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Performances of motherhood and migration: Addressing the silences of gendered waiting in two South African plays

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Performances of motherhood and migration: Addressing the silences of gendered waiting in two South African plays

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ABSTRACT
Despite the growing currency of migrant experiences among African women and the prominence of motherhood in reflections on African womanhood, literature and the performing arts have rarely addressed the challenges of mothering and migration together. Engaging with responses to these challenges in South African theatre, this article discusses representations of motherhood and mother–daughter relations in Yaël Farber’s A Woman in Waiting and Magnet Theatre’s Every Year, Every Day, I am Walking. It examines how these plays relate experiences of work and forced migration and how they create nuanced portrayals of motherhood-in-migration by staging dialogues between the mothers’ and daughters’ experiences and subjectivities, which mediate both intimacy and conflict. By tracing these dialogues within the context of plotlines and performative techniques, this article identifies the ways in which the plays convey the sociality of gendered suffering, foregrounding its particularity as well as structural features.

KEYWORDS
Motherhood; migration; South African theatre; Yaël Farber; Magnet Theatre

Suffering, agency and the figure of the migrant mother

Twentieth-century African literatures abound in images of mothers as resilient, strong, wise, but rarely as reflecting on their own painful experiences or communicating these to their children. From the 1960s, as women writers began reclaiming their voices and spaces of expression, motherhood became a central part of this reclamation – reconfiguring the idealized images through a persistent focus on the materiality of being a mother (Boehmer 2005, 100–101). Since the 1970s, as migration and travelling overseas became more common for women, writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo and recently Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have addressed these experiences. However, these texts seldom engage with motherhood as a core aspect of migrant women’s negotiations of work, family life and belonging, apart from Emecheta’s Second Class Citizen and some of Adichie’s short stories (Uwakweh 2014). Interlinking motherhood and migration experiences has been daunting due to the lack of a critical language in which to address migration and motherhood together, as such language would inevitably challenge the gendered imaginations of voice and mobility. Moreover, the creation of multifaceted portrayals of migrant mothers involves representing the
ambiguities of power and powerlessness, agency and victimhood, and the intersubjective character of identity that involves intergenerational dialogue and its dynamics in the contexts of displacement. As recent cultural production increasingly focuses on gendered experiences in narratives of migration and attempts to represent a variety of migrant subjectivities, a pertinent question is to what extent this involves nuanced images of mothers (and children). In conveying migrant experiences, literature and theatre, as media that require a degree of access privilege, often address host communities and aim to educate and sensitize them to the hardships and dilemmas of migration. This practice, however, is prone to essentialist representations of the suffering or disorientated “other” and to what Sara Ahmed (2013), with reference to Wendy Brown, has called “fetishization of the wound in subaltern politics” (32). The dangers of this fetishism – of “transforming wound into identity” – is that it obscures the historical origins of the wound and disregards the politics of witnessing in experiencing and communicating pain (32).

With regard to testimonial theatre, Julie Salverson (1999) cautions against the production of an “erotics of injury” (n.p.) which ultimately sustains the power relations between privileged viewers and testifying refugees. In the context of a globalized “trauma culture” which since the 1990s has become a leading mode of representing collective suffering and injustice (Kaplan 2005), the rhetoric of displaced “women and children” tends to create a generalized image of victimhood, which depoliticizes migrants’ individual and collective struggles.

It is this danger upon which Emma Cox (2012) reflects in her reading of Every Year, Every Day I am Walking – one of the two South African plays discussed in the present article. In this piece of physical theatre about a mother and daughter escaping mass violence in Central Africa only to face xenophobic treatment in Cape Town, she traces a dialectic of victimhood and hope typical of contemporary refugee narratives. She observes the potential simplification and even commodification (at least in performances for western audiences) that such oscillation between depictions of loss and alienation, on the one hand, and recovery and redemption, on the other, may produce. While identifying these negative potentialities inscribed within the affective dialectic of the play, Cox (2012, 131) recognizes that in a different context the same structure can produce deep emotional engagement and work towards social change.

A similar ambiguity pertains to the other play addressed in this article, Yaël Farber’s A Woman in Waiting, which in a testimonial form relates a story of the internal migration of a mother and daughter (told from the latter’s perspective) from rural to urban areas in South Africa. It is also a story of loss, dispossession and, eventually, recovery. The genre of testimony involves the claim of authenticity, and with it “the danger of a superficial empathy that can result in approaching representation as a ‘mirror of reality’” (Salverson 1999, n.p.); nevertheless, as Yvette Hutchison (2015) argues with regard to Farber’s testimonial plays, their autobiographical character is precisely what provokes “understanding and empathy for people whose histories and memories can be different from our [the viewers’] own” (154).

