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Listening to the past: A subjective exploration of cultural continuity in Shona migration through sculptural works

by
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A mini-dissertation submitted in
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts degree in Fine Arts,
Creative practice and mini-dissertation
(BKS859)

In the
School of the Arts
Faculty of Humanities,
University of Pretoria

Date: 31 March 2025

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Title of mini-dissertation: ***Listening to the past****:* A subjective exploration of cultural continuity in Shona migration through sculptural works

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Degree: MA(Fine Arts**)**

BKS 859: Creative production and mini-dissertation

School of the Arts

Faculty of Humanities

University of Pretoria

ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersections of cultural memory, migration, and identity through sculptural installations that merge personal narratives with historical Shona migratory experiences. Grounded in myth-making and oral histories, the research examines how contemporary art can serve as a vessel for ancestral knowledge, fostering dialogue between past and present migratory movements. Utilising natural materials such as clay, wood, stone, and found objects, the study reinterprets the materiality of Shona heritage while addressing the complexities of displacement, adaptation, and belonging. By engaging with archaeological traces from the Great Zimbabwe civilisation and Leopard Kopje migrations, the research situates contemporary migratory experiences within a broader historical continuum. Through a multidisciplinary approach that integrates art practice, historical analysis, and critical theory, this study demonstrates how sculpture and installation art can embody both personal and collective memories of migration. The research ultimately contributes to the discourse on cultural reinvention, offering a visual and sensory exploration of shifting identities in the context of urban transience and academic migration.

Key Terms

Migration, cultural memory, myth-making, sculptural installation, Shona identity, Leopard Kopje migrations, oral narratives, materiality, rootlessness, mnemotechnic, found objects, cultural carriers

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my parents, Joseph Mashingaidze Mapisre and Cynthia Mapisire, thank you for everything; to my brothers, Tinashe-Emmanuel Mapisire and Anesuishe Mapisire, thank you for always being there; and to my love, Enester-Makatendeka Maposa, thank you for believing in me even when I didn't believe in myself. Your love and support have been my constant anchor, and I am forever indebted to you all.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem Statement

Migration is a complex phenomenon shaped by various economic, social, political, environmental, and personal factors (Castelli 2018). It encompasses internal and external movements, significantly influencing individual experiences and societal dynamics. My journey as a student migrant in South Africa has been marked by the enriching experience of cultural immersion, exemplified by Heritage Day celebrations, alongside challenges such as personal insecurity due to xenophobic incidents (Mangena 2020). Motivated by these experiences, my research explores the interplay of cultural preservation, continuity, and memory. Drawing on Mudimbe's (1988) conceptual framework of discursive formations and the construction of "otherness," I investigate how cultural continuity and preservation can be negotiated amidst my experiences of displacement and disconnection through artmaking and writing.

Shona migrations from sub-Saharan Africa to Southern Africa are deeply embedded in oral histories describing the early Shona's connection to their ancestors and gods during their travels (Lathan 1987). These spiritual connections, manifesting as natural voices, were crucial in guiding the early Shona people, who fervently listened to these ancestral voices when making important decisions for their welfare and society (Chigamba & Kyker 2019; Fry 1976). This listening practice was a means of guidance and a way of ingraining cultural memory and reconnecting with deceased ancestors. The chronologies of these migrations have been passed down through generations, either by elders in family units or village chiefs (Lathan 1987; Chigamba & Kyker 2019).

The practice of spiritual mediumship, developed during these migrations, became a tradition among the Shona. It was used to consult ancestors for guidance and protection. This transgenerational tradition remains prevalent among Shona-speaking groups (Fry 1976). The building of shrines and other spiritual sites was a means to avoid cultural loss and to honour ancestral voices, offering protection and guidance during migrations and settlement (Chigamba & Kyker 2019).

During the early and late Iron Age migrations, the Leopard Kopje People[1] are ancestors of the current Shona-speaking groups, who travelled from central-eastern Africa to the north of the Zambezi River and eventually settled in Southern Africa (Mazarire 2009; Lathan 1987; Pikirayi 2001; Mlambo 2014). Upon arrival, they continued to listen to ancestral voices and constructed shrines to honour their gods, embedding cultural remembrance of their journey and ensuring the continuation of their traditional practices (Huffman 1985; Fry 1976). As a student migrant, researching cultural memory, continuity, and the importance of family traditional teachings can provide insights into maintaining cultural roots while residing outside one's cultural origin.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

It is important to note that this study's theoretical framework is not purely historical but also intersects with mythologising practices that lean into notions of nostalgia and identity formation (Adeoti & Adeyeri 2012). To do so, mythology and memory maps are positioned as the narrative framework within which cultural memory operates, and nostalgia is linked to the emotional response to migration and its impact on cultural identity (Okri 1997). Art practice as memory maps drawing from cultural material is presented as an active tool for navigating the complexities of cultural heritage in the context of migration, cultural displacement and shifting landscapes. Good.

1.2.1 Mythology, Nostalgia, and Memory Maps

Mythology encompasses the origins, meanings, and significance of cultural practices, traditions, and historical events (Mark 2018). It includes historical, aetiological, and psychological[2] categories, allowing for the reinterpretation and reimagining of the past to connect with the present and address contemporary challenges (Campbell 2008). Historical mythology plays a crucial role in art, and artists use it to create artworks based on

[1] The early and late Iron Age periods (850-1000) offer discoveries of Shona cultural origins. This is because the lifeways which were practised within this timeframe, gradually continued to Southern African states, which are Mapungubwe 1050-1270 and the Great Zimbabwe 1270-1580. Excavated pottery, beads, bowls and metal artefacts, as noted by Pikirayi (2001), insinuate that the people associated with such antiques lived during that period. These excavations portray possible artistic entry points in interpretations to visualise this historical period in the recent time frame.

[2] Myths play diverse roles in our understanding of human experience. Historical myths elevate past events, imbuing them with significance beyond the actual occurrences (if they even happened). Etiological myths delve into the origins of phenomena, explaining their existence. Psychological myths guide individuals from the familiar to the unknown, reflecting a need to harmonise external realities with internal perceptions (Mark 2018).

mythical narratives. Artists like Mariana Deball use this genre to create narratives from the past that resonate with contemporary issues. For example, the artist's installation work in (Figure 5) conveys Atzompa's mythological universe's creation, interpreting, remembering and demonstrating how art and mythology can sustain Mexican heritage.

This approach guides the investigation of historical Leopard Kopje and personal migrations through art. Blending these transitions allows for artistic expression that addresses contemporary issues like cultural displacement and rootlessness, which are challenges prevalent in the migration experience. Using mythology in this art study is because myths from oral traditions are ubiquitous in Shona culture (Chiparausha & Mavhunduse 2014). This provides continuity, belonging, and shared identity, connecting ancestral roots in contemporary times (Matiza 2015). Recounting migration tales and past cultural events reinforces community bonds, as seen in the role of ngano[3] (storytelling) and totems[4], which continue to build social relationships today (Mazarire 2002).

Employing mythology, nostalgia, and memory maps in this study utilises the concept of epistemological emancipation from *Indigenous Shona philosophy: reconstructive insights* to reinterpret contemporary experiences concerning ancestral heritage (Mungwini 2019). This philosophical reinterpretation approach allows me, as a student migrant, to culturally emancipate myself from being culturally rootless despite being displaced. The epistemological emancipation is further guided by Paul Tiyambe Zeleza's concept of reconstructing identity (Zeleza 1997). The author calls for African cultures to reclaim narratives and create liberating identities from marginalising paradigms such as acculturation[5] (Biyela 2019:34).

This can be particularly challenging as I navigate the complexities of adapting to a new environment while maintaining my cultural identity. The study emphasises the importance of reclaiming narratives and reconstructing identity to counteract the marginalising effects of acculturation and preserve cultural heritage. In art research, artistic mythmaking with

[3] Ngano are stories which are told by elders to the younger generations as a form of teaching, entertaining, and warnings with regards to life philosophies (Matiza 2015).
[4] Totems are cultural identifiers of an ancestral lineage for clans and sub-clans within the Shona people and are integral to cultural identity and heritage. Sharing a totem signifies a familial bond, connecting individuals. Through a common ancestry that represents the connection between individuals, their families, and their forebears (Tobayiwa & Jackson 1985).
[5]. Acculturation is the process of adapting to a new culture. This can involve adopting new cultural norms and values, which can sometimes come at the expense of one's heritage and traditions (Tirimboyi 2017).

reconstructive historical inquiry is showcased by Thierry Oussou's work (Figure 6), where he explores Benin's prehistoric heritage through contemporary art. His artistic process of "digging and finding" past narratives to connect with the present encourages me to metaphorically dig and find migration experiences from archaeological texts and my movements to create artworks that address migration challenges.

Reflecting on my experiences concerning past Shona migrations necessitates an exploration of the significance of time. Recognising its importance in an evolving world, mainly through the Shona concepts of "Sasa" (present and recent past) and "Zamani" (distant past) (Mbiti 1969), offers a unique lens for understanding these experiences. While the Leopard Kopje people migrated for agricultural advancement, my migration is driven by the pursuit of education that reflects an inherent search for progress and self-improvement within Shona migratory context.

The unison of present and past mobilities highlights time's fluidity and impermanent nature and the evolving factors influencing Shona migration. "Sasa" encapsulates the immediate challenges of adapting to a new environment, while "Zamani" embodies the enduring cultural heritage and ancestral connections that shape my identity. The cyclical nature of Shona time, where past and present migrations intertwine, emphasises the continuous theme of migration and adaptation throughout Shona culture.

To further submerge my contemporary experiences with past histories, my artistic practice is also informed by the concept of a "memory map," a process of bridging the past and present (Okri 1997). Guided by epistemological emancipation and artistic myth-making, this memory map ensures that my personal migratory experiences and Shona historical narratives are preserved and expressed through my art. The aim is to engage with the past in contemporary settings, preventing the erosion of cultural knowledge and identity.

This approach resonates with Amanda Esterhuysen's archaeological work at Makapane caves, as detailed in *Digging the Cave*. Her exploration sought to uncover the untold narrative of the Kekana Ndebele people, whose history was fragmented due to displacement and enslavement (Kros *et al.* 2022: 199-209). Similarly, as a student migrant, I recognise the risk of cultural fragmentation and the importance of actively engaging with Shona myths, historical writings, and family dialogues. By drawing on these sources, I aim

to create artworks that reflect the complexities of Shona migration and cultural identity, and develop a sense of continuity and belonging despite the challenges of displacement.

To avoid the cultural fragmentation of knowledge, as with the history of Kekana, I will use the memory map to relive contemporary and historical experiences. This approach is akin to Alex Haley's genealogical journey, highlighting the importance of oral narratives and ethnolinguistic methods in uncovering historical legacies (Perks & Thompson 1998). In art research, this longing for past experiences due to cultural disconnection is central to the migrant experience, paralleling the works of Zimbabwean authors Novuyo Rosa Tshuma (2019) and Petina Gappah (2016). Their writings address the longing for cultural identity in the face of displacement, integral to this study's artistic exploration and reinterpretation of addressing longing experiences, which are the aftermath of being culturally displaced.

Within this theoretical framework, mythology, nostalgia, and memory maps form an intersection, each offering a unique lens through which to understand cultural heritage in the context of migration. Mythology, acting as the conceptual foundation, provides the narratives and symbols that imbue cultural practices with meaning and significance. Through these myths, often intertwined with tangible and intangible artefacts, communities transmit their origins and values across generations (Mungwini 2019).

Building upon mythology, Nostalgia personalises this heritage by evoking an emotional longing for the past. This sentimental yearning shapes perceptions and influences how individuals construct their present identities about their cultural roots (Mbiti 2015). Memory maps offer a means of actively engaging with the past through tangible representations like shrines or intangible ones like oral histories (Okri 1997). They create a space for individuals and communities to connect with their history and heritage, often incorporating elements of both mythology and nostalgia.

However, this interplay has its complexities. While mythology provides a rich tapestry of meaning, an overreliance on it can lead to a romanticised view of the past, obscuring its complexities and challenges. Similarly, nostalgia, while a powerful motivator for cultural preservation, can also become a barrier to progress if it fosters an unwillingness to adapt and embrace change. Memory maps, too, carry the risk of perpetuating dominant narratives and excluding marginalised voices if not constructed with inclusivity in mind. In

the context of the Leopard Kopje migrations, a focus on their strategies for cultural preservation could inadvertently overshadow the nuances and complexities of individual migrant experiences, including my own. This potential for exclusion highlights the need for a critical and reflexive approach to these concepts, ensuring that memory maps and narratives are both tools for preservation and platforms for dialogue and diverse perspectives.

1.2.2 Cultural Memory and Material

Cultural memory, material culture, and migration form a complex, interconnected triad within the discourse of cultural heritage. Cultural memory is the conceptual foundation, representing the intangible reservoir of narratives, beliefs, and values transmitted across generations (Assmann 2011; University of Turku 2019). Material culture, encompassing tangible objects and artefacts, expands upon this foundation by serving as a physical repository and active expression of cultural memory (Tatira 2022; Tosh 2015).

Migration, however, introduces a dynamic tension into this relationship. It challenges the static preservation of both memory and materiality, forcing a renegotiation of their intersection in the context of displacement and disconnection. This tension offers ground for generating new insights. The contradictions inherent in migration – the simultaneous preservation and transformation of cultural heritage – highlight the fluid nature of cultural identity. It underscores the union between remembering and forgetting, continuity and change, and the power dynamics in shaping cultural narratives in the face of displacement.

This study explores this juxtaposition of contemporary and historical Shona migration experiences through art practice. Cultural memory is central to this exploration, encompassing a community's shared knowledge, traditions, and experiences. In Cultural Memory and Western Civilisation, Aleida Assmann describes how these elements are collectively and subjectively remembered, transmitted, and interpreted (Assmann 2011). By engaging with cultural memory on the Leopard Kopje people’s migrations, I seek to intersect symbolic migration experiences with my own, using art to preserve and continue Shona cultural heritage.

Assmann's distinction between cultural memory and historical knowledge is crucial for this study. She posits that while cultural memory adapts the past to fit the present needs, selectively recalling events to justify current beliefs, historical knowledge seeks an evidence-based understanding of the past, free from contemporary influence (Assmann 2011:121). This distinction resonates with John Tosh's views in *The Pursuit of History*, where he similarly differentiates the functions of cultural memory and historical knowledge (Tosh 2015:303-327). Hanna Meretoja also aligns with this perspective, defining cultural memory as the practices people and communities engage in to connect with the past, exist in the present, and prepare for the future through cultural carriers[6] (University of Turku 2021).

The ideas presented by these theorists support my approach to using cultural memory in art-making, specifically in creating mnemotechnics[7] that represent the remembering of past and present Shona regional transitions (Assmann 2011:17). However, In contrast, Assmann's approach is Eurocentric, focusing on the European Renaissance to the present; my study is grounded in an Afrocentric artistic perspective. Illustrating the experiences of other Africans or people of African descent who have experienced regional migration, I seek to create art that bridges the gap between artistic practice and Shona migrations (University of Turku 2021).

Stuart Hall's work on cultural, diasporic, and identity studies is particularly relevant to understanding the complexities of cultural memory and identity in the context of migration. Hall argues that diasporic Africans or African descendants must revisit their past to remain culturally rooted and avoid a hybridised identity shaped by colonial structures. His analysis of Armet Franci's *The Black Triangle* highlights the traumatic character of the colonial experience and its ongoing impact on diasporic identities (Mirzoeff 2000:25). This idea is echoed by W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, which describes the dual identity of belonging to two cultural groups, often leading to social and identity crises (Mirzoeff 2000:25-27).

[6] Cultural carriers are models focusing on how cultural narrative models serve as significant tools for understanding and conveying collective memory and identity (University of Turku 2019).
[7] Mnemotechnics refers to a set of principles and techniques used to organise memory impressions, improve recall, and assist in the combination of ideas (Assmann 2011).

In applying these ideas to my experience as a student migrant in South Africa, I explore the dual behavioural tendencies that arise from consciously and unconsciously inheriting linguistic and cultural norms. Valentin Yves Mudimbe's *Discourse of Power and Knowledge of Otherness* provides a framework for negotiating these tendencies, helping to break down linguistic and cultural marginalisation (Mudimbe 1988:16-22).

Despite the shared cultural beginnings of South Africa and Zimbabwe through the Mapungubwe civilisations, regional travel and migration are often fraught with challenges, including xenophobic tendencies and rigid geographical boundaries (Mangena 2020). Focusing on cultural similarities can help mitigate these challenges, allowing for a more fluid adaptation to new environments. By consciously visualising new spaces and revisiting historical references, my art practice aims to address the complexities of Shona migration, both contemporary and historical.

This visual exploration is guided by Mieke Bal's concepts of fabula and focalization in *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative,* which leads to the thematic structure of my art practice. Fabula pertains to the chronological order of events and will inform the depiction of migration from the Leopard Kopje movements to my own experiences. Focalization, or the lens through which the story is told, will allow me to step into the role of a character deeply rooted in Shona migrations, enabling the creation of artworks that resonate with the themes of migration and historical events that have shaped Shona culture (Bal 2009:12-46).

The concept of fabula and focalization is accompanied by art research and investigation of how artistic practices can facilitate the expression of complex identities and experiences, as Rodrigues noted in *Writing Life Narratives through Art Practice*. Focusing on the lives of Brazilian women in London, Rodrigues (2018) sheds light on broader themes of language barriers, displacement, and the potential of art to serve as a transformative field for storytelling and identity reclamation.

Through my artistic practice, I aim to explore the intersection of contemporary and historical Shona migration experiences through the lens of cultural memory. Engaging with the concept of cultural memory, I seek to preserve and continue Shona cultural heritage while bridging the gap between artistic practice and Shona migrations. Inquiring about the

experiences of other contemporary artists, Africans or people of African descent who have experienced regional migration, I aspire to utilise the concepts of fabula and focalization to create artworks that resonate with the themes of migration and historical events that have shaped Shona culture.

