Decolonizing Immersion

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Translation, spectatorship, *rasa* theory and contemporary British dance

R O Y O N A   M I T R A

INTRODUCTION: IMMERSION, SPECTATORSHIP, TRANSLATION AND THE TRANSNATIONAL

Current scholarship on immersion links this embodied and experiential audience phenomenon to the emerging, populist and participatory performance genre of immersive theatre, focusing on: 'what may be gained from considering the full sensorium we bring to spectatorship, beyond sight and hearing: haptics, proxemics, smell, the affective dimensions of performance experience?' (Werry and Schmidt; 2014: 469).[1] Characterized by the blurring of space and action between performers and audience members in order to offer this 'full sensorium' experience, immersive theatre, as sensationalized by the British companies Punchdrunk and Shunt, claims to enable its audience members to exercise choice and control to physically navigate their own experiences through an event. To this end, immersive theatre companies profess to design and facilitate immersion through physical interactivity with, and being surrounded by, the theatrical space, action and scenography. Embedded in this way of thinking is the idea that this kind of immersion creates an active audience, who are distinct from their passive counterparts in a more conventional theatre setting, where they are separated from the performers by both the theatre's architecture and the codes that accompany it.

This article decolonizes hitherto primarily Anglophonic theorizing of such 'full sensorium immersion' by disassociating the phenomenon from the participatory nature of immersive theatre practices, and locating it instead in the reception of contemporary British dance. I argue here that by looking to *rasa*, the art reception theory as laid out in the Natyashastra (an ancient Indian dramaturgical treatise written in Sanskrit), immersion can also be theorized and experienced as an embodied, psycho-physical state that transpires interstitially between any audience, any artist and any art that is primarily premised on gestural dimensions of communication, and regardless of interactivity. If *rasa* is immersion, as demonstrated through the context of contemporary British dance, then this article simultaneously de-Sanskritizes and de-exoticizes this very concept that has become many Western scholars' principal intrigue within the Natyashastra.[2] The article, then, further challenges preconceptions of *rasa* as a culturally loaded and temporally specific concept that is predominantly experienced through interactions with Indian art, as per its codifications nearly two millennia ago.[3] I must clarify here, however, that by arguing for *rasa*'s de-Sanskritization, I am not claiming that the experience of *rasa* is universal. Rather, I am proposing that it can be experienced as multiple, (inter)culturally specific manifestations that coexist in parallel to each other.[4]

In order to elaborate this argument, I draw on two case studies from contemporary British dance in which gestural language is central to the performance aesthetic: *Desh* (2011), by the London-based British-Bangladeshi dancer and choreographer Akram Khan, and *Yesterday* (2008), by the London-based Israeli choreographer Jasmin Vardimon. While distinct in many ways, *Desh* and *Yesterday* embody shared themes and aesthetics in the forms of border-identity politics, character

1 Margaret Werry and Bryan Schmidt helpfully summarize this scholarship through their review of six recent contributions to the field: *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* by Claire Bishop (2012), *Performing Presence: Between the Live and the Simulated* by Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye (2011), *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* by Josephine Machon (2013), *Simming: Participatory Performance and the Making of Meaning* by Scott Magelssen (2014), *Electric Dreamland: Amusement Parks, Movies and American Modernity* by Lauren Rabinovitz (2012) and *Spectacle Culture and American Identity* by Susan Tenneriello (2013).

2 For examples of Western scholars' engagement with *rasa* theory see Schechner (2015), Mason (2006), Meyer-Dinkgraffe (2005) and Cuneo (2015).

3 For other examples of recent scholarship that similarly explore the relevance of *rasa* beyond Indian art, please see Nair (2015b) and Mee (2015).

4 The decolonising agenda of this article is a conceptual and methodological development from my recently published monograph *Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism* (2015) where I argue that the eminent British Bangladeshi dance artist and choreographer Akram Khan's reframed deployment of *abhinaya* and *rasa* onto the landscape of contemporary British dance, transforms it in fundamentally intercultural ways. I further this methodology in this article to demonstrate how, in this instance, a transcultural interrogation of immersive theatre scholarship through *rasa* theory, enables its decolonisation.

transformations through body markings, and use of intermediality. Through comparative analyses, I argue that, in these pieces, audiences *can* experience immersion, but it is not through physical interactivity as championed by immersive theatre practices and theories. Instead, here, immersion is triggered through the performance and socioculturally-driven critical interpretation of corporeal gestures that generate an embodied and transformative state, accessed from within the audience members' attuned-ness to twenty-first-century global migration politics, and enhanced by their first-hand lived knowledge and/or second-hand mediatized awareness of what is at stake for bodies at borders.[5]

I argue that this form of embodied spectatorship is what *rasa* theory evokes in its concept of the *sahrdaya*, 'the initiated spectator, one of attuned heart' (Vatsyayan 1996: 155), who must recognize the gestural performance codes through which their own relationship to the performance's themes is triggered. In championing an initiated spectator's attuned-ness as embodied activity, *rasa* echoes the French philosopher Jacques Rancière's notion of the 'emancipated spectator' who, through the lens of her own 'attuned' and embodied knowledge, 'composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her' (2009: 13). This article then decolonizes immersion by (re)framing it through a transcultural, transnational, transmedial and transtemporal dialogue on embodied spectatorship, as exemplified through a translation of contemporary British dance practices through the principle of *rasa*.

