

Institution: University of Warwick		
Unit of Assessment: D33 – Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies		
Title of case study: Making Space: Connecting African creative practitioners through the African Women's Playwright Network (AWPN)		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2015-2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Yvette Hutchison	Reader, Theatre and Performance Studies	April 2006 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 - present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) <p>The African Women Playwrights Network (AWPN) is an international virtual forum developed by Hutchison in response to the fact that African women theatre creatives are largely invisible and hard to access by other theatre professionals. This network has had a transformative impact on the careers of the women involved, providing them with vital spaces to connect with other playwrights across Africa and to access support and mentoring offered by, and through, the network. It has also brokered funding and international opportunities to produce their work more widely. The work done through this network has resulted in cultural shifts in theatre programming, broadened cultural understandings within and beyond the continent, and impacted on decolonising curricula. The African Literature and Language Association identified AWPN as a 'very significant' model of collaboration between researchers and artists, one which recognises theatre as a key space of exchange and has become an important mechanism for enabling and empowering these exchanges (5.7). Its success is evidenced by its growth from a network into an independent organisation run by the women creatives themselves, enabling them to access funding, plan projects and further mentor and develop the capacity of other African women on the continent and in various diasporas.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) <p>This project started with Hutchison co-editing <i>African Theatre: Contemporary Women</i> (3.1), which Thomas Riccio (Uni of Texas at Dallas) called 'a long overdue twenty-first-century update on African theatre and performance that focuses on women' in his review for <i>Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute</i> (2017: 649-650). This publication analysed how African women practitioners, theatre makers, directors and actors were engaging with gender roles, inequalities, political and national issues in their artistic work. It was evident that contemporary women in Africa are producing rich and vibrant work, which is hugely underrepresented in scholarship and curricula, largely owing to the difficulties involved in accessing the work and artists.</p> <p>In response to this under-representation, Hutchison, in collaboration with Amy Jephta, a South-African artist-researcher, established the AWPN in 2015 (3.2) as a virtual forum through a mobile application (app) (3.3) co-developed with Every1Mobile, a UK-SA company. The aim was to use this app to move research away from static or macro approaches to African women's issues and instead, discover, highlight and network African women creative practitioners, thereby enabling them to improve their visibility, access to resources, training and foreground their agency in defining themselves and their creative products. The research drew on Linda Tuhiwai Smith's decolonising research methodologies to place African-authored theories and practices related to gender, sexualities and identities at the centre of the project. These methods encourage reciprocal knowledge generation that enables participants to compare different approaches to creative</p>		

processes, aesthetic choices and issues in ways that keep the community in control of their own representations and knowledges.

By building in opportunities for participants to engage with questions on a peer-to-peer level, the forum function of the app particularly adopted this decolonial approach in its generation and testing of research about the ways in which the women produce and disseminate new creative material. This approach reduced the extent to which research questions were defined by the researchers' *a priori* assumptions and encouraged a reciprocal research process. For example, Hutchison shared her research on how particular aesthetics mark emergent African feminisms with artists whose work she was analysing (3.4), and then used this research as the basis for creating online debates and shaping workshops for the two symposia (Feb 2017 and March 2018 in Cape Town), which resulted in new perspectives, behaviours and collaborations from the network's participants.

Hutchison and Jephta worked with playwrights from 7 African countries to develop and publish new plays in the anthology *Contemporary Plays by African Women* (3.5), only the second ever anthology of work by African women to have been published. Hutchison has analysed the impacts of using different digital and live platforms for network building, and adjusted AWPEN engagements according to the embodied and social aspects of the publics engaged (local and global). She has also analysed the extent to which these engagements translate into embodied practices (3.6).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

In addition to the creation of digital platforms for the AWPEN, Hutchison has co-edited collected works and published articles in peer-reviewed journals:

1. Plastow, Jane, **Hutchison, Yvette** and Matzke, Christine (2015) *African Theatre 14: Contemporary Women*. Woodbridge: James Currey/ New York: Boydell & Brewer Inc. ISBN: 9781847011312.
2. **Hutchison, Yvette** (2019 onward) *African Women's Playwright Network*. <https://www.facebook.com/African-Women-Playwrights-Network-837218766368787/>
3. **Hutchison, Yvette** (2015-2018) *E1M AWPEN Application*. AWPEN.org
4. **Hutchison, Yvette** (2018) *Aesthetics of South African women's embodied activism: Staging complicity*. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 28(3). pp. 355- 366. doi: 10.1080/10486801.2018.1476350
5. **Hutchison, Yvette** and Jephta, Amy (2019) *Contemporary Plays by African Women*. London: Methuen. doi: 9781350034525
6. **Hutchison, Yvette** and Ranford, Steve (10%) (2019) *Creating a network on and off-line, in and out of Africa: African Women Playwright Network*. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 24(4). pp. 508-521. doi: 10.1080/13569783.2019.1646122

