

CHAPTER 8 ATHI-PATRA RUGA'S POLITICS OF DISORIENTATION: QUEER(Y)ING THREADS

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1 Introduction



Figure 8.1: Athi-Patra Ruga, *Miss Congo*, 2009. Digital video still. Courtesy of the artist and Whatiftheworld. Photo credit: Kens Mukendi

One of Ruga's earliest references to embroidery – its implicit materiality, queer potential and relation to the body – coincides with the birth of his first black, femme, queer avatar, Miss Congo. Born in 2004 in Berea, Johannesburg, Miss Congo is the 'personification of the Black Femme in Modernism'.¹ Adorned in a bleached denim ensemble and a crimson headscarf in one scene, her body was later staged in a series of obscure and awkward poses. She is the protagonist in the three-channel video piece,

1 For Ruga, Miss Congo parodies modernism's primitivist gaze and valorisation of black bodies and 'our complicity as African artists to it'. A-P Ruga 'Preface' in A-P Ruga *Of gods, rainbows and omissions* (2019) 7 14.

Miss Congo (2009) (Figure 8.1). Filmed as a series of four performances or ‘craft meditations’, as Ruga names these acts, the film depicts Miss Congo in four different, unspecified public locations on the fringes of Kinshasa’s urban geography, unpicking embroidery’s silent, private, solo act.² In one section, we see Miss Congo’s body draped over discarded objects in a garbage dump. In another, she reclines on a cold cement slab by an abandoned building. In yet another, Ruga’s avatar perches on a decrepit cement beam as her feet hover over a grimy waterway on a backstreet. We also see her focused on her embroidery cloth, stitching intently while sitting on a stool behind a microphone in a dimly-lit club. Miss Congo, Ruga urges, stands for ‘ideas of displacement, of not belonging’, qualifying her relegation to these unsavoury locations.³ Despite the abject nature of these spaces, Miss Congo appears unphased and calmly continues her task. She occupies these spaces by will. She pushes the thread back and forth, meditatively piercing the tapestry’s surface rhythmically.

Ruga’s placements or, rather, *displacements*, of Miss Congo’s body in spaces of ruin, loss and abjection serve as ‘analogies for contextual breaks and ruptures’ proffering ‘an active forsaking or erasure of place, rather than merely helpless loss’, as Buys writes.⁴ Here, the subject of the tapestry itself is barely visible, forcing our attention, instead, on the act of embroidering rather than its objects. In some instances, Miss Congo’s peculiar positioning causes her discomfort. As I watch *Miss Congo*, my body jerks at her painful cries – intrusive shrieks echoed by her twitching muscles as they struggle to hold the pose. I realise that for Ruga, embroidery is not merely a loaded artistic medium or a craft with potential for opulence and theatre and subversion. Instead, ‘[t]hese [tapestries] are altars of her making, blood lust and body as sacrifice’, as Nkosi so movingly responds to the video piece.⁵ Siegenthaler also hints at the carnal act associated with Ruga’s stitching in *Miss Congo*, noting that ‘the cloth accompanying Ruga’s acts’ is comparable to the Holy Mandylion⁶ as it

2 ‘Athi-Patra Ruga’ 2022, <https://thecubespace.com/en/uncategorized-en/athi-patra-ruga/> (accessed 15 June 2022).

3 As above.

4 A Buys ‘Athi-Patra Ruga and the politics of context’ (2010) 24 *Critical Arts* 480.

5 L Nkosi ‘All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave’ in A-P Ruga (n 1) 35.

6 According to Christian convention, The Holy Mandylion, also known as the

both 'represents and incorporates Jesus through the traces of sweat'.⁷ She continues that 'every stitch being part of [Ruga's] suffered moments ... are in turn transformed into a physical texture'. In paying heed to my own bodily response to Ruga's embroidery acts, I concur with Nkosi and Siegenthaler. I argue that Ruga's performance *with* his tapestries carries the sign of his bodily fleshly self. Alternatively, phrased differently, the artist's embroilment of body and thread renders embroidery for Ruga an embodied act.

In this chapter, I work from the assumption that Ruga's tapestries are emblems of his embodied acts of stitching. I am guided by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's understanding of embodiment premised on the notion that our bodies are simultaneously biological and experiential entities – 'I *am* my body', he surmises.⁸ Embodiment encompasses the body as lived experience and the body as the context of knowledge and experience. In exploring *Miss Congo*, I rely on phenomenological assessments that yield the self as a subject that makes the world into objects through their activity, engagement and labour. I situate embodied consciousness in the world where meaning and materiality are inseparable, just like the body and mind – invariably entwined and folded at every level from the corporeal to the philosophical.⁹

I embark on contextualising embroidery within Ruga's practice. I untangle the artist's dual process of *querying* and *queering* by unpacking queerness via a brief semantic, historical and etymological survey. I explore how Ruga's *queering* exacts *querying*, too, as it engenders *disorientation*. I continue by unpicking the narratives the artist spins, focusing on the avatars and utopias he fabricates. I show how Ruga's alter egos and mythical land *queer(ie)s* myths, histories and political ideals as he weaves intricate tales, laboriously engaging fact and fiction, past and present. Suffused in the artist's woven narratives, I argue, is his embodied act of

Image of Edessa, is a piece of cloth bearing an imprint of Christ's face. The relic is an acheiropoieton image, meaning 'made without hand' translated from Greek. See M Guscini *The tradition of the image of Edessa* (2016) 137.

