



*Thuli Mlambo-James &  
Daria Tchapanova*



*When thinking about fair and sustainable mobilities, beyond the economic aspect of the concept of mobility, I am interested in travelling and how it shapes personal relationships. I invited my friend and colleague Thuli Mlambo-James for an online conversation. Thuli is based in Johannesburg, I am based in Vienna. We met in 2012 during my time in Johannesburg. Thuli is a cultural professional, working as an independent art curator, mainly multitasking between various national and international spaces and within different social spheres. I am a visual artist, engaging and working with the shift in context through travelling which shapes my art practice and my personal relations. Although Thuli and I don't share the same living space, we share similar questions and interests in life.*

*When looking at people's movements, we always travel together. There are always at least two sides involved.*

Daria Tchapanova

Thuli's first statement after agreeing to the online conversation ...

*Yes, it's nice, let's do it, you know, but what's gonna be the outcome? Are we going to continue?*

**DARIA** *I think this is very important. It's all about that. Okay, thank you for having a chat and so on ... but does it create something else? I don't know. Of course, I want to, but I know the challenges. The next step would be... you should come to Europe.*

**THULI** *But then this is where also environmentalists come in and they'll be talking about global warming, you know.*

**DARIA** *People will always travel. And how many artists or cultural professionals are traveling, what are we actually talking about? Are hybrid ways of working an alternative?*

**THULI** *I still find the hybrid way of a publication is quite good, but it's not sustainable. You know, we can be talking like this, but we can't go on for two years. At some point, we will lose interest. At some point, we have other things that we need to focus on. And in my situation in South Africa where there's load shedding, where electricity is constantly shed amongst people. There are times when there are power failures for two hours. So how do you sustain hybrid living or hybrid ways of working?*

**DARIA** *I am also thinking that it will create new categories, you know, of people who actually have access to the internet and electricity and those who are actually excluded.*

**THULI** *It's actually widening the class, the class gap between the haves and the have nots. Not everyone even in South Africa has access to generators. There are new types of generators that are used by businesses or institutions, known as the UPS system, which automatically switches on when the power goes off, but not everyone can afford it. So then this widens the class gap.*

**DARIA** *I have experienced electricity shortage in Bulgaria, it used to happen quite often and it was common at some point. But I have never experienced it in Central Europe.*

**THULI** *And chances are, this might also be happening in some countries in Europe where electricity will be shed amongst people. I got a message last week from a friend in London, a South African who works in the medical field in London. He sent me a message to say, they also*

*experienced some shedding of electricity for two hours. It doesn't seem to make sense. And I guess it'll affect big cities that have an influx of people, apparently there are too many people consuming electricity and there is not enough electricity to sustain everyone. And going back to the topic of sustainability and the world relations that we form when we do these residencies, travelling for cultural purposes ... I don't think hybrid life is sustainable because nothing beats human connection. We can do so much hybrid, but nothing beats human connections.*

**DARIA** *So would you actually like to come to Europe?*

**THULI** *I think as an arts practitioner in Africa, it never really works a hundred per cent because of the lack of enough funding from the government. They tend to fund more urgent projects, such as health, housing, education, and the arts is not really a priority and therefore never inject enough funds towards the arts. Therefore working outside of one's continent is ideal. So it's always to work within Africa and also outside Africa, also there's more of an art market in Europe & the U.S. And there are more opportunities to do exchange programs. And then in my case, the whole funding issue, especially that which also impedes your mobility, you know, your movement. And then at times when one does get funding, the next thing is to apply for a visa, which tends to be a problem. Most African artists or creators are, not at all times, but the majority of them, are never granted a visa. Then there's also the issue of Race and identity when one travels in some parts of Europe. I thought being in the arts would make things easier. But, when you travel the world, you're not always with artists or creatives. In some European countries and towns, there's also an issue of being made to feel like "the other" that of not belonging. However that's not the case with Europeans coming to Africa, you know?*

*As an African traveller one is always expected to know about European history. They assume that we grew up with western culture, that of the content of anglophone countries like England as well as America. So one is expected to know more about the Western world than they know about Africa. So one is obviously expected to do research... So you go there with that whole knowledge. You bring your own ideas, your concept, and yourself, but also consider your audience over there. So you find yourself working ten times harder than any other person.*

**DARIA** *And what do you think Europeans represent when they come?*

**THULI** *They're seen as people. Europeans, when they land in Africa, especially in Johannesburg at the airport, they don't need visas. They get a stamp. They come in easily. Their queues are usually short and quick. They're seen as "investors". They're never seen as a "threat" coming to exhaust Africa's resources. Excuse the pun here.*

*So it's all very political as well, some of the agreements signed between African leaders and Western leaders sometimes are inconsonant.*

**DARIA** *Yes, true. And travelling also creates some shift in context. When I used to travel, especially to Johannesburg, I got my funding through European institutions. And when you get your funding in Europe, you immediately step into some kind of colonial context, and you have to deal with it as well as its representation. I am Eastern European, but it doesn't matter on a particular level.*

*When thinking of shifting context, I think words and images can be very powerful and they change within different geographical, historical and cultural contexts. Even the perception of who you are and what you are representing is constantly shifting. And I think it is important for us to deal with and work with it.*

*During my time with UNESCO, I came across the expression "preferential treatment of the Global South". It made me think, although I do not connect with it I understand where it comes from. How do you feel about it?*

**THULI** *I thought, first of all when you read it, it sounds very strange. The entire statement just opens negative connotations. And why is it preferential? First of all, the word preferential I think it's just wrong. I find it negative. Why do you call it a "preferential treatment of the Global South"? You know, it opens up a lot of questions. You feel as if you have been given special treatment and you're supposed to feel "grateful"... you know, when people feel pity for you as if you are in a "sad situation" or a "sad case". I don't think there's any need. I find it's a very condescending and strange expression to be used in the era that we live in and that whole Global South also really begs for questioning. According to Wikipedia and Dictionary.com, this is the definition... It is one of a family of terms, including "Third World" and "Periphery", it's just subjugative. All these countries that live south or this continent... that's the Global South. It really doesn't seem to make sense, because Global South does not refer to Africa. It's a lot of countries put together.*

**DARIA** *Yes, and they are all very different, with different histories and different transformations. I would even say that some places in Europe can be connected to the concept of the Global South, but they are located North. Especially when thinking of the city Johannesburg, it's a cultural hub. Maybe we should think of the difference between urban and rural areas, no matter if it is South or North. It's a question of infrastructure and access to resources.*

*When we travel, it is all about working and looking at the art practice or cultural production as a product. Your identity becomes a product. Everything becomes a product. Whereas maybe you want to migrate, or you have to leave your place for other reasons... or even simple things like, you want to visit your friends, establish something together, you know, but you always have to go through particular paths. Time is essential and constructed. It is always set. For example, you travel, you get a visa for one month. Within this one month, you should be very productive. You should achieve something. How do you establish meaningful relationships or sustainable structures within this given time frame?*

**THULI** *Yeah. It's not, you do not when travelling, only when you live when you know that you're there for a long time. When you travel, you constantly have limited time, like you're saying, your time constraints. There are certain things that you need to achieve within those time constraints. So I doubt that you do get to have meaningful relationships or human relations. You could meet people but have short conversations. Because you're constantly looking at the time.*

**DARIA** *Yes, and as you mentioned in the beginning of our conversation. The most important question is how long will this conversation last and are we able to overcome the given time frame and create something new together?*