Exploring the Transnational Neighbourhood

Schaffer, Gad, C. Jung, Britta, Ehrig, Stephan

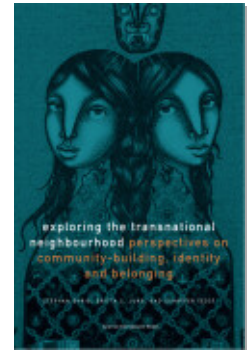# Transnational Neighbourhood and Theatrical Practices

The Concept of Home, Negotiating Strangeness and Familiarity, and the Experience of Migrant Communities in North Essex

MARY MAZZILLI

Abstract

By placing theatrical and related ethnographic practices at the centre of the debate around migration, this chapter contends that in the experience of migrant communities, at the local level of urban microcosms, a transnational neighbourhood exemplifies negotiations between strangeness and familiarity, where the concept of strangeness defines the figure of the migrant as the stranger, and familiarity as part of the process whereby the migrant attempts to make their country of destination into their own home. This chapter will argue that theatrical practices, operating at a local/micro level, are best placed to facilitate the process of a transnational/transcultural neighbourhood, because the performative space as a communal place can transform strangeness, a condition affecting much of the migrant experience, into familiarity. This will be documented by critically assessing the project *Human Side of Migration*, which has involved migrant communities (Syrian, Polish, Filipino and Chinese) from the North Essex region, in the research process that informed the writing of *Priority Seating*, a new stage play, which uses verbatim and non-verbatim techniques and styles.

Introduction

In response to the Brexit referendum, the *Human Side of Migration*[1] has involved migrant communities (Syrian, Polish, Filipino and Chinese) from the North Essex region, in the research process that informed the writing of *Priority Seating,* a new stage play, which uses verbatim and non-verbatim techniques and styles. By placing theatrical and related ethnographic practices at the centre of the debate around migration, this chapter contends that in the experience of migrant communities, at the local level of urban microcosms, a transnational neighbourhood exemplifies negotiations between strangeness and familiarity, where the concept

of strangeness defines the figure of the migrant as the stranger, and familiarity as part of the process whereby the migrant attempts to make their country of destination into their own home. This chapter will argue that theatrical practices, operating at a local/micro level, are best placed to facilitate the process of a transnational/transcultural neighbourhood, because the performative space as a communal place can transform strangeness, a condition affecting much of the migrant experience, into familiarity. This will be documented by critically assessing the experience of researching, interviewing migrant communities in the North Essex area, writing the play, and the play itself within the context of ethnographic/verbatim theatrical practices.

Contextualising the project within the field of theatre, as will be explained later on, this project follows the footsteps of many theatrical projects that have investigated issues related to migration by using ethnography and verbatim theatre. However, in this regard, I can claim some originality: unlike many theatrical projects that normally follow the experiences of one migrant group at a time, mine dealt with different migrant groups and their relations at one given time. It is in the interaction between theory and practice where I believe this chapter makes the most unique contribution, first by taking recourse to emerging new definitions of home and home-making. Secondly, in the spirit of this edited volume, this chapter demonstrates how the positioning of the transnational neighbourhood as a microcosm allows for a nuanced understanding of the migrant experience, which refutes the binary discourse of strangeness/familiarity and articulates a discourse of interconnectivity among migrant communities. At a theoretical level, this investigation of the specific North Essex reality as transitional urban network will reflect to what extent the transnational neighbourhood can be equated with the concept of home, i.e. to what extent it equates to the "close interaction, indeed con-formation, of (the ideas of) home and community".[2] Home is, here, considered as an affect that has the capacity to be experienced as polycentric, thus, as attached to a point of origin as well as a destination. Through the lens of this definition of a polycentric notion of home and as connected to the idea of community, the transnational neighbourhood implies the interconnectivity among communities, and the co-habitation of different communities. By relating theory and practice, where ethnographic practices are considered at the centre of the debate around migration, this chapter will be divided into three different sections (plus a conclusion) plunging in and out of theory while explaining the project, its process, and outcomes. The first section introduces how the project came about and its context. The second section, divided into three subsections, will present the theoretical context, the strangeness/familiarity and the transnational neighbourhood as it equates with the notion of home as affect, i.e. (2.1) in relation to migration studies, (2.2) in

relation to theatre and in particular, (2.3) the role played by space in theatre. The third section, subdivided into four subsections, will present the project and the play, bringing in the theory by critically assessing (3.1) the research process prior and during the writing of the play, (3.2) the play itself, (3.3) the ethnographic/ verbatim approach of the project, and (3.4) commenting on the outcome of this project and the play.

1. About the Project: The Beginning

Before going into the details of the theoretical framework, I will talk about how the project came about, which will reveal its partial auto-ethnographic nature. The *Human Side of Migration* was conceived in the aftermath and in response to the UK's Brexit vote in June 2016, which had led me to question my own identity as an Italian migrant, who has lived her entire adult life away from her country of origin. Having made the UK my home as an adult and tried to assimilate to the British culture, the outcome of the referendum had suddenly made me aware of my own strangeness, as a European non-British passport holder. At this point, I became very much aware of my own dichotomy, between strangeness and familiarity, between feeling at home and feeling displaced. The referendum also coincided with my relocation to North Essex, to Colchester, a well-renowned pro-Brexit region. To my surprise, however, I noticed how multicultural North Essex is, with many migrant communities being settled in the area. By proxy, dealing with my own personal questions of identity, I decided to explore the migrant experience of others, surveying the experience of other first-generation migrants from this area. Originally, this project aimed to give a platform to marginalised communities, reduce their feelings of alienation, and encourage dialogue between those communities and other sections of society. By liaising with existing local migrant communities in the North Essex region, in particular the local Chinese, Polish, Syrian and Filipino communities, an intensive period of research over two months saw the following activities take place: testimonial gathering through interviews with members of each community (30 people were interviewed), followed by in-depth interviews with selected members from each community (10 in total), and one theatre workshop, involving University of Essex graduates who worked with selected members of each community (20 participants in total).