The prefix 'trans', and its connectivity inducing, category blurring and non-normativity embracing conceptual stance, is thus at the heart of my study's decolonizing project. I transhistorically deploy Indian art reception theory written nearly two millennia ago to examine twenty-first-century British dance, thus not only placing intercultural concepts and practices in dialogue, but also demonstrating that the Natyashastra's theoretical principles may be applicable across temporalities. By

comparing case studies that speak of border-identity politics to multinational audiences, the article focuses on the transnational nature of spectatorship in a racially, culturally and nationally diverse location such as London. The case studies themselves deploy transmedial aesthetics, which are generated at the interstices between multiple media platforms such as digital animation, live action projection and recorded film, multiple artistic disciplines such as theatre, dance, music, film and visual arts, and the live dancing body, in order to evoke border politics in these pieces. However, perhaps most significantly, by challenging the hitherto primarily Anglophonic theorizing of immersion through putting it in dialogue with *rasa*, the article's translational dimension is key in its bid to decolonize immersion. Decentring the discourse of immersion by considering concepts beyond Western and Anglophone thinking on immersive theatre spectatorship requires a fundamental reconsideration of who has the authority to theorize and determine what immersion *is*.

IMMERSION, AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION AND IMMERSIVE THEATRE

Josephine Machon categorizes immersion in theatre into three modes: absorption, where audience members are fully involved through concentration; transportation, where audience members are reoriented scenographically into other spaces/locations; and total immersion, involving both of the above, alongside the idea that the audience-participant is also responsible for the (un)making of her experience (2013: 62–3). Inherent in Machon's theorizing of immersion is the idea that total immersion enables audience members to navigate performances through exercising choice. Furthermore, Machon distinguishes between absorption and immersion, suggesting that when audience members are absorbed in a performance, they remain passive, and are not necessarily able to control their experience. Immersion, Machon argues, is instead an

[5] In this I further dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster's claim in *Choreographing Empathy* (2011) that the connection between dancers and their audiences is not just a psychophysical one, but more importantly, one that is carefully mediated and framed by their specific sociocultural realities, by extending the discourse to a transcultural consideration of immersion, through the principles of *rasa*.

active state where, despite the all-consuming nature of the experience, audiences can retain control over how they want to navigate their experience physically. The emphasis Machon places on the relationship between audience agency and physical navigation of a performance creates a problematic binary between (inter)active spectatorship and passive and embodied spectatorship.

My endeavour to decolonize immersion furthers theatre scholars Gareth White (2013) and Adam Alston (2013), among others, who offer critiques of the idea that audience participation is unique to the immersive theatre genre. Furthermore, in this article I push forward Astrid Breel's (2015) call to question immersive theatre's linking of audience participation and agency, by dismantling the problematic binary between active spectatorship and agency, and passive spectatorship and oppression. In this, I continue Rancière's quest for blurring the distinctions between what constitutes activity and passivity within spectatorship. Following Alston's argument that if spectatorship is acknowledged as an embodied and potentially affective activity (2013), then all forms of performances can arguably offer immersion, I demonstrate how this is exemplified in contemporary British dance through its interface with *rasa* theory.

RASA AND THE NATYASHASTRA

The concept of *rasa* remains the most intriguing and elusive part of the Natyashastra. It remains unclear who authored this pivotal work. While it has been commonly attributed to the historical-mythical figure Bharata, Indian dance scholar Kapila Vatsyayan notes that it has been debated whether Bharata was an historical figure, or whether the name was in fact a pseudonym for a writers' collective, or indeed if different people contributed different chapters over a long period of time (1996:6). What is accepted, however, is that the contents of the book were originally generated as part of an oral tradition, which acquired its written form between 200 BCE and 200 CE. Despite its

