Traversing Distances and Differences: Developing the African Women's Playwright Network[1]

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Abstract

In 2015, playwright, director and screenwriter from Cape Town, South Africa, Amy Jephta and I set up the African Women's Playwright Network (AWPN) via a mobile app to traverse literal, conceptual and historic distances to enable artists, researchers, educators, programmers and publishers from various parts of Africa and its diasporas to connect. In this article, I will trace how and why this network was set up, while reflecting on what we need to think about when creating online and in-person spaces for artists and academics to explore difficult questions across cultural lines in postcolonial contexts. These questions include how we consider colonial legacies that continue to impact this kind of contemporary cross-cultural work, and how we shifted the network from discourse on creativity to what Aristea Fotopolou terms '*doing* feminism and *being* feminist' (2016:5), as lived and performed behaviours.

This article is a combination of a story and critical reflection on the establishment of the African Women's Playwright Network (AWPN) by South African screenwriter and playwright Amy Jephta and Yvette Hutchison to traverse literal, conceptual and historic distances between womxn creatives from various parts of Africa and its diasporas and with researchers, like myself, programmers, publishers and educators around the world. In a feminist mode, I work through my subjective story, tracing my challenges alongside the goals and accomplishments of the project to analyse the complexities of shaping creative and professional networks across cultures, especially in postcolonial contexts.

Along the way, I want to particularly reflect on the impact using decolonising indigenous research methodologies has presented in creating this network, as well as the stickiness of colonial legacies for all concerned.

African stories usually begin with a call from the storyteller and response from the audience In the same vein, I begin by asking you to write down the names of African playwrights whose work you teach, have read or seen. How many of these are women? How many women are creating in the 21st century?

And so, your story begins to intersect perhaps with ours….

This project began for me in 2014 when Jane Plastow, Christine Matzke and I set out to track new theatrical work by African women writers, directors, and actors for *African Theatre: Contemporary Women* (Plastow, et al, 2015). In our research process, we discovered that although African women creatives are engaged in a prolific amount of new and innovative playwrighting and theatre practices, they are largely unheard of, and certainly not being engaged with by scholars, publishers or those setting curricula.

In African literature, a fair amount of prose fiction and poetry has been published, but theatre texts lag significantly,[2] and papers on African theatre in journals tend to focus on work by African men published in the twentieth century, often from the 1970s and 1980s. Women's work is significantly under-represented, with a few texts by individual women having been published, and only two anthologies of plays about or by African women, both edited by Kathy Perkins in 2015, with only one exclusively by African women, published in 2009. This proportion is shocking, given the size of the African continent and the prolific creative activity of the women on it.

These patterns of publishing and programming exemplify the ways in which colonialism continues to haunt the present and is being challenged by movements like South Africa's #Rhodesmustfall & #FeesMustfall campaigns from 2015, that criticised the systems that lock them into western paradigms of knowledge practices, and demanded complete shifts in paradigms. This is what Gayatri Spivak calls 'the task of epistemological engagement' (2012: 9) that involve new habits of thinking […] and 'not just an addition of new things to think about'

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[2] This is paralleled in African literature awards, where there are prestigious awards for prose fiction – the Noma Award, the Caine Prize for African Writing, and the Brunel University African Poetry Prize. Potentially the EBRD Literature Prize, launched in 2017 by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in partnership with the British Council and the London Book Fair, and the Wole Soyinka Prize for literature in Africa would consider a playwright, and the Prince Klaus fund has awarded playwrights as laureates. But there is no specific award for African Theatre yet. Nonetheless, national associations do acknowledge playwriting. For example, the second runner-up for the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) Drama Prize in 2018 was a woman, Achalugo Ezekobe.

(Bala, 2017: 335). This is a complex undertaking, because, as M. Jacqui Alexander argues, although empire may be gone, 'the epistemologies, systems and knowledges it created continue to define and haunt us' (2005: 1). These epistemologies continue to be affected by how research is undertaken and disseminated and by whom; which artists' work is seen, published and taught. These decisions profoundly define what can or cannot be known, discussed, and practised now and in the future. At this point I asked myself: how do I/we begin to address these imbalances, access African women playwrights, and engage their work more widely? What would I have to think about in the process?

And of course, the first thing was methodologies. I was influenced by readings on indigenous and decolonising research methodologies, especially the writing of Linda Tehui Smith who demands a situated, critical, negotiated approach to researching with indigenous peoples; not only reflecting on what we might be asked in an ethics form on potential positive and negative outcomes for participants, but whether we even have the right to access such knowledge or practices. This highlighted the need to begin with the community in the design of this network project for which I had received AHRC funding. I approached Amy Jephta, a South African playwright who was teaching at University of Cape Town's drama department, to consider how to approach this project. She suggested that we create a purpose-built application to provide a safe space in which African women could identify themselves as creative practitioners and begin to connect with one another. This was a huge challenge for a 'tech luddite' who had never used an app before, never mind work with a company to purpose-build a platform, bearing in mind our research on how a platform's design would predefine its usage.