1.3 Research Question

Investigating personal and Leopard Kopje migrations is crucial for addressing the gap between historical context and visual representation within art. This is significant as history encompasses vital cultural elements that shed light on Shona culture's migratory establishment, evolution, and adaptation in the present time. Focusing on early Shona migrations with my contemporary movements, I seek to understand mitigating feelings of rootlessness amidst regional movements and strategies to combat cultural erosion and preserve memories. This comparative analysis between past and present migrations will provide a cultural reference point for me to explore the ongoing evolution of Shona migratory patterns in the present day through my artistic expressions.

The following questions build to an exhibition of 10 to 12 substantial works. The body of works, influenced by the use of history in contemporary issues, will address perceptions of my experiences as a student migrant. The study will consist of sculptural installations that intend to reveal the following research questions:

1. How can the creative process aid in cultivating cultural memory and exploring multigenerational narratives of migration?

2. How can a sculptural installation of artworks productively explore the intersection of multigenerational narratives of historical Shona migratory events and a personal experience of urban transience?

Implementing cultural memory will allow my art practice to express, reflect, and facilitate migration experiences. My moving and living encounters will be viewed against the art and migration studies of Sam Durrant and Catherine Lord (2007) and Nicholas Mirzeoff's (2000) diasporic visual studies in perceiving artistic representations of migratory narratives and used as thematic sources.

This study will examine the importance of cultural memory and avoiding cultural loss by drawing narratives from historical migratory Shona patterns and my own. This exploration of migration will be crucial to ingraining a preservation practice and minimising cultural rootlessness (De Mul 2007; Rodrigues 2018). The study will also explore the implementation of cultural ways of remembering the past in the present via an artistic practice that draws on my own experiences.

I started exploring cultural identity and belonging during my undergraduate studies. My fourth-year project, *Murenga soro renzou* (Figure 1), focused on one of the ancestral figures who contributed to the creation and expansion of the Shona people (Chigamba & Kyker 2019), Murenga soro renzou. Oral tradition describes him as a fearsome character who led the ancient people from other ethnic tribes while travelling from one point to another north of the Zambezi River (Lathan 1987).[8]

My artistic practice explores the complexities of memory, continuity, and migration within Shona culture, drawing upon personal experiences as a student migrant and the Leopard Kopje movements. Through sculptural installations, I investigate how art can preserve cultural memory, provide a sense of belonging, and inspire social change to convey the evolution of regional movements. Central to this exploration is the concept of memory as an indexicality[9], which emphasises the ability of art to trace personal and collective memories, bridging individual experiences with broader cultural histories (Gibbons 2007). This approach signifies the potential of art to serve as a powerful tool for navigating the complexities of identity, migration, and cultural continuity.

Pivotal to my work is exploring the "morphing" of cultural identities that occur in migration due to adaptation to new environments while striving to maintain connections to ancestral roots (Tirimboyi 2017). As a result of my migrations, I am interested in how art can aid as a

[8] His legacies inspired Shona revolutionary groups to use his name while fighting for independence during the Zimbabwean liberation struggle (Vambe 2004). The art project sought to understand cultural identity and belonging during the pre-historical period of the ancient Shona people.
[9] Memory as an indexicality discusses how memories can be seen as traces or remnants of past experiences, suggesting that artworks serve as physical manifestations of these memories (Gibbons 2007).

tool for navigating the challenges of displacement and the ongoing search for identity morphing in the diaspora.

I employ a range of natural materials and everyday objects as vessels of ancestral knowledge, connecting me to past generations and reflecting the hybrid nature of identities shaped by migration. My artistic practice utilises a deliberate selection of non-hierarchical materials- cardboard, fabric, found objects, seeds, clay, and repurposed plastics as a reflection of the theoretical concepts underpinning this research (Putnam 2009). These materials, often associated with the everyday, the domestic, and the transitory, dismantle traditional artistic hierarchies and echo the lived experiences of ordinary Shona people, past and present.

Their inherent accessibility and adaptability resonate with migrants' resourcefulness and resilience, while their capacity for transformation mirrors the shifting landscapes and identities shaped by migration. The meandering structures and installations I create with these materials serve as metaphors for the complex interplay of cultural memory, material culture, and migration. They embody the narratives and symbols of Shona mythology, evoke the nostalgic yearning for a homeland left behind, and function as memory maps that navigate the complexities of displacement and cultural preservation.

Figure 1: Tatenda Mapisire, *Murenga soro renzou,* Installation: cardboard, fabric, terracotta. 2021

The choice of seeds, for instance, brings forth notions of sustenance, resilience[10], and cyclical renewal, evoking a connection to the natural world and ancestral traditions (Pikirayi 2001). Clay's deep historical roots provide a tangible link to the past and a sense of continuity, allowing me to embody cultural heritage and ancestral knowledge in sculptural forms (Dewey 1986). The use of plastics, like rubble bags and cardboard, further underscores the transitory nature of migration. These repurposed materials reflect the resourcefulness of migrants in adapting to new environments and carrying cultural heritage and memories across borders. Cardboard is a common packaging material that I sculpt and transform into installations that evoke a sense of impermanence and adaptability. This material transformation process intends to mirror the shifting landscapes and experiences I encounter.

[10] In pre-colonial Shona history, Mutapa kings were rulers of Mutapa State or Munhumutapa, which existed between 1450 - 1629 after the demise of Great Zimbabwe. This state was located further from Great Zimbabwe's site, just below the Zambezi River, in central Zimbabwe, stretching to Mozambique. The implementation of making storehouses for grains, in preparation for inevitable drought, is a form of cultural memory and continuity in which they learnt from the harshness and difficulties of famine within that region (Pikirayi 2001).

The explorative work of *Text and soil* (Figure 2) plays a significant role in mapping identity. Shona parables and sayings, inscribed on packing and storing materials using soil collected from various locations, create a tangible connection to my cultural knowledge and the new environment. Layering and writing with soil becomes a form of cultural continuity, affirming a sense of belonging despite being displaced.

Ultimately, my investigative work aspires to create experiences that trigger memories, evoke emotions, and dialogue about cultural identity, migration, and belonging. By engaging with these narratives through art, I hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of the Shona experience and foster empathy and shared understanding across cultures.

Figure 2: Tatenda Mapisire. *Hupenyu hauperi (life never ends),* Text and soil. 2024

1.4 Aims and Objectives

My subjective experiences as a student migrant in South Africa, while simultaneously intertwining historical narratives of the early Shona migrations and cultural signifiers, aim to deepen an understanding of cultural continuity, adaptation, and preservation in the face of cultural displacement and shifts. I aim to bridge the gap between historical context and

visual representation through art, addressing cultural memory, continuity and rootlessness issues relating to migration.

Examining Leopard Kopjes and their cultural preservation and adaptation strategies, I seek to understand the evolution of Shona migratory patterns and their impact on my contemporary experiences. My journey, marked by both cultural immersion and challenges like xenophobia, highlights the complexities of migration. Through art, I aim to develop an understanding, promote dialogue, and facilitate cultural exchange in the context of migration.

The research's objectives are to investigate how sculptural installations can act as cultural artefacts that embody and transmit Shona ancestral knowledge and historical continuity in a contemporary setting. Artistic practices can reflect and address the complexities of migration, displacement, and the evolving nature of cultural identity in the context of a student migrant experience. Showcasing how installations mimic migration experiences and historical journeys, hope to engage viewers in a way that develops empathy, understanding, and a deeper connection to Shona history and contemporary migration issues.

1.5 Research methodology

This qualitative, creative practice research follows a practice-based methodology. There will be an analysis of natural materials and found objects to form sculptural installations that evoke a sense of historical continuity in contemporary times. Throughout the creative process, I will document and contemplate the development of the artworks, reflect on my working process and rework these artworks with my focus on migratory experiences in mind.

A comparative analysis of historical and archaeological texts, combined with research into artistic practices, will inform the creation of sculptural installations that reflect the themes of cultural memory and continuity. Visits to museums and cultural sites will supplement my research. The comparative analysis and practice-based research insights are integrated

with my subjective experiences as a student migrant in South Africa, to create an engaging body of work that may enable research insights to emerge.

1.6 Literature Review

This study will explore Shona migration patterns, using them to unveil historical and contemporary movements through sculptural installation. A multidisciplinary approach incorporating art practice and oral and written history will enrich the analysis of investigating contemporary and past moving transitions. The literature review will explore how historians and cultural theorists portray migration themes. It will also examine how contemporary artists employ material choices and artistic practices when connecting migration narratives with their works. The sources will include artworks, archaeological journals, historical books, and online resources relating to the study. This varied approach of encompassing art and historical, archaeological, and cultural theorists hopes to understand Shona migration comprehensively.

Essays in Migratory Aesthetics (2018) by Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord lays the theoretical groundwork, which makes me explore the complex intersection between migration, culture, identity, and artistic expression. Durrant and Lord's (2018) examination of migratory aesthetics provides a structure for understanding how migratory experiences shape artistic representations and narratives, offering insights into migration's emotional, cultural, and psychological dimensions. These theoretical insights reveal the emotional depth provided in the biography of Aya Zikken, which assesses the psychological dimensions of migration, including feelings of rootlessness and homesickness (De Mul 2007). Aya Zikken's biography is a poignant lens through which the emotional complexities of migration unveil profound experiences of rootlessness, homesickness, and the enduring power of remembrance.

In *The Genuine Shona* (1973), Michael Gelfand notes these modern-day challenges in his observations during colonial and postcolonial Shona. Shona working people, predominantly from rural backgrounds, began losing cultural knowledge due to an

acquisition or preference for urban lifeways.[11] Younger Shona individuals during this period also faced the same fate because they moved away from their rural homes to pursue education or employment, as Mbiti notes on the effects of modern change in Africans (1969;3).

Losing and forgetting cultural knowledge was because these individuals would spend most of their time away from their rural homes due to employment. Referring to losing and forgetting cultural knowledge while I am away from my native home, the sculptural creations will endeavour to postulate a hidden concern and reminder of the potential loss of culture and traditions among younger generations, especially those who migrate or live in communities far from their cultural origins. The artworks will desire to voice cultural rootlessness because diasporic moving is a move away from the original home space. While residing in the newer home, you tend to comply with the laws of that country.

Historians such as Gerald Mazarire in *Reflections on pre-colonial Zimbabwe* (2009), Alois Mlambo in *A History of Zimbabwe* (2014), and Brian Raftopoulos in *Becoming Zimbabwe* (2008) offer invaluable knowledge of historical Shona migratory patterns. Mazarire (2009:1-38) and Mlambo (2014: 9-29) denote pre-colonial structures and oral traditions that provide scenery for artistic inspection concerning contemporary happenings influenced by passed-on transgenerational narratives and customs. Raftopoulos (2008) further enriches this context by expanding the Zimbabwean historical trajectories and the significance of migration in shaping regional identities. The historical works will assist in understanding how my journeys with regional moving can learn from the historical trajectories.

Pikirayi in *The Origins and Decline of Southern Zambezian States* (2001) contributes to my understanding of incorporations between art and archaeology to produce material culture associated with Shona migratory patterns. Shadreck Chirikure and Thilo Rehren in *Iron*

[11] Urban lifeways in this context refer to the social, economic, and political systems of living which were in place during colonial times. These systems forced indigenous people to flee their rural backgrounds in search of employment in mines, farms, academic or missionary institutions or urban areas. Consciously fleeing their rural backgrounds substantially began an unconscious raising process which affected their identities because they now spent time away from families and rural homes (Gelfand 1973).

Smelting in pre-colonial Zimbabwe (2006) adds to the intersection of art and archaeology to understand iron smelting and smithing as early interventions of artistic practices in Shona culture. Through scientific processes of typology, carbon dating, stratigraphy, and metallurgy, Pikirayi (2001) and Chirikure & Rehren (2006) provide tangible evidence of ancient migrations and cultural exchanges, revealing the origins of the lifeways of the ancestral Shona from the early and late Iron Age AD 850-1000, The Mapungubwe state 1050-1270, and Great Zimbabwe states 1289-1550. The accumulated archaeological data and processes offer initiatives of artistic discoveries that will serve as material culture, linking possible interpretations that connect contemporary moving occurrences with past movements.

Fry's exploration of *Spirit-mediums among the Zezuru*[12] (1976) showcases cultural practices that foster community consensus and spiritual connection. Hamutyineni & Plangger in *Shona proverbial lore and wisdom* (1974) and Gelfand (1973) offer an in-depth analysis of Shona language, customs, rituals, beliefs, and ancestral reverence, significantly shaping social norms in rural and urban environments. Exploring Shona customs, beliefs, and language fabricates tracing intentional impressions to navigate contemporary Shona norms that affect me as a student migrant. Unpacking the norms and belief systems assists in addressing environmental complexities concerning cultural longing, displacement, memory, and preservation from a contemporary and historical Shona perspective.

As a foreigner residing in South Africa, Mungwini's (2019) examination of the significance of indigenous Shona philosophy and Mudimbe's (1988) evaluation of discursive formations and otherness provide a framework for me to explore and reconstruct cultural understanding. Doing this will foster an anthropological and historical knowledge of Shona regional transitions because, according to Levi-Strauss, history focuses on time, while anthropology deals with space (Mudimbe 1998:28). The proximity of time and space in this inquiry offers sculptural works reinterpreting what has happened and what is happening

[12] Zezuru is one of the six subgroups associated with Shona culture. Other Shona ethnicities are Manyika, Ndau, Kore kore, Karanga, and Kalanga. I am a Zezuru when it comes to Shona classifications, and the location of this subgroup is predominantly in the central parts of Zimbabwe.

concerning Shona movements. These perceptions will guide prevailing notions about what it means to be a student migrant.

Scholars such as Richard Shusterman and Adele Tomlin in *Aesthetic Experience* (2007) explain components of aesthetic experience, probing the intersections of neurology, culture, and memory. The authors' works aid in how I intend to employ sound in my art practice. The notion of aesthetic experience resembles how sound is pivotal for my well-being through shared voices and audio from my family. The contemporary expression of communication will juxtapose the communications of early Shona material (in their daily lives) and immaterial realms (with the deceased) (Lathan 1987; Dewey 1991; Gelfand 1973).

Dewey's research (1986, 1991) on *Shona artistry and Pleasing the Ancestors* made me grasp the importance of artistic media identified as cultural identifiers when creating artworks. Art within Shona culture was gendered from precolonial history, as men worked with wood and metal, whereas women were potters and weavers of cloths and baskets (Dewey 1991:20-60). The genderedness of Shona artistry suggests a platform on how I can employ materials, whether male or female, relating them to all genders to speak on people who have been instrumental to my upkeep as a student migrant.

In summary, weaving art with archaeology, anthropology, and history provides a cohesive and detailed foundation for creating sculptures and installations that capture the multidimensional contemporary and historical Shona migratory experiences. Scholars' continuous critical inquiry encourages a conscious exploration of cultural moving behaviours, contributing an in-depth meaning to migration and the artistic process. This comprehensive synthesis forms the foundation for a culturally resonant exploration of migration experiences through various creative mediums within the Shona cultural framework.

1.7 Review of visual texts

Artists worldwide have extensively investigated migratory themes (Mirzoeff 2000; Desai 2001), aiming to unveil the inherent difficulties in inhabiting culturally unfamiliar territories.

The works employed by Gerald Machona, Thierry Oussou, and Mariana Castillo Deball offer valuable insights for this study on Shona migration, cultural memory, and identity. Each artist contributes a unique perspective and approach, enriching this research's potential for artistic exploration in migration studies.

Gerald Machona's use of decommissioned banknotes in works like *"Cross-Border Trader Performance"* (Figure 3) directly resonates with migration's economic and political dimensions. This material choice speaks to migrants' resourcefulness, adaptability, and the complexities of navigating financial systems and borders. In my work, I can explore the use of everyday materials associated with migration that carry cultural significance or reflect the lived experiences of Shona migrants.

Figure 3: *Cross Border Trader Performance,* 2010. (Machona 2010)

Secondly, Thierry Oussou in *"Impossible is Nothing"* (Figure 4) demonstrates the power of collaborative and multimedia approaches in addressing cultural memory and heritage. The involvement of cultural academics and archaeology students at the University of

Abomey-Calavi emphasises the importance of collective engagement in reclaiming and preserving cultural narratives. This resonates with my research methodology, which seeks to integrate historical and archaeological research with personal experiences and artistic expression to develop artworks that relive contemporary migrations with historical movements.

Figure 4: Thierry Oussou, *Impossible Is Nothing*, 2016–18 Mixed media: video, colour, sound, 09 mins 37 secs (Dakin 2018)

Finally, Mariana Castillo Deball's installation, "*Quién medirá el espacio, quién me dirá el momento?"* (Figure 5), shows the potential of spatial arrangements and symbolism to voice complex narratives. The ceramic forms, arranged in columns, visually represent temporal and spatial narratives. The collaboration with Atzompa pottery heritage signifies the connection between material culture and cultural memory, where the contemporary refers to historical times. This approach can inform my exploration of Shona migration by creating sculptural installations that layer and weave symbolic forms and spatial arrangements to communicate a sense of movement, transition, and the passage of time.

Figure 5: Mariana Castillo Deball, *Quién medirá el espacio, quién me dirá el momento?, 7 (columna guerreros serpiente) (Who will measure the space, who will tell me the time?).*
Ceramic clay and metallic structure 169 1/4 in. (429.9 cm) (Deball 2015)

These artists provide a diverse range of strategies for exploring the themes of migration, cultural memory, and identity. Their works demonstrate the potential of art to engage with complex historical and contemporary issues, challenge dominant narratives, and showcase a deeper understanding of the human migrant experience. Their approaches and incorporating my cultural background and experiences, I aim to create a body of work that contributes to the ongoing discourse on Shona migration and its impact on individuals and communities experiencing regional moving and living.