culturally specific Indian origins, Vatsyayan emphasizes the Natyashastra's 'inbuilt fluidity', which she believes lends it 'scope for multiple interpretations' (2015:19). Sreenath Nair furthers this view in his claim for the text's wider applicability and accessibility. He notes that the 'most distinctive aspect of the performative discourse in the Natyashastra is its clear emphasis on the "universality" of production and reception of emotions presented in the *rasa* theory' (2015a: 5). He signals the tensions between the text's claims for its supposed universal categorization of human emotions, and its simultaneous cultural particularity of translating these universal emotions through the Indian body. In other words, Nair explains that, although the codifications in the Natyashastra were generated with reference to the particularities of Indian bodies, the human emotional states that are meant to be evoked by them are supposedly universal (5). In this article's transhistoricized decolonization of immersion through the lens of *rasa*, I critique the claim for its universality, while taking forward Vatsyayan's view that its inbuilt flexibility enables *rasa*'s discourse to interculturally translate and complicate twenty-first-century British dance spectatorship.

Approximately two thousand years ago, the Natyashastra claimed that there are eight *sthai bhavas* or fundamental human emotional states. Using the Indian body as its key reference point, these *sthai bhavas* were stylized through hand gestures and facial expressions into eight prototypes called *rasas*; these *rasas* constitute the emotional states of love, laughter, fury, compassion, disgust, horror, heroism and wonder. Much later on a ninth *rasa*, peace, was added, leading to the phrase *navrasa* or nine *rasas*. According to the Natyashastra, dancers train in the art of *abhinaya*, a strictly codified language that draws on the prototypes of the *rasas* through physicality, hand gestures and facial expressions (*angika*), textual delivery (*vachika*), costumes and make-up (*aharya*). Together they deliver characterizations, narrate stories and, in turn, evoke *rasa* in the audience. The gestural dimension of *angika*

abhinaya (expressive codified language), and its relationship to *rasa* is key to understanding my rationale for a transcultural translation of contemporary British dance, a genre primarily premised on corporeality, through *rasa*'s principles of embodied spectatorship.

So what is this elusive and slippery concept of *rasa*? Scholars remain consistently divided in their opinions, perhaps signalling its inherent malleability. For dance scholar Vatsyayan *rasa* is a psychosomatic state triggered between a performer's motor system and an audience's sensory system (1996). Performance philosopher Daniel Meyer-Dingkraffe theorizes *rasa* as an elevated consciousness (2015). Performance studies scholar Sreenath Nair conceptualizes *rasa* as both a derivative emotive state, mutually created by performers and audiences, and a neural activity (2015b). For Asian studies scholar David Mason *rasa* is a transformative experience, generated through an encounter with art, through which the audience can still retain aesthetic and critical distance (2015). Performance studies scholar Richard Schechner draws on its literal meaning of secretions from food, and considers *rasa* as the inherent flavour that is ingested and secreted from consuming an artwork (2015). And for artist-scholar Erin B. Mee, *rasa* is emotional contagion, contracted by the audience through witnessing performers' actions, and triggered through their mutually responsive mirror neural mechanisms (2015).

What unites these diverse theorizations of *rasa* is its embodied and experiential nature, triggered in audiences by their encounter with a performer's gestural codes of performance. This embodied nature of *rasa* is fundamentally transformative, while still enabling an audience to retain critical distance in relation to both the artist and the art. According to the Natyashastra, in order for *rasa* to be generated there must be, however, a direct correlation between the artistry being experienced, and the audience's knowledge of both the codes of the artistry and the themes being communicated through it. In other words, the codes of *abhinaya* have to be learnt by both performers and audiences alike in order for the channel of communication to

open up between their respective motor and sensory systems, to trigger transformation. Vatsyayan notes that, therefore, the audience too must be 'attuned, trained and initiated' through 'preparedness both of attitude and initiation into some technicalities' (2015: 38). However, the nature and extent of an audience's attuned-ness is much debated. Mee points out that 'while Bharata spoke of *rasa* as something that could be experienced by anyone, later commentators on the Natyashastra, including Abhinavagupta, stressed the importance of audience preparation and expertise in order to experience *rasa*' (2015: 158). This narrowing down of *rasa* to a culturally specific reception theory, connected to an equally culturally specific set of performance codes and artistry, is limiting and needs to be problematized.

If *rasa* can only be accessed through a familiarity with the gestural codes of *abhinaya*, then this suggests that it is a culturally specific experience, unique to audiences initiated in *abhinaya* alone. Yet, the human emotional states being evoked through *abhinaya* are supposedly universal, and experienced by people regardless of cultural specificity. There appears to be an apparent schism between the supposed universality of the human emotions argued to be codified through *abhinaya*, and the cultural particularity of the gestural codes themselves, making the experience of *rasa* culturally exclusive. It is such immutable thinking around retaining *rasa*'s Indian origins that has limited its wider applicability beyond Indian performance dramaturgies. In order for *rasa* to contribute meaningfully to global discourses on spectatorship three things need to be (re) considered: first is the contemporary relevance of the nine supposedly universal human emotional states, two millennia on; second is the nature of what constitutes *abhinaya* within twenty-first-century global and intercultural performance contexts; and third is what then constitutes an 'attuned' spectator in these reconsidered contexts.