My reading of the two plays generally aligns with the above-mentioned discussions, which foreground the ability of the plays to avoid the pitfalls of affect-generating representations of migrants and refugees, particularly when performed for audiences who share some of the experiences or are knowledgeable about the contexts of
oppression the plays invoke. Among the reasons mentioned is the use of embodied expression in *Every Year*, which conveys a deeper “truthfulness” precisely through non-factual representation that subverts the categories of verbal language (Cox 2012, 124). In *A Woman in Waiting*, a similar effect is achieved through inclusion of phrases and narratives in African languages, which facilitate a more reflective engagement by audiences who are made to “listen empathetically” while “acknowledging their place relative to the narrative” (Hutchison 2015, 153).

There is, however, another aspect of the plays that generates the viewers’ engagement and empathy but which neither critic has focused on. Both plays centre on stories of mothers and daughters that involve reciprocity and distancing, affective connection and conflict. The representations of migration involving two women’s experiences, as my reading demonstrates, do not entail mere doubling but are profoundly *dialogical*: the positionalities, knowledge, memories, reactions and traumas of the mothers and daughters are diverging and entwining. The conflicts between their experiences and actions drive the narratives forward and accentuate alienation of each character, while their sharing of emotions provides reinforcement and generates hope. Both aspects, of distance and proximity, in these representations mediate affect and facilitate recognition of generational, gender-specific as well as individual responses to displacement, subverting the use of generic tropes and static portrayals of migration.

Both plays perform stories of trauma and recovery in which states of waiting and silence are transformed into practices of speech and dialogic sharing. “Waiting” in Farber’s play refers to the experience of a rural girl longing to see her mother who works “in the kitchens” of white families in Durban, and of the same protagonist having become a mother herself, separated from her daughter while taking care of white people’s children. It functions as a trope of inherited gendered silences regarding women’s experiences of motherhood-and-migration. This is reflected in the daughter’s painful exploration of her mother’s hardships as a migrant worker, never expressed by the mother herself, but excavated and explored by the protagonist through her testimony. In *Every Year*, likewise, the traumatic experience of migration, compounded by the loss of the older daughter (and a sister, for the younger protagonist), results in intractable silences between the surviving women. The mother refuses to speak about the past and to tell her daughter Aggie about what happened to Ernestine; this causes Aggie’s sense of insecurity and distancing from her mother as she longs to reconnect with her sister. The figure of waiting here, comparable to Farber’s play, conveys the traumatic standstill that can be overcome by re-establishing communication between mothers and daughters.

These plotlines can be read as narratives of redemption charting a normative path – for postcolonial subjects in particular – from loss and despair to hope and “homing”. Even if this is the general trajectory, the road to regaining the self in a new place and time is performed in more complex ways. Whether the plays employ primarily the means of testimony or bodily movement to represent transition from silence to expression, the telling of one’s story of loss and migration is contingent on *dialogues between the mothers and daughters*. More specifically, it is determined by the daughters’ efforts at exploring their mothers’ histories and traumas and by their attempts to initiate real or virtual conversations across generations. The readings that follow suggest that this dialogic aspect in the plot structure and performance of the stories is crucial, as it
facilitates, along with the affect-generating methodologies of physical and testimonial theatre, a more nuanced understanding of postcolonial experiences of migration and the viewers’ ability to relate to them. This effect is enhanced by the interplay of generality and specificity, but it is the latter that is central to dialogic understanding. Such specificity is foregrounded through divergences between the mothers and daughters that shape the plots, the use of resonant objects involving both symbolism and materiality and the employment of local cultural repertoires (songs, dance and language). My analysis centres on these aspects.