1.8 Ethical considerations

The artworks created during this study will be informed by archaeological, historical and artistic research, along with personal reflections regarding the theme of migration. The works will explore the themes and ideas regarding the movement of Shona culture from the distant past and current perceptions. The artworks will mainly be made from soapstone, terracotta, wood and paper. There will be no human participants involved when creating

the body of work. The artworks will be exhibited publicly as part of the study in the Link Gallery, University of Pretoria, in 2025.

Invitations to the exhibition will be sent out through the Student Gallery mailing list. Audiences can engage with the sculptural works during the exhibition period. On particular dates, I will document the exhibition and will ask audiences for their consent to appear in these photographs as per the photo release form attached.

1.9 Chapter outline

Chapter One, *Introduction*, will establish the study's foundational elements, focusing on the background that necessitates inquiring about the Shona culture's migratory history and artistic representations. It will introduce the research questions that guide the exploration, articulate the aims and objectives, elucidate the chosen Methodology for conducting the research-based art practice, and address the ethical considerations inherent in the study.

Chapter Two*, Interwoven Narratives: Art, Migration, and Identity*, will offer an in-depth engagement with relevant discourses, drawing on critical readings that underpin the artistic practice. It will examine existing scholarly perspectives on Shona oral histories, migration as a theme in art, and the intersections of art and cultural identity. This chapter will serve as a theoretical foundation, informing the conceptual framework that guides the creative investigation.

Chapter Three, *Artful Narratives Unveiled*, will reflect on the artworks produced and the creative processes employed. The discussion will revolve around how the sculptures, installation and mixed media works aim to convey the relationships between past and present knowledge, emphasising the visual choices, symbolism, and narrative threads embedded in the tactile elements of the artworks. The chapter will offer insights into the creative process from initial thought, the building phase, and the outcome.

Chapter Four*, Urban Canvases and Historical Imprints,* will focus on the role of these artworks within other interdisciplinary fields, exploring the influence and strategic use of art within the Shona urban setting. The conclusive chapter will be my comprehension and portrayal of cultural memory, preservation, disconnection, and longing within the exhibition

setting. The cultural phenomena will be distilled and expressed through exemplifying art and artistic practices' capacity to communicate contemporary and historical narratives. These installations will serve as conduits for documenting Shona migration's tangible and intangible aspects, bridging traditional and hybrid cultural norms.

CHAPTER TWO

Interwoven Narratives: Art, Migration, and Identity - A Theoretical Foundation

This chapter lays a theoretical foundation for my artistic explorations by examining the connections between art, migration, and identity within the Shona context. I will begin by exploring the pivotal role of Shona oral traditions as repositories of cultural memory that shape artistic expression, encapsulating historical and contemporary realities of movement and displacement. Next, I will investigate how migration is thematically represented in art, focusing on how artists articulate the emotional and psychological dimensions of the migrant experience, contributing to cultural preservation and transformation.

A key part of this analysis will centre on Gerald Machona's artistic practice. I will examine his use of mediums, techniques, and symbolic language, explore recurring motifs, contextualise his materials concerning displacement and memory, and analyse how his narrative structures contribute to Shona cultural reconstruction. By synthesising these elements, I aim to reveal the deep interconnections between Shona oral histories, artistic representations of migration, and the dynamic interplay of art and cultural identity, establishing a framework to inform my artistic practice.

2.1 Critical readings facilitating artistic practices

The thematic representation of migration in art is evolving into a site of critical inquiry and methodological innovation (Perks & Thomson 1998; Ritchie 2003). Migration, as a lived experience, is inherently characterised by instability, liminality, and a pertinent reshaping of individual and collective identities. Within this context, artistic practices, as theorised by Smith & Dean (2009), define practice-based research, where creative outputs (art) and exegesis (textual analysis) coexist to address artistic expressions. Practice-based research can be considered as a form of knowledge production; therefore, innovative explorations of migration's emotional and social dimensions can contribute to expanding understandings of subtle, personal experiences. Art offers an important method for probing the

complexities of migrant experiences, as artworks can connote a sense of the fluidity and hybridity of cultural identities.

2.1.1 Reflective Practice in Art and Migration

Reflective, practice-based approaches provide insight into the emotional and psychological dimensions of migration in ways that historical accounts often overlook. Latour (1986) argues that knowledge, devices, and objects emerge through continuous inscriptions, drawings, and writings—what he refers to as "agents of change." Latour's (1986:20-30) perspective underscores how materiality embodies migration, mirroring the ruptures and reconstructions inherent in the migrant journey. In this sense, art becomes a site where displacement and adaptation are inscribed into physical forms, translating the intangible experiences of migration into tangible expressions.

Durrant and Lord's (2007) concept of "migratory aesthetics" further explores how art captures the complexities of displacement, rootlessness, and memory. Migration is laden with deep emotional resonance, as exemplified in Zikken's biography, necessitating artistic forms that articulate these interior landscapes. Art, in this framework, serves not merely as a representation but as a medium that conveys the psychological depth of migrant experiences, moving beyond documentary approaches to engage with the lived realities of migration.

2.1.2. Oral History as Artistic Activism

A critical approach to oral history enables the recovery of marginalised migratory narratives, reconstructing histories often overshadowed by dominant discourses. Dipti Desai (2001) highlights how artists blend oral history with visual art, utilising practice-based methods for education, activism, and cultural preservation. Tomie Arai's *Framing an American Identity (*Figure 6) transforms immigrant interviews into collective narratives, showcasing the negotiation of cultural identity in diaspora communities. By weaving interconnected stories, Arai emphasises the collaborative construction of identity, bridging generational and cultural divides and underscoring the dynamic nature of belonging as migrants navigate heritage and new environments.

Jackie Brookner's *Of Earth and Cotton* (Figure 7) pairs labour migrants' oral histories with archival photography to create a compelling dialogue on memory and socio-economic struggle. The oral histories humanise the migrant experience, while archival images provide historical context, illustrating systemic inequalities and the resilience of migrant communities. Brookner's work aligns with Desai's emphasis on empowering marginalised voices through collaborative methods, using art to amplify narratives and foster understanding.

These artistic interventions demonstrate that migration is both an individual journey and a shared experience embedded in broader historical and social contexts. By blending personal and collective narratives, Arai and Brookner transcend individual expression, actively contributing to cultural memory and social change. Their works exemplify how art creates bridges between marginalised stories and societal discourses, integrating migrant narratives into broader dialogues of belonging and justice.

Figure 6. Framing an American identity. *Mixed media, silkscreen, glass, wood, twine, dimensions variable.* Installation for The Alternative Museum, NY, 1992 and recreated for the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 2004 (Bronx Museum:2004)

Figure 7. Jackie Brooker. *Of Earth and Cotton*, Columbia, SC 1994

The blending of personal voice as an awakening to a collective outlook is highlighted by De Mul's (2007) discourses on cultural rootlessness. De Mul investigates Aya Zikken's life (1986:95-108) and emphasises the importance of artistic engagement in migration. Art becomes a message, capable of conveying the losses and longings migrants experience individually and collectively. Zikken's use of everyday writings, rooted in her travels between Asia and Europe, embodies the tactile and emotional dimensions migrants encounter when leaving familiar homes and adapting to unfamiliar surroundings. This aligns with Castelli's (2018) analysis of migration drivers and Biyela's (2019) exploration of personal challenges migrants face, such as cultural adjustment and identity negotiation.

Expanding this, Alex Haley's (1973) emphasis on griot traditions and ancestral memory highlights oral transmission's role in preserving collective identity, especially within forced migration contexts like the transatlantic slave trade. Haley demonstrates how genealogical research and family dialogues serve as mediums to maintain cultural continuity across generations. This approach informs my artistic practice by guiding the use of dialogues from family members who experienced migration, enabling me to connect individual stories with broader collective narratives. Haley's work exemplifies how oral traditions not only preserve history but also create frameworks for identity reconstruction.

From an African perspective, Giles-Vernick's study of the Mpiemu challenges linear perceptions of time, introducing concepts like "bori" (present life) and "doli" (historical relationships), which intertwine past and present. This understanding aids migrants in adapting to new environments by framing their experiences as continuous narratives rather than isolated events. Her work validates the interconnectedness of migratory journeys, offering a critical tool for contextualising personal and collective identities.

Amanda Esterhuysen's archaeological work at Makapane Caves, detailed in *Digging the Cave*, provides additional insights by recovering the untold narrative of the Kekana Ndebele people, historically fragmented due to displacement and enslavement. Esterhuysen emphasises non-traditional sources, such as oral histories, to decenter biased frameworks in migration studies, particularly in postcolonial contexts (Kros et al., 2022:199-210; White et al., 2001:195-211). These perspectives advocate for critically examining archival practices to amplify marginalised voices, which informs my exploration of migration within artistic contexts.

Art's capacity to convey the emotional and cultural dimensions of migration can be illustrated through the incorporation of everyday objects into artistic practice. Haley's (1973) focus on family genealogical narratives demonstrates how material objects can embody migratory experiences and cultural reconstruction. Latour's (1986:1-40) notion of "ruptures and reconstructions" reflects the dynamics of identity reshaping as migrants navigate new environments. By integrating physical materials and processes that symbolise migratory transitions, my work mirrors the interplay between heritage and adaptation, preserving native values while fostering hybridity.

Through these frameworks, Giles-Vernick's concepts of non-linear time ("bori" and "doli") and Esterhuysen's emphasis on oral histories offer critical tools for understanding migration's complexities, particularly within an African context. Migration is revealed not as a break from history but as a continuation of interconnected narratives, enabling migrants to situate their experiences within broader cultural and historical contexts. This recognition fosters resilience and a more profound sense of self.

The methodologies and theoretical frameworks discussed here—spanning migratory aesthetics, artistic research, and oral narratives—establish a foundation for exploring migration and identity through art. They highlight the interplay of personal voice, collective memory, and critical engagement with historical narratives. However, to fully appreciate the nuances of Shona migration and identity, the next section will delve into specific Shona oral histories, unpacking the cultural dimensions that shape narratives of belonging and transformation across generations.

2.2 Exploring Shona oral histories

2.2.1 Shona Folklore as a Living Archive

As asserted earlier, Shona oral histories are not mere relics of the past but repositories of cultural memory (Matiza 2014); thus, a meaningful artistic exploration of Shona migration and identity would involve delving into these narratives that continue to shape contemporary perceptions of belonging and displacement.

Folktales, spiritual beliefs, and linguistic expressions shape perceptions of belonging and displacement; these cultural forms are central to understanding Shona migratory experiences. The work of Chiparausha and Mavhunduse (2014) and Peter Fry (1976) provides crucial insights into the function of ngano (oral narratives) and spiritual beliefs in Shona culture. Chiparausha and Mavhunduse (2014) argue that *ngano* (folktales) are living archives that transmit indigenous knowledge across generations, embodying values that define Shona identity. Aaron C. Hodza's analysis of these stories reinforces their adaptive nature, demonstrating how they evolve to address contemporary challenges, including migration.

While Chiparausha and Mavhunduse highlight *ngano* as "living archives" transmitting cultural knowledge, and Fry explores their connection to spiritual beliefs, Hodza demonstrates the dynamic adaptability of these oral narratives. He shows how *ngano* evolves to address contemporary challenges, including migration, by providing frameworks for understanding displacement and cultural preservation.

Beyond folklore, spiritual practices also inform Shona narratives of movement. Fry's (1976) study on Zezuru spirit mediums highlights how ancestral wisdom guides social cohesion and identity formation. This is particularly relevant in contemporary contexts, where colonial legacies and religious shifts have altered traditional spiritual landscapes (Gelfand, 1973). Understanding these dynamics allows artists to engage with ancestral knowledge in ways that resonate with both historical and modern migratory experiences.

The interplay between material culture and migration is evident in the work of contemporary artists who use traditional materials and spatial arrangements to explore

movement and memory. Mariana Castillo Deball's *Quién medirá el espacio, quién me dirá el momento?* (Figure 8) exemplifies this approach by using ceramic forms arranged in columns to symbolise the passage of time and spatial narratives. By collaborating with Atzompa pottery artisans, Deball connects indigenous craft traditions to contemporary art, demonstrating how material culture can function as a vessel for cultural memory.

This approach informs my practice, where sculptural installations serve as carriers of Shona migratory narratives, embodying both continuity and transformation. Just as Deball's work reinterprets indigenous forms within a modern framework, my art incorporates Shona storytelling, symbols, and materials to visualise migration's layered impact. Through these methods, the intangible aspects of cultural memory—ancestral knowledge, oral traditions, and lived experiences—are translated into tangible artistic forms.

Figure 8: Mariana Castillo Deball, *Quién medirá el espacio, quién me dirá el momento?, 7 (columna guerreros serpiente) (Who will measure the space, who will tell me the time?).*
Ceramic clay and metallic structure 169 1/4 in. (429.9 cm) (Deball 2015)

The exploration of Shona oral traditions, particularly *Ngano* stories and spiritual beliefs, provides a vital foundation for understanding the cultural context of migration and identity,

through passed-down family narratives. These narratives and practices become living archives, shaping perceptions of belonging and displacement. However, cultural identity is not solely transmitted through stories and spiritual practices; language itself plays a crucial role in embodying and preserving cultural values. Therefore, the following section will delve into the significance of language, proverbs, and other linguistic elements as artistic influences, further illuminating the multifaceted nature of Shona cultural identity and its relationship to migration.

2.2.2. Language and Proverbs as an Artistic Influence

Language plays a crucial role in preserving cultural identity, particularly in migratory contexts where linguistic adaptation and hybridity shape new forms of belonging Hamutyinei & Plangger 1974). The authors highlight how *tsumo* (proverbs) encapsulates Shona social values through their documentation of words and phrases into collective wisdom and ethical frameworks. These proverbs, embedded in oral narratives, provide insight into how these changing linguistic forms can signal cultural shifts amidst displacement.

Mancuveni's (2011) *"Urbanisation, Shona culture and Zimbabwean literature"* delves into the dynamic interplay between Shona culture and language within the context of urban migration in Zimbabwe. Crucially, Mancuveni argues that Shona literature, reflecting the lived experiences of urban migrants, showcases the *fluidity* of language as a key mechanism for cultural adaptation. This fluidity manifests in the emergence of hybrid linguistic forms, where the Shona language blends with other urban vernaculars, creating new expressive modes that reflect the evolving realities of migrant life. This process is not simply a loss of tradition, but rather a creative negotiation of identity in a transformed environment.

Mancuveni's analysis aligns significantly with Gelfand's 1973 assertion, in *The Genuine Shona,* that Shona survival values persist despite external pressures. Gelfand emphasises the resilience of core cultural principles, and Mancuveni demonstrates how language acts as a critical vehicle for this persistence. While the *form* of linguistic expression may change, the underlying *values* embedded within the Shona language, as documented by

Hamutyinei and Plangger's work on *tsumo* (proverbs) continues to shape migrant identities. For instance, proverbs that emphasise communal responsibility or respect for elders may be reinterpreted or integrated into urban slang, maintaining their ethical framework even as the language itself adapts.

In the context of migration, this synthesis is vital. As migrants navigate new social and linguistic landscapes, they are not simply abandoning their cultural heritage. Instead, they are actively reshaping it, using language as a tool for both adaptation and preservation. Mancuveni's work shows that hybrid linguistic forms are not signs of cultural erosion, but rather evidence of cultural resilience and creativity.

The *tsumo* tradition, as a carrier of core values, continues to influence the linguistic choices of migrants, ensuring that a sense of Shona identity persists even in the face of displacement. Gelfand's concept of enduring survival values, coupled with Mancuveni's study of linguistic fluidity, suggests that migration prompts cultural transformation, not cultural annihilation. Language, in this context, becomes a dynamic space where migrants negotiate their past and present, generating new forms of belonging that embody both continuity and change.

The intention to use language and cultural values to address culture migratory narrative can reference the work of Thierry Oussou. *Impossible is Nothing* (Figure 9) stands as a potent practice-based intervention into the ongoing discourse surrounding colonial legacies and the restitution of cultural heritage, particularly within the Beninese context. More than a mere artistic endeavour, it functions as a critical examination of the power dynamics embedded in the possession of cultural artefacts, challenging the very foundations upon which colonial narratives are constructed.

The work (Figure 9) demonstrates how important collaborative and multimedia approaches are in addressing cultural memory and heritage. The involvement of cultural academics and archaeology students at the University of Abomey-Calavi emphasises the importance of collective engagement in unearthing and reclaiming cultural narratives, as perceived by the excavation process. This resonates with my approach, which seeks to integrate historical and archaeological research with personal experiences to develop artworks that relate contemporary migrations to historical movements.

Figure 9. Thierry Oussou, *Impossible Is Nothing*, 2016–18 Mixed media: video, colour, sound, 09 mins 37 secs (Dakin 2018)

Impossible Is Nothing emphasises the importance of reclaiming lost histories through video performance. He digs through the visual culture of present-day society, unearthing the memories that are common to human beings and function as a tool for exploration. This approach allows him to excavate not only physical objects but also the buried narratives and historical injustices that accompany them. Juxtaposing how video and performance become documentation, reliving these historical works. The importance of practice-based art using language and cultural values leads the study to mythmake the continuation of oral narratives in contemporary times. Oussou's multimedia and research-driven approaches exemplify this, as his works reflect those changes and could be seen as a continuation of reconstructing oral narratives. This is a key point about the importance of the study, as it is not just about depicting migratory culture,

Another factor is that a practice-based approach with these interdisciplinary fields makes culture accessible. Oussou's interactive and research-based work, along with using textual elements and interactive spaces, shows how art can break liminal barriers to resonate across time and place (Figure 9) and shows the significance of bringing the intangible cultural heritage (like proverbs and cultural narratives) into tangible forms, which is vital for

migrants who may carry values from their cultural origins, practising them despite being geographically separated.

