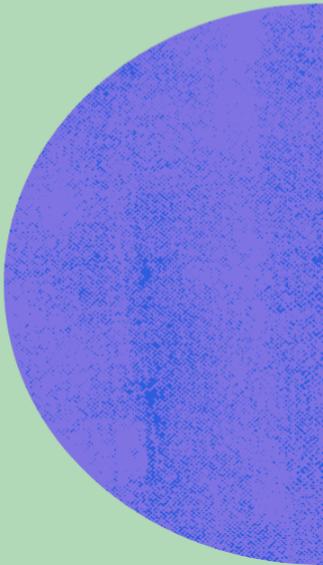


THINGS I AM NOT INTER VEN TIONS



Perspectives #2

MIGRANT DRAMATURGIES NETWORK

June 2021

#1

Bernadette Cochrane (University of Queensland, Australia)

‘Things I Am Not’: passing adaptation

I'm speaking today from Meanjin, also known as Brisbane, part of the traditional lands of the Jagera and Turrbal peoples. I acknowledge their custodianship of the land, and I pay my respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country. I value and celebrate the uniqueness, cultures, histories, and languages that have been created and shared for at least 65,000 years.

To open my contribution to this conversation with acknowledgement of the traditional owners is not merely an Australian tradition or gesture that recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as First Australians and Traditional Custodians of the land. It recognises and promotes an ongoing connection to place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Australians. Moreover, as "Reconciliation Australia advises that in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, the meaning of Country is more than just ownership or connection to land, [for] as Professor Mick Dodson explains: 'When we talk about traditional 'Country'...we mean something beyond the dictionary definition of the word. For Aboriginal Australians...we might mean homeland, or tribal or clan area, and we might mean more than just a place on the map. For us, Country is a word for all *the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area...* It describes the entirety of our ancestral domains. While they may all no longer necessarily be the title-holders to land, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are still connected to the Country of their ancestors, and most consider themselves the custodians or caretakers of their land." [Emphasis added].

There is an extra layer to my acknowledgement and Dodson's explanation of Country. Both speak to why we are gathered today in cyber-space. Collectively and individually, each of the artistic contributions to *Things I Am Not* critiques, praises, and pleads for recognition and welcoming of uniqueness, culture, histories, and language. They lay claim *to the values, places, resources, stories, and cultural obligations* associated with original and contemporary conditions but not by placing them in binary opposition or through creating a homogenising agglutinate. Instead, each offering speaks to connection but in very particular ways. This connection, in turn, speaks to the dramaturgical, theatrical, and common humanity of the *Things I Am Not* project.

There are three interconnected ideas with which I found myself grappling.

Passing Adaptation

The need imposed or otherwise, of passing in an adopted culture and the creation of conditions to perform self. Performance or adaption of self seems to require overt rebuttal of stereotypes. The implied and necessary requests for a moment to parse language, parse culture, and parse self in the dominant culture and its associated behaviours are exhausting. The cognitive work is not shared. It places the burden of such work on the migrant figure. This imposition seems to raise fundamental questions for countries that pride themselves on being multicultural to use a fraught term. I would add that although there have been several challenges to the word *multicultural* in Australia over several decades, the term is still used on some official government websites. Indeed, the Home Affairs website has several pages dedicated to the notion of Australia being a multicultural country. To return to the idea of adaptation and passing, there is a direct contradiction between placing somebody as Other through an *insistence* of understanding a migrant person through the lens of being different and the *obligation* for assimilation of that same person, while at the same time celebrating themselves for being

multicultural. To use somewhat dated language from Adaptation Studies, it is the migrant that needs to *do* and to *perform* the shift from source culture to the target culture, regardless of the emotional and cognitive labour required and systemic challenges imposed. It is, in fact, the migrant who enables the self-congratulating of the host culture. The individual migrant needs to pass but remain different.

Continuities

To rework Dodson's comments, while each of the contributors may no longer necessarily be the title-holders, each was connected to the Country of their ancestors, and most consider themselves the custodians or caretakers of their land or cultures. Old, new, all are ongoing. One of the challenges of passing, and part of the cognitive labour that the creative works highlighted was the burden of reconciliation of self within the self. What part of our individual histories do we not share, not emphasise, or need to ignore? What *values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations* are not shared, although they continue? What components of our individuality need to be subordinate, or sometimes denied, to pass?