Funding: AHRC: *Networking Women's theatre in Africa*. June 2015-June 2017, Ref: AH/M008096/1. **Hutchison, Yvette** (PI) (GBP35,954)

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

'I have been vocal about the need for more opportunities and spaces that don't merely "cater" for the black female voice/narrative/body in theatre, but ones that empower and back that narrative/voice in tangible ways, be it financially, or by providing resources i.e. space, mentors, facilities etc.' (Koleka Putuma, South African playwright, CASA Award Reflection, 5.1)

As Koleka Putuma, a member of the AWPEN states above, there is a critical need to make space and create opportunities to actively empower the voices of African women within theatre, across Africa and internationally. Due to the legacy of colonialism, which controlled colonised peoples by dividing them geographically and encouraging ethnic mistrust, there are still barriers within Africa to intra-African collaboration, communication and access to resources. Prior to the AWPEN, African

women playwrights had no way to connect with each other across Africa or in diasporas, or to access training outside of universities. Theatre programmers and educators also had very limited access to new unpublished work, and female playwrights had minimal opportunities to stage their work outside of their own regions or countries. As a result of Hutchison's extensive research from June 2015, via the unique prototype AWPN digital network, theatre funders, programmers and researchers have become more aware of contemporary African women playwrights, and thus programmed more of their work, as evidenced below. This greater visibility has enabled many more African women artists to access more resources, professional and personal support and career opportunities within Africa and around the world as they testify (5.3). It has created a community for the women to support one another as Kenyan playwright JC Niala testifies: 'what this network is doing for us, in a way is bringing down borders, recognising each other's work, meeting each other and supporting each other in ways that it's not possible to do otherwise' (5.3).

These claims for the significance of the network are supported by its growth. By February 2017, E1M reported over 10,000 sessions on the platform (where a user visited the platform for any period of time), over 22,000-page views, and 140 registered users from 21 countries (5.4, p.15). The network was migrated to other digital platforms in June 2018, including a closed group on Facebook and Twitter (with a formal Warwick webpage), to ensure financial sustainability. The Facebook site had 535 followers as of 30 October 2020, including artists, funders, theatre programmers, academics and educators (3.2; 5.5).



Empowering African women playwrights and transforming professional practices

Through the online network, Hutchison and Jephta were able to ascertain the concerns and industry exclusions facing African women creative practitioners, and feed these into the first ever symposium for African women creative practitioners, which they organised with the Arts Admin Collective in Cape Town (5-6 February 2017). This symposium enabled face-to-face encounters between 55 African practitioners across 7 African countries and the UK. Through facilitated workshops, the AWPN supported participants in analysing how they could tackle issues such as access to funding, industry infrastructures, space, targeting audiences, and the impact of self-censorship on the participants' work; and how they could strategize change, including setting up regional groups to lobby regarding space and female representation in formal arts organisations. Participants fed back that they had a new awareness with regards to 'how issues of social and political dynamics function', about how to have 'uneasy conversations' about 'access to state-sponsored institutions', and the value of collaborations in the context of limited resources (5.6, p.16).

The collaborations following these workshops demonstrate significant transformation of practice that strengthens the artists' capacities and professional reach. These included a Ugandan play being invited to a Zimbabwean festival; a Kenyan artist being invited to take her work and teach primarily black UG students at a South African university; a Cameroonian playwright touring her ecological play for children between 2-9 years to festivals in South Africa, Cameroon, Rwanda & Kenya (Nov 2017, May 2019) and Angola (July 2017), and then being invited to the USA on a fellowship. JC Niala's play 'Unsettled', featured in *Contemporary Plays by African Women*, was shortlisted for the 2020 Alfred Fagon award for leading Black British playwrights.

The online network has achieved significant benefits for artists and programmers by brokering opportunities for funding, fellowships and programming. This has resulted in changed programming both in African countries and the UK/USA. For example, through the network, the Pulley & Button theatre, Philadelphia, called for new plays by African women, and were excited to include 3 new, unpublished plays by AWPN members for their May 2019 program. Their Artistic Director confirms, 'There's a need for the African Women's Playwrights Network because it gives these incredibly talented women the exposure that they aren't getting through more traditional means and it allows those of us who are looking for them to find them' (5.3). All 7 of the new plays

coming out of this project were staged or read at the Arts Admin Collective Theatre in Cape Town in March 2019 and in response to them, the Artistic Director said, 'I think it's important to have the AWPN for a continental connection, which I think is essential to our development as South African theatre makers. These things open perspectives, relationships, partnerships, collaborations and a greater understanding of our place in the continent' (5.3). Talking about the significance of the network on her career development, Thembelilhe Moyo from Zimbabwe said that, 'The network is making a difference to me personally because I have grown globally. I have met people that I'm doing other collaborations with through the network...I have got other projects that I'm working on at home that are from other continents that I have met through the network. Personally, I think I have grown, in terms of my writing and I have grown in terms of acquiring global space and being connected' (5.3). The network has brokered opportunities for playwrights to have their work staged in Africa and internationally, as well as opportunities for international organisations to access new, diverse work from across the continent.