It would seem naïve to contemplate that human emotional states *are* universal. However, even if we suppressed our cynicism on this point

momentarily, we must admit that it is further naïve to consider that, in two millennia, these emotional states have remained unchanged. Instead it might be more valuable to recognize and acknowledge the relevance of additional or even a different and coexisting set of prototypical human emotional states that better reflect twenty-first-century, intercultural realities. For example, in our current existences, which are shaped by terrorism, border politics and mass-migration crises, the overriding emotional state of 'anxiety', which is not part of the nine prototypical *rasas*, needs to be recognized as such.[6] If we accept that these original emotional states would inevitably change over time and are (inter)culturally shaped, then we must also acknowledge a consequent shift in what constitutes the codes of *abhinaya* through which communication is rendered, and also what constitutes 'attuned-ness' among the spectators who encounter these codes.

Shifting our understanding of *abhinaya* from its codified Indian roots to embrace ritualized pedestrian gestures through which we achieve communication with others every day can open up the language of legibility within performance. Consequently, an audience member's 'attuned-ness' no longer has to be judged through their familiarity with an Indian coded performance language. Instead they can draw on their own already attuned ability to communicate with humanity through hand gestures and facial expressions that they use on a daily basis. Equally, if we accept that gestures mean different things in different cultural contexts, then the attuned-ness of spectators may vary depending upon their levels of familiarity with the culturally specific codes they are experiencing. In intercultural contexts, these gestures may even generate ambiguity. In this way, while there is a move away from the exclusively Indian rendering of *abhinaya*, there is simultaneously a recognition of multiple coexisting culturally specific manifestations of it. Thus what becomes emphasized through recognizing these multiple manifestations of *abhinaya* is the idea that different audience members are differently attuned to different

codes within a given performance event. The inherent fluidity in the Natyashastra thus enables an interpretation of *rasa* that is de-Sanskritized and in turns becomes a helpful lens through which contemporary British dance spectatorship can be theorized. Simultaneously, such a transcultural and transtemporal interface also complicates, expands and ultimately decolonizes discourses on immersion.

RASA IS/AS IMMERSION

By looking to *rasa*, discourses around immersion can not only be decolonized, but also broadened to (re)include within its remit the primarily ocular experience of spectating, which it currently undervalues. Immersion and *rasa* both generate transformative and embodied states. However, while scholarship on immersion invariably links it primarily with participation in performance events, I want to argue that immersion can also be experienced in a conventional theatre setting, where the visual and the aural are key means for spectating. Here, like *rasa*, the principal triggers for immersion are generated through attuned familiarity with the visual gestural codes of the performance that resonate with an audience's own embodied knowledge of its themes. Thus, *rasa* begins as a 'distinctly optical thing' (Mason 2006: 74). This is not to ignore *abhinaya*'s aural dimensions through the textual delivery (*vachika*), but to emphasize the importance of seeing the visual language and recognizing the codes. As Mee's neural theorization of *rasa* confirms, audiences watch performers' actions and imitate them back at neural levels. Thus, the ocular dimension of the triggers of *rasa* cannot be ignored and, I argue, an acknowledgement of this dimension can help reframe current and limiting discourses on immersion.

Furthermore, both of these elusive concepts – immersion and *rasa* – are concerned with the theorizing of embodied spectatorship and its relationship to experience. While some current thinking on immersion theorizes experience as a way to reinforce the problematic binary

[6] This becomes particularly resonant in British contexts in 2016, where 52 per cent of the country's electorate voted in a referendum for the UK to leave the European Union. The vote was predominantly driven by anti-immigration rhetoric that accompanied a call for shutting down of borders in order to stop taking in more Syrian refugees and allowing freedom of movement for Eastern Europeans to work and settle in the UK. The aftermath of Brexit has been divisive, revealing deep divisions in the country based on class and race, and the overriding emotional state of anxiety is embodied by the whole nation, regardless of how they voted.

between active and passive spectatorship, and champions this kind of experience as the full sensorium kind, *rasa* views experience as more internalized. Once the ocular dimension has been set in motion, and the audience members neurologically process performers' physical gestures, their experience of a performance transpires between the recognition of performance codes, their neuronal mirroring of the same, mediated and contextualised by their embodied knowledge of the themes of the performance. Spectating is thus active, experience is thus affective and *rasa* is thus immersion.

