

**A Sensory Journey into the Middle Ground:  
Interweaving Multiple Identities through  
Voice**

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## Abstract

This PhD documents and analyses my vocal practice of ‘interweaving’ (Fischer-Lichte, 2014) different languages and practices to create new pieces of music. The backbone of the submission is constituted by five newly-created performances, each telling stories of real or fantastical characters, and each developed in collaboration with artists and musicians from diverse backgrounds. This commentary explains how these performances are part of a deep investigation into vocal plurality within the dynamic potency of the ‘Middle Ground’ (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 2011), a metaphorical space without polarity and divisions, where movement is possible in multiple directions. My discussion engages with issues of personal identity as they resonate within hegemonic structures of power on national, international and ultimately global levels.

Three interconnected concepts are inherent in the processes of interweaving, as developed in my practice: Wandering (Travelling), Twilight (Immersing yourself in the Middle Ground) and Sensing (Reawakening the Senses). In combination, these shape my creative methodology for practice, as well as offering a framework to illuminate how I am thinking through my work. As experiences, and as lenses through which to examine what I have created, they are threaded through with an ethos of play and reflection. Where playfulness generates a mindset of fluidity, reflection articulates and grounds the transformative process. Through these processes my artistic voice has gained a new agency, which cannot but leave the spaces in which I work unaltered. Through my work I hope to transform that of others, and ultimately reach beyond our divisions to a place of new possibilities, even transcendence.

The five performances are available to view at [www.meritariane.com/research](http://www.meritariane.com/research).

## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>CONTENTS OF PORTFOLIO</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>DECLARATION</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: PROLOGUE</b> .....	<b>10</b>
PREMISE .....	10
MY BACKGROUND AND THE RESEARCH TRAJECTORY .....	11
VOCABULARY .....	14
RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THESIS AIMS.....	17
THESIS STRUCTURE .....	18
OUTCOMES AND PROCESSES .....	18
<b>CHAPTER 2: ETHOS AND PRACTICE</b> .....	<b>20</b>
THE OUTER JOURNEY .....	21
THE INNER JOURNEY.....	23
<b>CHAPTER 3: THE LANDSCAPE AND ITS ELEMENTS</b> .....	<b>26</b>
IDENTITY .....	27
LANGUAGE .....	29
VOICE.....	32
<b>CHAPTER 4: NAVIGATING THE LANDSCAPE</b> .....	<b>35</b>
WANDERING (TRAVELLING) .....	36
TWILIGHT (IMMERSING YOURSELF IN THE MIDDLE GROUND) .....	40
SENSING (REAWAKENING THE SENSES) .....	44
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.....	52
<b>CHAPTER 5: SWIMMING BETWEEN SHORES</b> .....	<b>54</b>
BACKDROP .....	54
<i>My Role in the Collaboration and Creative Process</i> .....	54
<i>Aims</i> .....	55
<i>Format of Submission</i> .....	55
THE PROJECT.....	56
WANDERING (TRAVELLING) .....	58
<i>Twilight (Immersing yourself in the Middle Ground)</i> .....	62
<i>Sensing (Reawakening the Senses)</i> .....	63

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.....	63
<b>CHAPTER 6: AFTER YEATS .....</b>	<b>65</b>
BACKDROP .....	65
<i>My Role in the Collaboration and Creative Process</i> .....	66
<i>Aims</i> .....	66
<i>Format of Submission</i> .....	66
THE PROJECT.....	67
<i>Wandering (Travelling)</i> .....	68
<i>Twilight (Immersing yourself in the Middle Ground)</i> .....	71
<i>Sensing (Reawakening the Senses)</i> .....	73
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.....	74
<b>CHAPTER 7: THUMBELINA .....</b>	<b>75</b>
BACKDROP .....	75
<i>My Role in the Collaboration and Creative Process</i> .....	75
<i>Aims</i> .....	76
<i>Format of Submission</i> .....	76
THE PROJECT.....	77
<i>Wandering (Travelling)</i> .....	78
<i>Twilight (Immersing yourself in the Middle Ground)</i> .....	80
<i>Sensing (Reawakening the Senses)</i> .....	81
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.....	83
<b>CHAPTER 8: WOMAN AT POINT ZERO .....</b>	<b>84</b>
BACKDROP .....	84
<i>My Role in the Collaboration and Creative Process</i> .....	84
<i>Aims</i> .....	85
<i>Format of Submission</i> .....	85
THE PROJECT.....	86
<i>Wandering (Travelling)</i> .....	88
<i>Twilight (Immersing yourself in the Middle Ground)</i> .....	90
<i>Sensing (Reawakening the Senses)</i> .....	92
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.....	94
<b>CHAPTER 9: MOONLARKING.....</b>	<b>96</b>
BACKDROP .....	96
<i>My Role in the Collaboration and Creative Process</i> .....	96
<i>Aims</i> .....	97
<i>Format of Submission</i> .....	97
THE PROJECT.....	98

<i>The Middle Ground</i> .....	99
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.....	105
<b>CHAPTER 10: EPILOGUE</b> .....	<b>106</b>
ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	107
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.....	110
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>112</b>
<b>APPENDIX</b> .....	<b>117</b>
PERMISSIONS: SWIMMING BETWEEN SHORES.....	118
PERMISSIONS: AFTER YEATS .....	120
PERMISSIONS: THUMBELINA .....	121
PERMISSIONS: WOMAN AT POINT ZERO.....	122
PERMISSIONS: MOONLARKING .....	124
PERMISSIONS: BIRDSONG & BORDERS.....	126
PERMISSIONS: CAROLINE BERGVALL'S WORK.....	127

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Maqam Hjaz Kar Kurd	p. 59
Figure 2: Maqam Hjaz Kar Kurd Variation	p. 59
Figure 3: Iqa' Nawakht	p. 59
Figure 4: Maqam Şaba	p. 60

## Contents of Portfolio

Swimming Between Shores	One hour	29. 04. 2015
After Yeats	10 mins	29. 07. 2015
Thumbelina	45 mins	26. 02. 2017
Woman at Point Zero	40 mins	13. 07. 2017
Moonlarking	25 mins	05. 07. 2019

## Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author of the written thesis. Whenever collaborators were involved in producing the performances, their roles are explicitly acknowledged. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.



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## Chapter 1: Prologue

I knew who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.<sup>1</sup>

### Premise

We live in a world where borders, divisions and differences are employed as political tools: promoted as means for generating safety, they are nonetheless used as weapons. Many people who have risked their lives to cross borders are marginalised or criminalised. But human migration is an inevitable part of global inequality and the ever-heightening climate emergency, which is throwing individuals and communities into crises of existence and/or identity. Yet migration, when freed from the harsh forces of injustice, can and has been an important way to explore and interweave cultures and to cultivate new connections to nature. Music in particular and the arts in general—powerful tools of interweaving languages, voices and identities—can offer responses and reflections on how to live in and engage with our constantly shifting identities and societies.

As a singer and composer of German/Egyptian heritage, my music deals with the inherent gaps, hybridities and pluralities of identity. Palestinian born, American educated scholar and literary critic Edward Said,<sup>2</sup> who famously laid the foundations of postcolonial studies in *Orientalism*, suggests that

For those of us who by force of circumstance actually live the pluri-cultural life as it entails Islam and the West, I have long felt that a special intellectual and moral responsibility attaches to what we do as scholars and intellectuals.<sup>3</sup>

While many artists and thinkers affected by postcolonial structures anywhere in the world are dealing with these urgent issues in their work, for me this responsibility entails instigating creative processes that can help us transform how we engage with our own and others' identities. The research-led performances created as part of this PhD demonstrate how a collaborative

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), 41.

<sup>2</sup> The act of identifying people highlights some of the complexity surrounding issues of identity. While one of the central concerns of this thesis is to avoid simplistic notions of—and introduce different ways of engaging with—identity, for purposes of clarity I have often opted to identify people by their cultural/national affiliation and/or profession, even though this inevitably feels reductive. Nationality can be a useful indicator of political and cultural awareness and sensitivities, taking into consideration potential conflicts between national and cultural affiliation (to my knowledge this does not apply to the people mentioned or quoted in this thesis). A profession, similarly, can be a useful way to indicate an area of expertise; many of those discussed here straddle, cross and challenge boundaries in their work, which I aim to indicate where possible.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), xvii.

practice of interweaving languages and artistic practices can model personal ways of harnessing the creative power of complex, contradictory and occasionally irritating identities that can resonate deeper in societal and political structures.

## My Background and the Research Trajectory

Situated between different cultures, languages, sounds and meanings, my personal and musical life is one of constant interweaving. Born in Germany to a Coptic<sup>4</sup> Egyptian father and a Protestant German mother, I now live in the U.K., having also spent time in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Egypt and Lebanon. My musical training encompasses classical western and Arabic music; my professional life is divided between performing, teaching and leading creative outreach and education projects in collaboration with musicians and artists from many different backgrounds.

As someone with plural belongings and many—often painful—experiences of otherness, I am often faced with questions about my identity and what I consider to be my home. Multiple affiliations are still problematic, as Amin Maalouf pointedly writes in *Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*: ‘Anyone who sets out, as I have done, a number of affiliations, is immediately accused of wanting to “dissolve” his identity in a kind of undifferentiated and colourless soup.’<sup>5</sup> I have found that people often find the need to reduce performers to a perceived cultural identity, as happened to me in a recent concert review: ‘Ariane’s singing is most at home in folk songs that use the improvisational ornaments of the Arabic *maqam*.’<sup>6</sup> Moreover, while as a performer, fluency in my musical languages is a prerequisite, my voice goes far beyond the languages I speak even while it is intimately shaped by them; my home is in my relationship with my voice, my breath, my body and the inner worlds of my imagination.

One of the most powerful outcomes of this research journey was overcoming the reductively binary way other people understood me, which I had also myself internalised. Another important outcome was the development of increased authorship and agency through engagement with other artists, and the realisation that another imposed division—performer/composer—had become irrelevant.

My research has been deeply inspired and shaped by the writings of Vietnamese filmmaker, writer, literary theorist and composer Trinh T. Minh-ha, especially her poetic and acutely political

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<sup>4</sup> The Copts, one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, form about 10-15% of the Egyptian population.

<sup>5</sup> Amin Maalouf, *On Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, trans. Barbara Bray (London: The Harvill Press, 2011), Kindle Edition, chap. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Bill Barclay, “Live Reviews: *Birdsong & Borders with Merit Ariane*, LSO St Luke's, London, July 5,” *Songlines* 150 (August-September 2019), 87. *Maqam* is the system of melodic modes used in Arabic and Middle Eastern music; I will elaborate on this later in the commentary.

meditations in *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*. Defying categorisation, her work cannot be contained within simple explanations, and I feel deep kinship with her statement: ‘I have always resisted the comfort of conventional categories. And my works are all sustained attempts to shift set boundaries, whether cultural, political or artistic.’<sup>7</sup> Further, Minh-ha’s concept of the Middle Ground has proven key for me to locate and articulate my practice:

Here, one is again easily reminded of the concept of the Middle Ground or the Meridian Way in Chinese theories of art and knowledge. Middleness in this context does not refer to a static center, nor does it imply any compromise or lack of determination. A median position, on the contrary, is where extremes lose their power; where all directions are (still) possible; and hence, where one can assume with intensity one’s freedom of movement.<sup>8</sup>

The term ‘interweaving’, coined by Erika Fischer-Lichte and her collaborators at the international research centre ‘Verflechtungen von Theaterkulturen/Interweaving of Performance Cultures’<sup>9</sup> at the Freie Universität Berlin, has been key in helping me to interpret, develop and frame my practice. A physical metaphor as opposed to an intellectual concept, it provided a powerful tool to illuminate and contextualise my research and collaborations, and disentangle them from the dominant East-West discourse:

Interweaving functions on several levels: Many strands are plied into a thread; many such threads are then woven into a piece of cloth, which thus consists of diverse strands and threads ... without necessarily remaining recognizable individually. They are dyed, plied and interwoven, framing particular patterns without allowing the viewer to trace each strand back to its origin.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here: immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event* (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2011), 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>9</sup> The German translation literally is theatre cultures; further, German does not have a term equivalent to the English word “performance”. Fischer-Lichte explains that “[w]hile in German-speaking theatre studies the word “Theater” encompasses all performing arts and cultural performances in a wider sense, in English-speaking theatre studies the word “theatre” merely designates dramatic theatre.’ Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Research programme – Second Funding Period,” *International Research Centre: Interweaving Performance Cultures* (2013), 4, accessed Sep 14, 2019. [https://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/en/v/interweaving-performance-cultures/about-us/application\\_procedures/IRC-IPC-Research-programme\\_-\\_second\\_funding\\_period.pdf](https://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/en/v/interweaving-performance-cultures/about-us/application_procedures/IRC-IPC-Research-programme_-_second_funding_period.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Fischer-Lichte, “Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures—Rethinking Intercultural Theatre: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism,” in *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures: Beyond Postcolonialism*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte, Torsten Jost and Saskya Jain (New York: Routledge, 2014), 11.

The concept was originally developed with regard to interweaving specific theatrical (performance) cultures (e.g. Japanese Noh theatre and Chinese Kunqu opera), as a politically and socially sensitive and astute alternative to the Eurocentric and outdated term ‘intercultural theatre’. Keenly aware of the ‘explicitly political and social dimension’<sup>11</sup> of any process of interweaving, Fischer-Lichte stresses how recognising the specificity of a theatre (or performance) culture is a ‘prerequisite for developing a theory “after post-colonialism”’<sup>12</sup> and helps to avoid ‘Western – non-Western dichotomies’.<sup>13</sup>

To situate my research, I have adapted and elaborated on the term so as to develop a framework, or creative methodology, which can be used either to instigate and/or illuminate and interpret creative processes. However, instead of referring to the interweaving of one distinct performance culture with another, I instead adapted the concept to the interweaving of specific components within my own practice and that of other artists working in similarly culturally complex contexts: the interweaving of musical and spoken languages and artistic practices through collaborative creative processes.<sup>14</sup> This, on the one hand, reflects a more holistic understanding of theatre as an integration of art forms, and on the other hand provides a useful conceptual tool for those artists who, like me, do not identify with a specific performance culture or tradition but with multiple cultures and/or languages (and often feel estranged to all of them).

As part of this framework, or creative methodology, I identified three main modes of interweaving, which I will discuss in depth in Chapter 4: Wandering (Travelling), Twilight (Immersing yourself in the Middle Ground) and Sensing (Reawakening the Senses). These concepts which, for me, clearly articulate key aspects of interweaving, were inspired by Trinh T. Minh-ha’s reflections on boundaries, borders crossing and the Middle Ground in *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*.<sup>15</sup>

The progression from Wandering to Sensing also reflects the larger trajectory, the metanarrative of my research: a journey that started concerned with the more visible, abstract, outer aspects of identity, progressed to a more nuanced understanding of identity, situated deeper in the body, only to then burst back out to connect with bigger issues. By definition, the notion of

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<sup>11</sup> “Project Description,” *International Research Centre “Interweaving Performance Cultures,”* accessed Sep 1, 2019. <https://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/en/v/interweaving-performance-cultures/about-us/project-description/index.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Fischer-Lichte, “Research programme – Second Funding Period.”

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that I do not apply the term interweaving to a generic idea of mixing two or more “cultures”, for example my German and Egyptian heritages, but look specifically at how the different spoken, musical and artistic languages interweave and interact as components in a creative practice.

<sup>15</sup> These terms are woven as key motifs into Minh-ha’s writing, however, are not explicitly highlighted as headings or chapter names. For reflections on Wandering (Travelling), see particularly pages 31-37 and 40-42. For Twilight (Middle Ground), see pages 61 and 70-75. For Sensing (Reawakening the Senses), see pages 42 and *Voice Over I* (pages 77 – 83).

interweaving dismantles reductive labels and boundaries; it allows for a more complex—potentially contradictory and confusing, but ultimately more open and accepting—understanding of our own and others’ identities:

For it is often the way we look at other people that imprisons them within their own narrowest allegiances. And it is also the way we look at them that may set them free.<sup>16</sup>

## Vocabulary

Before progressing into the thesis, I will briefly clarify the terminology I use, or avoid, throughout this commentary. The language linked with my practice is by its very nature entangled with politics and existing power structures and therefore needs careful consideration.

### East-West

I consciously avoid the inherently Eurocentric East-West division. ‘If you live in India or China, the “middle east” is in the west. The terminology is inextricably linked with a colonial legacy.’<sup>17</sup> Further, this term perpetuates the notion of ‘the west and the rest’, the idea that somehow ‘Western cultures are “universal” and non-Western cultures are “particular”’.<sup>18</sup> For this reason, I also use lowercase to spell ‘western’.<sup>19</sup>

### Exotic, Orient & Occident

Exoticism is part of the orientalist narrative that invests the oriental ‘other’ with a sense of longing and mysticism. Edward Said famously argued orientalism to be ‘a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’;<sup>20</sup> naming and exoticising the other, however innocently meant, maintains the status quo of the ‘superior’ west. Moroccan born, Sorbonne-educated philosopher and sociologist Abdelkebir Khatibi, acclaimed, like Said, for his ‘formidable theoretical critiques of the colonial condition’,<sup>21</sup> similarly grappled with these oppressive terms: ‘The Occident is part of me, a part that I can only deny insofar as I resist all the

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<sup>16</sup> Maalouf, *On Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, chap. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Eckhard Thiemann, Artistic Director of *Shubbak Festival*, text message to the author: Mar 22, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Fischer-Lichte, Torsten Jost and Saskya Jain, *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures: Beyond Postcolonialism*, iii.

<sup>19</sup> Practice of spelling used a.o. by Prof. Rachel Beckles Willson.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Said, “Orientalism,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 2006), 25.

<sup>21</sup> Françoise Lionnet, “Counterpoint and Double Critique in Edward Said and Abdelkebir Khatibi: A Transcolonial Comparison,” in *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, ed. Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011) 387, acc. Jul 15, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444342789.ch24>.

Occidents and all the Orient that oppress and disillusion me.’<sup>22</sup> Khatibi’s work, possibly even more than Said’s,<sup>23</sup> disrupts ‘all sorts of binary definitions of Self and Other, East and West’,<sup>24</sup> advocating the importance and utopian potential of ‘heterogeneity, heteroglossia, and heterophony – or to thinking with and in other languages as well as other voices’.<sup>25</sup>

#### Intercultural, Cross-cultural, Trans-cultural, Multicultural

I avoid problematic terminology such as multi-, inter-, cross- or transcultural, as it often plays into reductive, binary narratives by implying ‘a sharp division between ‘our’ and the ‘other’ culture’.<sup>26</sup> These terms presuppose and designate cultures as separate, homogenous and easily-distinguishable entities, which ‘can always be clearly separated from one another’,<sup>27</sup> ignoring how culture, by definition, is a constant morphing of identities and stories. Fischer-Lichte further points out how,

if we examine the use of the term ‘intercultural theatre’ in Western writing more closely, we make a striking discovery: The term always indicates the fusion of something Western and non-Western—not, say, of African and Latin American traditions or of different Asian cultures. This strongly implies a notion of equality that almost always requires the West to be involved.<sup>28</sup>

#### Hybridity

This term can be regarded as similarly problematic, as, again, ‘it seems that hybridization is only invoked when a Western and a non-Western culture are brought into contact’.<sup>29</sup> Fischer-Lichte further criticises its binary connotations:

This term, coined and originally used by biologists, presupposes that in this process two entities, which by their very nature are completely

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<sup>22</sup> Amine Khalid, “Double Critique: Disrupting Monolithic Thrusts,” *Textures - Online Platform for Interweaving Performance Cultures*, Mar 27, 2013, accessed Sep 10, 2019, <http://www.textures-platform.com/?p=2800>.

<sup>23</sup> See Lionnet, “Counterpoint and Double Critique in Edward Said and Abdelkebir Khatibi: A Transcolonial Comparison.”

<sup>24</sup> See Khalid Amine, “Double Critique: Disrupting Monolithic Thrusts.”

<sup>25</sup> Lionnet, “Counterpoint and Double Critique in Edward Said and Abdelkebir Khatibi: A Transcolonial Comparison,” 404. Interestingly, Lionnet argues that ‘Khatibi’s method of double critique is the philosophical equivalent of a material practice best described by a sewing or stitching metaphor used in the arts of weaving or quilting.’ (p. 392).

<sup>26</sup> Fischer-Lichte, “Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures—Rethinking Intercultural Theatre: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism,” 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

different, are brought together in order to generate a new kind of—  
biological—being.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, although these oversimplifying overtones are problematic, there have been highly discerning and useful discussions on the notion of the hybrid voice.<sup>31</sup> I therefore have decided to use this term, in acknowledgement of its plural undercurrents.

#### Fusion

I avoid the term fusion, due to its commercial overtones.

#### Side note on the compromises of a performing musician

While I am able to choose the terminology carefully within the confines of this commentary, the daily reality of funding applications and concert promotion makes it much harder to avoid problematic terms. The market demands that an artist's work fits into clear boxes and is easily classifiable, and buzzwords such as cross- and intercultural help audiences to understand the experience that awaits them. Further, beyond organisations and festivals who specifically engage with these issues, such as Arab Arts Festival *Shubbak*, who have a policy to exclude such politically charged terms, there is not enough awareness around the political implications. For a recent concert at LSO St Luke's, my performance was promoted as part of their 'Eclectica East Meets West' concert series and although we had discussions about dropping the 'East-West', in the end they kept it as the billing of the concert in order to meet sponsor commitments. Still, as Chantal Mouffe argues, I believe in an artist's responsibility to challenge the system, and thus contribute to a change in culture:

Today artists cannot pretend any more to constitute an avant-garde offering a radical critique, but this is not a reason to proclaim that their political role has ended. They still can play an important role in the hegemonic struggle by subverting the dominant hegemony and by contributing to the construction of new subjectivities.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Gema Ortega's article, "The Art of Hybridity: Maryse Condé's *Tituba*," *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 47, no. 2 (2014).

<sup>32</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces," *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* 1, no.2, Summer 2007, accessed Feb 18, 2018, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>.



## Research Questions and Thesis Aims

My research questions address the possibilities of transforming our understanding of and critical and creative engagement with identity, language and voice through artistic practice. Language is understood as spoken and/or musical language. I understand voice as the manifestation of our creativity as human beings: for me, as a singer, that specifically includes the singing voice, but I use voice more broadly to indicate the expression of identity through composition, performance or, indeed, any other creative expression.<sup>33</sup> The questions below are arranged to reflect the trajectory of the creative process and range from personal to larger discourses:

- How might exploration of instability and fluidity of identity be manifested in artistic practice?
- How might processes of interweaving languages and practices affect identity, language and voice?
- What is the artistic and political potential of the Middle Ground or *Spannungsfeld* (lit. ‘field of tension’)<sup>34</sup>?

The PhD portfolio explores these questions through a series of performance projects devised, developed and delivered in a range of collaborative settings, the development and implications of which will be discussed in this commentary. They are open and embodied, and set up as territory that can be explored through the framework of Wandering (Travelling), Twilight (Immersing yourself in the Middle Ground) and Sensing (Reawakening the Senses). Ultimately, the questions lead to the deeper enquiry of this dissertation: how can a practice of travelling and interweaving help an artist to traverse from the personal to the global, simultaneously addressing deep internal questions of identity while challenging audiences to engage with urgent global issues such as immigration, oppression of women and climate change?

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<sup>33</sup> For a more detailed discussion on voice in relation to language and identity, see chapter 3.

<sup>34</sup> On occasion, I find it useful to employ the German term *Spannungsfeld*, as it expresses the inherent volatile energy of the Middle Ground.

## Thesis Structure

This commentary is divided into ten chapters. Following the introduction to, and overview of the thesis in this first chapter, Chapter 2: Ethos and Practice delves deeper into the background of my practice and sets out the ethos underpinning my work.

Chapter 3: The Landscape and its Elements sets out the landscape within which my practice is located and Chapter 4: Navigating the Landscape develops the framework of interweaving within this landscape; my discussion refers to both theoretical and performance based work that has informed this research.

The main focus of the PhD is five performances created in response to the research questions: *Swimming Between Shores*, *After Yeats*, *Thumbelina*, *Woman at Point Zero* and *Moonlarking*. Chapters 5 - 9 accompany each of the performance pieces discussing the interweaving processes detailed in Chapter 4. Video recordings of all performances, and scores where appropriate, as well as translations, texts and programme notes are provided as supplementary materials.

Chapter 10: Epilogue concludes the thesis with a discussion of the research questions in relation to the performances and of the themes woven through them, discussing their artistic, political and utopian implications.

## Outcomes and Processes

The main outcomes of this thesis are traced through the performances created through engagement with the research questions. As a significant part of engaging in artistic research is creating open ended processes, I have split the outcomes into concrete results and open-ended instigation of processes. The aim of the thesis was to reflect on the implications of creative practice from an artist's, rather than a listener's, point of view.<sup>35</sup>

### Concrete Outcomes

- The creation of five original performances through a collaborative practice of interweaving (musical and spoken) languages and artistic practices.
- The development (through performance) of a theoretical basis for a creative methodology, or framework, for interweaving languages and practices, as inspired by Minh-ha's work.
- The elaboration of strategies for reimagining performances as sensuous experiences transcending language, genre and style.

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<sup>35</sup> I have therefore not included polls from audience members. There are certain assumptions I can (and do) make on the shared spaces I have created, but these are from a personal, and therefore limited, perspective.

## Open-ended Instigation of Processes

- The exploration of multiple, fragmented identities through performance.
- The exploration of borders as multidimensional spaces of contact instead of dividing lines.
- The exploration of the Middle Ground as an explosive creative field.
- The exploration of how the Middle Ground can be methodologically employed not just for an artistic but also a political/activist purpose within a performance.
- The exploration of how interweaving can challenge both performer and listener to be silent and vulnerable, and to respond from a visceral rather than an intellectual space.
- The rooting of a performance in the embodiment of characters and their stories rather than in a specific language, genre or style.
- The challenging of binary, hegemonic structures and erosion of hierarchies through a collaborative practice of interweaving.
- The addressing of political issues such as postcolonialism, feminism and climate emergency within the Middle Ground.
- The exploration of abandoning familiar grounds of language and embarking on the adventure of voicing in a ‘not yet distinguishable’<sup>36</sup> form.

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<sup>36</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 73.

## Chapter 2: Ethos and Practice

Here I discuss the ethos and practice that have informed the creation of the work. The chapter is divided into two parts, one dealing with the collaborative process (the outer journey) and one with the aspects of my independent work (the inner journey).

When I watch my children play, and they are at one moment a self-proclaimed mean turtle and then a nice turtle and then a grown man, each fiercely and completely, it reminds me of the primary human hope that identity might in fact be fluid, that we are simultaneously ourselves and the beasts in the field ... and that identity might be nothing more than dipping our Heraclitean feet in the river, moment to moment. And if identity is fluid, then we might actually be free. And furthermore, if identity is fluid, then we might actually be connected ... if we can be the leaves of grass and also the masses on the Brooklyn Bridge, then we can leave the ego behind and *be world* for a moment. And this is one reason why we go to the theater, either to identify with others, or to *be* others, for the moment.<sup>37</sup>

At the heart of my practice, shaped by my experience of a life steeped in different cultures and languages as well as my creative practice as workshop leader, lies an ethos of play and reflection. This ethos is inherent in many parts of my working life, and here I elaborate on it in order to introduce it as my underlying motivation. It underpins both the collaborative processes as well as my independent artistic work, what I might term ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ journeys. The ethos is one of fluidity and of erasing borders, led by a desire for transformation; in essence a utopian vision of ‘new forms of social coexistence’.<sup>38</sup>

Two elements are central to my experience and thinking, namely play and reflection. Bringing them together offers grounding of the territory—the landscape—within which the processes of interweaving take place. By play I refer to an open and spontaneous attitude, a state of mind that fosters the flexibility and ability to go beyond perceived categories, or a permissive environment that allows one to freely inhabit and discover different identities. Reflection is the

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<sup>37</sup> Sarah Ruhl, *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write: on Umbrellas and Sword Fights, Parades and Dogs, Fire Alarms, Children and Theater* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 214.

<sup>38</sup> Fischer-Lichte, “Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures—Rethinking Intercultural Theatre: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism,” 11.

feedback process which situates the practice and allows it to change over time. My collaborators become my partners in play and act as reflective mirrors.