The interviews enabled the members of the migrant community to talk about their stories and their current situation, reflecting on the meaning of home and the process of home-making. The material of the in-depth interviews informed the initial writing of monologues created from the transcripts of the interviews,

based on four characters, who conversely were based on the four groups that were interviewed. These were shared in the workshop, which saw the participation of a core group of interviewees, who were invited to respond to the material. Their responses informed the further writing of the play, which was then rehearsed and workshopped with professional actors and presented as a staged reading at Mercury Theatre on 17 November 2017. The reading was then followed by an open discussion on the night, led by a panel made up of local councillors, representatives of each community, sociologists and LiFTs[3] researchers. In June 2018, one focus group comprising the core group of interviewees assessed the impact of their participation in the project on their sense of belonging, on the perception of home and homemaking. Themes that emerged during the interviews confirmed the duality I was experiencing between strangeness and familiarity but also the fluidity between the two. As will be further explored later on, the people I interviewed experienced both, but not all the time. Another element that emerged was the question of intercommunity relations, which inadvertently became a central concern of the play and affected the participating interviewees the most.

In the two years that followed, until the beginning of 2020, further research was carried out on the question of home and home-making, which looked into Sanja Bahun's edited volume *Thinking Home* and her forthcoming publication *Modernism and Home*. The concept of home and home as affect, which will be discussed at length later on, informed subsequent activities, which saw the theatrical experience being used as an educational tool to affect young people's understanding of migration and home. The educational material, combining the theoretical premises of Bahun's study and extracts from the play, was used to enable young people to understand experiences of migration, home and cultural identity; workshops were delivered to 150 pupils aged 6–13 at six schools in North Essex and Suffolk, which had either a strong interest in the performing arts and/or a highly ethnically diverse student population.

Unlike many other theatre projects, which focus on the representation of one community at a time,[4] this project brought together different migrant communities and, very importantly, also included European migrant communities, which are underrepresented in theatre and in the creative industries. As mentioned above, one of the main impacts of the process leading to the writing of the play, and the staged reading itself, for instance, as recounted in responses given by the core interviewees, was that this project highlighted the need to create interaction among communities. The interviewees recognised that the different communities do not often interact with one another and realised that this needs to happen. The project intentionally did not explore the interaction between migrants and the host country but focused on presenting the experience of people coming

from different countries in one space, thus representing the tapestry of a micro-cosm made up of interconnecting cultures.

2. Strangeness/Familiarity

2.1. Relation to Migration Studies

Having outlined the general premises of this project, this chapter will now ex-plore and analyse its theoretical premises and context, concerning the tension of strangeness/familiarity as connected to the migrant experience, the concept of home as equated with the transnational neighbourhood and how these relate to the theatrical medium and in particular the question of space and place. Strange-ness is a condition that is typical of the migrant experience. Graziella Parati talks about the location of strangeness, thus defining strangeness not only as a condi-tion but also as spatial entity:

> The location of 'strangeness' resides both in the country where their migration originated and where their migration took them. The location of 'strangeness' resides both in the destination culture that they inhabit and in the attempt to re-inscribe their selves within the pre-migration familiar context. Strangeness be-comes a marker for the changes in both who and what they are.[5]

The spatial (and temporal) dimension of migration has been part of conven-tional accounts of the migration experience, as Vince Marotta explains:

> In this bounded view, the migration experience comes to signify processes that challenge and disrupt the container model of society and its institutional and symbolic tools – citizenship and belonging. From a conventional perspective, for a migrant experience to reveal and distinguish itself from other experiences, it has to satisfy several preconditions: it has to have a spatial and a temporal dimension and must occur within a nation-state system.[6]

Hence, Marotta points not only to the disruptive nature of the migration ex-perience but also to the spatial dimension that contains it. This is not merely a physical space but is part of the geopolitically constructed nation-state system, which also extends to any idea of a 'transnational' migrant experience, affected by a prior existence of a nation-state system.[7] It is, however, beyond the nation-state system that we find the root of strangeness as part of a phenomenological process.

As cited in Marotta's article, which surveys major trends in the conceptualisation of the migrant experience, Alfred Schutz's phenomenology of the stranger has been adopted by many studies on migration as it "speaks directly to the nature of experience and its relation to knowledge construction."[8] The stranger, for Schutz,

> is the cultural other who attempts to assimilate into the host group; however, strangers find it difficult to assimilate because they do not share the taken-for-granted basic assumptions or world-view of host members.[9]

Whilst emphasising assimilation as playing an important part in the strangers' experience, Schutz also defines this experience as a disruption that forces migrants to question their worldview:

> immigrants have gone through a disruptive phenomenon; the stranger's previous self has been transformed through a self-reflective process of inquiry in which they reinterpret and rewrite past horizons and thus expand their knowledge base. Yet, when the stranger finally incorporates the host's scheme of meaning, expression and interpretation, the host's lifeworld becomes the lifeworld of the stranger.[10]

In this process of assimilation, according to Schutz, the passage from their lifeworld to that of the host country indicates that their condition of strangeness changes to one of familiarity, only when they leave behind their own lifeworld and adopt that of the host country. This means that in this process of assimilation, to some extent, to overcome their condition of strangeness, migrants need to reject their relation to their country of origin, which describes the passage from strangeness to familiarity as one of loss and rejection. This definition of the migrant experience, unlike Parati's, not only disregards the migrants' relationship to their country of origin but also places the life of migrants on a polarity between familiarity and strangeness, with any locality in between being one of self-questioning and disruption. The latter denies the possibility that the place in between strangeness and familiarity can be a positive one and also does not account for the migrants' attempt to make a home for themselves without totally leaving behind their attachment to their country and culture of origin.