We began to research mobile technology in Africa and discovered that it has transformed how people communicate with one another and access information (GlobalStats 2016, GSM Association 2018, 2018a). However, the accompanying research emphasised that digital inequalities exist in any society and are unsurprisingly affected by gender, race, and socioeconomic status (Cooper & Weaver, 2003; DiMaggio et al., 2004; Junco, 2013). These cautions informed our decision to work with Every1mobile (E1M), a SA-UK company with multi-device platform expertise for users in Africa who have limited access to the internet. This company run projects in multiple countries on a huge range of topics and has reached millions of people. However, up to this point, E1M had worked primarily on message-based projects, but we wanted to create a more dialogic platform which placed more control of the material on site in the hands of the users. The build consultation process highlighted the importance of considering how an

online app's structure and functionality will affect how a network can function before a project begins.[3]

Given the considerations around online structure and the methodologies suggested by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, we wanted a partnership model of working with the network that differentiated research process and network management roles to recognise colonial legacies and power hierarchies, while actively supporting reciprocal knowledge generation. Once we had the basic wire-frame designs, we approached a small group of women playwrights who were invested in the idea to begin to conceptualise and test the online space as a democratic platform that would enable researchers and creative practitioners to interact with one another and compare methodologies, aesthetic choices and issues in ways that ensured that the participants remain in control of their own representations and knowledges, rather than being led by researchers' *a priori* questions or assumptions. Together, we conceptualised an application to meet the following project aims:

- increase the women's visibility and connectivity beyond their specific regions, so that they could access other artists, programmers, opportunities nationally and internationally, by enabling all participants to create an online profile with their name, location, and profession, searchable by country, city, name;
- highlight performance events and share practice as creative practitioners;
- facilitate critical engagement of issues related to women's creativity via forums.

Most of the features offered by the app were similar to those available via social media sites like Facebook, where people share their profiles, events, and opportunities. However, the application's structure and searchability functions shifted the network from a linear feed of information to an assembled bank of knowledge that could be easily searched. The differentiated registration and sign on also secured a safe space for women to share and discuss issues particular to their experiences and limit outsider access to encourage sharing and open discussion of issues arising.

The awpn.org website was launched at the Womens' Playwright International Conference in Cape Town in June 2015 and grew slowly to c140 registered participants from 21 countries by June 2017. We then began analysing application engagement by the group and noticed that the AWPN Facebook page and calendar function on the app were being used primarily to share opportunities for work and announcements of events, and that most of the sharing of practice

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[3] For an analysis of considerations regarding online networking, see Hutchison 2019a.

happened on the closed application; but even this was limited (analysed further in Hutchison, 2019a). These patterns supported Linda Tuhiwai Smith's argument in *Decolonising methodologies* that 'Relationships are initiated on a face-to-face basis … [which] is about checking out an individual's credentials, not just their political credentials but their personalities and spirit' (Smith, 2012:157-158). Aristea Fotopolou's research on the embodied nature and impact of digital networks (2016) further supports the need to analyse digital networks as complex, more than a system that facilitates connections, but also about the materiality of the processes and relationships involved, and the making of new publics (Stephansen 2016:38).

In response to this data, we saw the need to hold an in-person event. This was the first symposium for women creative practitioners in Africa with the theme, *Breaking Boundaries: African Women Writing on the Edges of Race, Gender and Identity*, hosted by the Arts Admin Collective in Cape Town, South Africa from 4-5 February 2017. This brought together 55 women from eight African countries and the UK to discuss and share skills, expertise, and good practice. Instead of making individual presentations, we arranged facilitated structured workshops around questions that had been raised via the app forum. This led to the women analysing and strategizing how they could tackle access to funding, industry infrastructures and space, target audiences, and consider the impact of self-censorship on their work. They discussed how they could strategize change, including setting up regional groups to lobby regarding space and female representation in formal arts organisations. Participants fed back that they had a new awareness with regards to 'how issues of social and political dynamics function', about how to have 'uneasy conversations' about 'access to state-sponsored institutions', and the value of collaborations in the context of limited resources. The symposium actively tested Fotolopou's analysis of how networked feminism, described as 'the collective identities and communicative practices of activists as they are shaped by the social imaginary of the internet (understood as The internet) and digital engagement' (2016: 4), involves an 'interplay between local embodied struggles, protests and the more discursive and disembodied activity online' (2016. 5). By bringing these embodied struggles into a literal space, we shifted the network from discourse on creativity to what Fotopolou terms '*doing* feminism and *being* feminist' (Ibid.), where the women explored what these ideas mean as lived and performed behaviours for themselves.

