



*Photo credit: author.*

**Unpacking Voices of Forced Migration: Personified Significations of the Ubiquitous Plaid Bag in the Works of South African Artists Nobukho Nqaba and Dan Halter**

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**Author bio**

Sophie-Anne Mullen holds a BA in Comparative Literature with Film Studies from King's College London and an MA in History of Art and Archaeology from SOAS University of London. This research builds on her MA dissertation, which earned the Walter Rodney Prize for Academic Excellence in the History of Africa and the African Diaspora. She is currently a Registrar at Lisson Gallery in New York City, managing the logistics and shipping of artwork globally. As an

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## **Abstract**

This research examines how South African artists Nobukho Nqaba and Dan Halter interpret the ubiquitous plaid bag in their artworks to reflect the ineluctable entanglements between migration and identity. Utilising Ferdinand de Saussure’s sign formula, the research exposes the bag’s lack of a universal name due to its complex association with migrant communities. When the bag is further deconstructed using theorist Irit Rogoff’s rematerialisation of the sign formula when examining luggage and suitcases, the bag is shown to have a paradoxical definition of both ‘displacement’ and ‘home’. Isolating and deconstructing the intricacies of the artist’s portrayals of the bag within this context reveals how the bag exists as more than just as a metaphor for arrival or departure. Instead, it resides in a sort of spatial-temporal transmission, thus interpreting the concept of identity as something that exists in constant motion.

**Keywords:** Plaid mesh bag, forced migration, South African artists, identity, displacement, sign theory, post-colonial theory, migration narratives

## **Introduction**

The mesh carry-bag, instantly recognisable by its plaid composition of red, white and blue, has garnered a global reputation as a practical travel necessity because of its sturdy, inexpensive and spacious qualities. Unlike other forms of luggage, this particular bag lacks one, universally accepted name and instead possesses a variety of names depending on the geo-cultural location in which they are found. Some names include *Zimbabwe bag* in South Africa, *Ghana-Must-Go bag* in Nigeria, variations of *Türkenkoffer* or *Turkish suitcase* throughout Europe, *migrant workers bag* in China, and *Chinatown tote* in the United States.<sup>1</sup> These names all reference an exteriority from the location in which they exist, revealing complex perceptions towards those associated with using the bag. Deconstructing the bag as a form of language in and of itself

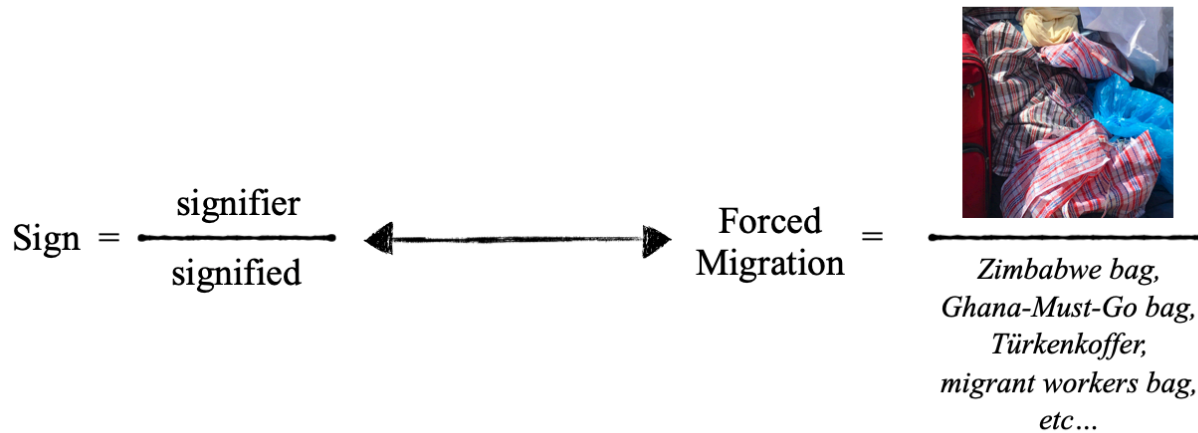
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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Simbao, “China-Africa Relations: Research Approaches,” *African Arts* 45, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1162/afar.2012.45.2.1>.

shows how the ubiquitous item possesses powerful and compelling stories of our inter-related history.