## The Outer Journey

My professional practice of leading workshops in collaborative settings, often specifically with people from vulnerable and/or culturally diverse backgrounds, of creating music and art which connects and interweaves the most diverse voices, has sharpened my awareness of and insight into the processes of dialogue, improvisation and listening,<sup>39</sup> all of which are key to the processes discussed here. It also taught me how to move fluidly between several roles; within the collaborative processes of my research these roles encompassed performer, composer, collaborator, arranger, teacher, student, director, leader and producer, sometimes within the same project. I found certain questions crystallising at the centre of my thinking regarding: authorship, listening/sensing and disruption.

All projects, whether I was co-author as in *Swimming Between Shores*, a co-creative voice as in *After Yeats* and *Woman at Point Zero*, or director as in *Thumbelina* and *Moonlarking*, are characterised by several autonomous yet interwoven voices, voices that transformed mine while mine was transforming them. They resonated within the pieces—and within my voice. Sometimes they were manifestations of the multiple voices inside me, the voices of what Elif Shafak calls the ‘mini harem ... [of] our conflicting selves’.<sup>40</sup> Often, it became hard to distinguish whose idea belonged to whom, revealing how voices, like cultures, are not ‘hermetically sealed, homogeneous entities’.<sup>41</sup> Thus, this multiple authorship became key to the narrative of each performance.

This plural authorship occurred through dialogue and discussion as well as improvisatory processes. In her thesis *The Development of Co-Creative Listening in Collaborative Ensemble Practice*, violinist Dr. Preetha Narayanan presents a constructive model of co-creative listening, a deep tuning-in as the basis for ‘finding both the individual’s and group’s voice’.<sup>42</sup> Such processes of co-creative listening naturally affect the way we create material and thus also our understanding of authorship. We sharpen to how our ideas have been shaped by others and thus open up a—

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<sup>39</sup> This multilingual recording of *Sly and the Family Stone’s* ‘Everyday People’—<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p05ncjdk>—created by teenage refugee group ‘Everyday People London’, and arranged by John Barber for the BBC Symphony orchestra and BBC Singers, is an example of the interweaving processes within my workshop practice. (‘Everyday People London’ is run by Music Action International in collaboration with the British Red Cross).

<sup>40</sup> Elif Shafak, *Black Milk: on the Conflicting Demands of Writing, Creativity, and Motherhood*, trans. Hande Gaye Zapsu Watt (New York: Penguin, 2012), x.

<sup>41</sup> Fischer-Lichte, “Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures—Rethinking Intercultural Theatre: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism,” 7.

<sup>42</sup> Preetha Narayanan, “The Development of Co-Creative Listening in Collaborative Ensemble Practice,” (PhD Thesis, Guildhall School of Music & Drama and City University, 2016), 3.

potentially fragile—space within our own creative expression, which in turn can transform the creative process and outcome. The idea of authorship, as in being ‘the source ... of a piece of writing, music, or art’,<sup>43</sup> or having artistic ownership attributed to oneself, thus becomes more complex, fluid and less containable.

Working across artistic practices, I found it useful to extend this deep, vulnerable sense of listening to a notion of sensing. In *Woman at Point Zero*, for example, our musical improvisations were triggered through movement work, which required a complete sensory awareness. In *Moonlarking*, on the other hand, my improvisations with Korean taegüm player Dr. Hyelim Kim were affected by connecting our voices not only in the music but by imagining the physical experiences of the birds, sharpening our senses and our musical interactions.

I found that these processes of listening/sensing required me to let go of my inner borders, allowing my norms to be disrupted and thus my voice and language to change and develop. Guitarist Stefan Östersjö, who uses his collaborations with musicians from different traditions to reflect on artistic practice, discusses how a ‘denial of habit’,<sup>44</sup> through the introduction of ‘resistant materials’,<sup>45</sup> can become a ‘threshold leading to the embodiment of new skills and modes of expression’.<sup>46</sup> By resistant materials he refers, on the one hand, to ‘instruments and scores, or the performer’s body’,<sup>47</sup> but also points to ‘a third kind of resistance: that of the cultural impact of the habitus itself in collaborative intercultural settings.’<sup>48</sup> Through these disruptive resistant materials, ‘instrumental clichés can indeed be bypassed or transformed’,<sup>49</sup> unsettling and challenging performers to respond in new ways. In *Swimming Between Shores*, it was the disruption of my beliefs through intimate discussions with my friend and collaborator Dr. Morag Galloway. In *Moonlarking*, where I was composing music inspired by creative work with writer Dr. Octavia Bright and visual artist Jessie Rodger, as well as with Hyelim Kim, I had to respond to and absorb unfamiliar ideas, which challenged both my vocal habits and creative voice.

Collaborative practice, by definition, disrupts binary understandings of the world. By allowing other voices to resonate in our own, by ‘contemplating *otherness*’,<sup>50</sup> we become other to ourselves. John-Steiner, in *Creative Collaboration*, further argues that ‘transformative changes require

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<sup>43</sup> Merriam Webster Dictionary, s.v. “authorship: noun,” accessed Feb 02, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authorship>.

<sup>44</sup> See Kathleen Coessens and Stefan Östersjö, “Habitus and the Resistance of Culture,” in *Artistic Experimentation in Music - An Anthology*, ed Darla Crispin, and Bob Gilmore (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014), 333-348.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Morag Galloway, “The Dynamics of Mutuality in the Composer and Performer Relationship,” (PhD Thesis, University of York, 2016), 7 (Original italics).

joint efforts'.<sup>51</sup> The journey of my practice happened in the interchange of play and reflection with my many collaborators from different artistic and cultural backgrounds. Through our processes and the performances we created together, we aspired to a 'framework for experiencing the utopian potential of culturally diverse and globalized societies.'<sup>52</sup>

## The Inner Journey

As a singer and composer, I am driven by the same impulse as the workshop leader within me to fluidly and instinctively connect and interweave potentially disparate voices. I consciously travel to different languages to experience other worlds inside myself. Outer and inner journey are intertwined; the boundaries between them often dissolve and merge. Through the processes instigated in this research, my vocal journey broadly took me from a place of adhering to languages and styles, to disrupting my practice by exploring different ways of connecting and interweaving, to reaching a place of playfulness beyond language.

My overriding concern in this research is not one of vocal technique. I approach the notion of voice holistically, focusing on artistic impact and process. I have an intense relationship with my voice, in its multiplicity, and tied up as it is with my body, my identity and languages. My training in western classical technique and Arabic classical singing notwithstanding, I generally approach singing, in whichever style, in the same way—by connecting my voice to my body and breath. My timbre, phrasing and articulation, on the other hand, are shaped by the conventions and demands of the musical style (such as pitch range or tuning), or by the sonic qualities and emotional resonances of the language I am singing in. I do not feel my voice (or indeed my voices) to be rooted in one, or several, particular styles—it is (or they are) first and foremost interwoven with my body, my imagination, the music I sing and the characters I create.

My mother tongue is German, my first musical experiences were those of German folk songs and later of the European classical canon. My relationship with Arab language and music developed later, after university, when I trained intensely in London, Beirut and Cairo and developed a parallel life as an Arabic singer. I was drawn to the rawness of the sound and the freedom in the music, the possibility to express feeling—the Arabic term is *iḥsas*—إحساس—through improvised ornamentation, to the microtonal richness, the connection to rhythm, the intense physicality of the language, and the feeling of finally having found another missing part of myself. Exploring the Middle Ground between speech and song in *After Yeats* tapped into this

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<sup>51</sup> Vera John-Steiner, *Creative Collaboration* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 203.

<sup>52</sup> Fischer-Lichte, "Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures—Rethinking Intercultural Theatre: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism," 11.

sensory-emotional connection with Arabic, while also reshaping my relationship with the language by disrupting my conventional way of interacting with and singing in it.

Multilingual sound artist and poet Caroline Bergvall reflects on what happens when '[s]pitting out the most intimate ... source language, or so-called mother tongue',<sup>53</sup> believing this process 'is a dare, it is dangerous, but it also starts a whole process of re-embodiment and re-appraisal of language's spaces.'<sup>54</sup> For me, it set off a continuous process of disconnecting and reconnecting to my mother tongue and the languages I feel close to. Simultaneously it triggered a journey of falling in love with languages, and exploring them vocally by connecting to their physicalities and resonances. For example, in my multilingual retelling of *Thumbelina*, a tour de force through different languages, I also employ these languages to shapeshift between the different characters in the story. I now experience and use the different languages I sing or speak in like different strings resonating in my body.

Through the interweaving processes in my PhD, whether it was linking my sound with movement as in *Woman at Point Zero*, or linking my language to birdsong as well as Hyelim Kim's taegŭm in *Moonlarking*, my relationship to my voice changed, becoming more playful and freer. In this way I feel connected to vocal improviser and composer Gabriel Dharmoo:

The voice is so linked to the body ... Every culture has their own way of using the voice. There is no true voice, there is no real way to sing ... So what I try to do is kind of blur all cultural kind of references and just use the voice as someone would if they were discovering a violin on the floor and trying to get sounds out of it.<sup>55</sup>

Yet while Dharmoo's playful sense of shapeshifting is arguably more influenced by sonic, gestural and expressive possibilities, my practice is ultimately rooted in creating and living the different characters. It was connecting to the dimension of acting, to the characters' imagined stories, their voices and their power, which ultimately rooted my voice and performance, regardless of which language or style I sing in. These elements inform my performance and communicate the underlying message, often one of hope, inspired by my love for the characters' disparities. In doing this, the big questions about identity and language are distilled to the essence of a particular character. As these processes of interweaving and connecting change and affect my relationship to my voice and music, I begin to question the hierarchy often afforded to sound over body and

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<sup>53</sup> Caroline Bergvall, "A Cat in the Throat - On bilingual occupants", *Jacket Magazine* 37, 2009, accessed Aug. 29, 2019. <http://jacketmagazine.com/37/bergvall-cat-throat.shtml#fn1>.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Gabriel Dharmoo, "Solo Vocal Improvisation and Podcast Interview/The Banff Centre," Soundcloud Recording, posted by Gabriel Dharmoo, 2012, accessed May 10, 2019, <https://soundcloud.com/gabrieldharmoo/solo-vocal-improvisation>.



character in musical training and learning: the focus, especially at conservatoires, on ‘sounds at the expense of the bigger picture of being a performer’.<sup>56</sup> I hope that by nurturing different approaches, connecting and re-connecting musical practice across these artificial divisions, we can find new ways forward.

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<sup>56</sup> Paul Barker and Maria Huesca, *Composing for Voice: Exploring Voice, Language and Music* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), Online edition, loc. 46.

## Chapter 3: The Landscape and its Elements

The moment the insider steps out from the inside she's no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out ... She is, in other words, this inappropriate other or same who moves about with always at least two gestures: that of affirming 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference and that of reminding 'I am different' while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at.<sup>57</sup>

In this chapter I set out the metaphorical landscape, the cradle of the Middle Ground, within which the processes of interweaving, informed by the ethos of play and reflection elaborated in the previous chapter, take place. I envision the landscape as constituted of three main elements: identity, language and voice. These can be navigated through three interconnected modes of interweaving—Travelling, Twilight, Sensing—which I will discuss in depth in the following chapter. To prepare the ground for this discussion, below I lay out an overview of relevant discourses on the elements shaping the landscape.

Through the processes of interweaving, the landscape, situated on the fractious borders of identity, language and voice, can transform into an energetic Middle Ground, a space of inherent possibility, of risk and of potential transcendence. The Middle Ground is related to the idea of a borderscape, a space of multiple border crossings, and a term 'coined precisely to question still-dominant concepts of territoriality'.<sup>58</sup> Similarly to a borderscape, the in-between spaces of the Middle Ground 'can be investigated as transition areas and contact zones'.<sup>59</sup> Minh-ha further explains it as a

place of decentralization that gives in to neither side, takes into its realm the vibrations of both, requiring thereby constant acknowledgement of and transformation in shifting conditions.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference," *Feminism and the Critique of Colonial Discourse* 3-4, Inscr. 3-4 (1988), ed. Deborah Gordon, Center for Cultural Studies, University of California Santa Cruz, accessed Jan 10, 2019, <https://culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/inscriptions/volume-34/trinh-t-minh-ha/>.

<sup>58</sup> Call for Papers: Symposium 8/9 April 2016, Luxembourg, "Borderscape as an Interdisciplinary Project," accessed Aug 30, 2019, <https://www.imiscoe.org/docman-docs/522-en-cfp-symposium-borderscapes-final/file>.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 70.

The deeper motivation of this enquiry is to explore how I and other artists can navigate the Middle Ground to create work that fosters new approaches and thus allows a different world view to develop. In other words: how can these processes help us to create

performances, as sites of in-betweenness, [which] are able to constitute fundamentally other, unprecedented realities—realities of the future, where the state of in-between describes the ‘normal’ experience of the citizens of this world?<sup>61</sup>

Crucially, here, ‘[d]ifference’, rather than being ‘the cause and source of conflict’, is ‘paired with harmony’, so the Middle Ground can be understood as ‘harmony-difference-middleness.’<sup>62</sup> In that sense, rather than as a place, I perceive the Middle Ground as an energetic, a creative state—a ‘moment of multiplicities, transformations and metamorphoses’.<sup>63</sup>

In the following three sections, I discuss the individual elements of the landscape: identity, language, voice. Identity, language and voice fluidly intertwine and shape each other. They form a continuum whereby identity is voiced through language, and language forms our ideologies as well as the sonic properties of our voice. Our voices, by resonating language, become the site of our identities—through our voices, we play with language and thus shape our identities.

## Identity

What types of identity should artistic practice foster?<sup>64</sup> While ‘[i]t would be a serious mistake to believe that artistic activism could, on its own, bring about the end of neo-liberal hegemony’, Chantal Mouffe contends that artists ‘still can play an important role in the hegemonic struggle by subverting the dominant hegemony and by contributing to the construction of new subjectivities.’<sup>65</sup> The perpetuation of power structures and their disruption are closely interlinked with notions of authenticity, purity, authority and hybridity, and how these are woven into our identity narratives.

It is the abstraction of identity, the act of ‘leveling out differences and ... standardizing contexts’,<sup>66</sup> through which the process of othering and thereby gaining power over an ‘other’ is achieved. Minh-ha argues that ‘[u]ncovering this leveling of differences’ is to resist

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<sup>61</sup> Fischer-Lichte, “Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures—Rethinking Intercultural Theatre: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism,” 12.

<sup>62</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 70.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>64</sup> See Mouffe, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces.”

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Minh-ha, “Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference.”

that very notion of difference which defined in the master's terms often resorts to the simplicity of essences. Divide and conquer has for centuries been his creed, his formula of success.<sup>67</sup>

'Divide and conquer' was key to the colonial mindset that 'construct[ed] and dominate[d] Orientals in the process of knowing them',<sup>68</sup> a mindset that still extends to today's increasingly polarising politics. The colonising powers used the Orient as

one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.<sup>69</sup>

This desire for othering, 'safely' delineating ourselves from others, frequently betrays itself in the infamous question: "but where are you really from?" This tacit demand for a 'real' or 'pure' identity is linked to problematic notions of authenticity, employed to uphold the status quo, and oblivious to many (if not most) people's hybrid realities:

The further one moves from the core the less likely one is thought to be capable of fulfilling one's role as the real self, the real Black, Indian or Asian, the real woman. The search for an identity is, therefore, usually a search for that lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic self, often situated within a process of elimination of all that is considered other, superfluous, fake, corrupted, or Westernized.<sup>70</sup>

Unless we consciously engage with these realities, we can further fail to recognise how identities can 'perform' us, as '[i]dentity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.'<sup>71</sup> Yet, '[o]nce we accept that identities are never pre-given but that they are always the result of processes of identification, that they are discursively constructed',<sup>72</sup> we can begin to resist, to free ourselves from pre-given, generalising narratives, and learn 'the art of narrativizing one's subjectivity out of the connections and contacts with others.'<sup>73</sup> Thus, to disrupt and challenge hegemonic binary systems is to understand and perform identity as 'increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular, but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions.'<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Edward Said, "Orientalism," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 24.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Minh-ha, "Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference."

<sup>71</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge 1990), 24-5.

<sup>72</sup> Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces."

<sup>73</sup> Ortega, "The Art of Hybridity: Maryse Condé's *Tituba*," 113.

<sup>74</sup> Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who needs identity?," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (Denmark: Sage Publications, 2012), 4.

In fact, if we accept that there is no clear division ‘between us here and them over there’, nor ‘between I and not-I’<sup>75</sup>—if we recognise ourselves as a hybrid of simultaneously ‘outsider and insider’<sup>76</sup>—we have no choice but to incorporate ‘[other people’s] narratives into the narrative that we make of our own selves.’<sup>77</sup> Such blurring of separation allows us to create, in the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘a unique artistic system’ by going ‘beyond the fixity and barrenness of absolute discourses.’<sup>78</sup>

Here lies the disruptive potential of creative practice. A performance does not only *reflect* identity, through performance we can further *produce*, and can therefore shape, our identities.<sup>79</sup> And embracing its ‘distinctly anti-imperial and antiauthoritarian’<sup>80</sup> aspects, we have the power (and, I would argue, the responsibility) ‘to deploy hybridity as a disruptive democratic discourse’.<sup>81</sup> Moreover if, like Taiye Selasi, we say: ‘Don’t ask me where I’m from, ask where I’m a local’,<sup>82</sup> we connect with the particularity of our experiences, ‘the light of the sky on location ... the taste of native water, ... the smell of the environment, and ... the nature of the surrounding silence’<sup>83</sup>—the colours, sounds and smells of the places that shaped us and sensory selves.

## Language

Home and language tend to be taken for granted; like Mother or Woman, they are often naturalized and homogenized. The source becomes then an illusory secure and fixed placement, invoked as a natural state of things untainted by any process or outside influence ... or else, as an indisputable point of reference whose authority one can unfailingly rely on.<sup>84</sup>

As the discourse on language is moving away from the notion of languages as absolute, discrete systems, the focus is shifting to exploring multi- and heterolingual spaces: to how, through

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<sup>75</sup> Minh-ha, “Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference.”

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ortega, “The Art of Hybridity: Maryse Condé’s Tituba,” 113.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> See Simon Frith, “Music and Identity,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (Denmark: Sage Publications, 2012), 109.

<sup>80</sup> Joseph May, “Introduction,” in *Performing Hybridity*, ed. Joseph May, and Jennifer Natalya (Minneapolis: Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Taiye Selasi, “Don’t ask where I’m from, ask where I’m a local,” TEDGlobal 2014 Video, 15:56, posted by “TED”, Oct 2014, accessed Feb 03, 2016,

[https://www.ted.com/talks/taiye\\_selasi\\_don\\_t\\_ask\\_where\\_i\\_m\\_from\\_ask\\_where\\_i\\_m\\_a\\_local?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/taiye_selasi_don_t_ask_where_i_m_from_ask_where_i_m_a_local?language=en).

<sup>83</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 12.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 33.

‘language crossing’,<sup>85</sup> new, multivocal,<sup>86</sup> identities can be created, and monolingual ideologies challenged and/or transformed. Questions of linguistic fluency, belonging and authority are closely entangled with my own work, in its constant shifting between languages, traditions and artistic practices.

Language is simultaneously conceptual and physical, as we consume, process and spit out language, while developing our worldviews within the given constructs of the language(s) we were born into. Postcolonial and feminist literary critic Gayatri Spivak articulates how the complex relationship and interdependence with language shapes us as human beings:

The problem of human discourse is generally seen as articulating itself in the play of, in terms of, three shifting ‘concepts’: language, world and consciousness. We know no world that is not organized as language, we operate with no other consciousness but one structured as a language – languages that we cannot possess, for we are operated by those languages as well. The category of language, then, embraces the categories of world and consciousness even as it is determined by them.<sup>87</sup>

Minh-ha similarly interrogates the power of language over us and our consciousness; yet, in the context of ‘language [as] a site of change, an ever-shifting ground’,<sup>88</sup> and as a means of ‘[j]ourneying across generations and cultures’,<sup>89</sup> she also highlights the creative, fluid interplay between us and language:

A shameless hybrid: I or It? Speaker or Language? Is it Language, which produces me, or I who produce language? In other words, when is the source “here” and when is it “there”?<sup>90</sup>

We create, while being created. So, what happens when we move between, or belong to, multiple languages? How important is our fluency in these languages? And which part of language is it that forms our consciousness and shapes our world? The conceptual construct, or also the physicality and resonance of language? Do languages shape our bodies as well as our minds?

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<sup>85</sup> Julie Choi, *Creating a Multivocal Self: Autoethnography as Method* (New York: Routledge, 2017), xxviii. Here she discusses the work of Professor Ben Rampton, founding Director of the Centre for Language Discourse & Communication at Kings College London.

<sup>86</sup> Julie Choi has chosen the term multivocal rather than multilingual to reflect her plural experience of self, having grown up, and living within multiple languages: ‘I do not view the entanglement of languages as producing “a” voice but many particular voices.’ Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Gayatri Spivak, “Feminism and Critical Theory,” in *Modern Criticism and Theory - A Reader*, ed. David Lodge, and Nigel Wood (New York, Pearson Education, 1998), 477.

<sup>88</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 28.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

Anyone who navigates more than one language is familiar with a sense of displacement from and/or confusing entanglement with your language(s), even your mother tongue. Caroline Bergvall explores such fragmented notions of belonging, understanding and connection to language through her poetry:

Whoever needs to create an allegiance or a correspondence, sometimes seemingly from scratch, or from access-points hidden from view, to a mixed cultural background, to a complex living jigsaw of multiple markers and untranslated biographical circumstances, will also often question what linguistic belonging means, what fluency entails.<sup>91</sup>

Her connection to language is a visceral one, as she immerses herself and us ‘in the fullness of language, in the connective and lubricated tissues of language, and around language.’<sup>92</sup> For example, in her epic poem *Drift*, she reshapes and fragments her words, foregrounding sound over sense until new meanings appear between the letters, words and spaces. In the excerpt below, for example, the splintering of the words, more than their meaning, draws us into the confusion of being lost at sea:

Mo stof those onboard completly l ost l ost l ost their reckoning Th  
ec rew had no idea in which direction they were ststeering A thick  
fo g which d i d n ot l ift for days The sh ip was driven off course to l  
and They were ossted about astea for a longt ime and f iled tor each  
their destination ...<sup>93</sup>

Bergvall also challenges ‘the nativist myth often given to language belonging, that one’s body is unalterably the shape of one’s first language’<sup>94</sup>—language in itself being an illusory source of stability, if we hark back to Minh-ha. As we speak (or sing) different languages, the imprints of their resonances and sensations (harsher or softer, more nasal or more gutturally produced sounds) will imprint themselves in the memory of our bodies, altering and expanding them—and our voices.

Being simultaneously outside and inside, these fluidities—the ‘simultaneity of multiple meanings, intentions, personalities and consciousness’<sup>95</sup>—open up a playing ground, in which we can form our hybrid, plural, fragmented and contradictory identities ‘in and through language’.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Caroline Bergvall, “Cat in the Throat,” in *Meddle English: New and Selected Texts* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2011), 157–8.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>93</sup> Excerpt from Caroline Bergvall, *Drift* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2011), 37.

<sup>94</sup> Bergvall: “A Cat in the Throat - On bilingual occupants.”

<sup>95</sup> Julie Choi, *Creating a Multivocal Self: Autoethnography as Method*, xxix.

<sup>96</sup> Ortega, “The Art of Hybridity: Maryse Condé’s *Tituba*,” 127.

Interestingly, Claire Kramsch, in her studies on multilingual individuals, suggests that they begin to inhabit a space between—indeed a space outside—these languages:

[Multilinguals] also learn to have a different relation to place—not only places on the map, but a third place between grammars, styles and categories of thought. The world they engage with is not a world of functional instrumentalities or cost-benefit analyses, but voyages of self-discovery and explorations into the very boundaries of meaning.<sup>97</sup>

This place—physical, conceptual, or both—thus forms another kind of Middle Ground between languages. Could such a place, even if we cannot escape the worlds of our languages, free us up to discover unknown, secret spaces (and creative states) within the confines of these worlds, and allow us to challenge, renew and transform them?

## Voice

Voice, ‘in the confines of this relationship with the body, from inside out, between absence and presence, desire’,<sup>98</sup> sits at the interstices of so many meanings and experiences, within and without: body–mind, sound–meaning, sense–nonsense, conscious–unconscious, desire–restraint. While, in my research, my voice has become the means of interweaving languages and identities, my voice has also, through its constant shapeshifting, emerged as a kind of Middle Ground—a space I can explore, yet never contain.

How much agency do we have in ‘voicing’? We produce our voices, yet they are also somehow beyond our control, created by nature as well as by the languages entwined with our world and consciousness, to return to Spivak. Voices also find themselves at the centre of power struggles, sovereignty and human rights, as Dr. Patrice Buzanell, whose work explores communication from feminist perspectives, demonstrates:

voice can be considered to be composed of dialectics: assertion–suppression, agency–control, truths–distortions, consent–dissent, presence–absence, empowerment–disempowerment, legitimacy–illegitimacy, expression–silence, exposure–disguise, and human–nonhuman agents.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Claire Kramsch, “The Multilingual Subject,” *Townsend Newsletter* 5-6 (Berkeley: Townsend Centre for the Humanities, University of California, 2011), 5.

<sup>98</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 77.

<sup>99</sup> Patrice Buzanell, “Voice/Multivocality,” in *The International Encyclopaedia of Communication Research Methods*, ed. Jörg Matthes, Christine S. Davis, and Robert F. Potter (John Wiley & Sons, 2017), accessed Sep 15, 2019, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/9781118901731.icrm0266>.



To have voice can thus be seen as a right, a privilege or even a responsibility. Bergvall, considering the implications of navigating different languages, further makes a crucial distinction between having and siting voice, while emphasising its transitional nature between physicality and abstraction:

It is not about having a ‘voice’ (another difficult naturalising concept), it is about siting ‘voice’, locating the spaces and actions through which it becomes possible to be in one’s languages, to stay with languages, to effect one’s speech and work at a point of traffic between them, like a constant transport that takes place in the exchange between one’s body, the air, and the world.<sup>100</sup>

If language shapes our bodies as well as our minds, then metaphorical voice—the impulses, purposes or ideologies behind our expression—is also inseparable from our body, from its sensory source. And while it is shaped by, voice also instigates sensuality: ‘desire is made audible, rhythmic. The timbre, tone and rhythm can enliven myriads of sensations—visual, tactile, spatial, temporal.’<sup>101</sup> Even as we speak, trying to convey concepts and meanings, voice is ‘not just in the words, but in their sounds, in the way it sounds and sculpts the place it traverses’,<sup>102</sup> and sometimes, unwillingly, voice will ‘slip into non-sense, coming closer to the scream, the laugh, the cry, the song’.<sup>103</sup> And so voice, at the edge of control and abandon, also betrays the thin faultline between us and animals, us and nature:

here one does not speak; one groans, moans, sighs; one breathes. Resists.  
Turns faint, inaudible. Lovers becoming sound becoming animals are so much alike. There is no longer I, but only Sighs, Sighs, Moans, Moans, Breaths. Nothing original, nothing personal, yet all intensely intimate ...

Move your tongue over your lips.<sup>104</sup>

This keenly felt sensuality, this extra part in our voice that betrays us, our private, hidden selves, can irritate and offend, be perceived as ‘too much’. For ‘some, [sensuality] delights, moves, awakens desire; for others, it sows doubt, irritates, and is finally rejected on the side of femininity’.<sup>105</sup> Embracing this sensuality can thus be a site of resistance against structures reflecting patriarchal norms and directives.

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<sup>100</sup> Bergvall, “A Cat in the Throat - On bilingual occupants.”

<sup>101</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 81.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 77

Maybe, siting voice, ‘physical, erotic, *and* uninhabitable’,<sup>106</sup> lies partly in the acceptance that we cannot control it. Maybe, instead we could learn to embrace and play with the fact that ‘meaning can only circulate at the limit of sense and non-sense’,<sup>107</sup> giving in and tuning our voices to the ripples and soundwaves of our bodies, to the acute impermanence of our voices’ Middle Ground. ‘It manifests transit and spitting out.’<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>108</sup> Bergvall, “A Cat in the Throat - On bilingual occupants.”