But what is particular about reframing immersion as *rasa*, and what sets it apart from the way in which immersion has been theorized by scholars on immersive theatre, is the issue of critical and aesthetic distance. The Natyashastra emphasizes that *rasa* simultaneously generates empathy and critical distance in the spectator (Masson and Patwardhan qtd in Mason 2006: 76). While scholars evoke the need for a similar critical distance in immersive theatre spectatorship, one has to question to what extent full sensorium immersion allows audience members to retain their ability to effectively critique and remain 'outside' the event. Gareth White acknowledges this tension and states that 'to be immersed is to be surrounded, enveloped and potentially annihilated, but it is also to be separate from that which immerses' (2012: 228). But how can one be simultaneously annihilated by and remain separate from that which immerses? I would argue that physical proximity to a performance environment and action generates two possible triggers in an audience: the first is when audience members are so physically (and emotionally) close to the action that they are not able to separate themselves from it. This results in their inability to apply any form of criticality to their experience of the piece. The second possibility crops up when, despite and because of the unusually close proximity to the action and the expectation of interactivity put upon them, audience members can become hyper removed from and conscious of their own presence within the environment

and the action. This makes them disconnect from the performance completely. Neither of the possibilities are thus productive experiences that can take forward scholarship on embodied spectatorship, which champions a balance between empathy and criticality among audience members.

I propose that once again the primarily ocular trigger that generates *rasa* is also what allows an audience member to retain an aesthetic distance from the piece of art she is able to experience. And this aesthetic distance has a direct correlation to the actual physical distance between the audience member and the piece of art itself. In other words, the closer the physical distance, the more obscured and muddied becomes the audience member's ability to retain a sense of critical objectivity. Therefore, when an audience member experiences immersion in a conventional theatre, she does so by looking at a piece of art from a critical position of embodied knowledge. She consumes the art by comparing what she discovers within it to what she already knows. Thus, inherent in the act of spectating is embodied knowledge that is used to translate the art being experienced through observation, selection, comparison and interpretation. Immersion becomes critical, generative and an embodied state of spectatorship, mediated by the audience's own lived sociocultural realities. To illustrate how such immersion transpires within contemporary British dance, I would now like to exemplify my argument through two case studies: *Desh* (2011) by Akram Khan Company and *Yesterday* (2008) by Jasmin Vardimon Company. And from this point on when I use the term immersion, I signal it to embrace *rasa*'s principles of the ocular, the experiential and the critical distance, and evoke *rasa as* immersion.

IMMERSION IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH DANCE

Desh and *Yesterday* are made by British choreographers who belong to two distinct London-based diasporas. Akram Khan is a second-generation British-Bangladeshi man

whose parents moved to the UK in the 1970s. Jasmin Vardimon is a first-generation Israeli woman who moved to the UK in the 1990s after winning the prestigious British Council 'On the Way to London' Choreography Award. While in many ways distinct, Khan's parents' country of heritage, Bangladesh, and Vardimon's own country of heritage, Israel, share a troubling preoccupation with borders.

It is well documented in sociological research that the politics of borders (and the associated construct of nationhood) are invariably played out on individual subjects who can/not cross and navigate them, in pervasive and powerful ways.[7] Nationalist projects are designed to reify borders through reinforcing who is included and excluded from these states. It is therefore vital to note that such border politics are not just relevant to Khan's and Vardimon's personal diasporic realities, and their lived and inherited identity politics. Rather their particular conditions are symptomatic of a larger globalized migratory world, where not only do people move (through choice or force), but nations and borders appear and disappear (Selasi 2014). And in its most extreme manifestations, as the current and large-scale Syrian refugee crisis rages in 2015–16, and images of drowning refugees infiltrate our hyper-mediatized reality, the world at large has never been more aware of the havoc that violent border politics reap on bodies that are desperate to navigate them for the sake of their lives. Spectatorship of performances that are imbued with and informed by such border politics, in relation to the bodies that navigate them, thus calls upon an audience's inherited and embodied knowledge and awareness of what is at stake at border crossings, both metaphoric and literal.

Desh, Bengali for homeland, is an autobiographical homage by Akram Khan to his parents' homeland of Bangladesh.[8] A solo performance in collaboration with the poet Karthika Nair, the composer Jocelyn Pook and the visual artist Tim Yip, *Desh* embodies border politics at multiple levels. It explores Bangladesh's mythical, political and lived landscape through the eyes of a young man who

both belongs to the nation through his parental ties, and feels alienated from it as a British-born man. Khan grew up in London, and his piece candidly equates his reluctance to identify with Bangladesh to his reluctance to identify with his father. Bangladesh for Khan, with its impenetrable culture and rituals, is his father. Yet, within this solo piece, it is Khan's body that lives the crucial blurring between the multiple and metaphoric cultural, national and linguistic borders he negotiates every day, including the one he disassociates from the most, his father. His father becomes a border he must cross and navigate in order to find a sense of integrated wholeness within his fragmented self.