Swiss linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure formulated the two-part model known as the sign formula. The ‘sign’ refers to anything that conveys meaning and consists of a signification that is made up of the two concepts, the signified and the signifier, where the signifier determines the signified.<sup>2</sup> Consider the following allocation for how we would approach the bag through the sign formula (*fig. 1*).

*fig. 1. Sign Formula for the Plaid Bag (credit: author).*



In this case, if we consider the sign “forced migration”, the signifier, which is the mental image of something, is the physical existence of the bag, and is immediately recognisable for its unique plaid fabric. The signified is the word or phrase that conjures the signifier, in this case, it is wildly ambiguous. What makes this bag even more fascinating is that its lack of text or logo on its fabric generates such momentous references. This leads one to consider the bag to represent profound and momentous experiences. While the sign formula is rooted in the study of words and language, transferring its fundamental concepts to the study of art history allows for deeper analysis into how we attribute meaning to objects that embody entangled experiences. Nobkuho Nqaba (b. 1992) and Dan Halter (b. 1977), two South-African based artists, utilise the bag in their oeuvre to express their complex relationship between identity and migration.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Chandler, “Semiotics for Beginners: Signs,” *Princeton*, accessed June 29, 2024, <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/>.

Nqaba was born in the Eastern Cape of South Africa and moved around the Western Cape during her childhood with her mother, who regularly travelled for her work as a farmworker. This led then 22-year-old Nqaba to reimagine the bag in her final assignment for her degree in Photography from the University of Cape Town. She produced a photo series entitled *Umaskhenkethe Likhaya Lam*, which roughly translates from Xhosa to read “The Tourist Bag is My Home”. The series consists of self-portraits that refer to memories from her childhood, which was imbedded with the constant presence of the bag with her mother’s regular movement. Nqaba won the Tierney Fellowship for this series, which was also exhibited at the Musée de L’Elysée in Switzerland as part of the initiative reGeneration3 celebrating rising stars in the arts.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that some would classify Nqaba’s intra-African migration experience as a form of labour migration, which is widely considered separate from forced migration. While this is a legitimate differentiation, Nqaba’s series is rooted in her lack of control over her own movement as a child, which produces emotionally charged notions of what ‘home’. Her relationship with the bag is worth exploring further within the discourse of involuntary migration and displacement as her experiences with the bag translate to other lived experiences undergoing similar economic hardship.

Born in Harare, Zimbabwe, Halter moved to South Africa in 2001 to complete his BA in Fine Arts at the University of Cape Town and has since lived and worked in Cape Town. When asked about what drew him to using the bag in his practice, Halter said he found it to be a tactile way to explore the regional migration between post-colonial Zimbabwe and South Africa.<sup>4</sup> His interests lie not only in its visual properties, but its technical properties too, manipulating them to take on other forms. His exhibition in Melbourne, Australia from 2019 entitled *Plenty sits Still, Hunger is a Wanderer*, consists of works that explore the mobile characteristics of the bag and its contribution to the underlying rhetoric of the regional and national geopolitics of migration. The exhibition’s title references a Zulu proverb which alludes to the human condition of searching for what satisfies us. Halter portrays a visual rendition of the proverb using the plaid carry bags to act as voices of those experiencing displacement, resulting in the metaphor taking up new meaning.

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<sup>3</sup> Writers from Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, “Nobukho Nqaba,” *Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa*, accessed June 30, 2024, <https://zeitzmocaa.museum/artists/nobukho-nqaba/>.

<sup>4</sup> Dan Halter (artist), in discussion with the author, July 5, 2021.

Furthermore, in the context of the sign formula, we are all wanderers because it is in our innate nature to seek meaning in everything around us.

The deadly Xenophobic attacks in South Africa in 2008 left comparative impressions on Nqaba and Halter. Nqaba did not view the violence as just Xenophobia, but more specifically Afrophobia, pointing out that the colloquial name for the bag in South African is *Zimbabwe bag* or khumbula'ekhaya which is Xhosa for *remember home*. “We are Africans”, states Nqaba, “[but] some people of my country fear other people that come from other African countries”.<sup>5</sup> Halter remembers, “There was a huge exodus of Zimbabweans, ... so those bags were definitely in the news a lot...I felt no one was talking about it at that time”.<sup>6</sup> Accused of stealing jobs, immigrants from neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe and Mozambique became targets of intra-black racism. Individual voices and experiences of the violence were clouded by the global coverage which prescribed the violence because of unemployment and poverty.<sup>7</sup> The artists therefore strive to reinvent the bag into various configurations that permeate the stigmatized narratives of forced migration in South Africa. In doing so, they reveal how the bag signifies more than just a ubiquitous accessory of travel.