Gelfand (1973), Mancuveni (2011), and Hamutyinei and Plangger (1974) collectively develop the importance of engaging with Shona oral histories as a means of understanding the cultural context within which artistic practice operates. By drawing on these insights, artists can, and do, create powerful works that explore these themes through personal narratives, intuitive connections, and a willingness to embrace the fluidity and ambiguity inherent in the migrant experience. Art serves as a channel, allowing for the communication of cultural complexities that often defy straightforward articulation, and providing a space for both artists and audiences to navigate the intricate terrain of identity, memory, and belonging.

2.3 Migration Themes in art: Contemporary Shona lenses and cultural reconstruction

Migration is not merely the physical movement from one place to another; it is a profound cultural and emotional journey that reshapes identities and challenges the boundaries of belonging. Within this context, art serves as a crucial tool for cultural reconstruction, offering migrants a platform to navigate, articulate, and adapt to evolving realities. Through practice-based art, particularly from contemporary Shona perspectives, artists engage in identity negotiation, transforming and reconstructing migrant experiences rather than merely reflecting them. This section draws on Nyoni (2024), Tirimboyi (2017), and Biyela (2019) to explore how art bridges cultural contexts, confronts notions of "otherness," and fosters hybrid cultural forms, redefining narratives in a constantly evolving global landscape.

Biyela's *Experiences and Challenges of International Migrant Students: At the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College)* (2019:30-60) examines the practical and emotional challenges faced by migrants, such as cultural adjustment, social integration, and negotiating "otherness." These insights highlight art's role in processing these struggles and building shared understanding. Tirimboyi (2017:85-132), in *The Role of Migration in the Morphing of Shona Identity,* extends this argument, exploring how migration reshapes identity through interactions of time, space, and culture. By capturing these dynamic

processes, art empowers migrants to process their experiences, articulate evolving identities, and foster meaningful cultural connections amidst displacement.

Gerald Machona's work exemplifies this reconstructive process. In *Cross-Border Trader Performance*, Machona transforms decommissioned Zimbabwean banknotes into garments, critiquing economic instability and highlighting migrant adaptability (2013:45). This resonates with Tirimboyi's ideas of identity morphing as the materials bridge past and present, reflecting the migrant experience of navigating financial and social systems. Similarly, Machona's *Ndiri Afronaut* performance visualises foreignness and belonging, addressing xenophobia and fostering dialogue on displacement, echoing Nyoni's (2018:154-252) assertion that art serves as a platform for cultural negotiation. By blending traditional Shona symbols with contemporary elements, Machona illustrates Matiza's argument that cultural heritage is reshaped, not erased, in migration (Machona 2013:67).

Nyoni (2024:45-117), in *Diaspora in Dialogue: An Ontology of Diasporic Subjectivity in the Work of Three Artists Living In-Between South Africa and Zimbabwe,* explores diasporic subjectivity and proposes that "in-betweenness" is a universal human condition shaped by sociocultural histories. Nyoni critiques reductive notions of migration and academic approaches, advocating for hybrid methodologies that bridge philosophy and artistic practice. Analysing the works of Zimbabwean artists such as Ronald Muchatuta and Machona, Nyoni highlights how art articulates displacement and belonging, processing trauma while contributing to decolonial discourses.

Together, these perspectives illustrate that art is not merely documentation but an active site for negotiating identity, challenging exclusionary narratives, and reshaping cultural understanding. Through this transformative capacity, art fosters hybrid identities and intercultural dialogue, enabling migrants to engage with the complexities of displacement while actively contributing to cultural preservation and adaptation. By re-contextualising the migrant experience, artists like Machona provide compelling examples of how art becomes a dynamic means of cultural reconstruction in migratory contexts.

Figure 10: *Cross Border Trader Performance,* 2010. (Machona 2010)

Biyela (2019) emphasises the challenges that migrants face in adapting to new socio-economic and cultural landscapes, particularly the emotional and financial struggles encountered in new environments. Machona's (2013) use of decommissioned Zimbabwean banknotes in works like *Cross-Border Trader Performance* (Figure 10) directly engages with these concerns. By transforming obsolete currency into symbolic garments and performative pieces, Machona critiques the economic instability that drives migration while highlighting migrants' adaptability in foreign financial systems.

The choice of materials—discarded banknotes—serves as a metaphor for economic exclusion and the devaluation of identity in new environments. This concept aligns with Biyela's discussion (2019:30-60) of how migrants struggle to integrate into host societies, where financial instability often reinforces social marginalisation. Through his artistic

practice, Machona brings visibility to these economic struggles, illustrating how financial precarity becomes a defining aspect of the migrant experience.

Machona blends traditional Shona cultural symbols with contemporary artistic and performative elements. His performances often incorporate Shona language, customs, and attire, yet these elements are recontextualised within foreign environments, emphasising how identity is neither static nor singular but rather an ongoing negotiation. His work finds support in Tirimboyi's (2017) notion of the morphing and reshaping of Shona identity through migration: new identities emerge through the interplay of memory, displacement, and adaptation. Machona's use of banknotes as wearable art further signifies these processes of hybridisation and reconstruction. The materials reference Zimbabwe's economic collapse, yet when transformed into sculptural or performative objects, they become cultural signifiers conveying past narratives and present times.

Figure 11. Gerald Machona. *Ndiri Afronaut (I am an Afronaut).* 2012. Decommissioned Zimbabwean Dollar, Foam Padding, Fabric, Wood, Perspex, Rubber, Plastic Tubing, Nylon Thread and Gold Leaf Dimensions Variable

Machona's performances, such as *Ndiri Afronaut* (where he presents himself as an "alien" figure navigating foreign terrain), challenge notions of exclusion and belonging in their engagement with xenophobia and cross-border tensions. By positioning himself as an "Afronaut"—a displaced space traveller— (Figure 11), visualises the experience of foreignness in host societies. This aligns with Nyoni's argument that Zimbabwean artists use their work to address themes of displacement, belonging, and cultural negotiation. Machona's artistic interventions disrupt fixed narratives of national belonging, reinforcing Nyoni's claim that art plays a crucial role in reconstructing migrant identities and fostering a sense of community among displaced individuals.

Machona's work (2013) examines how visual and performance art can mediate xenophobic tensions and cultural conflict. His work is a direct response to the discrimination faced by Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa, where xenophobia often manifests in violent and exclusionary practices (Mangena 2020). The performative aspect of his art—such as his interactions with audiences in public spaces—actively engages with the discourse of "otherness" and challenges hostile perceptions of migrants.

This connects with his choice of decommissioned banknotes as a material, which symbolises economic migration and how Zimbabwean migrants are often viewed through an economic lens—either as cheap labour or as burdens on host economies. His work thus disrupts these stereotypes, humanising the migrant experience and encouraging dialogue about economic displacement and cultural exclusion (Nyoni 2024:249-251).

His use of banknotes can also be seen as a reinterpretation of traditional Zimbabwean craft practices, where materiality holds cultural significance. As traditional crafts use natural materials to tell stories of ancestry and belonging, Machona repurposes banknotes to tell stories of economic migration and identity transformation. This demonstrates how contemporary art practices serve as a bridge between past and present, reinforcing Matiza's argument that cultural heritage is not lost in migration but rather adapted and reshaped. By transforming financial artefacts into symbols of identity and resistance, Machona's work highlights the economic, social, and cultural negotiations that define the migrant experience. His practice reinforces the argument that art is not just a means of documentation but an active site for reconstructing cultural narratives, challenging exclusionary discourses, and fostering intercultural dialogue.

2.4 Art and Cultural Identity: Aesthetic Experience and Mythmaking as Bridges to Belonging

The intersection of art and cultural identity provides a crucial framework for understanding how migrants navigate displacement and cultivate belonging in new environments. Through aesthetic experiences and contemporary mythmaking, art transcends simple representation, enabling migrants to engage with cultural memory and create connections that anchor them in shifting contexts. Migrants do not merely carry static identities; rather, their lived experiences, informed by memory, tradition, and adaptation, foster a morphing of identity that reflects continuity and transformation.

Achille Mbembe's theoretical contributions offer a valuable framework for interpreting this engagement with identity and memory. His concept of *Afropolitanism*, introduced in *On the Postcolony* (2001:14-17) and later expanded in various essays, describes a mode of being that is simultaneously rooted in African specificity and open to global flows and cultural exchange. The notion of hybridity, multiplicity, and negotiation reflects the lived realities of many migrants, especially within postcolonial Africa, whose identities are shaped by continual movement, adaptation, and encounter. In my sculptural installations, the blending of Shona oral traditions with contemporary urban materials and spatial symbolism reflects this Afropolitan condition. My practice embraces the tension between rootedness and mobility, engaging with art as a dynamic site where fragmented identities can be reassembled and reimagined through material form.

This Afropolitan aesthetic is reinforced by Mbembe's concept of postcolonial temporality, where time is not linear but fractured—an overlay of ancestral, colonial, and contemporary rhythms. Migrants, particularly those navigating South-South mobility, often experience cultural identity as a negotiation across these temporalities. My installations draw on myth and nostalgia not as forms of escape into the past but as tools for acknowledging the non-linearity of cultural experience. These mythic and nostalgic strategies, embedded in sculptural forms and spatial arrangements, allow for a layered navigation of time: ancestral migrations merge with personal urban displacement, producing a symbolic space that mirrors the disjunctures of memory and identity. Through the use of clay, soil, wood, and found objects, I attempt to materialise this temporal hybridity and cultural dislocation—what Mbembe might describe as "living within the ruins of time."

Mbembe's work also offers a powerful critique of the colonial archive in *The Power of the Archive and Its Limits* (2002:21-26). He challenges traditional Western frameworks of historical record-keeping and insists on the importance of alternative archives—oral, embodied, and artistic—for capturing African histories and subjectivities. This argument supports my use of Shona proverbs, ancestral stories, and family dialogues as legitimate sources of knowledge.

In my work, these oral narratives are transformed into sculptural forms that function as counter-archives. Rather than seeking verification through dominant historical texts, these works present memory through materiality—stone, grain, twine, and earth—offering a tactile means of preserving and transmitting identity. Like Mariana Castillo Deball's ceramic installations that reframe indigenous memory through contemporary sculpture (Figure 5), my approach visualises Shona narratives as both evolving and embodied, resisting erasure while adapting to new contexts.

The work of Gerald Machona exemplifies how art becomes a medium for cultural negotiation. In *Cross-Border Trader Performance* (2010), Machona's use of decommissioned Zimbabwean banknotes highlights economic exclusion, resourcefulness, and resilience in migration, while simultaneously creating a dialogue about identity reconstruction. The transformation of discarded currency into symbolic garments critiques xenophobia and stereotypes of economic migrants while asserting the agency of Shona identity in reshaping cultural narratives. This process echoes Matiza's argument that migration does not erase cultural heritage but reconfigures it, affirming that past and present coexist dynamically in the migrant experience.

Similarly, aesthetic experiences serve as bridges to belonging by connecting individuals to personal and collective memory. Petina Gappah's *The Book of Memory* (2015) delves into the subjective nature of memory and its role in shaping identity. For migrants, memory acts as a repository of cultural continuity, even when fragmented or reconstructed. Through recalling and reinterpreting their past, individuals make sense of new environments, drawing on memory to foster stability amidst the dissonance of displacement. However, memory is more than individual; Novuyo Rosa Tshuma's *House of Stone* (2019) demonstrates how personal and national narratives converge, as historical trauma and cultural myth intertwine to inform the identity of Zimbabwean diasporic communities. These

works underscore that cultural reconstruction is neither static nor linear but rather a complex interplay of past, present, and future.

In addressing migration's sensory and ecological dimensions, cultural memory also extends into food and indigenous knowledge. Brown's (2020) exploration of food as a mnemonic device illustrates how sensory experiences evoke emotions and cultural belonging. The smell, taste, and texture of food become acts of remembrance, connecting migrants to their roots and creating continuity within the flux of migration. Shava's (2005) research on indigenous knowledge systems, particularly in the context of wild food plants in Zimbabwe, furthers this understanding. His work underscores how ecological practices are ingrained in cultural identity and memory, showing that migration is not merely spatial but deeply connected to lived relationships with land and resources. These connections expand the scope of artistic engagement beyond the visual to encompass the ecological and multisensory aspects of cultural identity.

The transformative power of storytelling and mythmaking in art is also evident in Ben Okri's *A Way of Being Free* (1997). Okri's emphasis on art as a means of mapping memory and identity transcends geographical boundaries, presenting storytelling as a vehicle for negotiating belonging in migratory contexts. His argument finds resonance in the aesthetic philosophy of Shusterman and Tomlin's *Aesthetic Experience* (2007), which highlights the capacity of art to evoke emotions and cultural associations that foster understanding and empathy. These works collectively illuminate the potential of aesthetic practice to mediate the challenges of migration and to reframe identity not as a loss but as an ongoing negotiation.

What emerges from these perspectives is a synthesis of art, memory, and mythmaking as essential processes for cultural reconstruction. Migrants, through their creative practices, confront the challenges of displacement while creating spaces of healing, dialogue, and resistance. Rather than being celebratory, this engagement with aesthetic practices is grounded in the critical recognition of art's power to shape cultural identity amid exclusionary narratives and systemic inequalities. Artistic expression, from Machona's wearable sculptures to the sensory evocations of food, provides both individual catharsis and collective frameworks for belonging. By navigating the tensions between past and present, art transforms memory and myth into bridges of cultural negotiation, offering a means to reimagine identity in a world defined by migration.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have built a strong theoretical foundation for exploring the intricate connections between art, migration, and identity within the Shona context. Shona oral traditions, such as ngano and tsumo, function as living archives, preserving cultural memory and shaping contemporary understandings of belonging and displacement. Through the works of artists like Gerald Machona, Thierry Oussou, Tomie Arai, and Mariana Castillo Deball, I have shown how artistic practices articulate the emotional and psychological dimensions of migration, transforming personal experiences into collective narratives.

This study highlights oral history's power as a form of artistic activism, recovering marginalised voices and challenging dominant discourses. By examining language, proverbs, and Shona notions of time—as articulated in Giles-Vernick's work—I have revealed how cultural context deeply shapes the migrant experience. Additionally, I have explored how art serves as a platform for negotiating "otherness," fostering hybrid cultural forms, and disrupting exclusionary narratives. Through aesthetic experience and mythmaking, art emerges as a bridge between past and present, enabling migrants to cultivate belonging and reimagine identity amidst displacement.

To fully apply these theoretical insights to my artistic practice, a focused investigation of contemporary Shona artists' methodologies is necessary. The next chapter will delve into their use of materials, techniques, and symbolic language within the context of migration, memory, and cultural identity. By analysing their creative processes and situating their works within a broader socio-cultural framework, I aim to uncover how Shona artistic practices contribute to cultural preservation, transformation, and reconstruction. This practical exploration will directly inform the development of my creative approach, bridging the theoretical concepts discussed here with the lived experiences of the Shona diaspora.

CHAPTER THREE

Artful Narratives Unveiled

In this chapter, I transition from theoretical frameworks to practical applications, exploring how artistic processes and materials serve as conduits for communicating and preserving migratory experiences within the Shona context. I examine how artists, including myself, engage with historical and contemporary narratives of movement, displacement, and belonging. Drawing from archaeological insights in Pikirayi (2002) on early Shona settlements and material culture, and engaging with Mieke Bal's (2009) narratological concepts to structure narrative within my artistic practice, I explore the creative processes involved in working with materials such as soapstone, clay, iron, charcoal, and repurposed grocery bags. These mediums become vessels for cultural memory and social commentary, informed by Stuart Hall's discourse on diaspora and identity, and Marianne Hirsch's exploration of post-memory (within Gibbons 2007). This chapter illustrates how my artistic interventions, aligned with Estell Barret's (2007) notion of 'experience and experiment' as knowledge generation, not only reflect the complexities of migration but also actively contribute to the ongoing reconstruction of cultural identity, bridging past and present through tangible artistic expressions.

3.1 Art’s capacity to communicate

Historical writings on the Leopard Kopje people can attest to their movements from Central Africa to what is now known as Zimbabwe, but little is known about how this society felt while they were travelling and settling from one region to the other. Their personal accounts are not documented. Early artistic practices such as soapstone carving, ironworking, and pottery provide a sense of some of their social activities. These art objects served social and ceremonial purposes, and archaeologists have suggested that while it is not possible to infer the exact personal circumstances of my ancestors, my practice seeks to find resonances through working in similar mediums and processes from

Shona cultural traditions are the slow migration from Central Africa until reaching Southern Africa in Zimbabwe (Mazarire 2009) by those who are now known as the Leopard Kopje people.

Art's capacity to communicate contemporary and historical narratives is perceived by the processes and the materials used by the early Shona. This is because the historical and academic writings do attest to their movements but have minimal mention of how they felt when they were travelling and settling from one region to the other. To understand how these people may have felt through early artistic processes through soapstone carving, ironworking, and pottery skills, because the objects made served social and ceremonial purposes, as noted (Fry 1976; Chigamba & Kyker 2019). These processes and objects best exemplify how the Leopard Kopje may have to negotiate longing, displacement, and belonging. The lack of this emotional communication is the basis of how I use art to convey belonging, longing, displacement and the importance of memory in migration based on my migrations.

3.2 Soapstone, iron smelting and smithing remains, pottery practices

The presence of Soapstone birds, iron smelting and smithing remains and objects and pottery from the early Iron Age 800-1100 AD practices, helps the study to understand the artworks and processes and how they relate to migration in Shona culture (Pikirayi 2002; Chirikure & Rehren 2006). This ideation of studying artworks and processes draws from Jones (2007:2-14), where he states that the presence of an object becomes a relationship that provides an understanding of the people or culture associated with it.

