

The Times They Are A-Changin'

Black and Asian Drama in Britain

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When I was asked to write about Black and Asian Drama in Britain in August 2018, it immediately raised the question of what had happened since I worked on *Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights in Britain* (Cambridge University Press) in 2003, then – surprisingly - the first volume on this topic in the UK. The ‘war on terror’ was in full swing at that time, and anti-Muslim sentiments were being fuelled on many fronts, but much, including Brexit, had not begun to happen. In 2018 we confront a different scene – politically, socio-culturally, economically. Globalization has taken many turns, including the expansion of the Chinese sphere of influence, the addition of Eastern Europeans as the ‘new others’ within the UK – new others here meaning a social group that is variously vilified in public discourse, the media, and political efforts seeking to extrude these others. The politico-cultural focus, which in 2003 was on

‘Black and Asian’, is, from within the UK public sphere, no longer so firmly on those communities - except when it comes to gang-related knife crime in London, or mass sexual abuse of young white girls by men of Pakistani and other ‘Asian’ descent in the north of England¹

This shift in focus is also evident in the theatre scene where in 2018 we see, for instance, the Royal Court Theatre offering an extremely interesting, sold-out, short season (4-6 Dec. 2018) on ‘New and Now: Plays from China’² to be followed by a strongly multi/mixed cultural program in the spring/summer of 2019 that includes the play *White Pearl* by Anchuli Felicia King, a New York-based, multidisciplinary artist of Thai-Australian descent. Meanwhile at the Arcola Theatre in Dalston, London, presided over by the fantastic Turkish-born artistic director Mehmet Ergen, there has been a significant push to promote the canon of Russian plays and



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plays by African and Arab playwrights as well as by writers of mixed descent such as Gabriel Gbadamosi, an Irish-Nigerian writer whose *Stop and Search* – the title speaks for itself in some ways – opens in the spring of 2019. The hyphenated identities of the playwrights mentioned above point to one of the impacts of globalization: identities are no longer as unitary as even in 2003 it was still possible to imagine them, even as the empire had been writing back for a long time³. Nowhere is this more evident than in *British East Asian Plays* (2018) where ‘British’ might mean ‘about Britain’ rather than living in Britain or being in some way of British origin. In this volume, too, ‘Asian’ is geospatially qualified to denote a region not thought of in 2003 when ‘Asian’ generally meant ‘South Asian’ in that still quasi back-to-empire manner

that, alarmingly, is being resurrected in current Brexit discussions where the ‘divorce’ from Europe is expected by some to be countenanced by a reunification with the ‘empire’ supposedly eagerly awaiting Britain’s return into the new embrace of new trade agreements.

The playwrights represented in *British East Asian Plays* are of diverse heritages: Chinese-Malay, Singaporean but living in New York or in London, Hong Kong born and adopted in the UK, mixed Chinese-English, etc. Many represent a first generation that no longer consider themselves as such – the idea of generationality in migration having itself become unmoored by global mobility trends that invite and incite different dispositions towards mobilities. This is evident not least in

two plays in this volume which deal with transracial adoption: Lucy Chau Lai-Tuen's *Conversations with my Unknown Mother* and Joel Tan's *Tango*. Transracial adoption as a concern has come to the fore only in the past ten years and then mainly in the US, as such transracial adoptees have come off age. Lai-Tuen, herself such an adoptee, uses the trope of ghosts and hauntings in this play, a trope one finds in a number of cultures

that practise ancestor worship including Chinese ones, to explore the relationships between Michelle, a transracial adoptee from Hong Kong, her birth mother, her adoptive mother and the adoptive mother's mother. With the exception of Michelle, all are dead at the point in time when the play takes place. The play's multiple locations (Michelle's adoptive mother's house, her own flat, outside places, hell in various forms, etc.) and



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multiple conversations between Michelle and her mothers, between Michelle and her grandmother, between that grandmother and Michelle's adoptive mother, between the two mothers – which may either be in Michelle's head or psychically 'real' – reflect the complexities of the decisions made and effects created by the women involved. They also reveal the gap between intention and outcome. As is common in adoption scenarios, the focus at the point of adoption is on the parents' desire and needs⁴ but it is the adopted child, the central character in this play, who lives the consequences of that action perhaps most fully. Rather oddly, the adoption of Michelle is motivated within the play by the adoptive mother's dislike for heterosex, coupled with her desire for a submissive female child she can raise in her own image. But as the adoptive mother herself as a child proved difficult and resistant, so Michelle does not turn out to be the submissive daughter her mother wanted. Both Michelle and her adoptive mother Mary feel unloved by the mothers who raised them though for different reasons. Mary's mother Betty lost many children in childbirth and mourned them – from Mary's perspective at the expense of paying attention to her living daughter. Michelle thinks her adoptive mother was not maternal: kind, warm, cuddling. I found the motivation for this adoption rather odd – though of course there are many reasons for adopting. Adopting

