Vesptures

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Vesptures

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University, 2023.

By

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My Zim family

To Cush and Day for choosing me to be your mother. My Husband Tendai for refusing to be used by me and enabling me to grow my welding and grinding skills. To the babysitters who showed up on time. My sisters Pamela and Rumbi, thank you for keeping me strong with your words of encouragement and calling me at odd hours of the night just to talk. To my mom for passing on educator tendencies to me.

My VCU family

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Abstract

This is an invitation into the delicate space of living between two worlds, of having feelings of happiness and sadness at the same time. Delicate emotions and situations which are not easy to share but are paramount in my research of what it takes to want more out of being just a parent, come from a certain country than the one I am living in, and navigate between two cultures. This is a journey around some of the experiences I have faced when I found myself in a different space other than the one I grew up in. The research has been focusing on some of the things I used to cope with being in a new environment that has different cultures. I invite the reader to look at these issues through the work and how I have translated these mechanisms into my work. My interest is the dualities of:

A. Being a Zimbabwean woman studying in America

B. Having my Zimbabwean culture overlapping with some of the American cultures

C. Being a parent in graduate school

I am discussing the dualities of all the things I have written above and how both are unique and different in their way. I am also discussing the in-between space where these things come together.
Definition of terms according to my understanding and their use in my research.

The African Diaspora:
Consists of people of African origin living outside the continent/the movement of moving to another location\(^1\).

Migration:
Refers to all forms of forced or voluntary movements or displacements of people due to political, economic, environmental, and other reasons from rural to rural or urban regions to other countries or continents\(^2\) (In my case the voluntary movement to pursue graduate school in the United States).

The US State Department defines diasporas as:
Immigrants and their descendants who maintain a connection to their country of origin, have a collective memory and an interest to support the country of origin, holding an option to return. Aware of their diasporic consciousness\(^3\).

Vesptures

I created a word for the pieces in my MFA show. These objects are to be called Ventures. The word is a combination of the words vessel and sculpture. The coming together of these forms resembles the duality of two cultures.

\(^1\) https://www.experience-africa.de/index.php?en_the-african-diaspora
\(^2\) Introduction to human migration, National Geographic, Xpedition lesson, “Human Migration: The story of the cultural landscape”
\(^3\) https://www.lawinsider.com/dictionary/diaspora
In this world but of which world?

Living between worlds is a fascinating concept in my practice. It is impossible for one to live between two worlds physically but conceptually that is the reality that many immigrants face. As I began my journey, I started to focus on examining my experiences as an immigrant by taking a deeper look into my journey as a graduate student in America: The moments between African culture and American culture. I also explored my cultural, social, and political location as a contemporary Zimbabwean woman. As I looked deeper into myself, I realized that I am an open book in terms of how my life experiences influence the work that I produce. One of the most profound differences in cultures I experienced was how individuals call each other by name in the United States. Back in Zimbabwe anybody who is older than yourself is rarely called by their name. But when I came to the United States, in the environment that I was in many people would be called by their first name. This was very fascinating to me because it gave me a different perspective on age and generational gaps. That very hierarchical structure was broken. I did not remember the last time I had been called by my name after getting married and having children. I became known as Mai Dayi\(^4\) (Karanga, Zimbabwean) which translates to Day’s Mom. This is a very common practice in Zimbabwe, if one doesn't have a child yet they are called by their husband’s last name.

\(^4\) Mai Day, Mai Cush or MaiMupita
Nostalgia

Right before coming to the United States to graduate school, my family and I were living in the remote areas of Zimbabwe in a place called Goromonzi. We had about 2000 square meters of land where we reared 6 sheep, 10 rabbits, 20 egg producing chickens and our two dogs Max and Suzzy. Life in Goromonzi was bliss but there was something missing. I did not see myself getting old in that place and doing the same thing everyday. We needed more. We decided that we were going to pursue our studies and try and better our lives and those of our dependents. Our preparations started and we landed in the United States to begin our studies and our lives as immigrants, students and parents at the same time. While nostalgia has often been defined as looking back with regret to the past, to me it is not only about the past but also about fantasies of the past which are determined by the needs of the present. In one book called *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym notes that there are restorative and reflective nostalgias which is something that I saw taking shape in my practice. This extract of transnationalism is fascinating to me. It speaks volumes about the intricacy of vast emotions and how brutal the process of immigrating is to the individual although it is important that it be done.

