

CREATIVE ETHNOGRAPHIES: WRITING EXILE, THEATRE, AND CITIZENSHIP

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Reflection

Two main events inspired me to write about creative ethnography and to use drama to convey my PhD research findings. One of them was the workshop 'Theatre as a social metaphor', led by Sanjoy Ganguli, director of the Theatre of the Oppressed, Kolkata, in November 2017. The workshop was a mix of performances, role-play, games and playback theatre. In one of the performances I had to play the role of a male, which proved challenging, as I had to enact a different type of behaviour and gestures that were not familiar to me. I realised that theatre means using the body to convey a powerful message and to invoke reflection and change. Secondly, in November 2018 I took part in the session 'Listening and performing together: emotions, experience, and ethnopoetry', at the ASA Conference, Oxford. During this session I experienced two emotional complexities: embodying someone else's story and having someone else perform mine, with attention being paid to pauses, silences, and missteps.

Introduction

In this article I aim to explore the creative possibilities that emerge from alternative modes of ethnographic practice, with an emphasis on transformative forms of communicating qualitative data. This approach will be exemplified by contemporary artistic and ethnographic works involving participatory action research, applied theatre for social research and documentary verbatim theatre (Erel et. al 2017; Kaptani 2019; Sahamizadeh 2017).

I argue that enacting stories of life in detention, in exile and at the margins of citizenship can be a powerful means of constructing identity through performativity. In this sense, performativity as metaphor describes the 'non-essentialized constructions of marginalized identities', like women of colour, gays, and lesbians, and other combinations and intersections of these categories and positionalities (Dolan 1993: 419). The argument is that these marginalized identities are self-consciously alienated from what has constituted traditional subjectivity (white, heterosexual man) and here the concept of performativity becomes useful to work with.

In this paper I add to Dolan's argument another category of marginalized identities: asylum seekers held in detention for indefinite periods of time, like the Iranian asylum seekers on Manus Island, off-shore Australia, and migrant women of African descent in a citizenship contest in the UK. I emphasize how the politicization of their bodies and the performance of their identity constitutes 'the metaphor of a body staged [and] figures the social as a theatre' (Dolan, 1993, pg. 434). The social or 'experimental' theatre is a 'performed' or 'restored' experience, in which meaning emerges by reliving the original experience, which may constitute a social drama subjectively perceived, and is given an aesthetic form. This then helps others to understand better their own being in the world and the times and cultural conditions which compose their experience of reality (Turner, 1982).

The paper will first discuss two theatre plays that emerged from research and interviews conducted with migrants and asylum seekers. The reasons for choosing to present these plays are academic and personal. Both plays highlight how theatre inspired by experiences of migration can bring those at the margins back to the centre, and how academic research intertwined with arts has the potential for transformative practices. These plays focus on life in detention and exile, and life at the margins of citizenship. The first play is a performance of the stories of Iranian asylum seekers detained off-shore on the Manus Island, Australia, enacted in the verbatim theatre *Manus* (Sahamizadeh 2017). The second theatre play, *Me? I just put British*, is the outcome of a research project about migrant women in London enacting citizenship and performed by the research participants themselves (Kaptani 2019).

The second part of this article will present a creative interpretation of the findings of my second PhD ethnographic fieldwork in India, July-September 2017, in the form of a short verbatim theatre play. The play emerged from analysing the data gathered in the form of qualitative, semi-structured, walking and ambulant interviews and participant observations. My research seeks to understand experiences of Indian citizenship for Tibetans living as migrants and refugees in India. Citizenship, in this case, is a conceptual tool that illuminates the connections between a sense of individual and collective belonging(s) and the role of the state in governing migrant populations.

During my ethnographic research I paid particular attention to the non-verbal language, the pauses, silences, laughter, tone of voice, background sounds of rain, cows, dogs, traffic, music, and conversations taking place at the same time in multiple languages (Tibetans, Hindi, and English). These mobile, multi-modal, and sensory methods (O'Neill 2018) are extremely important as they reveal emotions, intentions, meanings, and context, constituting 'live methods' (Back and Puwar 2012). They are creative, public and novel methods of doing critical sociological research in contemporary times (O'Neill 2019).

