we inhabit and practice, refusals that can be equated with a desire for freedom that Ruth Wilson Gilmore characterises as the possibility of living an unbounded life (in Campt, 2017).

To think about the Process Lab as a work of migritude is to consider how the project was defined by a dramaturgy of displacement (Fleishman 2015), in that movement was the primary feature of the form, content and context of the project. It also addressed Africa as a point of migratory arrival and departure, disrupting notions of the African Diaspora and all the accompanying connotations of extraction *from* the African continent. The intersections of race, gender and migration provided

critical points of orientation for the project and an enduring notion of possibility was established by the gifting of prompts that could be responded to at any time in the future, determined by each of us, and according to our own capacities. This was a particularly resonant discovery in the search for a dramaturgical framework that centres migrant potentiality.

Framing Priority Mail as a project of migritude and a form of feminist praxis, is to suggest that its slow and steady work of imagining this kind of unbounded life, lies in its "ability to keep insisting on something: the ongoing existence of the very things we wish to bring to an end" (Ahmed 2017, 6). The success of Priority Mail rests on the space that was created for black women migrants to meditate collectively on the possibilities of living unbounded lives, and on how we all in our own small ways already are. In *Migritude*, the performance poem, Patel establishes the parameters of a community of migrants with attitudes that are unapologetic in their refusal to hold on to things that diminish them, and their rebellion against things that do. It is this life-giving gesture towards possibility that the Priority Mail Process Lab was able to mobilise and instantiate as a core feature of migrant dramaturgy.

As an experiment in migrant dramaturgy, The Priority Mail Process Lab was defined by virtual residency, analogue exchange and diasporic care practice. It piloted a form of artistic research that was invested in experiential artistic encounters across borders that in this case included the borders of geography, artistic discipline and language. It centred the capacity of the figure of the migrant to disrupt illusions of certainty, stability and fixity in productive ways, by foregrounding mobility, unpredictability, fluidity and surprise. Importantly, it did not aim at producing marketable artistic objects, but instead worked with the idea of sharing some documentation of a process-based experience with an online public. A migrant dramaturgy follows Paul Carter's "framework of thinking that makes the migrant central, not ancillary to historical processes" (1992, 7) and argues for the condition of migrancy itself as being generative of new cultural forms. This necessitates a move away from understanding migrant identities as hopelessly displaced, both physically and psychologically, and forever seeking to be reunified to an original (national) home. Instead, it expands our understanding of how identities and relationships are actively invented and therefore susceptible to reinvention (Carter 2004). Carter argues for migration as not only a cultural and historical fact, but importantly for this project, for migrancy as a poetic attitude, and it is this poetic migrant attitude, or *migritude*, that provides the foundation for a migrant dramaturgy.

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Notes

1. https://thenapministry.com/.
2. Hersey describes 'grind culture' as a "collaboration between white supremacy and capitalism" (Hersey, 2022:11). Grind culture views people as machines.
3. https://www.t-n-b.fr/magazine/africa2020.