## Chapter 4: Navigating the Landscape

It's as if writing were something outside you, in a tangle of senses: between writing and having written, having written and having to go on writing; between knowing and not knowing what it's all about; starting from complete meaning, being submerged by it, and ending up in meaninglessness. The image of a black block in the middle of the world isn't far out.<sup>109</sup>

Having set out the metaphorical landscape of identity, language and voice, I will now examine the processes through which we can navigate, engage with and transform this landscape—the three, interconnected, modes of interweaving I have uncovered through my research: Wandering (Travelling), Twilight (Immersing yourself in the Middle Ground) and Sensing (Reawakening the Senses). In the three subsections of this chapter, I will examine these modes of interweaving as an interpretative framework, which I will use to discuss the musicians, artists and thinkers, whose work has provided a meaningful background to my own practice. While I see these modes (processes) of interweaving as critical lenses, I also consider them as creative tools.<sup>110</sup>

Specifically, I will investigate how: 1) these processes can help to disrupt or resist existing power structures by challenging hegemonic binary systems; 2) how one can achieve agency by siting, rather than simply having voice;<sup>111</sup> and 3) how one can reach towards transcendence within the Middle Ground by accentuating the sensory aspects of identity. As I will illustrate, I see a progression from a more linear, external and visible creative process (Travelling) through to a more nuanced articulation of the in-between spaces of languages and artistic practices (Twilight), to a more intuitive, physical or sensory approach (Sensing). By foregrounding Sensing, can the disruptions—or ruptures—caused by multiple, uncontainable and potentially contradictory identities (for both performer and listener), transcend into a sense of rapture? Further, instead of trying to dissolve borders, how can we play with the ruptures they cause? And how can interconnections between rupture and rapture be fostered?

The artists I discuss in the following sections engage with these complex issues in their work. Singers Abir Nehme and Fadia Tomb el Hage's musical background and training is close to my own; I investigate how they negotiate different vocal styles in their performances through the

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<sup>109</sup> Marguerite Duras, *Practicalities*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1980), 25.

<sup>110</sup> I envisage, for example, that these modes of interweaving could be used to instigate creative compositional processes in workshop situations. Through such practical engagement with these concepts, participants could develop a more nuanced understanding of their own creative practice as well as explore new creative starting points.

<sup>111</sup> See the section on Voice in chapter 3, p. 32-34.

lenses of Wandering and Twilight. Singer and composer Dhafer Youssef creates work that reaches beyond genre into an indefinable, hybrid space of Twilight. Elaine Mitchener and Gabriel Dharmoo, both vocal artists and composers, have developed striking, experimental and original work which, by foregrounding Sensing and intensifying the physicality of their practice, challenges political, social and personal structures and concepts.

As my practice engages closely with language, I also chose to discuss some relevant literary work. Maryse Condé's novel *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*—and Gema Ortega's insightful analysis thereof—demonstrates the creative, transformative power gained through Wandering (Travelling), and illuminates the subversive, poetic potency of negotiating a space of Twilight. Poet Caroline Bergvall's multilingual and multidisciplinary work, already mentioned in chapter 3, resonates across all three modes of interweaving; although hers is a different discipline to mine, the issues she uncovers—of disruption, multiplicity and the sensory nature of language—are close to those I grapple with in my work.

In the pieces I created, different processes were emphasised at different times. In *Swimming Between Shores*, the emphasis was predominantly on travelling across languages; on connecting to different voices and experiences. *After Yeats* is a sensory, physical articulation of the Middle Ground (Twilight), especially of the in-between spaces of music and poetry. *Thumbelina* is an exploration of the Middle Ground as an explicitly—and occasionally contradictory—multiple space, while *Woman at Point Zero* foregrounds the experience of Sensing through the intertwining of musical and physical gesture. In *Moonlarking*, the three modes (Wandering, Twilight and Sensing) are activated simultaneously, interwoven in a space where borders have become less perceptible than in the other pieces.

I have articulated three sub-modes within each mode of interweaving to further uncover their particular resonances and potential implications. In chapters 5 to 9, I will explore my five performances through each of these lenses, delving deeper into their artistic, political and utopian implications.

## Wandering (Travelling)

Every voyage is the unfolding of a poetic. The departure, the crossover, the fall, the wandering, the discovery, the return, the transformation.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 40.

Wandering (Travelling) is the first step, the precondition, for embarking on processes of interweaving languages, cultures, identities or practices. While art, according to Goethe's philosophy, is in its essence 'a voyage to the other',<sup>113</sup> for the processes of interweaving, this travelling is made explicit and visible. I suggest that the process of Wandering, whilst there is a danger of unsettling our sense of rootedness, can help transform our perception of the world and of ourselves in relation to the world: that it can shape our understanding and use of—and sometimes even help to transcend—language.

I identify three levels on which Wandering (Travelling) can impact artistic process: 'wandering as a mode of receptivity', 'the instability of travelling as a source of creative power', and 'the path as destination'. While interdependent, these notions can reveal different artistic motivations and concerns. I believe that artists who consciously—metaphorically or literally—travel in their work have understood how this allows them to become more receptive; that they thrive on the inherent instability and that, in many instances, the act of travelling can become an artistic impulse in itself.

Minh-ha describes the act of walking 'as a mode of receptivity, because when you walk you see things differently', having 'put yourself in a space of instability'.<sup>114</sup> An avid explorer of musical and vocal worlds is Lebanese singer Abir Nehme, whose singing moves fluidly between different techniques and vocal languages and who seems to effortlessly absorb different accents and colours into her voice. In her TV programme 'Ethnopolia', she embarks on journeys to different places, to meet, learn from and improvise with musicians from different musical traditions. Her experience of 'when I go through every country, I find a piece of myself there',<sup>115</sup> echoes Minh-ha's reflections on 'the voyage out of the (known) self and back into the (unknown) self'.<sup>116</sup> In a rendition of an old Bhajan devotional song, here entitled 'From Lebanon to India - A tribute to Mahatma Gandhi',<sup>117</sup> Nehme adopts the more nasal timbre associated with Indian singing, delving into the characteristically sinuous, occasionally angularly florid ornaments, yet at times, her Lebanese vocal accent shines through clearly (for example at 0:44 or 1:09). Delving into an unfamiliar culture, her rendition of this traditional song is not about finding perfection, but about discovery. As Minh-ha writes, '[i]mperfection thus [can lead] to new realms of exploration', and travelling can be 'a practice

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<sup>113</sup> Edward Said discussing Goethe, in Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim, *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society* (London: Bloomsbury Paperbacks, 2014), 11.

<sup>114</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Interview," YouTube video, 7:05, posted by "CTLcasts," Oct 19, 2011, accessed Oct 11, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADtmeCFcBFk>.

<sup>115</sup> Abir Nehme, "Ethnopolia," Facebook video, 0:52, posted by "Ethnopolia," Aug 27, 2016, accessed May 6, 2018, [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=10157358067335029&id=249280670028&rd=1](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10157358067335029&id=249280670028&rd=1).

<sup>116</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here: immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 41.

<sup>117</sup> Abir Nehme, "From Lebanon to India – A Tribute to Mahatma Ghandi," YouTube video, 4:46, posted by "India in Lebanon," Oct 3, 2018, accessed May 10, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4Iaf390Zpc&feature=youtu.be>.

of bold omission'.<sup>118</sup> Moving between languages, Nehme's singing is supported by traditional Indian and Arab instruments (for example sitar, tabla, oud, darbuka and riq<sup>119</sup>); for her, 'traveling back and forth between home and abroad [has become] a mode of dwelling.'<sup>120</sup>

Constant movement, however, can undermine stability, as can happen to writers in exile: 'They are said to be always lost to themselves, to belong to the foreign, and to be deprived of a true abode'.<sup>121</sup> Yet, in this instance, writing itself often becomes a home and thus the instability and resulting vulnerability can transform into a source of creativity:

The voyage out of the (known) self and back into the (unknown) self sometimes takes the wanderer far away to a motley place where everything safe and sound seems to waiver while the essence of language is placed in doubt and profoundly destabilized. Traveling can thus turn out to be a process whereby the self loses its fixed boundaries—a disturbing yet potentially empowering practice of difference.<sup>122</sup>

These reflections on instability are investigated in Gema Ortega's analysis of Maryse Condé's seminal novel *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*. Based on the true story of Tituba, a West Indian slave, the book tells the journey of this extraordinary character, struggling against multiple and repeated violent discrimination. Through personal transformation, Tituba challenges all perceived notions of fixed identity by developing a powerful voice, which transcends any master narratives imposed upon her. Ortega explains:

Condé's Tituba is not only multiple, but also unstable within herself—open to change. She does not attempt to organize the natural chaos existing in the exterior world into patterns and models. Instead, she thrives on complexity, instability, and dynamism, since an interior creative force surges to produce a single and personal order out of chaos.<sup>123</sup>

Tituba stays with us as a character who cannot be contained, a powerful woman who has had to undergo seemingly countless transformations of self in order to survive, for example in the way she develops and surpasses her relationships with her multiple owners, masters, mistresses and lovers. Ortega suggests that the power Tituba gains beyond the novel stems from the way her hybrid, multiple voice is developed through language: 'the combination of multiple discourses into

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<sup>118</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 42.

<sup>119</sup> A riq is a Middle Eastern type of tambourine.

<sup>120</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 33.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>123</sup> Ortega, "The Art of Hybridity: Maryse Condé's Tituba," 128.

a unified narrative of self,<sup>124</sup> told in first person in Tituba's voice from beyond her death. The 'chaotic and constant movement'<sup>125</sup>—and the resulting sense of instability in both Tituba's life story and the language of the book—becomes 'a source of creative power for Condé'.<sup>126</sup> It reflects her (and her antiheroine Tituba's) rejections of any 'socially prescribed scripts linked to a singular time, place, community, gender, and language'.<sup>127</sup>

It is through Condé's 'jarring and disjointed'<sup>128</sup> language that we get a sense of the notion of 'the path as destination'. As crucial to the novel's message of agency and suppression as Tituba's story itself, Condé's 'choppy narrative style'<sup>129</sup> embodies Tituba's nomadic life, one of constant displacement: she never really arrives until she finds a sense of peace and purpose in her afterlife following her execution. Ortega draws on Deleuze and Guattari's reflections on nomadic philosophy to illuminate the power inherent in the path:

The nomad ... goes from one point to another; he is not ignorant of points (water points, dwelling points, assembly points etc.). But ... although the points determine paths, they are strictly subordinated to the paths they determine ... A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the intermezzo.<sup>130</sup>

Such a nomad is Caroline Bergvall. Born in Germany to French and Norwegian parents, now based in the U.K., her work, crossing between languages and different artistic media, grapples with her multilingual realities. Her epic poem and performance project *Drift*, which traces the sagas linked to early medieval North Atlantic travels through to the current migrations of refugees crossing the sea, 'takes you on a journey through time and space, where languages mix, where live percussion meets live voice, where the ancient cohabits with the present.'<sup>131</sup> As discussed in my earlier example, the poetry drifts from meaning to sound, as the words disintegrate into syllables, then letters. Transcending traditional language structures, these sounds ring more purposefully and poignantly than any grammatically coherent sentence. Bergvall's poetry, a 'conscious way of being

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 114. Tituba's experiences and encounters throughout the novel deal with slavery, religion, politics, antisemitism, witch-hunting and feminism, as well as providing a more ironic take on the supernatural and afterlife.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ann Scarboro Armstrong, "Afterword," in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (Charlottesville [VA]: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 217.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), 380.

<sup>131</sup> Caroline Bergvall, *Caroline Bergvall: "Drift – Performance,"* accessed Aug 10, 2019, <http://carolinebergvall.com/work/drift-performance/>.

in transit between points',<sup>132</sup> thus imaginatively dissolves 'rigid and static boundaries imposed by any monologic narrative of identity'.<sup>133</sup>

Nehme's, Condé's and Bergvall's journeys show how this sense of travelling not only 'allows one to see things differently from what they are, differently from how one has seen them, and differently from what one is',<sup>134</sup> but that Wandering entails a 'profoundly unsettling inversion of one's identity'.<sup>135</sup> In my own work, the momentum gained, for example, by going on linguistic journeys with composer Dr. Morag Galloway in *Swimming between Shores* unsettled both of us and challenged our sense of stability and security. Yet it was through this collaborative journey that I discovered a new agency in my artistic voice: I had 'become me via another'.<sup>136</sup>

## Twilight (Immersing yourself in the Middle Ground)

Twilight: the hours of melancholia, loss and nostalgia; but also of preparation for a renewal, when the sun sets in the west, the moon rises in the east and the ending passes into the beginning. The journey to the west is, no doubt, the journey towards the future, through dark transformations.<sup>137</sup>

When immersing yourself into the twilight space, the emphasis is on zooming in on the multiple intersections, cracks and contact points that emerge at border crossings, on exploring the different qualities which navigating these can draw out. Twilight, the time of day which separates day from night, is an example of the Middle Ground, situated across liminal spaces. Here, there is no clear-cut opposition, no sudden switch between light and dark (or dark and light); instead, we discover an infinite number of shades as one light transitions to the other. Minh-ha further evokes twilight as a time during which people's identities transform, during which things can happen that are not yet known, not yet defined.<sup>138</sup> I consider how focusing the processes of interweaving on these in-between spaces can manifest itself in three particular qualities: 'middle gray' (exploring the multiple shades between), 'hybridity' (erasing and dissolving borders), and 'multiplicity' (embracing and performing the contradictions of plurality).

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<sup>132</sup> Ortega, "The Art of Hybridity: Maryse Condé's *Tituba*," 128.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here: immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 41.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>138</sup> Minh-ha, "Interview."



‘Twilight Gray, Middle Gray’<sup>139</sup> is the title of a segment of Minh-ha’s chapter ‘Nature’s r: A Musical Swoon’.<sup>140</sup> Here she explores the aesthetic and spiritual significance of the colour grey in various eras of Japan’s history and its myriad philosophical aspects in Japanese culture, including the simple, restrained qualities of the ‘wide range of shades of gray obtained through the matting and subduing of colors’.<sup>141</sup> Yet grey also always includes a dimension of being ‘the realm where both the interior and the exterior merge’<sup>142</sup> and an element of pause or suspense. Minh-ha further goes on to reflect on grey as a colour ‘composed of multiplicities’,<sup>143</sup> which is ‘neither black nor white, but somewhere in between—in *the middle* where possibilities are boundless.’<sup>144</sup>

The Arabic rendition of Bach’s ‘Erbarne Dich’ from *St. Matthew Passion BWV 244*,<sup>145</sup> by Lebanese contralto Fadia El-Hage, whose vocal training includes oratorio as well classical Arabic music, can be seen as situated in such a space of ‘middle gray’. Together with Sarband, an ensemble connecting historically informed European performance practice with living traditions including those of Arab, Mediterranean and Chinese musics,<sup>146</sup> El-Hage developed a new vision of this aria. The violin solo is played by Mohammed Ali Abbas Hashim al Battat, who imbues Bach’s famous melody with Arabic ornaments and improvisation. To ensure the intelligibility of the words—honouring the primacy of the text in Arabic singing—the aria is transposed down by a fourth. El-Hage’s voice sustains the same warm resonance throughout, yet balances on the fine line between a fuller western classical vibrato on the vowels and a straighter, less roomy, more ‘chest-leaning’ sound as determined by the demands of the Arabic language, with its complex consonants and glottal stops (for example at 3:35 – 3:45). At times, we hear a more operatic colour on a melodic run (5:50 – 6:00); at other points the sliding portamentos more typical of Arab singing (for example at 1:03 – 1:06). Yet, neither quality takes over the other: they are both ‘subdued’ without losing their character or power. We encounter, within Bach’s soaring melody, multiple definable and non-definable shades of vocal colour. Here, in the meeting ground of the deep spirituality of music and text, ‘the boundaries of “culturally” defined vocal identities’<sup>147</sup> begin to dissolve—difference begins to replace binaries.

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<sup>139</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 70.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-75.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, (Original italics).

<sup>145</sup> Sarband & Fadia el-Hage, “Erbarne Dich, mein Gott, in Arabic,” YouTube video, 7:12, posted by “sicimteorici,” Feb 12, 2013, accessed Mar 3, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUj3LEiMEKE>.

<sup>146</sup> Sarband, “This is Sarband,” 2019, accessed Sep 19, 2019, <https://sarband.de/index.shtml>.

<sup>147</sup> Christian Utz and Frederick Lau, “Introduction: Voice, Identities, and Reflexive Globalization in Contemporary Music Practices,” in *Vocal Music and Contemporary Identities: Unlimited Voices in Asia and the West*, ed. Christian Utz, and Frederick Lau (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 5.

While in this Arabic version of ‘Erbarne Dich’ the divergences of language, culture and style are evident, even as they transform and fade into each other, sometimes another kind of voice or expression emerges—the origins of which are much harder to distinguish. Ortega suggests that Tituba developed her unique and powerful hybrid voice through a ‘complex discursive process [blurring] the oppositional differences between self and other’:<sup>148</sup> ‘as she encounters others in her journey, she assimilates their ways of seeing the world into her own.’<sup>149</sup> Her voice—the ‘T’ of *Tituba*—constantly evolves and never arrives, showing how ‘hybridity, as Condé conceptualizes it, does more than merely display diversity and heteroglossia’.<sup>150</sup>

This quality of what Bakhtin calls a constant ‘act of becoming’<sup>151</sup> reminds me of Dhafer Youssef’s unearthly singing in ‘Bird Canticum’ from *Bird Requiem*.<sup>152</sup> Youssef, an oud player, singer and composer born in Teboulba, Tunisia, was trained in reciting the Qur’an while clandestinely listening to jazz during his schooling.<sup>153</sup> At the start of ‘Bird Canticum’, the oud and the characteristically fluid playing of Turkish clarinetist Hüsni Şenlendirici place the music within the cultural boundaries of these regions, with overtones of jazz provided by the piano. Yet, as Youssef starts singing (1:20), and especially as he moves into the higher register of his voice (1:54), none of these influences are clearly distinguishable anymore, or even relevant. The resonances and undulations of his voice, in extreme registers, merge with the clarinet so that at times it becomes hard to distinguish one from the other. The interplay of clarinet and voice seems to conjure up images of natural phenomena; like birdsong it touches on something inside us that needs no definition. Youssef’s voice here has evolved and keeps evolving; it has—even if only temporarily—escaped the ‘box’, transcended the boundaries of ‘self and other’.<sup>154</sup>

As moments of ‘complexity, instability, and dynamism’,<sup>155</sup> such hybrid experiences are powerful, able to ‘[challenge] essentializing notions of identity that demand authenticity’.<sup>156</sup> Even as we experience the dissolution or transcendence of boundaries within a performance, interweaving is not about ‘negating or homogenizing differences but permanently de/stabilizing and thus invalidating [the performances]’ authoritative claims to authenticity.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ortega, “The Art of Hybridity: Maryse Condé’s *Tituba*,” 114.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), 3.

<sup>152</sup> Dhafer Youssef, “Bird Canticum,” YouTube Video, 3:17, posted by “Ahmed Sfaxi,” Oct 31, 2013, accessed Jun 07, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aeR1-Gmc4s>.

<sup>153</sup> Wikipedia, s.v. “Dhafer Youssef,” Feb 21, 2020, accessed Feb 22, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dhafer\\_Youssef](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dhafer_Youssef).

<sup>154</sup> Ortega, “The Art of Hybridity: Maryse Condé’s *Tituba*,” 114.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-8.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>157</sup> Fischer-Lichte, “Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures—Rethinking Intercultural Theatre: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism,” 12.

Another aspect of hybridity can be to embrace and foreground its—potentially contradictory—multiplicity. For those who exist between and within different languages, the ‘simultaneity of multiple language usage’<sup>158</sup> expresses not only a ‘simultaneity of multiple meanings but also multiple belongings’,<sup>159</sup> as British-Lebanese composer Dr. Bushra El-Turk describes:

I find myself most expressive when speaking all languages together, not just in English. It’s the same in making music and the other art forms it becomes or crosses to ... I can only express love in [Lebanese], but on the other hand my emotional and intellectual vocabulary is limited in it and more fluent in English.<sup>160</sup>

Bergvall’s multilingual work actively exposes such ruptures and cracks of her multiplicity, with the aim to ‘show up the impact that languages have against, or into, each other’.<sup>161</sup> Her trilingualism (Norwegian, French and English) inspired her ‘critical and ... artistic interest in the crossing points between languages. The way languages and cultures meet, can or cannot meet.’<sup>162</sup> Switching languages in the middle of a poem or live performance, Bergvall confronts her listeners with her (and their own) multiplicities. By speaking languages that the audience might not understand, Bergvall forces her listeners to engage with their own borders, limitations and ignorance. Bergvall explains how, through the process of putting languages with shared histories side by side, she exposes their similarities and/or differences, making her listeners question notions of belonging and, again, authenticity.<sup>163</sup> Not concerned with creating a space of harmony, or developing ‘mongrel or hybrid languages’,<sup>164</sup> her work brings out contradictions and paradoxes—‘an interest in misspellings, in idiosyncrasies of all kinds, kinds of mis-translations’<sup>165</sup>—as, for example, in her sharp musings on the idiomatic French expression (and its parallels in English) ‘to have a cat in one’s throat’.<sup>166</sup>

Yet, beyond complex personal notions of identity, Bergvall’s work exposes issues of politics, power and violence. ‘How does one keep one’s body as one’s own?’<sup>167</sup> she asks with regard to her poem ‘Cropper’, in which repeated sentence fragments shift between three languages. ‘Cropper’ is a reflection on the boundaries of one’s own body, the erasure of our bodies, and the

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<sup>158</sup> Choi, *Creating a Multivocal Self: Autoethnography as Method*, xxviii.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Bushra El-Turk, text message to the author, Apr 5, 2019.

<sup>161</sup> Caroline Bergvall, “Speaking in Tongues,” *Magma Poetry* Vol. 15, 2019, accessed Sep 15, 2019, <https://magma-poetry.com/archive/magma-15-new-poetry-from-around-the-world/articles/speaking-in-tongues/>.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> See Bergvall, “Seeing Through Languages,” posted by “LOUISIANACHANNEL,” 2013, accessed Aug 20, 2019, <https://channel.louisiana.dk/video/caroline-bergvall-seeing-through-languages>.

<sup>164</sup> Caroline Bergvall, “Speaking in Tongues.”

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> See Bergvall, “A Cat in the Throat - On bilingual occupants.”

<sup>167</sup> See Bergvall, “Seeing Through Languages.”

violence inherent in assigning collective identities onto a body—or groups of bodies. Bergvall reflects on how languages can aggressively reinforce historical narratives and impose them on those that speak (or do not speak) these languages. Drawing out these contradictions and paradoxes through explicit multiplicities becomes one way of resisting the infliction of such power structures. Like Condé's *Tituba*, Bergvall here presents a way of being 'not only multiple, but also unstable within herself—open to change.'<sup>168</sup>

Twilight is a space of 'multiple encounter[s]'.<sup>169</sup> In its inherent refusal to be definite or definable, it can confound both artist and listener; in the incongruousness of its diversity, the Middle Ground holds an explosive energy, the 'capacity to disrupt and destabilize Western master narratives'.<sup>170</sup> Fischer-Lichte suggests that this 'state of in-betweenness will change spaces, disciplines, and the subject as well as her/his body in a way that exceeds what is currently imaginable.'<sup>171</sup> The potential impasse of a border thus shows up new paths, opens up spaces for imagination, and 'enables ... listeners to become other to themselves'.<sup>172</sup>

This constant encountering and re-encountering of outer and inner, visible and invisible boundaries is central to my own performances. Similarly to Bergvall, whose work expands with her 'interest ... in kinds of cross-art forms',<sup>173</sup> in *After Yeats*, it is the encounter between music and poetry, and in *Woman at Point Zero* the encounter between sound and movement, that allowed me to explore the borders between languages. *Thumbelina*, on the other hand, confronts my ambivalence towards and navigation of my own multiplicities, and thus becomes a space of jarring, fragmentation and occasional transcendence of boundaries.

## Sensing (Reawakening the Senses)

home is nowhere else but right here, at the edge of this body of mine.<sup>174</sup>

The deeper we go into exploring the Middle Ground, the more sharply our senses seem to be involved. The Middle Ground moves from being an abstract, hypothetical space, to alerting us to the sensory nature of our identities, languages and voices. This is reflected in Minh-ha's metaphorical use of twilight or the colour grey, her intensely sensuous reflections on voice and

<sup>168</sup> Ortega, "The Art of Hybridity: Maryse Condé's *Tituba*," 127.

<sup>169</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 62.

<sup>170</sup> Ortega, "The Art of Hybridity: Maryse Condé's *Tituba*," 118.

<sup>171</sup> Fischer-Lichte, "Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures—Rethinking Intercultural Theatre: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism," 12.

<sup>172</sup> Áine McMurtry, "Sea Journeys to Fortress Europe: Lyric Deterritorializations in Texts by Caroline Bergvall and José F. A. Oliver," in *The Modern Language Review* 113, no. 4 (2018), 823.

<sup>173</sup> Bergvall, "Speaking in Tongues."

<sup>174</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 12.

body, as well as the physical metaphor of interweaving coined by Fischer-Lichte. As we try to transcend and transform the boxes and boundaries of identities, this is not achieved through arguments won or theories developed, but through intense processes of connection—to ourselves and others as sensory, erratic and uncontainable beings.

For Marguerite Duras, who saw writing as ‘returning to a wild country’,<sup>175</sup> this foregrounding of sensing over rational thinking was a disruption of the status quo, and a way to uproot outdated and defunct hegemonic patriarchal systems. Her statements, written years ago, are still relevant today. Declaring that ‘[t]he criterion on which men judge intelligence is still the capacity to theorize’,<sup>176</sup> she also notes, however, how across the arts

the theoretical sphere is losing influence ... It ought to be crushed by now, it should lose itself in a reawakening of the senses, blind itself and be still.<sup>177</sup>

Minh-ha describes such processes as ‘gain[ing] insight by letting oneself go blind as one gropes one’s way through the oversaid and all-too-clear of one’s language’.<sup>178</sup> When interweaving languages, identities and voices, what does it mean to embrace a more instinctive, ‘blind’, ‘still’ approach? How can we embrace Sensing as an intuitive, powerful way of dismantling and transcending existing structures and gain agency beyond them? The three aspects I have identified when focusing on interweaving from a sensuous perspective are ‘silence’ (as a prerequisite for instigating a more sensory connection to our work), ‘physicality’ (the development of a more intensely physical and gestural language), and ‘sense-ing’ (creating sense through sensing, heightening the connection between body, voice, language and identity).

Silence, ‘[w]ithin the context of women’s speech ... has many faces.’<sup>179</sup> While silence can be passive or helpless, a consequence of oppression or a reaction to uncertainty, silence can be ‘subversive’ when ‘freed ... from the male-defined context of absence, lack, and fear as feminine territories’.<sup>180</sup> Here I understand silence not in its ‘commonly set ... opposition with speech’,<sup>181</sup> but as an inner response, a particular engagement with ‘language, world and consciousness’,<sup>182</sup> which embraces ambiguity and allows us to unlearn, reassess and reinterpret the structures,

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<sup>175</sup> Marguerite Duras, “From an Interview,” trans. Susan Husserl Kapit, in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks (Amherst: Massachusetts U.P., 1980), 175.

<sup>176</sup> Marguerite Duras, “Smothered Creativity,” trans. Virginia Hules, in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, 111.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 42.

<sup>179</sup> Minh-ha, “Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference.”

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Spivak, “Feminism and Critical Theory,” 477.

languages and practices we live within. And it is in fact the silence we experience when faced with injustice or confusion which becomes the starting point for this transformation.