Feedback from the symposium suggested that it was been hugely impactful on several levels: A participant of the project reported:

It [the symposium] was all about bringing us together. Up until I was in the network, I had never met my fellow playwrights. ...we all cried on the first night, because we African women who all had other jobs, all were doing other things, all writing plays, all very passionate about it, but none of us met each other. None of us had had the opportunity to discuss with each other all the issues. And the

biggest issue was: how do we get our work out there? (JC Niala, at 'Africa Writes', 7.40-8.30 mins)

The personal relationships brokered have facilitated several collaborations between artists across the continent and beyond it. These included a Ugandan play being invited to a Zimbabwean festival; a Kenyan artist being invited to take her work and teach primarily black undergraduate students at a South African university; and a Cameroonian playwright touring her ecological play for children between 2-9 years to festivals in South Africa, Cameroon, Rwanda & Kenya (Nov 2017, May 2019) and Angola (July 2017), and then being invited to the USA on a fellowship.

And for me this meant being thoughtful about appropriate contribution I could and should be making to this network as it evolves. I drew consciously on Soyinka Madison's critical ethnographic approach (2012:30) that insists that we keep our own positionality in mind, especially regarding status, privilege, and how this could skew participant responses to us in the field, which led me to remain at a service level of engagement at the symposium – feeding, driving the participants around. And it was effective, as one of the writers thanked me for my silence in the event, seen as an overt contribution. This is another consideration for researchers: when to lead, and when to remain silent, listen and learn.

In March 2019, we held the second symposium, where we launched the new anthology *Contemporary Plays by African Women* (Hutchison and Jephta, 2019) with staged readings of the seven plays in Cape Town. The Artistic Director of the Arts Admin Collective Theatre, the venue for this event, Caroline Calburn said, 'I think it's important to have the AWPN for a continental connection, which I think is essential to our development as South African theatre makers. These things open perspectives, relationships, partnerships, collaborations and a greater understanding of our place in the continent' (2019). These events have also enabled researchers to see how artists think and approach their work in ways that could not be foreseen, and which may have been overlooked had a priori research questions led the encounters. The efficacy of the events is captured in the short AWPN project film (2019).

Since its inception in 2015, the online network has achieved significant benefits for artists and programmers by brokering opportunities for funding, fellowships, and programming. This has resulted in changed programming both in African countries and the UK/USA. For example, through the network, the Pulley & Button Theatre, Philadelphia called for new plays by African women and were excited to include three new, unpublished plays by AWPN members for their May 2019 programme. Their Artistic Director Bridget Reilley confirms, 'there's a need for the African Women's Playwrights Network because it gives these incredibly talented women the exposure that they aren't getting through more traditional means, and it allows those of us who are looking for them to find

them'. The network has enabled international organisations to access new, diverse work from across the continent. Talking about the significance of the network on her career development, Thembelilhe Moyo from Zimbabwe said that 'the network is making a difference to me personally because I have grown globally. I have met people that I'm doing other collaborations with through the network. I have got other projects that I'm working on at home that are from other continents that I have met through the network. Personally, I think I have grown, in terms of my writing and I have grown in terms of acquiring global space and being connected'.

The network has also actively pursued ways for these practitioners to access mentoring and professional development opportunities. It has set up live and online peer mentoring and partnered with the Canadian Guild of Playwrights on the CASA (Canadian and South African) Awards Project. Between 2017 and 2022, CASA funded one or more annual three-month residencies for a South African woman creative, which was supported financially by CAD 5,000 (06-2017) and dramaturgically by a senior woman-identified playwright in Canada and a South African host theatre and director to produce the new work professionally. This initiative has cultivated meaningful artistic connections; since the award's launch, two of the award's recipients have toured their work in Canada and one recipient has won the Distell National Playwright award, based on the script she developed during her CASA residency. From 2019, Hutchison began developing the network into an organization, with a steering committee of women being trained to set up, plan and run AWPN as a business that can access funding, plan events and mentor emerging artists.

AWPN has also worked to broaden cultural understandings of social concerns in Africa and beyond. To this end, I worked with the Belgrade Theatre Youth Group in Coventry, UK in 2019 to stage extracts from the three plays from *Contemporary Plays by African Women* that were performed at the Belgrade and Oxford Playhouse Theatres in the UK, with Q&As after each performance. This worked to change perceptions of playwrights and plays from the continent and raise important social issues such as gender-based violence and child soldiers, and how these may parallel in the global north, for example in gang violence in urban cities. Practitioners and audiences discussed how pan-African plays can break silences and become a road map for difficult conversations, a space for sharing stories and identifying shared experiences. As one audience member noted: 'I was hugely struck by the diversity of the voices, experiences and heritage represented by the collection – but also the points of commonality/connection/shared experiences' (Oxford feedback). Audience members commented that the events had shown them 'how powerful theatre is in raising difficult issues and making people talk about them' and highlighted 'how women are treated in society and that it really needs to change' (Belgrade feedback). The events facilitated the voices of African women in spaces where they have historically been excluded, as

Ugandan playwright, Adong Judith says, 'in a world where men have dominated for so long, it is very important to have a space that provides room for women to be who they are, to tell the stories they want to tell without fear and that's why the AWPN is very important'.