In this regard, I find it useful to connect the migrant experience to an understanding of home and home-making. Such an understanding is provided by the interrelationship between home and community as presented by the edited volume *Thinking Home* by Sanja Bahun and Bojana Petric. This volume focuses on the connection between home and community, the "close interaction, indeed co-formation [of], (the ideas of) home and community"[11] and proposes the notion of home as an affect, which has the capacity to be experienced as polycentric,

thus, as attached to a point of origin as well as of destination. The emotional dimension of home and home-making considers home "as it interacts with human values and human rights in various communities."[12] Such a definition, applied to the migrant experience context, helps position it in a transnational neighbourhood, more fluid than as accounted for in the strangeness/familiarity binary.

In a forthcoming publication, Bahun goes into more detail about the definition of home as affect, first of all by defining affect as being "described as an embodied emotive response forged out of the subject's everyday relationship with the world; a mental processing of reality which excites pleasurable or unpleasurable sensations and feeds our 'moods' in environment". Most importantly, by reflecting on the concept of "affective atmosphere", as elaborated by Lauren Berlant, Bahun states that affect operates "as a discourse and a behavioural practice that interprets and produces that world itself – 'a form of social action' that creates effects in reality."[13] The fact that affect can create and influence change and as a social dimension applies well to the connection home and community. Quoting Mary Douglas' notion of home, Bahun defines it as "a specific space and deep time through an affective experience" and embedded in a community of individuals.[14] In other words, affect as a mental process, behavioural practice and social action creates interactive relations between home and community, between individual and collective, and due to their emotive nature as an "act of imagination"[15] such interactions, albeit unstable and unpredictable, are also fluid, polycentric and multidirectional.

Applied to the migrant experience, in their building up a sense of home, while assimilating the host culture, this describes the potential for migrants to form multidimensional emotional ties not only with the host community, but also with the many communities in the host country and with communities in their country of origin, thus generating further and extended communities that live and develop beyond national boundaries and geographies. This devalues strangeness and familiarity as categorical attributes to the migrant experience and proposes a continuous interaction between the two. Equating this with the transnational neighbourhood and the key focal points of spatiality, temporality and agency, i.e. beyond the binary of strangeness and familiarity, migrants can be considered to have a strong agency in determining the negotiations of both spatial and temporal realities of home and belonging, which are not stable but subject to continuous transformations. Thus, there could be possible periods where one prevails over the other, or both can coexist at the same time, mirroring the emotional complexities of human nature and the dynamic interaction between individuals and communities, all of which constitute most transnational neighbourhoods. It is through the lens of this definition of home that, in the spirit of this edited volume and the fluidity and openness of its definition, this adds another dimen-

sion to the transnational neighbourhood, further stressing the interconnectivity among communities, and the co-habitation of different communities.

2.2. Familiarity and Strangeness in Theatre

As we move on and consider theatrical practices, I consider the interconnection between strangeness and the familiar to be at the heart of tragedy, as we can see them clearly being played out in the definition of the tragic hero. I focus here on tragedy as a genre, and the tragic hero in particular, because even though I worked within the practices of verbatim theatre, in experimenting with genres, and in writing the play *Priority Seating* in particular, I consider its characters to be "tragic heroes" according to Paul Hammond's definitions of the "unhomely". In *The Strangeness of Tragedy*, talking about the tragic hero, Hammond refers to Freud's definition of the uncanny and reflects on how the *heimlich* [familiar, homely] and *unheimlich* [uncanny, strange] share "overlapping semantic fields, so that *heimlich* means both 'what is familiar and agreeable' and 'what is concealed and kept out of sight', and in this latter sense 'inaccessible to knowledge, hidden and dangerous' – and therefore *unheimlich*."[16] Most importantly, he explains that a better rendering of *unheimlich* is not the uncanny but "unhomely":

> The *unheimlich* describes the condition of being displaced; one's grasp of 'home' (*Heimat*) is undone, as the distinction between home and foreign is elided; one becomes divided or multiplied, as events seem to be repeated and time no longer seems to follow its normal course: man is no longer at home in the world.[17]

Hammond connects the notion of *unhomely* to that of the tragic hero, which is not only an abstract condition but one that encapsulates the essence of home and belonging, of losing one's own sense of origin and destination. However, I would argue that the above quote does not fully equate *unhomely* with strangeness but presents it as a condition whereby the distinction between strangeness and the familiar is blurred by a sense of multiplicity and divisions. Conversely, like the migrant, the tragic hero can experience simultaneously strangeness and familiarity and the tension between the two in a continuous process of self-questioning and self-discovery.

Even though Hammond emphasises strangeness as the condition of the tragic hero, he also attributes a spatial connotation to the notions of homely/unhomely.

> The space which we think of as home – and by space here I mean both geographical space and conceptual space, both the literal hearth and that framework of familiar assumptions which holds ourselves in place – such a space is labile; we

discover that our home ground is *unheimlich*, that a foreignness haunts the familiar. Tragic protagonists are displaced from their *heimlich* spaces, and find their identities fissured or multiplied.[18]

It is in this spatial connotation, resonating with Parati's locality of the migration experience, that again we find the connection with a multidimensional, polycentric notion of home (identity), which, again, in my view blurs the boundaries between strangeness and familiarity. Such a spatial connotation is relevant when we consider theatrical practices as inherently being space-bound, as will become clear later when referring to Chris Goode's notion of space in theatre.