Performing the Body: Exile as Theatre

In this section I will introduce *Manus*, a theatre play written by playwright Nazanin Sahamizadeh in 2017. I will outline the most recent developments of the immigration and asylum policies in Australia that constitute the background of writing the play *Manus*. The Australian government started to operate offshore immigration detention centres in the Pacific islands in 2001, at the time of the 'Tampa incident', when the Government refused to allow the Tampa vessel to unload the survivors of a sinking vessel (packed with 433 would-be asylum seekers) on Australia's Christmas Island and instead ordered them to be transported to Nauru (Rajaram 2003). Therefore, asylum seekers arriving by boat in the Australian maritime borders are now directly sent to one of the Pacific islands, where they are detained for an indefinite period of time while they await the processing of their asylum claims. The lack of external regulation and the fact that no media is allowed access to these facilities has contributed to creating 'a culture of secrecy' in which human rights abuses occur but are hidden from the public by the Australian government (Rea et. al., 2018: 480). The remote prison-like centres, which isolate those seeking asylum, create a powerful discourse that constructs asylum seekers as threats to Australia's physical safety, territorial integrity and national identity (McNevin 2008).

It was in this political context that the theatre play *Manus* was written by Nazanin Sahamizadeh in 2017. The play tells the story of eight Iranians who fled for Australia and were detained in inhumane conditions on Papua New Guinea's Manus island (Flitton 2017). It follows their lives in the detention

camp for more than four years, their experiences and reasons for leaving Iran, their struggle to reach Australia, and how they were sent to the offshore detention camps at Manus and Nauru following Australia's 2013 brutal off-shore asylum policy (Thrissur 2018).

The play narrates their lives on the islands and their uncertainty over their future; the indefinite detention time, as well as the theme of violence in the camps and the deteriorating mental and physical health of the inhabitants (Doherty 2017). In this theatre play interviews with Iranian asylum seekers living in limbo on Manus and Nauru are relayed verbatim by a cast of eight actors. The play was performed in Tehran (*Tehran Times* 2017) and will be produced at the Adelaide Festival, Australia, in March 2019.¹ The play *Manus* was also staged at the International Theatre Festival of Kerala, India, in 2018 (Ramanath 2018). Sahamizadeh, the playwright, declared in an interview with the Indian media:

Maybe art can bring those shunned from the centre back into focus. We see theatre as a great medium through which people can reach a new understanding of events, not by being fed the verdict but by seeing the reality of the situation. And there is no easy answer for the questions at hand (Sahamizadeh 2018).²

One of the lead characters of the play is the Kurdish Iranian writer Behrouz Boochani, detained on Manus Island since 2013. He was in daily contact with Nazanin via phone as the play was being written (Doherty 2017):

We worked together for more than a year, I sent her information about what is happening in Manus, like the court news, the Australian election, the changes inside the detention centre, even when people attempted suicide. I was reporting almost every day. My role in this project was to take Nazanin into this prison by describing life in Manus. It was important that Nazanin understood well how life is in Manus to tell the story in artistic language (Boochani 2017).³

Thus *Manus* can be seen as the production of a story originating in, and seen through, the eyes of exiled and detained bodies and expressed in their own words (verbatim). What The director's role was to give these stories an artistic shape and to reach out to a multitude of audiences, in several countries, conveying a powerful message about the absurdity of Australia's off-shore asylum policy, as reflected in the lives of asylum seekers detained indefinitely. Performing their own stories was not possible for these asylum seekers, as they were detained on Manus Island and denied freedom and mobility and so their stories were enacted by professional actors.

Personally, I have had an interest in Australia's asylum policy since 2010, when I graduated with a Master's degree in Anthropology and was preparing my PhD application to study in Melbourne and focus on the dehumanizing treatment of asylum seekers in Australia, a project which in the end I did not pursue. Fast-forward to 2019: I connected with Behrouz Boochani, the detained writer and Iranian asylum seeker on Manus island, via his Facebook profile and followed his posts, despite the physical distance between our geographical locations. This helped me reflect on the transformative potential of writing, research, and theatre that I could apply to my own PhD research about Tibetans living in exile in India.