from China was quite common among UK feminists in the 1990s (Jacqueline Rose is just one example here) but such adoption was not commonly motivated in the ways described in this play. It often arose from complex personal reasons but also socio-ideological commitments that do not form part of this play. Heterosex disgust as a motivating factor in adoption occurs more commonly in writings in western cultures from the 1970s or early 1980s and often relates back to a pre-feminist age when women were by law and convention compelled to submit to the sexual demands of their husbands. However, the play speaks powerfully to the alienation generated by transracial adoption for the adoptee whilst at the same time suggesting that biological relations are not necessarily more binding or less alienating. Relationships are not a given, the play suggests, even if we yearn for this, encouraged by the sociocultural ideals of relationships that surround us.

Joel Tan's *Tango* picks up on transracial adoption within a context of gay parenting, a currently much discussed topic within queer and trans circles and studies (see e.g. Griffin and Leibetseder 2019). The play features a mixed-race gay couple from Singapore, Kenneth and Liam, who have migrated to Britain and adopted an English boy. This neatly counters the more common scenario of Lai-Tuen's play where people from the wealthy north adopt children from the

less wealthy south. The play also raises the nowadays often made point of elite migration: Kenneth, originally from Singapore and a banker, moves back to Singapore because he feels guilty about his elderly father Richard living alone there. Kenneth has the money to facilitate his transnational movements – back and forth. As an elite migrant he has choices, including to leave a homophobic culture that those who experience forced migration do not invariably have.

His father Richard had thrown Kenneth out when he discovered that he was gay, and like *Conversations...*, this play is partly concerned with cross-generational family relations. Inflected by the issue of homophobia and repressive politico-cultural regimes, the play both celebrates the young adoptive son's ability to stand up for his gay fathers in a confrontation with conservative agitators, and portrays the problematic of being politically engaged in contexts that are fundamentally hostile to queers. Kenneth and Liam end up going back to Britain, constructed as less homophobic than Singapore.

T*ango*, unlike *Conversations...* which is in many ways theatrically quite conventional, is theatrically typical of certain recent theatre work which utilizes and normalizes multi-media material, makes reference to internet activism and social media, as part of a performance grounded in realist theatre

conventions that reference the everyday to anchor the social issues they deal with. The question of individuals' relation to movement politics forms part of that scenario which is one of the serious political concerns of the 21st century.

This is also raised in Asif Khan's (2017) *Combustion*. Set in Bradford in the north of England during Ramadan, the play explores the question of political involvement and activism as a gendered and raced phenomenon. *Tango* centres on conflicts over gender identity and gender activism whilst *Combustion* explores race relations through a gendered lens. Samina, a feisty young Muslim woman, decides to go on a counter-demonstration, 'Bradford for Peace', to an English Defence march. However, the young men around her, her brother and his friends, try to stop her, quite prominently through asserting male authority over females in commandeering and belittling ways, e.g. 'You'll be staying indoors. Help mum out. Play with your make-up' (Khan, 2017, sc. 1: 31). Samina, however, outwits her brother and his friends and, in the course of the play, befriends an older English Defence supporter, Andy, who had a halal shop, whose daughter has married a Muslim, and who is finally convinced by Samina to join forces with the 'Bradford for Peace' movement. Whilst all of these latter points seem somewhat unlikely – even if the

underlying message that interpersonal contact is key to ‘changing hearts and minds’ is reasonable – perhaps the most interesting dimension of this play is that a young male playwright produces the image of a young Muslim woman who navigates the constraining and at times outrightly sexist attitudes of her male peers successfully and is constructed as cleverer and more politically competent than they. This play, like *Tango*, considers the issue of citizen activism and suggests that it is a successful strategy for change – with the English Defence supporter emerging as the carrier of that change, a rather optimistic take in a time when nationalism and right-wing populism are on the rise.

Ambreen Razia’s (2016) *The Diary of a Hounslow Girl* (henceforth: *Diary*), like *Combustion*, is partly concerned with growing up in an ethnic minority community in contemporary Britain. It was toured by Black Theatre Live, a company ‘committed to effecting change for Black, Asian and Minority ethnic touring theatre’ (see blacktheatrelive.co.uk). Here ‘Black’ in the theatre company’s name features as a political term to cover racialized and ethnicized minorities, a practice that has history in west London⁵. *Diary* in its title references well-known texts such as *Bridget Jones’ Diary* but also what in Britain is known as ‘Essex girl’ – the idea of a particular kind of young woman

identified with a geosocial terrain that she has to manoeuvre. In the introduction to the play Razia writes of her school days when she was surrounded by ‘beautiful, confident, streetwise hijab-wearing Muslim teenagers who often led double lives. . . try[ing to] balance their two co-existing worlds’ (Razia 2016: 12). Caught between an Islamic world that casts these teenage girls as needing to ‘preserve’ themselves and learn obedience, and their desire to explore love relationships, Shaheeda, the central character, aged 16, dreams of a life beyond Hounslow, a place she regards as boring. She wants to travel the world. She meets Aaron, a young man who is a tattoo artist and who seems to be interested in her dreams. Seduced by his interest in her and by the fact that he buys her a round-the-world ticket, she has sex with him and becomes pregnant. She decides to have the baby and stay put.