In theatre and tragedy in particular, as mentioned above, strangeness and familiarity are at the heart of theatrical practices and the theorisation on the function of theatre, on whether it represents or does not represent reality. At two opposite poles of the theatrical tradition are Aristotle and, millennia later, German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht. Aristotle advocated the idea of mimesis, imitation of reality, thus suggesting that theatre should aim for familiarity on stage.[19] Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* [distancing/alienation effect], on the other hand, pushed for a process of defamiliarisation on stage, encouraging the audience's critical distance towards what was represented on stage.[20] Generally, Brecht's notion of theatre has affected much of experimental modern and contemporary theatrical practices. Vicki Angelaki, talking about the theatre of contemporary British playwright Martin Crimp, refers to the practice of "making strange" as part of producing theatrical innovation in terms of experimental forms of playwriting, whereby the familiar is rendered unfamiliar in the process of deconstructing reality and fiction on stage.[21]

Mimesis and defamiliarisation (or making strange) in theatre are not totally opposite practices. For instance, mimesis in tragedy does not mean that what we see on stage is real; mimesis implies imitation, which in turn implies fictionalisation. Furthermore, strangeness as a condition of the tragic hero could appear at odds with Aristotle's idea of mimesis, but as such it can be explained as a necessary transformational phase that not only changes the hero's life on stage but also the audience's perception of reality, through a process of "making strange" at an aesthetic and dramaturgical level. The idea of catharsis, of purification, is the product of this process of defamiliarisation, of rendering the familiar strange. In this regard, Aristotle's idea of tragedy shares some similarities with Brecht's theatre.

Notions of strangeness and familiarity can also be equated with the reality/ non-reality tension in theatre. Closer to this project and the writing of the play, I cannot but discuss strangeness and familiarity equated with the reality/non-reality tension in connection with verbatim theatre, whose "claim for veracity"[22] has been questioned by scholars and theatre practitioners. This will be discussed

later on in reference to the research and writing process of this project, which embraced veracity (familiarity) but, in a similar vein to Martin Crimp, also welcomed experimentation, thus strangeness, here intended as "strange making" on an aesthetic and dramaturgical level.

2.3. Space and Place in Theatre

Going back to the notion of home as a spatial concept and the migrant experience as locality, when we talk about theatre, one cannot avoid referring to the connection between theatre and space, i.e. the performative space. Famous theatre-maker Peter Sellars talks about theatre as connecting communities, with the potential to create shared spaces: "The act of making theater is the act of recognizing, affirming, extending, imagining, and re-affirming a community or, possibly, communities. Metaphorically at first, and then literally and tangibly, theater is the creation of newly shared space on Earth."[23] In *The Forest and the Field*, Chris Goode references the objection by poet Keston Sutherland in his rehearsal that "[p]eople don't live in spaces […] [t]hey live in places",[24] suggesting the idea that any performance space is also a place, with a context. Goode refers to John Cage's famous composition from 1952, *4'33"*, which demonstrates that not even the emptiest of spaces are devoid of total silence, but are inhabited by background sounds. By focusing on the notion of places rather than spaces in theatre, unlike Peter Brook's idea of 'Empty Space',[25] Goode highlights how the performative space is never a neutral space.

Connecting to the concept of home as affect, this definition of space as an inhabited space full of noises, connotations and pre-meanings – the assumption that as there is no silence, there is no no-meaning – suggests that home or homes are places rather than spaces full of connotations even before we start to inhabit them. Furthermore, if home is a place created by the interaction of communities and people, home is never devoid of meaning. Thus, equating with the idea of place, transnational neighbourhoods are inhabited places formed by the migrant experiences that simultaneously produce familiarity from strangeness, and strangeness from familiarity. This occurs in their attempt to make a home for themselves, by filling their new homes with meanings, while having to negotiate with the pre-existing meanings of those spaces, thus continuously negotiating between strangeness and familiarity. These meanings and connections are created by the microcosm of communities of individuals, not only by the macrocosm of the social, cultural structures and by and large the political structures of the nation-system. Thus, transnational neighbourhoods imply connections between communities at the micro level of communities rather than at the macro level of cultural and national systems, where a sense of home as affect is formed and in-

forms much of the migrant experience. Working at a micro level, theatre further empowers this microcosm of interactions, creating a shared place, a common ground facilitating the polycentric and multidimensional discourses and interactions among communities.

3. The Human Side of Migration

3.1. The Research Process

The project exploited the potentiality of theatre as a catalyst for interaction by employing an ethnographic approach, collecting and exploring real life experiences through a process of audio-recorded face-to-face verbal interviews. The initial sets of interviews were carried out mainly in groups and offered me a general sense of the migrant experience in each community group. These were followed by in-depth interviews with individuals. Some of them ended up forming the core group of participants, who followed through the full process. Such an approach varied, though, according to the accessibility to individual community groups. For instance, accessibility to the Chinese, Filipino and Syrian communities was facilitated by existing organisations, such as Refugee Action Colchester, Colchester Chinese Organization and the Catholic Parish of St Helena and St James the Less. Furthermore, these three groups seemed eager to participate and easy to reach. For the Polish community, even when contacted through the parish, reluctance to participate meant that I only had two interviews with two different individuals. The paucity of Polish interviewees did not greatly affect the outcome of the project, since my intention was not to give a representative portrayal of the migrant experience but to create a sharing opportunity. In fact, the stories that were selected for the play were those from individuals who were most eager to share, because they believed in the process and also felt the need to interconnect with others from other communities.

Coincidentally, the stories selected were unique and distinctive, and even though all of them were from first-generation migrants, they represented different waves of migration. The Chinese interviewees had moved from Hong Kong to the UK in the 1950s. The Filipino interviewee had moved in the last 20 years, the Polish interviewee in the last 10 years, with the Syrian interviewee being the most recent. Even though they had experienced some form or another of discrimination, most of them had made the UK their home and were settled in the urban community. This was not the case of the Polish experience, whose responses, possibly affected by the Brexit vote, reported accounts of serious discrimination. Similarly, the Syrian refugees expressed uncertainty about their fu-

ture and talked about the trauma of having to flee their country of origin, which affected how they felt about their settling in the UK.