Theatre as Citizenship Practice

Arguing for the transformative potential of participatory theatre methods, Erel et. al. (2017) emphasize that they are part of a broader endeavour to democratize the practices and theories of citizenship and the relationship between the researcher and the participants. Participatory theatre is a method that shows how marginalized groups can engage in social transformations (Kaptani and Yuval-Davis 2008) and how the participants themselves constitute political subjects, articulating and performing their knowledge and experiences.

The theatre play *Me? I just put British* is a performance resulting from two years of collaborative research with artists, social scientists, and human rights organizations working with migrant families on the question of 'Theatre as citizenship practice' (Kaptani 2019). The play is a story of a citizenship contest, raising the question about what a good citizen is. It asks how a woman, a black body, a mother, an immigrant can become a British citizen, and it focuses on how the political and social system in Britain treats migrant women as undeserving and as a social problem (Erel et al 2016).

The participant-actors in this play have been living in the UK for 10 to 20 years and have contributed to the society in various ways. However, the recent policy of the UK Government, No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), means that migrants subject to immigration control cannot access social services, tax credits or housing assistance and are subjected to precarious jobs (Erel et al, 2017). Section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 states that a person will have 'no recourse to public funds' if they are 'subject to immigration control'.⁴ The response to this Policy given by the migrant women-actors in the theatre play stated:

I proved all these years, that I get my children to school, I pay taxes, I go to park, I go to church, as you citizens do. Still I have to declare any private intimate parts of my life to any (social) case worker good or bad. If only when you make your decisions you could imagine with how much skill and art I am practicing this citizenship you deny me...
(Extract from the theatre play *Me? I just put British*, 2019).⁵

Writing and performing one's story of exile, detention, spoiled identity, and contested citizenship is the enactment of a creative relation between a bodily experience and a physical reality. In the words of Gloria Anzaldúa: 'The body is a text. Writing is not about being in your head; it's about being in your body' (cited in Keating 2009: 5). For Schechner (2005) performance is an inclusive term and theatre is only one point on a continuum that moves from ritualization to everyday performances such as greetings, emotion, family scenes, professional roles, sports, theatre, dance, ceremonies, rites, and other performances (Schechner 2005: x). Therefore theatre is as an important means for the intercultural transmission of 'achieved modalities of experience' (Turner 1982: 18). This means that enacting one another's social dramas, rituals, and theatrical performances will contribute to seeing and apprehending the reality of human symbolic formations (ibid.).

I followed the development of the two-year research project culminating in the theatre play *Me? I just put British* since November 2017, when I took part in the PASAR Conference in London and met the researchers as well as the participants: migrant women who enacted a short performance about their lived experience. Fast-forward to January 2019, I was a spect-actor (Boal 2008) in the theatre performance *Me? I just put British*, enacted as Forum Theatre on a stage in East London. While watching the theatre play live, I reflected on the academic and methodological connections between

this performance and my own PhD research about the Tibetan migrant-refugee population in India. I began to consider how my ethnographic work about their quest for Indian citizenship could be written as a short drama and possibly enacted by the research participants.

Creative Ethnography: Theatre Play in Two Acts

In this section of the article I will present the interpretation of my PhD fieldwork data (2017) as creative ethnography in the form of a theatre play entitled *Amma la*, which means ‘mother’ in Tibetan, and some of the theoretical grounding supporting this novel practice.

The methodological approach to my PhD research involves multi-sited ethnography, which allows the ethnographer to spend various periods of time in several research settings (Falzon 2016). In 2017 I conducted 21 audio-recorded, individual, group, and ambulant interviews with Tibetan participants, and held more than 50 informal interviews with Tibetan and Indian participants in four locations in India: New Delhi, Dharamshala, Shimla, and Mundgod. My fieldwork reflections were recorded in a 70-page fieldwork diary and a blog post.⁶

When writing the PhD research findings in the form of a drama, I also made use of the concept ‘verbatim theatre’ (Paget 2009), in the sense of creating a documentary drama (in this case a short theatre play). The play employs recorded material from interviews with research participants in 2017 alongside the emotional and non-verbal context of these meetings, which gave the piece its dramatic shape.