The network has also actively pursued ways for these practitioners to access mentoring and professional development opportunities. It has set up live and online peer mentoring and partnered with the Canadian Guild of Playwrights on the CASA (Canadian and South African) Awards Project. Between 2017 and 2022, CASA is funding one or more annual 3-month residencies for a South African woman in Canada, supported financially by CAD5,000 (06-2017) and dramaturgically by a senior woman-identified Canadian playwright, and then in South Africa by a host theatre and director to produce the new work professionally. This initiative has cultivated meaningful artistic connections; since the award's launch, two of the award's recipients have toured their work in Canada and one recipient has won the Distell National Playwright award, based on the script she developed during her CASA residency (5.1). From 2019, Hutchison began developing the network into an organization, with a steering committee of women being trained to set up, plan and run AWPN as a business that can access funding, plan events and mentor emerging artists (5.2).

Broadening cultural understanding of social concerns in Africa and beyond

The launch events for *Contemporary Plays by African Women* (3.5) at the Oxford Playhouse and Belgrade Theatres in the UK and Theatre Arts Admin Collective in SA, changed perceptions of playwrights and plays from the continent, and raised important social issues such as gender-based violence and child soldiers. The events made space for the voices of African women in spaces where they have historically been excluded; 'in a world where men have dominated for so long, it is very important to have a space that provides room for women to be who they are, to tell the stories they want to tell without fear and that's why the AWPN is very important' (Ugandan Playwright Adong Judith, 5.3).

Practitioners and audiences discussed how pan-African plays can break silences and become a road map for difficult conversations, a space for sharing stories and identifying shared experiences. As one audience member noted: 'I was hugely struck by the diversity of the voices, experiences and heritage represented by the collection – but also the points of commonality/connection/shared experiences' (Oxford feedback, 5.6). Audience members commented that the events had shown them 'how powerful theatre is in raising difficult issues and making people talk about them' and highlighted 'how women are treated in society and that it really needs to change' (Belgrade feedback, 5.6).

Following on from these events, Hutchison has received requests to consult on how the network could be modelled in different areas, for example the African Literature Association reached out to AWPN when setting up their Caucus on Performance (5.7), as did a network for playwrights facing government persecution (5.8) to achieve similar aims.

Decolonising curricula

The increased accessibility of African playwrights and their work is facilitating important decolonisation of curricula in Africa and beyond, particularly with the new play collection being

available to schools and HEIs. AWPN's first endeavour was to seek out and publish new work – resulting in *Contemporary Plays by African Women* in 2019 (3.5). This anthology, the second only anthology of plays by African women playwrights after that of Kathy Perkins (2009) and a few individual plays in various single editions or anthologies, most from the 1970s and 1980s, demonstrates the success of the project, which sold over 500 copies in the first year. Professors from Stanford and Harvard (USA) are currently advocating for the inclusion of the play collection on literature syllabi, and Universities of California, Irvine and Bayreuth, Germany have adopted the collection, alongside South Africa universities: UCT, Kwa-Zulu Natal and Rhodes.

Additionally, in collaboration with the Africa Writes project, part of the Royal African Society in London, the AWPN piloted ideas for an African theatre education toolkit for secondary teachers at Stoke Newington School, North London. 20 students from years 7-9 performed two play extracts at a local community event and were programmed for the Africa Writes event on 5 July 2019 at the British Library. Africa Writes have stated that 'the partnership was extremely valuable, moving us into new territory in the curriculum through drama, and offering fresh perspectives for our partner teachers, who gained professional development from observing and participating in the workshops. ... The workshops also changed perceptions of Africa and African theatre for those who took part' (5.9). Subsequently, Hutchison scoped the theatre, history and literature curriculum in the UK and responsively expanded this work into a digital education resource on *Theatre in the African Context*, designed for secondary schools and made available through the network internationally (5.2). Between 09 March 2020 and 31 December 2020, it was downloaded for use in 46 schools, 39 Universities, 10 public sector organisations, 6 social enterprise companies, 7 charities and 1 local authority in 25 countries across North America, Europe, Asia and Africa (5.10). This pack has broadened cultural awareness and engagement of young people with the African continent.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. Canadian Guild of Playwrights project CASA reports
2. AWPN project web-site, <https://warwick.ac.uk/awpn>
3. Transcriptions of interviews with AWPN members
4. E1M reports & surveys
5. Facebook Page Followers
6. Event feedback (UK play launch audience feedback – Coventry Belgrade and Oxford Playhouse; Arts Admin Collective Symposium)
7. ALA (African Literature & Language Association): Emails and Feedback from 2019 conference
8. Email about network for playwrights facing persecution
9. Statement from Africa Writes, Royal African Society
10. Woza Africa! Educational Toolkit data