The Post-colonial Condition

The final conundrum I contemplated is a shift from individual migrancy to systemic migrancy. Yasmeen, Becka, and Lanna all, in some way, spoke to the post-colonial condition. The challenges of system migration, or invasion of another country, brings about questions of migration squared. For post-colonial countries, their existence is predicated on systemic migration. For countries such as Australia, the dominant culture is an imported one and one that has created devastating intergenerational injustices for the traditional custodians of Country. We should not understand the story of First Australians solely in terms of deficit discourse, but that same story needs to be folded into the conversation around what migration is and what it can mean.

When a post-colonial country, such as Australia, speaks of migration and migrants, there needs to be an explicit and meaningful engagement, including both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and contemporary migrants. Post-colonial countries need to address the legacies of the past while working in the present with all migrants towards shaping the future: the individual and the systematised need to work together.

Conclusion

That last comment returns me to the personal. I am migrant, and not just because I am a Non-Indigenous Australian. *Things I Am Not* asked me to consider the question of not *where* is my country? But *what* is my Country? What *the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations* with which I grapple? A question for which I thank, applaud and celebrate the contributors of *Things I Am Not*.

<https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/multicultural-affairs>

#2

Katja Krebs (University of Bristol, UK)

Opening our mouths- the multiplicities of the audible migrant

Some of the podcasts made me laugh, some made me cry, some did both, and with most I could hear myself saying: 'I remember that feeling! Yes, that is what it was, and sometimes still is, like!'. The frustration of not being able to articulate myself with the same efficiency and precision as I could in my mother tongue and the change in the way I understood myself and the different reactions to me that I encountered then. Having to have the same conversations over and over again: 'Why don't you find Hitler jokes funny?'; 'What, you don't know the battles of the second world war off by heart?'; 'You look so Germanic' (whatever that might mean - being tall and blonde I suppose).

I arrived in the U.K. in the 1990s and sometimes I was glad I wasn't mistaken for a woman from Scandinavia: while I had to take the Nazi jokes and salutes, the swastikas drawn on my car with its German number plate, as well as the more sincere attempts to discuss the Third Reich on the chin (and what an English expression that is), at least I didn't have to put up with the sexism towards women from Scandinavia or the racist abuse towards any woman who wasn't white European. I could hide by not opening my mouth, by not speaking.

When I first arrived in London in 1993, jokes were made about some expression I used and I didn't understand the underlying viciousness until much later: how was I to know the difference between 'just had breakfast' and

‘only had breakfast’ when I was struggling not to lose myself in this inability to be myself, or rather my previous self, my pre-migrant self?

That was the first phase of arriving elsewhere: not opening my mouth, not speaking for fear of recognition and ridicule. The second phase was constituted by my desperate attempts to hide that I was a migrant in the first place, and there were two parts to that phase:

1) In my attempt to get rid of my German accent, British native speakers started to assume I was South African. If you want to be between a rock and a hard place, that is it: the choice between Nazi German or white South African during Apartheid.

2) Going back to Germany, to visit family and friends, to renew my passport, to vote, and so forth was no longer a return to my pre-migrant self: language moves and shifts, and my German was suddenly recognisable as that from someone who had left. My vocabulary dated me. I still used phrases which long lost their street-cred, I was too polite at the dinner table, I had adopted the mechanism of saying sorry at any given opportunity, I apologized too often. I got accustomed to that in my migrant existence, but back home it led to friends and family saying I devalued apologies, I somehow embodied the assumed superficiality of the British.

No matter where I was, I was an audible migrant, still am to some extent. And being an audible migrant does things: to the way you understand yourself, to the way others see you, to the way you present yourself, manifest your body in space, to the way others try to manifest your body. There is a German word for what the migrant encounters internally and externally, sometimes before and during the process of migration and always, or so it seems, upon arrival: *Gewalt*. A word which can mean violence and force and ferocity and intensity all at the same time. There is a positivity, a strength, a freedom and a sense of

agency in force and ferocity. Yet there is also cruelty and viciousness, mercilessness and rage.

To be a migrant then is to experience *Gewalt*, all of the above together, at different times and at different scales. Sometimes, the *Gewalt* is of such force and skewed towards viciousness rather than strength, that the migrant doesn't arrive. Depending on where you migrate from and to and for what reason, that *Gewalt*, that force, is more visibly vicious and violent. What the monologues are telling me though is that everyone has experienced and not forgotten the *Gewalt* part of the migratory experience, whether its strength or its viciousness or both. And that is played out in the way our voices and bodies are constructed and understood. Our voices and bodies undergo a process of translation and adaptation, a process we don't have exclusive agency or power over. This process can be creative and constructive, freeing and emancipatory, as well as brutal and vicious, forever excluding and something we seemingly cannot control at all.