Interpreting the 2017 ethnographic data through the use of verbatim theatre was inspired by academic sources that emphasize the need for sociologists and social scientists to share their findings in new and creative forms, such as arts, theatre and online media (Jones, 2018). It relies on using new, textual, personal and performance approaches to ethnography, inclusive of imagination and creativity (Denzin 1997; Lincoln and Denzin 1994; Atkinson 2004). This means experimenting with and moving across several writing styles and genres, a form of performance writing that includes personal histories, academic articles, artistic ideas and stories from the field, where multiple voices coexist.

The rich data emerging from the ethnographic research conducted in 2017 shows that the question of Indian citizenship is a debatable and critical possibility for both young and older generations of Tibetans living in India. While the older generations born in Tibet who fled to India seeking refuge in 1959 and the following years have an active hope of returning to Tibet and have less interest in becoming Indian citizens, the second and third generations of Tibetans born in exile in India are more likely to seek alternative ways of political participation by gaining Indian citizenship and/or moving abroad. These statements, however, should be read and interpreted carefully as the qualitative data does not aim to generalize any particular views on the question of citizenship, but explores in depth attitudes, experiences and meanings associated with being a Tibetan in contemporary India. The play is set up in a rural background, inspired by my ethnographic fieldwork in Mundgod, the South of India, where Tibetans mostly live out of agricultural work.

Lastly, the short play presented below is an adaptation of Samuel Beckett’s drama *Waiting for Godot* (2004), first published in 1952 and considered to be an innovation in the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’. It is important to mention that the data interpretation presented in the play *Amma la* does not follow the

content of the original play *Waiting for Godot*, nor the description of its main characters, who are of questionable social status. However, the structure of the play *Amma la*, the props and its theme (a seemingly endless wait for something or someone) can be considered an adaption or appropriation of Becket's play. Sanders (2005) writes about adaption and appropriation as processes of reinterpretation of an original source text. Adaptation involves the transition from one genre to another, such as novels adapted into films or dramatization of prose, while appropriation leads to the creation of a new cultural product (Sanders 2005). The two terms take various meanings and degrees of similarity and difference in studies of literature, theatre and the arts, including a degree of criticism and debate over their uses, but for the purpose of this article I will refer to Margherita Laera's (2014) argument that adaptation is a synonym for appropriation. Both concepts largely refer to mechanisms of cultural practice and theatrical operations in which a transformation takes place, and in which artists and audiences – and researchers, I will add – adapt existing cultural materials into performances by returning to and rewriting histories and narratives and offering new interpretations from a different perspective and sometimes a different language and culture (Laera 2014: 2).

Waiting for Godot was staged in numerous locations since its production: Sarajevo, South Africa, Avignon, New Orleans, London. In each place it acquired new meanings and interpretations about human existence, oppression, nobility, absurdity, in a metaphorical theatre where 'Godot can be anything you want (Smith 2009). What is important to note is that in both plays – *Waiting for Godot* and *Amma la* – the characters wait for something, or someone, by a lonely tree, in a world where time, place and memory are blurred and meaning is where you find it. The theatre play *Amma la* has yet to be performed at the time of writing this article.

Amma la **Theatre Play in Two Acts**

Two characters:

Amma la ('mother' in Tibetan): 60 year old Tibetan lady who came to India as a child.

Tenzin: 25 year old Tibetan working in an Indian city.

Act I

A bench. A tree.

Evening.

Amma la: (sitting on the bench) Did you feed the birds today, Tenzin? It is going to rain soon... (sound of thunder approaching).

Tenzin: Yes, I did, Amma la... (the young girl responds in a hurry, while entering the gate with a basket of mangoes, coconuts and papaya).