At a certain point in *Desh*, through the intelligently crafted illusion that is generated by drawing facial features onto the top of his shaved head with a black felt tip pen, and dropping his upper body towards the floor, Khan becomes his father. Khan's own body is now inseparable from the person he wants to distinguish himself from the most. Yet, the poignant black drawings of the eyebrows and nose and mouth onto his own skin evoke a self-knowledge. We become aware that, no matter how much he wants to disown Bangladesh and his father as his heritage, he is marked by these associations in embodied and inescapable ways. These borders live and manifest within and on him. Transformed into his father, Khan makes use of simple, legible and everyday hand gestures that frame and animate his expressive, marked head, bringing his father's face alive on and through his own skin. He layers this with Bengali and heavily accented English stating, for example:

> *Aami purushmanush – o aami ranna kori* (I am a man and I cook)
> Cook for my village – 200 people.
> *Ekhane*, my own restaurant England-e. (Here, my own restaurant in England). (*Desh*)

Much like the codes of Sanskritized *abhinaya* (gestural language) where the *angika* (facial expressions and hand gestures) and the *vachika* (text) reinforce each other, Khan accompanies each of his words above with a corresponding gesture. But the gestures

[7] For scholarship on the impact of border politics on individuals who can/not cross and navigate them see Naples and Bickham Mendez (2015) and Schwenken and RuB-Sattar (2014). For scholarship on nationalism and individual subject formation see the pivotal text *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson (1983).

[8] In my recently published monograph *Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism* (2015) I analyse *Desh* as a case study through the lens of the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha's critical concept of the third space, arguing that Bhabha's erudite concept finds an embodied form in Khan's body itself.
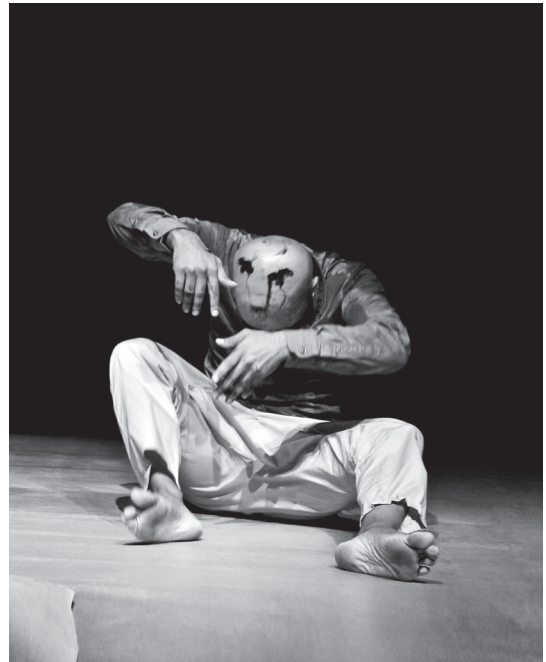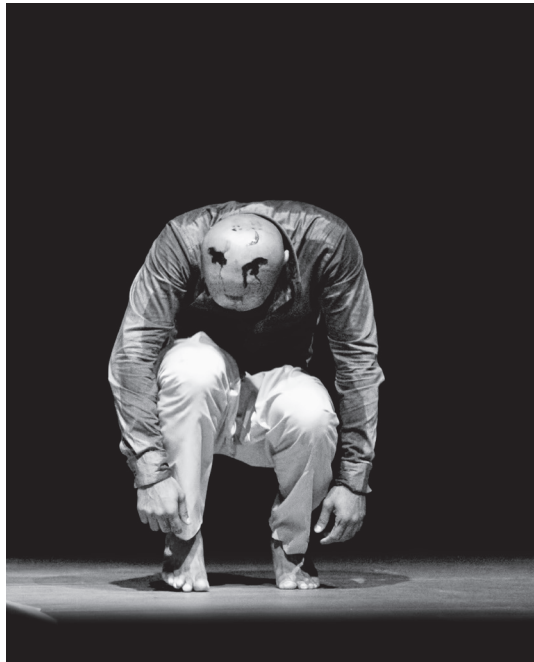
themselves belong to a twenty-first-century (inter)cultural milieu, illustrative of the words that accompany them and legible to a global audience. These layered codes of mixed-language text and pedestrian everyday gestures divide Khan's audience into those who are immediately able to correlate the visual gestures and the accompanying aural soundscape, and those who take longer. While the visual gestures are legible to all, it is those who are privy to understanding Bengali who make the correlation first, followed a little later by those who rely on the broken English translation that follows. Khan does not universalize his audience. Instead he plays upon the fact that different audience members will relate to the experience of displaced diasporic identity politics at different levels.