7 F Siegenthaler 'Athi-Patra Ruga's performances. Showing the invisible side of public space' in *Beyond every horizon there is another one: The Works 2006-2013* (2012) 74.

8 M Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of perception* (1962 [2005]) 202.

9 Merleau-Ponty (n 8) 247.

embroidery, twisting and crossing to *disorient* our experience of being in the world.

Building on Ruga's and queerness's tendency to *disorientate*, I introduce Ahmed's politics of *disorientation* as she interrogates phenomenological texts. I indicate how Ahmed's ideas overlap and depart from traditional phenomenology and explore how her theorisation of queer subject positions, as differently oriented towards objects, may offer an insightful queer phenomenological reading of Ruga's embodied act of embroidering. I elaborate on Ahmed's ideas as I explore the centrality of the orientation devices of the images of the Victorian drawing room, investigating Miss Congo's *disorientation* of this space and the spaces' *disorientation* or straightening devices it employs in return.

2 Spinning tales and fashioning avatars



Figure 8.2: Athi-Patra Ruga, *Miss Congo*, 2007. Digital video still. Image courtesy of the artist and Whatiftheworld. Photo credit: Kens Mukendi

Judith Butler writes that queerness provides 'site[s] of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and future imaginings'.¹⁰ The space of queerness is 'redeployed, twisted,

10 J Butler *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of 'sex'* (1993) 228.

queered ... in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes'.¹¹ Sedgwick similarly notes in *Tendencies* (1994) that *queer* is a sustained moment, perpetual movement or a rationale marked by recurrent, spiralling and unnerving motion. She elaborates: 'The word "queer" itself means *across* – it comes from the Indo-European root – *twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*.'¹² Queerness may then be understood as a tendency to move *across* boundaries, genders and ideas while maintaining a sense of fluidity. I suggest that Ruga's acts of embroidery work in a similar way, twisting, knotting and navigating as the thread moves in and out of the fibrous cloth. Probing at the limits of boundaries is also Miss Congo's *modus operandi* – not only is she understood as queer in sexed and gendered terms; she *is* queer (Figure 8.2). She also embodies queerness by employing it as her act – she disrupts, warps and distorts through her deliberate displacement and subversion.

In *Camp: Queer aesthetics and the performing subject* (1999), Cleto augments *queer*, noting that it is an 'indefinable issue and a vagrant entry, rich in implications and historico-theoretical nuances'.¹³ Cleto highlights that *queer's* fluid grammatical functioning – the interchangeability of the words as an adjective, noun and verb – reinforces the term's inherent sense of motion.¹⁴ During the eighteenth century, the English language's seizing of the term rendered it '*oblique, bent, twisted, crooked*'.¹⁵ The full force of *queer's* continuous motion and skewness also inform Ruga's practice. As *queer* operates via 'a spatial metaphor, twisting and bending straight principles ... and the idea itself of normality', as Cleto clarifies, Ruga's *queering* of narratives – his twisting of history and bending of reality – is meant to confuse fixed orthodoxy.¹⁶ The artist's blurring of the boundaries of normality displaces us. To come to terms with this sense of bewilderment, we are compelled to interrogate our position.

11 As above.

12 EK Sedgwick *Tendencies* (1994) viii.

13 F Cleto 'Introduction: Queering the camp' in F Cleto (ed) *Camp: Queer aesthetics and the performing subject* (1999) 12.

14 As above.

15 As above.

16 Cleto (n 13) 13.

We are prompted to *query*. Therefore, Ruga's strategy is twofold: he *queer(ie)s* to *disorientate* us from the world as fixed by offering an ever-changing conflation of time and space.

As the first in a long line of Athi-Patra's team of black, queer, femme avatars, Miss Congo reiterates associations of fabrication in her entanglement with embroidery. The sense of fabricatedness extends from the avatars' often-flamboyant costumery and tapestries' crafted qualities to a tradition of drag in South Africa (blanked out from local memory, too).¹⁷ Buys, drawing on Sontag, also highlights the importance of fabrication in Ruga's practice, noting that camp functions as 'an operation of displacement and de-familiarisation'.¹⁸ Considering camp in this way, as Sontag notes, is to 'understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role' – a 'metaphor of life as theatre' in the most extreme.¹⁹ Without delving into camp and its role in Ruga's practice, camp's exchange of the original with its copy – the inherent sense of fabrication at play in Ruga's practice – displaces and disorients. Here fabrication forges history differently, with forging understood as making and faking at play in the avatars and tapestries.

