

Decolonising the narrative

by Raquel Meseguer Zafe

This blog considers Edward Said's *Orientalism* as a tool to reflect on textural representation, in the context of a dance theatre research & development project that took place in 2021 / 2022. The project leads were choreographer Raquel Meseguer Zafe, director Amy Hodge and playwright Jude Christian.

In 2021 we began research on a dance theatre piece based on the novella *Monsieur Linh & His Child*, by French writer Phillip Claudel. At the heart of this story is the friendship between an old man who has fled a land at war, and a local frenchman. Although not explicit in the novella, you come to understand one man is from Vietnam and the other is from France. Both men recognise loss in one another. Neither speak the other's language. And yet they meet everyday at a bench and a friendship grows. It is a friendship beyond words. This is the story we were interested in telling.

The 2021 national lockdown and the need to reschedule our time in the studio (multiple times!) afforded us a long, protracted thinking period. During that time these things happened:

- In August 2021 the US withdrew its military presence from Afghanistan, with little warning. In the small window of time people had to leave, Afghans rushed to board planes out of Kabul. On Women's Hour I heard about Afghans arriving in UK airports and how charities gave out Sainsbury's bags, so the arriving Afghans would have a way to carry their belongings. I have imagined all those orange bags and what they carried. I wonder where those people are now.
- People continued to risk their lives to cross the channel between France and the UK in small boats. Boats landed daily. To dissuade people from making the crossing, the conservative government under Boris Johnson brokered a deal with Rwanda to 'outsource' the refugee application processes. People granted asylum through this scheme would be granted asylum in Rwanda and not in the UK. The 'Hostel Hope' in Kigali was made ready. Human rights lawyers claimed this 'outsourcing' of refugee asylum claim was illegal. The first flight to Rwanda was grounded at the last minute, due to an emergency

appeal to the European Court of Human Rights [ECHR]. The government commented that they made need to leave the ECHR to make sure they could go ahead with their plans. Journalists commented that the rule of law was failing.

- In February 2022, Russia invaded the Ukraine, sending waves of people towards the borders, attempting to reach European countries. I read that the UK asylum application is slower than that of other European countries receiving people from Ukraine.

With the ongoing refugee crisis, and against this particular backdrop, it felt important to tell asylum stories with authenticity. What follows are some reflections on how we struggled to achieve that, and how we sought to use Edward Said's theory *Orientalism* as a tool to interrogate the narrative and aesthetics of the work we were developing.

A question we wrestled with from the beginning, is who has the right to tell asylum stories. There has been a trend in recent years to centre the stories of those with lived experience. As someone who has told stories about people with invisible disabilities, I know my own experience of invisible disability and chronic illness has been crucial to developing a language to frame and communicate those stories. But there are obvious safe guarding issues around asking asylum seekers to re-tell their stories. And those organisations who act as safe bridges were overwhelmed during the pandemic: we learnt from Asli Tatliadim (formerly at Bristol Refugee Rights) that people seeking asylum were held in hotels for months, and that the organisation was stretched to capacity meeting people's basic needs, including mounting mental health needs, and access to their rights as asylum seekers. In these conditions they could not be bridges.

As a directorial team we hold asylum and migrant stories in our mothers' and grandmothers' histories. And we began to wonder if we could weave in a thread of these stories which we knew to be authentic (as far as memory, mis-memory and family lore allow). So we decided to change tack, and to use these histories to reimagine the story as a friendship between two older women, one seeking asylum or a migrant. I should underscore how aware we are that migrant and asylum experiences are hugely different, both in terms of how much 'choice' people have to leave and the asylum or immigration processes people experience once they arrive. But we were looking for authentic experiences of being 'othered' to base the character on, and to base the friendship in the piece on. And these were the stories and histories we had access to.

Whilst exploring these histories we became fascinated by the complexity of our mixed White Asian heritage: my heritage is Filipino-Spanish and Jude's is Chinese-English. We acknowledged how rarely we get to talk about this and how under-explored and under-represented these experiences are. So along with reimagining the story as a friendship between two women, we also started to think about the possible role of a daughter in the narrative, who could explore some of this complexity.