These diverse dimensions of accessing the piece make the audiences of *Desh* experience immersion at multiple levels. The key sensory means through which audience members experience the visual and gestural codes that drive the physical transformation of Khan into his father is, in the first instance, the ocular. We first see Khan as Khan, and then we see him transform into his father with the marked facial features on his shaved head and his dropped upper torso. We exercise our critical imagination as we witness and process this transformation. We are active in our ability to process the image before us, and acknowledge how it both unleashes our imagination, and makes us critically alert. As Khan uses an aural dimension of speaking Bengali to articulate the person he has become as his father, we identify the signifiers, and the transformation is complete. Yet, on another level, we retain our criticality to know that it is indeed Khan *pretending* to be his father. There is a coexistence of two distinct individuals, played out in and through a singular body, for both Khan and us audience members. It is this double-awareness on the part of the audience that makes us exercise both empathy and criticality towards what we are experiencing. Here, experience operates at the interface between our own internalized awareness and lived knowledge of the struggles that characterize intergenerational interactions between diasporic subjects, and Khan's story. This keeps us active and constantly (re)negotiating our knowledge. We are simultaneously absorbed in Khan's story, while reassessing our own preconceptions and awareness through close interactions with it. We are immersed.

If *Desh* evokes metaphoric borders, *Yesterday*'s depiction of bodies at borders takes a more literal form. A meditation on memory, *Yesterday* is Jasmin Vardimon Company's ten-year retrospective performance. It recontextualizes material from the group's previous pieces *Justitia* (2007), *Park* (2005), *Lullaby* (2003) and *Lurelurelure* (2000) (among others) and creates a new performance text that simultaneously references the past while forging a whole new piece. One of the strategies deployed in *Yesterday* to congeal its fragmentation between old and new material is the use of a recurrent motif that continues to develop in form and content through the duration of the performance, until it reaches a dramatic climax. A Korean dancer, YunKyung Song, walks up to the front of stage right, lies down and looks straight into a video camera. The camera is placed at floor level and is linked via a live projection system onto the floor-to-ceiling cyclorama behind her. She begins to mark her face with a black felt tip pen, starting at the forehead. She draws a line down the alignment of her nose, her chin, down her neck and to the top of her chest where her vest top starts. The trace left by the pen divides her face and neck into halves. What begin as mere lines gradually transform into maps, borders and boundaries.

She draws them down the length of her right shoulder, her right arm, her right leg and her right foot. When the right side of her body becomes fully marked, she moves onto her left foot and continues upwards through her left leg, her left arm and her left shoulder until she returns to her neck and her upper chest.

The vulnerability in the process of marking her body is emphasized not only through her live presence but also through the amplified projection behind her. Every tiny detail on her face and her body, its birthmarks, imperfections and contours, becomes a vivid and breathing extension of the maps that cover her skin. We witness her body being marked by the intricacies of the landscapes it journeys through. We also become aware of the ways in which the body writes itself onto these landscapes, as the maps and her body become inseparable.

For the final time she returns to resume the marking of her body and takes off her vest top and continues to draw on her stomach. This time the maps and borders assimilate into the image of a home with two windows, a chimney, a door and a winding path emerging from it. This conflation of the publicly policed and often violent spaces of borders, the private and supposedly safe domains of homes and

■ YunKyung Song in *Yesterday* (2008). *Photo Alastair Muir*

individual subjects who are caught up in and defined by the politics of these spaces, echoes Rosemary Marangoly George's conceptualization of homes as highly charged spaces that overlap with, and are defined by, the politics of nationhood (1999: 11). The home is enmeshed onto her belly. She repositions the zoom of the camera to focus just on the home, so that the live projection becomes a magnified image of it. And then this two-dimensional home comes alive through the bodies of two other performers. A man appears at the upstairs window through the split screen of the cyclorama, and waves to a woman who comes out of the door to water the garden outside. Signs of happy domesticity are played out, on and through the projection of the home, and give it a tangible three-dimensionality. As the image of the picture-perfect picket-fence existence fills the space, the audience are reminded of course that this happy home is embodied by and indistinguishable from Song, whose body is the surface on which this home was landscaped, alongside the borders that mark it. And that the permanence and safety of this home are entangled within the impermanence of the body that created them. The happy home is short-lived because it *is* delible, and gradually its clean lines start to blur and disappear as Song begins to erase the markings with her hands. The maps and lines remain, but the home disappears, leaving its black cloudy remnants scarred onto her skin.