Ruga's avatars also extend beyond the fixity of sex, race and gender. Sparked into existence by the artist's participation in the Johannesburg club scene of the early 2000s and his background in fashion, Ruga's avatars offer respite from the emotional and physical harm that may result from 'communicating the meaty issues', noting that they ensure 'self-preservation'.²⁰ While protecting the artist, on the one hand, the avatars also aim to disrupt, expose and lay bare the seemingly ordinary atrocities evident in contemporary South African life. Hennlich elaborates: 'The malleable nature of the avatar exists as mythmaker, shaman, and trickster, while also serving an apotropaic function, protecting the artist from the damage of traumas confronted in the work ... In the words of Walter Benjamin, the avatar "brush[es] history against the grain".'²¹

17 See A Adendorff 'All that glitter is not gold: Counter penetrating in the name of blackness and queerness, or, Athi-Patra Ruga's camp act in the dirt' (2021) *Image & Text* 35 for an elaborate discussion of the intersection between queerness, blackness and camp in Ruga's practice.

18 Buys (n 4) 482.

19 S Sontag *Against interpretation and other essays* (2001) 280.

20 Ruga (n 1) 7.

21 AJ Hennlich 'Nongqawuse Island' in Ruga (n 1) 120.

I argue that, by proxy, Ruga's avatars *queer(y)* what Cleto refers to as 'the rectitude, or straightness, of orthodoxy.'²² Miss Congo, Ruga notes, 'lives in a "perpetual other space"'.²³ Although references to this other-worldly space only appeared in 2010, it is also now home to Miss Congo. The artist's disrupting spatio-temporal narratives resonate with his utopian state, the Versatile Kingdom of Azania.²⁴ References to Azania first appeared in a body of work embarked on in 2010. Initially unfolding around a series of performances, Azania and its inhabitants were made tangible as tapestries, sculptures and photographs, later exhibited as *The Future White Women of Azania Saga* (2013).²⁵ Ruga's saga spins a fable of a mythical promised land where alternative identities may reign supreme – a tale that runs parallel to those ideas informing the rainbow nation myth – as a way to critique South Africa's post-colonial political and social *status quo*. As an expression of Ruga's creative impulse, Azania is furnished with maps, rulers, history and tapestries bearing witness to tales of conquest and paying tribute to those that shaped its history.²⁶ Already here, Ruga's

22 Cleto (n 13) 13.

23 P Dlungwana & A-P Ruga 'Interview' in Ruga (n 1) 230.

24 Derived from ancient Greek, the Versatile Kingdom of Azania (Azania) is 'both real and fictional', as Mary Corrigan notes. Inferring historical references to the remains of a pre-colonial society submerged in the Kingdom of Mapungubwe in the Limpopo province in South Africa to its role in the liberation narrative during the 1960s, Azania threads through historical, fictional and sociocultural contexts. For an excellent exploration of Azanian narratives, see M Corrigan 'Unpicking the Azanian seam' in *F.W.W.O.A. saga* (2014) 87.

25 The exhibition was held at Whatiftheworld, Cape Town, from 27 November 2013 to 1 January 2014. The show, comprising a series of tapestries, sculptures and performances, launched a squad of new mythical avatars in the newfound kingdom of Azania. In the narrative myths, failed promises and unrealised dreams posited as part of the South Africa post-apartheid vision play out.

26 *Queens in exile 2014 – 2017* was installed at Whatiftheworld in Cape Town from 29 November 2017 to 7 February 2018. Showcasing an expansion on his 2014 *Future white woman of Azania saga*, the show includes a large-scale film projection and numerous large-scale exquisitely hand-embroidered *petit point* tapestries. Ruga exhibits several large-scale *petit point* tapestries to give substance to the Versatile Kingdom of Azania by mapping its land. Mapping out each nation-state in all the colourful flamboyance his yarn can muster, Ruga's large-scale tapestries plot, for example, the Venda and Gcakela Bantustans as islands inside the Oceans of Forgiveness and Redress, accompanied by the flags 'of each semi-autonomous

intent of *disorientation* commences. A glance at the kingdom's tapestries salutes the exiled Azanian's '[e]xilor' – their current ruler and monarch, the Versatile Queen Ivy; its 'transhuman pageant queen', Miss Azania in all her garish gloriousness; and the country's first citizen, The Future White Woman of Azania, '[m]ade from human breath, latex and gauze bandages'.²⁷ Along with *The Walking Wounded* – an exiled journalist (premised on Ruga's father) who returned to the new South Africa to cover the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, wrapped in linen bandages – and several others, Azania's royalty are exiles, half-humans and Xhosa myths entwined in Ruga's flamboyant imaginative characters.²⁸ They do not conform to the importance and status for which state portraits and historical narratives were traditionally reserved. Ruga's slant to the margin, his honouring those discarded by society due to sex, race or gender, bends our orientation towards history and those who write it, critiquing 'the archive's authority to proclaim history "as it really was"', as Andrew J. Hennlich phrases it – he *disorients* his audience.²⁹

Relying on his imaginative vision and exploiting his artistic licence, Ruga's cartography is more than a graphic representation, offering disruptive potential. These maps are cross-referenced and deeply inscribed with historical and fictional references, deliberately poised to flummox. The artist's fashioning of this metaverse offers a territory where his bounty of avatars reign supreme – 'a difficult one to categorise under traditional definitions ... At best, Azania is a semi-absolute monarchy whereby most authority is vested in the reigning monarch.'³⁰ Despite cartographic attempts at pinpointing Azania, it remains slippery, elusive and utopian. Here 'indexes of race and gender are no longer relevant' as Ruga's Azania draws on numerous real and fictional narratives in its connotation to a time before colonialism and a period beyond it.³¹ Ruga's fabled Azania

(and fictive) nation state created by the apartheid regime' to contain black individuals. Hennlich (n 21) 130.

