

PAULA DIOGO

“WALKING IS A MODE OF MAKING THE WORLD AS WELL AS BEING
IN IT.” REBECA SOLNIT, IN WANDERLUST

TERRA NULLIUS ----- or space precedes place

BIO

Paula Diogo (b.1977) is a Portuguese performer, deviser, and director that has been meandering between art making and producing in the last years. Her creative work is based on the desire to develop improbable ideas. She is interested in thinking performance work as a space of shared experiences between the audience and performers where we can propose different ways of looking at the world and of coming together. In the last years, she has been developing Mã-Criação (www.ma-criacao.com).

The first idea for this project was to put myself on the move. To go to an unknown place where I would be alone and not able to control my surroundings.

My first impression from Iceland was that the sky was bigger than the earth. My days were filled with an always moving sky, changing rhythm, color and form at every minute, sometimes second.

I started to walk as a way to get to know the city, as a way to extend my territory little by little. And this territory grew day by day with each new person I met or each new place I visited. I became an urban walker.

Wandering became my work – a work called TERRA NULLIUS.

I also started to write as a way to keep track of things. In a situation where everything is new, every single detail seems an important thing to keep, because you are experimenting with ways to relate to the world around you. Details help you to map spaces and create a sense of a safe environment.

Movement became part of my experience of the place: movement above me, on the top of my head, movement on the ground, on my feet, and movement on my hand and on my writing.

Writing became a natural way to expand my experience of walking. Jumping from space into time, mixing lived experiences, learned knowledge, reflections and memories.

Something funny happened when I walked: at first my mind would start to fast forward immediately, I had the unusual sensation of having to run after my own thoughts. Then little by little, time would just slow down, my body would begin to sweat and my hands would swell. This numbing sensation that comes with tiredness seemed to get me in a state where I could just simply be in the present moment. As Frédéric Gros, the philosopher of walking said in an interview:

...exploring the mystery of presence.
Presence to the world, to others and to yourself... You discover when you walk that it emancipates you from space and time, from ... vitesse.

Speed?

Yes, speediness. It emancipates you from speediness. And Rousseau says in his Confessions, when you walk all is possible. Your future is as open as the sky in front of you. And if you walk several hours, you can escape your identity. There is a moment when you walk several hours that you are only a body walking. Only that. You are

1. Cadwalladr, Carole. "Frédéric Gros: Why Going for a Walk Is the Best Way to Free Your Mind." *The Guardian*. April 19, 2014. Accessed June 10, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/apr/20/frederic-gros-walk-nietzsche-kant>

2. Plato, in *The Republic*.

3. John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 54.

nobody. You have no history. You have no identity. You have no past. You have no future. You are only a body walking.¹

Some weeks ago, during a shamanic journey of dreams in a house facing the lake, I wrote down something the shaman said just before starting: 'the intent of a journey is very important'.

I find the metaphor of the journey to be most central to this specific work.

Movement and displacement can be the keywords for a certain understanding of the world to emerge. Allowing a new way of seeing and a reconfiguration of the self by the simple fact of not recognizing a place or having to learn a new language.

Socrates claimed "to be a foreigner in his own city", he became *átopos* (out of place). For him it was absolutely necessary to become foreign in his own city to be able to freely speak, to freely expose everything. For him, foreignness was the only condition that would allow total exposure. To Socrates to be part of a society was to be part of a shared silence. Only the new comer was able to see with new eyes, point out things from a detached and not compromised point of view.²

Routine and habit can put to sleep our capacity to wonder. After some weeks in Iceland, I had to remember myself that the sky was still there and that to see it I just needed to look up while walking instead of looking down.

As I spent more time walking and wandering through the city, I have begun to think about how movement can challenge common understanding of concepts such as 'home' and 'belonging'. Two writers that have fed into this thinking are John Berger and Achille Mbembe.

John Berger refers to the original meaning of the word Home as suggested by Mircea Eliade, Home as the center of the world, the center of the construction of the self where different worlds come together (the divine, the underworld, and the path). Home as "the heart of the real" where the being is never lost.³

The philosopher Achille Mbembe recalls the nomadic nature of mankind and establishes a very beautiful connection between walking the land and owning it. The idea proposed by Achille Mbembe is interesting to me because it relies on the image of crossing, of owning the land by walking it, but also because doing that, the idea of space as we know it dissolves. Cartography and geography have tried to render tangible our notion of space, but it's the subjectivity of places that creates the emotional, intellectual and spiritual

meaningful cartographies that allow the preservation of the self.

4. S. Silliphant, writer, "The Way of Intercepting the Fist," in Longstreet. Paramount Television. September 16, 1971.

5. Gaston Bachelard, Poetics of Space (Beacon P.U.S.), 42.

Home, is no longer a solid place, Home is in this case liquid, is fluid. Home is in constant movement and change. "Be water, my friend, be water".⁴ Home is no longer the solid house from our childhood, to where we will go back one day, or the house as Bachelard says that we will build in the future,⁵ but it is simultaneously our departure and our arrival point, what constitutes us as a person and that is also, and still – a place To Be. Mbembe points out that...