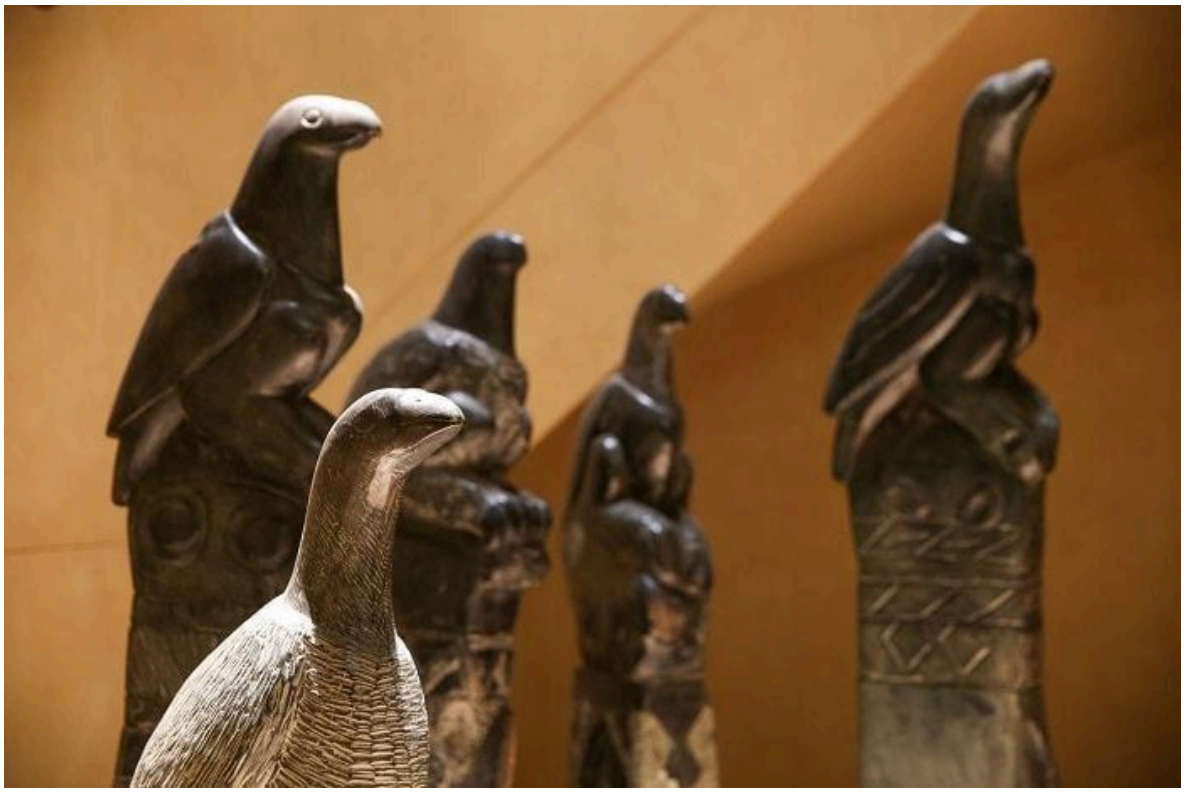

Figure 12. Coolancientstuff. *Soapstone birds*. 2020.

The soapstone birds are the first objects that help us understand the early Shona people, and these objects bring context to how they relate to cultural memory, significance, and relation to migration. This is because when the early colonialists surveyed Zimbabwe, they found these sculptures within the empty enclosures (Pikirayi 2002). The interpretations from research writings and oral history become possible connections because these objects were found where the kings and religious authorities of the time lived and operated within the great enclosures (Matenga 2011). No one knows when they were made, as all knowledge is based on carbon dating, academic writings (Hubbard 2009), and oral narratives (Chigamba & Kyker 2019) to generate data concerning their existence.

Figure 13. Tatenda Mapisire. *Soapstone carving*. 2023.

In my practice, soapstone carving became a means to connect to early Shona artists. The connecting patterns were inspired by the doodles made during my monthly conversations with my family, who live in different geographical areas. By fixing the patterns in stone, I am commemorating these conversations as they guide me and provide the necessary support. The birds are believed to have been carved to commemorate past Shona kings of Great Zimbabwe (Matenga 2011; Chigamba & Kyker 2019), and thus, this relates to my approach to commemorating family conversations. It is in this gap between us that even without them in proximity, their messages continue to guide or watch over me.

Importantly, these examples of soapstone sculptures in early Shona art have led to the assumption that the stone working has been in continuity from the distant past (Pearce 1993). However, there is no direct link which substantiates a continuity between the soapstone birds and contemporary soapstone carvings. Current stone-practising cultures

erupted during postcolonial times, facilitated by Frank McEwen[13] and originating from commercial interests in global art. Also, some of the artists in the Shona Art or Shona sculpture movements were not ethnically Shona, as they came from neighbouring tribes, as noted by Zilberg (1996).

However, despite the lack of a direct link of continuity, the presence of the locations where the soapstones were found, oral narratives, and present-day Shona stone-making initiatives have led artists to keep interpreting and reinterpreting stone materials as a reconstruction of lost narratives (Zuva Gallery 2024). This is because Shona sculptors use the material as a cultural and spiritual medium which documents traditional narratives, ensuring the preservation of heritage and celebrating the nation's cultural landscape. These works stand as a testament to cultural pride and identity.

The spiritual dimension is equally prominent, with the sculptures depicting ancestors and spirits, reflecting the connection to ancestral beliefs and the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship with the spiritual world. This notion also reflects on the ideation of Davidson (2023), who elaborates that art practice, due to the presence of objects, can enable continuities or discontinuities of cultural ideas. My understanding of Jones (2007) and Davidson (2023) makes me investigate further and reflect on how clay and iron production, as creative processes, help connect past and present knowledge in Shona migratory culture.

Clay was used for building and pottery, with women traditionally making special pots for afterlife ceremonies (Mahohoma 2020). Much like the social and ceremonial aspects of soapstone and iron objects, clay afterlife pots serve as vessels for sacred offerings. This is shown by the chikuva ceremony (a sacred space in Shona homes) with its pottery, showcasing how objects and space hold cultural memory.

[13] Frank McEwen was a pivotal figure in the development of Zimbabwean stone sculpture as a recognised art form. He served as the first director of the Rhodes National Gallery (now the National Gallery of Zimbabwe) from 1957 to 1973 (Zilberg 1996).

Figure 14. Duncan Wylie. *Chikuva*. Traditional Shona kitchen. 2020.

The ceremonial clay pots embody cultural and spiritual narratives when the living would engage in ritual ceremonies, which were intended to unite the living and the deceased (Mahohoma 2020). The pots were also offered as prayer offerings to the immaterial realm, with the intent of having a connection to the environment. This connection to ritual practices and beliefs about the afterlife acted as a continuation that even if one passes away, they remain existing by the representation of the presence of the clay pot in the home space. As noted from traditional Shona practice, the placement of pots for prayers and rituals in (Figure 14) also became a contact that ties the family line and members. Even if any member of the family were to relocate to another area, the pot and its offerings would bind any person associated with the family.

Figure 15. Tatenda Mapisire. Soil bowls on wood. 2023.

It is in this act of connecting with the environment that I revert to using soil to connect with my environment, as noted in this slip-casting experimental work (Figure 15). The art of slip-casting is a process of transforming liquid soil into a solidified form within a mould, suggesting the experience of being a migrant. Just as slip adapts to the contours of the plaster, as a migrant, I must navigate and adapt to the unfamiliar contours of a new culture, a new environment, and a new sense of self. This process, while offering the potential for creation and growth, is inherently one of negotiation, translation, and often, a temporary loss of fixed identity.

Slip-casting demands a surrender to the mould. The soil, representing my own fluid identity, must conform to the pre-existing structure, a structure that symbolises the host culture's norms, expectations, and unspoken rules. I, much like the slip, am poured into this new context, absorbing its essence while simultaneously solidifying into a new form. This is not a passive process; it involves a constant negotiation between the original self and the emerging one. The mould may represent the demands and the social pressures of a different cultural milieu, or even the subtle yet pervasive expectations of a community that views me as an "other."

It is in these experimental representations of past and present that the soil bowls become tangible links to memory, ensuring that living and non-living people remain associated with these cultural practices. However, today, clay practices are marginal, as they can be located in certain geographical areas within Shona culture (Habeenzu 2021). In the urban Shona societies, these practices declined because of the practice of Christianity or the influences of the city (Gelfand 1973). The chikuva continues to exist, though, in traditional Shona homes, because the traditional homes are the uniting factor where all Shona cultural practices began.

The engagement of creative historical processes can further be noted by iron objects like axes (gano) and knives (bakatwa), which were depicted as markers of authority and prestige (Dewey 1986). These objects are also deemed vessels of spiritual significance because the knives were found under the palace of one of the Torwa State, in proximity to the soapstone birds (Pikirayi 2002:83-110), which has led to notions that they signified authority, guidance, and protection. The spatial separation of iron smelting and smithing, as indicated by Chirikure and Rehren (2006), contributed to the understanding of ritualistic and utilitarian aspects, showing how iron production is embedded in social and religious life.

Figure 16. Duncan Wylie. *Gano* (ceremonial axe). 2020.

Dewey (1986:220), through his interviews and observations of postcolonial traditional artists, also notes that the iron objects *were* socially and ceremonially used in rituals, and they acted as mediators to have revelations that acted as messages from the spiritual to the physical realm. It is in these direct observations and use that the iron object becomes significant in understanding cultural memory.

Figure 17. Duncan Wylie. *Bakatwa* (ceremonial daggers and knives). 2020.

The passing of one of these objects also helps narrate the previous beholder, the history of the object, and the potential holder in future. As the cycle passes from one person to another, it is where the material becomes a material culture that explains the history of a family, spirituality, and connection to ancestors, which are crucial aspects that reinforce social structures and spiritual beliefs, helping to maintain cultural cohesion. Due to a lack of smithing and smelting, these historical practices are vanishing. Dewey (1991:112-136)

notes that he observed some of the last practising smithers and smelters, in remote areas in Zimbabwe and not in the city and urban spaces.

Figure 18. Tatenda Mapisire. *Experimental work*. Flat and round bar. 2024.

Intersecting past and present cultural knowledge by the act of "passing objects" refers to the notion of transference as noted by Hannula *et al.* (2005), which imbues history and contemporary narratives. This finds a compelling parallel in my experience, particularly when viewed through the lens of welding. Both artistic processes of (smithing/smelting and welding) speak to the construction of identity through the fusion of disparate elements, the dialogue of inherited legacies, and the amalgamating of new connections. In the context of migration, this "passing of objects" is not merely the physical transfer of an object, but the transmission of cultural knowledge, lived experiences, and the very essence of identity, welded into my being as I navigate a new landscape.

As a welded joint combines two distinct pieces of metal, simultaneously one piece connecting to another, my identity becomes a fusion of their heritage and their adopted

culture. The "passing of objects" symbolises cultural traditions, languages, and values from one generation to the next and is analogous to the foundational materials being joined. However, the intense heat and pressure of migration by welding transform these inherited elements. Migrants do not simply carry the past; they reshape it, adapting it to the new context and forging a unique blend that reflects both their origins and their present reality.

3.2.1 Relevance of these processes as past and present knowledge

The exploration of Shona material culture, through soapstone birds, iron tools, and pottery, reveals an undercurrent of migrant feelings. A deep longing for continuity and connection permeates the interpretations of these objects, a desire to anchor oneself in ancestral roots even when direct lines of tradition are obscured. This echoes the migrant's fundamental need to preserve cultural identity amidst new or shifting environments. Simultaneously, acknowledging colonial disruption and commercial influence, which fractured the continuity of stone-working practices, underscores a profound sense of displacement and disruption.

This mirrors the migrant's experience of feeling disconnected from their heritage as traditions are altered because of the influence of the dominant cultures or lost by forgetting these values. The weight of historical loss further compounds these feelings, as the looting of artefacts and the denial of Shona contributions to Great Zimbabwe evoke a sense of cultural erasure, a pain familiar to migrants who have witnessed the difficulty of fully expressing their heritage while away from home. However, the emphasis on oral narratives and the interpretation of material objects as carriers of cultural memory highlights the importance of memory and remembrance. This is a vital tool for migrants seeking to maintain their identity across generations and time.

Despite these challenges, the presence and reflection of these objects and their continued use in social and ritual contexts convey a powerful hope for cultural reinterpretation. This is a crucial element for migrants striving to rebuild their lives, as an awakening of illustrating the fragility they go through. Finally, the struggle to validate Shona contributions to Great Zimbabwe signifies the persistent feeling of needing to prove cultural validity, simultaneously denying their roots. This sentiment is felt by migrants who often face

challenges to their cultural legitimacy, based on fear of being victimised through xenophobic tendencies.

Summing up, the reflection on the creative processes through soapstone carving, ironworking, and pottery skills, through art, best exemplifies how the Leopard Kopje may negotiate memory, displacement, and belonging through objects they made. This ideation comes from the locations where the materials were found and the interpretations generated from cultural understanding of the objects. The lack of this emotional communication is the basis of how I use welding and slip-casting based on my migrations. To convey belonging, longing, displacement and the importance of memory in migration. Through a reflective art-based practice approach, the sculptural installation ties my experiences to understand how contemporary and historical knowledge can become intertwined through material expressions.

3.3 Art as a Negotiation Space

The fusion of personal movements, to make this installation, draws on Mieke Bal's concepts of fabula and focalization in narratology to inform my artmaking approach (Bal 2009). My artistic practice, of employing charcoal and paper grocery bags as primary materials, becomes a site where ancient migratory narratives intersect with the contemporary realities of migrant labour, particularly the precarious conditions faced by delivery drivers. This convergence illuminates the enduring human experience of displacement, adaptation, and the relentless pursuit of belonging. The parallels are drawn between the Leopard Kopje migrations, my journey, and the contemporary struggles of migrant workers. I aim to weave a narrative that transcends temporal and spatial boundaries, highlighting the shared humanity that underpins these seemingly disparate experiences.

Through practice-based art, I document my experiences by weekly and monthly accumulating paper food bags (Checkers 60/60 bags) from the groceries I buy and source. The process of creating the work consisted of storing, tearing, stamping, duplicating, layering, and weaving drawings from the reflective practice as a means of generating knowledge (Rutten 2016). The use of charcoal, a material historically associated with mark-making and storytelling, becomes a poignant symbol of the migrant's enduring presence.

Like the ancient inhabitants of Leopard Kopje who left traces of their existence with the soapstone birds, migrant workers leave their mark on the urban landscape, navigating its streets and delivering goods. The fragility of charcoal, its capacity to both mark and smudge, mirrors the precarious nature of their labour. The dark, smudged marks on the paper grocery bags, created through the process of stamping with food colouring and charcoal, become a visual metaphor for the physical and emotional toll of their journey, the weariness and resilience that characterise their struggle.

Figure 19. Tatenda Mapisire. *Zuva nezuva (Day by day).* Charcoal and food colourings on grocery paper. 2024.

The paper grocery bags, repurposed from their function as carriers of sustenance, become both a literal and metaphorical representation of my journey. Storing these bags and accumulating them over time mirrors the gradual collection of experiences and memories shaping my identity. This act becomes an archive of movement, embodying the tactile and emotional dimensions of migration, as Rutten (2016) suggests, where materiality acts as a repository of knowledge. The tearing of the bags signifies the rupture inherent in leaving one's home and the fragmentation of identity that accompanies displacement. Mangena (2020) links this act to the cultural, physical, and psychological loss experienced in leaving autochthonous spaces, particularly for undocumented migrants.

By duplicating motifs and patterns onto the bags, I create a visual rhythm reflecting the monotonous nature of migrant labour. This mirrors the repetitive challenges faced by delivery drivers, highlighting the cyclical movement that defines their work. The layering of patterns evokes depth and complexity, paralleling the layered identities migrants develop when navigating multiple cultural contexts. This layering reflects the process of constructing a new life, stacking experience upon experience, echoing Bedford's (2016) view that art creates immersive aesthetic connections between past and present.

The act of weaving the torn bags transforms fragments into a cohesive whole, metaphorically representing migrants' integration and adaptation. This connection recalls the migrations of the Leopard Kopje people, whose material culture connected communities through social and ceremonial objects, as Mlambo (2014), Chirikure and Rehren (2006), and Dewey (1991) document. Like Leopard Kopje pottery and ironwork, the woven bags act as vessels for transmitting cultural memory. This weaving represents the resilience of migrants, forging belonging from disparate elements and forming connections in unfamiliar landscapes.

My personal experiences as a student migrant navigating displacement resonate deeply with these themes. Collecting and transforming these bags becomes a way of archiving my journey, documenting the emotional and physical labour of adapting to a new cultural landscape. Storing, tearing, stamping, duplicating, layering, and weaving become tangible expressions of negotiating identity and belonging. Mieke Bal's (2009) concepts of fabula and focalization in narratology guide my approach, helping me frame rootlessness and displacement. These themes align with Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory (in Gibbons, 2007), where the current generation engages with past traumas, and Assmann's (2011) discussion of cultural memory as a tool for continuity and adaptation.

The connection to delivery drivers, primarily foreign nationals, is symbolic rather than literal. Their precarious labour, constant movement, and vulnerabilities resonate with themes of displacement and adaptation. Every day, materials like charcoal and paper grocery bags ground these abstract ideas in tangible realities, linking personal experiences to broader social forces. This is further informed by W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double

consciousness, Valentine Yves Mudimbe's critique of cultural othering, Stuart Hall's analysis of diaspora and identity, and Mirzoeff's (2000) insights into visual culture within diasporic conditions.

The Leopard Kopje migrations, driven by ecological and economic pressures, provide historical context for the enduring human impulse to seek new opportunities. Their movement and transmission of cultural knowledge echo contemporary migrant experiences navigating globalised economies and complex borders. The passing down of traditions through Leopard Kopje artefacts parallels the transmission of language, customs, and resilience among contemporary migrants.