Prominent academic theorist Irit Rogoff dedicates a chapter from her book ‘Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture’ to deconstructing luggage and suitcases as a sign system in visual culture. Through this perspective of entanglement and situatedness, the plaid bag arguably exists within a *semiotic crisis* because it presents ambiguity where a universal meaning would be anticipated. Rogoff coined this term to diagnose signs that “fail to reproduce fully the narratives in which they are embedded”.<sup>8</sup> By carving out the romanticism historically imminent of the metaphor for luggage, Rogoff points out the problematic expectation of recovery when referencing the meaning of luggage.<sup>9</sup> She brings into question the legitimacy of geographical boundaries in favour of epistemological indicators through her interpretations of luggage as a language itself.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Nobukho Nqaba (artist) in discussion with the author, July 6, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Halter in discussion with the author.

<sup>7</sup> Hashi Kenneth Tafira, *Xenophobia in South Africa: A History* (African Histories and Modernities) (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1–2.

<sup>8</sup> Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture* (London, UK: Routledge, 2000), 50.

<sup>9</sup> Rogoff, “Terra Infirma.”

<sup>10</sup> Patricia A. Morton, “Book Reviews [Review of Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture; With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture, by I. Rogoff & L. Bloom],” *Signs* 31, no. 3 (2006): 872.

Rogoff therefore integrates post-colonial discourse into the expanding field of Visual Culture, offering a vantage point from which to examine the personal and global encounters with this iconic, plaid mesh bag.

Fundamentally, Nqaba interprets the bag more personally and locally while Halter weighs in on its regional and global reverberations. Although the two artists provide unique readings of the bag as a form of luggage, they both evoke similar themes and emotional sensations associated with the un-homed voices of forced migration. As a result, Nqaba and Halter arguably communicate via the material of the bag, just as one communicates with words.

### **Redefining the Narrative: Acts of Self-Location and Memory**

Nqaba and Halter redefine the bag's role as a symbol of migration by placing it in new contexts that reframe its significance. The malleable nature of the bag allows the artists to play with the mobility, transforming and extending the bag into other spaces.

Nqaba had always felt that her relationship with the bag was a complicated one, and when asked about her relationship with the bag, Nqaba responded, "To me, the bag became a constant reminder of movement and the notion that the home is never permanent".<sup>11</sup> Nqaba relies heavily on visual references of the bag, and uses its association with foreignness to express her own feelings of displacement within spaces that hold memories. In *Untitled 6 (fig.2)*, Nqaba situates herself in a room where the wallpaper and surrounding surfaces are covered in the plaid pattern. She wraps herself in a grey blanket and looks longingly beyond the border of the photograph. Here, she imitates a memory wherein her father waits up for her mother to return from her work for the day.<sup>12</sup> Nqaba recontextualises the bag into her childhood memories by enlarging and extending the bag to constitute the entire atmosphere of the photograph. The harsh light on Nqaba's face isolates her from her surroundings and dramatises her feelings of foreignness within the space. Nqaba materialises this memory of her father in the context of the bag, imbuing the atmosphere of the photograph with a sense of longing, the radio to her left visible on a chair clad with the bag's plaid fabric. Through her performative presence, Nqaba relives this memory, not necessarily by *doing* anything in the photograph, but rather allowing her immersion in this space to speak for itself. Through the darkness, the plaid pattern of the bag looms in the background, just visible in the stark

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<sup>11</sup>Nqaba in discussion with the author.

<sup>12</sup> Nqaba in discussion with the author.

darkness of Nqaba's surroundings. By reimagining the bag into overwhelming the space, the significance of the bag itself is not lost but rather enhanced through the supplement of longing, naturally camouflaging itself in an arguably otherwise ordinary photograph. The significance lies not in the literal accuracy of the photograph but in what it represents, in other words, its context.

Nqaba's perspective into the hardships of migration on the family dynamic offers personal narratives that speak to the collective voice of migration stories. When examining this from a semiotic approach, rather than following the traditional *text*→*context* formula, the sequence exists in reverse: *context*→*text*. When placed into the conversation of Nqaba's reimagining of the memory of her father using the bag, *memories*→*context* becomes *context*→*memories*. In other words, the context comprises of memories made tangible. When revisiting de Saussure's formula used to define 'forced migration' from earlier, in this case it is the sign itself that is replaced with another meaning while the significance (signifier and signified) remains the same. The new sign itself is interchangeable, from 'father', 'mother', or something more arbitrary like 'home'. It does not necessarily encompass a tangible concept, but rather one of an emotional charge as made evident by the bag's pattern.