The use of “dialogic” in my readings refers to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theorization of dialogism in discourse and representation. By stressing the situatedness and internal heterogeneity of voices, dialogism proposes a model of interaction within which different positions, even within a single utterance, relate to one another but, unless forced, never become reduced to each other (Bakhtin 1986, 89). Central to this vision is the idea of situatedness of one’s perspective and positioning. The premise of all understanding is the subjects’ ability to respond across time and place, without leaving their culturally and historically specific locations. Hence, the uniqueness of one’s position is what characterizes any responsive (and responsible) act (Bakhtin 1993, 42). Importantly, Bakhtin’s conception of dialogic discourse does not entail coherence and agreement but, on the contrary, stresses struggle and confrontation between subjectivities. Yet, although “all of each individual’s words are divided into the categories of his own and others […] the boundaries between them can change, and a tense dialogic struggle takes place on the boundaries” (Bakhtin 1986, 143). This argument foregrounds the possibility of shifting constructed differences between the self and the other. The existence of boundaries is not questioned, but they are theorized as dynamic spaces (as opposed to lines) where movement and negotiation are possible.

This lens is helpful for understanding the emergence of verbal and embodied narratives about the past which foreground interactions between different experiences and show only initial steps towards possible healing in place of a celebratory narrative of reconciliation. In both plays, the mothers’ stories and subjectivities are marginal in relations to those of the daughters, particularly in Farber’s piece, where the mother is only invoked through the protagonist’s memories and appears on the stage as an inanimate object – a huge suspended dress. The stories are, however, formative for the daughters’ recreation of their own identities; the entire plays, in this sense, can be regarded as dialogues on the boundaries – in the Bakhtinian sense – between the mothers’ and daughters’ positionalities.

The dialogic concreteness of such interactions is a significant characteristic of the performances, given the problem of commodification inherent in representations of pain and suffering in postcolonial contexts, including those of migration. However, as Zoë Norridge (2013, 14–25) argues with regard to African writing, texts that frame expressions of trauma in terms of what Françoise Lionnet (1993) has called “social suffering” and that invoke particularities of experience can avoid the dangers of victimization and in fact politicize readers’ perceptions. Social suffering, in this context, points at “the ways in which the wider social, political and cultural systems affect the lives of individuals” and “render[s] visible violence systematically inflicted on people configured as ‘other’ by Western eyes” (Norridge 2013, 15).

The readings that follow explore the socio-historical specificity in representing migrant women’s struggles while considering, alongside them, the stories of internal (rural to urban) and transnational migration (across different regions of Africa).
illuminate the confluences in representing the experiences by black women from rural areas within the deeply racialized economy of South African cities, with continuities between apartheid and post-apartheid times. From a literary-historical perspective, discussing these representations in dialogue can help to identify common tropes and idioms. While gendered experiences of internal migration have been among major themes in South African women’s writing since the 1980s, transnational migration is an emerging focus of cultural productions since the beginning of migrant and refugee movement to South Africa in the 2000s. The representations of the latter, with Jonathan Nkala’s play *The Crossing* and Yewande Omotoso’s novel *Bom Boy* being acclaimed examples, have focused primarily on men’s experiences (Flockemann et al. 2010; Fassett 2015). Produced in 2006, *Every Year* is a pioneering example of engaging women’s stories of seeking asylum and starting a new life in South Africa.

Beyond international theatre practices of staging migrant narratives on which Magnet Theatre and Farber certainly rely, my reading traces the repertoires which link them to the literary-cultural archive of representing migrant women in South Africa. A central aspect in these representations is the impossibility of mothering experienced by women due to exile, work migration and pass laws; and, from the children’s perspective, the disconnection from and lack of knowledge about their mothers. This estrangement provokes the children (usually daughters) to search for ways of learning about their mothers’ (and sometimes grandmothers’) experiences; most representations focus on the traumas caused by this gulf, represented through repetitions of the mothers’ experiences in the daughters’ stories. Both plays, in reflecting on different experiences from varied periods, involve these motifs and speak from within the outlined tradition. They perform the traumatic detachment and repetitions, but, unlike many earlier or contemporary representations, they place the stories of mothers and daughters in a *dialogue* and represent the daughters’ partial assimilation of their mothers’ experiences through their speaking to, with and about their mothers.

**Repetition and difference**

The testimony of Thembi, recounting her life from her birth (from the imaginary perspective of her mother) to the narrative present is structured by the motif of waiting. The play consists of four parts, the first and the third of which (“Counting Full Moons” and “Spilt Milk”) mirror the protagonist’s experiences of waiting as a daughter and mother. Counting moons until the Christmas holidays, when Thembi would be visited by her mother, introduces the context of separation, reproduced once she becomes a young mother herself and, as a “live-in” domestic servant, has to wait a whole week to see her baby daughter and breastfeed her. Here, not the full moons but the flow of milk becomes the measurement of time.