In expanding my practice, I incorporate stop-motion animation and video art to animate stone and leaf writings on the ground, utilising natural materials as vessels of memory and ancestral presence. These time-based sequences become meditative gestures that reflect the impermanence, repetition, and ritual embedded in migration and cultural transmission. The frame-by-frame movement mirrors the incremental process of adapting and remembering, where fragile materials—stones displaced, leaves blown by wind—embody the ephemeral and unstable conditions of migrant life.

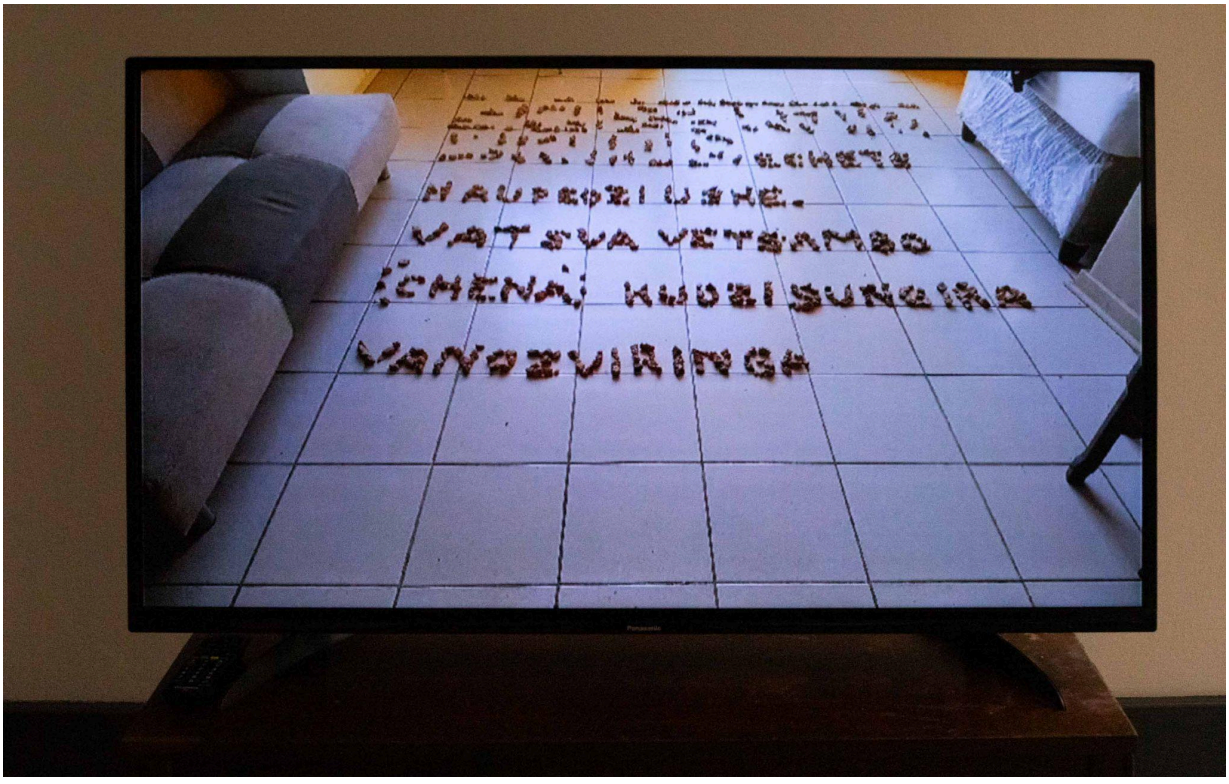

Figure 20. Tatenda Mapisire. *Mazwi anesimba.* Stone and Leaf Movements. 8mins 32 secs. 2024.

This approach aligns with Assmann's (2011) theory of cultural memory, in which media—both material and immaterial—play a critical role in preserving collective identity across time. By animating natural inscriptions through stop motion, I extend the weaving and layering processes of drawing into the temporal realm, transforming tactile repetition into moving visual rhythms. The animated sequences echo the method of layered drawing on grocery bags, as each frame in the animation, like each layer in the drawing, builds on previous gestures, mirroring how memories and cultural identities are accumulated and sedimented.

Further, the animated writings are informed by Hirsch's concept of post-memory, as noted by Gibbons (2007), which evokes inherited memory by re-enacting gestures and symbols from ancestral practices. The use of video, voice, and movement channels the immaterial presence of those who came before me, creating a space where memory is not simply stored but actively reinterpreted and re-performed. These visual narratives are both personal and communal, serving as dynamic sites where diasporic identity, ancestral connection, and the everyday rituals of migration converge.

Ultimately, the grocery bags and the stop-motion video work, along with the processes of storing, tearing, stamping, duplicating, layering, and weaving, articulate the complexities of migration. These materials become testaments to the resilience of migrants, reminders of the human cost of displacement, and calls for nuanced understandings of the forces shaping our world. With parallels between ancient migrations and contemporary realities, my work highlights the enduring human struggle for belonging and art's potential to unite temporal and spatial divides.

3.3.1 Challenges of cultural continuity

It is important to note that actions that have a direct link to cultural continuity on the objects and artistic processes are futile based on cultural loss, which has been happening since the inception of colonialism in Shona culture (Gelfand 1973). This was because colonial processes favoured the colonialists through building systems that served their interests. A lot of erasure began happening within Shona culture, as indigenous knowledge systems were forbidden in favour of the colonial way.

From a historical and archaeological outlook, this is evidenced by the looting of valuable

materials such as beads and traded ornaments, which were found by initial researchers when they were excavating Iron Age sites, such as Great Zimbabwe ruins, and other stonewalling remnants (Pikirayi 2002; Mlambo 2014). This looting was for denying the notion that Shona-speaking people had been responsible for building the Great Zimbabwe walls, and other stonewalls across Zimbabwe. These denials dampen attempts to try to

understand and connect the early process of Shona art practices and have continuity links towards the current Shona-speaking groups.

From a contemporary outlook, this is evidenced by *The Genuine Shona* (1973), where Michael Gelfand noted modern-day challenges in his observations during colonial and postcolonial Shona. Shona working people, predominantly from rural backgrounds, began losing cultural knowledge due to an acquisition or preference for urban lifeways[14]. Younger Shona individuals during this period also faced the same fate because they moved away from their rural homes to pursue education or employment, as Mbiti notes on the effects of modern change in Africans (1969: 3).

Losing and forgetting cultural knowledge was because these individuals would spend most of their time away from their rural homes due to employment. Referring to losing and forgetting cultural knowledge while I am away from my native home, I am also prone to losing my cultural knowledge based on my studies, and while abiding in the new home, to comply with the laws of that country. This gap, being away from home, led to investigating the processes, materials, and objects of Leopard Kopje and reflection and documentation in my practice-based art efforts as an endeavour to postulate a hidden concern and reminder of the potential loss of culture and traditions. Thus, the creative works of the study will seek to voice cultural rootlessness among younger generations, especially those who migrate or live in communities far from their cultural origins, because diasporic moving is a move away from the original home space.

3.3.2 Artworks as a hope for cultural memory

Attempts to have some sort of cultural continuity come from art (Dewey 1986), historical (Mazarire 2002), and archaeological (Pikirayi 2002; Chirikure & Rehren 2006) discourses regarding the context of the objects, processes, and materials which were used. The above processes are the closest elements which can be used to generate forms of cultural

[14] Urban lifeways in this context refer to the social, economic, and political systems of living which were in place during colonial times. These systems forced indigenous people to flee their rural backgrounds in search of employment in mines, farms, academic or missionary institutions or urban areas. Consciously fleeing their rural backgrounds substantially began an unconscious raising process which affected their identities because they now spent time away from families and rural homes (Gelfand 1973).

memory and continuity, based on the existence of materials and rituals today. This is because the objects, apart from being visually intriguing, were made for social and ceremonial purposes in the culture. The experimentation of objects, past processes, and practice-based art approach relates to Estell Barret's (2007) notion of experience and experiment as a voice for generating knowledge.

Social objects made would be used in specific social gatherings, and this helped tie a family unit, a tribe, and altogether a culture. Ceremonially, these objects would be used by diviners in ceremonies to solve insolvable physical matters due to the nature of the problem. Diviners would then use the objects as a representation of a deceased person, family member, or an ancestor, to receive guidance, which would be a direction to the issue. By being used in the ritual, whatever revelation comes from the object to the diviner would then be communicated to the living.

In contemporary times, the processes and interpretations of the soapstone birds, iron smelting and smithing residue, and the chikuva event best help elaborate on the history of migration within the culture. This is because of human interpretation based on attempts to have some sort of cultural understanding from current discourses regarding the presence of objects, processes, and materials used to make them. Where the objects were found and the current perceptions concerning them have led to the mythmaking of trying to understand how early artistic practice has led to cultural identity today.

The work in (Figure 5) relates to the historical creative process and objects as an evolution of showcasing migratory occasions from the distant past until now. Just as soapstone birds, iron residue, and the chikuva event serve as historical markers of migration and cultural identity, the grocery paperwork acts as a contemporary artefact of migration, mirroring the precarious nature of modern migration, unlike durable materials like stone and iron. The artwork also projects social and ceremonial initiatives, as they are also significant occasions for acquiring migrant connections.

Historical objects were used in gatherings and rituals to unify communities; similarly, the installation embodies rituals of movement and sustenance, symbolising how migrants carry not just food or belongings but also their histories and identities. The process of layering, stamping, and tearing the paper can be seen as an artistic ritual, much like diviners

interpreting spiritual messages through sacred objects. Lastly, the installation intends to generate a mythmaking lens around Great Zimbabwe and early Shona artistic practices that parallels my process of reinterpreting materials. The work creates new meanings from found objects, much like how archaeologists and cultural historians construct narratives from ancient artefacts.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how art serves as a negotiation space where personal and historical migratory experiences intersect, shaping cultural memory and identity. Through practice-based methods, I have examined how materials—such as charcoal, food-coloured stamps, and repurposed grocery bags—become vessels for storytelling, connecting my journey as a student migrant to broader narratives of displacement and adaptation. By drawing from Mieke Bal's concepts of fabula and focalization, the works presented navigate multiple temporalities, aligning my lived experiences with those of the Leopard Kopje migrations and contemporary migrant labourers.

The discussion on cultural continuity and loss has highlighted how colonial disruptions, urban migration, and modern socio-economic structures have fragmented Shona cultural traditions. Yet, through artmaking, these ruptures are reinterpreted and reimagined, ensuring that ancestral knowledge remains an active force in the present. The installation work, much like historical artefacts and ritual objects, functions as a contemporary archive that preserves and transmits migratory experiences. The processes of storing, tearing, stamping, duplicating, layering, and weaving reflect the cyclical nature of migration, the precarity of labour, and the resilience required to forge new identities in unfamiliar landscapes.

Ultimately, the chapter has emphasised how artistic practice operates as a bridge between historical and contemporary movements, embodying a myth-making process that links the past to the present. The material and conceptual strategies used in my work engage with post-memory and cultural transmission, underscoring how migration is not only a physical movement but also a narrative that is continuously reshaped. In this sense, my art practice serves both as a critical reflection on the precarity of modern migration and as an act of

cultural reclamation, ensuring that Shona artistic traditions persist and evolve within new contexts.

CHAPTER FOUR

Urban Canvases and Historical Imprints

This chapter delves into the intricate relationship between sculptural installations and interdisciplinary fields, specifically history, memory, and migratory studies. It investigates how artistic practice, as theorised by Hannula, Suoranta, and Vadén (2005), functions as a form of knowledge production, offering unique insights into the search for stability amidst change. Drawing from Rutten's (2016) exploration of art, ethnography, and practice-based research, and informed by critical perspectives on cultural memory (Assmann, 2011; Gibbons, 2007; Hall, 2000), this chapter examines how my sculptural installations serve as cultural archives, challenging dominant narratives and reflecting the complex realities of contemporary Shona migratory experiences. Furthermore, it engages with a reconstruction of identity, including the work of Zeleza (1997), to centre African voices within these narratives. Through an analysis of materiality, spatial arrangement, and sensory elements, this chapter aims to articulate how art acts as a cultural compass, navigating the tensions between rootedness and mobility, and fostering new embodied ways to interpret and engage with cultural narratives.

4.1 Material Memory: Artworks Across Landscapes

This body of work intersects with disciplines such as migration studies, memory studies, anthropology, and history through practice-based initiatives within sculptural installations. These artworks engage with displacement, elaborating on the tensions between rootedness and mobility, and the negotiation of cultural identity. These experiences are central within migratory contexts worldwide. This is done using materials and compositions to convey these lived realities through artistic methods.

For example, the layering of organic and inorganic materials creates multisensory experiences that extend beyond visual representation, transforming abstract themes into tangible and intangible forms. This material engagement provides a visual language that communicates the nuances of displacement, adaptation and resilience while fostering embodied ways to interpret and engage with cultural narratives.

Using natural materials such as clay, wood, stone, and found objects, the work aims to become a channel for cultural narratives while reflecting on the ongoing negotiation between historical and contemporary identities. This interdisciplinary approach positions the sculptural installations as both cultural artefacts and commentaries on the lived experiences of migration. The material choices and working processes translate the emotional and physical landscapes of migration into sensory experiences that aim to bridge personal and collective memory. Through these methods, the artworks offer an alternative mode of knowledge production, challenging the dominance of textual representation and providing innovative frameworks for interpreting the migrant experience.

In the field of migration studies, my work resonates with the revisitation of culture and history, as described by Stuart Hall (2000), to preserve and transmit memory towards contemporary migrations. My work draws from the critical examination of African studies presented by Zeleza (1997) in *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises*, which calls for centring African voices and challenging externally imposed narratives. Through the manipulation of tree stumps sourced from different geographical locations, theorists' ideations allow for to manufacture of a process that voices the emotional and physical impact of migration. (Figure 20) illustrates this process, where I use tree stumps as a grounding element—a symbolic attempt to find stability while navigating new environments.

Figure 21. Tatenda Mapisire. *Pazvakatangira (Where it all began).* Wooden stumps. 2024.

Working on these wooden stumps allows me to reconnect with formative memories from childhood, which become a structural base supporting my migrant journey. The trees remind me of the cultural narratives in the form of proverbs or wise teachings, which I would listen to between my infant and primary school years. While playing in or near the forests, elders would summon us (children), in preparation for the evening meal and narrate these migratory tales as a form of teaching. It is in the texture of the wood that I then remember these memories, as they are an imagery of the environment I grasped migratory concepts.

Chiselling on the wood mirrors the challenges of establishing a sense of belonging, reflecting the effort and care required to shape one's identity to familiarise the cultural landscapes. The patterning on the material evokes a sense of place and movement, to bring out these memories through the years as they are being materialised into reality. Chiselling is also a reflection of the difficulty of carving out space for oneself in new environments and the ongoing negotiation of identity, which requires patience and precision, echoing the slow and deliberate work of forging connections and adapting to dominant cultural frameworks. The work also resembles how physical engagement with

the material can become a form of embodied knowledge, enriching the discourse within migration studies by foregrounding affective and experiential dimensions of migration.

Marking the wood signifies an attempt to immerse myself within new surroundings while confronting the uncertainty that often accompanies the migrant experience. The rhythm of the carving process becomes a symbiotic relationship between me and the wood, to reflect the immaterial into a material connection with the medium. This process aligns with anthropological perspectives that emphasise material culture as a repository of social memory and identity, reinforcing how objects can mediate relationships between past and present experiences (Jones 2007).

This sensory engagement also draws from historical Shona artistic practices, particularly the creation of wooden headrests, which served as spiritual paths and mediators between the physical and immaterial worlds (Dewey, 1986). In times of displacement or uncertainty, Shona artisans would craft headrests to rest on, due to seeking stability and spiritual assurance, which would guide the direction they take upon receiving revelation. The installation *Pazvakatangira (Where it all began)*, however, deviates from this tradition by creating objects for sitting—an act that references communal gatherings I partook in where narratives of migration were shared.

This reinterpretation of traditional practices reflects my desire to anchor memory and cultural knowledge within contemporary migratory experiences, emphasising how these histories are preserved and reshaped across temporal boundaries. Furthermore, this practice intends to show how cultural artefacts are often viewed as static in historical disciplines, proposing a view of cultural identity as continually evolving through material engagement.

Through the use of tree stumps from various places where I reside, the artwork embodies migration as a transformative process—one that continually voices identity while balancing the tensions between longing and belonging. This physical engagement with organic materials becomes a metaphor for the migrant condition, offering both a reflection on the past and an exploration of future possibilities. The tree stumps aspire to be embodiments of the migrant experience and provide

4.2 The Enduring Echo: Art's Multifaceted Role in Contemporary Shona Communities

My artistic practice, informed by memory studies, seeks to create memory indexes that bridge personal and collective narratives. The use of curvilinear motifs, inspired by traditional Shona homes, artefacts, and tools (Tatira 2022), serves this purpose. Similarly, my engagement with the chikuva process, a practice deeply rooted in Shona culture, finds resonance with Mahohoma's (2020) research, which highlights its ancestral role in connecting spirituality and family traditions with the environment.

Ivhu Rangu (My Soil) draws from this slip-casting process in (Figure 21) by reinterpreting and familiarising myself with the neighbourhoods I settle in. The accumulated soil of each area I walk and reside in becomes a documentation process that links my being with the environment. Collecting the soil is intended to nurture my migrant life as a basis for improving my interactions. This action of nurturing is depicted by slip-casting the soil into multiples, as their increment becomes a sign of growth or connection. This conveys the need to grow and connect the soil with my academic pursuits, as the basis of my being a migrant in South Africa.

Mahohoma (2020) elucidates the role of ceremonial clay pots as tangible representations of cultural and spiritual narratives, employed in rituals intended to bridge the divide between the living and the deceased. These vessels functioned as channels of prayer offerings to the immaterial realm, signifying a profound connection with the environment. The presence of these pots within the domestic sphere symbolised the continuation of existence beyond physical death, while their ritual placement served to reinforce familial cohesion, beyond geographical separation.