Amma la: I am so tired sitting on this bench, my knees are hurting all the time... (tries to stand up while the cows in the shed are mooing and the dogs start barking).

Tenzin: I will come and help you, Amma la, after I empty the basket of mango and papaya....they were the best I could find in the market today...

Amma la: (looking at the fruits bought by Tenzin and then speaking softly, more to herself than to Tenzin) When we first arrived here, we were given real mango, coconut, banana, papaya. All people rushed for banana and papaya... They gave the fruit after some time, they said we give the coconut after five years. 'Oh, 5 years, we don't want, we plant mangoes, it takes five years to grow, we'll get the food but in 5 years we'll be back in Tibet!'

Tenzin: Amma la, are you talking to me? I did not hear you well because of the dogs barking...

Amma la: No, no, I just said my prayers to our spiritual guru, our Holiness the Dalai Lama...

Tenzin: Amma la, tomorrow I will go to the city to collect your pension (sound of wind and torrential rain)....you know this is your first pension, so I can buy you a gift... (smiling).

Amma la: Pension? Yes, I am waiting, still waiting... but I have no pension, Tenzin, no Tibetan receives any pension, we are not Indians (with a sober tone in her voice).

Tenzin: Yes, you do, this is a new decision by the Government, because you fought in the 22 Regiment, you told me all the stories, remember? You were para-instructor, since 1986 to 2007. You fought in Kargil and then Kashmir, so many stories, in paramilitary school for 19 years! (very excited).

Amma la: I remember, of course, we were preparing to fight and protect His Holiness and get ready to go back, waiting for India to win over China... (sighs, pauses, then continues with a grave voice). Because when we enrolled in Army, in our force, after one month, the Indian Government gave some money, 'what is this?', 'your pay', 'we have not come for pay', 'you give us weapon, you give us training, we don't want salary'. Then at that time, what they have given, we are satisfied with this...

Tenzin: Yes, Amma la... (it's raining loud and torrentially, the sound covers their voices almost entirely). Also, do you remember Namgyal? The neighbour's son? He will come over this evening to borrow a suitcase...

Amma la: Namgyal, the boy of Lobsang la? (with a louder voice, to make herself heard in the rain).

Tenzin: Yes, him. He said he is going to New Delhi next week, his aunt has a pension in Majnu ka tilla. They are building a new hotel and his uncle is now buying euros, not dollars...

Amma la: His father needs him at home, to help with the fields... he owns 4 to 5 acres of agricultural land, who will do the physical agricultural work?

Tenzin: Yes, Amma la, but he wanted to go to Dharamshala, to help with the cause, with our Tibetan movement for independence... but he could not find work there, so now he is back. He told me he wants to go to Canada... (speaking slowly, in a low tone).

Amma la: (not listening to Tenzin anymore) The movement... our cause... We are waiting ... 59 years... the green pastures of Tibet, going out with the horses, the animals and the entire family for six months on the mountains.... (pausing, then silence, then speaking to Tenzin) Dalai Lama used to fold the hands

and ask for support for our own people, he travels all over countries for his own people, to get support for the people. Because of his hard work, we are so privileged to get all the facilities, support from all over the world...

Tenzin: Yes, Amma la, but now Namgyal says that if he goes to Canada and gets a passport, he will then be able to go to Tibet... (the rain gradually subsides)... there are a lot of young people going abroad and trying to study, to continue their studies and then coming back to India and contributing to the movement for independence or working in the Government... it is a good thing, Amma la...

Amma la: Studying is good... I did not go to school, my parents were farmers... we did not know the weather change in India... did not know how to cultivate the rice, potatoes, because the higher altitude, the agriculture was different, when we came 500m down, we did not know how to cultivate, what to cultivate.... And still then we wanted to go back... we are waiting to go back.... (it is getting dark outside and the wind and rain have stopped).

Tenzin: Yes, Amma la, but the Tibetan solution is not coming up. And most of the young generation, they are losing their hope and want to migrate, you know, to other countries..... Still then, the Tibetanness will never be lost, you know, Tibetanness will never be lost. And then, of course, citizenship is nothing, it's a paper, is nothing, it's a paper, you know....