As for the question on the notion of home (Do you miss your country of origin? What does home mean to you?), such differences were also reflected in the answers. One of the main Chinese respondents, who migrated to the region in 1950s, felt settled but ambivalent about his country of origin, in between nostalgia and forgetfulness:

> Because I was basically bought up, I spent my teens in Hong Kong, I'm still very nostalgic of Hong Kong. It doesn't mean I want to go back and live there, but I always regard Hong Kong as part of my life. But increasingly, I've found that I have less of an affiliation with Hong Kong than I do with I think Colchester. For me, it's also a bit different. My children are born here. My grandchildren are here. This is very much my root now. I regard my present home as my home. Hong Kong is a place that I have a lot of history with. I would never forget about Hong Kong.

The main Filipino respondents (wife and husband) expressed a more ambivalent feeling towards the UK as the host country and a stronger attachment to their country of origin:

> I still think that I'm an immigrant. Because I'm a foreigner, because of my colour, or whatever race for me. I still think I'm from the other country. Sometimes I just stop thinking that I'm an immigrant here because we already received our nationality. It's like you've been accepted in a family community, but if you're experiencing things like racism and other things, it will come back again that you're just an immigrant.

In one of their final comments both husband and wife said, "Yeah, of course. There's no place like home", referring to their country of origin.

Whilst expressing anger towards the UK as their host country, interestingly, the main Polish respondent also expressed quite ambivalent feelings towards their country of origin:

> The thing is, when I go home… I don't travel a lot home. I can see the sadness of the people that's on the street. I can see development. My home place is completely different than it was 13 years ago. But I can see the sadness and those people are not really happy.

The main Syrian respondent also avoided directly expressing a sense of attachment towards either the host country or the country of origin. Possibly as a reac-

tion to the destruction of their home and the experience of war and conflict, they expressed a need to look forward to the future without defining what the future might bring:

> I can't tell you about the future. I think different now. Home is home. My child is my future. The most important thing is not to be stubborn, what you think is right might not be later on. Now I feel much better. I can't describe what it is like but even if you go through darkness, people need to move on to see beyond. You need to push and go on.

It is quite telling that the Syrian respondent equates the future with their current family, their son; their sense of home is connected to affects, to family relations – in this case not the family they left behind but their present family, their off-spring, who in their minds represent the future and the future is what matters to them.

The ethnographic research did not aim to paint a macro-level picture of the migrant experience and as such the above responses cannot be taken as representative of all migrant experiences, not even of those living in North Essex. However, in attempting to draw a general picture, the experiences of the selected individuals are not dissimilar to those I interviewed in group sessions. As a general rule, with the exception of the Polish respondents, at the beginning of the interview process most of them said that they felt settled in the host country, yet when digging deeper, talking about some rare yet still quite vivid incidents of discrimination, they expressed some unease about their sense of belonging. An important aspect that transpired was their ability to experience home as an affect and multiple homes, through the multiple connections to several communities (work-related community, their children's school, local organisations, connection with their country of origin, etc.). All these elements were integrated in the writing of the play. Before going into detail about the artistic choices, which will explain how the original interviews were integrated into the script, I will talk, first, about the play and the draft presented at the staged reading, and then will discuss the context of the ethnographic approach and verbatim theatre.

3.2. Priority Seating

The play presents four characters on an imaginary train back to the UK (possibly the Eurostar from France). On this train, there is only one seat and an inanimate/non-speaking character is sitting in it. The premise of the play, and one of the connotative thematic layers, is that the non-speaking inanimate character is the only character occupying the only seat in the carriage. As given away in the title,

the dystopian setting of the play is that the world of the play represented here is one where priority rights (access to seating in the train) are given only to those with privileges, due to the lack of resources. The latter equates migration with a society that is unequal in the attempt to symbolically articulate the fact that hatred against migrants is, in some cases, caused by situations where resources are deemed to be scarce. The social backdrop is clearly presented by having the inanimate/non-speaking character on stage sitting in the only seat in the carriage and by a voiceover in the first scene of the play, a loudspeaker announcement explaining the priority system with absurdist humour. This setting plays an important part in creating conflict among the four characters and dramatic tension, as, with the exception of John Carlo, everyone (we have a heavily pregnant woman, a physically disabled woman and a frail elderly man) is in need of a seat yet is denied this during the journey; thus, the lack of seating becomes a point of contention.

Besides the fictional setting, each character, to the greatest possible extent, has been moulded by proxy on individual respondents, while representing the four migrant groups. Saya is a Syrian pregnant woman who is the odd-one-out as she has lived in the UK for the least amount of time, thus representing a new migrant and the refugee experience. Echoing the Polish respondents' discontent, Agusia, a Polish woman who has lived in the UK for 10 years, is really unhappy about her situation and suffers from a physical disability, used as a marker of her displacement. Cheon, an elderly Chinese man who moved to the UK from Hong Kong in the 1950s and who is married to an English woman with children and grandchildren, represents one of the earliest post-war migration waves. John Carlo, a Filipino man who is married with three children, works as a carer/nurse and has lived in the UK for over 20 years, is the only one without any particular physical condition that would make the impossibility of sitting down during the journey really unbearable.

In terms of the basic plot, the train is stalled, and the characters start talking about their experiences as migrants. They debate why they cannot sit in the only seat, but as they begin to realise the train cannot move forward, they start blaming one another. Agusia thinks that Saya is the reason why they are not allowed back into the UK. The men try to defend Saya, but they become more and more frustrated with the situation. Cheon tries to dispose of the inanimate/non-speaking character, but the train seemingly derails. Expressing satisfaction with his situation as a migrant at the beginning, John Carlo also becomes increasingly upset and tells stories of how he has been discriminated against on the basis of his skin colour and by the authorities. At the end, there is some sort of reconciliation between Agusia and Saya, as Agusia realises that she has only projected her anger about the situation onto Saya. The play ends with the characters left in limbo, and the question remains whether they reach their destination.