Nqaba's approach to the theme of migration and displacement reveals her intentions to revisit the assumption that migration only occurs when one leaves their home country. "There is also inter-migration within countries as well," she points out, "especially in countries like South Africa where we have so many provinces".<sup>13</sup> In this photograph, the bag acts as an extension of the self and reflects memories experienced by many in the intra-migratory community. The grey blanket — which is also the only item not covered in or made of the bag's pattern — is a typical accessory used in low-income communities in South Africa.<sup>14</sup> Its contrast to the plaid pattern emphasises her experience with intra-migration, and therefore expresses not only her personal struggles with constant movement, but that felt by a wider community as well. Rogoff notes that the "suitcase circulates in culture as the cipher of memory".<sup>15</sup> A memory quickly fades and loses its materiality. The context of the photograph reproduces this memory and extends beyond the photograph because Nqaba includes threads of narratives of what happens *beyond* of the artwork,

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<sup>13</sup> Nqaba in discussion with the author.

<sup>14</sup> Writers from Art Meets, "Nobukho Nqaba," *Art Meets*, accessed June 29, 2024, <https://art-meets.com/nobukho-nqaba>.

<sup>15</sup> Rogoff, "Terra Infirma."

conveying her father's emotions with the sensation of being both spatially and temporally displaced. She captures a moment where there is something, or more importantly, *someone* missing, which is a narrative of migration that gets left out of the significance associated with the bag.

*fig. 2. Nobukho Nqaba, "Untitled 6", 2012 (photo credit: nobukhonqaba.co.za.).*

Despite his valuable insight into the migratory relationship between Zimbabwe and South Africa, Halter falls between the nationalism of Zimbabwe and South Africa. This has led to snubs of opportunities to represent either country national art for either country on larger platforms. He admits that he falls between the cracks of South African and Zimbabwean representation, but



nevertheless continues to work with themes from both countries because specific stories rather than locations inspire him.<sup>16</sup> His utilisation of the bag as a form of language comes to fruition in

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<sup>16</sup> Dan Halter (artist) in discussion with the author, July 3, 2021.



his re-fabrication of the bag into a traditional Scottish kilt in his photograph entitled *Furry Boots Are Ye Fae* (fig.3.). The title refers to a popular expression in Aberdeen that is historic for ‘whereabouts are you from’ and Halter transfers the pattern of the bag into a high-end cashmere kilt, creating a “refugee tartan”.<sup>17</sup> Tartans were historically a source of clan identification, and in the late 18th to 19th century, clan chiefs chose particular tartans to become symbols of their family identity, and there are now more than 7000 unique tartans in Scotland.<sup>18</sup>

Halter imitates the semiotic crises attached to the bag and marks the societal differences of the bag by revealing the similarities between the tartan and the plaid bag. In his creation of the sign formula, de Saussure differentiated between two types of speaking: *langue* and *parole*. *Langue* relates to the “global set of rules” while *parole* relates to the “actual utterances” of the language.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, none of the names garnered by the bag from around the world are considered part of the *langue* of their respective languages. Its associated names all exist within sociocultural utterances of *parole*, which also contributes to its existence as an ambiguous ‘signified’. In this case, Halter utilises the *parole* of Scottish culture in the title of his photograph and thus engages with visually displaying the intersections of language and its significations. He places the pattern in its original form (that of a bag) into that of Scottish context through its background, tartan, and the title of the photograph. By transforming the plaid pattern into a tartan shape, Halter juxtaposes two seemingly disparate histories, creating a convergence of historical narratives. This brings forth another dimension of the sign formula for force migration. That of location and national identity.

Halter has plans to register the refugee tartan as an official tartan in Scotland.<sup>20</sup> In this photograph, he therefore imparts a new national identity, but one that does not exist in one physical location, and therefore arguable exists embedded in a state of translation. Rogoff’s concept of luggage being a cipher of memory is evident in the interpretation of Halter’s translation of signs across borders. Translation is arguably one of the top reasons for the loss of meaning between

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<sup>17</sup> Halter in discussion with the author.