Thembi is initiated into the gendered norm of waiting from a very young age; even the second (European) name her father chooses for her, “Heavygale”, anticipates the hardships that a woman was expected to endure. She treats this senseless name in a way similar to her dismissal of the English nursery rhyme she was taught at school, as it has no relation to her daily life: “We did not understand a word we were saying. This ‘Jack and Jill’. [ … ] What did it have to do with my world? I waited to share my Gogo’s [Grandmother’s] rhyme. I waited – but no one asked” (Farber 2008, 44). On the other
hand, the traditional songs taught by her Gogo, which feature prominently throughout the performance, convey most meaningfully Thembi’s emotions and desires. Performed in Zulu, they recreate an atmosphere of home and bring in the intimate meanings that shaped Thembi’s world. It is noteworthy that the songs, as part of the cultural repertoire that provides a grounding for the girl’s identity, are transmitted to her by her grandmother: this communication stresses a generational gap between mother and daughter, but it also creates a close gendered connection as Thembi’s performance of the songs recalls the singing and dancing by her grandmother.8 This embodied entwinement of two identities is emphasized even more when we learn, at the end of the play, that Thembi is now a grandmother herself.

In some of the songs, she addresses the Ncede bird (a popular trickster character in Zulu tales), asking him to deliver messages to her parents and urge them to visit her sooner (Farber 2008, 41). The bird becomes a proxy in the girl’s imaginary conversations with her mother, stressing the lack of real conversations between them and Thembi’s deep yearning for such communication. The freedom and courage of the tiny bird, who managed to touch the tallest mountain, contrasts with the girl’s predicament of waiting for the possibility of moving to Durban and living with her parents. In the later scenes, Zulu songs reappear mostly involving the contexts of Thembi’s own mothering or longing to mother her daughter. Thus, the songs function as a nexus between mother and daughter subjectivities and, by extension, create affective links between performers and audiences.

Most poignantly, the effects of the separation on the daughter and mother are rendered through the image of the little shoes which Thembi receives every Christmas. Every year her mother would measure her feet, but the shoes she would bring the following year, belatedly, were always too small. This pair of shoes, cherished but unfitting, appears in the performance as an object symbolizing both affect and alienation. It can also be read as a metaphor for conveying the “unspeakable” and as a resonant object enabling the communication and exteriorization of trauma. The figure of the shoes returns in the last scene, when the protagonist relates her feelings of powerlessness and inability to protect her daughter who started school in Soweto in 1976 when she herself, having become a lead actress at the Market Theatre, was performing for the white audiences in Johannesburg. “Ten kilometers away – Soweto was another country … And it was burning” (Farber 2008, 78), she explains, and the girl’s little shoes, again, stand for the unbridgeable disconnections between black mothers and children in the apartheid economy and so signify the acute absences in parent–child interactions through the interplay of presence and absence.9 The reappearance of the shoes involves a dialogue between the mother’s and daughter’s subjectivities as they become interrelated through interlinked objects. This performance of disconnection exceeds simple repetition and signifies change: the children have “stopped waiting” (78), as Thembi observes when speaking about the Soweto uprising, and she herself begins addressing her white audiences, engaging her position and authority as a mother: “My children make petrol bombs / While I take care of you” (75).

Another object used in the performance is a clay doll (lying in a pile of sand pre-set on the stage) with which Thembi plays as a child. After singing a lullaby and hushing the baby whose “mama [is] not around” (Farber 2008, 48), she assembles the doll out of clay parts and plays a mother who breastfeeds. She then recalls that her sister living in
the city has a rubber doll from China which does not break, while she needs to be careful with her sand toys. Unfolding the metaphor within the social context of parent–child relations in South Africa and focusing it on black mothers’ experience, she sums up:

These were dry and fragile babies – never with us for long. And so we learnt how to crumble our little creations each day and return them to the river from whence they came. Return them to the Earth and walk away. Babies to make, babies to hold, babies to break. (49)

The metaphor is re-invoked in Thembi’s meditation on the collective figure of black mothers waiting for their children to return home in the wake of Soweto. She gathers the sand in which her childhood doll lies and lets it slowly spill through her fingers as she walks backwards and whispers: “Babies to make ... Babies to hold ... Babies to break” (79). The evocative materiality of the sand doll enables the performance of family break-up and loss due to the apartheid politics of work migration that turned mothers into unwilling agents of creating “disposable lives”. Notably, it involves a dialogue between Thembi’s perspectives as a daughter and mother, with the difference between her own mother and herself concerning her resistance to imposed waiting.