Deliberating on foreignness, Minh-ha writes that

although living in two dualistic worlds (here versus there) proves to be still acceptable to the rational mind, living in two and many non-opposing worlds—all located in the very same places as where one is—inevitably inscribes silence.<sup>183</sup>

This is an experience painfully familiar to artists with multiple—potentially never complete—belongings, wrestling with concepts of fluency and authenticity, both within themselves and with how they are seen by the outside world. Singer, composer and improviser Gabriel Dharmoo, for example, who has an ancestral connection to the Indian subcontinent and has spent time in southern India studying Carnatic singing, faces these issues in his complex relationship with his heritage. While on the one hand ‘audiences looked at this young brown man and thought they knew what they were seeing—and hearing’<sup>184</sup>—as Dharmoo himself puts it, ‘the Indian guy that’s been to India’<sup>185</sup>—Dharmoo ‘realizes that he can never be fully of that culture[:] it’s something admired and yearned for, but forever out of reach.’<sup>186</sup> This is an experience that chimes closely with my own (and, in fact, most people whose identities involve some sort of travelling or displacement). Dharmoo explains how his trips to India started with the aim to ‘research a new form of music so that it would seed my practice in new music and composition’,<sup>187</sup> but that ‘it proved much more than that.’<sup>188</sup> Instead of simply deciding to apply ‘this raga behaviour exactly, or this rhythmic touch’<sup>189</sup> to his music, Dharmoo contemplated: ‘How do I digest this?’<sup>190</sup>

Minh-ha suggests that ‘[i]f the space of language is to resonate anew, if I am to speak differently, He must learn to be silent—He, the Traveler who is in me and in woman ... who thinks s/he sees best because s/he *knows* how to see.’<sup>191</sup> I understand Dharmoo’s response as one of silence—its initial hesitance a way to grapple with identity that does not involve constructing a straightforward response, but daring to embrace complexity, stumbling and entanglement. Embracing silence allows instinctive responses such as these to form: ‘That kind of singing has really bled into how I improvise.’<sup>192</sup> Dharmoo’s music, intermingling vocal improvisation, extended

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<sup>183</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 2.

<sup>184</sup> Alexander Varty, “The Shapeshifting Sounds of Gabriel Dharmoo,” *Musicworks* 125 (Summer 2016), 25.

<sup>185</sup> Gabriel Dharmoo, quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 42 (Original italics).

<sup>192</sup> Varty, “The Shapeshifting Sounds of Gabriel Dharmoo,” 24.

vocal techniques, as well as his studies of Carnatic musical styles, shapeshifts in a way that is at once tangible yet indefinable, and stubbornly ‘continues to defy naming’.<sup>193</sup>

Musicians learn to tune into silence as part of their practice:

The skilled listening of the musician also requires an inner and outer silence: without that silence, more silent than the silences to which everyday living accustoms us, the musicality of beings, and the voices of our manmade instruments, will not give themselves to be heard.<sup>194</sup>

Silence can thus also be understood as a deep tuning in, a way of ‘listening that comes from a bodily felt understanding’,<sup>195</sup> that gives us ‘access to what is hidden from sight’.<sup>196</sup> Starting from a place of not-knowing, from creating or co-creating ‘from blackness, from darkness’,<sup>197</sup> silence in this sense is also the search for an alternative to ‘the sense of seeing ... privileged in the creation of knowledge in the West’.<sup>198</sup> As violinist Dr. Preetha Narayanan describes in her discussion of co-creative listening,<sup>199</sup> silence encompasses the willingness to ‘[let] go of [one’s] vision to give [others] space’,<sup>200</sup> thus allowing the creative process to ‘unfold beyond [one’s] imagination.’<sup>201</sup> As a collaborative process, silence is ‘precisely the sum of voices of everyone, the equivalent of the sum of our collective breathing’,<sup>202</sup> and something to further explore as a tool of resistance, to resound ‘the voices of marginalized others.’<sup>203</sup>

This instinctual approach to creating often seems to instigate a more physically involved or raw creative response. For example, composer Bushra El-Turk’s response to not fully belonging to either heritage, to ‘being born into alterity’,<sup>204</sup> was to go beyond integrating the sound worlds and philosophies of Arab and European art musics by developing a ‘sound vision’ of an ‘expressive rawness of sound’.<sup>205</sup> Focusing ‘as much, if not more, on character than specific pitch’,<sup>206</sup> El-Turk has been developing an intensely gestural language, in which the body and movement of the performer are as integral to the performance as the sound they produce. A lighthearted and

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<sup>193</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 85.

<sup>194</sup> David Michael Levin, *The Listening Self: Personal Growth, Social Change and the Closure of Metaphysics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 84.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 70.

<sup>197</sup> Duras, “From an Interview,” 174.

<sup>198</sup> Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing*, 70.

<sup>199</sup> As mentioned in chapter 2, p.21.

<sup>200</sup> Narayanan, “The Development of Co-Creative Listening in Collaborative Ensemble Practice,” 116.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Duras, “Smothered Creativity,” 112.

<sup>203</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 42.

<sup>204</sup> Bushra El-Turk, “Bleeding through ... Compositional processes in the Integration of Middle Eastern and Western Art music.” (PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, 2017), 11.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

irreverent example is ‘Crème Brûlée on a Tree’<sup>207</sup> for voice and piano, based on American chef Andy Ricker’s durian custard recipe.<sup>208</sup> The score includes a specific vocabulary of gestures developed as an intrinsic part of the musical language, eliciting a visceral response from the listener. While this piece is set in and composed for a traditional European art music context, it shows El-Turk’s concern with gesture as a direct response to her explorations of the ‘cultural dialogues and tensions, whatever they may be, in ... sound’.<sup>209</sup> Expanding her language from ‘pure’ music into the more instinctual realms of movement and theatre set her free to distil and transcend specific cultural references, something we began to explore further together in *Woman at Point Zero*.

Vocal and movement artist Elaine Mitchener, on the other hand, has developed her own unique performance practice, creating hard-hitting, transformative and subversive ‘contemporary music theatre and performance art’.<sup>210</sup> Shaped by a wide range of musical influences, from opera to jazz, to ‘ska, reggae and dub’, thanks to her ‘Jamaica rooted and music-loving family’,<sup>211</sup> her work challenges conventional categories and confronts her audiences with often uncomfortable issues.

*Sweet Tooth*, a cross-disciplinary music theatre work with a small ensemble on stage, in which Mitchener ‘casts a unique look upon the history of the sugar trade’,<sup>212</sup> is an unsettling tour-de-force, partly composed, partly improvised, which unfolds in six chapters. In Chapter 3, entitled ‘Scold’s Bridle’,<sup>213</sup> she portrays the brutal punishment—often reserved for female slaves—of having an iron muzzle inserted into their mouths. Physical and vocal expression become inseparable in Mitchener’s almost excruciatingly vulnerable and unsparing performance, as she compels the audience to endure the torture and humiliation with her, to gag and retch with her. Smashing boundaries of genres and disciplines, her vocal and physical performances transcend and transform each other; deeply troubled, our own realities and structures begin to show cracks.

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<sup>207</sup> Bushra El-Turk, “Crème Brûlée on a Tree,” YouTube video 5:43, posted by “Bushra El-Turk,” Mar 11, 2019, accessed Mar 11, 2020, <https://youtu.be/5Y787bKnTHc>.

<sup>208</sup> “[D]urian is the world’s most forbidden fruit’, due to its nauseating stench. See “Bushra El-Turk: Crème Brûlée on a Tree,” *Composers Edition*, accessed Mar 6, 2020, <https://composersedition.com/work/bushra-el-turk-creme-brulee-on-a-tree/>.

<sup>209</sup> El-Turk, “Bleeding through ... Compositional processes in the Integration of Middle Eastern and Western Art music,” 16.

<sup>210</sup> “Biography,” Elaine Mitchener, accessed May 1, 2019, <http://www.elainemitchener.com/biography>.

<sup>211</sup> Elaine Mitchener, interviewed by Chris Searle, “I am definitely not a Jazz Singer,” *Morning Star*, May 28, 2019, accessed Jun 1, 2019, <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/c/i-am-definitely-not-jazz-singer>.

<sup>212</sup> “Sweet Tooth,” Elaine Mitchener, accessed May 1, 2019, <http://www.elainemitchener.com/sweet-tooth>.

<sup>213</sup> As part of the punishment, a ‘bridle-bit (or curb-plate) ... was slid into the mouth and either pressed down on top of the tongue as a compressor or used to raise the tongue to lie flat on the wearer’s palate.’ “Wikipedia, s.v., “Scold’s Bridle”, accessed May 10, 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scold%27s\\_bridle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scold%27s_bridle).



The physicality of these processes, as with Fischer-Lichte's processes of interweaving, does not 'necessarily result in the production of a whole',<sup>214</sup> but rather is about freeing up our languages to challenge the status quo and to find deeper connections, even if

mistakes, errors, failures, and even small disasters might occur when unintended knots appear in the cloth, when threads unravel or flow apart, when the proportion of the dyes is off, or the cloth woven becomes stained.<sup>215</sup>

Heightening our sensory awareness of the languages or identities we inhabit—by falling silent, or by intensifying the physicality of a creative process—allows us to connect more closely to the particular nature of these languages or identities as well as to simultaneously transcend them. Tapping into the more instinctual parts of what it means to be human, acknowledging that '[h]ome ... is .... in the eye, the tongue and the nose [and] acutely in the ear',<sup>216</sup> can also be a way of freeing ourselves from rigid boxes, as we acknowledge the asymmetries and idiosyncrasies beyond our control.

These themes— notions of 'sense-ing'—are poetically and conceptually explored in Bergvall's work, as she embarks on 'a whole process of re-embodiment and re-appraisal of language's spaces',<sup>217</sup> unwrapping our relationship with language:

So there is this friction inside the speaker's mouth. This friction on the throat. The intake of breath, the raspy sound as one clears one's throat, the spit that forms and wells up, the sounds that follow, the words that form: all of this is linguistically where you are, and how you must begin to understand who you are in language.<sup>218</sup>

As she reminds us of how of the 'sounds of language [are] explicitly composed of the body's mechanics',<sup>219</sup> and explores what that means for bi-, tri- or multilinguals, Bergvall's choice of words and imagery—'[b]reathing, coughing, spitting'<sup>220</sup>—drives home the thin line between 'what is perceived as civilized or uncivilized'.<sup>221</sup> These lines are also blurred in, for example, the work of Dharmoo or Minh-ha.

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<sup>214</sup> Fischer-Lichte, "Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures—Rethinking Intercultural Theatre: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism," 11.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 12.

<sup>217</sup> Bergvall, "A Cat in the Throat - On bilingual occupants."

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> "News: Gabriel Dharmoo wins prestigious Jules Leger Prize for New Chamber Music," *Concordia University*, accessed Jun 6, 2019. <http://www.concordia.ca/cunews/finearts/2017/11/20/gabriel-dharmoo-wins-prestigious-jules-leger-prize-for-new-chamb.html>.

Yet the understanding of art as sensory is an ancient aesthetic concept, which has evolved in different artistic traditions and philosophies. Minh-ha, for example, cites master of Japanese Noh theatre Zeami Motokiyo,<sup>222</sup> who ‘identified three aspects of the art and equated them with the senses: seeing was called the skin, hearing the flesh and feeling the bones.’<sup>223</sup> In parallel, Narayanan alerts us to ‘Rasa’, a concept in Indian arts, which links aesthetic appreciation to the sensation of taste or flavour. According to Schechner, ‘Rasa is sensuous, proximate, experiential. Rasa is aromatic. Rasa fills space, joining the outside to the inside’.<sup>224</sup>

Narayanan draws on the concept of Rasa as ‘a means of understanding communication between creator, performer, and listener’<sup>225</sup> to illuminate her concept of embodied co-creative listening, highlighting the term’s ‘inherent emphasis on emotion and affect’.<sup>226</sup>

The literal translation of *rasa* stems from the root *ras*, “to taste”; used in ancient medicinal treatises and the Vedic scriptures to mean “taste” and “flavour,” *rasa* is associated with the whole entity that results from the mixture of ingredients and tastes. The result of this mixture of ingredients or tastes is a single, new and exclusive taste of its own. These tastes unite to create a singular and dynamic blend, and upon bringing delight to the mind, create *rasa*.<sup>227</sup>

Embracing the idea of *rasa* as a ‘quintessentially ... holistic, tacit experience’<sup>228</sup> allows us to interweave identities and languages from a place of intuition. Narayanan describes how the music created by the diverse band members of her ensemble *Flux* ‘was perhaps “authentic” for different reasons altogether’,<sup>229</sup> identifying her work and approach as a ‘shift from tradition-based authenticity to person-based authenticity’.<sup>230</sup>

Similar concerns, as well as the notion of expression and creativity as sensory processes, can be found in Dharmoo’s work, albeit from a more individual, radical perspective. For example, *Anthropologies Imaginaires*—a ‘solo vocal performance that interacts with a mockumentary’<sup>231</sup>—is an exhilarating, outrageously funny, daring and deeply sensitive work devised, composed and

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<sup>222</sup> Also spelled Seami, he lived from 1363 – 1443. See Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 85.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>224</sup> Richard Schechner, “Rasaesthetics,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 45, no. 3 (2001), 29.

<sup>225</sup> Narayanan, “The Development of Co-Creative Listening in Collaborative Ensemble Practice,” 52.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-3.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> Gabriel Dharmoo, “Anthropologies Imaginaires: Trailer,” Vimeo video, 3:39, posted by “Gabriel Dharmoo,” 2015, accessed May 09, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/105009513>.

performed by Dharmoo. Through a series of ‘pseudo-ethnological arias’,<sup>232</sup> representing invented tribal communities and framed by a video showing an ‘on-screen analysis’ from an assortment of ‘mock-anthropologist talking heads’,<sup>233</sup> the performance addresses issues of ‘post-colonialism, post-exoticism, cultural extinction, globalization, normalized racism and cultural appropriation.’<sup>234</sup> The mock-anthropologists, speaking from a point of authority and a colonial mindset of ‘knowing the other’, gradually expose themselves as hypocritical hegemonic figures, while Dharmoo’s invented languages, consisting of syllables, clicks and pops, invoke the tradition of ‘Sound Poetry’s revolutionary and internationalist poetics [and] its profound revolt against semantic dominance.’<sup>235</sup> Dharmoo shapeshifts and transforms himself into the different imaginary tribes through different vocal techniques and inflections, ranging from avantgarde to jazz, pop and Carnatic music; the constantly morphing soundscape is grounded in expressiveness, rawness and his commitment to the characters he has dreamt up. The mock-anthropologists’ authoritative comments are juxtaposed with the explosive energy of Dharmoo’s gestural language; the drama and humour of the invented, ‘nonsensical’ languages draws us in, as the distance to the ‘coherent’ academics begins to grow. Suspending our ‘theoretical brains’, we connect to the story on an instinctual level, while simultaneously being challenged to question the powerful logocentric structures of Eurocentric academia.

The processes at play here remind me of Minh-ha’s evocative meditation on the expressiveness of voice:

Voice then, not in the words, but in their sounds, in the way it sounds and sculpts the place it traverses ... When the non-representable finds its place in the relation of word, sound, silence and image, or of timbre, tone, dynamics and duration, meaning can only circulate at the limit of sense and non-sense.<sup>236</sup>

As we ‘[shuttle] back and forth between critical blindness and critical insight’,<sup>237</sup> foregrounding and giving in to our senses, we can finally let go of having to fit inside a box. We can connect deeply with our specific languages, traditions and experiences, while transcending them by identifying with our innermost human parts. This is something I discovered in *After Yeats*, where I had to delve deeply into the sonic, physical and expressive aspects of the Arabic language, which in turn allowed me to develop a new emotional and artistic relationship with it. On the other hand,

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<sup>232</sup> Varty, “The Shapeshifting Sounds of Gabriel Dharmoo,” 25.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Gabriel Dharmoo, “Anthropologies Imaginaires: Trailer.”

<sup>235</sup> Bergvall, “A Cat in the Throat - On bilingual occupants.”

<sup>236</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 78.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 42.

through the intense movement and physical work we developed in *Woman at Point Zero*, I found a powerful access to my character which transcended the musical language I was expressing myself in. In *Moonlarking*, it was my sensory connection to nature and the physical interaction with Hyeelim that allowed me to develop the music from a place where I let myself '(become) shamelessly hybridize (d)'.<sup>238</sup> In this sense, I connect closely to Marguerite Duras' dream of a language with no syntax, a language that speaks to the senses and to the free and playful spirit within us:

There should be a non-writing, and it will come some day. A simple language without grammar. A form of writing consisting only of words. Words without grammar to sustain them, abandonment as soon as they have been written down.<sup>239</sup>

## Concluding Thoughts

And the journey continues its course, exposing itself as a sight of transience and availability, as play between rapture and rupture.<sup>240</sup>

The above discussion shows how artists are creating defiantly plural works of art, recognising the power of interweaving to gain agency, challenge binary hegemonic world views, and create powerful, transformative work. Through its sheer plurality, my own work resonates deeply within this landscape. By analysing the processes through which this landscape can be navigated, I came to understand how interweaving reaches its transcendent and utopian potential only when all the modes of navigating—Travelling, Twilight and Sensing—are set in motion at the same time. The Middle Ground emerges as different borderscapes meet and our senses become entangled in the crossing points of linguistic, cultural, artistic and physical borders. This recognition is reflected in the way my performances, throughout my research, have become increasingly theatrical and sensory. My collaborations with artists from other disciplines were key to this process.

The potential sense of shock, discomfort or offence, as experienced, for example, in Mitchener's or Dharmoo's work, or of being faced with our own ignorance and lack of comprehension, as in Bergvall's multilingual sound-poetry, are part of this transformative experience. It is precisely these ruptures that allow us to surrender to the irritation of 'too much',

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Cynthia Cruz, "Notes Toward a New Language: Holes: On Marguerite Duras," *Poetry Foundation* (blog), Apr 22, 2015, accessed Mar 10, 2019, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/04/notes-toward-a-new-language-holes-on-marguerite-duras>.

<sup>240</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 83.

to sensuality. And it is by embracing these provoking ruptures, by playing with them, that we learn to disrupt and to achieve agency and transcendence.

By developing an embodied, explicitly multiple approach to creating a musical-artistic language, the performances I have created in response to the research questions (and will discuss in the following chapters) question notions of borders, roots and authenticity. Playfully—and seriously—they address ways of engaging with audiences and musicians, challenging them to explore their notions of themselves and others, and to consider how we communicate, live together and create meaning.

## Chapter 5: Swimming Between Shores

The two of us wrote *Anti-Oedipus* together. Since each of us were several, there was already quite a crowd. Here we have made use of everything that came within range, what was closest as well as farthest away.<sup>241</sup>

### Backdrop

*Swimming Between Shores ... a woman's journey through identity ...* was a deeply personal collaborative project with composer Dr. Morag Galloway. Supported by the Terry Holmes Composer/Performer Award, a commission awarded annually in the Department of Music, University of York, we developed the piece to be premiered in the Sir Jack Lyons Concert Hall in April 2015 as part of the York Spring Festival of New Music. A semi-staged, collage like, one-hour long concert performance, *Swimming Between Shores* is held together by a metaphorical narrative arch: a woman questions her identity in a series of sensory, dream-like scenes. As the title implies, the piece deals with journeys—symbolic and literal—between places, cultures, voices, musics and languages, between different times in history and places we deem as fixed (the shores). Syriac-Aramaic chants and Arab musical settings intermingle with western compositional genres and approaches; words from Arab women authors and poets sit alongside those of European women. These are anchored by texts from Rumi and the Bible.

### My Role in the Collaboration and Creative Process

Morag<sup>242</sup> and I co-created *Swimming Between Shores*; our collaboration was an organic and fluid process, shaped by our close and long-lasting friendship. While our roles were essentially divided into composer (Morag) and performer (Merit), they became blurred in the process: I composed some of the music and Morag performed in the piece, as well overseeing its stage direction. Inspired by intimate discussions about our lives, relationships, values and experiences as women in society, we worked closely on developing the concept and choice of material.

We chose the performers together: students from the University of York and professional musicians, including Iranian kanun player Nilufar Habibian and Charlotte Watson, a cellist and dancer. For the students, we ran preparatory workshops. I arranged the two Aramaic chants framing the piece, as well as my compositions ('Stunning Looks', 'Double Love' and 'Realisation')

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<sup>241</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3.

<sup>242</sup> Due to the personal nature of the relationships I have developed with my collaborators, I have chosen to refer to them by their first name throughout the commentary, after introducing them by their full name and title.

in the workshops through improvisatory tasks and in separate rehearsals in London with Nilufar. Morag's research for her PhD, *The Dynamics of Mutuality in the Composer and Performer Relationship*, as well as my research questions, closely influenced the direction of the piece.

### Aims

- To create a piece of music theatre to reflect on, illustrate and explore the multiplicity and fluidity of modern-day cultural identity.
- To create a narrative arc with a particular focus on female experience of identity and give voice to those who challenge existing dominant narratives.
- To explore aspects of personal relationships within a musical and linguistic journey, with the aim of investigating the transformative effect of travelling on personal and artistic voice.

### Format of Submission

I am submitting the film of our live performance at the Sir Jack Lyons Concert Hall, University of York, in April 2015. I am further submitting a score of the piece (containing Morag's and my compositions, which Morag originally created and submitted as part of her PhD portfolio in 2016) and the programme for the performance.

## The Project

When I teach Middle Eastern history, I confront deeply entrenched stereotypes about veiled and submissive women. These ideas do not emerge out of thin air; they are embedded in our literature and consciousness. Orientalists and fiction writers have exoticized and eroticized the harem; and colonial governments have compared their “enlightened” treatment of women to “degraded” and “exploitive” Arab custom. What has been missing is the Arab point of view and, especially, the voices of Arab women.<sup>243</sup>

*Swimming Between Shores* was the most personal project of this portfolio, devised in collaboration with my close friend Dr. Morag Galloway, a composer, performer, director and creative practitioner with whom I’ve had a long personal and musical relationship. The project marked the beginning of my PhD journey. Morag’s compositions emerge from her love for theatre, dance and visual arts as well as her deep enquiry into the transformative potential of a genuinely collaborative relationship between composer and performer, creator and executor. Her artistic personality, like mine, is explicitly multiple and fluid. Our starting point for the collaboration was gender: ‘as women, we wanted to give voice to other women.’<sup>244</sup>

The project sets out the landscape of my PhD. It lays out a metaphorical home, by drawing on the musical styles Morag and I respectively felt rooted in. Through the process of transforming our relationships with these styles, this project simultaneously points in the direction my practice and research was going to take—even though some of these directions were still latent in this project. At this stage in the process, I still felt very much torn by a perceived and incomplete biculturality or bimusicality, and presumed that the aim of my research was to find a third, harmonious identity in which I could combine my Arabic and western classical training and background, an identity which would alleviate my feelings of otherness. Part of my concern was how I could publicly negotiate my multiple artistic identities; how they were perceived and understood from the outside. The creative process of devising *Swimming Between Shores* was the beginning of the realisation that my aim was not to unify and define my voice, but to consciously and proudly embrace its multiplicity; it was about the particularity of each story that I lived and

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<sup>243</sup> Geraldine Forbes, “Afterword,” in *Nadia, Captive of Hope: Memoir of an Arab Woman* (London: Routledge, 2015), Kindle Loc. 6421.

<sup>244</sup> Galloway, “The Dynamics of Mutuality in the Composer and Performer Relationship,” 38.



told, about the aliveness in my senses and about using my voice to challenge perceived borders and ingrained hegemonic hierarchies.

Hegemonic systems, be they postcolonial or patriarchal, work by reinforcing difference, binary ideas of identity and simplistic essences. As Minh-ha writes, acerbically,

[i]f identity refers to the whole pattern of sameness within a being, the style of a continuing me that permeated all the changes undergone, then difference remains within the boundary of that which distinguishes one identity from another. This means that at heart X must be X, Y must be Y, and X cannot be Y. Those running around yelling X is not X and X can be Y, usually land in a hospital, a rehabilitation center, a concentration camp, or a reservation.<sup>245</sup>

Such notions of difference, as discussed earlier in relation to identity (see chapter 3), can be resisted by exposing the ‘leveling of differences’<sup>246</sup> and also by reclaiming difference from being a ‘tool of segregation’ to using it as ‘a tool of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance’.<sup>247</sup> Morag’s experiences of otherness mirrored my own; hers were not of a linguistic or cultural nature, but those of a woman whose diverse talents are hard to fit into a box. In order to situate our experiences within a wider field of voices, voices that articulate difference, we drew on writings by Arab women, women who fight daily on the fronts of feminism as well as those of racism. Instead of telling a single story, we decided to weave together voices that could express the myriad realities permeating our and other women’s lives, exploring different aspects of female experience, including motherhood, love, desire and facing violence.

As metaphorical travel companions across the terrain of our languages and identities, Wandering (Travelling) became Morag’s and my primary mode of connecting and interweaving our voices. Yet there were moments in the performance where the clear boundaries began to dissolve, and we found ourselves immersed in Twilight. As implied by the title, an awareness of the sensory side of our identity threads together the whole of *Swimming Between Shores*, even though we did not consciously explore this in the musical language.

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<sup>245</sup> Minh-ha, “Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference.”

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

## Wandering (Travelling)

In traveling, one is a being-for-other, but also a being-with-other. The seer is seen while s/he sees. To see and to be seen constitute the double approach of identity.<sup>248</sup>

In a moment of recognition, as we were putting together the programme, Morag called my character The Wanderer. This name not only elucidated my fragmentary experiences as a character but also the nature of our process and the essence of our piece. *Swimming Between Shores* is not a linear narration with a dramatic arc, a climax and a resolution. It is a contemplative, yet intensely emotional experience of exploring a landscape of identities. As Morag and I journeyed towards and with each other, in conversation with voices from past and present, we also visited and invited each other into our existing musical homes. We used both our individual as well as shared modes of Wandering. For example, a maqam<sup>249</sup> we were both drawn to, became at once a starting point, a destination, as well as a shared vehicle: Morag used the maqamat we chose as inspiration for character, intervallic and pitch material, while I used them to introduce her (and our fellow musicians) into my musical world. At times, we encountered the threat of destabilisation inherent in travelling.

The perceived fragmentation of identity was symbolised by the dissected Apollonian cone,<sup>250</sup> which I play with and explore in ‘The Flaw of Space’ (Part One and Part Two), two settings of excerpts of Sabah al-Kharrat Zwein’s poem ‘As if in Flaw’ or ‘In the Flaw of Space’. I was particularly drawn to the spatial symbolism in the poetry; Morag composed beautifully sparse yet lusciously harmonised pieces, in which I wandered into her sound-world, singing the melodic line in a pure and straight style without adding ornaments or embellishments. These two pieces—the posing and solution of the puzzle—were placed near the beginning and end of the performance. The reassembling of the cone, the acceptance and celebration of our contradictory identities, happens in tranquil ecstasy, reflecting the nature of Rumi’s Sufi poetry.

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<sup>248</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 41.

<sup>249</sup> Maqam (Arabic: مقام, pl: maqamat), literally translates as ‘place’ or ‘location’, and refers to a particular mode, as well as the entire modal system used in Arabic music. More than simply a scale consisting of a series of pitches, a maqam refers a set of musical phrases, behaviours and particular ornaments. Systems closely related to maqam can be found in Turkey (Turkish Makam), Iran (Dastagh), and across the entire region from Greece through Azerbaijan (Mugham) to Uzbekistan. For more info, visit <https://www.maqamworld.com/en/index.php>.

<sup>250</sup> An Apollonian cone is a teaching tool used to show the conic sections: circle, ellipse, parabola and hyperbola. In our piece, it became a symbol that ‘articulated the confusion underlying a sense of identity formed from seemingly mismatched and contradictory parts [and] a metaphor for the scenes and journey throughout the show.’ See Galloway, “The Dynamics of Mutuality in the Composer and Performer Relationship,” 43-44.

One way in which we connected our musical languages was through pitch material. Morag’s melodies in ‘Flaw of Space’ explore the same chromatically pungent intervals as my own setting of ‘Stunning Looks’ (13:45 – 17:00),<sup>251</sup> a poem written by Safiyya al Baghdadiyya, a twelfth-century female Arab poet. The mode I use here is Maqam Hjaz Kar Kurd (مقام حجاز کر کرد):



Figure 1: Maqam Hjaz Kar Kurd

When played, this maqam incorporates two augmented major seconds, which morph chromatically with the melody:



Figure 2: Maqam Hjaz Kar Kurd variation

My setting of ‘Stunning Looks’ was inspired by an Andalusian *mwashshah*,<sup>252</sup> a style I studied closely as part of learning Arabic singing. Together with two other poems I set from Abdullah al Udhari’s collection *Classical Poems by Arab Women*, ‘Stunning Looks’ represented one of my musical homes as an Arabic singer. Morag and I chose the poem, as it is about love and eroticism and simultaneously disrupts the stereotype of the docile Arab woman. The music is set in the time signature of 7/4, a rhythmic pattern—*iqa*<sup>253</sup>—called *Iqa’ Nawakht* (إيقاع نوخت), popular in *mwashshah*:

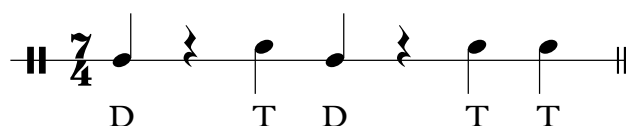


Figure 3: Iqa’ Nawakht

<sup>251</sup> See accompanying video. I indicate the relevant sections in the performance videos in the same way throughout.