<sup>18</sup> Writers from The Scottish Tartans Museum and Heritage Center, “What Is Tartan?” *The Scottish Tartans Museum and Heritage Center Inc.*, accessed June 29, 2024, [https://www.scottishtartansmuseum.org/content.aspx?page\\_id=22&club\\_id=170857&module\\_id=290899](https://www.scottishtartansmuseum.org/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=170857&module_id=290899).

<sup>19</sup> Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History,” *The Art Bulletin* 73, no. 2 (1991): 177.

<sup>20</sup> Halter in discussion with the author.

signs. From Halter's approach, translation therefore *is* the context. There is a space of transition created between the original and its translation. It is a space that allows for reflection, as well as a space for which new meanings of national identity and nationalism to emerge.

Jorge Luis Borges, an Argentine writer and poet, claimed "The original is unfaithful to the translation", and inspires Halter's photograph.<sup>21</sup> In the 'original' which here is the original form of the bag, to Halter's right, he tries to capture what is often *lost in translation* by placing the bag and its 'translation' into a kilt of it into the same space. The bag and its *translation* are two separate things and can therefore be interpreted as translations of each other (*bag pattern* ↔ *tartan pattern*). Halter creates a link between the two originals, and therefore two contexts. Halter's photograph therefore might never be able to answer the question, "where are you from", because what image would conjure in the signified what once thinks of the word *from*?

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<sup>21</sup> Halter in discussion with the author.



*fig. 3. Dan Halter, Furry boots ye fae? 2010, image by Matthew Sandager (photo credit: danhalter.com).*

### **Disrupting the Notion of Recovery: The Halfway Home Perspective**

According to de Saussure, the only way a sign exists, is that it exists in difference to itself. Language was a “system of functional differences and oppositions.”<sup>22</sup> While it is therefore impossible to fully contain the entirety of the sign because of its relational difference, by placing the bag in a visually telling environment, the artists *attempt* to reorient the significance of the bag through the context in which the bag exists in their works. The sign exists in its own arbitrariness,

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<sup>22</sup> Chandler, “Semiotics for Beginners.”

so even between the sign and its signification rests an infinite number of differences. Nqaba and Halter navigate this ambiguity by perceiving the bag through their own controlled contexts, and to explore further into the ways the artists approach the sign of the bag, revisiting the intimate space of the home will focus on how the bag acts as a supplement for a *halfway home*.

A supplement supplies what is *missing*.<sup>23</sup> The bag is symbolic of the lack of permanence of a home. When viewing the bag as the supplement of travel, it implies that the sensations associated with the bag “are not simply the discursive sphere of the travel but actually its very fabric”, according to Rogoff.<sup>24</sup> Nqaba and Halter redesign notions of the home and *supply* what is *missing* of the bag by reimagining its components into what it supposedly is representative of lacking: a home. By doing so, the artists reveal the innate desire we possess to have a space of our own. In the instance of migration, this desire is disrupted, causing an endeavour to make a “halfway house”.<sup>25</sup> This situated existence, which grows into situated knowledge feeds our continued encounters with entangled experiences with one another.

Rogoff explains how luggage and suitcases take on a sense of duality, where they do not embody the romanticism of a destination reached, but exist suspended between in both time and place.<sup>26</sup> Nqaba approaches the idea of home with the following understanding, “In a home, you think of four walls, and you never really know what’s happening behind and inside of the four walls. And if the walls could talk, they could say a lot”.<sup>27</sup> In *Untitled 3 (fig. 4)*, Nqaba designs a bedroom with colour variations of the bag, but the bag in its original form is nowhere to be found and, instead, its significance lives vicariously through her immediate surroundings. This imagined space imitates the very shape of the bag making it, so Nqaba lives within the confines of the bag itself. Nqaba lays her head on a pillow made of the bag. Here, Nqaba is at ease, having created a nook in the space for relaxation that acts as a refuge from the outside world.

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Bernasconi, “Supplement,” in *Jacques Derrida: Key Concepts*, ed. Claire Colebrook (London, UK: Routledge, 2014), 13.

<sup>24</sup> Rogoff, “Terra Infirma.”

<sup>25</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, UK: Routledge, 1992), 13.

<sup>26</sup> Rogoff, “Terra Infirma”

<sup>27</sup> Nqaba in discussion with the author.



fig. 4. Nqaba, Nobukho. “Untitled 3”, 2012. (Photo credit: nobukhonqaba.co.za.).