Transnationalism is defined as the “processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement.” The *cluster of emotions* is a piece I made because I was feeling different emotions like nostalgia, happiness, sadness, being overwhelmed, and many more. To get familiar with Richmond, I took sand from the James River and made a cluster of balls with stoneware. The work was placed on the floor because in the Karanga culture (Zimbabwe) the ground is a place where people sit together to eat and talk. Any meeting takes place when people are seated in a circular way and

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6 Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994, p. 6
on the ground. The smell of the wet sand brought back good memories of when I was in Zimbabwe, which was a short while before starting this work. Gathering these buckets of wet sand was a painstaking task but I experienced happiness whilst doing it. When I installed the work I had to keep the sand wet. I became accustomed to going into the gallery every day in the morning and spraying it with water in an effort to make the sand stay wet as part of the work. Each morning I became grounded by this routine which brought to me happiness, joy and purpose.

Fig 1 Installation view of the work Cluster of Emotions, 2022.
Holding on to what we know/are used to

It became very important to me to make work that connected me to my home when I felt a sense of disconnect. I started to explore the significance of traditional Zimbabwean music as a grounding factor and a source of comfort to me during my journey as a graduate student in America. I became compelled to make the piece *Nziyo Yokubika* as a way of grounding myself in the studio and outside. During my first days in the United States either at my apartment or in the studio I listened to a lot of music from Mbuya Stella Chiweshe. She was a renowned mbira player and vocalist, playing music that I grew up listening to but being in a place I did not grow up in was very calming to me and it made me become more comfortable in this new world. This piece was born out of listening to that music. It is 2-dimensional and yet resembles a 3-dimensional musical instrument, its title is *Nziyo Yokubika (The sound of cooking)*. This piece was embedded with tiny spoon-like keys, with different templates of the original spoon I used to cook for my children every morning hanging from it. I incorporated an unraveled string from my son’s pants and braided them, making this string the part that holds the spoon and the instrument together. I experimented with glazing on this piece and was able to fabricate an apparatus that allowed them to be viewed from a wall. This process brought out how I was learning new information and unlearning some of the prejudices that I had before coming to study. Also, the thread on this piece was symbolic of how this thread seemed to be straining under the weight of the spoon, a situation that spoke to the responsibility that I had as a parent and a student. This provided an entry into dialogue on how much music impacted my soul and my self-being in times of distress and happiness. Even though these were made out of clay and I could not play them, making them brought a sense of comfort, and the repetitive approach to making them served as a ritualistic part of my everyday life. Most of my work here in Richmond
would document some of the mechanisms that I have employed to deal with some feelings of loneliness (from being far away from home) and the sort of double life that I had of being a parent once I stepped outside of the Depillars building and being a student once I stepped back in.

Fig 2. Nziyo Yokubika (*The sound of cooking*), 2021.
The struggle is real

Once graduate school started I eased into a routine of getting the children to school in the morning. I would begin to concentrate on working in my studio, but as soon as time to pick them from the bus came I had to leave what I would be doing to continue it afterwards. I began to make a work titled *Hurukuro ye Tsava Tsava* (Karanga, Zimbabwe) which translates to the conversation of the struggle. It was a group of 5 pieces of vessels that had a childlike height. The pieces looked like they were struggling to be balanced on the ground and they might fall to the side and yet they did not fall. They seemed to be in a state of breaking apart but they were not. I viewed these pieces as reflective of my life process from the time I arrived in the United States. It documented the moment I started graduate school and dealt with the two lives that I existed in and my desire for them to eventually merge and become one. One of these vessels was embedded with spoon-like keys that symbolized the multifaceted function that a vessel can have and how that changed the aesthetic appearance and function of the vessels. They questioned the basic definition of function and utilitarian norms. I became interested in exploring ways of representing and merging both ceramic sculpture and my Zimbabwean traditional pottery in contemporary narratives. Documenting my experiences in a different environment gave me a platform to experiment with the knowledge and skill I had prior to graduate school and that which I had once I was in it. Experimenting with smoke-firing effects on the different clay bodies I had not worked with before became a starting point for what would become my theoretical and physical research.
Fig 3. In progress shot of the work *Hurukuro ye Tsava Tsava (conversations of a struggle)*, 2022.

