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## Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga's *The Mobile Workshop: The Tsetse Fly and African Knowledge Production*

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[The Mobile Workshop: The Tsetse Fly and African Knowledge Production.](#)

[Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga](#)

MIT Press, 2018. 412 pages.

Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga's latest book, *The Mobile Workshop*, is

a historical examination of attempts to control the mobilities of the tsetse fly in Zimbabwe (formerly Southern Rhodesia, then Rhodesia). It is also an experiment in writing – hence, a ‘workshop’ – and a rallying cry for the critical importance of situating African knowledge production and the writing of other – African – stories. The book follows the historical entanglements of humans, animals, tsetse flies, and the parasites causing animal trypanosomiasis and human sleeping sickness, tracing their mobilities through Zimbabwe. It is also a beautiful illustration of the role of language in how we construct our worlds, and the power that language wields in the production of knowledge and as a technology of erasure. Mavhunga writes in English but his analytical approach relies heavily on concepts in *chidzimbahwe* – which refers to the culture and language of *vedzimbahwe* (dwellers of the houses of stone, where the country’s name ‘Zimbabwe’ comes from). The reader can follow these terms using a glossary at the back of the book. I will first give a brief summary of the manuscript, then delve into some of the main themes it explores, before turning to its methodological innovation and political importance for academic thinking.

*The Mobile Workshop* is organized around a central discussion of the attempts to control and manage the tsetse fly, which is referred to throughout the book in its *chidzimbahwe* name: *mhesvi*. It is an investigation into recovering and reaffirming local ways of knowing and living with *mhesvi*, which white colonizers appropriated as their own through practices of erasure across the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A central argument throughout is that this is not a story of white domination and unilateral knowledge transfer from Europe to Africa, but rather it is a story of knowledge *encounters*, granted within unequal power relations, yet nevertheless an undisputable intellectual engagement between peoples.

Through the lens of specific assemblages that he considers ‘mobile workshops,’ Mavhunga’s fifteen incredibly rich chapters pursue the circulation of ideas surrounding the management of the tsetse fly in the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century Rhodesia and Zimbabwe. He shows how local people’s *ruzivo* (knowledge) in living with the tsetse fly was appropriated and translated into ‘science’ by white men, a phenomenon he exposes throughout the text by tracing the diverse efforts to know, manage, and destroy the pestiferous insect. He explores in depth the variety of strategies experimented with to trap and to kill the insect, including sterilization, the burning and extensive clearance of the insect’s environment, the mass destruction of its primary food supply (animals), and the white man’s use of black people as human barriers to the tsetse fly’s mobility. The book accounts for the fly’s adaptation to technological and infrastructural advances, including the changing modes of transportation such as railroads, cars and bicycles that facilitated other forms of mobility for the insect and the parasites it carries.

Mavhunga then addresses the mass deployment of pesticides over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, situating the use of different chemicals in Zimbabwe in a global context and exploring the work of black spraymen in the anti-tsetse operations. Mavhunga raises concern over the increasing rates of cancer that ensued in Zimbabwe and the lack of work investigating the link between this trend and the historical toxic contamination of the environment. The fallout from chemical operations is not limited to human bodies, and Mavhunga considers the experimentation with drugs to cure or prevent trypanosomiasis in cattle and the poisoning of the animals in these trial-and-error approaches. The final chapter follows how the war of self-liberation led to the abandonment of anti-tsetse operations, and how, in the eyes of the government, freedom fighters were considered vermin like the tsetse fly, thus justifying in their eyes a similar pest control approach to the political insurgents.

The workshop and mobility are two fundamental analytics in this book. *Mhesvi* is the pivotal workshop, bringing together several actors in the attempts to know and manage its “pestiferous mobilities” (21). There are multiple other workshops throughout the book, including bodies (of humans, animals, insects and parasites). For instance, the body of the black sprayman charged with dispersing insecticides becomes a mobile site through which to read and analyse trajectories of knowledge and the relations of power in which they operate. The book examines the work of these diverse and multiple assemblages of actors, and the infrastructures produced by these workshops.

Moreover, the workshops are mobile as “a site of work produced through and because of movement” (22). In this sense, mobility is a crucial analytic of the book (mobilities of *mhesvi*, mobilities of humans, mobilities of transport systems, and mobilities of knowledge) and it is through these overlapping and mutually-influencing mobilities that he tells his story. From a methodological perspective, Mavhunga argues that the mobility of the various actors enables a more complex and dynamic reading of the attempts to control *mhesvi* than if one chose to focus on this topic through the analytic of race relations, for instance. Mobility lies at the centre of local people’s understanding of their relationship with *mhesvi*, directing their actions to try and control it, and provides the space in which to think through the reasoning and strategies behind managing the tsetse fly.