Nqaba lays on the bed with her legs crossed in her *halfway home*, reading a magazine or newspaper covered in the bags’ fabric. With her shoes placed by her bed, Nqaba is clearly communicating a space in which she is at ease. In this photograph Nqaba’s interpretation of the house through the bag reveals how notions of home are not always resolved by recoverability. However, her use of the bag alternatively shows that the act of moving is never fully resolved. Nqaba’s feelings of familiarity in the space does not mean there is optimal comfort within the space, seen through the wallpaper plaid, but rather communicates a state in which she is both at home but never fully unpacked: *The notion of the home is not fully there*. The bag absorbs the



space in every way, thus resonating with the impermanence of home. Nqaba's use of the bag to create a home is not a situation in which she is losing herself but rather, she simply is herself. The attachment between Nqaba and the bag is almost embryonic, innate. Here Nqaba shows an element of nomadic existence and the constant state of living *in-between*.

Halter creates a similar sensation in his piece *Zimbabwe* (fig.5). The letters are Mandarin and translate to the work "Zimbabwe". In addition to this layered linguistic element, symbolically, the piece mimics a carpetbag, which is an item that exists simultaneously as a carpet and a bag. Here, almost like an optical illusion, *carpet* and *bag* exist within the same *sign* ( $carpet \leftrightarrow bag$ ) and like the torment that exists within the sign which can never fully being able resolve itself, *Zimbabwe* never settles fully in one or the other sign (fig. 6). Halter drew inspiration from the historical object that was used by those who could not afford very much, who would turn their bag into the carpet when they found a new home, and then back into a bag when it was time to move on.

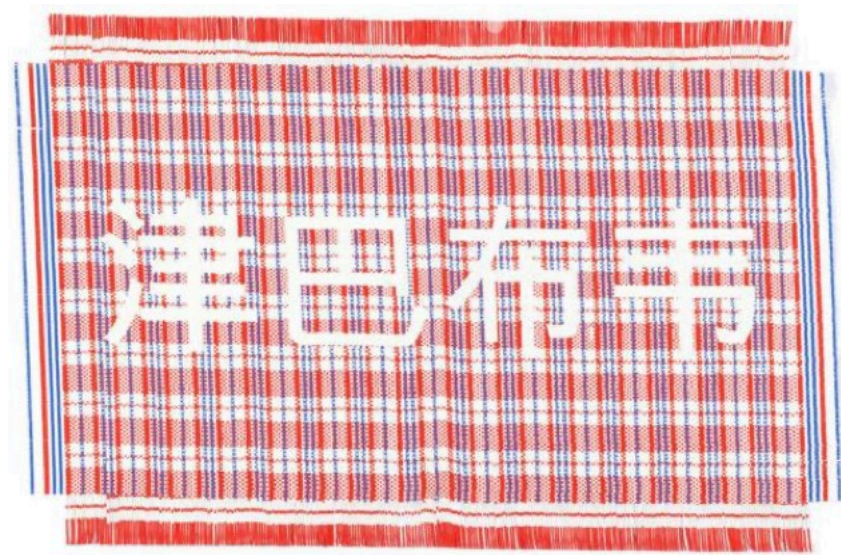
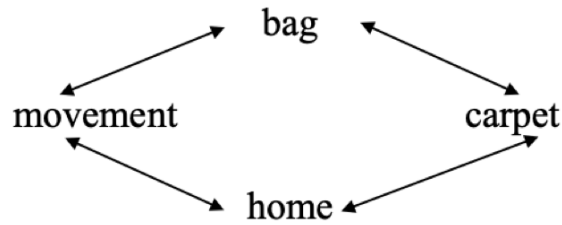


fig. 5. Halter, Dan. "Zimbabwe (red)", 2016 (photo credit: danhalter.com).



*fig. 6. Constant cycle of difference that connect because the signs of supplements of each other (credit: author).*

The addition of Mandarin produces another layer of analyses and entangles several meanings into one concept. The word almost acts like a stamp imprinted on the carpet, to claim its space and blend two nationalities together. This is another interpretation of the bag as luggage. Rogoff defines the concept of a suitcase as functioning “neither as the reality of the journey nor as its symbolic representation”, as it “slides” between these two meanings, forever.<sup>28</sup> The luggage and the home, therefore, become supplements of each other and vice versa, existing in a constant back and forth like a tennis match.