27 The Versatile Queen Ivy is the current monarch and founder of the New Azania, 'assumed by the artist's grandmother, Nompuku Millie Ngalonkulu'. Ruga (n 1) 10-14.

28 Ruga (n 1) 15.

29 Hennlich (n 21) 121.

30 A-P Ruga in Ruga (n 24) xi.

31 Corrigall (n 24) 87.

is a counter-futurity conjured up to make the performance of black queer identity feasible, contrasting against the post-apartheid backdrop as it continues to blossom with impotent rainbow politics and empty promises. Here, utopia offers a refuge for the 'silencing of black voices that extends back to the first moments of colonial contact', offering them a platform as the 'ideologies of forgiveness, reconciliation and redemption' plays out.³² Azania, then, is an intricately woven polyvocal multimedia text with threads of truth and myth to reveal radically alternative futurity as it simultaneously straddles the past and present. The contradictory charting of this 'bittersweet space', as Ruga terms it, 'bend[s] time and subvert[s] staid narratives', offering a place that does not exist despite the feelings of familiarity it espouses.³³ Ruga's *queer(y)ing* of history draws our attention to the omission of queers, blacks and women from the constructed rainbow nation narrative of hegemonic progress. In Ruga's hands, 'queerness', 'questionable,' 'suspicious' and 'dubious' qualifications are turned on the very institution responsible for casting queer in disrepute with its norms.³⁴ It is from the polyvocal cross-referenced context of Ruga's practice, marked by its perpetual *queer(y)ing*, that we lose our way. The avatars, narratives and utopias enable a spatial understanding, not of this world. In the following section I consider how such a politics of *disorientation* may offer an embodied understanding of Ruga's embroidery acts.

3 The politics of *disorientation*

Considering Ruga's impetus to *disorientate* us towards queerness, I engage phenomenology to offer an embodied material review of the artist's tapestry making. I embark on making sense of Ruga's orientation by unpacking Ahmed's understanding of queer phenomenology and explicating her critique of traditional phenomenology. I review Ahmed's theorisation of queer subject positions as differently oriented towards

32 AJ Hennlich "'Touched by an angel" (of history) in Athi-Patra Ruga's *The future white women of Azania*' in C Boule & J Pather (eds) *Acts of transgression: Contemporary live art in South Africa* (2019) 316.

33 A-P Ruga in N Moloi 'Interior/exterior *dramatis personae* – A saga in two parts' 2020, <https://bubblgumclub.co.za/art/interior-exterior-dramatis-personae-a-saga-in-two-parts/> (accessed 1 June 2020).

34 Cleto (n 13) 13.

objects, hoping that this insight may offer an enhanced understanding of Ruga's act of embroidery and queer status as I consider the orientation devices of the Victorian drawing room. I consider Miss Congo in this space, applying Ahmed's politics of *disorientation*.

3.1 Queer(y)ing phenomenology

As Ruga weaves a jarring and confusing metaverse, I argue that the artist's *queer(y)ing* of history, myth and politics offers queerness as a *disorienting* experience. In *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others* Ahmed explores the concept of *orientation* – what it means for bodies to be situated in space and time – phenomenologically. As part of her dedication to the queer project, the text reveals phenomenology's productive use in the context of queer studies. Rather than offering a queer phenomenology per se, Ahmed infuses her phenomenological exploration with queer angles to 'redirect our attention toward *different* objects'.³⁵ To be precise, Ahmed, like Ruga, *queer(ie)s* 'the concept of orientation *in* phenomenology' as well as the 'orientation *of* phenomenology' to answer the question, '[w]hat does it mean for sexuality to be lived as oriented?'³⁶ Drawing on queer geography's indication that space is sexualised and fronting the notion of orientation, the text aims to 'retheorize this sexualization of space, as well as the spatiality of sexual desire'.³⁷ Thus, placing her emphasis on 'the orientation' in 'sexual orientation' and the 'orient' in 'orientalism', Ahmed investigates what it means for (queer) bodies to be situated in space and time.³⁸ Like Ruga fabricates his avatars from tales and threads, bodies take shape as they navigate the world, coordinating themselves amidst objects and others. Ahmed begins her excursion by asking what orientation entails – orientation toward and against objects in worlds for

35 S Ahmed *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others* (2006) 3.

36 Ahmed (n 35) 13.

37 See D Bell & G Valentine (eds) *Mapping desires: Geographies of sexualities* (1995); D Bell et al *Pleasure zones: Bodies, cities, spaces* (2001); F Browning *A Queer geography: Journeys toward a sexual self* (1998), for example.