This dialogic difference is introduced – again, through the figure of waiting – in the second act, which recalls Thembi’s time of living with her mother in a township. The sense of alienation from her mother is conveyed by the lack of the latter’s bodily presence: the mother is represented by a giant suspended dress, which remains still and unresponsive to her daughter’s emotions (Thembi hugging and kissing the dress). This disconnection is both intensified and bridged when she witnesses her mother’s humiliation at the hands of her employer. Once when accompanying her mother at work in a white man’s house, Thembi used a toilet. She was frightened by a large belly pushing in and shouting at her mother: “You girls – you KNOW you’re not supposed to use MY toilet! You must use the toilet OUTSIDE!” (Farber 2008, 57). As the mother starts apologizing to the “baas”, the dress slowly sags and turns into a “limp pile” (58). The moment of shock at how the woman “who stood so strong” was reduced to a “girl” is mediated by the crumpling of the dress. At the same time, Thembi pulls a tiny version of the dress from the toilet bowl at the centre of the stage, a materialization of whiteness that “swallowed up” her mother (58): “that day, I looked my mama in the eye too soon. Not because I had grown tall ... But because in that house – she had been made small” (58–59). This moment of inheriting becomes also a point of intersubjective dialogue as Thembi begins “to understand the reality of what my mama had to go through to buy me that little pair of shoes that never fitted” (59).

The symbolic use of dresses continues in the next act, in which Thembi appears wearing a standard domestic worker’s pink uniform. Like her mother, she has to leave her newborn daughter in the care of her family while taking care of white people’s homes and children. The physical and emotional exhaustion from working as a sleep-in servant during the week, travelling for hours in overcrowded buses and being arrested during a rare weekend night with her daughter in the township by the police searching for “illegal” residents culminates in the scene when Thembi’s body is replaced by her dress hanging on a washing line. Here, washing clothes transforms into washing one’s body as she starts rubbing her arms; this renders the protagonist’s resistance to the humiliating orders of her “madam” through embodiment of her verbal response: “I’ll wash the clothes. [ ... ] Wash myself ... of you!”
She then pegs her domestic dress on the line and steps in it, “appear[ing] suspended” (73), the prolonged hanging – reminiscent of images of lynching – being accompanied by intensely emotional music and a lament.

This image of a hanging dress, according to Farber, inspired the entire play: seen from a train window, the “limp, worn-out garment looked – for a poignant moment – like a tired woman washed, wrung and hung out to dry” (2008, 31). The play engages the ambivalence of this image by juxtaposing a vision of black women’s “stoic patience” (31) and the endlessness of their inherited gendered waiting, profound humanity and dehumanization, agency and victimhood. It also figures both disconnection (the dress being an inanimate, irresponsible object) and interconnectedness of the mother and daughter’s subjectivities in the play. The connection is activated and becomes dialogic – and enabling – through the protagonist’s performative engagement (when she “hangs” her body in/like a dress in resistance to being objectified) and reflection on it (speaking of her own and her mother’s experience as interlinked).

In the last act, entitled “This Museum in Me”, these intersubjective dialogues are extended to a collective of black women sharing their experiences. Testifying from her present position as a mother and grandmother, the protagonist uses this language to create narratives of identity-making for black South African women as she assembles pieces of interrupted and failed communication between mothers and daughters in “this museum” of individual and communal past. Thembi’s narration of her and her mother’s trauma now parallels the testimonies of women before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as thematized in the last scene (Farber 2008, 79). Relating to these women as mothers who “waited with a dignity and patience that shamed all those who never had to wait for anything” (82), she recounts their pain which sometimes brought them to tears and stopped them from speaking during the TRC hearings. The same message is conveyed in the final song, which concludes with these words:

Seliya ngomtsha wendoda. Woza, mama, woza!
[Come, mama, come!]
Bath’intandane enhle ngumakhothwa unina
[You are not an orphan when you have a loving mother]
Bayeza kusasa. Bayeza!
[The healers are coming tomorrow. They are coming!]
Bayeza kusasa, bayeza!
[The healers are coming, to heal our land!] (84–85)

The collective process of healing is imagined here through mothers and children reaching out to each other across the painful divides. This reciprocal dialogic movement, echoing Thembi’s rendering of her own story, recognizes the traumatic disconnections between the generations and attempts to imagine a process of healing through a retelling of the inherited pasts.