To this end we invited five female performers and creatives of mixed asian and white heritage into the rehearsal studio for a week's R&D. Our aim was to give space to experiences of dual heritage and to hear those voices; to decolonise the process in order to decolonise the narrative. In an opposite strategy to that of the novella, we wanted to explore how to access the universal through the highly specific. To give you a window into that week we talked about and around:

Class - race - whiteness - lineage - where do you feel at home? - feeling displaced - languages disappearing - the loss of land - "8 fathers came, now dad's alone" - London in the 70's, a time when things felt possible - mum a hungry child - "work hard and get smart" - "what was in your lunch box?" - "does your grandmother live with you?" - "whose in charge?" - "I've played untold beggars and prostitutes, but never a queen."

And we danced about and around:

Awkward joy - complexity and the non-binary - we worked with an ambiguous idea of 'unity' - we tethered ourselves to one another - we sang, voiced and conjured a forgiving land - we claimed queen - we created images of a woman at peace and at rest - we danced belonging.

That week we dove into the knottiness of our heritages: shame around immigrant experience; how painful it was to have seen whiteness played out in our families; how to reclaim our heritage for those of who only look like we belong to those mother countries when we are standing next to our mum; we talked about how our families estimate 'how asian we are' i.e. half or quarter? And how we can celebrate being 200%, rather than half of either.

I share these threads with some uneasiness, as I am keenly aware I may not yet have the language to talk about difference without unwittingly ‘othering’, or playing into existing stereotypes. If it feels difficult, it might also be because South East Asian (SEA) and East South East Asian (ESEA) identity is not unmediated, or to quote Edward Said “a free subject of thought and action”. Said’s 1978 book *Orientalism* is considered to mark the beginning of post-colonial theory. A professor in comparative literature and a Palestinian, Said set out to demonstrate how the ‘Orient’ was largely a European fiction and invention, the most recurring image of ‘the other’ on which European discourse created the binary of ‘East’ and ‘West’, and in opposition to which a ‘European’ identity was created. Said also states the discourse of a cultural hegemony like *Orientalism* cannot be understood or studied without also studying the configurations of power:

“Taking the late 18th century as a roughly defined starting point, Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it. In short Orientalism as a style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.”

He points out the durability of Orientalism as a complex cultural hegemony and asks questions like: How do novels and lyrical poetry come to the service of Orientalism’s broadly imperialist view? How does Orientalism transmit to reproduce itself from one epoch to another?

In texts Said finds to be *Orientalist*, he finds recurring essential ideas about the orient’s sensuality, exoticism, romanticism (in the sense of a land of remarkable experiences), cruelty and despotism, backwardness, habits of inaccuracy, and a unchanging quality, a “bad sort of eternity”. When we re-read the novella having engaged with Orientalism, we began to see some problematic aspects: the novella has instances of these essential ideas in the sensual description of the village and food in Vietnam; the exoticism of the Asian women; in the romanticism around village life and death; and the timelessness of the novella. Written as a fable, the novella exists in a kind of timeless present. This allows the author to do beautiful things, like making the reader feel that the story could take place anywhere and anytime; and crafting a moment of forgiveness between the two men. But in *Orientalist* terms, aesthetics are never far from structures of power, and ar-

guably to render the Orient static and timeless, is to justify western intervention to 'modernise'. This weighed heavy on us.

In terms of the timelessness and lack of specificity of the novella, we attempted to counter that by bringing real stories into the room, both from the performers and a real life friendship beyond words between an asylum seeker and a European, shared with us by Asli Tatliadim. Initially we felt the romanticism and exoticism could be easily written out of our version. But when we sat with how prevalent and pervasive those stereotypes are, we began to wonder if we could (and should) expose the 'lense', the tendency to read Asian bodies in prescribed ways, with prescribed language.