Shaheeda’s narrative is juxtaposed with that of various other young and older females: her sister who is getting married the traditional way via an arranged marriage, her mother who was left by her father to ‘hold the baby’ exactly as Shaheeda finds herself at the end of the play, another schoolgirl, Tracy Brooker, whom everybody slags off because she had a baby and dropped out of school, Shaheeda’s two best friends who are only interested in fashion, make-up and boys but not in education or anything else. The

play is interesting because it features a girl of Pakistani extraction getting pregnant when the conventional version of this, including for the stage, has been young Black women having that experience. But the play also makes uncomfortable viewing (and reading) since Shaheeda ends up precisely where she did not want to be, her dreams replaced by a problematic reality that grounds her in territory she did not want to inhabit. A surprising element is the imam in this play: having seemingly produced mainly fairly sanctimonious messages about girls 'need[ing] the most guidance' (Act 1.7: 35), he comforts Shaheeda when she confides in him by telling her that 'Allah has written everything already' (Act 3.1: 59). This may be construed as fatalistic and as absolving people of responsibility – the latter does occur to Shaheeda – or as reassuring her when she 'wants stability' (Act 3.1: 60).

Much current Black and Asian writing for theatre, as this article has shown, remains concerned with questions of identity and identification in the context of coming off age. This invariably involves gendered dynamics, most often within heterosexual scenarios. But the plays also and simultaneously engage with important contemporary issues in ways that unpick conventional understandings of such issues. A good example is Ery Nzaramba's (2017) *Split/Mixed* which premiered at the Edinburgh

Fringe Festival in 2016. Nzaramba came to the UK from Rwanda via Belgium, and this one-man show is partly autobiographical. It features Eddy, a Rwandan actor who tries to pick up a girl in an East London club by telling her that he is from Rwanda, hence – so he implies – a victim of the genocide there⁶. His story then unravels in a fashion akin to medieval morality plays, with Vanity and Conscience playing two perspectives on his life narrative and arguing over the pros and cons of presenting his story in this or that manner. Eddy is a witness to the genocide but not a 'survivor' – he lost his family to AIDS, not to the genocide. He thinks that using the survivor narrative will help him to get a girl, but the play suggests that this also keeps him stuck in the position of survivor. We might read his purposive identification with the survivor role as a symptom of melancholia and grieving for the family he did lose. But it is also one, the play suggests, that does not allow him to develop into a person in his own right.

The play is unconventional in casting Eddy as a middle-class Rwandan with a middle-class lifestyle and the possibility of escape when the genocide occurred. This countermands the association of refugee status with poverty, but also that of Rwandans as either survivors or perpetrators of the genocide in some unmediated fashion. Nonetheless, Eddy's emotional

dilemmas – as embodied by Conscience and Vanity – are no less convincing. The end of the play which repeats its beginning, as Eddy moves back into his role as one-man performer, is modulated by him saying to the girl that he is from Belgium, rather than from Rwanda, as he did in the opening scene. This signals his

is that the unmooring of ethnic identity from place – as the identities of many of the playwrights mentioned indicate – as much as the provisionality and multiplicity of residence in many cases as an effect of globalization (whether this be for economic, political, cultural or other reasons) produce new questions



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readiness to move on from the survivor persona he had taken on in order to ‘pull girls’. But it also reinforces the issue of the split as opposed to being mixed since he could with equal legitimacy say he is from Rwanda and/or from Belgium. Each identification tells only part of the story – though the question might also be, what exactly is the story here, or which story are we after? The point

about how to frame identities and identifications. As a phenomenon this contrasts interestingly and worryingly with the rise of nationalism across Europe. The question we might ask is: what will replace the question, ‘where are you from’.

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Endnotes

1 This topic is picked up in the play *Combustion* discussed below.

2 See <https://royalcourttheatre.com/whats-on/new-now-plays-china/>, accessed 5 Dec. 2018.

3 See B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin (1989) *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*. London: Routledge.

4 David Eng has written movingly about the issue of transracial adoption in the US (see with Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming 2018), *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

5 See, for example, Southall Black Sisters (at <https://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/about/sbs-timeline>, accessed 6 Dec. 2018).

6 Interestingly, BBC2 in late 2018 ran a series entitled *Black Earth Rising* which also dealt with the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide and featured a female survivor as the central character (see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0b-k8t10>, accessed 8 Dec. 2018).