The art of slip-casting is symbolic of the student migrant experience. Much like liquid soil adapts to a mould, I negotiate on a new cultural and academic landscape, absorbing its essence while solidifying it into a hybrid identity. This process, though transformative and potentially generative, necessitates a surrender to the mould of its norms, expectations, and unspoken rules. The resulting form, bearing imprints of both the original slip of cultural heritage and the mould of the adopted environment, reflects the migrant's journey of battling translation and the forging of a unique, multifaceted self.

The challenges inherent in slip-casting—potential cracks, imperfections, and the fear of losing original form—mirror the vulnerabilities and anxieties of migration. Yet, just as I shape the mould, I also retain agency in sculpting their narrative. This agency makes me choose which aspects of the new environment to internalise, building resilience and constructing a personal mould through selective engagement. Ultimately, slip-casting, like the migrant journey, is a testament to the human capacity for adaptation and integration, yielding a final form that embodies the transformative power of navigating disparate cultural spaces.

Figure 22. Tatenda Mapisire. *Ivhu Rangu.* Soil bowls on wooden stands. 2024.

By referencing cultural practices to my work, the installation becomes a mnemotechnic, as noted by Assmann (2011), linking contemporary migratory experiences to narratives of survival. This symbolic language is particularly significant in the context of migration and identity as it suggests how cultural heritage can be nurtured and reinterpreted, to grow and remain connected to my cultural origins across different landscapes.

The experimentation of soil evokes a ritualistic lens to seek continuity while interrogating the fragmentation that accompanies migration.

The exploration of memory indexes, as noted by Gibbons (2007), as both personal and collective memories as abstract representations of uniting the material and immaterial, for instance, as tangible reminders of this connection. *Life movements* (Figure 22) are a representation of the two realms of how I reference family and cultural narratives and my movements to find a connection to the environment when I travel. This is guided by how smelted and smithed iron objects served social and ceremonial purposes in the traditional Shona past, often to protect the living from any harm, and to remember the deceased and pass on their legacy (Dewey 1991). As these objects pass from hand to hand, they serve as vessels of personal and communal history, linking individuals across time.

The flat and round bar is welded based on the road and walking travels I use from going to churches, and cultural or religious gatherings in Pretoria, to garner from other migrants. The layering of the artwork explores the hybridity of different travels, reflecting rootlike resemblances, becoming a metaphor for how my values are being immersed through regular travels as a migrant.

The seemingly mundane industrial forms of flat and round bars, often used in construction and fabrication, can be transformed into symbols for the student migrant experience. These elemental bars resemble strength, malleability, and potential for transformation, to convey the challenges and triumphs of navigating a new cultural and academic landscape. Their roles in building and connecting provide a framework for understanding my journey, a journey marked by both constraint and the forging of new pathways.

Flat bars, with their broad surfaces and defined edges, can symbolise the initial constraints placed upon being a migrant. They represent the established structures of the host country's social norms and cultural expectations. I, much like the flat bar, am often required to adapt to these pre-existing frameworks, to conform to the "flat" surface of a new reality. This leads to navigating bureaucratic processes, learning new languages, and understanding unfamiliar social cues, all while maintaining my own cultural identity. This process can feel restrictive, like being pressed into a mould, but it also necessitates a degree of flexibility and a willingness to adapt to the "flat" terrain of a new environment.

Conversely, round bars, with their cylindrical form and capacity for bending and shaping, represent the student migrant's resilience and adaptability. They symbolise the potential for transformation, the ability to forge new pathways and create new connections. Like the round bar, which can be bent and shaped to serve various purposes, I may adapt and reshape my own identity to fit the new context. This also leads to developing new skills, building new relationships, and discovering hidden strengths, transforming initial experiences of displacement into opportunities for growth. The round bar's ability to connect, to act as a structural support, also mirrors how migrants bridge cultural divides, fostering understanding and building new communities.

The act of welding these bars together, the fusion of flat and round, represents the transformative process of cultural integration. It symbolises my ability to combine my heritage with the adopted culture, creating a hybrid identity that is both strong and adaptable. The intense heat and pressure of welding, mirroring the challenges of cultural adjustment, create a bond that is stronger than the individual components. This welded joint, the fusion of flat and round, becomes a metaphor for how migrants' abilities to navigate the tensions between belonging and otherness, to create a cohesive identity.

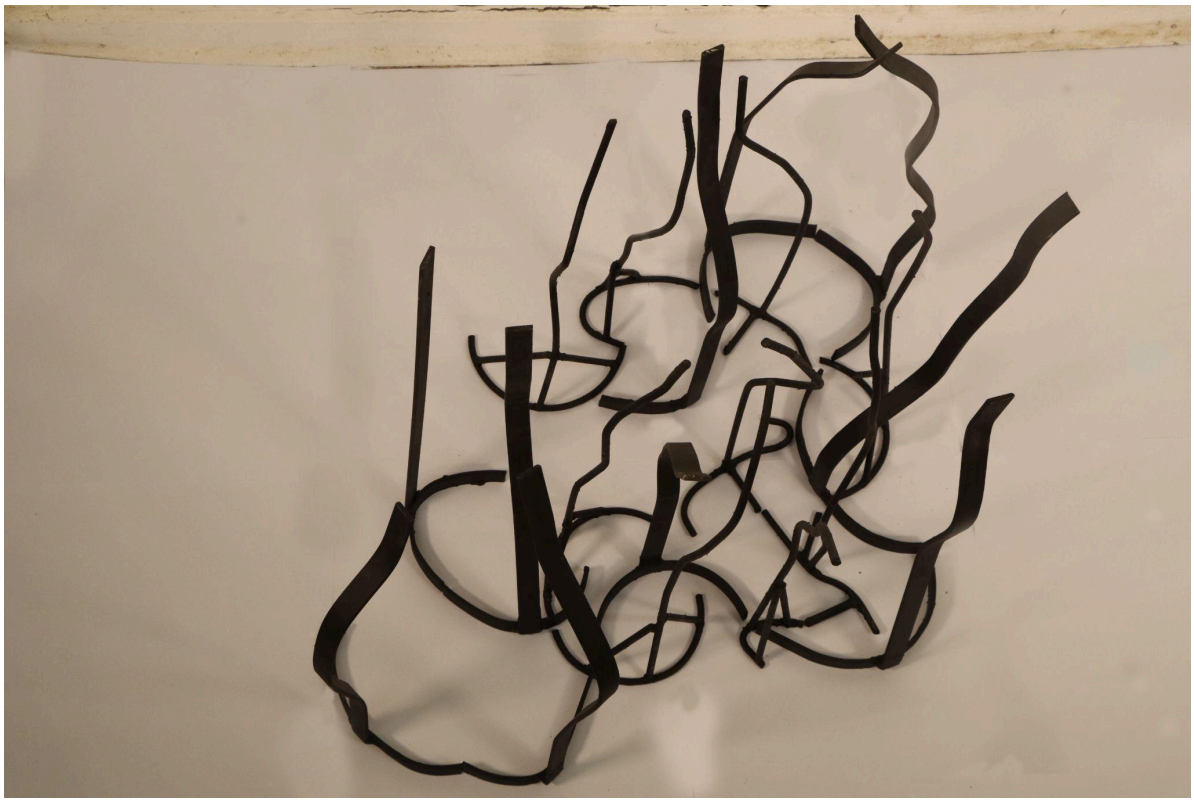

Figure 23. Tatenda Mapisire. *Life movements.* Welded flat and round bar. 2024.

Both artworks in (Figures 21 and 22) become a means of survival and engagement, creating a thriving factor that necessitates navigating where I reside and travelling within the unfamiliar terrain without fear. This is because the challenges and stereotypes subjected to migrants become null and void, as I assert an agency that redefines Shona culture beyond expectations concerning migrants. This interaction allows for an exchange of ideas between the material and the enrichment of the artistic landscape while maintaining cultural integrity.

Using soil in Figure 21 and experimenting on iron and flat bars in Figure 22 becomes a relevant process of citing cultural resonance and embodies the materiality of cultural memory. This reflection signifies the importance of cultural origin and evolution, representing that the foundation of home is not static but negotiated from one place to another to find protection and strengths through moving.

These artistic explorations provide the role of materiality in preserving and redefining cultural identity within contemporary Shona communities. Engaging with soil and iron, the

installations ingrained a negotiation of home, memory, and belonging in migratory contexts. The artworks become both personal and collective archives, where the tangible and intangible aspects of culture intersect, allowing for a continuous process of cultural reinvention. This exploration of material and movement not only develops resilience but also reinforces the evolving nature of Shona heritage. As the next section explores, art becomes a cultural compass, guiding the negotiation of identity, space, and belonging while offering a medium through which historical and contemporary experiences converge.

4.3. Art as a Cultural Compass

In the landscape of contemporary Shona culture, the study becomes a compass, guiding me through the emblems of identity, tradition, and social realities. I use soapstone and soil on found objects to engage in a dialogue of flight, bus, and plane terminuses. This artistic expression becomes a vital tool for conveying how terminuses become a site of vulnerability since they are zones that connect and disconnect my culture.

The assertion of connection and disconnection is a central function of Shona art, particularly in the face of migration and globalisation. *Mafambiro* (Figure 23) continues the legacy of working on stone through my practice, utilising soapstone as a link to connect with historical carvings done in the distant past (Hubbard 2009; Matenga 2011).

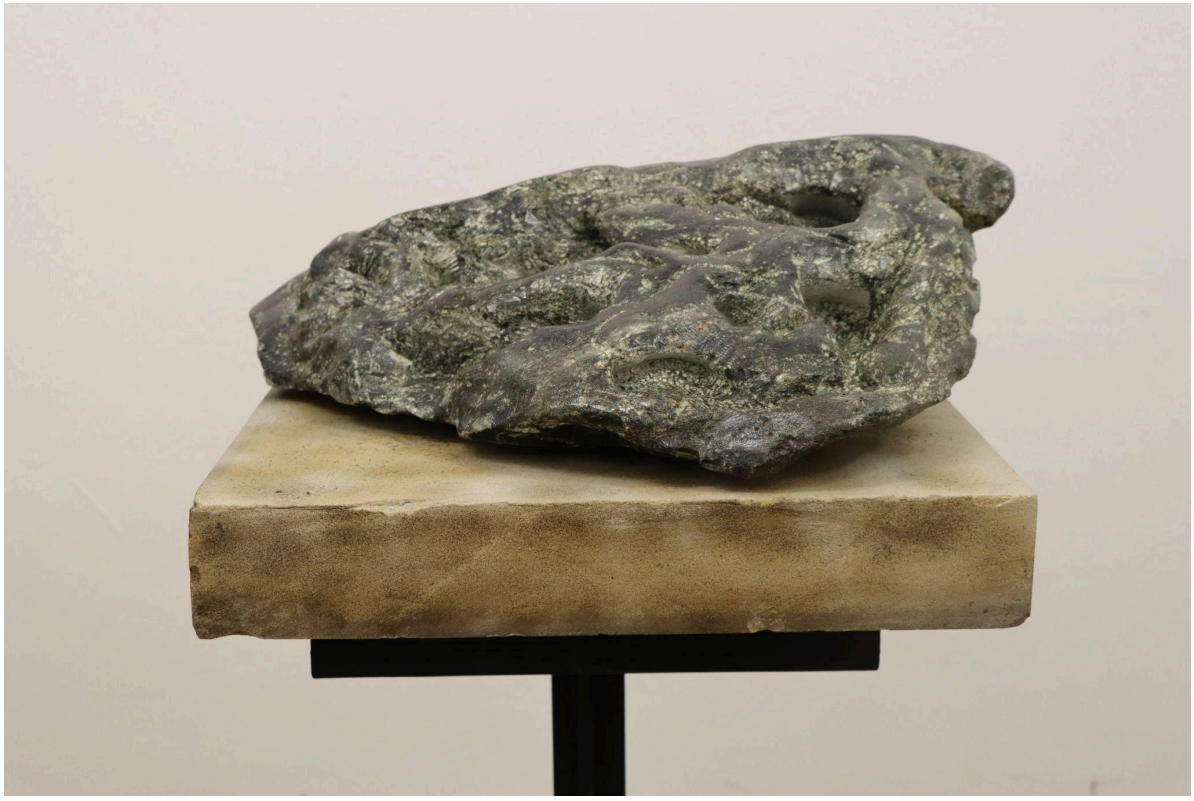

Figure 24. Tatenda Mapisire. *Mafambiro.* Soapstone. 2024.

In my artistic practice, the deliberate carving of soapstone is taken from spoken phrases and family audio recordings as a connection for the Shona language, transforming it into more than just a means of communication. Doing this cites The soapstone birds, unearthed within the ancient enclosures of Zimbabwe (Matenga 2011). These objects, found in spaces inhabited by kings and religious authorities, are interpreted as symbols of cultural memory and significance. While their exact origins remain shrouded in the mists of time, pieced together from carbon dating, academic writings, and oral narratives, their presence within these sacred spaces suggests a connection to the spiritual realm. The question of whether they acted as messengers remains open to interpretation, yet their placement within enclosures of power and ritual hints at a role beyond mere ornamentation.

This leads us to the messages referenced in my work. The messages carried by the soapstone carvings and audio elements, derived from family conversations, cultural wisdom, and ancestral narratives, mirror the potential role of the ancient soapstone birds.

They are messengers, not necessarily from a divine entity, but from the collective spirit of my heritage. They carry guidance, support, and a sense of belonging, much like the messages my family send across the distances created by migration.

The carvings and audio elements, like the ancient birds, provide a tangible connection to an intangible realm, a realm of cultural memory and spiritual resonance. The messages I receive and then re-transmit through my art are therefore not just personal communications, but echoes of a dialogue, uniting the material and immaterial, the living and the departed, and the present and the past. The carvings are the tangible manifestations of a spiritual connection. Even when my time of passing comes, the materials may continue to convey these connections to those alive. But also that the conversations and relationships are intangible and take place across distances.

4.4. Seeking Familiar Soil and the Comfort of Cultural Kin

Beyond expressing identity, *Comfort* plays a crucial role in life lessons of encouragement while moving. These words and phrases depict a notion of rebirth through the fusion of words on the packaging and recycled materials, ensuring that Shona artistic heritage remains relevant in my time.

Adhering to this motive ensures the continued vitality and transmission of their cultural legacy. The indigenous seeds—sorghum, cowpeas, and millet—encapsulated within the synthetic embrace of plasticine, become a poignant visual language for me, particularly when viewed through the lens of seeking comfort and connection within a culturally familiar community. These seeds are ingrained with ancestral significance and represent not only sustenance and heritage but also the vital role of cultural kinship in navigating displacement and forging a sense of belonging in a foreign land.

Sorghum, cowpeas, and millet, as symbols of indigenous agricultural practices and cultural continuity, carry a profound emotional weight for the student migrant (Shava 2005). They represent a tangible link to home, a reminder of shared traditions and ancestral knowledge. They are the seeds of familiarity, the roots that anchor me through cultural identity, providing a sense of comfort and stability in an otherwise unfamiliar environment. In the context of Shona migrants seeking solace within a culturally familiar community,

these seeds become emblems of shared experience, a common ground upon which to build connections.

Figure 25. Tatenda Mapisire. *Comfort.* Sorghum, millet, cowpeas, and plasticine. 2024.

The act of encasing these seeds in plasticine, a malleable and artificial substance, introduces a complex layer of meaning. While plasticine represents the artificiality of the new environment, the often unnatural pressures and adaptations required for survival, it also becomes a medium for creating a protective space, a microcosm of cultural familiarity. The plasticine, in this context, can be interpreted as the haven created by the migrant community. This community is a space where cultural traditions are preserved and shared, providing a sense of comfort and belonging. This references Rodrigues' (2018:218-233) work by investigating the relationships between language and place in the life of Brazilian women living in London, United Kingdom.

Working with these seeds, encasing them in plasticine, becomes a symbolic act of recreating a sense of home. It is a way of nurturing the seeds of cultural identity, of ensuring their survival in foreign soil. The plasticine, while initially a symbol of isolation,

becomes a protective layer, allowing the seeds to thrive within the confines of the migrant community. This act mirrors my efforts to cultivate a sense of familiarity and belonging by surrounding myself with people who share my cultural background.

The tension between the organic seeds and the synthetic plasticine reflects the struggle to reconcile my cultural heritage with the demands of their new environment. The seeds, representing the rootedness of their identity, are juxtaposed with the plasticine, representing the fluidity and adaptability required for survival. However, within the context of seeking comfort from cultural familiarity, the plasticine also becomes a symbol of the protective embrace of the migrant community, a space where cultural traditions are preserved and shared.

The act of moulding and shaping the plasticine, of creating a protective enclosure for the seeds, can be seen as a motif for shaping their experience. I am not a passive recipient of their new environment; I actively engage with it, creating spaces of comfort and familiarity within the broader context of displacement. The plasticine, in this context, becomes a medium for building community, for developing connections with others who share their cultural background.

In summation, indigenous seeds engulfed in plasticine, when viewed through the lens of seeking comfort from cultural familiarity, become an index for the migrant experience. They represent the vital role of cultural kinship in navigating displacement and the need to cultivate a sense of belonging in a foreign land. The seeds are nurtured within the protective embrace of the migrant community, symbolising my resilience and adaptability, and the ability to find solace and strength in shared cultural experiences. Just as the seeds hold the potential for germination, I also hold the potential for transformation, for creating a new sense of self that is both grounded in heritage and enriched by connections to my cultural kin.

4.5 Installations as documented tangible and intangible hybrid cultural norms.

The installation, *Mwedzi yeChiShona (Shona months)* (Figure 25), act as a sensory archive, capturing loss, memory, and adaptation, providing a counterpoint to traditional textual

analyses. This interdisciplinary approach highlights art's capacity to document migratory experiences, developing an understanding of identity formation and diasporic belonging.