The projection screen amplifies the erasure of the home and the happy couple, who had once enacted their domestic bliss to bring the home alive, and now deal with the trauma caused by the decimation of their home. The woman rubs her face on the black ink left on the stomach of Song until she herself is scarred. What follows is a disturbing duet that captures the breakdown of the couple's relationship because of their inability to cope with the erasure of their place of belonging and the identity that accompanies it. The personal and the political collide into a devastating commentary on the politicization of home, once again evoking George's postulations on the conflation of homes, nations, borders and identity politics (1999).

Immersion in *Yesterday* transpires through the beautifully crafted relationship between Song's racially and nationally (dis)placed, live Korean body, the projected large-scale close-ups of her digital persona, and the interpretative spaces that open up in the thresholds between the two, where we are able to enter with our own attuned awareness and knowledge about twenty-first-century migratory narratives. Reliving our own experience of global itinerancy and resettlements in multiple places, we empathize with Song's mapping of her mobile existence onto her body. Here too, the ocular dimension is key to triggering our own attunedness to twenty-first-century border politics. At a neuronal level, we recognize, mirror and make sense of her gestures as she literally marks her body with maps. We process this information as a metaphor for the journeys she has undertaken. We therefore simultaneously empathize with her personal narrative, as we critically place it in the context of global migratory narratives of the twenty-first century. This awareness lends us perspective. And then, in the final dramatic moments of the piece, where the mapping of her body turns into the disturbing decimation of a home that is both enmeshed on her belly, while simultaneously belonging to a young couple seemingly distinct from her, our critical knowledge of border politics is fuelled by recalling heart-wrenching mediatized images of large-scale refugee crises that bombard our everyday reality. It strikes us that, like so many refugees whose homes are decimated through no fault or actions of their own, this couple's home disappears. Our experience of these multiple layers of information requires intellectual, emotional and even physical labour to process. We find ourselves both engrossed with Song's bodily presence and the power of her gestural language, while simultaneously and actively seeking ways to critically situate her narrative in the larger global contexts of border politics and refugee crises. We are immersed.

In both these examples, immersion is triggered through and intrinsically reliant upon the power of bodily gesture. In my decolonization of immersion, I therefore shift

the emphasis from audience interactivity with space and action to the ability of audience members to witness and experience a gesture, mirror it at a neuronal level and interpret its repercussions at mediated, intellectual and embodied levels. In this shift, I am also signalling that, while most current theorizing on immersion has acknowledged the embodied state of the audience as key to the experience of immersion, it has not, adequately, addressed the relationship between the ocular encounter of the performance of corporeal gestures, the neuronal mirroring of these gestures by audience members and the power of embodied and critical interpretation that is generated at this interface. This is also one of the reasons why I am looking to (re)locate the discourse of immersion within dance performances through drawing on *rasa* theory, premised on the power and efficacy of bodily gestures.

I wish to further pre-empt and argue against possible critiques that the two examples I cite above are in fact instances of absorption, and not immersion. To do this I want to remind us that at the beginning of the article I took issue with Machon's distinction between these two supposedly distinct kinds of spectatorship by pointing out that Machon considers absorption as passive and immersion as active spectatorship. In arguing that what might be considered absorption by some is in my opinion immersion, I wish not only to complicate the discourse on immersion and embodied spectatorship through transcultural discourse with *rasa*, but also to question who is authorized to create and reinforce these discourses. The audience experience of watching *Desh* and *Yesterday* is by no means passive – as I have demonstrated in detail above, even if it does not involve audience participation in the way immersive theatre practices champion.

CONCLUSION

Immersion, in the above examples and in the way I have theorized it in this article, thus operates as a form of critically aware yet empathetic and embodied spectatorship.

In both of the dance pieces I have analysed, the importance of the ocular dimension is crucial as the initial gateway into experiencing immersion. This is not to ignore other sensorial dimensions from the discourse. It is to argue, however, that it is through this ocular dimension that audiences can observe, mirror and execute gestures that they are witnessing at a neuronal level before they are mediated and interpreted through audience members' own socio-cultural realities. The mirroring enables the audience to experience a piece at an embodied dimension, triggering a transformative experience. At the heart of transformation, however, are the simultaneously operative actions of empathy and critical distance. Empathy draws an audience closer to the action, while critical distance helps audience members retain objectivity. It is in this space between empathy and criticality that an audience member experiences immersion, absorbed, critically heightened and always active. Immersion, reframed in this manner, reasserts the importance of embodied sight and an audience's critical point of view within discourses of spectatorship. By borrowing these crucial elements from *rasa*, both immersion in particular and spectatorship theories at large can find more nuanced and transcultural manifestations. This can simultaneously decolonize current scholarship on immersion *and* de-exoticize and release *rasa* from its culturally and temporally specific roots.

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