3.3. Verbatim Theatre and Ethnographic Approach

As mentioned above, I chose an ethnographic research approach working within the genre of verbatim theatre and documentary theatre, while also embracing experimentation on an aesthetic and dramaturgical level. An ethnographic approach is often used in theatre-making, sometimes with the intervention of the ethnographer;[26] and like in the case of this project, with the involvement of the writer themselves. Generally, what is produced on stage are verbatim accounts of the words used by interviewees themselves, not merely a version of their stories:

> Ethnographic theatre is, in its simplest terms, theatre that uses actual voices and real stories to create a play, either through the research of the writer or through the involvement of participants in the actual script […] Verbatim theatre is often linked with ethnographic theatre. In verbatim theatre, participants of a community are interviewed and their actual words are used in the script.[27]

The scope of verbatim theatre is to represent authentic truthful stories on stage, thus voicing the experiences of the people and community they are trying to represent. However, scholars and theatre-practitioners have questioned the authenticity of this process:

> By acknowledging that the very process of transposition of reality onto the stage will throw up its own limitations and potential accusations on the grounds of 'manipulation of facts', it is possibly more honest to once again seek to stay faithful to the language of theatre which renders the real-life story into a metaphorical framework, rather than to maintain a claim to complete authenticity. […] [W]hat is much more important is for the theatre artist/interviewer to engage epistemically on a number of levels with what is being related to them both verbally and non-verbally by their interviewee so that they can find an appropriate theatrical translation for it.[28]

It is in agreement with this view that as an ethnographer/writer I was an active listener and observer, and created a relationship with the respondents. It is in this vein that I created a fictional framework, and it is in this framework I inserted their stories, while slightly changing them and sometimes moving away from their exact wording. Having created a relationship with the respondents, I managed to involve them in the writing process, where I could check directly with them whether the slight changes made to their stories and the fictional framework were still close enough to their versions of facts, thus avoiding misrepresentations and enabling their stories to be heard in all their complexities and nuances. This sort of process was possible because, thanks to the ethnographic

approach and in the theatrical workshop, a shared common place was created where experiences were exchanged and my role was one not only of a distant observer but of an invested participant with my own experience of migration, who was looking for common ground with others with similar experiences to understand my own. To some extent, even if not using my own experience, there was an element of auto-ethnography that helped me connect to the interviewees and made it easy to find "an appropriate theatrical translation for" their experiences that worked at a dramatic level while respecting their veracity. Going back to the tension between strangeness and familiarity, one could argue that at the artistic and creative level the process of research and writing of the play exemplified the fluidity of familiarity and strangeness also on an aesthetic and dramaturgical level, thus (to use Angelaki's terms) "making their stories strange", while still allowing them to recognise them as their own and thus retain a sense of familiarity.

In the theatrical context, this is not the first and only play to deal with migration, but as I said at the beginning of the chapter, there are very few plays that connect different migrant communities. One play that comes close to *Priority Seating*, in terms of the variety of the migrant experience, is *The Container* (2007) by Clare Bayley, a play about refugees (two Afghans, two Somalis and a Turkish Kurd) stuck in a big container crossing Europe, which was staged in a container at the Young Vic in 2009 and in 2007 at the Edinburgh Fringe. However, the focus in this play is on the refugee experience, and even though the writer talked a lot to refugees (Hoby[29]), it is not a verbatim play.

In a similar way, Ros Horin's *Through the Wire* (2005), a verbatim Australian play about the detention of asylum seekers in Australia, deals with migrants from different countries, but mainly from Iran and Iraq, and like Bayley's play explores the condition of imprisonment, of forced detention, where migrants are on their journey of migration or have been stopped from pursuing it. Attracting much press coverage and also controversially failing to secure funding from the Australian government, this play is an interesting example of how theatrical and narrative strategies can manipulate verbatim theatre to great dramatic and to some extent political effect. Wake talks how it "blurs the boundary between theatre and reality through a series of textual, paratextual and performance strategies",[30] these being the ring-composition narrative[31] and the characters talking into microphones with their images projected onto the backdrop of the stage through a live feed.

Moving away from plays about migration, Owen Sheers' *Pink Mist* (2012) is a verse-drama about three young soldiers from Bristol who are deployed to Afghanistan. Not strictly verbatim, Sheers employed an ethnographic approach by interviewing soldiers and their families, which as material for the play was included alongside the medieval Welsh poem *Y Gododdin* in a lyrical dramatic composition.

These examples of verbatim and pseudo-verbatim theatre show very clearly that testimonial material can be often re-imagined through theatrical strategies for dramatic effect whilst still fulfilling, to different extents, the aim of giving voice to the voiceless, and above all of enabling audience to identify (familiarity) with realities other than their own (strangeness) through the theatrical shared place. In the case of *Through the Wire*, for instance, "realist aesthetic facilitated [audiences'] identification with asylum seekers".[32] In the case of *Priority Seating*, the main fictional element added to the verbatim account was the use of an absurdist situation as backdrop to the play: a train that cannot reach its destination in an unequal society and the presence of an inanimate mannequin/non-speaking character. The setting was inspired by Jean-Paul Sartre's *Huis Clos* (*No Exit*, 1944), an existentialist play about three unrelated deceased characters that are destined to argue, for eternity, about their own condition behind closed doors (in French legal terms *huis clos* means behind closed doors), which exemplifies an existential sense of entrapment. Furthermore, additionally some re-writing was needed in the dialogical exchanges between the characters (all the testimonials were gathered individually from each respondent). Sartre's play, which represents three characters at odds with one another, led me to add and create conflict, especially, between the two female characters, Agusia and Saya. This deviates slightly from the strictly verbatim/documentary model and is part of the formal experimentation of this play.