38 Although Ahmed's phenomenological exploration of bodies' orientation in space and time considers these ideas in sexual, gendered and racial contexts, due to the scope and length of this chapter, my focus is only on queerness. Ahmed (n 35) 1-3.

the queer self:³⁹

If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as 'who' or 'what' we inhabit spaces with ... If we foreground the concept of 'orientation', then we can retheorize this sexualization of space, as well as the spatiality of sexual desire. What would it mean for queer studies if we were to pose the question of 'the orientation' of 'sexual orientation' as a phenomenological question?

Ahmed hosts an 'encounter' between queer studies and phenomenology (revisiting, in particular, the writings and spatial experiments of Merleau-Ponty) to uncover novel ways to conceive of identity as she articulates how bodies are oriented towards the objects around them and how this 'direction', in turn, shapes sexual orientation.⁴⁰ Inhabiting a particular space with our bodies offers us 'certain things, not others, depending on the objects that define it'.⁴¹ To be orientated, Ahmed suggests, is to know where we are as we navigate the world – it implies that we are 'turned toward certain objects' (both physical objects such as landmarks and abstract objects such as the experience of happiness) that guide us along the way.⁴² She follows Lefebvre, suggesting that 'space is always orientated' and the occupying spaces determine what 'comes into view' simply as it is the thing in front of us.⁴³ Therefore, orientations affect what is close to the body – in view or at arm's length. Considering that social relations are then arranged spatially – an idea Ahmed built on Lefebvre's notion that

39 Ahmed (n 35) 1.

40 The term 'sexual orientation' is understood as being clarified by the sex (same or opposite) of the people to whom an individual is mentally and physically attracted. As such, sexuality has an orientation as it is 'directed in one way or another'. Ahmed (n 35) 68.

41 Ahmed (n 35) 4.

42 Ahmed (n 35) 1.

43 In *The production of space* (1974), Lefebvre offers an analysis of space and shows how our being in space impacts the ways we shape and conceive of spatiality. Ahmed follows Lefebvre's theorisation of space, noting that 'if space is always orientated ... then inhabiting spaces "decides" what comes into view'. Ahmed (n 35) 14.

space, as knowledge and action, is a 'locus of social relations' serving the 'establishment' and 'hegemony' – the orientation of sexuality may then be understood as (hetero)normative as the dominant orientation of space.⁴⁴ Ahmed's *queer(y)ing* sexual orientation phenomenologically reveals how queerness disrupts and reorders social relations; queerness is to challenge a latent sense that there is a linear or 'straight' orientation to the world – an orientation that renders non-normative bodies *disoriented*.

As part of her theorisation, Ahmed considers the significance of the objects that are visible to us and those that are not as evidence of orientation in phenomenological texts. Her development of a queer model of orientations relies on an intertwining of readings of phenomenological texts with insights drawn from queer studies, feminist theory, critical race theory, Marxism and psychoanalysis.⁴⁵ Her argumentation *queer(ie)s* these texts by deliberately *not* orientating herself towards hegemonic social relations. Instead, Ahmed offers a politics of *disorientation* whereby bodies turn towards that which is outside the purview, excluded from view and not in line with the lines of direction prompted by a space. Heterosexual orientation and the straight lines of direction that orientation creates are invisible, suggesting them as the norm, orienting bodies that are not 'in line', deviant (and visible?).⁴⁶ Ahmed offers queerness as an orientation towards objects that are 'out of line' (such as a same-sex partner or the experience of shame) with what is constructed as 'natural' or given within dominant sociocultural discourses – queerness unsettles and alters social relations by not following conventional paths.⁴⁷ Put differently, queer desire, therefore, transforms one's experience of spatiality and embodiment as it orients the subject away from (hetero)normative objects, or 'happy objects', or *disorients* bodies purposefully.⁴⁸

44 H Lefebvre *The production of space* ([1974] 1991) 11.

45 Ahmed (n 35) 4.

46 Ahmed (n 35) 19.

47 Ahmed (n 35) 12.

48 In *The promise of happiness*, Ahmed explains that positive affect (the experience of happiness) 'involves an orientation toward something as being good'. Happiness, therefore, is 'intentional in the phenomenological sense (directed towards objects), as well as being affective (contact with objects)'. In this context of sexual orientation, 'happy objects' may be understood as (hetero)normative objects. Orientation toward these ensures a life of happiness. Put differently, when bodies orient themselves toward the norm, if they align with what is accepted, their

3.2 Miss Congo and the table in the drawing-room

In navigating objects from Ahmed's slanted perspective, I want to show how Ruga's embodied embroidery-making *queer(ie)s* phenomenology's apparent neutrality towards objects. In her text, Ahmed argues that to engage phenomenologically with objects in the world relies on the labour of others, often forgotten by the white male philosophers she critiques. It is the overlooked others and objects that facilitate a queer perspective. In the same way, I argue, Ruga's (via Miss Congo's) engagement with embroidery also prompts an oblique angle from where sexual orientation may be *queer(i)ed*.