<sup>252</sup> A *mwashshah* (Arabic: موشح, pl: *mwashshahat*) is a form of poetry and music developed in ancient Andalusia and part of the key repertoire of classical Arabic music. Unlike the even metered Khalili rhyme used in previous settings of poetry, the poems set in *mwashshahat* vary in length, rhyme and duration, which had a profound impact on the development of the music.

<sup>253</sup> An *iqa’* (إيقاع) is a cyclical rhythmic pattern used in Arabic music. Each *iqa’* is formed of two basic sounds: “dum” (D) and “tak” (T). Similarly to the melodies, these rhythmic patterns are ornamented and fleshed out with additional beats and sounds, according to the genre, the words of a song, the style of the percussionist and the size of the percussion section. For more information, visit <https://www.maqamworld.com/en/iqaa.php>.

Another joint mode of travelling we used was Maqam Şaba (مقام صبا), a poignant, sensuous mode with a yearningly placed semitone between the third and fourth degree. This maqam exists in Arabic tuning with a microtone on the second degree, as the ‘western’ Maqam Şaba Zamzama (مقام صبا زمزم) with an Eb, as well as in a Greek version of the mode with an E natural.



Figure 4: Maqam Şaba

Maqam Şaba (in its various forms) provided the basis for both one of Morag’s and one of my compositions; Morag used it as inspiration for pitch material and I employed it more traditionally in line with its modal behaviour. Both these pieces, juxtaposed in the performance, symbolised our journeys towards each other in different ways. Morag’s composition ‘There’ was based on the text by Lebanese-American poet Etel Adnan, which is ‘rooted in the exploration of relationships, but ... also explores on a philosophical level concepts of home, nationality, war, displacement, disconnection and being the other.’<sup>254</sup> Morag’s approach to this composition was melodic and folksong-like, as opposed to the more abstract, angular shapes of ‘Flaw of Space’. She asked me to improvise and embellish the melodic line as I saw fit. As the melodic and harmonic writing allowed it, I changed the melody to the Arabic tuning with the microtonal E. Thus, our two creative voices intermingled.

‘Double Love’ (33:18 – 37:35) is a famous poem by Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya, an eighth-century female Sufi Saint. I set the poem for voice and kanun, in the form of an Arabic mawwal.<sup>255</sup> While the music develops within a more traditional maqam language, we joined our interpretations of the text by interweaving the piece with Morag speaking excerpts from Egyptian feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi’s autobiography *Daughter of Isis*, which she had chosen to reflect her experiences of love and motherhood.

In 2012, I went on a three month research trip to Lebanon to study ancient Arab Christian chants; there I delved into the music of the Syriac-Aramaic liturgies<sup>256</sup> and began to learn Aramaic.

<sup>254</sup> Galloway, “The Dynamics of Mutuality in the Composer and Performer Relationship,” 44.

<sup>255</sup> A mawwal (موال) is a—usually improvised—traditional vocal genre in Arabic music, which is slow, highly ornamented and characterised by elongated syllables and vowels. Usually sung as an introduction to an actual song, a mawwal is often highly sentimental and emotional, resembling a lament.

<sup>256</sup> Aramaic is the liturgical language of churches that follow the West Syriac Rite (those based in Lebanon and Syria, including the Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic and Maronite churches) as well as of those following the East Syriac

We decided to frame *Swimming Between Shores* with two Aramaic chants as a key metaphor. As some of the melodies of these chants potentially date back to the fourth century AD, they are a symbolic link to the past and disrupt the narrative of the schism between East and West: Christianity was born in the East, and the music is sung using the same modal structures within which the Qur'an is recited.

The first chant, 'Man Dodekh', a setting of a text from the *Song of Songs* (04:55 – 8:50), worked effectively by connecting it to the improvisation of the saxophones. The rhythmic freedom and simplicity of the chant was an easier sound world to creatively respond to for the performers, not familiar with Arabic repertoire, than, for example, 'Stunning Looks'. In hindsight, I realised that the performers felt not at home enough with the complex rhythmic material and tight structure of the piece to be able to respond freely, so it remained a slightly unsettled version of home for all of us. I had invited the performers to journey into my sound world, but the distance was too great for them to feel confident and fully at ease. The sense of disruption felt both by them and by me amplified the experience of otherness I was so familiar with. It also intensified the sense of isolation and uprootedness of my character, The Wanderer. This experience is echoed in Minh-ha's reflections on how travelling can instil a sense of a loss—of home, belonging, and safety:

Writers who, in writing, open to research the space of language rather than reduce language to a mere instrument in the service of reason or feelings, are bound like the migrant to wander from country to country ... Nothing remains unmoved; everything safe and sound is bound to sink somewhere in the process.<sup>257</sup>

This sense of linguistic instability is further explored in one of the most ostentatiously violent sections of the performance, which follows on directly from 'Stunning Looks'. Here, my character is assaulted by a violent male voice and chastised for the free and liberated expression of her sexuality. Morag invented a 'sub- or pre-language', made of 'syllables and part-words from an annotation [she] made of Rumi's *Only Breath*.'<sup>258</sup> This 'fantasy language [also] symbolised male appropriation of language and the voicelessness so many of the women, whose work we had read, had spoken of',<sup>259</sup> rendering my character speechless, able to only utter disjointed vocalisations.

The poignancy of this section is also symbolised in the way it links to 'Forbidden Love' (19:30 – 31:30), another section in which a woman is punished for her desire and, as Morag points out, the next time my character is allowed to sing again ('Forbidden Love' is mainly a spoken piece

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Rite (those based in Iraq, including the Assyrian Church of the East, the Ancient Church of the East and the Nestorian Church).

<sup>257</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeism and the boundary event*, 34.

<sup>258</sup> Galloway, "The Dynamics of Mutuality in the Composer and Performer Relationship," 47.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

for me), ‘is the Greek Chorus warning. She has learnt her lesson and been oppressed but not destroyed.’<sup>260</sup>

The silencing of my character thus not only manifests female oppression, but also reflects my inner turmoil of voicelessness, the oppressive feeling that I needed to ‘make sense’ of. Part of me felt silenced, because the whole of me didn’t make sense. And it was by recognising and together engaging with this silencing, this speechlessness, that Morag and I found our way forward.

Embracing the notion of travelling, which forms such a big part of my work and my life in a positive way, was part of the transformative journey of *Swimming Between Shores*. The three different aspects of Wandering (Travelling) I discussed in the chapter on interweaving are all present in our process and performance. We fully embraced the notion of ‘wandering as a mode of receptivity’—opening up to each other, personally, artistically, conceptually. We travelled into each other’s (sound) worlds, with each other towards the different writers whose voices we integrated, sharing, for example, a maqam as a vehicle, even if it took us in different directions. And while at times it unsettled and challenged us and our vision, the ‘instability of travelling’ became our primary ‘source of creative power’—the inspiration for the piece in the way it encompasses different styles and languages. In *Swimming Between Shores*, ‘the path’ was our ‘destination’, our home was in our travels, which required courage and openness from both of us. I started to realise that as a ‘professional foreigner’<sup>261</sup> I could begin to challenge those dominant narratives, and maybe accept that, as Julie Kristeva writes, ‘writing is impossible without some kind of exile.’<sup>262</sup>

### Twilight (Immersing yourself in the Middle Ground)

*Swimming Between Shores* was essentially a project of travels. However, I feel that the scene of ‘Forbidden Love’ (19:30 – 31:30) was a moment in which perceived borders and clearly distinguishable languages began to disappear. The stark, yet earthy and urgent sound world created by Morag in ‘Forbidden Love’ has something true and raw. Crossing into a ground of ‘middle gray’, here Morag intensified and foregrounded different points of contact: musical, textual, theatrical and movement aspects fluidly blur into each other. Using her rootedness in English folk music, symbolised by the tune of ‘The Blacksmith’ played by John, the violinist/lover, she also explored the musical ground between Dorian mode and Maqam Hijaz (مقام حجاز).<sup>263</sup> She rewrote

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>261</sup> Abdelkebir Khatibi, quoted in Amine Khalid, “Double Critique: Disrupting Monolithic Thrusts.”

<sup>262</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 34.

<sup>263</sup> Dorian mode and Maqam Hjaz are both rooted on D. Dorian uses all the ‘white’ notes, whereas the pitch material of Maqam Hjaz includes an Eb, an F# and a Bb, with the typically augmented, followed by a minor second.

excerpts from the ‘Song of Songs’ into a contemporary text telling the story of a woman who is physically punished for being intimate with her boyfriend and added an element of dance.

This scene for me embedded the spark of something new, like a place of birth; potentially a piece in its own right, which could be developed dramatically and musically. While the scene needed more rehearsal to ground it dramatically, I felt free and connected. I believe this is because it simultaneously embodied a non-definable creative Middle Ground and was rooted in a dramatic narrative with elements of love, humour, violence and a sense of the grotesque.

Rather than ‘hybridity’, *Swimming between Shores* as a whole, with its juxtaposition of languages and the exploration of plural identities through ‘multiple encounter[s]’,<sup>264</sup> further exemplifies the ‘multiplicity’ I discussed earlier as an aspect of *Twilight* (see chapter 4, p.40).

### Sensing (Reawakening the Senses)

Sensing as a mode of interweaving, beyond grappling with ‘silence’ as discussed above, is not something we consciously explored in *Swimming Between Shores*. However, in my conversations with Morag about our understanding of our identities, something that came up powerfully was my love for cooking, my joy of creating teas by assembling fragrant herbs and, for both of us, our keen sense of smell. These discussions were the spark that led me to think about identity in a less abstract way. They were also an inspiration for our title, which I found one morning as I listened to someone on the radio talking about swimming between shores.

In the final part of the performance, different melodies from the piece reappear, superimposed over the repeat of the ‘Realisation Mwashshah’, the words of which symbolise a newly found contentedness and clarity.<sup>265</sup> The other melodies symbolically immerse the new melody of ‘Realisation’ into a soundscape of difference, representing me, The Wanderer, swimming between shores. As the music gradually expands into Rumi’s poem ‘One Breath’, our languages become sensory experiences; my voice is not drowned out by the difference, but carried and elevated by it.

### Concluding Thoughts

Our journeying in *Swimming Between Shores*, as much as it was about personal language and finding agency in multiplicity, was an exploration of identity through the relationship with another.

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<sup>264</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 62.

<sup>265</sup> The words of the ‘Realisation Mwashshah’ are life-affirming assertions of the poet’s tastes and desires: “I’d rather be in a life-throbbing house, than in a tall palace ~ I’d rather have a pleasing smock than a chiffon dress ...” Abdullah Udhari, *Classical Poems by Arab Women: A Bilingual Anthology* (London: Saqi Books, 1999), 78.

Created from a place of wanting to include the whole crowd of our several selves and, for me, finding it hard to let go of any parts at this stage, I can see its meandering, fluid vastness as a potential detriment. Yet I also see its positive aspects in the way it asks the listener to come and immerse themselves alongside us—Morag, me and our fellow performers. As we allowed a multitude of voices to resonate within our relationship and the processes of travelling to destabilise our personal boundaries, I began to challenge the dominant narratives within myself. Coming back to voice—my voices, our voices, the piece’s voices—maybe the whole performance was rooted in an experiencing of Sensing after all:

And sensuality? Sensuality follows the listeners ... From the depths of ...,  
on the very surface, it tells all my secrets. I can’t hear it without feeling  
exposed. Whose is it?<sup>266</sup>

Five years ago, I knew how much I loved swimming, the experience of the water on my skin, of submerging myself completely. However, I thought that I was not able to stay in the water, that at some point I had to go and rest on one of these shores. From where I am now, I discovered that swimming is not only my source of creativity and power, but that I can challenge categories only by going deeper inside. And that there are infinite islands in the water.

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<sup>266</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 77 (The second ellipses are the author’s).



## Chapter 6: After Yeats

The fragile moment is that of a multiple encounter between day and night.<sup>267</sup>

### Backdrop

*After Yeats* is a performance research project conceived by composer Prof. William Brooks, in which I was commissioned to co-create and perform a part. *After Yeats* is an enquiry into the potential of creatively responding to Yeats' fascination with—and practice of—musical declamations of poetry, by translating Yeats' poetry and ideas into different languages and using these as the basis for new compositions. Brooks' instructions read as follows:

*After Yeats* is not a score for performance but rather a method for determining a score; it extends W. B. Yeats's practice of poetic declamation to languages other than English. *After Yeats* describes a collaboration between a performer, who declaims a Yeats poem in translation, self-accompanied by a plucked string instrument, and a composer, who works at a remove to observe and amplify the implications of the declamation.<sup>268</sup>

Brooks commissioned three performers to create musical realisations of new or existing translations of Yeats' poetry, in collaboration with a chosen composer. These compositions formed part of a concert programme which also featured a reconstruction of Yeats' collaboration with actress Florence Farr, with whom Yeats had worked closely on developing his vision of musical poetic declamations. In the first part of the programme, alto Robin Bier, informed by Brooks' research and 'the musical notations made by Farr and Dolmetsch',<sup>269</sup> performed poems by Yeats accompanying herself on Dolmetsch's original twelve-stringed psaltery, which Yeats and Farr had especially commissioned. The second part of the programme consisted of the new commissions realised in three languages (Vietnamese, Italian and Arabic) by đàn thran player Thanh Thủy Nguyễn, guitarist Lucia D'Errico and myself. I created a set of four short pieces, in collaboration with three composers, to be performed on voice and oud with a pre-recorded backing track.

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<sup>267</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 62.

<sup>268</sup> William Brooks, *After Yeats - for Performer and Composer*, (Lebanon: Frog Peak Music, 2013), 1.

<sup>269</sup> William Brooks, "Afterword," *Everlasting Voices: for Bass Clarinet, Actor and Fixed Media* (Lebanon: Frog Peak Music, 2013), 5.

## My Role in the Collaboration and Creative Process

My role was that of a performer, creative collaborator and collaborative composer. According to the brief, I developed melodic declamations of four of Yeats' poems translated into Arabic, accompanying myself on the oud (which I only play rudimentarily). I worked with three composers who created backing tracks for these declamations, either using recordings of me singing/declaiming the poems and playing the oud or, in the case of Nehad El Sayyed, an Egyptian oudist, recordings of his own playing. Apart from the collaboration with Nehad, who is based in Basel, Switzerland, I collaborated with the composers in the studio to finalise the backing tracks. Working with Jason Emberton, I took the compositional lead in developing the backing track for the last poem, 'To A Child Dancing in the Wind' (إلى طفل يرقص في الهواء).

## Aims

- To create pieces of music in response to Brooks' instructions that interweave his compositional concept with the qualities of the Arabic language and the principles of maqam music.
- To create poetic readings in Arabic which could challenge my vocal and compositional relationship with the Arabic language in the process.
- To work with different musical collaborators to creatively explore the *Spannungsfeld* between sound and meaning, poetry and music, as set up in this project.

## Format of Submission

I am submitting the filmed recording of a live performance in Sligo at the 'Yeats International Summer School' from July 2015. Counter to Brooks' instructions, neither I nor the composers created a score for the pieces, as all the pieces were developed through improvisation and live recordings in the studio. The resulting pieces are not intended to be recreated; it would make more sense for other performers to recreate the processes as suggested by Brooks. I further submit Brooks' score, which takes the form of a brief, as well as my programme notes, which include the original poems and the Arabic translations.

## The Project

Just start by breathing. The sharp intake of breath at the beginning and in the punctuating pauses of many of William Burroughs' audio recordings is by now as much part of the legend of his audio pieces as the verbal material itself.<sup>270</sup>

*After Yeats* differs from the other projects presented in this portfolio, in that it was created in response to a commission, rather than being a project I instigated myself. However, the brief opened up an intriguing space, which allowed me to investigate the implications of interweaving an abstract western art music concept (Brook's co-creative compositional vision) with the intricacies of the Arabic language<sup>271</sup> and maqam structures. The process also allowed me to reevaluate my use of voice, language and text. Both the brief and the collaborative structures suggested by Brooks were open and fluid, giving us the freedom to develop our own creative paths within the given parameters. The lines between composer and performer were blurred in the process and the final pieces: I had a compositional role in their creation and El Sayyed, for example, played on the backing track of *Sweet Dancer* (الراقصة الحلوة).

The creative process unfolded in several distinct stages and was shaped by different artistic voices. Our brief was to find a translation of one or more of Yeats' poems and to develop musical readings of these by ear. These readings, informed by Yeats' writings on his practice and his collaborations with Florence Farr, were to traverse the ambiguous line between speech and song. According to Yeats,

although [Farr] sometimes spoke to a little tune, it was never singing as we sing today, never anything but speech. A singing note, a word chanted as they chant in churches, would have spoiled everything; nor was it reciting, for she spoke to a notation as definite as that of song.<sup>272</sup>

The recordings of our readings were to be passed on to a composer, who would develop them into full compositions, with the option of including electronics. I felt that the creative space opened up by electronics would work well to reflect the notion of multiple voices reverberating in the compositions. Having created the readings, I decided, in line with the practice of poetic recitation, to keep the integrity of the poetic structure intact and not to fragment the poems into

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<sup>270</sup> Bergvall, "A Cat in the Throat - On bilingual occupants."

<sup>271</sup> The poems have been translated into *fushḥa* (الفصحى), meaning classical (or modern standard) Arabic.

<sup>272</sup> William Butler Yeats, "Speaking to the Psaltery," in *Ideas of Good and Evil* (London: A. H. Bullen, 1902/1903), 16-17.

abstract pieces of music. I therefore asked my collaborators to create electroacoustic backing tracks around the texts. Hence, we ended up with four miniature pieces (between 1.5 - 2.5 mins each).

Unlike in *Swimming between Shores*, where we travelled to quite distinct musical places, the paths in *After Yeats* were very much focused on exploring the border zones. In essence, *After Yeats* was an exploration of Twilight, an immersion into—or opening up of—a manifold *Spannungsfeld* between speech and song, between Yeats’ poetry and classical Arabic, between western art music and maqam structures, between performer and composer. Yet, as I will discuss below, the other modes of interweaving, Wandering and Sensing, were also present. Brooks’ brief was shaped by and instigated an impulse to travel across languages and artistic approaches, which manifested itself in the idea of translation: the translation of Yeats’ poetry as well as of Brooks’ research into a different linguistic context. Personally, perhaps the most surprising outcome was the resulting intensity of my physical and sensuous connection with the Arabic language. Looking at Thûy’s, Erica’s and my interpretations, I was struck by how the intense engagement with our particular languages simultaneously highlighted our shared sensory experience of speech and communication, which Bergvall articulates so astutely: ‘Start by noticing the rasps and spits in language.’<sup>273</sup>

### Wandering (Travelling)

One common motive—and motif—that set us off on our respective creative journeys was exploring the potency of the connection, the path, between music and speech—a central creative tool for Yeats: ‘Like every other poet, I spoke verses in a kind of chant when I was making them ... I would speak them in a loud chanting voice, and feel that if I dared I would speak them in that way to other people.’<sup>274</sup> For Brooks, who had identified this connection as a compelling compositional tool, this was also a journey into the past and back to the present. Having closely researched Yeats’ fascination and obsession with exploring the implications of chanting poetry, Brooks asks:

what does one *do* with such experiments, once the project in question is completed? In particular, what can one do with a practice that is so deeply grounded in the persons, the voices, the very bodies of a generation that is long since passed?<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Bergvall, “A Cat in the Throat - On bilingual occupants.”

<sup>274</sup> Yeats, “Speaking to the Psaltery,” 18-19.

<sup>275</sup> Brooks, “Afterword,” *Everlasting Voices: for Bass Clarinet, Actor and Fixed Media*, 4.

*Everlasting Voices*, a music theatre piece for bass clarinet, actor and media was Brooks' first creative response to his research into Yeats' practice, in which he 'appl[ie]d] Yeats's method to altogether new readings.'<sup>276</sup> In *After Yeats*, he opened up the compositional approach he had developed to other performers and composers. This deliberate invitation of other voices into the creative process meant that the project became intrinsically 'a voyage to the other',<sup>277</sup> and instilled in all of us a shared mindset of 'receptivity' on our travels. For me, this mindset was key to negotiating the web of conversations and the multitude of paths that opened up in the process: to Yeats' practice, Brooks' concept, my collaborators, the Arabic translators, as well as to the structures of maqamat, the qualities of Arabic when spoken, and my own relationship with my voice and its expressive qualities.

Key to the creative interest of this project was the notion of 'the instability of travelling as a source of creative power' (which I referred to earlier in chapter 4, p.37) inherent in the multiple processes of translation. Investigating the destabilisation that takes place through translation, Minh-ha suggests that '[t]he translator transforms while being transformed ... In the zest of telling, I find myself translating myself by quoting all others.'<sup>278</sup> When developing the realisations of these poems, I came up against issues of deep-rooted cultural, linguistic and musical structures and meanings and the freedom of my own creative voice within—as well as my responsibility towards—these.

This creative instability revealed itself in my treatment of maqam as I created the readings. Brooks had instructed us to develop our readings by ear and not to notate them, but to 'practice the text repeatedly until your performance has fully stabilised and can be replicated with an exceptional degree of accuracy.'<sup>279</sup> To connect the compositions deeply with the cultural meaning and sonic-physical properties of the oud, I made the choice to base my readings of three of the poems on the musical structures idiomatically associated with my instrument.<sup>280</sup> For each reading, I therefore set up a home of a particular maqam, which I felt suited the mood of the poem, and worked out the reading within its particular melodic behaviours. I set 'Sweet Dancer' (الراقصة الحلوة) in the exulted, joyful mood of Maqam Rast (مقام رست);<sup>281</sup> for 'Drinking Song' (أغنية شراب), I chose Maqam Sika (مقام سيكا), the root of which is a microtone, and which therefore can have a slightly unsettling feel, while 'A Deep Sworn Vow' (عهد قطوع بحرارة) inhabited the poignant sound world

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>277</sup> See Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim, *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society*, 11.

<sup>278</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here: immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 42.

<sup>279</sup> Brooks, *After Yeats - for Performer and Composer*, 2.

<sup>280</sup> For the fourth poem, 'To A Child Dancing in the Wind' (إلى طفل يرقص في الهواء), I experimented with a different starting point, using the tuning of fourths between the strings of the oud as harmonic inspiration for the melody.

<sup>281</sup> The third degree of Maqam Rast is a microtone, situating the mode right between a major and a minor scale.

of Maqam Şaba (مقام صبا) (see chapter 5, p.60). This compositional choice explicitly rooted the pieces in an Arabic tradition; I mirrored the translation of the text on a musical level. However, having situated it there, I simultaneously distanced myself from the usual treatment of melody within maqam, the ornamentation with traditional *iḥsas* (إحساس), or ‘feeling’.<sup>282</sup> In this process of artistic translation, the compositional result moved from its traditional setting to a different, still unknown, fragile, yet dynamic space.

The Syrian essayist, poet and translator Adonis suggests that ‘[a] translated poem is the result of linguistic destruction.’<sup>283</sup> Was there an element of destruction in the way I treated the melodic form, omitting one of its defining features? And was it perhaps this destruction which allowed me to explore the vocal interpretation of the text from a new angle? In the last line of ‘To A Child Dancing in the Wind’,<sup>284</sup> I included some word painting, emulating (softly) the ‘monstrous’ crying of the wind.<sup>285</sup> Including this new element, akin to extended technique, began to alter the space of the musical language I was working within, an art form which prides itself on its deeply established connection to poetry. Adonis reminds us that

[t]ranslation enriches the target language with the source language, and enriches the lyricism of the former with the lyricism of the latter, so it is not a form of documentation but another form of composition. It is a highly skilled cultural task and an important moral responsibility.<sup>286</sup>

Was I perhaps abandoning my cultural responsibility, entering a damaging, illegitimate space by travelling into this new area, an area in which the language and music (neither of which are fully mine) connect in this different way? A musical space in which my voice did not engage with the traditional improvised and ornamental patterns of maqam music, but instead imbued the melody with a more dramatically informed approach? While I questioned myself, I also was reminded of, for example, the vocal and storytelling art of the Korean Pansori tradition, and how its dramatically flamboyant delivery and word painting are so closely connected to nature. As I journeyed deeper into the texts, their sounds and meanings, new paths began to open up. In this space between creativity and responsibility, I was searching for a balance between staying true to the physical and sonic demands of the Arabic language, so as not to inflict damage, and finding

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<sup>282</sup> Within the maqam tradition, a performer will imbue a melody with their own *iḥsas*, or feeling, meaning their own versions of the melismas and ornamentations characteristic of Arabic music.

<sup>283</sup> Adonis, “Translation, a Second Act of Creation?,” *Lecture for The Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation*, trans. Paul Starkey, The British Library, London, Nov 29, 2018 (London: Banipal Publishing, 2019), 22, accessed Aug 20, 2019.

<https://www.banipaltrust.org.uk/resources/files/Adonis%20Lecture%20English%20Translation.pdf>.

<sup>284</sup> See Video of ‘To a Child Dancing in the Wind’.

<sup>285</sup> The last word of the Arabic translation literally means “from hell”.

<sup>286</sup> Adonis, “Translation, a Second Act of Creation?,” 28.

the freedom to play with it. As I travelled down these paths, unsettled and inspired, I realised that, in the act of translation, there is a responsibility both to nurture as well as to unsettle. In the words of Walter Benjamin, translation '[charges us] with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.'<sup>287</sup>

### Twilight (Immersing yourself in the Middle Ground)

The processes of translation, and the musical poetic nature of this project, opened up an unexpected twilight space for all the performers (and composers), irrespective of our different languages and performance traditions: a space of crossings, where we could explore the borders between spoken and sung text, between poetry and music and between musical and artistic concepts and traditions. Through these processes, we encountered both a state of 'middle gray', a heightened awareness of the borders and cracks we were negotiating, as well as moments of 'hybridity', where boundaries became invisible. Artistically and vocally, a playground opened up, in which we could amplify the rhythms, the melodic contours and the imagery of the language free from musical notational constraints, while remaining deeply rooted in the qualities and demands of our respective languages.

The expressive gaps between speech and song have been explored historically, and around the world. John Potter, in *Vocal Authority: Singing Style and Ideology*, mentions that until 'around the third or fourth centuries Ancient Greek was a pitch-inflected language in which the boundaries between speech and song were often blurred',<sup>288</sup> explaining how, for the art of oratory, the 'expressive possibilities of pitch inflection were developed to a high degree.'<sup>289</sup> Preparing the readings, I was further reminded of Schoenberg's instructions for Sprechgesang in *Pierrot Lunaire*, as he struggled with concerns similar to Yeats':

The performer ... needs to be fully aware of the difference between a sung and a spoken tone: a sung note sustains the pitch, while in speech the pitch is touched upon and then immediately abandoned. The performer, however, needs to avoid a sing-song manner of speaking ... Still, realistic, natural speech is not the goal. On the contrary, the difference between normal speech and speech as musical form needs to be emphasised. However, it is never allowed to sound like singing.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 37.

<sup>288</sup> John Potter, *Vocal Authority: Singing Style and Ideology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 10.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Arnold Schönberg, "Vorwort," (Preface), *Pierrot Lunaire, Op. 21* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1923), iv. (The translation is mine).