3.4. Comments on the Play

Going into more detail about the main artistic choices, I will explain how strangeness/familiarity tensions and home as an affect with a polycentric nature are articulated in the play. The play follows a two-act structure, which is used to create a journey, a progression, which works at both an aesthetic and a narrative level between reality and the theatrical, between verbatim and non-verbatim, between the use of long monologic speeches, dialogical exchanges, and in Act 2 a totally scripted poetic interlude. Inspired to some extent by Horin's play, which shifts between reality and the theatrical (the stories of the people she interviewed and the manipulation of these stories for the theatrical spectacle), in *Priority Seating* the first act presents the characters in the realistic setting of a train carriage (absence of seats and the presence of the inanimate/non-speaking character already hint at the oddity of the situation) and they are engaged in long monologist expositions about their experiences of migration. Developing the conflicts that had started to emerge in the first act and in the attempt to remove the inanimate/non-speaking character from the only seat, the second act presents more clearly a dystopian world, with the setting being gradually destroyed till the final de-

railment of the train. Stylistically, in the second act more dialogic interactions take place and the absurdist setting is more prominent. It is in these dialogic interactions that I as a writer had to intervene, create and add to the testimonials gathered during the research period. Thus, this means that in the second act more creative interventions had to be applied and were less close to the verbatim accounts. In scene 3 of Act 2, all characters are engaged in a slow dance accompanied by a poetic interlude. In this regard, the transition between the two acts marks a passage from familiarity to strangeness. However, such a passage is never fully complete, as much of the text and the stories from the respondents' account are still recognisable even in Act 2.

The strangeness/familiarity tension is part of the symbolic journey of the characters: at the beginning, most of the characters are familiar with this journey; they have taken this train many times. But then the train stalling makes the journey more and more strange to them. The strangeness between the characters creates conflict, as we see Agusia accusing Saya, the outsider, of being the reason why the train stalls. It is then, through the process of sharing their accounts, of finding their common ground, that familiarity is experienced, as they also realise that they are involved in the same situation together. The recognition that they are all in it together is the core message of the play and the main outcome of the project. The common shared space facilitated by the ethnographic and theatrical experience had created a meeting place for intercommunity relations. In the end, through the theatrical workshop, the staged reading and the follow-up focus group, the different participants interacted together, started to share thoughts and ideas and found common ground. It is no coincidence that one of the main impacts of the project was that the participants realised that more connections among the different migrant communities in the urban setting of North Essex were needed. To some extent, the play's narrative mirrors this process: in the same way that the respondents had found common ground throughout the process, the characters also realise that despite their differences, they all share similar experiences and are in the same situation together. The sameness and similarities among migrant experiences were also part of Horin's play, which, however, focused mainly on the refugee experience and did not show much conflict between the characters. Thus, I can claim that this project goes further than Horin's.

Conclusion

By bearing in mind the parallel characters of the play and the migrant intercommunity relations, one can also draw conclusions about the translational neighbourhood as equated with the concept of home and home-making when

considering the question of place and agency. Similarly to Bayley's container, it is important to notice that the space, the setting of a moving train, is not a fixed place; similarly to both Bayley's container and Horin's detention camp, the train in *Priority Seating* also exemplifies a condition of entrapment, a condition that, unlike in Bayley's and Horin's plays, the characters only become aware of later on. The in-betweenness and the moving nature of the setting are at odds with the fixed urban place, the microcosm of the research process. This is also at odds with the respondents' situation, which in most cases, having made North Essex their new home, fluctuates between familiarity and strangeness. Furthermore, beyond its apparent liminality, the train is not an empty space but is a place with pre-established connotations, exemplified by the inanimate/non-speaking character sitting in the only seat in the carriage, whose meaning is expanded by the voiceover referring to priority privileges. The latter is challenged literally and allegorically by the characters, whose needs/wants are to recreate a sense of comfort, make this place their own, make themselves at home.

Beyond the destruction of the place, the disappearance of the inanimate/non-speaking character and the dismantling of the only seat can also be interpreted as the characters' ability to take over the space by deconstructing its own premise as a place, which at the beginning was marked by control and inequality. Even though they cannot escape this situation of entrapment, they find a way to establish their own sense of home and belonging, where home, understood as an affect, is the place created by personal and emotive experience. Despite the characters complaining that they could have taken advantage of the fact that the inanimate/non-speaking character had gone in scene 9 of Act 2, conversely, by not taking the seat, they did not submit to the pre-imposed condition where comfort is only possible by sitting on a given chair. The fact that they end up sitting on the floor means that they chose to create comfort for themselves, on their own terms. Going back to the parallel characters of the play and the migrant intercommunity relations, through the second act and the ending, the theatrical experience still ends up mirroring the respondents' experience of home, which fluctuates between familiarity and strangeness, is pluridimensional and above all is connected to a community of individuals. The characters in the play not only find common ground but also create a sense of community.

Thus, while the train signifies a reclaimed and almost atemporal transnational place (a space that transcends national borders and also is not tied to specific temporal conditions) symbolising the migrant experience and the agency of migrant communities in their never-ending journey of resilience, of continuous adapting and responding to constraints, the project has given migrant communities agency and a common place to explore their common grounds. This is thanks to the power of the theatrical experience, which can create a shared space for intercon-

necting communities. It is through this process that one can see the potential of transnational neighbourhoods as a discourse that is fluid and polycentric and can also empower migrants beyond the binary of strangeness and familiarity. Furthermore, by focusing on one microcosm – such as the North Essex region as a transitional urban network, a place on the margins, away from the main cosmopolitan centres – such a discourse can overcome binaries and allow for a more nuanced understanding of the migrant experience not as a monolithic entity but as a meeting of individuals and communities. The positive responses to the reading and to the following educational activities, forming a 2021 REF Impact case study, have explored this further and with future plans for a full production and regional tour of the play, which has been re-written since, the hope is to continue building positive discourses around transnational neighbourhoods and the notion of home, now more important than ever in a post-Covid-19 and post-Brexit society.