What do I mean by that process of translation and adaptation? To come clean, I am an academic who looks at histories of translation and adaptation in the theatre and in performance, and that means I am obsessed with it. But there is also a reason why I got obsessed with it in the first place: that is the experience, the embodied experience of both. When I first arrived, I translated everything in my head before speaking. It meant, I was slow. It took me ages to take part in conversations: while translating in my head what was said and what I would like to say, everyone had moved on. Now I don't translate into English anymore but, depending what I speak about in German, I still translate myself. So, there are at least two of me at the moment: the English academic, who thinks in sentences rather than paragraphs (this is very German), and the funny archaic slightly odd German, who is too polite and uses 'could', 'would', 'possibly', 'if you don't mind' too much.

There is more than translation happening in and with the migrant self. There is also adaptation: a change from one to another, a continuous journey that you sometimes embark upon yourself and that you are sometimes embarked upon by others; an adaptation because the previous incarnation of you doesn't disappear but exists at the same time. Many of the podcasts address this not always wanted nor invited yet imposed adaptation: adapting ourselves to be fine when we are not, changing our walk, and so forth. There is myself who joins the queue as I have adapted myself and been adapted to do so in response to the quiet grumbles when I didn't understand the cultural significance of the queue. The glances, the tating contributed to that process of adaptation. And there is also myself who still doesn't queue, depending on where I am. Having said that, the longer I am here, the less good I get at not queuing.

Adapting and being adapted, translating and being translated happens all the time and continuously to the migrant self. The migrant self becomes a translation and adaptation of the non-migrant self. The body of the non-migrant self is reflected in, and part of, the body of the migrant self. We exist in multiplicities and as multiplicities, which is exciting but also scary and sometimes frightening. In translation and adaptation, that which you translate and adapt is still there, if sometimes not easy to find, yet there is no longer a non-migrant body without the migrant body and vice-versa. The migrant then is a multiplicity of body, rather than a singularity, and there needs to be a mindfulness which does stop the violation of such multiplicity of body. Such multiplicity can be wonderful and a privilege, but it can also be disorienting and confounding, all at the same time.

I have now been in this country longer than I lived in Germany. I'm no longer attempting to hide my multiplicity but I am secure and lucky enough in my status as a dual citizen and myself as a person, to enjoy the privilege that can

come with such multiplicity. I am too grey to be mistaken for a Scandinavian and I haven't tried to avoid speaking German in public for at least a decade or so. I no longer listen to Nazi jokes and no longer pretend to find them funny.

Things I am Not transcends my own experience and is not exclusive to Britain. Yet, my own horizon of experience is limited to and allows me to see the way in which the U.K. in general and my own professional area, that of Theatre, in particular have avoided, sometimes even refused to accept such multiplicities of bodies. And for that I am grateful to Lara Parmiani and all artists involved for *Things I am Not*, for opening our mouths and speaking. All we need to do know is open some ears.

#3

Anika Marschall (Aarhus University, Denmark)

Intersectional listening: how migrant womxn take up sonic space

Listening to the *Things I am Not*, I hear ten different womxn voices speaking from different localities. And none of them sounds like me. They are passionate, playful and outspoken political. They are mothers, friends, lovers, travellers, party guests, survivors, homemakers, shape-shifters. What they share is a glimpse into their story, into their position of where they find themselves now, living in a different country than where they were born. They speak of the immense financial, emotional and bureaucratic labour they pour into crossing borders. They share their anger, exhaustion and simply being fed-up with micro-aggressions, hyper-sexualisation, infantilisation, misogyny, xenophobia, tokenism, white ignorance, racial profiling, not being seen nor heard on their own terms.

The womxn voices are all fluent in English, each with their own intonation and accent, with their own rhythm of breathing. They all share sharp creative skills, they know how to choose words, how to use their voice to create tension and ease, to make listeners laugh or cry, feel-with. They know how to put in words what they experience, what I have experienced too, and why, and how that affects our self-understanding, presentation and adapting as migrants. Also, do note and listen for those stories and forms of migration that are *not* here.