During that week we played with the idea of an 'unreliable' or 'biased' expert (an 'Orientalist') to expose the lens. We asked the performers to describe a movement duet, sometimes as a solo narrator and sometimes in dialogue with another. At times deeply uncomfortable, we played into the cliches, and explored the edges of what went too far into reifying the very thing we wanted to draw attention to. Here are some extracts of the improvised text:

They've been going on and on and on for a long, long time. Thousands of years actually... and even though there's been lots of prayers to change things it seems like nothing's changing at all.

The young one is only about 7 weeks old and the old one is about a thousand, a thousand and three. And she is supporting the young one to develop herself through this ancient practice, ritual. But the old one might die soon, so it's important to pass it on.

A: It's kind of beautiful but it's solemn. It's slightly sexy.

B: It's totally got a sexiness.

A: It's the suffering. The suffering is sexy.

B: It's very relaxing to watch. Definitely something zen about it.

A: Caring for your elder.

A: I'm thinking about my dressing gown.

B: What dressing gown?

A: I was given a kimono. I had a really beautiful one and I sold it in a car boot sale. And I was gutted cause I got not much money for it, but I was a bit desperate at the time. It was gorgeous. Japanese. But I never felt quite gorgeous enough in it. They'd look quite good in it.

B: Just dress them in kimonos.

A: How do we feel about this kind of slowness?

B: I've never seen quick butoh.

A: The wise master sits.

B: The beautiful teacher.

A: The beautiful suffering.

B: I could see this in a bamboo setting.

A: I love bamboo.

B: I love crouching tiger. I used to love that film. The girls were so good weren't they?

A: Fucking amazing.

By the end of our research time we had moved away from the relatively straight forward task of adapting the novella into a dance theatre show, and gotten into a much more complex and knotty endeavour. In this endeavour we feel exposing the lense to be key, alongside telling South East Asian stories and looking for a way to tell the story about a friendship beyond words. This could all be held within the thematic question of our relationship to land - to distant lands, motherlands, and the land where we reside.

But I still have a lot of questions about this endeavour. For example how far does irony push an audience away rather than invite them into a conversation? how could I expose the lens without being didactic? (or should I embrace the lecture as theatrical form), it is story or emotion that shifts knowledge and behaviour? Having stumbled into the politics of representation within a cancel culture climate, I admit to being worried about 'getting it wrong' or unwittingly contributing to another kind of label.

I am left feeling like I need time to reflect and to be in dialogue with artists and peers about how to challenge cultural hegemonies and forge fresh aesthetics. Maybe then I will feel a little braver. Because having begun to work with question, I do feel a desire (and to

some extent a duty) to do what I can to further debate and challenge stereotypes. Why else do we make work after all? As Riz Ahmed writes in his essay *Airports and Auditions* in *The Good Immigrant*:

“As a minority....you are intermittently handed this Necklace of labels to hang around your neck, neither of your choosing nor making, both constricting and decorative. Part of the reason I became an actor was the promise that I might be able to help stretch these Necklaces, and that the teenage version of myself might breathe a little easier as a result.”

In conclusion: Said’s work gave us an incredible tool to think about how representations are carefully managed within an aesthetic and ideological system that justifies oppression. I am at the beginning of understanding how to use this tool to make work that decolonizes the narrative, from within a Eurocentric view.

One of the strongest ideas I am left with from the R&D, is our relationship to land (real land) and the lands we conjure because we need them: in Phillip Claudel’s novella, the bench the two men meet at becomes a kind of land within a land; Asli Tatliadim told us about painting a land for her son that does not exist, she tells him about the myths and sights and sounds of that land, but leaves out the violence; and in the studio we painted, sounded and described a land we wanted to see, also devoid of violence. We imagined the studio (eventually the theatre) as a land that could grow out beyond the walls, into the city. Could we tell the story in a way that makes that land feel possible?

I wrote this reflection in as honest a way I could, exposing where I am at in a process. And I invite the thoughts and input of my peers in the spirit of dialogue and of forwarding debate.

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With thanks to Amy Hodge & Jude Cristian. With special thanks to Jo Fong, Emily Lue-Fong, Racheal Lopez de la Nieta, Linzy Na Nakorn, Chisato Ohno, Jasmin Rodgman and Asli Tatliadim.

R&D funded by Arts Council England and The Place.

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