The dynamics of separation and confluence

Similar to Thembi’s testimony that includes Zulu songs and rhymes, Every Year reflects the multilingual context of communication in (South) Africa; here, however, the difference between a mother tongue and a public language is played out not within
a national postcolonial context but between two regions of Africa separated by colonial borders. The mother and daughter fleeing from a Central African country find themselves ignored and abused in South Africa’s xenophobic environment. Considering the aim of creating awareness about refugee experiences, the use of French throughout the play as a means of “estrangement” of the audiences is particularly powerful. Along with the use of linguistic means for creating empathy, the play employs the aesthetic of physical theatre to render the excess of migrant women’s suffering beyond verbal expression. The use of resonant objects, as in A Woman in Waiting, and the telling of stories through bodily movement and manipulation of objects, also allows for invoking the dialogicity of mother–daughter relations, involving both detachment and mutual support. These expressions range from the concerted movement of bodies and objects which render emotional proximity and care, to a dissonant dynamics which reveals generational difference and conflict. The latter expressions foreground silence and stillness, in a manner similar to the ways in which the trope of waiting is conveyed in Farber’s play. Following these dynamics of dissonance and confluence, the performance can be read as revealing the emergence of silences between migrant mothers and daughters, and the way they exacerbate the women’s traumas, as well as the importance of re-established communication in countering their traumatic states.

The first scene depicts the two sisters, Ernestine and Aggie, playing nonchalantly at a stream. The intimate connection between them is rendered through their manipulation of shoes which imitate birds’ wings and represent their flights of imagination and through the traditional African cloths which they wrap around their bodies to transform themselves into adult women/mothers. The actress playing the older sister, Ernestine, acts for the rest of the play as the mother. These playful transformations emphasize fluidity and reciprocity of connections. The shoes in this scene and later ones represent different emotional states shared by the characters, from happiness to despair. The language of everyday things and gestures charts the affective links that are key to understanding the gendered stories of migration.

Such everyday happiness is, however, interrupted by the alarming news of killings in a neighbouring village. As the sound of machetes being sharpened is heard behind the scene, the sisters recount the story of elephants – Ernestine speaking the lines in French and Aggie in English. Once upon a time, elephants who populated the African continent could walk “anywhere and everywhere” as “there were no borders, no barriers, no barbed wire fences”; “[w]hen they were lonely, they walked to find friends. […] When they were hungry, they walked to find leaves to eat. […] And when they were frightened they walked to find comfort from their mothers” (Reznek, Fleishman, and Yisa 2012, 28–29). As the story is being told, Aggie is manipulating a colourful wire elephant, imitating its walking, eating and being rocked by a mother. This harmony is sharply contrasted by the following scenes in which Aggie and her mother are fleeing after their house in which Ernestine got locked is burnt down, the mother witnessing it and being unable to help.

For the most part, the flight and long journey are represented by two pairs of shoes – first Mama’s shoes running up and down in search of Aggie, collapsing and getting up; then together with the child’s shoes, walking, heavy and exhausted, across a desert (a table covered with sand). When Aggie’s shoes falter, Mama’s shoes lift them up, and “they continue, one set of shoes on top of the other” (Reznek, Fleishman, and Yisa 2012, 32). Relying on increased emotional effect produced by concentrating on the physical
movement of the shoes, accompanied by lyrical music, this scene represents the intimacy between mother and daughter. The synecdoche of walking shoes can also be read as symbolizing the anonymity and objectification of migrants, for whom walking becomes not an exercise of freedom (as it was for the migrating elephants) but a labour of escape and adjustment. The use of shoes in this scene, by way of abstraction and distance, allows for telling the most “unspeakable” parts of the story of loss and migration. At some points, however, the expression switches to interaction between the performers’ bodies, such as when the mother carries Aggie on her back (32). These episodes, similarly, emphasize reciprocity and care – as when Aggie wipes the sweat from her mother’s forehead or comforts her after the scene implying her rape at a refugee camp, represented by men’s shoes trampling over her body (35).