In pre-colonial African societies, movement and flow of goods is the condition and principle of all societies' dimensions: cultures, religions, matrimonial systems, commercial systems, all of that was the product of movement. Movement proceeds space, territory. Movement is the very tissue of space. It is completely different from the European concept, in which space exists before movement. In Africa it is the opposite. Therefore, in the African pre-colonial paradigm of the relationship between space and movement, borders don't exist because, by definition, it is borders which block the transit of vital flow. Movement is at the core of life, not necessarily space. If it is translated into space, this is done by means of space being perceived as movement. Therefore, we are facing two completely opposing philosophies. From this point of view, the African movement philosophy, the pre-colonial one, is similar to a rationale specific to the digital world, according to which, fundamentally, one seeks to create connectivity, using networks, instead of tracing categories, classifying, establishing hierarchies and limiting movement.⁶

6. BUALA, accessed May 20, 2019, <http://www.buala.org/en/face-to-face/africa-is-the-last-frontier-of-capitalism-interview-with-achille-mbembe>.

For Achille Mbembe it is not anymore, the question of the traveler, or the foreign, with a home to where to return to, or a home to build, Achille Mbembe moves forward (or backward) towards the idea of the nomad to whom the land is the Home. With Achille Mbembe space loses materiality and becomes subjective.

In an article in The Guardian newspaper I discovered for the first time someone talking about desire paths. Paths that continuously and stubbornly appear in the big cities as a result of people's necessity to cross over and not obey to the 'naturally designed' routes already existing. We can trace them very easily in parks: a path of grass stepped on over and over again until there's almost no more grass left or a hole that suddenly

appears on the middle of a hedge. Some architects describe it as the city expressing itself, expressing a desire that should be listened to.

The path became important. By walking and writing, I started little by little to establish a territory, exploring the friction between the necessity of a place and the necessity to move.

The questions that this work raises go deep inside of me.

My father and mother met in a hotel called HOTEL PRAIA MAR (Hotel Beach and Sea) where several families coming back from the ex-colonies spent some time before going to more definitive homes. They married there, on a non-place, a provisory place where they started to make plans for the future together when they lost their past. They were married on a border, a frontier between their past and their future. This event formed my way to relate to territory, to words like home, country, nationality, memory.

Writing this I go back to Agnès Varda about memory: "Memory is like sand on my hands. I keep some and some is going".⁷ In fact, for my family, the past became a black hole in which reality and fiction would mix. It started to lose materiality and became a 'story' that someone told once, and all of us remembered in different versions.

On the book *The Argonauts* by Maggie Nelson, I bumped into a quote about a concept of Anne Carson:

Many years ago, Carson gave a lecture at Teachers & Writers in New York City, at which she introduced (to me) the concept of leaving a space empty so that God could rush in. I knew a bit about this concept from my boyfriend at the time, who was big into bonsai. In bonsai, you often plant the tree off-center in the pot to make space for the divine. But that night Carson made the concept literary.⁸

This concept stays on my mind as I try to place it regarding my work and the things I'm busy with. I like to think of it as a model to interpret the world.

When I read *God*, I do not think about any kind of spiritual manifestation, but a larger understanding of what exists in the world that we normally don't perceive. This can go from discovering the poetry hidden in daily life banalities or listening to the diversity of the world that tends to express in many different ways and levels. What is expressing itself when we take time and space to listen?

7. Williams, Richard. "Agnès Varda: 'Memory Is like Sand in My Hand.'" The Guardian. September 24, 2009. Accessed May 21, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/sep/24/agnes-var-da-beaches-of-agnes>.

8. Maggie Nelson, The Argonauts (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2016), 42.

The act of not occupying the hegemonic center proposes multiple, polyphonic, non-hierarchical realities to co-exist in a sometimes conflictive, sometimes interdependent way. Refusing the idea that everything derives from the center or converges to the center.

Trying to see what's lays beside the center requires some energy and an active desire to do so. Trying to relate to the world not positioning yourself in the center also.

Maybe we need to walk in the ruins, as walking not in virgin land, on new land, but in overexploited land, over violated, over walked on land.

To walk as I seem to talk about here, as the flâneur that wanders through the landscape is a privilege only accessible to some. By forcing myself to recognize that privilege I also have to force myself to recognize the responsibility that comes with it.

In the frame of this research movement has become a way of constituting myself, as well as constituting my environment. Rewriting the places with those I get to encounter. As well as, rewriting the terms upon which I get to encounter them. Recognizing that I will always be a foreign somewhere, that more and more people will be forced to move and change places, by climate changes, by economic and political decisions. Recognizing that there are no safe places, that the only safe place we can provide is the safe place that we decide to create ourselves finding new (or old ways) to connect and to relate. A new territory of shared fragilities and relationships.