Following on from these events, Hutchison has received requests to consult on how the network could be modelled in different areas, for example the African Language and Literature Association reached out to AWPN when setting up their Caucus on Performance, and a network for playwrights facing government persecution (5.8) to achieve similar aims.

The increased accessibility of African playwrights and their work is facilitating important decolonisation of curricula in Africa and beyond, particularly with the new play collection being available to schools and HEIs. The success of the anthology is evidenced in its having sold over 500 copies in the first year of publication. Professors from Stanford and Harvard (USA) have advocated for its inclusion on literature syllabi, and the University of California, Irvine and Bayreuth University, Germany have adopted the collection, alongside South Africa universities – University of Cape Town, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal and Rhodes University.

Additionally, in collaboration with the Africa Writes project, part of the Royal African Society in London, the AWPN piloted ideas for an African theatre education toolkit for secondary teachers at Stoke Newington School, North London. 20 students from years 7-9 (first three years of secondary school) performed two play extracts at a local community event and were programmed for the Africa Writes event on 5 July 2019 at the British Library. Africa Writes have stated that 'the partnership was extremely valuable, moving us into new territory in the curriculum through drama, and offering fresh perspectives for our partner teachers, who gained professional development from observing and participating in the workshops. The workshops also changed perceptions of Africa and African theatre for those who took part'. Subsequently, Hutchison scoped the theatre, history and literature curriculum in the UK and responsively expanded this work into a digital education resource on *Theatre in the African Context*, designed for secondary schools and made available through the network internationally. Between 16 April 2020 and 31 December 2020, it was downloaded for use in 46 schools, 39 Universities, 10 public sector organisations, 6 social enterprise companies, 7 charities and one local authority in 25 countries in North and South America, Europe, Asia and Africa. It is being used in both school and undergraduate university curricula by over 100 organisations, suggesting both the paucity of material available on the subject, the interest in the work, and the interest there is in broadened cultural awareness and engagement of young people with the African continent.

But there have been challenges, particularly on sustainability and colonial legacies. Regarding sustainability, to enable events, AWPN has to move from a network to an independent organisation, which requires management and governance structures and funding streams This is hugely challenging as a transnational organisation with steering committee comprising artists without business management training, in three African countries (Nigeria, Botswana and South Africa). This challenge has made the second issue – legacies of colonialism – more visible. Colonialism tended to keep the management and financing of projects in the same hands of those from the Global North. Thus, while the women are keen to grow the project, they often seem ill-equipped to run such an organisation.

We have addressed these two challenges by drawing on expertise and financial support from the university via philanthropic sponsorship, as the women are supported to can learn what it means to create a business and financial plan, organise events and projects on and off-line. This has required financial investment in training them in business and social media strategic planning. One important critical reflection is the need to have appropriate home for the network in mind and involved from the outset.

I reflect on the AWPN steering committees programme of work during COVID-19, when it ran various online sessions and master classes mentoring young writers, and organised an inaugural festival of new 10-minute plays co-hosted with the University of Ghana in September 2022. Women from six countries tackled taboo topics. This platform is important as it creates a space for women to work together, and define themselves and their work with a sense of critical mass. However, challenges continue to confront us – including the enormous diversity of the continent in terms of languages (over 2000), cultures, and sub-cultures. A network demands a lingua franca, despite the invitation for people to use whatever language they choose, which highlights tensions between local and global communities and the ways in which language affects inclusivity and deeply situated expressions of personal experiences. So, as we attempt to traverse distances together, using unprecedented contemporary opportunities technology affords us, we remain mindful of differences – between countries, peoples, cultures and above all remember that new technologies are fast moving platforms and need users and researchers to challenge simplistic views that they are necessarily liberating spaces (Tovar, 2012), to be clear about their potentialities for inclusion <u>and</u> exclusion.

It is now my pleasure to introduce the new work of Getrude Vimbayi Munhamo-Pfumayaramba, a Zimbabwean playwright and 2022 AWPN artist-in-residence who spent 10 weeks at the University of Warwick as artist-in-residence as she wrote her new play, *Sizwe… Nyika… Nation!*, which explores ethnic hatred that has led to genocide in various nations. She seeks to answer the question, 'what

now?' There is a recording of a staged reading by University of Warwick students available on AWPN YouTube page, https://youtu.be/Yh26thPX_PI.

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