Figure 26. Tatenda Mapisire. *Mwedzi yeChiShona (Shona months)*. Stoneware clay. 2024

For example, the installation *Mwedzi yeChiShona* conveys the Shona calendar year, which is a central structure in Shona oral history associated with migration and survival of the early Shona establishments (Zimboriginal 2019). This is because the establishment of Shona culture was influenced by hunter-gatherers and farmers based on how the early Shona reverted to agricultural processes such as farming, ploughing, harvesting and toiling to address life lessons (Hamutyinei & Plangger 1974).

The notion is further supported by archaeological remnants found in pre-colonial Leopard Kopje migrations' iron age sites, which suggests the likely livelihoods, based on where the iron slag remnants were found (Chirikure & Rehren 2006; Swan 2007). In pre-colonial times, in the event of famine, storehouses were made to accumulate as many crops as possible in preparation for calamitous times, also suggestive of the early Shona

surviving by agriculture as a preservation mechanism (Pikirayi 2001). These survival factors made me explore figurines as a representation of not only preserving these early migratory histories but also as memory traces (Gibbons 2007), guiding each month from a historical and contemporary view.

The use of curvilinear symbols in (Figure 25) depicts the repetition of cultural history, based on my time as a migrant in South Africa. This is because of the intention of advancing my artistic endeavours for the betterment of my life and how I interpret Leopard Kopje transitions in Southern Africa, endeavouring for the betterment of environments to sustain their welfare.

Using hollow forms is a way that I adhere to listening to traditional knowledge about seasonal occurrences and timekeeping. This work invites viewers to reflect on how memory is interpreted and transformed across generations. Scholars in memory, historical, and migratory studies can interpret the installations as a means of engaging with embodied interdisciplinary practices, where material objects become vessels for transmitting cultural narratives across time and space.

4.6 Navigating Shifting Environments: Reinterpreting Tradition

Adaptation is a critical intervention within the evolving scenery for migrants. The exploration of this theme is to construct a stable foundation within the new regions due to residing in unfamiliar territory. Investigating adaptation using polystyrene contributes to a dialogue to assemble and disassemble a space that deciphers the uncertainties and boldness that migrants undergo.

Home Space actively engages with the expression of adapting to new environments by employing materiality, symbolism, and spatial storytelling. I utilise polystyrene as a material which is helpful towards storing or protecting devices, simultaneously being a menace to health and the environment, reworking it into a carrier of memory while in South Africa. This approach not only reinforces a connection to the neighbourhoods I have resided in, but also reflects how difficult it is to find stability in a society which can be against foreigners.

Metaphorically, the lightness and fragility of polystyrene mirror the often precarious emotional state of a student migrant. Despite voluntarily being uprooted from familiar surroundings for academic purposes, I have experienced a lack of grounding and a sense of being adrift during my studies. This is indicated by the material's inherent brittleness, which can easily be cracked and broken, suggesting the vulnerability and emotional fragility that accompany the daunting task of adapting to a foreign environment. The insulating properties of polystyrene, while offering a form of protection, can also represent the isolating experience of cultural dissonance. Sometimes I may find myself encased in a metaphorical bubble, separated from the host society by language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and a sense of otherness.

Conversely, the adaptability of polystyrene and its ability to be cut and assembled into various shapes reflect the resilience and resourcefulness required for successful migration. To be resilient often demonstrates remarkable flexibility, adapting to new academic systems, social norms, and cultural expectations. However, this adaptability can also come at a cost, potentially leading to pressure to assimilate, to shed aspects of my identity to fit in. The non-biodegradable nature of polystyrene and its enduring presence in the environment serve as a motif for the lasting impact of migration. The experience leaves an indelible mark, shaping my identity, even after I have settled into the new life. This enduring impact, like the persistent presence of polystyrene in landfills, underscores the profound and often irreversible nature of the migrant journey.

Figure 27. Tatenda Mapisire. *Home Space.* Polystyrene. 2024.

Moreover, *Home Space* maintains stonewalling traditions through innovation, to situate the work within the lineage of Shona's artistic heritage despite exploring in a strong and fragile medium. Similar to the assembling of stone walls throughout Zimbabwe, my work extends an assembling tradition into an immersive experience.

The work aspires to reconcile my cultural background with the cultural norms of my host country, discussing the balance between preservation and adaptation. The polystyrene installation, with its use of modern, disposable material to evoke an ancient, enduring structure, represents this process. It becomes a space for exploring the complexities of cultural memory in a globalised world, where traditions are often reinterpreted and reimagined.

In essence, my work in (Figure 26) both challenges and reinterprets being othered within migration and broader cultural narratives. It challenges notions of instability faced by migrants, simultaneously conveying the means and ways migrants embrace impermanence and transformation. Within the artwork, this embracing can be felt by

navigating the space within the installation as a way to make the viewer experience or navigate the paths or encounters foreigners take.

While honouring traditional processes of assembling, *Home Space* mimics notions of belonging and the visual representation of Shona history. Instead of presenting Shona heritage as a static past, it reveals it as an evolving process shaped by movement and adaptation. This idea is foregrounded by Leopard Kopje migrations and expands the discourse on Zimbabwean cultural origins (Pikirayi 2001; Mlambo 2014; Mazarire 2009). Using inorganic material as an installation showcases the idea that cultural preservation must not solely rely on natural materials but can be created by any material, prompting the viewers to rethink how histories of movement shape identity.

My practice is a form of reinvention, ensuring that Shona identity in contemporary art remains adaptive and relevant by fusing ancestral narratives with experimental forms. Doing this also signifies historical narratives with lived experiences and personal migration with collective memory, honouring Shona artistic norms and contributing to the ongoing evolution of contemporary Shona art.

4.7 Portrayal of cultural memory, preservation, disconnection, and longing within the exhibition setting.

The exhibition space was a crucial site for shaping the viewer's understanding of cultural memory, preservation, disconnection, and longing. The artworks were curatorially considered to engage the audience both intellectually and emotionally, placing them in the position of meandering-like memory maps. The expression of materiality, spatial arrangement, and sensory elements aspired to a layered experience that mirrors the non-linear nature of migratory journeys.

A key aspect of this approach is the positioning of materials such as found objects with soil, wood, and grain, which carry cultural resonance and embody the materiality of cultural memory. These elements become vessels of historical and personal narratives, transmitting impressions of seeking comfort in cultural rootedness. Soil, for instance, signifies both life and growth—it establishes unlimited boundaries as a substance that can

be carried away, scattered, and reconfigured elsewhere, carrying with it the essence of a homeland. This portability, this ability to be relocated and re-established, mirrors the migrant experience, the act of transplanting cultural roots into foreign soil. The act of scattering soil becomes a potent metaphor for the diaspora, the dispersion of people and culture across geographical divides.

However, as equally relevant to the migrant experience, soil can also represent barrenness, erosion, and the loss of fertility, mirroring the sense of displacement and cultural depletion that migrants may experience. It can symbolise the contamination of ancestral lands, the disruption of traditional agricultural practices, and the psychological weight of being uprooted. The dust and dryness of depleted soil can evoke feelings of desolation and a lack of belonging, reflecting the migrant's struggle to find fertile ground in a new environment. The presence of these organic and inorganic materials within the exhibition space reinforces themes of growth and rupture, where cultural traditions are interpreted and reinterpreted despite geographical dislocation.

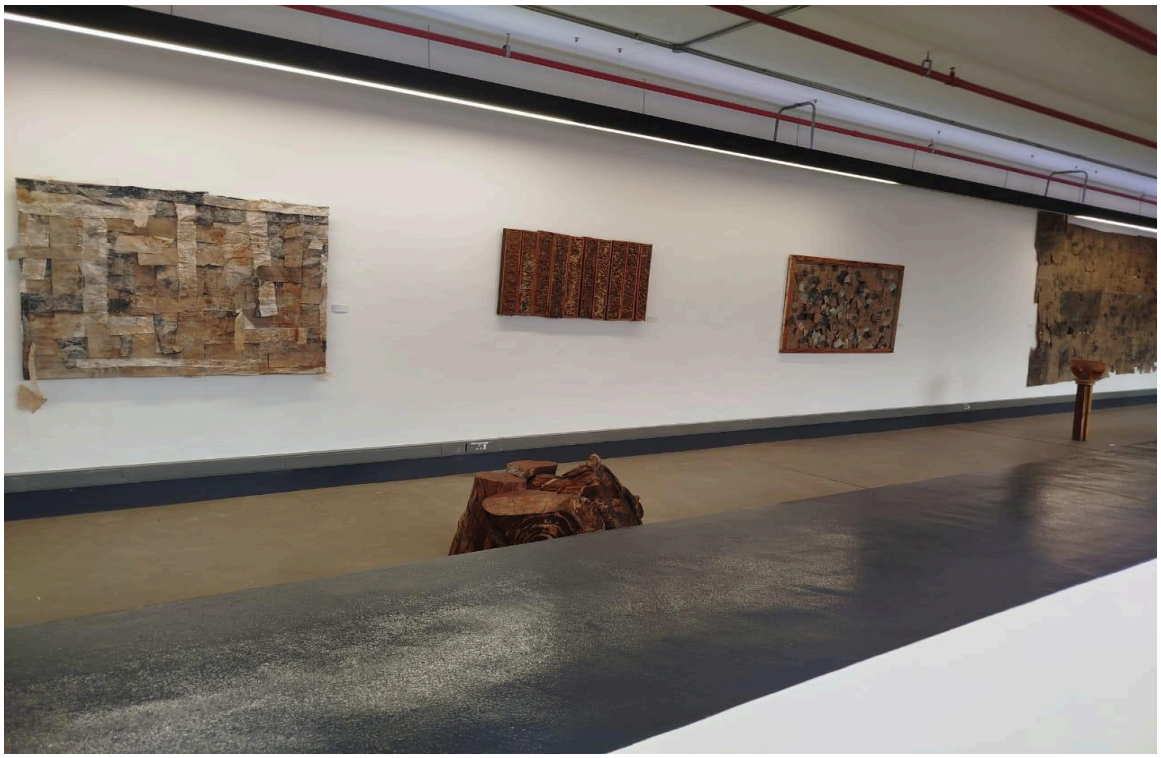

Figure 28. *Listening to The Past.* Front view. 2025.

The spatial arrangement of the artworks is done through iterative patterns, these themes reflecting the pathways of migration from the initial point. The works are placed in a sequential engagement to narrate the journey from where it began, how it has been, and the current outlook. This may compel the audience to navigate the exhibition space in ways that echo the uncertainty and fluidity of migratory experiences. Spacing the works at varying heights, distances, and angles within the exhibition encourages the visitors to move, pause, and shift their perspectives—both physically and metaphorically—contemplating the spaces of how migrants undergo daily life.

Figure 29. *Listening to The Past*. Middle section. 2025.

Incorporating sensory elements such as sound adds to the interpretative possibilities within the exhibition. The audio compositions of Shona communal life—whether in the form of recorded voices, rhythmic conversations, or ambient environmental sounds—transport the audience into the lived realities of migration and cultural nostalgia. These auditory cues activate memories and emotions, creating a multisensory engagement that yearns for longing for home or echoes of displaced histories. As explored by Jamalpour and Derabi (2023), such sensory experiences significantly contribute to the formation and recollection of cultural memories. Sound functions as both a tether to the past and a marker of absence, enhancing the thematic exploration of cultural disconnection and reconfiguration.

Figure 30. *Listening to The Past.* Back view. *2025.*

The exhibition setting, therefore, is not merely a backdrop for the artworks but an active agent in meaning-making. It transforms into a space where cultural preservation is continuously reinforced through interaction, movement, and interpretation. Viewers become participants in an unfolding narrative, where their encounters with displacement, belonging, and memory intersect with the themes presented in the artworks. This engagement produces a reflection on how cultural identity is constructed and redefined through migration.

Integrating these curatorial and artistic strategies, the exhibition space aims to be an immersive environment that encapsulates the complexities of Shona migratory experiences. It highlights the tensions between loss and preservation, the pull of nostalgia and the realities of adaptation. The use of carefully arranged sound and spatial composition enhances the interpretive experience, ensuring that the themes of longing, cultural memory, and disconnection possibly resonate with the audience. In doing so, the exhibition does not simply display art; it enacts the very processes it seeks to explore, making cultural memory and longing tangible and resonant for the viewer.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Migration, both historical and personal, profoundly shapes identities, redefines cultural boundaries, and leaves lasting imprints on material culture. This study has explored how sculptural installations can act as vessels of memory, preserving the complex narratives of migration, displacement, and adaptation. Drawing from my personal experiences as a student migrant and referencing historical Shona migrations, this research has sought to bridge past and present through artistic practice.

Art practice, as demonstrated throughout this study, is unequivocally a powerful vehicle for communicating complex cultural narratives. It effectively distils themes of migration, identity, and historical memory into visual forms that resonate through artistic engagement. The study has transformed these phenomena into immersive sculptural installations that reference past and present encounters. By using materials such as soil, wood, and found objects, my work embodies cultural knowledge while addressing contemporary experiences of displacement and adaptation.

The sculptural installations showcased in this study translate personal and collective migratory histories into physical spaces that invite reflection and interaction. The arrangement of organic materials echoes the stratification of memory, suggesting how histories are preserved, obscured, or reimagined over time. Incorporating elements such as circular patterns and hollowed markings connects contemporary Shona experiences with long-standing traditions of storytelling and cultural expression. These works mirror the cyclical and fluid nature of migration, symbolising how migrants navigate new cultural landscapes while maintaining connections to their heritage.

This study also tackles the challenges of narrating migration in non-linear ways, offering historical, memory-based, and migratory lenses to the artistic practice. Migration is not presented as a singular event but as an ongoing process intertwined with longing, remembering, and belonging. The installations illustrate the evolving attributes of migration, inviting multiple interpretations and encouraging viewers to engage with narratives that resonate with their own experiences of belonging and movement.

Furthermore, the artworks challenge dominant perceptions of migrants by amplifying marginalised voices and lived experiences. By creating spaces that honour both personal and cultural histories, the work demonstrates how cultural identity is dynamic and cyclic. These installations counter conventional portrayals of migration that often centre on figures in transit, focusing instead on material traces and the environmental imprints of movement. The exhibition setting reinforces this dialogue, turning art into an active site of memory preservation and reinvention.

Utilising organic and inorganic materials, patterns, and audio elements, the artworks function as memory indexes, cultural compasses, and agents of adaptation. They challenge misconceptions about migrants while elevating underrepresented perspectives. By incorporating sensory elements, such as sound and indigenous grains, the installations deepen the viewer's engagement, connecting migration narratives to broader cultural and historical discourses. This participatory nature ensures migration is recognised as both a personal and collective experience.

Migration is commonly framed as a movement between geographical locations, yet this study has demonstrated it is also a psychological and cultural process. Narratives embedded in my work reveal that migration extends beyond arrival or departure, encompassing transformations within individuals and communities. The intersections of personal memory, ancestral storytelling, and material engagement underscore the non-linear and cyclical aspects of migration.

The sculptural installations act as alternative archives, encapsulating physical traces of movement. By incorporating soil, wood, and grains, the materials symbolise displacement while forging a dialogue between cultural and geographical narratives. These elements highlight how migrants redefine their surroundings to create belonging amidst flux and dislocation. Such representations contribute to historical methodologies that prioritise sensory and material engagement with the past, enriching our understanding of migratory processes.

This study has emphasised how materials—clay, wood, grains, soil, and found objects—carry ancestral knowledge and personal history. By engaging with these materials, the artworks evoke a sense of presence and absence, much like the remnants

of historical migrations. Inspired by archaeological traces of Great Zimbabwe, my installations reflect on what is left behind and how objects retain the essence of movement, labour, and adaptation.

Natural materials become channels for cultural narratives, reflecting the continuous negotiation between historical and contemporary identities. The interdisciplinary approach positions sculptural installations as both cultural artefacts and commentaries on migratory experiences. The material choices and working processes translate emotional and physical landscapes of migration into sensory experiences that bridge personal and collective memory. Through assemblage, deconstruction, and reconfiguration, the works embody fragmented and layered experiences of migration. As historical Shona migrations were shaped by environmental shifts and sociopolitical changes, the sculptural forms illustrate how migrants renegotiate spaces of belonging and alienation.

The participatory nature of these installations reinforces migration as a shared, collective experience. By interacting with sculptural assemblages—touching, moving, or witnessing—audiences engage directly with themes of displacement, resilience, and memory. The use of sensory elements, such as sound and indigenous grains, deepens this experience, allowing viewers to connect migration narratives with their histories. Audience engagement transforms the works into active spaces for memory preservation and dialogue.

This study contributes to broader discourses on migration in contemporary art by offering alternative ways to visualise and experience migratory histories. By substituting the human body with found objects, the installations shift the focus to material traces and cultural imprints left by migration. The use of geometric patterns, ancestral symbols, and oral traditions underscores how cultural identity evolves through migration, constantly redefined in response to changing environments.

One of the most significant realisations during this study was how the process of working with materials mirrored the emotional and physical labour of migration. Breaking down and reassembling found objects symbolised disruptions and continuities inherent in migratory experiences. Layering materials reflected the endurance of oral histories passed through generations, illustrating how migrants carry, adapt, and reframe their identities.

In conclusion, migration is not simply physical relocation but an evolving process of cultural transformation. By integrating historical Shona migrations with personal narratives, this study demonstrates how artistic practice can preserve, question, and reimagine migratory identities. Sculptural installations become tangible and intangible archives of migration, offering new frameworks for documenting, interpreting, and preserving cultural narratives. Through material engagement, symbolic representation, and sensory experience, these artworks highlight the complexities of diasporic belonging and the dynamic nature of Shona identity. As the study advances, future exploration will examine how these interventions contribute to broader discourses on cultural continuity, hybridity, and the role of art in shaping historical memory.

Word count: 26187

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