Orientation for Ahmed not only fashions how we inhabit space but also points to how we understand the 'world of shared inhabitation' by revealing which objects or others draw our attention.⁴⁹ Our inclination towards certain objects informs our understanding of orientation; objects, as they appear in phenomenological texts, then operate as 'orientation devices'.⁵⁰ Ahmed embarks by 'showing how phenomenology faces a certain direction, which depends on the relegation of other "things" to the background'.⁵¹ She examines phenomenology 'gendered as a form of occupation' by considering a table, specifically Husserl's writing table described in his first volume of *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy*.⁵² Ahmed probes this site as a place where Husserl's ideas unfold to confront the seemingly invisible conditions that made this table available to him to pursue his writing. Husserl commences his thinking of human beings as surrounded by a world of objects and others by offering a first-person account of his surroundings as 'continually [being] "on hand" for [him]':⁵³

I simply find the physical things in front of me furnished not only with merely material determinations but also with value-

acquiescence is awarded in kind. S Ahmed *The promise of happiness* (2010) 25.

49 Ahmed (n 35) 3.

50 As above.

51 Ahmed (n 35) 27.

52 Ahmed (n 35) 68.

53 E Husserl *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy: First book, general introduction to pure phenomenology* ([1913] 1983) 53.

characteristics, as beautiful and ugly, pleasant and unpleasant, agreeable and disagreeable, and the like. Immediately, physical things stand there as Objects of use, the ‘table’ with its ‘books’, the ‘drinking glass’, the ‘vase’, the ‘piano’, etc.

Ahmed takes exception to Husserl’s lack of engagement with these objects as they appear for his use. She critiques his unspoken privilege by drawing attention to his omission of the labour that aided the table’s existence, noting that this object did not simply materialise for his use. Ahmed elaborates on the ‘domestic work that must have taken place for Husserl to turn to the writing table, and to be writing on the table, and to keep that table as the object of his attention’.⁵⁴ In the context of the ‘family home’, Ahmed inflicts the ‘politics of housework’, noting how women (wives and servants) are tasked to ‘keep such spaces available for men and the work they do’.⁵⁵ Ahmed builds her argument on how objects, here the table, offer themselves as sites for phenomenological inquiries into their existence as domestic objects imbued with the history of women’s labour.

When placed at a writing table, ‘certain things, not others’ are available to us: Placing our bodies at this table would align us or allow us to inhabit space as a writer.⁵⁶ Ahmed notes that despite Husserl’s calling upon the table’s existence, it remains in the background and operates as ‘an object “from” which to think and toward which we direct our attention’.⁵⁷ Here, the writing table is brought forward to show ‘how “what” we think “from” is an orientation device’.⁵⁸ Ahmed’s rearranging of the furniture allows for a queer phenomenological lens by offering a new perspective on the notion of orientation itself – a stance particularly informed by that which is relegated to the ‘background’ of traditional phenomenological inquiries. Ahmed’s *queer(y)ing* of phenomenology indulges that which is ‘behind the philosopher’, the ‘background’, and that which is out of the line of sight.

However, what if we surrender to the queer path and orient ourselves towards objects that are out of line as an expression of our desire? ‘Desire lines’, Ahmed notes, are used in landscape architecture to ‘describe

54 Ahmed (n 35) 30.

55 Ahmed (n 35) 31.

56 Ahmed (n 35) 14.

57 Ahmed (n 35) 4.

58 Ahmed (n 35) 15.

unofficial paths' that appear because of continuous journeying of people deviating from main routes.⁵⁹ Ahmed elaborates: 'Deviation leaves its own marks on the ground, which can even help generate alternative lines, which cross the ground in unexpected ways. Such lines are indeed traces of desire; where people have taken different routes to get to this point or to that point.'⁶⁰

The oblique indentations on the ground, the imprints of feet that mark obscure paths and the lines of desire that slant, tilt or skew accepted routes become visible expressions of the kind of *queer(y)ing* of orientation this may invoke. From this slanted location, I read the image of the Victorian drawing room offered in Parker's seminal text, *The subversive stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine*. As Parker notes, '[t]he act of embroidering came to be seen as correct drawingroom behaviour, and the content was expected to convey the special social and psychological attributes required of a lady'.⁶¹ This social, semi-public domestic space is ornately designed as a space ordained to orientate bodies towards the ideals of femininity, or the 'index of gentility' as Parker refers to it, fulfilling its purpose in maintaining heterosexuality as the norm. Here, the orientation devices are the room's objects (such as spools of coloured yarn, embroidery hoops, scissors and needles) and others (Victorian women behaving per ladylike etiquette prescriptions of the time). We assemble a selection of objects in a particular space to create our bodies' space to inhabit. Inhabiting one specific space with our bodies allows access to certain things and/or bodies while simultaneously denying others. The ornate floral decoration and neatly-organised decorative cabinets reiterate lines of orientation that 'evoke ... and inculcate ... femininity'.⁶² Here, we find women embroidering – an act that aligns with the feminine ideal. These white heterosexual women – their actions and objects – line up with the social and economic expectations of the time. These bodies and their actions – their intentionality – then engender lines of direction that shape our perception and determine how they orientate their bodies toward the assembled objects. The Victorian women, confined to the (with)drawing