Amma la: When is Namgyal coming, you said?... It's already evening... (with a worrisome voice).

Tenzin: I don't know, he said we should wait...

Amma la: Wait for how long? It has been 59 years

(A young boy opens the gate and starts speaking fast but with a shy voice):
Namgyal said to tell you he cannot come today, but he will surely come tomorrow.

(He then shuts the gate and runs back outside, into the street, into the darkness).

Act II

*A bench. The tree is sprouting leaves.
Morning.*

Amma la: Namgyal did not come last night, did he? I was waiting, then fell asleep...a boy came in my dream and said something,... I don't remember.... (takes a deep breath).

Tenzin: Amma la, he said he would be coming today. We will be waiting... I fed the birds this morning. Did you see the tree is sprouting? (with a joyful voice) We will have coconuts soon! But I saw a snake trail in the garden. Do you think the cobras are here again? (worried)

Amma la: Maybe, but cobras never harmed any of us, since we first came here, we always lived in harmony with the nature... (speaking with a calm voice). Karma la is soon going to Manali with the sweater business. I will be going to stay in her house and look after it....

Tenzin: Oh, again you have to stay in their house, you were there last year, too... (slightly unhappy).

Amma la: I will wait for her to come and let me know when she needs me... Is Namgyal here?

Tenzin: No, he is not here yet, Amma la. We can wait a little.... You know, my friend from College, she said she is getting a job as a nurse in a Hospital in New Delhi. She will have a good salary... (with excitement in her voice). Maybe I should also go there with her and find a better job? But only Government jobs are safe and well paid... (disappointed)... How can I get a Government job if I have my Registration Certificate, and not an Indian passport? (sighs deeply and then stops talking).

Amma la: New Delhi is a big city, it's overpopulated, over 14 million... and we are Tibetans. We live in India, eat the food and drink the water, speak the local language, so maybe we are 90% Indians this way, but we know that our blood is 100% Tibetan.

Tenzin: Yes Amma la... I have never been to Tibet, you know, I only heard your stories... and how will I go there? When would we get our freedom back?... The Middle Way approach had no dialogue with China since 2011... I don't know, Amma la... (confused)... I will ask Namgyal when he comes....

Amma la: Yes, Namgyal should be coming... We have been waiting... Did you prepare the suitcase? (sitting on the bench for one minute, then getting up and walking).

Tenzin: (not listening to the last question) Even the daughter of Karma la moved to U.S. and said that Tibetans there are very active for the Tibet cause... (pauses then stops, changes the topic). Do you know the cook at the Old People's Home? He just came from Tibet last year. He said that he could not find a place to stay in India, rents are high in the cities, so he came here, to our village. Maybe Karma la can give him her house to stay and look after it? Since it will be empty? (with a hopeful tone).

Amma la: You can ask Karma la when she is gonna be here.... (tired, sitting on the bench again).

Tenzin: When is she coming?

Amma la: She said today... And Namgyal? Has he come?

Tenzin: Waiting....

End of the play.

Conclusion

This paper explored creative ethnographic practices employed following my PhD fieldwork in India (2017), grounded in 'live methods' and inspired by participatory action research, theatre as citizenship practice and documentary verbatim theatre. I argue that using theatre as a means of presenting research data is a novel, powerful, politically transformative and critical method that brings those situated outside of traditionally centred subjectivities – migrants, women, refugees, exiled – back to the centre in academic research and in artistic performances, challenging hostile migration policies and impacting multiple audiences.

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Notes

¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20190201011734/https://www.adelaidefestival.com.au/events/manus/>

² <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/poignant-narratives-from-a-refugee-camp/article22580160.ece>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/mar/08/australias-shocking-offshore-immigration-regime-inspires-play-staged-in-iran>

⁴ <http://www.nrpfnetwork.org.uk/information/Pages/who-has-NRPF.aspx>

⁵ <http://fass.open.ac.uk/research/projects/pasar>

⁶ <https://canterburysociology.wordpress.com/2017/09/12/reflections-on-living-and-freedom/>