This endeavour to clearly express an idea that falls between established categories and is therefore hard to pin down, also illustrates the mystery of *Twilight*, with its infinite shades between two lights. While working out the readings, I was acutely aware of this quality of ‘middle gray’ (as discussed in chapter 4, p.40), of how to negotiate the expressive space in between the notes. To keep the timbre as natural as possible, I developed the readings in a low pitch, close to my speaking register. Yet, some passages naturally have more of a singing quality than others, as can be seen, for example, in ‘To A Child Dancing in the Wind’. The falling melodic pattern at the start of the middle section has more of a sung quality, especially considering that Arabic singing inherently involves a lot of portamento and glissando (1:15 – 1:35). The following phrase, on one pitch, has a much more spoken feel as I bend the pitch and alter my tone quality with the emotion of the words (1:35 – 1:41); from here until the end of the section (1:41 – 1:46), the pitches establish themselves again more clearly.

Rhythmically, in most of the passages I aimed to recreate a naturalistic spoken pace, while in others I accentuated the implied rhythmic feel of the words, resulting momentarily in specific meters. For example, in ‘To A Child Dancing in the Wind’, the whirling 5/8 rhythm of the first line becomes the main creative impetus for the reading. It developed into the most rhythmic piece of the set; even as it moves from the 5/8 pattern to a lilting 6/8 feel, and then to a more naturalistic spoken pace in the middle section, there seems to be an underlying pulse. In the last phrase, I re-introduce the 5/8 pattern, before dissolving it at the end of the poem.

The crossings between speech and sound amplified the implications of the Arabic language, sonically and emotionally. Arabic culture is a culture of poetry; in fact, the music originally developed out of poetry. It is a highly sensitive language, with strict rules in pronunciation. When singing, the correct enunciation of words is just as important as singing in tune; the enjoyment of the words is key to the experience of the listener. The rules for pronunciation extend not just to which letters can or cannot be prolonged, but to how much time one needs to pause on a specific letter. The fact that in Arabic consonants can (must) be elongated, means that it lends itself very well to this heightened spoken-sung quality: whether the consonants are voiced or unvoiced, sustaining them avoids the need to sustain vowels (one of the key qualities of singing) to create rhythmic interest.

Paying tribute to the characteristics of the language, I could be playful melodically, such as in ‘Drinking Song’, where I use occasional wider pitch variation for drunken emotional outbursts (see 1:25 – 1:30).<sup>291</sup> The friction in my mouth from the sustained consonants intensified my physical connection to the language, and allowed me to play with their dramatic impact as, for

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<sup>291</sup> See Video of ‘Drinking Song’.



example, with the last words (1.44 – 1.54).<sup>292</sup> By developing Yeats' practice and amplifying the essence of the text through the creative treatment of the voice, a new, hybrid, space emerged, in which the question of speech or song became ultimately irrelevant. Instead, we touched on a new aesthetics of declaiming Arabic (opening up the potential for a deeper investigation), rooted in the sensory quality of the language, yet full of expressive and creative freedom.

### Sensing (Reawakening the Senses)

Start by noticing the breath in language ... It starts in here, at the source of one's own breathing, through the life pulse rising in the throat, carried through it in a transport of air.<sup>293</sup>

The place between speech and song is special, almost magic; the amplification of rhythmic and pitch implications allows for an expressive and emotional intensity, without being tied to the more formal demands of music. The quality of 'sense-ing' referred to earlier (chapter 4, p.45) emerged strongly for me, as I began to engage more deeply with the sensory aspects of language. Through developing the performances, I learnt how to 'taste' the words and feel their meaning resonate throughout my body; I began to embody the poems. Not a trained musician, Yeats' readings were often criticised and dismissed for being off key. Yet, while it is difficult to make out definite pitches when listening to the remaining recordings of Yeats' own chanting of his poems,<sup>294</sup> it is clear that he seems to have embodied his poetry to such an extent that he physically remembered the pitches: his various recitations of 'The Lake of Innisfree' were almost the same pitch despite being made several years apart. Sensing and 'sense-ing' are inextricably linked.

As discussed above, the Arabic language lends itself particularly well to this practice of heightened declamation. Sensuous, intricate, guttural and physically involved, the letters literally 'fill' your mouth, make you choke and notice the involvement of every part of your tongue, your throat, your breath. The interweaving processes in *After Yeats* were incredibly physical and instinctual. Perhaps most crucially for me, they illuminated the power of language's physical nature, an insight which informed the remaining journey of my research.

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<sup>292</sup> "And I sigh".

<sup>293</sup> Bergvall, "A Cat in the Throat - On bilingual occupants."

<sup>294</sup> See "William Butler Yeats reading selections from his work," *PennSound*, Center for Programme in Contemporary Writing: University of Pennsylvania, © 2017, accessed May 4, 2018, <https://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Yeats.php>.

## Concluding Thoughts

I would like to end by saying that the self that does not translate the Other will not know how to translate itself or know itself. In living practice it will just be a form of death.<sup>295</sup>

This project was situated within a *Spannungsfeld* situated on various borders, enabling and challenging me to integrate different languages, vocally and creatively. Transferring Yeats' concept to Arabic meant that I needed to disrupt my relationship with Arabic singing, which felt like a risk; however, through this process, this relationship changed, developed and expanded. In fact, some of the *After Yeats* pieces travelled with me to other projects, transforming into more theatrically extrovert versions. Responding to different concepts, voices and previously developed practices, and navigating these with the collaborating composers, helped me to develop new tools to explore a different and excitingly ambiguous space. By exploring the Middle Ground between speech and song, I discovered a different kind of vocal freedom and a poetic and sonic musical space I had not imagined before.

Politically, this was a complex project. Yeats, an impassioned orientalist, and problematically involved in developing 'hegemonic intercultural theatre',<sup>296</sup> has been 'criticized for Western appropriations of non-Western cultural forms in service of falsely universalizing claims that extend rather than intervene in imperialist cultural agendas.'<sup>297</sup> Possibly, working with original poetry instead of Yeats' translations could have helped to address such issues as well as diversifying the project even more. However, I believe that through *After Yeats*, Brooks helped to open up a potent, diversifying artistic space, a site 'of in-betweenness',<sup>298</sup> rooted in our beautiful, indefinable and magic relationship with language, as articulated so evocatively by Tahar Ben Jelloun:

This language, which one speaks, but does not write, is the warm fabric of my memory. It shelters and nourishes me.

Can it withstand the travel, the shifts, the extreme mobility in the new clothes of an old foreign language? Out of modesty, it retains its secrets and only rarely does it give itself in. It is not it that travels. It is I who carry a few fragments of it.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Adonis, "Translation, a Second Act of Creation?" 31.

<sup>296</sup> Fischer-Lichte, "Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures—Rethinking Intercultural Theatre: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism," 9.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid. 12

<sup>299</sup> Quoted in and translated by Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 27.

## Chapter 7: Thumbelina

I dare not say: “There is a mini harem deep down in my soul. A gang of females who constantly fight for nothing and bicker, looking for an opportunity to trip one another up. They are teeny-tiny creatures, each no taller than Thumbelina. Around four to five inches in height, ten to fourteen ounces in weight, that is how big they are. They make my life miserable and yet I don’t know how to live without them. They can come out or stay put as they like. Each has declared a different corner of my soul her residence.” I cannot mention them to anyone. If I did they would have me institutionalized for schizophrenia. But isn’t the personality schizophrenic by definition?<sup>300</sup>

### Backdrop

*Thumbelina* is my one-woman theatrical realisation of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale, first published in 1835 in Copenhagen. Thumbelina’s fantastical journeys are embedded in a kaleidoscopic musical journey through time and space: from ancient Aramaic chants and traditional folkloric repertoire, through twentieth-century compositions by Darwish, Gershwin and Montsalvage, to newly composed music and electronic soundscapes. The performance, as well as the film version submitted here, has an intentionally simple, almost homespun flavour, corresponding with the apparent naivety of fairy tales.

### My Role in the Collaboration and Creative Process

*Thumbelina* was in essence a collaboration with my past selves, as a singer, composer, collaborator, researcher, a little girl and a grown woman. I used songs that represent the different languages and traditions I sing in, compositions from my previous research projects *Swimming Between Shores* and *After Yeats*, music I had created in response to my time in Lebanon, as well as drawing on music from my album *The River*, an homage to classical Arabic music. I designed the musical arc, condensed the story into a sequence of scenes,<sup>301</sup> and created the backing track in the studio with sound designer Jason Emberton. The music on the soundtrack is a mix of past studio

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<sup>300</sup> Shafak, *Black Milk: on the Conflicting Demands of Writing, Creativity, and Motherhood*, 29.

<sup>301</sup> The text I read on the backing track is based on the following translation: Hans Christian Andersen, “Thumbelina,” trans. Jean Hersholt, *The Hans Christian Andersen Centre*, 2012, accessed Nov 11, 2016, [https://andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/Thumbelina\\_e.html](https://andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/Thumbelina_e.html).

recordings, live concert recordings and manipulated field recordings, some created by myself, some by other artists. Staging and characters were developed with Annemarie Sand; the film was created by Lynette Quek.

### Aims

- To explore the plurality of identity by drawing on past and present vocal, linguistic, musical and creative selves to reimagine and reinterpret the classic fairy tale by H. C. Andersen.
- To disrupt the narrative of a story located at the centre of European culture by reinterpreting it through European and non-European languages and musical traditions.
- To create an immersive, kaleidoscopic experience in which both performer and listener can reassess their relationship to language, entering into a state of exploration and play.

### Format of Submission

I submit this project as a film, without a score, as *Thumbelina* is not a conventionally through-composed work intended to be recreated by another performer. The individual songs in the performance have been reimaged and arranged symbiotically with the precomposed electronic backing track. I also submit a programme with a summarised translation of each song.

## The Project

Women are named and defined by men who thus shape their self-understanding. Female self-knowledge is mediated by social perceptions conditioned by patriarchal culture.<sup>302</sup>

*Thumbelina* was a deeply personal project, a loving tribute to—and reclaiming of—a story I grew up with as a child. It was also a way to bring this story into my adult life, reimagining and re-evaluating it through my multiple languages and experiences as a performer and creative artist. *Thumbelina* is a story which fits into a seemingly straightforward box; one I could squeeze into, but also knew I was strong enough to break apart once inside. Shapeshifting my way through languages, cultures and styles, I resisted the pressure to be ‘naturalized and homogenized’<sup>303</sup> (to come back to Minh-ha); in the performance, I presented neither a home nor a language through which I could be ‘named and defined’.<sup>304</sup> It was further an endeavour to expose the darker undercurrents in the story: the themes of abduction, displacement, domestic abuse, forced labour and forced marriage. Essentially, *Thumbelina* is an intensely ambivalent story of agency and free will within the structures of society.

The performance interweaves languages, genres and musical styles, threaded together by the story narrated in English and a continuous backing track featuring both live instruments and electronics. The still projections were designed to add to the immersive, magical experience. The project’s predominant spirit is one of Wandering, of voyage: *Thumbelina*’s journeys interweave with the journeys of the music. Through these journeys, traversing multiple crossing points of identities, *Thumbelina* became a space of explicit multiplicity: a complex *Spannungsfeld* which I, as a performer, could only navigate by creating and fully living the characters’ intense emotions. Plunging with me into a multilingual space, the audience was asked to make a leap of faith; as it was unlikely they would understand the song lyrics in six different languages (including Aramaic and Ladino), I invited them instead to engage with the sensory aspects of these languages.

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<sup>302</sup> Françoise Lionnet, “Dissymmetry Embodied: Feminism, Universalism, and the Practice of Excision,” in *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature*, ed. Margaret R. Higonnet (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 27.

<sup>303</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 33.

<sup>304</sup> Lionnet, “Dissymmetry Embodied: Feminism, Universalism, and the Practice of Excision,” 27.

## Wandering (Travelling)

Unlike Alice in Wonderland, I do not need to drink some magic potion and shrink to thumb size in order to travel to another realm, because it is not my body but my consciousness that is doing the traveling. I can take on any shape I want and still have no shape at all. Knowing this, I take a deep breath, grab a candle and start descending the mossy stairs to the dungeons of my soul. It is time to have a serious talk with my four finger-sized women.<sup>305</sup>

*Thumbelina* is an expression of ‘the path as destination’ (as discussed in chapter 4, p.37) in its creation as well as in the resulting performance. Symbolically, the show is framed by a field recording of a church bell which I made on my research trip to Lebanon in 2012. The bell was recorded in Hamatoura monastery, which dates back to the fourth century AD and is accessible only by foot through a forty-five-minute climb up the hill where the monastery is carved into the mountains. At the start, the electronically manipulated sound of the bell forms the background to a setting of a text by Khalil Gibran about time; at the end, the bell (in its original form) is heard ringing underneath an Aramaic wedding chant. These bells also reappear at the two moments when friendly creatures—the shawl of fish and later the Swallow—help Thumbelina to escape from being trapped into forced marriage.

*Thumbelina* has a sense of adventure; both Thumbelina’s and my own (musical) travels are instinctive and not profoundly premeditated and thrive on the instability inherent in travelling. The experience of travelling during the process of creation was intense: I ventured outwards in all possible directions simultaneously, into all the musical styles and languages I felt I had a connection to, and then returned to a reunion of my past and present selves, imagined and not yet imagined, known and yet unknown. There was a feeling of urgency as I developed the first performance of *Thumbelina*, the concept and the backing track, in just under two weeks. I sketched out Thumbelina’s journey—the musical and emotional worlds she would encounter—informed by the practical considerations as to what material I could realistically pack for this lone journey, as well as by what kind of arrangements would work on a simple, pre-recorded backing track. I chose songs and music with which I have a close relationship. Removed from the uplifting warmth and energy of a live band, these songs—and I—began to transform in this new, solitary and exposed, environment. While at first I felt destabilised, this ‘voyage out of the (known) self’—i.e. my familiar

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<sup>305</sup> Shafak, *Black Milk: on the Conflicting Demands of Writing, Creativity, and Motherhood*, 45.

musical and vocal identities—‘into the (unknown) self’<sup>306</sup>—this new, brazenly plural space—was exhilarating.

Accompanying Thumbelina on her fantastical journeys and encounters with weird and wonderful, scary and aggressive creatures encouraged me to shapeshift, musically and theatrically. The fairy tale, shifting me into a state of receptivity and wonder, became my means of travel—to childhood and back to reshape the present—as Marina Warner observes in her introduction to *Angela Carters’s Book of Fairy Tales*:

Fairy tales also offered [Carter] a means of flying—of finding and telling an alternative story, of shifting something in the mind, just as so many fairy tale characters shift something in their shape.<sup>307</sup>

The songs that travelled with me also began to shapeshift in the process. For example, ‘The Moon’ (3:07 – 7:10) was originally written for me by Morag Galloway for my album *The River*. It is a setting of an evocative Andalusian poem, in which ‘the violin represents an idea which transitions between the pen scribbling on a page, to the sound of a sigh, and back to the scribbling pen again’ and the piano ‘the constantly moving moon’.<sup>308</sup> For the album, Morag had mixed the separately recorded takes of piano, violin and voice, which made it easy to create a shortened backing track. When I first performed *Thumbelina*, I imagined the song was sung by the mother planting the barley corn which would flower into Thumbelina; however, when preparing the next performance, I realised that it would work much better as the song of the witch making the spell and selling the barley corn to the woman. This allowed my performance to become increasingly delirious and unhinged, in a premonition of what was to come: the mother loved Thumbelina dearly, yet she was prematurely taken from her.

Two poems from *After Yeats*—‘A Deep Sworn Vow’ (10:30 – 12:20) and ‘To A Child Dancing in the Wind’ (27:10 – 29:00)<sup>309</sup>—also joined me on my travels, as I adapted them for the characters of the Ugly Toad and the Field Mouse. These pieces, already fluid canvases, lent themselves easily to quite a radical theatrical transformation: being poems rather than songs, I had the freedom to create vocal caricatures. As slightly grotesque, distorted portraits, recited in Arabic, they consciously cross a red line, representing an empowered female figure challenging both the

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<sup>306</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 41.

<sup>307</sup> Marina Warner, “Afterword,” *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairytales* (London: Virago, 2005), 447.

<sup>308</sup> Morag Galloway, “The Moon: Programme Notes,” *Merit Ariane: The River*, (London: Flussmond Productions, 2012).

<sup>309</sup> Yeats wrote ‘To a Child Dancing in the Wind’ originally about a girl, even though this is not clear without knowing the context. The Arabic translator took the child to be a boy (Arabic is a gendered language), and I used that version in *After Yeats*. For *Thumbelina*, however, I changed the text, so it corresponds with the Field Mouse talking to Thumbelina.

western image of the exotic (and often sexualised) ‘oriental’ other<sup>310</sup> and the general view in Arab speaking societies of female singers as beautiful, goddess-like figures. Encouraged to meet, get to know and enact the other Thumbelinas inside me, I not only subverted, but multiplied my identities, travelling not in fragments, but in the fullness of my plural voice.

### Twilight (Immersing yourself in the Middle Ground)

The convergence of plural identities in *Thumbelina* created a volatile *Spannungsfeld*, mirroring my inner consciousness, a busy intersection buzzing with linguistic travellers—or Thumbelinas—arriving from and leaving in different directions. Whilst there are moments of ‘middle gray’ or ‘hybridity’ (see the discussion in chapter 4, p.40), the experience of the twilight space here is mostly not one of subtle or invisible borders, but of exuberant ‘multiplicity’, as musical and spoken languages intermingle and transition rapidly. Working with more than one language has been a technique that poets have used throughout the twentieth century; however, in the last thirty years, there has been a proliferation of poetry that combines multiple languages, and a large percentage of this poetry has been written by women:

Poetics scholar Sarah Dowling (2012) argues that women poets have been drawn to this plural form of expression to address both the imperializing force of English and how linguistic discrimination is intimately intertwined with gender oppression.<sup>311</sup>

The creation of the show, for me, was an act of personal resistance: by appearing so explicitly multiple and uncontainable as an artist, I unmasked myself as a multivocal being, defying any outside attempt to be named. As well as singing in multiple languages (Aramaic, German, various dialects of Arabic, English, Ladino and Spanish), I used different registers and timbres in my voice, from the middle register customary in Arabic singing, to the more operatic tone of my higher register, to the rather extreme theatrical delivery of the two *After Yeats* poems. In addition, I kept shapeshifting between characters—Thumbelina (from a young girl to a grown woman), the Witch, the Mother, the Ugly Toad and the Field Mouse. This multiplicity was also a way to engage with the somehow problematic depiction of Thumbelina’s character. In the original fairy tale, Thumbelina has limited agency. Life happens to her, she comes into the world, is abducted, rescued, and in the end, she marries her prince—the King of the Flowers. Her only real

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<sup>310</sup> See Sheila Bock and Katherine Borland, “Exotic Identities: Dance, Difference, and Self-fashioning,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 48, no. 1 (2011), 2-3.

<sup>311</sup> Janet Neigh, “Dreams of Uncommon Languages: Transnational Feminist Pedagogy and Multilingual Poetics,” *Feminist Formations* 26, no. 1 (2014), 73. Here Neigh refers to: Sarah Dowling, “Remote Intimacies: Multilingualism in Contemporary Poetry,” (PhD Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2012).



independent decision is to secretly help the Swallow and then eventually to escape with it. While I do not change the storyline,<sup>312</sup> I flesh out Thumbelina's character as she sings in multiple languages, going through and showing us a range of real and powerful emotions and thus developing into a woman who has gained wisdom and agency through her experiences. Like Condé's Tituba, or Bergvall's poetry, could multivocal Thumbelina find her power in the indefinable plurality of her voice?

In *Thumbelina*, the multiplicities, the 'breaks and shifts made audible in language',<sup>313</sup> are palpable in the various genres and colours heard across the backing track (from the jazz piano in 'The Moon' (3:07 – 7:10) to the Arabic violin solo as Thumbelina searches for a warm place to stay in the winter (20:26 – 21:01)) and in the way my voice changes resonance as I sing in different styles. The way in which musical and linguistic borders between, and sometimes within songs, are crossed, ignored or abolished can be heard, for example, in 'Summertime' (24:24 – 26:39). Here, in the lullaby Thumbelina sings to the Swallow to nurse it better, I superimpose Gerswhin's pentatonic melody over a nay<sup>314</sup> and voice taqasim<sup>315</sup> in Maqam Bayati (مقام بيات).<sup>316</sup> The movements across the borders are visible and become part of the story, as Thumbelina voices the multiple shades of her personality, grounded in her caring for the Swallow. Situated somewhere on a busy intersection between schizophrenia and imagination, *Thumbelina* is playing—I am playing—encountering different sights and different travellers, delighting in our visible and invisible ruptures.

### Sensing (Reawakening the Senses)

*Thumbelina* emerged as a space of energetic, intensified 'physicality' and 'sense-ing' (as discussed above in chapter 4, p.45). While there are attempts to silence Thumbelina's character in the fairy tale, and while 'living in ... many non-opposing worlds ... inevitably inscribes silence'<sup>317</sup> as discussed in chapter 4, the process of creating *Thumbelina*—my response to the story of a female with limited agency, and to feeling boxed in—felt more like a scream. Hence, the quality of 'sense-ing' in *Thumbelina* was sometimes overwhelming for both me, but also, I would suggest, for the

<sup>312</sup> In Emma Rice's devastatingly poignant and raucous production of *The Little Match Girl and Other Happier Tales* at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, Shakespeare's Globe, in 2016, a feisty Thumbelina actually ends up getting together with the Swallow.

<sup>313</sup> McMurtry, "Sea Journeys to Fortress Europe: Lyric Deterritorializations in Texts by Caroline Bergvall and José F. A. Oliver," 823.

<sup>314</sup> A Nay (ناي) is a reed flute used in Arabic, Turkish and Persian music.

<sup>315</sup> A taqasim (تقسيم) is a melodic, rhythmically free, instrumental improvisation which usually precedes the performance of a composition.

<sup>316</sup> In Maqam Bayati, the second degree of the scale is a microtone; it is commonly used in lullabies. The music for this section is the introduction to an Egyptian lullaby, also taken from my album *The River*.

<sup>317</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 2.

listener. Physically and emotionally, it is a demanding performance for me, both in terms of my vocal stamina and the constant dramatic intensity and shapeshifting.

The performance is grounded in the English narration, yet the song lyrics are not directly related to the story. Assuming that only a handful of people would be able to understand all the (current and ancient) languages, even the words of the English songs function more like abstract poems or paintings, splashes of colour or feelings in the story. Somewhat like Bergvall, I thereby also confront the audience with their own ignorance, their own borders.

I tried to invite the audience into my own experience of multilingualism by creating a multi-resonant space in which the different languages could be experienced like physical sensations or emotional resonances, without feeling the need to make sense of the languages and the diverse styles. As I ground the meaning in the characters' emotions and stories—shaped by the particular language of a song—and my dramatic/physical interpretation, *Thumbelina* becomes a virtual playground, a place where I ask the audience to suspend logic, erase their borders and come to play with me, to connect with me to my contradictory, unpredictable characters. Confounding and disrupting my listeners—and myself—with this multitude of styles is challenging and one of the reasons why, I believe, *Thumbelina* is so intense. Yet it is also a space of vulnerability and sensuality, a space in which we can surrender, 'los[ing] [ourselves] in a reawakening of the senses, blind [ourselves], and be still.'<sup>318</sup>

The more I performed the show<sup>319</sup> and the closer to *Thumbelina* I became, the more intense the performance became—the more urgently the dark themes rose to the surface, such as the bigotry of the Field Mouse or *Thumbelina*'s desperation as she is about to be forced into marriage. And increasingly, 'little' *Thumbelina* challenged me to face and give expression to the dark and ugly parts of me. As Shafak said: 'It took me a while to get to know and love all of the six *Thumbelinas*.'<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Duras, "Smothered Creativity," 111-112.

<sup>319</sup> Live performances of *Thumbelina* so far include: 'Princes Amongst Men' at *The Ritzy Cinema* (Feb 26, 2017), *Ismaili Centre* (Apr 27, 2017), 'Amici Concert Series', *Festival of Chichester* (Jul 12, 2018). 'Tuned In London', *Sands Films* (Jul 18, 2018).

<sup>320</sup> Shafak, *Black Milk: on the Conflicting Demands of Writing, Creativity, and Motherhood*, x.

## Concluding Thoughts

In *Thumbelina* I explore the instability and fluidity of identity through the conjunction of my (and Thumbelina's) past and present selves to allow the utopian growth of a future self. In all its contradictions and erratic shapeshifting, my artistic voice finds joy and exhilaration in being destabilised and multiplied. Interweaving languages and styles, from ancient Aramaic chants to jazz to electroacoustic music, and artistic practices including theatre, visuals and later film, ironically helped me to ground my voice—a process that happened ultimately through connecting emotionally with my characters. Contemplating the political resonances of the piece, the following aim still felt beyond the scope of this performance:

Minh-ha ... suggests in order to re-think the role of women in a hegemony, she must expose socio-cultural differences that the prevailing culture has worked to conceal.<sup>321</sup>

Yet, within the scope of this fairy tale, I believe that through the creation of such a multivocal space, the notion of *Thumbelina's* infallibly solid European nature was destabilised, while simultaneously Thumbelina's agency grew. I was able to touch on domestic abuse and forced marriage as universal issues outside their common cultural (non-western) affiliations and to create a space which artistically challenges ideas of language and belonging.

Thumbelina's story is one of poignancy and joy, of silence and of finding voice. Still, many issues stay unresolved and unaddressed. The story suppresses themes of loss and sacrifice, by ignoring the loss of the mother or the Swallow's separation from Thumbelina as she marries the King of the Flowers. Reflecting the fragmented nature of these themes, the backing track proceeds, almost relentlessly, towards Thumbelina's happy ending. We are still unsure about her agency, yet she has undergone a huge transformation on her journey. The performance ends with an expression of Thumbelina's trust in and thirst for life; in this vein, Warner urges us to overcome our cynicism and indulge, at least for a while, in the idea of a happy ending:

Feminist critics of the genre—especially in the 1970s—jibbed at the socially conventional 'happy endings' of so many stories ... But Angela [Carter] knew about satisfaction and pleasure; and at the same time she believed that the goal of fairy tales was not a conservative one, but a utopian one, indeed a form of heroic optimism—as if to say: One day, we might be happy, even if it won't last.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> Regina F. Bartolone, "Re-Thinking the Language of Pain in the Works of Marguerite Duras and Frida Kahlo," (PhD Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2006), 161.

<sup>322</sup> Warner, "Afterword," 447.

## Chapter 8: Woman at Point Zero

Consider, for example, that in many parts of Islamic Africa, notably the Sudan and Somalia, the worst form of insult is to call someone “a gaping vulva”. There, speech acts perform tradition, reinforcing the doxa, the meaning of age-old practices. Ideologemes contribute to ensure powerlessness before the social system so that women may take their rightful place as subjected objects of desire.<sup>323</sup>

### Backdrop

*Woman at Point Zero* is an operatic project and artistic collaboration based on the seminal novel by Egyptian author, doctor, feminist and human rights activist Nawal El Saadawi. The novel is based on El Saadawi’s encounter in a Cairo prison with Firdaus, a prostitute condemned to death for murdering her pimp, while El Saadawi was conducting research into neuroses in female prisoners. Addressing issues such as women’s rights, patriarchal systems, sexual violence and female genital mutilation (FGM), this is the story of a woman repeatedly brutalised by society and her journey to ultimate freedom and dignity through death. The opera was created by British-Lebanese composer Dr. Bushra El-Turk, British-Egyptian performance poet and librettist Sabrina Mahfouz, British born Greek Cypriot movement director Maria Koripas and myself. We developed the project through a series of residencies and workshops at Snape Maltings, Aldeburgh, and the Atlas Academy, Amsterdam, with support from the Royal Opera House and Abu Dhabi Festival. In July 2017, we presented a work-in-progress performance at LSO St Luke’s as part of the London Shubbak Festival of contemporary Arab culture.