Sino-Zimbabwe relations are greatly supported, with many in favour of China’s foreign investment in Zimbabwe, but others are wary of how the influence will impact the country in the long term. President of Zimbabwe at the time, Robert Mugabi had smart sanctions put in place on his government by the West in favour of a policy entitled ‘Look East’, which dealt specifically with China. When asked about his work on China, Halter explained that Chinese culture was warmly embraced in Zimbabwe. He mentioned that Zimbabwean schools began teaching Chinese, and Chinese currency became widely accepted.<sup>29</sup> However, the ‘Look East’ policy did not reap the benefits it had promised and between 2005 and 2008, roughly 1.5 million Zimbabweans fled to South Africa to escape violent evictions, and economic hardship because of the collapse of the economy, as well as the aftermath of the 2008 elections.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Rogoff, “Terra Infirma.”

<sup>29</sup> Halter in discussion with the author.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Amon, “Neighbors in Need,” *Human Rights Watch*, accessed June 29, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/06/20/neighbors-need/zimbabweans-seeking-refuge-south-africa>.

Significantly, reflects Ruth Simbao, “discourse is not just talk. It *acts*”.<sup>31</sup> The contra-flow relationship between Zimbabwe and China, is an incredibly complex one. This artwork is a clear indication of the conscious presence of China and Africa relationships, particularly Zimbabwe and South Africa.

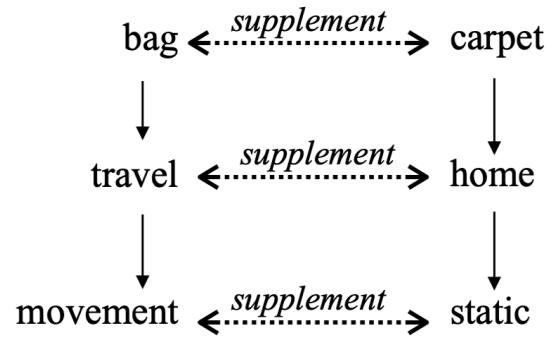


fig.7. Signs as supplements of each other (credit: author).

Nqaba and Halter’s works address the inherent *lack* of one concept, revealing how each cannot exist without the other. Travel complements home, and movement complements the static. The union of these concepts should exist independently from one another. This interaction, as Rogoff terms it, happens “in-the-place-of”,<sup>32</sup> creating a constant flow between the signs (fig.7). We cannot fully understand one without the other, so these signs merely replace each other.

### Conclusion

The two artist’s unique perspectives on their experiences of migration enriches the cultural history of the bag as well as its contemporary meaning in our everyday lives. Using de Saussure’s sign formula and Rogoff’s reinterpretation of luggage, as a socio-cultural signifier, reveals how the bag challenges the narrative associated with the bag itself, as well as disrupts the notion that luggage symbolises a sense of recovery. Isolating and deconstructing the intricacies of their portrayals of the bag within these contexts reveals how the bag exists in more than just as a metaphor for arrival or departure, and instead remains in a sort of spatial-temporal transmission, which could interpret the concept of identity as something that exists in constant motion.

We are all interconnected through our shared histories and future experiences, and the bag exemplifies this profound connectivity. Through isolating and deconstructing the bag’s various signifiers, the artists underscore the importance of context in interpreting its meaning. Their artistic

<sup>31</sup> Ruth Simbao, “Pushing Against ‘China-Africa’ Slowly, and With Small Stories,” *Something We Africans Got*, no. 7 (2017): 228.

<sup>32</sup> Rogoff, “Terra Infirma.”



exploration highlights the reality of forced migration's impact on communities, emphasising that migration reshapes personal and global realities.

Nobukho and Halter narrate the history of the bag, but it is a history that is currently in the process of writing itself. The definition of the bag will remain incomplete in its ability to frame its purpose in the absolute, but that is what makes it such a gloriously exciting entity. Sitting at the very core of our social history, the ubiquitous plaid carrier bag is an emotional symbol that houses an amalgamation of stories. Therefore, within the complicated globalisation of our histories and interaction, lies a simplicity of our collective story. Future research on the reception of these works could further illuminate the relationship between human experience and material culture, offering deeper insights into how identity is shaped through our interactions with objects and spaces. The artists' contributions provide a redefined understanding of how the bag, as a form of language, can express complex narratives of identity, inviting us to recognize the intricate stories embedded in seemingly ordinary objects.

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