In *The Mobile Workshop*, Mavhunga argues that through the attempts to control *mhesvi*, *vanhu vatema* (black people) have been subjected to a process that Aimé Césaire denotes as ‘thingification’, in which black people are reduced to mere objects, either as labourers enacting the white man’s will or as instruments through which knowledge for anti-tsetse operations may be accrued. This process is accompanied by their deintellectualization, and Mavhunga traces how colonial figures

constructed black people as objects of study instead of as intellectual equals and producers of knowledge in their own right. He calls for an African self-reintellectualization, a reassertion of *vatema* (blacks) as intellectual agents. In this sense, rather than tell a tale of white colonization and unilateral knowledge transfer, *The Mobile Workshop* uses *mhesvi* as a site of knowing that brings together different actors in an intellectual encounter.

Thus, *The Mobile Workshop* is an account that recognizes and reaffirms the important role of *vatema* as intellectual agents in the control of the tsetse fly. Mavhunga deftly provides the proof of *vachena*'s (white [man]'s) reliance on local knowledge, notably by reading through the archives, including 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial explorers' eyewitness accounts of how *vatema* related to *mhesvi*. He argues that these historical traveller's letters are in fact confessions, the white man admitting to the knowledge of *vatema*, which was then subsequently appropriated and used *against* the local population themselves. For instance, *vatema* had long been using practices of land clearance as a way of controlling *mhesvi*. Mavhunga shows how *vachena* relied on this knowledge, appropriated it as their own through subjecting it to 'scientific experiments', and weaponised it against *vatema* by forcing them to resettle in this prophylactic zone to act as a human barrier between *mhesvi* and white people. This example goes beyond highlighting another incidence of the instrumentalization of *vatema* by *vachena*, and rather, considers how this knowledge of territorial management in the control of *mhesvi* was taken from *vatema* in the first place.

Mavhunga emphasises this fraudulent practice of stealing *vatema*'s knowledge and then using them "as guinea pigs" (69) to 'test' this expertise through white people's ways of knowing. The question of what counts as knowledge and *how* one can know is peppered throughout the manuscript. Mavhunga demonstrates how *vatema*'s experiential knowledge in the management of the tsetse fly was considered 'tradition' or 'myth', to be subjected to *vachena*'s 'scientific' experiments in order to become valid, and then re-appropriated, written up and circulated in the form of peer-reviewed journal publications, thus erasing the original source of this knowing. Part of the brilliance of Mavhunga's approach is that, by finding the confessions in the archives, he argues that white men were actually learning from *vatema*'s knowledge of management of the tsetse fly and retraces the movement of this knowledge from Africa to Europe and North America. In doing so, he highlights the erasures that took place and that have constructed a narrative of a unidirectional North-South transfer instead of recognising the intellectual engagements that occurred in these encounters.

The final chapters of the book explore some of the chemical legacies of

these encounters. *Vatema* knew how to coexist with and manage *mhesvi*, whereas *vachena* were intent on destroying it completely. This belligerent approach shaped the environment over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, notably through extensive chemical warfare against the insect. Mavhunga discusses in detail the different organochlorine pesticides used in the battle against the tsetse fly, locating Zimbabwe's experience within the global histories of pesticides. He raises questions on the underexplored link between the vast poisoning of the environment over the course of the century and the sharp rise in cancer cases in the country. The bodies of the black sprayers employed by *vachena* to disperse insecticides from pumps carried on their backs bear witness to the toxicity of the chemicals they were exposed to. Yet Mavhunga refutes the idea of the spraymen as simply *vachena*'s instruments, highlighting their intellectual engagement in their work, as they learned and adapted their strategies according to the knowledge they accrued through the dangerous activity of spraying. In this way, the action of spraying insecticides as a "site of knowledge production on the move" (65).

As well as the fascinating material it is dealing with, *The Mobile Workshop* stands out for its methodological innovation and the important questions it raises for academic work, in particular concerning the issue of language. Mavhunga's text is heavily peppered with *chidzimbahwe* words. He differentiates the categories with which he is writing – notably, *vatema* (blacks) categories and *vachena* (whites) categories, and his vernacular changes according to the perspective from which he is discussing a phenomenon.