Fig 4. Installation view of *Hurukuro ye Tsava Tsava (conversations of a struggle)*, 2022.
The power of music

*Dance under the rain*

*Dance under the sun*

*Dance whilst shaking the tree so that the mangos can fall to the ground*

This was me and my friends as we were growing up. In boarding school as a 15-year-old (2003), we had a dance session every Saturday night in the dining hall. Girls would dance holding each other, dancing in a line. And singing along to every song. This was one of the happiest moments of my life as a teenager and I can safely say this is when my love for music was born. Now as a grown woman, I continue to feel safe in an environment where music can be constantly played like in my studio. Poems about what interested me find their way into my sticky notes and they become a part of feasts for my eyes and mind. One particular poem that has been a permanent collection of my notes is the poem *A Paused Playlist* which was written by Mandla Malandela (South African).

Many times, when I move to a new place, music is a grounding factor. It gives me comfort in a new environment. So as soon as I got to my studio in the United States, the first work that came to me was the drum instrument. I rendered these drums in different iterations and the process of making them became a sanctuary as I familiarized myself with the new environment and those around me.
Fig 5. Work titled *Drum Beat*, 2021.

**A Paused Playlist**

There definitely is no height, light, genre, and note of music you’ve never taught me of.

You made sure that I teeth these things all through and through. Today, included.

Your eyelashes always would come to this surreal clap of a drumroll. Then you would whistle a mourney wail.

Unbalanced foot taps on the equation. Then again like a tiresome revolute your eyes would draw again and rise.

Now…Now that your eyes refuse to open up. To rise, I only have one question for you. To you.

Are you still digesting three playlists or it’s just stubbornly of eternity?

*A Paused Playlist* by Mandla Malandela

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7 *A Paused Playlist* by Mandla Malandela
Formation of New Identities/Roles

After moving to the United States, I found myself taking on the roles that were usually considered male roles while growing up in my family. One of them was being passionate about my career and doing the work that advances my development as an artist and educator. I know now as gender roles shift all around the world it is a different world but I saw the change in me. Back when I was in Zimbabwe, I was speaking and making work about empowering women but after moving to the United States I began to see a force of ambition in me, it was a new force of empowerment and a drive was reawakened. I could see the possibilities of having an impactful career, something that was blurry to me before. As I took on one role after another, I could see that my perspective of gender roles changed as a new identity was forming in me. I could see the same happening to my husband, Tendai. When we were in Zimbabwe, we both were involved in child care with me being the most involved in terms of making sure that they bathed, eat and have everything they needed whilst Tendai was mostly providing financial support. Now when we moved, we both needed to work and so it became a situation where whoever was not working, was taking care of the household needs. We both began to contribute financially and emotionally as needed. For us to thrive in the new land we needed our relationship to have duality in it. It was not going to work if each of us stuck to their way of doing things in the same manner we had done before moving.
Paradoxical Duality Aligned Chores