### My Role in the Collaboration and Creative Process

The project began formally when I commissioned Bushra to write a piece for me. We were keen to explore our experience of Arab and European cultural heritage as well as our shared quest for a musical language that both contains and reaches beyond these identities. Bushra’s practice has been informed by issues which also resonate in my own work: notions of the other, identity and belonging, translation, the integration of multiple musical idioms, collaborative practice, the continuum between improvisation and composition, and an intrinsic desire to address social

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<sup>323</sup> Lionnet, “Dissymmetry Embodied: Feminism, Universalism, and the Practice of Excision,” 26-7.

and/or political issues through our practice.<sup>324</sup> Struck by Firdaus' story and character, we chose to work on *Woman at Point Zero*. We decided to draw on the physical intensity of El Saadawi's writing to develop the idea of musical gesture extended into—and out of—physical gesture. Having developed the initial concept, we assembled a team of collaborators and musicians. With Maria and Sabrina we developed a rectangular relationship, in which all of four us took shared responsibility over—and ownership of—the project through ongoing discussion, planning and evaluation. My role was both practical and artistic, as a singer, co-creator and producer. The team of musicians consisted of six wind players from different traditions: Dr. Hyelim Kim (Korean taegŭm), Naomi Sato (Japanese sho), Louai Alhenawi (Arabic nay), Dr. Carmen Troncoso Caceres (recorders), Raphaela Danksagmüller (Armenian duduk,<sup>325</sup> fujara,<sup>326</sup> recorders) and Miloš Milivojevič (classical accordion).<sup>327</sup>

Following a year of planning, the development period consisted of six intensive residencies at Snape Maltings. In the workshops, we worked with Maria on learning the basic vocabulary of movement and dance, including the rhythmic dynamics and spatial structures used in choreology. These were used both to choreograph the pre-composed sections, and as starting points to develop the music and drama through improvisation and co-creation.

## Aims

- To develop a multilayered language dissolving cultural and artistic boundaries.
- To develop a sharp, potent musical language in which sonic and physical gestures are inextricably intertwined, able to express the rawness of the book and Firdaus' extreme experiences.
- To give Firdaus a voice that rises above her Egyptian national identity and cultural belonging.
- To challenge and subvert some of the hierarchical structures of opera, reflecting Firdaus' rebellion against the system.

## Format of Submission

I am submitting the film of our work-in-progress performance at LSO St Luke's in July 2017. I am further submitting the full score of scenes from the opera.

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<sup>324</sup> See El-Turk, "Bleeding through ... Compositional processes in the Integration of Middle Eastern and Western Art music."

<sup>325</sup> The duduk is a mournful sounding double reed instrument made from apricot wood.

<sup>326</sup> Originated in Central Slovakia, the fujara is a shepherds' bass overtone fipple flute.

<sup>327</sup> The accordion is not strictly speaking a wind instrument, however, we included it due to its resonance and bass qualities.

## The Project

I'm a killer, but I have committed no crime.<sup>328</sup>

As a team of four women, we set out to develop Firdaus' story into an opera challenging cultural and artistic boundaries, both through our process and performance. Through processes of interweaving different musical traditions with movement and poetry, we began to develop a language situated along cultural and artistic borders. Through this multivocal language we hoped to express Firdaus' traumatic experiences and allow her voice to resonate beyond her Egyptian identity, relating to women's fates across patriarchal societies worldwide. I further look at how engaging with the—for me—relatively unfamiliar language of movement helped me to develop my portrayal of Firdaus' character. Before discussing our processes through the lenses of *Wandering*, *Twilight* and *Sensing*, I will present a synopsis of the story, summarise the scenes of the work-in-progress performance and illustrate the role of the musicians on stage.

An allegorical tale of historical female oppression in Egypt, *Woman at Point Zero* details El Saadawi's encounter with Firdaus in a Cairo prison cell. El Saadawi is intrigued to meet Firdaus, an enigmatic woman, but Firdaus refuses to see her, until the day before her execution. In their meeting, Firdaus agrees to tell El Saadawi her story: she has suffered through FGM, was abused by her uncle, forced into marriage and experienced domestic violence, before she decided to run away from her elderly husband and eventually became a prostitute. She recounts how, disillusioned by the double standards of patriarchal dominance, she became a rich and influential woman, only to be held to ransom by a powerful pimp, whom she eventually killed in self-defence. Once in prison, she is given the chance to ask for pardon to overturn her death sentence, yet Firdaus refuses, finding her agency in choosing death over a compromised, unjust and painful life. Firdaus is an enigmatically powerful and hypnotic character, drawing everyone in the prison, guards and prisoners alike, under her spell. When we meet her with El Saadawi in the novel, she has lost all fear. She explodes out of the book and screams into the world, fiercely, angrily, proudly; her dignity and power are almost bewildering.

Our work-in-progress performance consisted of seven scenes plus an overture. Focusing on Firdaus' life, we told the story up until the moment Firdaus decides to return to prostitution. As this was not the finished opera, the scenes were connected by narration to help the audience to orientate themselves:

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<sup>328</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* (Zed Books: London, 1983), 109.

## **Overture**

*Inside the Prison Cell.* Firdaus brings her memory spirits (the musicians) to life with her breath. The memory spirits close in on Firdaus as she is about to tell her story.

## **Scene 1: 'Hay'**

*In a field near Firdaus' family home.* Firdaus plays in the hay with a local boy, Mohamedein. She feels sexual pleasure for the first (and last) time in her life.

## **Scene 2: 'FGM'**

*Inside her parents' house.* Forced by her mother, Firdaus is subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM). The mother is represented by Naomi, the sho player.

## **Scene 3: 'Lullaby'**

*Inside her parents' house.* Transitioning on seamlessly from the FGM scene, Firdaus sits on the floor, soothing herself with a lullaby. Her mother ignores her.

## **Scene 4: 'Light Light'**

*Firdaus' uncle's flat in Cairo.* Surprised and almost shocked, Firdaus, for the first time in her life, sees a mirror and electric lights.

## **Scene 5: 'Respectable'**

*In Firdaus' bedroom.* Firdaus is now a prostitute. Her client Diaa' upsets her deeply by telling her that she is not a respectable woman.

## **Scene 6: 'Ibrahim'**

*At a factory.* Following her conversation with Diaa', Firdaus chooses to find 'honest' work at a factory. There, she meets Ibrahim, a young revolutionary and falls in love with him. She finds out he is engaged to the chairman's daughter.

## **Scene 7: 'Queen of Egypt' (QoE)**

*In her flat, alone.* Heartbroken by Ibrahim's betrayal, Firdaus decides to return to prostitution, gaining new strength and determination.

Onstage, the musicians form an integral part of the drama. They portray Firdaus' memory spirits; she breathes life into them at the start of the performance, so they can help her tell her story. They are extensions of Firdaus' character: the aspects of her which help her push through, which comfort her, and which eventually assist her in raising her hand to kill her aggressor. Sometimes, they represent Firdaus' traumatic memories that suddenly appear to attack, overwhelm and crush her. In some scenes, the musicians take on the form of pivotal figures in Firdaus' life, such as her mother, her customer Dīaa' or her lover Ibrahim. These roles developed out of the players' personalities and the characters of their instruments. Extending their physicality to their instruments, they breathed life into them—almost like puppeteers—so the instruments became an essential tool of the storytelling. The quality of the players' engagement with Firdaus drove the development of the piece; Firdaus' character, in turn, emerged out her relationship with them.

All three aspects of interweaving were present as we developed the performance: Wandering, as we ventured into each other's musical and artistic worlds (music, movement and poetry), and together on an intensely emotional journey to tell Firdaus' story. Twilight, as we explored the crossing points between music and movement. Yet, Sensing emerged as the most prominent mode of interweaving, through the heightened role of 'physicality' in the creative process and in my connection to Firdaus' character.

### Wandering (Travelling)

Through an intensely collaborative creative process we began a metaphorical journey which led us all outside our comfort zones. We connected our different musical and artistic vocabularies and engaged with unfamiliar tools. Travelling thus truly became a 'mode of receptivity' for all of us, as we developed a language through which we could interpret Firdaus' story with fresh eyes, ears and bodies, and sidestep multicultural clichés. Simultaneously, the resulting destabilisation of our artistic personalities became our creative stimulus; we drew on 'the instability of travelling as our source of creative power' (as discussed in chapter 4, p.37). Vocally and creatively, I was wandering between Bushra's compositional language, maqam music and the improvisational language we developed within our multilingual ensemble, as well as between singing in English and Arabic. The interconnected scenes 2 and 3 (FGM and Lullaby; 10:40 – 16:10), which I discuss below, clearly show this sense of musical travelling. Another journey I embarked upon was towards the movement language we devised with Maria, to ground and expand my development of Firdaus' character.

As Firdaus undergoes the devastating event that will change her life forever (as depicted in Scene 2: FGM), there is an unsettling musical and vocal journey from the eerily menacing music



to the intimate, desolate Egyptian lullaby Firdaus sings to soothe herself (Scene 3). Bushra set Sabrina's text into an intricate, rhythmically driven score, which I experienced like a ritualised dance into which Firdaus is helplessly drawn, restrained, powerless and paralysed by fear and disbelief in the face of the knife about to cut off her clitoris:

Knife, knife, between my legs  
Was it glass? Was it flames between my legs?  
The pain, the pain, between my legs  
They cut away a piece of me.<sup>329</sup>

Sitting on stage, Naomi, still and apparently indifferent, takes on the role of Firdaus' complicit mother: the perpetual turning of her sho over a small electric heater symbolises the ritualistic preparation of the knife. The other musicians look onto the scene from behind their stands: an image of society tacitly abiding by cruel, engrained customs and laws.

Against a backdrop of music resounding with the players' intricate idiomatic ornamentations, my own singing becomes increasingly ornate with each verse, moving from a stricter western classical to a more improvisatory interpretation of the score. Wandering from one spectrum to the other, my voice gradually morphs into an Egyptian-style lullaby. During the transition from the third verse to the lullaby ("rock, rock, myself to sleep"), devised organically through improvisation, I gradually change register and inflect my tuning:

Wrapped, wrapped Bandages, blood  
Left to cry, cry, cry  
On the table where they eat  
I wrap arms around my arms  
Rock rock myself to sleep.<sup>330</sup>

As Firdaus tries to soothe herself, she slips into the Egyptian dialect and Maqam Bayati, typical for lullabies of the region.<sup>331</sup> Her mother tongue (linguistic and musical) is reserved for her most personal moments.

While vocal voyaging is an integral part of my practice, it was my journey into movement, a language unfamiliar to my untrained body, which helped me to connect more deeply with Firdaus. Early in the process, in one of our first residencies, lying in a field in Aldeburgh, Maria asked me to repeatedly open my legs, over and over again, mimicking a movement Firdaus would have had to do, until the discomfort turned into a kind of trance. This process was unsettling on several levels, as I was not used to expressing myself through my body alone and felt very exposed

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<sup>329</sup> Sabrina Mahfouz, *Libretto*, 'Verse 1, Scene 2: FGM.'

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, Verse 3.

<sup>331</sup> Bushra wrote the melody for the lullaby inspired by an Aramaic lullaby.

by the explicit nature of the movement. Yet this unsettling of my identity intensified my journey into Firdaus' world; the physical sense I began to gain of her became a key that later profoundly informed my performance.

### Twilight (Immersing yourself in the Middle Ground)

The twilight space of the language we were developing manifested itself—as a space of 'middle gray' (see chapter 4, p.40)—in the meeting of Bushra's musical/sonic and Maria's physical/visual language, Sabrina's visceral poetry and the performers' various musical idioms. Our metaphorical and literal point of connection was breath, as the instigator of sound and of movement. In the process, Firdaus' character took on a defiantly hybrid quality. Her persona developed both through my vocal and physical journeying as well as through the different musical languages and idioms of her memory spirits, inseparable from her character. Firdaus, similar to Condé's Tituba, who was also abused by society, emerges as a commanding character who cannot be contained. Firdaus claims this hybridity of her character as a powerful tool, as, for example, in 'Scene 7: Queen of Egypt' (32:30 - 37:00), discussed below, which is vocally and musically situated across liminal spaces. The movement work with Maria further aided this evolution of Firdaus' character as irrepressibly plural, yet deeply grounded.

In 'Queen of Egypt', Firdaus, betrayed by love and disillusioned by the double standards of a patriarchal society, decides to go back to prostitution. Having spent time working in a factory to try and earn a living through 'honourable' work, she has realised that the system would never allow her to live in dignity and decides she would instead spend life on her own terms. The musical development—from speech to song, from notated music to improvisation—mirrors the gradual process of her empowerment: she gets ready to face the world proudly, fiercely, in a multiply hybrid voice, and to embark on the journey for which she is ultimately condemned to death, but in which she also finds freedom:

Eyes up  
chin up  
hands up to take cash.  
I carry myself as a Queen.  
I am Queen of Egypt.  
I am golden skin and golden touch.  
I take it, take it all.<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Mahfouz, *Libretto*, 'Scene 7: Queen of Egypt.'

The musical and dramatic trajectory of the scene, instigated by Bushra's vision of the music moving from speech to song, was devised through improvisation and intense discussion. Bushra used the improvised material to compose a melodic arc, clearly structuring the progression from the spoken to the sung text. Firdaus hypnotically repeats the same phrase over and over again, like a mantra; she gradually chooses which words to sing until she finally bursts into the sung, improvised, phrase "I am Queen". Each word she chooses to sing symbolises her growing agency and strength. She is in charge. With the final phrase she transitions into Maqam Rast, the king—or queen—of Arabic modes.<sup>333</sup> Yet, different to Arabic singing, the vocal line is situated in a higher, more operatic register, placing Firdaus in yet another not quite definable hybrid space.

The physical movement in 'Queen of Egypt' was minimal; Maria focused mainly on how the spatial tension of our positions on stage created energy between the different characters. Yet, exploring the liminal spaces between music and movement—the idea of musical gesture extended into and out of physical gesture—gave us tools for physical expression and communication which also impacted on our musical interpretation. To introduce us to the basic vocabulary and tools—the rhythmic dynamics and spatial structures—of choreology, Maria taught us the principles of rhythmic dynamics as developed Rudolf Laban (1879-1958). Laban, having spent time in factories analysing the mechanics of human movement, used his observations to develop a theory and language of movement structures, which he then applied to teaching and interpreting dance.<sup>334</sup> Below, I list the five basic rhythmic dynamics Maria described as deriving from Laban's methods. As well as describing the quality of a particular movement, these rhythmic dynamics are deeply interconnected with the expressive essence of human gesture:

1. Impulse (fast to slow - accent at the start)
2. Impact (slow to fast, abrupt stop - accent at the end)
3. Swing (slow to fast to slow, gaining and losing momentum - accent in the middle due to giving in to gravity)
4. Rebound (slow to fast to slow, gaining momentum with a clear point of return - sharp accent in the middle due to body resisting gravity)
5. Sustain (continuous - no accent)

These rhythmic dynamics can be clearly related to basic musical patterns and articulations, and we explored them using our bodies, breath and sound (both vocally and with instruments). Yet they are too elementary to be used as material for complex rhythmic, melodic or harmonic structures. We therefore utilised them to inform our movements, and as emotional links to Firdaus'

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<sup>333</sup> For Maqam Rast, see chapter 6, footnote 281.

<sup>334</sup> For more information on structures in dance, refer to Valerie Preston-Dunlop, ed., *Dance is a language, isn't it?* (London: Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, Laban Library and Archive, 2013).

story. For me, the impulses became her first yearnings of lust as she lay in the hay with Mohamedein. The impacts turned into the blows that hit her, the blows with which she killed her pimp. The rebounds her stubborn tenacity as she kept fighting on after each humiliation. Her story began to resonate in my body.

By grounding the players' diverse idiomatic languages in a physical impulse, the sound fused across the ensemble, yet the cultural inflections remained distinct. In our improvisational processes, we created music and movement simultaneously, producing our sound from a physical impulse rather than consciously finding a way to connect our musical languages. It is hard to pinpoint the exact musical outcomes of these processes and I believe that this was only the beginning of what could be a much deeper practical and analytical research process.

The multiplicity of our voices, the different personal relationships we developed with Firdaus, and the unfamiliar musical-physical space created a complex *Spannungsfeld*. Firdaus, like Tituba, was shaped by—and transcended—her countless devastating experiences.<sup>335</sup> By developing a strong and multilayered connection to each other and to Firdaus, we purposefully combined, as Ortega wrote, our, and Firdaus', 'multiple discourses into a unified narrative of self'.<sup>336</sup>

### Sensing (Reawakening the Senses)

Words rape as surely as the penis, or the knife that the groom must use on his wedding night to open his bride's vulva and consummate the marriage.<sup>337</sup>

In her dissertation, *Re-Thinking the Language of Pain in the Works of Marguerite Duras and Frida Kahlo*, Regina Bartolone 'examine[s] the means through which both artists re-negotiate the socio-cultural/political boundaries that Western culture has placed around the expression of pain'.<sup>338</sup> She proposes that, in their respective art forms, the artists 'reveal through their languages of pain the plurality of feminine identity within both Western and non-Western cultures'<sup>339</sup>—languages that resist standardising hegemonic power structures.<sup>340</sup> Similarly, the plural Middle Ground we had

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<sup>335</sup> Revealingly, both Tituba and Firdaus find agency through/after their deaths.

<sup>336</sup> Ortega, "The Art of Hybridity: Maryse Condé's Tituba," 114.

<sup>337</sup> Lionnet, "Dissymmetry Embodied: Feminism, Universalism, and the Practice of Excision," 28.

<sup>338</sup> Bartolone, "Re-Thinking the Language of Pain in the Works of Marguerite Duras and Frida Kahlo," 8.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>340</sup> Here Bartolone refers to: Minh-ha, "Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference."

created, and in which we could ‘with intensity assume [our] freedom of movement’,<sup>341</sup> was able to hold and express Firdaus’ acutely painful experiences.

Our approach was one of ‘silence’ (as discussed in chapter 4, p.45), as we, together navigating movement and music, ‘grope[d] [our] way through the oversaid and all-too-clear of ... language’.<sup>342</sup> Out of this silence emerged the heightened, sensuous ‘physicality’ (see chapter 4, p.45) of our language, through which we tried to embody and reflect Firdaus’ suffering as, for example, in ‘Scene 5: Respectable’ (21:00-25:30).<sup>343</sup>

Firdaus, by now earning a good living as a prostitute and, for the first time, able to lead an independent and comfortable life, is deeply humiliated by one of her clients, Dīaa’. His words open her eyes to how society really views her and shatter the sense of security she has worked so hard to establish. As Firdaus’ memory spirits turn on her, she breaks down, physically and mentally; her singing builds into a scream and distorts into disjointed outbursts of unhinged laughter. Our starting point for devising this scene, which developed over several residencies, was movement, specifically Laban’s rhythmic dynamics. The musical material was minimal (a six-bar chord sequence), which allowed for intricate movement work. As my vocal line was devised solely through improvisation, I chose some short phrases from Sabrina’s libretto to work with:

Not respectable

no

no

no

So it’s all been a dream?

An illusion of power

as they all laughed at me<sup>344</sup>

As we started to work on this scene, Maria asked the musicians to choose one rhythmic movement dynamic each, representing how they experienced Firdaus’ distress. The repeated impacts of Miloš’s accordion felt like Dīaa’s words hitting her over and over again. Carmen, on recorders, who had developed a deeply sympathetic bond with Firdaus, hypnotically repeated rebound movements as if trying to help her to cope. The idea of shoving the *duduk* into Firdaus’ mouth had arisen in a previous improvisation session, exposing her degrading vulnerability. She ends up on the floor, her legs wide open, attacked from all sides, while Dīaa’ (Louai) watches passively, complicit with society, ignorant of and indifferent to the pain he has caused.

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<sup>341</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 70.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>343</sup> There is a narrated introduction from 21-22 mins.

<sup>344</sup> Mahfouz, *Libretto*, ‘Scene 5: Respectable.’

As Diaa's words ring in Firdaus' ears, violently penetrating her, my vocal line repeats the words over and over, in a way that is structurally reminiscent of the way classical Arabic singers repeat and improvise on certain words, however without the modal structures and ornamentation. Moving organically between sung and spoken/shouted text, Firdaus' voice gradually turns into an almost indefinable scream, as the words become indistinguishable. Firdaus has become speechless in the face of 'the men to whom she submits [and who] also name and define her.'<sup>345</sup>

We become silent in solidarity with her, resisting to be named, resisting existing definitions, but blindly, hesitantly, learning to employ all our senses. The music has become inseparable from the physical drama; we have created a multiple, almost primal space, which carries Firdaus' pain.

## Concluding Thoughts

Saadawi is, and will become, Firdaus, the double that compels her. To tell Firdaus's story is to give voice to the "other" that haunts her, to see her own face in the contours of the prostitute's narrative, and to be provided with a moving link to her own experiences as an excised woman.<sup>346</sup>

In *Woman at Point Zero*, we created a sensuous space that consciously resonated with fluidity and multiplicity, while searching for a language which could both ground and sharpen these resonances. Our philosophy of the Middle Ground extended to the artistic outcomes as well as our processes. Our collaborative approach and the rectangular structure of our team, as opposed to the usual pecking order of composer, director, librettist, performer, inadvertently challenged many of the hierarchical structures inherent in opera:

- Starting with the body, and challenging our default languages and identities, we created a piece which is simultaneously opera, dance and theatre.
- The performers were treated as creative artists, not simply reproducing what they were given.
- The musicians and instruments were on stage as part of the narrative.
- We subverted the power dynamic of the East-West narrative: here East meets East, meets further East, meets nearer West, meets regional dialects and accents.

Starting from our own fluid identities, we expanded simultaneously outwards towards each other's (musical and artistic) worlds and inwards (through our movement work) towards our bodies. Through the process of interweaving multiple threads, we created a space which could

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<sup>345</sup> Lionnet, "Dissymmetry Embodied: Feminism, Universalism, and the Practice of Excision," 27.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 33.

simultaneously hold Firdaus' experiences and allow her to have a voice that refuses to be named. These processes had a deeper personal effect. Through our multiple, sensory identification with Firdaus, she became part of us, we carried her story in our bodies.

As I read El Saadawi's autobiography *A Daughter of Isis*, I was struck by how interlinked her childhood accounts are with those of Firdaus. 'I do not separate between fiction and facts. They are inseparable', says El Saadawi, 'creativity means you write reality in a better way than reality'.<sup>347</sup> Deeply affected by Firdaus, El Saadawi intertwines her own path with that of Firdaus', as she gives voice to one of the most enigmatic characters of modern literature.

As we journeyed into Firdaus' and El Saadawi's worlds, receptive, silent, destabilised and transformed, we were all somehow strangers in the process, to ourselves and to each other. Sometimes we interwove so many voices that we all became entangled. Hyelim, the taegŭm player felt this very deeply:

Am I relating to Firdaus as an Egyptian? My instrument has such strong cultural connotations. Do we reflect the identity of our instrument or does the instrument reflect our identity? I have so many presences to think about. Merit, the instrument, myself. Which is the dominant presence?<sup>348</sup>

While some of these questions became clear in the process, others did not. Some of the threads unravelled, some of our patterns turned out uneven, sometimes the cloth was stained.<sup>349</sup> There is a long way yet to go to fully develop Firdaus' (and El Saadawi's) story into a coherent opera. Yet, by travelling together, towards Firdaus and towards each other, her voice began to sound across our multiple languages, cultures and practices. Carmen summarised this poignantly:

I felt the story, I wanted to tell it. Our role is to empathise. This is our message: look what happened, what is still happening. It hurts, we all feel the pain even though we are so different and from different countries. It is about empathy.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, "Woman at Point Zero," *World Book Club*, recorded 2009 (London: BBC World, 2009), accessed Ap 10, 2016, <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/nawal-el-saadawi-woman-at-point-zero/id263658343?i=1000054500053>.

<sup>348</sup> Hyelim Kim, Rehearsal Archive Video, *Woman at Point Zero*, 28th May 2017.

<sup>349</sup> See Fischer-Lichte, "Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures—Rethinking Intercultural Theatre: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism," 11.

<sup>350</sup> Carmen Troncoso Caceres, Rehearsal Archive Video, *Woman at Point Zero*, 28th May 2017.

## Chapter 9: Moonlarking

I was a bird then who flew out of her cage and was desirous to go further away. Some people, like birds and fish, have an inner drive to travel and explore more than others.<sup>351</sup>

### Backdrop

*Moonlarking*, a multidisciplinary musical-visual project inspired by birds and birdsong, was created in collaboration with filmmaker and multimedia artist Jessie Rodger and writer Dr. Octavia Bright. Written for voice, taegŭm and electronics, it was performed as part of *Birdsong & Borders*, a concert I gave at LSO St Luke's in July 2019.<sup>352</sup> The concert, in three sections, unfolded as an imaginary transformative journey from dusk through night till dawn. The multilingual 'Dusk' section explored our connection as humans with—and poetic evocation of—birds as symbols of freedom and love. In *Moonlarking*, the 'Night' section, which internally mirrors the dusk to dawn trajectory of the whole performance, the birds take centre stage in a series of five dreamlike dramatic scenes. In 'Dawn', musicians and birds (and musicians as birds) connect their voices symbolically in the celebratory exuberance of a dawn chorus. The music in *Moonlarking* was paired with live projections onto a pyramid like structure, creating a playful, fantastical world. The poems, written in the voices of four different birds, address issues including feminism, post-colonialism, climate breakdown and deeply relevant personal subjects such as fragile mental health and our relationship with death.

### My Role in the Collaboration and Creative Process

*Moonlarking* was a collaboration with artists from different disciplines, which I conceived and directed. I started discussions with Jessie Rodger in late 2017 about the idea of creating a multidisciplinary performance about birds, combining music, written/spoken word and video projections, aiming to fully integrate sound, text and visuals. Together with writer, poet and literary critic Dr. Octavia Bright, our aim was to explore the universal nature of birdsong, the birds' ability to cross—actual and symbolic—boundaries and the visual poetry of their movement, while juxtaposing this with their fragility and potential to be restrained and caged. Originally, I had envisaged a multilingual performance with a full band, linking newly composed with existing music

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<sup>351</sup> Etel Adnan, interviewed by Aftim Saba, "Etel Adnan's "THERE" - A Meditation on Conflict," *Al-Jadid - A Review & Record of Arab Culture and Arts* 4, no. 23, Spring 1998, accessed May 6, 2018, <https://www.aljadid.com/content/etel-adnans-there-meditation-conflict>.

<sup>352</sup> I gave this concert with a band consisting of Arabic and Korean flutes (nay and taegŭm), jazz piano, double bass, piano, percussion and electronics.



and improvisations; in 2018, we presented this concept as a one-hour performance with projected visuals and new poetry by Octavia in concerts in London and Portugal.<sup>353</sup>

Inspired by the irrepressible bird characters Octavia had created in her poems, we then decided to create a show of entirely original material. During a three day residency, Jessie, Octavia and I developed the new concept for *Moonlarking* for the performance at LSO St. Luke's in July, as well as a vision for a (future) larger piece featuring nine birds. We experimented with visual, musical and dramatic ideas for the existing bird poems in the performance which would unfold in 5 sections:

- 1) 'Sing' (Nightingale) – Dusk
- 2) 'Wake' (Vulture) – Night
- 3) 'Dance' (Kingfisher) – Dawn
- 4) 'Dawn Chorus' - Dawn
- 5) 'Listen' (Goldfinch) – Transition out of Dawn

The sparks for the musical ideas were created in improvisation sessions with taegŭm player Dr. Hyelim Kim; her parts within my compositions were improvised and devised, according to different parameters I suggested regarding structure, character and texture. The sound design was created by Jason Emberton in response to the musical material and the dramatic arc of the piece. Staging and characters were developed in practical sessions and discussions with Annemarie Sand.

## Aims

- To create an immersive, boundary-crossing performance through sound, projections, light and text, inspired by birdsong.
- To create a musical language by interweaving different musical idioms with birdsong.
- To create and explore an artistic Middle Ground by addressing perceived borders between cultures, between humans and nature and between reality and imagination.
- To address urgent political issues in a playful, fantasy like world.

## Format of Submission

I am submitting a film of *Moonlarking* from the live performance at LSO St Luke's from July 2019. For reference, I further include the film of the whole *Birdsong & Borders* concert, as well as a film of the original *Moonlarking* concert at Vortex Jazz Club, London, in 2018. I further enclose a score of the five pieces I composed, Octavia's poems and the programme of *Birdsong & Borders*.

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<sup>353</sup> This performance was also called *Moonlarking* and took place at the Vortex Jazz Club, London, and in Setúbal, Portugal, as part of the Setúbal Music Festival.