By writing in this way, the author draws attention to the fact that language constructs the world in very different ways. For instance, the fly carrying trypanosomiasis parasites was named *tsetse* by white travellers – in the book it is *mhesvi*, which refers to "the one that drives the *mukono* (bull) crazy" (1). Mavhunga shows how *vatema* language categories draw from experiential knowledge, and how this knowledge is erased by the language of *vachena* – in scientific journals it becomes *Glossina morsitans* (its Latin name), referring to the action of bloodsucking and erasing the relations to its environment present in the original *chidzimbahwe* word. What happens when one being is named as something else in order to become 'knowledge' – what happens in that translation? What is lost, or more precisely, what is erased? *The Mobile Workshop* convincingly reminds us that it matters what categories we think the world with.

Moreover, language contributes to the "thingification" and deintellectualization of *vatema*, speaking to Mel Chen's (2012, 30) argument that "animacy is political, shaped by what or who counts as human, and what or who does not". This idea is conveyed in Mavhunga's

account of the dehumanization of *vatema* in their exchanges with *vachena*. Yet his critical approach demonstrates how the dominant narrative of the oppression of a black people devoid of agency does not hold up when their experience is analyzed from a more situated conceptual and philosophical space in which the intellectual agency of *vatema* is revealed and reasserted.

*The Mobile Workshop* is therefore a call to attentiveness to the vernacular and vocabulary we use in making knowledge. The richness of *chidzimbahwe* as an analytical space to write from offers a more complex understanding of the experience of *vatema* and invites the reader to take a different vantage point, one outside of the Anglophone comfort zone. The initial unease of getting accustomed to the *chidzimbahwe* vernacular is a revealing experience, in that it provokes a reflection of what non-Anglophone colleagues must contend with on a much broader scale, and raises the question of what is being lost or obfuscated in the stories we tell as academics when limiting ourselves to this hegemonic language. Mavhunga's approach invites creativity and non-conformity in addressing this issue.

This leads me to the political importance of what Mavhunga is achieving here. This book is an invitation to reflect upon the situatedness of knowledge production and of the concepts used in understanding particular relationships and mobilities, and what happens when that situatedness is erased by dominant colonial and 'scientific' forms of expertise. As an African scholar, Mavhunga emphasises the importance of thinking African histories and experiences with local concepts. He is calling for the re-intellectualization and re-humanization of Africa: "Do not even *decolonialize* or *decolonize*. I am saying *re-Africanize*" (xiii). In the words of feminist writer Audre Lorde (2018), "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house", and the importance of Mavhunga's engagement lies in this creative defiance, this use of his own tools to write his own stories and produce his own knowledge. Using such concepts is much more powerful and revolutionary. Rather than instruments or informants, Mavhunga reasserts African intellectual agency, and invites us to learn from their knowledge on African terms.

In this way, he adds another dimension to the call from other scholars in STS and beyond, such as Donna Haraway (see Terranova 2016), in arguing the importance of writing *other* stories, ones that allow us to speculate other ways of doing and being in the world. *The Mobile Workshop* becomes not only an "experimental space to test new forms of writing the African experience" (xi), but also a radical location from which Mavhunga seeks "to reclaim [his] own humanity through an insect" (19).

On this note, I also would add that the political importance of his work

does not only concern human actors. He explains in detail how *vanhu vatema* knew how to coexist with *mhesvi* without resorting to massively destructive or belligerent means, offering the possibility of exploring other ways of coexisting with these pestiferous creatures that can leave different legacies (besides toxic waste and cancer, for instance). As shown in other places (see Fairhead and Leach 1996 for example), the ignorance and erasure of local knowledge can lead to counterproductive policy and engagement with the land and creatures that inhabit it, and in these times of environmental destruction, such knowledge can be crucial for living better with our planet.

To conclude, Mavhunga's latest work continues in his original and scholarly trajectory of studying science, technology and innovation from an African perspective. He has previously published *Transient Workspaces: Technologies of Everyday Innovation in Zimbabwe* (2014), as well as the edited volume *What Do Science, Technology, and Innovation Mean from Africa?* (2017). *The Mobile Workshop: The Tsetse Fly and African Knowledge Production* (2018) marks another important advancement in this vein, and will be of interest to scholars in STS, anthropology, and the history of science, amongst other disciplines, not only in its content but also in its methodological and political significance.

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