I am listening to one womxn's voice after another. I let the podcast run, the migrant womxn take up sonic space. My specifically located listening position is that of being a white, cis female, able-bodied, German citizen, speaking

fluent English and temporary but full-time employed theatre scholar invested in questions of migration. Currently, I live as migrant in Denmark, where I am easily passing in public space as someone who belongs. While I am less than fluent in Danish, I do hold immense structurally enabled advantages and thus, responsibility to act in solidarity with those without, and to continuously ask and listen for those voices not present or those I am overhearing.

In my response to *Things I am Not*, I seek to open three prompts for different lines of thinking further:

Self-determined presentation

In her monologue, Emmanuela Lia imagines how a fictional other, her addressee would talk back at her, saying “But you are here, talking, in public, alone...” and in her response she sounds calm, clear and kind “I need to be here, but I don’t need to be here instead of everyone else.” While *Things I am Not* presents theatre monologues, written and spoken by people working professionally with and in theatre productions, they here make explicit the unique possibilities a medium such as that of a podcast could offer. Podcasting offers particular medium-specific opportunities, where people can present themselves on their own terms and make audible the challenges of migrant narration in the context of inequality, with particular focus on intersections between gender, sexuality, race and class. In podcasts, people present themselves on their own terms, establish their own their own feminist, anti-racist and queer reference points and cover under-represented experiences within and against a media landscape characterised by exclusion, gatekeeping and increased commercialisation, and mainstream normative frameworks of gender, race and sexuality (Georgiou 2018; Tiffe and Hoffman 2017; Koning, Nolten and Leurs 2019). While often directed toward a small, self-selected but heavily invested audience, podcasts confound the otherwise persistent, racially and gender essentialist accounts of the voice, and *Thing I am Not*

makes me focus on my positioning as listener, what I have in common with the womxn speaking, and what I might share with their imagined addresses. The speakers at times question me directly, and at times make implicit a reflection about my biases as listener to these womxn. I too might problematically cast them as representatives of certain stereotypes, which are deep ingrained through our shared saturation with images, stories, and media representations about what a migrant womxn might sound like, which stories they might share and how. The media scholar Tanja Dreher has prominently focused on the practices of listening to and in media, which has guided my own research on migration, and I reiterate it as a prompt: “attention to listening provokes important questions about media and multiculturalism: how do media enable or constrain listening across difference?” (2009: 445).

Politics of listening

Things I am Not speaks directly to emerging scholarship on the politics of listening, which recently has grown against the grain of a traditionally dominant focus on voice, speaking up, talking back and freedoms of expression. This shift moves towards listening as political metaphor for a practice of responsiveness, where responsibility for change moves from marginalised voices onto the discursively privileged and powerful institutions. As Susan Bickford and Tanja Dreher have proposed, the failure or refusal to listen thus is arguably structured by prevalent colonialist logics, but a commitment to *continued* listening keeps the possibilities for shared action open (Spivak 1988; Bickford 1996; Dreher 2009; Bassel 2017).

Throughout many of the *Things I am Not* monologues, the speakers put painful emphasis on the immense cognitive labour, the bureaucratic and financial hurdles in the way of migrating and simply seeing your loved one residing on the other side of a border. Becka McFadden’s monologue in particular speaks about the “horrors at the airport” she has experiences many

times, when flying to see her partner, and how the powerful and discursively privileged *listen-out* for certain keywords in the documentation for a visa: “my right to the rest of my life is deeply entangled with [the words husband, wife] [...]. It is not enough to write ‘my love, my person, my partner’. I need to use other language. Language the Home Office will understand.”

Here, I also listen-out for the systemic oppressions that are also imbued in listening, when powerful institutions and nation-states are listening-in or listening-out to discriminate, to manage borders and bodies moving across. Therefore, I ask where do we find allies and what forms of solidarity does *Things I am Not* foster? In what ways do the monologues make audible and visceral, how our *collective responsibility* is interwoven, rather than reinforcing marginalised to carry the burden of sharing narratives of un-belonging? What kind of intervention into the politics of listening does *Things I am Not* enable, and how might we move from a dealing with social discomfort and individual introspection, towards finding deeper connection and more complex encounters in order to cooperate and tackle the historically specific and intersectional systems of oppression and fear of it narrated here.