Notes

1. This project was awarded with the Arts Council Grant of the Arts (England) and ESRC Impact Acceleration Account 2017.
2. Bahun, Sanja, and Bojana Petric (2018): Homing in on Home. *Thinking Home: Interdisciplinary Dialogues,* edited by Sanja Bahun and Bojana Petric. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 14–22, 14.
3. The Department of Literature, Theatre and Film Studies.
4. In a recent publication, Cox, Emma (2014) *Theatre and Migration*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, examples are given of theatre pieces that deal with diverse migrant groups but focus only on the refugees and asylum seekers.
5. Parati, Graziella (2013): *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 129.
6. Marotta, Vince (2020): The 'Migrant Experience': An Analytical Discussion. *European Journal of Social Theory* 23(4), 591–610, 597.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 600.
9. Marotta, Vince (2012): Theories of Strangers: Introduction. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 33(6), 585–590, 585.
10. Marotta (2020), 602.
11. Bahun and Petric (2018), 14.
12. Ibid.
13. Bahun, Sanja (forthcoming 2022): *Modernism and Home*, 12.
14. Ibid., 14f.
15. Ibid.

16. Hammond, Paul (2009): *The Strangeness of Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 5.

17. Ibid., 6.

18. Ibid., 6f.

19. Aristotle & Kenny, A. (2020) Poetics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

20. Brecht, Bertolt (1964): *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, translated by John Willet. London: Methuen Drama.

21. Angelaki, Vicky (2012): *The Plays of Martin Crimp: Making Theatre Strange*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

22. Hammond, Will, and Dan Steward, eds. (2008): *Verbatim, Verbatim : Contemporary Documentary Theatre*. London: Oberon, 6.

23. Cox, Emma (2014): *Theatre and Migration*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Kindle edition, 117.

24. Goode, Chris (2015): *The Forest and the Field: Changing Theatre in a Changing World*. London: Oberon, 51.

25. Peter Brooks' *The Empty Space* (1968); this also contradicts Michel de Certeau's idea that "space is a practiced place." Cox (2014), 154.

26. Summerskill, Clare (2020): *Creating Verbatim Theatre from Oral Histories*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 12.

27. Wiltshire, Kim (2015): *Writing for the Theatre*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 158.

28. Radosavljevic, Duška (2013): *Theatre-Making: Interplay Between Text and Performance in the 21st Century*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 137.

29. Horby, Hermione (2009): The Container – Young Vic. TheObserver.co.uk (19 July).

30. Wake, Caroline (2013): To Witness Mimesis: The Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics of Testimonial Theatre in Through the Wire. *Modern Drama* 56(1), 102–125, 107.

31. Whereby the first and final scenes both portray a particular element (event, object, person, phrase, etc.), the second and second-last scenes both depict another element, the third and third-last scenes yet another element, and so on, all the way into the narrative's centre. Ibid., 107.

32. Ibid., 118.

Works Cited

Primary Literature

Bayley, Claire (2007): *The Container (NHB Modern Plays)*. London: Nick Hern Books.

Horin, Ros (2004): *Through the Wire*. Unpublished manuscript.

Mazzilli, Mary (2017): *Priority Seating*. Script available from the HEI on request. Link to the reading of the full play, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOhhOt-p8F4&feature=youtu.be. Accessed 7 July 2021.

Sartre, Jean-Paul (1989): *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. New York: Vintage International.

Sheers, Owen (2013): *Pink Mist*. London: Faber & Faber.

Secondary Literature

Angelaki, Vicky (2012): *The Plays of Martin Crimp: Making Theatre Strange*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Aristotle & Kenny, A. (2020) Poetics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bahun, Sanja (forthcoming 2022): *Modernism and Home*.

Bahun, Sanja, and Bojana Petric (2018): Homing in on Home. *Thinking Home: Interdisciplinary Dialogues*, edited by Sanja Bahun and Bojana Petric. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 14–22.

Brecht, Bertolt (1964): *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic,* translated by John Willet. London: Methuen Drama.

Brooks, Peter (2008): *The Empty Space*. New York: Penguin.

Cox, Emma (2014): *Theatre and Migration*, with a foreword by Peter Sellars. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Kindle edition.

Goode, Chris (2015): *The Forest and the Field: Changing Theatre in a Changing World*. London: Oberon.

Hammond, Paul (2009): *The Strangeness of Tragedy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hammond, Will, and Dan Steward, eds. (2008): *Verbatim, Verbatim : Contemporary Documentary Theatre*. London: Oberon.

Horby, Hermione (2009): The Container – Young Vic. TheObserver.co.uk (19 July).

Marotta, Vince (2012): Theories of Strangers: Introduction. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 33(6), 585–590.

Marotta, Vince (2020): The 'Migrant Experience': An Analytical Discussion. *European Journal of Social Theory* 23(4), 591–610.

Parati, Graziella (2013): *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Radosavljevic, Duška (2013): *Theatre-Making: Interplay Between Text and Performance in the 21st Century*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Summerskill, Clare (2020): *Creating Verbatim Theatre from Oral Histories*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge.

Wake, Caroline (2013): To Witness Mimesis: The Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics of Testimonial Theatre in Through the Wire. *Modern Drama* 56(1), 102–125.

Wiltshire, Kim (2015): *Writing for the Theatre*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.