59 Ahmed (n 35) 19.

60 As above.

61 R Parker *The subversive stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine* ([1984] 1996) 152.

62 Parker (n 61) 11.

room, embroidering cloth, ‘maint[aining] and creati[ng] the feminine ideal’.⁶³ Parker notes that during the seventeenth century, young girls were trained in embroidery to ‘inculcate femininity’ as ‘innate’ womanly behaviour.⁶⁴ Elaborating on this during the next century, ‘not working’ became the ‘hallmark of femininity’; delicately, decorative stitches evoking associations of royalty and nobility, offering ‘perfect proof of gentility and providing concrete evidence that a man was able to support a leisured woman’.⁶⁵ In this setting, I propose that women’s embroidering reifies the lines of direction that conform or orientate women toward the norms that privilege white, cisgender, heterosexual men. The direction lines are strengthened with each stitch, disguised in feminine decorum. Thus, as Parker notes, femininity – a sign of ‘docility, obedience, love of home, and a life without work’⁶⁶ – is conflated with embroidery, a natural association. Put differently, the embodied act of embroidery is in line with the things made available to women’s bodies in the context of the Victorian drawing room, thereby shaping their perceptions and how these bodies orientate themselves towards the objects of embroidery.



Figure 8.3: The artist at work in his studio in Cape Town. Courtesy of the artist and Whatiftheworld. Photo credit: Jarred Figgens

- 63 As above.
- 64 As above.
- 65 As above.
- 66 As above.

Enter Miss Congo. Here, in the centre of the Victorian drawing room, carefully-adorned surfaces bear evidence of conventional femininity, and we encounter what Ahmed would recognise as a body that ‘appears “out of place”’.⁶⁷ Amidst the agreeable muted palette of the drawing room – its so-called orderliness and tasteful ornamentation inscribed by the patriarchal desire of women – we chance on her black, queer body. This body offers everything that this space is not. Contrasting the public urban area of Kinshasa with the private domestic space of the Victorian drawing room, Miss Congo challenges conventional notions about femininity (Figure 8.3). Her body, with its clear masculine structure, lying supine on the dirty concrete or reclining on a heap of rubbish, contravenes the straightness of perfectly-poised female bodies. Her regalia’s jarring patterns and colours disrupt the congruous colours of the English ladies’ robes as they blend into the decorated objects that fill the drawing room.

Petit point (translated as a tiny point from the French) is a kind of embroidery comprising minuscule, decorative stitches on individual canvas, fine mesh or silk gauze. These exquisite, detailed tapestries originated in the French court during the Baroque and Rococo eras as a popular pastime for court ladies. As unpacked earlier, embroidery of this kind became the sign of femininity *par excellence* during the Victorian period in the West. Intricate designs comprise delicate stitches in various colours to create pictorial motifs utilised to decorate the home in tasteful and distinguished ways or, in queer phenomenological terms, to orient bodies towards heteronormativity.

When viewed up close, a single *petit point* stitch runs diagonally. Like Miss Congo’s queer desire, each stitch crosses over a single intersection of the threads of the warp and weft of the canvas, thus making a slanted 45-degree angled stitch (also known as a tent stitch). This is the method on which Ruga relies for embroidering his tapestries. Here, as Miss Congo casts her tiny, canted stitches, obscuring the straight horizontal and vertical canvas threads, the orientation of her act of *queer(y)ing* is clear. With each stitch, her queer desire is deliberate in its orientation away from the line of heterosexuality. However, is it possible for bodies with a queer orientation to withstand the pull of the hegemonic force? In this section following Ahmed, I show how Ruga *queer(ie)s* the act of embroidery in

67 Ahmed (n 35) 9.

phenomenological terms. I focus on the tapestries' tiny stitches – their appearance as they orientate themselves diagonally; their raised texture as each across marking evokes a sutured wound, a 'desire line' of sorts.

Her body is at odds with everything in this space – she is out of line with feminine ideals and obscures the lines of direction that emanate from white, patriarchal imaginations. What happens when our bodies are not aligned with the lines of direction? Ahmed explains that from a queer stance, homosexuality is pitted against the background of heteronormative sexual practice where the homosexual subject is 'constituted as having an "orientation"'.⁶⁸ In this unequal equation, heterosexuality is considered 'neutral' with "the homosexual" as a person who "deviates" from what is neutral'.⁶⁹ Ahmed continues her argument by noting that sexual orientation becomes a state of being that itself becomes (sexually) orientated. Thus, in terms of sexuality, 'being orientated' implies an alignment with normative (patriarchal, cisgender, heterosexual) practices. In turn, 'being disorientated' suggests that bodies not in line are deviant. While straight lines of direction appear invisible in their toeing the line of normativity in the Victorian drawing room, skewed lines, on the other hand, are highly noticeable. Slanted lines obscure the lines of orientation; their oblique direction disturbs straightness. Miss Congo's presence disrupts (and interrupts) the orientation of this space; she tilts the lines of orientation. The diagonal lines expressed by her queer desire *queer(y)* the grid of heterosexuality, crossing it out and skewing it while casting its inevitability into question. In short, Miss Congo *disorientates* the drawing room and the neutral presumptions of linear experience it prioritises; the 'straight' lines of femininity *disorientate* Miss Congo's non-normative body rendering her deviant, out-of-line, queer.