A methodology of the gut

Things I am Not turns me as listener to my and others’ sexed and racialised bodies, reminding me that political and economic systems, “no matter how global and institutionalized they may be, ultimately target flesh-and-blood bodies” (Weitzel 2018: 423). This prompts me to present a speculative proposal of a *methodology of the gut*, which I start exploring in the following. A methodology of the gut might at best, help us to more carefully grasp how epistemic violence is deeply ingrained within all our bodies, and that it takes emotional and bodily labour in addition to cognitive, in order to unlearn.

Lara Parmiani beautifully captures in her monologue something that resonated deeply with me: what it means to lose your sense of self, by losing

your language and the power that comes with expressing yourself precisely: “Words were my thing [...] I was articulate and people listened to me.” And later at the end of her/your monologue, you make the point that “It’s not just words, and gaps, and crevices that give you away. It’s posture, too. It’s your body.” This opens to me another layer of what happens to me when listening continuously and committed to *Things I am Not*, positioning myself carefully as listener, seeking to practice and anti-racist listening, I have started to embed in my research practice. Parmiani’s notion of the body, which gives us away, makes me turn toward something other we find in the body, in the voice that resonates with our own body, beyond words and linguistics.

Mladen Dolar describes this equally as that which resonates within the voice: it “is there, in the very act of saying, but it eludes any pinning down, to the point where we could maintain that it is the non-linguistic, the extra-linguistic element, which enables speech phenomena, but cannot itself be discerned by linguistics” (2006: 15). I am thinking here also about Adriana Cavarero (2000; 2005), who locates uniqueness in the sonorous materiality of our voices. She argues in light of womxn’s histories and the experience of being silenced, that the devaluing of the uniqueness embodied in each sonorous voice, has effected a bias against female-sounding voices. In so doing, the migrant womxn voices offer an intersectional reckoning with repressive, hetero-patriarchal notions of “the universal”. John Durham Peters states accordingly that voice is “a site where sexual differentiation is most clearly and most routinely accomplished” (2004: 88).

The way my body listens to *Things I am Not* reminds me of the writing and work by Resmaa Menakem, who is based in Minneapolis, where he works as a therapist and trauma specialist. Menakem has recently published the book *My Grandmother’s Hands* (2017), in which he shares anti-racist practices, which help us to notice the history and intergenerational traumas we all carry

with us in our bodies. In the podcast *On Being*, Menakem shares a situation to pinpoint what he means by that: you answer a call from a person who is dear to you, someone you know really well, but you might be miles and miles away. Before that other person has even said anything about how they are, how they really are, you might notice a hunch, a *gut* feeling that there is something up, something wrong – just by having heard their voice. This feeling is something, which comes from the body listening to a voice, resonating with, even over long-distance, rather than something manifesting on intellectual or linguistic level. I sense and my body knows that there is something, I just do not have the words and logics for it.

With my privileged position as cis female white migrant, I admit that I am more used to hearing things that make me, my body comfortable, rather than uncomfortable. At work as theatre scholar, I am constantly dealing and hearing intellectual terms, knowledge and theories around migration, decolonisation, feminisms - all of which do take work and time to really land in my *body*. However, *when knowledge literally settles in*, we might be enabled to move from contesting problematic representation towards actually starting to dismantle hegemonic knowledge systems, epistemic ignorance, the ‘naturalised’ and deeply ingrained racist, sexist, classed imagery, stories and ways of storytelling.

As a practice to notice how knowledge is settling into our bodies, Menakem turns to our vagus nerve, which helps dealing bodily with doubt, conflict and difficulty. The vagus nerve quite literally connects our brain with our gut. Menakem describes it in the *On Being* podcast as follows: “The vagus nerve comes out of the brain stem and it’s called the wandering nerve. And it hits it in the face, it hits it in the pharynx, it hits it in the chest, it hits it in the gut – it wanders the whole body. [...] if I’m with you long enough, [...] over time I will start to hear things in your throat because the vagal nerve is either open or

constricted.” Thus, we pick up on bodily communication, knowing otherwise that we should pay attention now, that something is going on, without knowing or being immediately able to contextualize what it is.

Things I am Not prompts a committed, continued listening, which connects nation-states’ policing of migration to living, breathing, resonating bodies and our vagal nerves. The womxn voices in *Things I am Not* take up sonic space and drive us to take serious *bodily knowing*, and make me speculate about how a *methodology of the gut* would manifest in the spaces of the academy and its politics of listening.

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Things I Am Not: Interventions Perspectives #2

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