As they arrive in Cape Town, mother and daughter encounter the hostility of the big city and its inhabitants towards immigrants from other African countries. This part of the play emphasizes the alienation experienced by the two women, and their estrangement from each other. A scene at the Home Affairs office, where the women undergo fingerprinting, conveys through an embodied metaphor the humiliating experience of being mistreated by the state. The dehumanizing effects of this treatment are emphasized as the mother climbs into one rubbish bag, covers her head with another, and disappears: “She rolls slowly onto the floor as if she is a bag of human rubbish being blown around by the wind” (Reznek, Fleishman, and Yisa 2012, 42). This expression of ultimate loneliness is converted into the intensity of address when she climbs out and looks the audience in the eyes, holding her shoes to her chest. Aggie, in turn, experiences verbal abuse (“amakwerekwere”, a denigrating reference to “foreign” Africans in South Africa) and physical violence at school conveyed through the sounds of sharpening knives and evoking the traumatic memory of her sister’s killing (45).

The mother’s and daughter’s suffering is thus represented through parallel episodes, their experiences made visible for audiences yet not involving any communication between the performers. Aggie’s pain is shown as being exacerbated by her mother’s silence – her unwillingness to reveal the fact and circumstances of Ernestine’s death. The girl keeps writing letters to Ernestine, relating events of her life and asking her mother to post them, while Mama hides them away. Aggie’s growing anxiety is revealed through the scenes recalling the shoe-games played with her sister (Reznek, Fleishman, and Yisa 2012, 42) and those of writing letters to Ernestine on her own body. This writing on the body, “using her finger to scratch the letter into her skin” (43), metaphorically conveys the girl’s trauma, aggravated by disconnection from her mother, who refuses to speak about the past.

A confrontation between them occurs when Aggie discovers a bag containing her unsent letters, demands an explanation from her mother and perceives the truth, conveyed through Mama’s emotional gesticulating, since she is still unable to put what she witnessed into words (Reznek, Fleishman, and Yisa 2012, 47). She runs away to a park, where she meets a dream version of Ernestine (the actress takes off the mother’s shoes and hat) who plays with her and Aggie’s shoes, imitating their flying together and landing side by side. Together they recite, again intertwining English and French, the rest of the story about the elephants, in which the family decides to migrate, having realised the impossibility of reuniting with the little elephant who had been separated from them by a fence. This performance, involving animated objects as well as familiar imagery and narration, re-enacts the intimate connections between the
sisters; by concluding the interrupted performance of the elephants’ story in the first act, it also helps to bridge the gaps between the mother and daughter. As they find each other in the park, both are prepared to talk, and Mama convinces Aggie that she has to “try and find a way to say goodbye” (50).

Aggie’s burning of her letters and giving away her own and Ernestine’s shoes become a sign of her recognizing the loss and reconciling herself to it. This is followed by Mama’s handing her a pair of new, adult shoes, replacing the childhood pink pair that symbolized the link with her sister. Yet the memory of the sister is being re-invoked rather than displaced: in the new shoes, Aggie discovers the little blue origami bird that the girls used to play with, and at this moment mother and daughter “look at each other, feeling Ernestine’s presence” (Reznek, Fleishman, and Yisa 2012, 52). As Aggie puts her new shoes on, Mama helps her to get up and make some first steps:

Delicately these steps develop into a faint Mapantsula dance that brings back physically some of the gestures from home that she and Ernestine performed together – the clapping, the cooking, etc. This is a very slow, delicate development – a slow journey to opening up again. (52)

Thus, the gradual healing is figured here as a joint movement: the mother supporting the daughter in her learning to walk in her new shoes. Leaning to walk and walking out of the limbo of waiting, in this scene, are similar to developing a new language to regain the self – as in the episode of Thembi performing her writing of a letter to “Mr. Boss” – which gives shape to the past and connects past, present and future.

The embodied repertoire of the play reflects both the silences and the developing conversations between the mothers and daughters. The trauma-related silence, caused by the mothers not sharing the hardships of loss and displacement with their daughters as an attempt to protect them, is figured through moments of stillness, as in Aggie’s waiting for a response from her sister. These moments are, on the other hand, countered by an active response such as Aggie’s writing on her body, which lead to re-established communication. The dialogic practice, throughout the play, is conveyed through bodily movement, which forges affective connections between the estranged mothers and daughters and transmits this affect to the audiences, making them engage with the characters’ experience.