We will wash the dishes

We will cook the food

We will wash the clothes

We will take the children to the doctor

We will wake up and prepare the children for school

We will watch them grow

Duality of courtship
Shuttling between the old self and the new self

One novel that I read while I was in Zimbabwe that influenced and made me look at the African diaspora in a different light was a book by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie called Americanah. In Americanah, Adichie portrays a coming-of-age story of a young female international student from Nigeria who travels to the United States to pursue university education, beginning in Philadelphia and ending much later with an academic fellowship at Princeton University. What really interested me in this novel is how Ifemelu epitomizes a new African diaspora that is largely well-educated and in search of choice. Throughout the novel, I was reminded of the idea of Ifemelu's choicelessness in Nigeria. While in Zimbabwe I admired the character that was portrayed in this novel, because although her life abroad was difficult she had better choices. The character who is called Ifemalu has a desire for choice and certainty, which marks her life’s trajectory. Ifemelu does not stay in the US. Instead, towards the end of the novel, Ifemelu returns after a 13-year absence to an ever-changing Lagos, Nigeria. Upon her return and finding comfort in a group of expatriates called the Nigerpolitan Club, Ifemelu understands that her acculturation to the U.S. was done largely through small processes of learning. This was what Ifemelu hoped she had not become but feared that she had. She realizes how she has acquiesced to a privileged life as an African immigrant and elite cosmopolitan in the U.S. In this way, I was deeply interested in this notion that I myself have been becoming accustomed to the privileges as an African immigrant and that has changed me, whether I chose to go back to Zimbabwe now or later. I considered how the novel portrays

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8 Americanah, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2014
9 Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. The Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Website. Accessed April 11, 2023
the African diaspora, the perspective of the outsider within and shuttling between the old self and the new self\textsuperscript{10}.

An analysis that I found interesting which speaks to this research of living between worlds that I am interested in is by Alfred Schutz; many years ago he was comparing the figures of the stranger and the homecomer and argued that a return to the place of origin often reveals an unaccustomed face, in such a way that one has the sensation of being in a strange country, a stranger among strangers. His focus was, however, on the differences between these two types. He contended that their experiences are not identical because strangers already know that they will arrive in an unfamiliar world\textsuperscript{11}. That is why on the vesptures surface treatment, I used graphite as a way of reminding myself that I was writing my own story that is not identical to anyone’s. The homecomer, in contrast, expects to return to an environment which they are familiar with but has to find their bearings within it. While strangers expect to encounter the unfamiliar and know they will have to undergo an adaptation process in the receiving community, homecomers enter into a state of dislocation and disorientation upon their arrival in the place of departure because they feel this is no longer the place they had left. \textsuperscript{12}The experience of leaving home in migration is mostly about the failure of memory to make sense of the place one comes to inhabit, a failure that is experienced in the discomfort of inhabiting a migrant body, a body that feels out of place. The process of returning home is likewise about the failures of memory, of not being inhabited in the same way by that which appears as familiar.

\textsuperscript{10} Shane A.McCoy (2017) The Outsider Within: Counter Narratives of the New African Diaspora in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Americanah (2014)

\textsuperscript{11} Alfred Schuts, On Multiple Realities, 1945

\textsuperscript{12} King Russel. Generalizations from the History of Return Migration. Return Migration: Journey of Hope or Despair?, 2000
Cultural history and contemporary craft gives birth to Vesptures

Tshambakodzi and Hadyana (Zimbabwean traditional clay pots) vessels were made for cooking, making brews, serving and storage of food and liquids, washing, and using during the performance of rituals. They still are made for these purposes but not to a larger extent as they were before modernism. These pots were normally not painted because soot would obliterate their colorfulness. Through much use they would become black in color, the only aesthetics that could be on these pots were the line patterns engraved by the potter. Just like the diasporic homecomer, this point of departure became the basis for the vespture hence can be seen in the form that I used in the vespture pieces. And so, me taking this traditional utensil and altering it to be non-functional was a residing place for content.

These forms are so appealing to me because I grew up seeing them in my grandmother's kitchen whenever we visited her in the rural area. They would be stacked so beautifully in a precarious way that as a young child it always made me want to tip them over but I would then remember how mad and sad my grandmother would be. I believe there is an absence for these vesptures to be able to function in day-to-day life yet the forms resemble utilitarian pottery. This is a representation of concepts and overlaps somewhat with both iconography and representation. It was a quest to use the forms and vessels that I made to change opinions and translate experiences, the vesptures work as communicative and expressive tools. The rounded forms are a gourd of content because they brought a conscious way of visually drawing the viewer to interrogate the use of such forms. I have been radically and constantly changing the way traditional ceramics from my culture can be viewed, therefore challenging cultural diversity and bringing out the possibilities that my way of making can
accomplish. Also, by incorporating different layers of material I am breaking boundaries and challenging utilitarian pottery and sculpture at the same time.

