

Priority Mail: Virtual Residency, Analogue Exchange and Diasporic Creative Practices of Care

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In 2019, I was invited, by the Africa 2020/1 Festival in France, to participate in the curation of a programme of events that featured artists of different disciplines across Africa. In response to this invitation, I, along with two collaborators, Lindiwe Matshikiza and Nicola Pilkington, envisioned a 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 and ideas between six Francophone and Anglophone artists whose biographies flow through the African continent. Instead of asking artists to create content based cultural goods, the aim of the Process Lab was to facilitate different ways to travel through a counterpart's imaginary and world through artistic correspondence, laboratory experiences and resource sharing.

As a temporary collective, Priority Mail brought together women from across the African diaspora working in a range of artistic disciplines, in a process of artistic exchange and collaboration that centred on the making and receiving of a physical package of artistic prompts. The undercurrent guiding our discussions during the residency were about our personal experiences of migration as women with complex relationships to the Africa continent. Making, sending, tracking and receiving the packages became a way to actively reflect on current geopolitics and the ways in which migrants are made and defined by colonial borders.

In this planetary moment that has thrown into sharp relief issues of physical distance, social inequality, and the complexities of product and content driven economies, among the questions that guided the curatorial framing of the Lab at an intimate level, was *what does it mean to be talking about Africa right now if we think about it as not being a physical place?* Through deliberately analogue physical activity, virtual meetings and the making of a shared diary, the Lab aimed to leverage the opportunity for artists in Francophone and Anglophone Africa to be more easily connected, while critically engaging with the historical reasons that they are not.

The opportunity and invitation of the Lab was to (re)invest in experimental and experiential artistic encounters and connections that are process-based, slow, iterative, collaborative, and that occur across and between borders, disciplines and languages. The residual material from the package exchanges, edited selections of our virtual meetings, and selections of the Residency Diary have been documented on a dedicated page on the Africa 2020 magazine website (<https://www.t-n-b.fr/magazine/africa2020>). I would like to take the opportunity of the ARA 2022 conference to reflect on the Priority Mail Process Lab project through a paper presentation. The focus of this reflection will be on the ways in which Priority Mail is an articulation of the black migrant artistic genre called migritude which Shailja Patel defines as “philosophical meditation on what it means to live within the concept of Migrant”¹. The presentation will explore how the processes of sending and receiving, sharing and gifting of the physical artistic prompts stands in for the relocation and dislocation of people and objects at the heart of migratory inquiry.

Bio:

Mwenya B. Kabwe is a Zambian-born maker of theatre and performance, facilitator of creative processes, a performer, writer, arts educator and scholar. Her creative practice is focused on contemporary African theatre and performance, immersive and site-specific performance work, live art, collaborative and interdisciplinary art making and re-imagining African futures. She is currently a Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Theatre Dance & Performance Studies at UCT, and a Research Associate at the Wits School of Arts.

¹ (Patel, Shailja, 2010, p. 12)