Conclusion

The above reading of two South African plays that engage with gendered experiences of migration, within and into the country, has focused on the question of whether the suffering they convey is “social” (in Lionnet’s use of the term) and, most importantly, how this “sociality” is produced. Along with the role of particular genres (testimony, physical theatre) and the chosen performative techniques (the use of resonant objects in both plays and the centrality of embodied expression in the second), I have presented their representations of mother–daughter relations as yielding dialogic portrayals of migration experiences that value nuance and particularity. The performances of dialogic dissonances and confluences of the mothers’ and daughters’ experiences have been traced through the plotlines and their logic. But, as the readings demonstrate, they are also mediated by the performative employment of objects (the shoes, dresses, figures of elephants, and sand dolls), bodies (throughout Every Year, and in the scene of body/
dress hanging or in the episodes of Thembi’s dancing in *A Woman Waiting*) and different languages as well as folk tale images and songs.

This dialogicity of representation reveals the multiplicity of conflicts and multidimensionality of traumas in situations of migration: the tensions involved are not only between the migrants and the hostile social environments, but also between individuals of different generations and genders. In both plays, the trauma incurred through the loss of family members and homes is exacerbated by the silences between mothers and children. These silences and beginnings of conversations are key structural elements in each play, the experiences on which the performances emphatically dwell and which they reveal as being gendered, generational and collective. While stressing the particularity of experience and refusing generalizations of migrant womanhood, the plays zoom out to social interpretations of suffering; they move from explorations of silence and waiting (as shared and inherited practices) towards conversations between different subject positions (mothers and daughters) and invocations of collective resilience. This sharing, however, is represented as incomplete: the mothers’ traumas remain only partly perceivable and their experiences unassimilable by the daughters, whose perspectives are foregrounded in the plays.

From a cultural-historical perspective on gender representations in the South African public sphere, these plays participate in ongoing postcolonial critiques of the media for foregrounding figures of mothers while depriving them of their political voice. In exploring the sociality and inheritance of gendered waiting and silence, they join the larger body of texts and performances that recover and enable dialogic relations between historically and culturally situated subjectivities of mothers and daughters. The Magnet Theatre production develops pertinent ways of speaking about the new experiences of migration, from outside South Africa, while using the tropes and themes that interlink it with performances of internal work migration, such as Farber’s play, and their explorations of gendered inheritance.

Notes

1. Physical theatre is a genre of performance that employs bodily movement as a primary means of expression.
2. The sources used for this reading are the video recordings of the performances as well as published texts of the plays. See Reznik, Fleishman, and Yisa (*n.d.*) and Farber and Mtshali-Jones (*n.d.*)
3. On the complexity of inter-generational relations in postcolonial fiction, see Robbe (*2015*).
5. In Lauretta Ngcobo’s (*1981*) *Cross of Gold*, the mother waiting for her sons to join her on the border with Botswana is killed just as her children are arriving; in Bessie Head’s (*1971*) *Maru*, the female protagonist is longing for her two mothers, one who passed away and the other, adoptive, who emigrated.
6. For a representation of children’s perspectives, see Bessie Head’s (*1971*) *Maru* and Pamphilis Hlapa’s (*2006*) *A Daughter’s Legacy*.
7. Intertextual references to Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* might be intended, given the centrality of the waiting motif and the structuring role of repetition. Thembi’s use of the Xhosa “Gogo” to address her grandmother may refer to Estragon’s shortened name.
“Gogo”. The play, thus, performs a refocusing of a European classic onto women’s and locally specific experiences.

8. A similar connection between the young female protagonist and her grandmother, and the related trauma, is elaborated in Ramadan Suleman’s (2004) film Zulu Love Letter.

9. The use of shoes without a person as a resonant object in this scene might reference a common trope of post-Holocaust memory. It can be read as an instance of “multi-directional memory” (Rothberg 2009).

10. Cf. Hutchison’s (2015, 153) remark regarding the Zulu songs in Farber’s play producing the effect of estrangement among predominantly white audiences in South Africa.

11. The Mapantsula is an energetic dance that originated in South African townships.

12. Such critiques were developed particularly in response to the design of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s public hearings and their media representations, in which women appeared as speaking about their male relatives, while their (implicit) rendering of their own experiences of apartheid often remained unheard (Ross 2003).

13. See the works mentioned in notes 3, 5 and 7 as well as Njabulo Ndebele’s (2003) The Cry of Winnie Mandela and Antjie Krog’s (2000) Waarom is dié Wat Voor Toyi-Toyi Altyd so Vet? (Why are those who toyi-toyi in front always so fat?).

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