Fig 7 Installation view of Thesis Vespulture 1, 2023.
Fig 8 Installation view of Mapping new paths smoke fired 3d printed ceramic, 2023.

Fig 9 Vespture 2, 2023.
Vesptures come alive

This term is very important to me because it shows that just as much as I have created a space between the two worlds where I find comfort, these vesptures also find their own space where they exist. A space where they do not need to be a storage vessel for either food or water yet they can hold.

They are shaped in the form of my culture’s traditional functional clay pots at the bottom and abstracted sculptural forms towards the top end. These are vessels that function as objects, with their original function of being functional clay pots removed. This form is neither a vessel that can hold things nor solely a sculpture. This speaks to my way of life of neither being in the physical space of where I was born nor a permanent resident of where I am at the moment. The swing in the middle of the two vesptures is made out of a 3D-printed form that is covered with African print inspired cloth. It shows how I exist in this state of limbo, not cushioned by the thought of being permanently rooted.

Mapfiwa is a Karanga (Zimbabwe) word that refers to stones that are used to jag the pot while cooking using firewood, as traditionally done in many African societies. Like the stones that support pots, the 3D-printed clay supports play a new role in supporting the vesptures. Technology is playing a very big role in this world and so for vesptures to also exist in this new world, they needed technological support to be a part of their existence. The surface treatment on the vestures is very minimalistic which symbolizes the nature of my immigrant journey. When moving from place to place, I had to take only a few things with me, the dearest and most valuable to me. The most used material for surface treatment is graphite. It symbolizes that I am writing my own story and mapping new paths for me and my family. The 3D-printed piece on the wall is a literal representation of the Goromonzi and Richmond maps, it is a hybrid of the
two places which signifies my ability to map new paths in this delicate time of living between worlds. Smoke firing is a century-old technique and\textsuperscript{13} Smoke-fired pottery is a unique record of collaboration between heat, chemistry, culture, and creativity\textsuperscript{14}. By combining 3D-printed objects and smoke I brought old traditions into the 21st-century world of ceramic making. Thereby showcasing what is possible with ceramics.

\textsuperscript{13} Smoke Firing, Contemporary approaches and Artists, Jane Perryman, 2022

\textsuperscript{14} Contemporary artists and traditional approaches in Kiln Design and techniques for Carbon-trapping amongst Southeast Asian ceramicists, E-journal Volume 7
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CURRICULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION

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2016 BFA Ceramics, Chinhoyi University of Technology, Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe

EXHIBITIONS

2023 Vesptures, Thesis Solo Exhibition, The Anderson gallery, Richmond, VA

2023 Sadza series 2 1708 gallery, Richmond Virginia

2022 Sadza series 1, Darbytown, Richmond Virginia

2022 All Media Show Group Exhibition, Artworks, Richmond VA

2022 Unmasked: Candidacy Group Exhibition, 23 West Broad Street, Richmond, VA

2021 New Beginnings: A First Year Craft Graduate Exhibition, The Depillars Building, Richmond, VA, USA

2021 Surreal and Enchanted Wanderings, Virtual exhibition, South Africa
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2020  The Arts Gathering (TAG) 2020, Afrikera Arts Trust, Zimbabwe

2019  Engaging the 45th Year, curated by Helen Lieros, Gallery Delta, Zimbabwe

2018  Musimboti, National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Mutare, Zimbabwe

2018  Young Artist, Gallery Delta, Harare, Zimbabwe

2017  Artist in the stream IX, curated by Helen Lieros, Gallery Delta, Harare, Zimbabwe

2017  From Line to Form, curated by Hellen Lieros, Gallery Delta, Harare, Zimbabwe

2016  Det-Zim Cultural Exchange Exhibition, U245 Gallery, College for Creative Studies

2016  Artist in the Stream VII, curated by Helen Lieros, Gallery Delta, Harare, Zimbabwe

2015  What About Us: A Woman Only Exhibition, curated by Helen Lieros, Gallery Delta, Harare, Zimbabwe

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Awards

2021 Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Virginia Commonwealth University

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Talks

2021  Artist talk, ICA, Richmond, VA