I suggest then that Miss Congo's *petit point* tapestry-making act denounces the objects of embroidery, their intended endorsement of femininity and ultimately their perpetuation of heterosexual desire and patriarchal inscription. Nevertheless, her playing around in this embroidery space extends beyond merely skewing the lines of orientation constrained by the Victorian drawing room. As she *queer(ie)s* the space and its objects, Miss Congo's slanted lines of desire cross out the lines of

68 Ahmed (n 35) 69.

69 As above.

orientation pointing towards heterosexuality. In her different orientation towards objects – her queer desire – she embroiders tiny, oblique stitches bearing witness to her ‘effort, but also [her] manifestation’, as Siegenthaler notes.⁷⁰ For Miss Congo, each stitch indicates the ‘suffered moments which are transformed into a physical texture’.⁷¹

4 Casting off: Tying up loose threads

My consideration of Ruga’s avatar, Miss Congo, and her embodied acts of embroidering allowed me to engage with Ruga’s practice on material and phenomenological levels. Untangling Ruga’s spinning of narratives, forging queer utopias and fabricating alter egos, I indicated how his praxis of *queer(y)ing* engenders *disorientation*. *Disorientation* of this kind, however, is political and by no means a passive exile. Via Miss Congo’s deliberate displacement, I showed how her *disorientation* denounces passive positions of estrangement, instead inhabiting a ‘queer slant’ as ‘a matter of everyday negotiation’.⁷²

I elaborated on the politics of *disorientation* by engaging with Ahmed’s queer phenomenology to offer a sensual and spatial understanding of Ruga’s embodied act of embroidery and sexual orientation. I elaborated on Ahmed’s theorisation of sexual orientation as a ‘matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as “who” or “what” we inhabit spaces with’.⁷³ Working from Ahmed’s premise of queer phenomenology, she shows how queerness disrupts and reorders social relations, despite the certainty of the grid of heterosexuality and the straightening devices employed to maintain its straightness. I showed how Miss Congo’s embroidering of her tapestry in abject spaces disrupts the harmonious lines of orientation exerted by the drawing room, thereby obfuscating the craft’s application as a feminine reserve and its use in maintaining straightness and whiteness. In short, Miss Congo’s deviation from normativity unsettles heterosexuality as she crosses out the lines of orientation.

In the last part, I elaborated on her tendency to cross out or to work slantwise. I focused on the queer act of cruising as an aimless kind of

70 Siegenthaler (n 7) 14.

71 As above.

72 Ahmed (n 35) 107.

73 Ahmed (n 35) 1.

wandering, crisscrossing between the lines of the grid of heterosexuality as other objects and bodies pull its subject. I explored how straightening devices and the inevitability of heteronormativity aim to pull wandering subjects back. I also showed how Miss Congo going off course is reinforced by her slanted, queer stitching. Miss Congo's is not a tale that concludes with all living happily ever. After all, as Muñoz reminds us, queerness is not here yet.⁷⁴ Queerness resides in Ruga's fabricated world and alter egos – a future calling out to the present as he *queer(ie)s* normative narratives spun by history, society and politics. As Ruga strings his threads, he obscures the straightness of the grid. He *disorients* us. Through his act of embroidery and politics of *disorientation*, he encourages us to savour each queer moment, oblique glance and instance of brushing up against those objects and bodies that are deemed out of line. Ahmed, too, incites us to indulge in obscure(d) junctures, 'to reinhabit the moment [rather than to] overcome the force of the vertical' by enduring the opinions of others, braving the straightening devices and bearing the violence that flows forth from such parochial views as they solidify into social forms.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, willingly choosing to be *disoriented* is not without injury, but the hope lies in an ongoing refusal to be pulled back or *reorientated* into the field of heterosexuality. As Ahmed's stirring voice reminds us,⁷⁶

we are hailed; we are straightened as we direct our [queer] desire ... For a ... queer politics, the hope is to reinhabit the moment after such hailing ... we hear the hail, and even feel its force on the surface of the skin, but we do not turn around, even when those worlds are directed toward us. Having not turned around, who knows where we might turn. Not turning also affects what we can do. The contingency of [queer] desire makes things happen.

Ahmed's queer phenomenology enabled me to consider how our actions give form to our bodies and our orientation toward the objects and bodies we encounter. It allowed me to demonstrate how the activities of Ruga's and Miss Congo's bodies crisscrossed contingent heterosexuality – a

74 JE Muñoz *Cruising utopia: The then and there of queer futurity* (2006) 1.

75 Ahmed (n 35) 107.

76 As above.

slantedness expressed in the artist's performances, narratives and tapestries. As Miss Congo follows the threads of her desire, embroidering slantwise and suturing utopian futures, I hope that soon the sun may rise in a new direction to orient our desires towards acceptance and understanding.

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