## The Project

Those who use the expression “the female bird builds the nest” don’t understand the bird. It is true that birds build nests, but with every new season they abandon the home they have made to erect a new one in a different place. There is no bird that stays in the same nest for the entirety of its life.<sup>354</sup>

*Moonlarking* was originally inspired by an almost naive emotional impulse; like a bird, I wanted to be able to cross cultural and linguistic borders, communicating and connecting with people no matter which languages they spoke and which cultures they belonged to. Yet there was a deeper desire, which was to address the perceived borders between our real and our imaginary worlds and to connect to the transformative essence of nature. Entwined within these desires was a more instinctive concern with the intrinsic condition of being a woman, ‘trapped ... within the frontiers of their bodies and their species’,<sup>355</sup> and to the delicate and often hidden relationship with inner and outer freedom:

As regards Mother and Woman ... she is likely to be restrained in her mobility—a transcultural, class- and gender specific practice that for centuries has not only made traveling quasi impossible for women, but has compelled every “traveling” female creature to become a stranger to her own family, society and gender.<sup>356</sup>

While the birds in our project are deliberately non-gendered, the poems, the hybrid nature of our collaboration and performance, and especially our joyfully disruptive and defiantly plural bird characters address these issues playfully, challenging our norms and realities.

My creative role in devising this piece was markedly different to the previous projects; simultaneously director and collaborator, I was developing my voice in the creative exchange with others, while overseeing the interweaving of everyone’s voices into a coherent whole. I created *Thumbelina* (in which I was also director) by weaving existing parts of myself into a pre-existing story; in *Moonlarking*, we devised the concept and the artistic ingredients—words, dramatic arc, visuals and music—from scratch. The diverse relationships with and autonomous creative voices of my collaborators were central to the development of the project, and symbolic of the multitude of voices resonating in a dawn chorus.

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<sup>354</sup> Shafak, *Black Milk: on the Conflicting Demands of Writing, Creativity, and Motherhood*, 18.

<sup>355</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 33.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*

This project is in many ways the summation of my research while also marking the beginning of a new creative journey. All the strands I have laid out in the commentary are interwoven here, and while this is the only piece sung fully in English, I also connect my singing to the non-language of birdsong, picking up threads similar to those of Marguerite Duras' vision of 'non-writing'.<sup>357</sup>

I had envisaged this performance as an invitation to the audience to let go of their borders. In the end, this was a process for me to transcend the borders and boxes I had unwittingly created for myself. In parallel, in this commentary I am beginning to dissolve the structure I set up for myself in the previous chapters, as I realised that the three modes of interweaving—Wandering, Twilight and Sensing—were taking place simultaneously. They had become so intertwined into my process that it became hard to separate them out artificially in my writing.

*Moonlarking*, in fact, epitomises the Middle Ground. It exists in Twilight—thematically and conceptually—and pulsates in a multiple, energetic *Spannungsfeld* of languages and practices. It also demonstrates how the Middle Ground is a space where all the modes of interweaving are manifest simultaneously. Encompassing, at different moments, aspects of 'hybrid', 'multiple' and 'middle gray', *Moonlarking* was created in a movement of travelling simultaneously outwards (by connecting to seemingly distant languages, such as the Korean sounds or the visuals) and inwards, deeper into my voice. As with Twilight, all three sub-modes of Wandering were present: 'wandering as a mode of receptivity', 'the instability of travelling as a source of creative power' and 'the path as destination'. Finally, the piece was created in and inspired by a state of Sensing, through the wish to connect to nature, to become like birds; 'silence', 'physicality' and 'sense-ing' were all an inherent part of the creative process.

## The Middle Ground

Wir brauchen Phantasie, weil sie uns hilft, uns selbst und damit auch die Welt zu verstehen, in der wir leben: uns ein Bild, eine Vorstellung von ihr zu machen. Wenn wir das nicht selbst tun, tun es andere für uns—und manipulieren uns mit Ideologien.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> Cruz, "Notes Toward a New Language: Holes: On Marguerite Duras."

<sup>358</sup> Michael Ende in: Erhard Eppler, Michael Ende and Hanne Tächl, *Phantasie, Kultur, Politik* (Stuttgart: Weibrecht, 1982), 124. 'Imagination, for us, is essential; it helps us to understand ourselves and therefore also the world in which we live: to create an image, a concept thereof. Unless we do this for ourselves, others will do it for us—and will be able to manipulate us with ideologies.' (The translation is mine).

One of my most treasured childhood novels was Michael Ende's *Die Unendliche Geschichte*.<sup>359</sup> Yet only when I re-read the book as an adult, did I grasp that at the heart of the story lay one of the fundamental motivations for my approach to art. The novel is an existential contemplation of the permeability of the borders between our 'real' and imaginary worlds, represented as the human world and *Phantasia*. The recognition of their interdependence (one cannot exist without the other, as represented by the two ouroboros-like snakes on the book cover) becomes the key for us to live our most authentic and daringly vulnerable selves—and to find belonging. Minh-ha touches on aspects of this when she writes that '[fo]r a number of writers in exile, the true home is to be found, not in houses, but in writing' and that 'exile, despite its profound sadness, can be worked through as an experience of crossing boundaries'.<sup>360</sup>

It was with this in mind, the erosion—or at least destabilisation—of the distinction we tend to make between what is real and what is not, that I approached the creation of *Moonlarking* and my collaboration with Jessie and Octavia. As creatures with the power of crossing real and symbolic boundaries, the birds became our means of travelling, encountering the twilight space and connecting to the transfiguring essence and heightened sensory experiences of nature. Conceptually, it was this interweaving motion of travelling deep inside and reaching back out to something beyond our grasp that characterised the different layers of the development of the project. Through a 're-siting of [our] boundaries',<sup>361</sup> for example as Hyelim and I crossed into each other's idiomatic musical spaces, the Middle Ground we created became both a vulnerable space of open borders as well as one brimming with diverse and autonomous voices. Setting the performance between dusk and dawn intensified this symbolism and allowed us to tap into

the powerful and peaceful experience of twilight as the coming and going  
of color, the waning and waxing of desire, or the ability to open wide into  
the abyss of the world of shadows.<sup>362</sup>

To develop the vocal and musical language, I connected with and began to interweave a plurality of voices into my own: the poetic and visual voices of Octavia and Jessie, the Korean language of Hyelim's taegŭm, Jason's world of electronics, Annemarie's dramatic visualisation of the birds' movements on stage—as well as the voices of the birds we were creating. The travelling motion was contained within the musical language and my voice, not crossing into separate realms as, for example, in *Swimming Between Shores*.

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<sup>359</sup> The Neverending Story.

<sup>360</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 34.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

The bird characters we developed have agency and freedom, not just the freedom of being able to travel to places beyond our reach—a freedom assigned to them by us—but the freedom to speak for themselves, in their own voices. In turn we decided to respond to them in our own creative voices rather than trying to capture their factual likeness, and therefore avoided including any audio or visual footage of real birds. This also helped us to develop their characters on a more imaginary, supernatural level. Octavia created the birds as wise, rebellious and fragile characters with agency and complexity ‘engaging with and sometimes subverting the stereotypical ideas we humans have assigned them’,<sup>363</sup> and gave them powerful voices to deliver their messages. Jessie’s projections of the dancer ‘play[ing] with the characterful movement of the birds in her choreography’<sup>364</sup> further added to the creative agency of the birds, while the pyramid structure, inspired by ‘the form of an abstract bird cage’,<sup>365</sup> played with their fragility and the potential of birds to be caged.

One such powerful creature is the Nightingale (‘Sing’; 00:20 - 05:30), who ‘ushers in dusk, responding to the male Romantic poets who reduced and idealised her, singing her rebuke in sapphic verse’:<sup>366</sup>

You can debate me all you like. Swamped by the  
mass of your intellect, lost in your ego,  
swinging your Poetry, you Romantics don’t  
listen to my song.<sup>367</sup>

The musical language of ‘Sing’ reflects this defiance of the Nightingale to be named by evolving as an indefinably hybrid space. This space developed out of my improvisation sessions with Hyelim, in which she introduced me to the worlds of Korean folk and court music. The collaboration with Hyelim was key to my vocal journeys in *Moonlarking*. Identifying as a traditional musician, Hyelim’s research and practice focuses on collaboration through the medium of her taegŭm, an instrument ‘closely linked with nationalistic perspectives’.<sup>368</sup> In her music she searches for how ‘to find alternative positions in order to develop potentials for creativity involving Korean traditional instruments.’<sup>369</sup> We have a close musical relationship, underpinned by our approach to performance as deeply rooted in the connection to character and story. In our collaboration, I was keen to learn more about Korean music and find ways of exploring the inflections of the taegŭm

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<sup>363</sup> Octavia Bright, “Programme Notes: Birdsong & Borders,” *LSO Eclectica: East Meets West* (5th July 2017), 7.

<sup>364</sup> Jessie Rodger, “Programme Notes: Birdsong & Borders,” 6.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Bright, “Programme Notes: Birdsong & Borders,” 7.

<sup>367</sup> Octavia Bright, ‘Sing,’ first stanza.

<sup>368</sup> Hyelim Kim, “Tradition and Creativity in Korean Taegŭm Flute Performance,” (PhD Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2014), 172.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

in my singing as well as linking Hyelim's playing more closely into the intonations and ornamentations of my Arabic singing.

For 'Sing', I chose as inspiration a piece of Korean court music.<sup>370</sup> I felt that the powerful and elegant stillness of the music allowed for the beauty of the Nightingale's singing to come across while giving its voice a serene gravitas as it expresses its anger. The slowness and composure of the music also counters preconceptions, as the Nightingale does in the poem. Further, the rhythmic spacing of the notes allowed us to create a sound world containing and responding to each other's inflections as well as the nightingale's original song. From the pentatonic mode and the characteristic ornaments Hyelim had shown me, I developed the music to travel into my own language—improvisation and composition intertwining fluidly—to which Hyelim responded in return, multiple shades of sound resonating in our respective voices. At times, our playing reaches the 'third place between grammars, styles and categories of thought' mentioned by Kramersch,<sup>371</sup> a space in which the Nightingale's voice could exist beyond both our languages. We became partners in play; connecting further to each other—and to the Nightingale—as we developed the birds' imaginary characters with Annemarie.

Musically, the Middle Ground was further embodied by the fact that I was setting poems written in English. Unintentionally, this threw my vocal habits and musical borders wide open. Unlike in *Swimming Between Shores*, here I could not retreat to my more comfortable compositional space of Arabic, where the demands of the language automatically set certain limits and instinctively create a connection to the language of maqam. Yet this space allowed me—or forced me, by disrupting my habitus, to refer back to Östersjö—to search for the Middle Ground (be it 'middle gray', 'hybrid' or 'multiple') within my voice and gave me the freedom to play with any resonances that rang true.

The creation of 'Wake' (Vulture; 5:50 - 11:15), for example, was one such place where I had to let down my guard. In the previous year, I had developed a rhythmically wild and aggressive, spoken, dramatised version of the poem accompanied by percussion.<sup>372</sup> Yet in our residency, as we were discussing the character of the Vulture, Octavia stressed the powerful, plural and maternal energy she had envisaged when writing the poem, as the Vulture 'urges her human children to face the fears contained within the vulture's conventional symbolism'.<sup>373</sup> This was also inspired by the Egyptian mother goddess Mut, 'sometimes depicted as the scavenging bird of prey'.<sup>374</sup> In what felt

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<sup>370</sup> "Classic vocal music 'Urak'," YouTube video, 6:18, posted by National Gugak Center, Oct 29, 2015, accessed Mar 17, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4pBC230XjuU>.

<sup>371</sup> Kramersch, "The Multilingual Subject," 5.

<sup>372</sup> See 30:34-34:15 in the film of *Moonlarking* at Vortex Jazz Club.

<sup>373</sup> Bright, "Programme Notes: Birdsong & Borders," 7.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

like a deeply vulnerable process, I improvised with the words, exploring ways of singing them that reflected the dark warmth, fullness and patience of their presence Octavia had envisaged, their movements deliberate, paced and controlled, while also encompassing their threatening (maternal) energy. Through this process, I arrived at the musical flow and drooping tone quality of the vultures' arrival in the first verse, which I later set to a specific melody; a musical quality which I would not have arrived at through a solitary compositional process (07:15 - 08:35).

'Wake' emerged both as a space of 'multiplicity' and 'middle gray': it embodied plural cultural, linguistic and artistic resonances—reflecting the social nature of vultures, how they often 'feed, fly or roost in large flocks'<sup>375</sup>—yet also had a quality of continuously crossing borders. Octavia explained that the first line of the poem was inspired by the rites of Tibetan sky funerals, where vultures are symbolically summoned with juniper incense to descend on the dead bodies and consume their flesh:

In Juniper air we silent assemble,  
We come in committees to clean up your mess.  
Swoop leisurely down to your mutable temple,  
By sight and by scent, we're here for what's left.<sup>376</sup>

At the beginning of the piece I improvised a microtonal incantation (inspired by the languid qualities of Byzantine chants) to invoke the smoke rising into the sky (6:25 – 7:15). As the Vulture's plural voice gathers energy in the third verse, I wrote a driving melody (08:57 - 10:00) inspired by one of legendary Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum's most famous songs, Enta 'Omri (You are my life: انت عمري).<sup>377</sup> While the cultural association metaphorically linked the music back to the goddess Mut, this was also a symbolic reference to one of the most powerful musical voices to have emerged out of the Arab world. The artistic space of 'Wake' was further multiplied through an intensified 'physicality', as Hyelim and I used the 'impact' and 'rebound' rhythmic dynamics taught to us by Maria in *Woman at Point Zero* to elicit the vultures' frenzied feeding movements (08:35 - 08:50). The Vulture here evokes the quality of 'middle gray' which Minh-ha ascribes to '[n]ature: the feminine, the sexual, but also the supernatural, the spiritual.'<sup>378</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> 'A group of vultures is called a committee, venue, or volt. In flight, a flock of vultures is a kettle, and when the birds are feeding together at a carcass, the group is called a wake.' Melissa Mayntz, "Fun Facts About Vultures: Trivia about Vultures, Buzzards, and Condors," *the spruce*, updated Mar 26, 2020, accessed Mar 29, 2020, <https://www.thespruce.com/fun-facts-about-vultures-385520>.

<sup>376</sup> Bright, 'Wake,' first stanza.

<sup>377</sup> Umm Kulthum (أم كلثوم), "Enta 'Omri – انت عمري," YouTube video, 58:18, posted by "Umm Kulthum – أم كلثوم," Mar 26, 2015, accessed Jun 5, 2019, <https://youtu.be/1wBvuZVE7FI>. (Chorus at 10:01).

<sup>378</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 71.

The most explicitly multiple space in *Moonlarking* is the beginning of ‘Dance’ (11:40 – 13:50), as the Kingfisher, ‘summoning the spirits of David Bowie and Mercutio’s Queen Mab’,<sup>379</sup> explodes with exuberantly extrovert multiplicities in Hyelim’s and my voices. Octavia created the Kingfisher, whose scintillating blue coat is considered magical by those lucky enough to see it pass by in a flash, as a mesmerising character. While it enjoys sharing its magic with others, it hides its fragility and sensitivity underneath its flamboyance, as betrayed by its heart beating ‘in double time’:

So blue, blue, electric blue,  
I shock the reeds and dandelions.  
By sun or moon my lapis plume  
Will dance the river through your eyes.

My cyan wings will hold the breeze,  
And though you call me halcyon,  
Tucked within my tiny breast,  
A heart that beats in double time.<sup>380</sup>

The character of the Kingfisher, its openness and vulnerability, also revealed in the intimacy of mine and Hyelim’s playful connection, thus ‘disrupt[s] the existing orders of representation by emphasizing the multiplicity of positions, the complexity, and the contingency of any given individual.’<sup>381</sup>

In ‘Dawn Chorus’ (17:00 - 22.15), the different qualities of the Middle Ground are absorbed in ‘silence’ and ‘sense-ing’. As the different birds’ voices join together, mine and Hyelim’s voices intertwine improvising ecstatically: high up in our registers, mirroring the Dawn Chorus’ nature as a sonic reflection of sunlight, as sound coming alive when the sun arrives (20:20 – 20:55). Our sound has become an embodied sensory experience: we sense each other, we sense the birds’ sonic vibrations, and we sense the sunlight—having abandoned the logocentric parts of ourselves.

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<sup>379</sup> Bright, “Programme Notes: Birdsong & Borders,” 7.

<sup>380</sup> Bright, ‘Dance,’ third and fourth stanzas.

<sup>381</sup> Ortega, “The Art of Hybridity: Maryse Condé’s *Tituba*,” 127.



## Concluding Thoughts

A lone voice emerges out of the ‘Dawn Chorus’ with a deeply serious message. However, we are not quite sure how aware the cheeky Goldfinch is of the magnitude of the message, as it urges us to ‘Listen’ (22:28 – end of video), trying to warn us until it is forced off stage by the oncoming flood. As it is gone, leaving an empty stage, will we learn to listen? To listen, instead of hiding behind our borders, behind divisive social and political messages? To listen to and sense each other deeply? Can we listen to the voices of the young people forced into desperate action to save our planet, instead of staying within our seemingly safe spaces, perpetuating the system? Could we, instead, claim the Middle Ground as a space in which we can allow other voices to destabilise and expand our own?

*Moonlarking* was born from an experience of ‘silence’. Absorbing multiple (real and imaginary) worlds and the boundaries between them, I had to face feeling overwhelmed, hesitant and disoriented in a space where I could not hide behind my existing languages. Yet, as the voices of myself and my collaborators resounded together in the creative process and eventually in the performance, I connected with each of them from a shifting central point, receptive, destabilised, having gone through a process which reminds me of these words by Minh-ha:

those who leave and risk in multiplicity, often tend to go on cold for a while, living life as it comes, fasting verbally and linguistically, before learning how to speak again, anew.<sup>382</sup>

Sounding together as if in an imaginary dawn chorus, our ‘aesthetic sense’ ‘intoxicate[d]’<sup>383</sup> by nature’s voices and colours,<sup>384</sup> and travelling towards each other, we met in the Middle Ground—a space where ‘all directions are (still) possible’.<sup>385</sup> And yet I feel this is only the beginning of a much longer journey.

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<sup>382</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 2.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>384</sup> See *Ibid.*

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 10: Epilogue

I said here we go again. What is conflict. What is this “other.” This Europe that refuses the other, the different and why? I wanted to go into the other and see that the other is really us. If you have an enemy, and you are so obsessed by it, that enemy will occupy your head. It becomes you. It is a difficult situation. And the fear is to sell out, and not to resist anymore. But I am asking to fight where it matters. There are victories in history that are worse than defeats. Annihilation. Can atomic bombs solve problems? There will not be a tree alive. We do not want that kind of victory. We need a positive, real, cultural and economic competition.<sup>386</sup>

Having begun by looking at interweaving processes as a way of responding to and engaging with plural identities, I arrived at a larger topic, that of challenging binary and hegemonic systems and eroding hierarchies. Unwittingly, my PhD had assumed a more political dimension. While the projects I worked on instilled the wish to break through hierarchies, this wish in turn influenced the topics and processes I chose to work with. I began to take more conscious steps into uncovering the damaging binary structures underlying our culture—from postcolonial and patriarchal systems to the engrained divisions between composer and performer, between our bodies and the primacy of sound and between our economic system and the fragilities of nature.

The more deeply I submerged myself in the processes, the more creative, daring, autonomous and openly multiple my voice became. As I grew aware of them, I allowed the plurality of voices to fully resonate within my own voice(s). Thus, forming my identity anew, I gained authorship—a feature Ortega describes ‘as ... distinctive ... of a hybrid consciousness’—over ‘the narrative[s] that we ultimately create about our own selves.’<sup>387</sup> I wanted to erupt from the dark box. Yet the challenge for a working artist is how to balance the integrity of your voice and believing in your message with allowing promoters to advocate and ‘package’ your work in a way that helps to attract audiences. I am also keenly aware of my communication with my audiences: the wish to transport them and take them with me into the story, while being aware that at times the plurality of experiences I give them may feel challenging or confusing.

By exploring the three research questions below through my practice, I embarked on a transformative journey, which started at the edges of my identity and progressed deeper into my

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<sup>386</sup> Adnan, interview.

<sup>387</sup> Ortega, “The Art of Hybridity: Maryse Condé’s *Tituba*,” 130.

body, into the nucleus of the Middle Ground, only to burst back out to connect with the unique stories of those around me. Yet what I originally perceived to be a straight line in and out, turned out to be more like a torus, a three-dimensional surface of revolution, ultimately connected and infinite.

## Addressing the Research Questions

*How might exploration of instability and fluidity of identity be manifested in artistic practice?*

In the process of creating the performances, I experimented with intensifying and expanding my experiences of instability and fluidity. These processes triggered the creation of multiple, ambiguous, intensely expressive spaces and often yet untravelled territory. They led me to finding rootedness in a place beyond language, genre or style—in my body and in the idiosyncrasies and uniqueness of human experience in the characters I created—and thus to challenge notions of authenticity.

The intensification of instability and fluidity happened both through the collaborative interweaving processes of creation as well as the resulting performances. In *Swimming Between Shores*, the profound and vulnerable process of travelling and shifting our internal borders created an unsettling yet beautifully sensuous mobile space, while my almost feverish movements of criss-crossing between languages and sudden shapeshifting between characters in *Thumbelina* told a tumultuous yet exuberant story of wholeheartedness. By allowing my—and our—practice to be destabilised, we discovered new linguistic spaces, such as in *After Yeats* or *Woman at Point Zero*; I realised how such processes can intensify creative voice, agency and authorship over our own narratives. In the almost mischievous intertwining of musical, visual, poetic and bird languages in *Moonlarking*, I found the confidence to abandon the familiar grounds of my languages and embark on the adventure of voicing in a ‘not yet distinguishable’<sup>388</sup> form.

*How might processes of interweaving languages and practices affect identity, language and voice?*

The interweaving processes of Wandering, Twilight and Sensing explored throughout this research—an approach Khatibi understands as ‘the feminine process of “weaving silence”’—emerged as ‘an alternate mode of knowing’.<sup>389</sup> With their ‘constant back-and-forth to link and delink different objects’,<sup>390</sup> these processes can help to shift understandings of identity, language

<sup>388</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 73.

<sup>389</sup> Lionnet, “Counterpoint and Double Critique in Edward Said and Abdelkebir Khatibi: A Transcolonial Comparison,” 404. Here she discusses Abdelkebir Khatibi, “A Colonial Labyrinth,” in *Post/colonial Conditions: Exiles, Migrations, Nomadisms*, ed. Françoise Lionnet, and Ronnie Scharfman, (Connecticut: Yale French Studies, 1993), 5.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*

and voice on personal, artistic and political levels. Personally, they enabled me to recognise and question the boxes of home and belonging imposed from without and unconsciously from within, and to sing my own stories, shattering their walls. On a broader level, my research has demonstrated that they can be methodologically employed not just for an artistic but also a political/activist purpose within a performance.

In this commentary I have shown how these creative, collaborative processes can increase our awareness of how we are being performed by identity, divided and reduced by narratives of the other. Yet conversely, by increasing authorship as a central aspect of a plural, hybrid voice, they empower us to disrupt existing narratives and perform our multiplicities, hybridities, harmonies, and dissonances.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, by interlinking movement with the diverse idioms of our ensemble, we were able to expand Firdaus' voice beyond that of her Egyptian identity to ring powerfully as that of a woman who speaks for women all over the world wrestling with destructive patriarchal structures. In *Swimming Between Shores* on the other hand, also concerned with amplifying reductive narratives of Arab women's voices, we used these as inspiration for rewriting our own stories and created vignettes of love, loss, motherhood and violence. These overlapping threads shifted the focus on the particularity and multiplicity of experience. In *Moonlarking*, inspired by our sensory and multiple identifications with the birds, their identities playfully transcended our grasp and powerfully challenged stereotypes, our inner borders and engrained structures.

Similarly, these processes open up 'the space of language', allowing it to 'resonate anew'<sup>391</sup> and us to play more consciously with the tension of producing versus being produced by language. Through the disrupted continuity created by the multilingual spaces of *Thumbelina* I was able to reassess and question how languages construct sense and communicate, and explore the impact of their physicality and resonance. Playing with the more sensory, embodied side of language, as in *After Yeats* and *Woman at Point Zero* allowed me to develop a different relationship to the musical languages I was working within, and to open up new creative spaces within these. As I began to consciously discover in *Moonlarking*, if our worlds are 'organized as language',<sup>392</sup> the processes allow us, even if we cannot escape these worlds, to be more wilfully adventurous within them, to find hidden paths, caves and treasures, and maybe to connect with parallel worlds.

My voice gained agency. Dismantling boxes, performing plural narratives, finding untrodden linguistic paths, allows us to site our voices, to claim their space between the conscious and the unconscious, between rational thought and wild, sensuous desire. *Thumbelina's* multiple

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<sup>391</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 42.

<sup>392</sup> Spivak, "Feminism and Critical Theory," 477.

voices joyfully resonate within me, beyond mine or anyone else's control. The birds in *Moonlarking* communicate their messages 'at the limit of sense and non-sense'.<sup>393</sup> My voice, consciously surrendering to silence during the journeys of creating *Swimming between Shores* and *Woman at Point Zero*, my voice, noisy and grating in the outbursts of the Ugly Toad or the bullying Field Mouse in *Thumbelina*, has become more playful and more serious, more challenging, less comfortable and more stubbornly alive.

The interweaving processes did not always 'result in the production of a whole'.<sup>394</sup> At many moments, 'threads unravel[led] ... the proportion of the dyes [was] off, or the cloth woven [became] stained'.<sup>395</sup> Yet they have shown their transformative potential: 'We are no longer ourselves ... We have been aided, inspired, multiplied.'<sup>396</sup>

*What is the artistic and political potential of the Middle Ground?*

The Middle Ground is a space of possibility and challenge, of instability and energy. Inside, change can happen—change cannot but happen. As seen in *Moonlarking*, in the Middle Ground all the processes of interweaving happen at once: there is a movement of travelling inwards and outwards, it is a space of intensified sensing, of letting down borders, of complete immersion. While in *Swimming Between Shores*, the Middle Ground was just beginning to emerge and in *After Yeats* it related to a specific aspect of my practice, by *Moonlarking* it had become a way of creating, of thinking, of being. As my performances have shown, the Middle Ground is not an advocacy for blandness, but an embracing of diversity—'[a] harmony-difference-middleness',<sup>397</sup> to return to Minh-ha's expression. And it is by nature an intensely political place, a place of '(r)evolution',<sup>398</sup> which unravels any binary notions.

Sited between rupture and rapture, in *After Yeats*, the disruption of my practice allowed an enraptured sensory-linguistic space to emerge. Here, in the Middle Ground, we can deliberately play with and enjoy rupture, as I explored in the fragmentation—and multiplication—of identity and voice in *Thumbelina*. As another metaphor for twilight, Minh-ha cites fog, 'a transcultural symbol of that which is indeterminate'.<sup>399</sup> Fog signifies confusion, it unsettles us deeply—when we are lost in fog, unable to see clearly, our imaginations run wild. When searching for a language in the often disconcerting in-between spaces during the development of *Woman at Point Zero*, blinded

<sup>393</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 78.

<sup>394</sup> Fischer-Lichte, "Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures—Rethinking Intercultural Theatre: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism," 11.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

<sup>396</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3.

<sup>397</sup> Minh-ha, *elsewhere, within here : immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 70.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

by the fog, my collaborators and I had to use other senses to navigate, which in turn helped us to convey the rawness of the story.

‘*A drama of transition*’,<sup>400</sup> or a sensory explosion, the Middle Ground, never settling, demands our full attention. While exploring this interplay of electric energies, as signified by the German word *Spannungsfeld*, my artistic voice diversified and learned to ground itself in ‘sense-ing’ (see chapter 4, p.45). Navigating the Middle Ground simultaneously sharpened my political conscience and awareness, as a place from where we can find and voice narratives together which do not fit into boxes—and with which we can fight for more equal, more just, healthier societies. The progression from the disruption of hegemonic structures, to finding agency by siting voice and to reaching towards transcendence through the interplay between rupture and rapture thus extends beyond the personal and the artistic. The decentralisation inherent in the processes of interweaving is also a disruption of postcolonial thinking; there is no centre, no periphery, no West, no East; the torus movement, interrupting straight lines, becomes a way of being in and navigating the Middle Ground. If we all dared to meet in the middle, vulnerable, our borders open, our senses wide awake, receptive through the destabilisation of travelling, who knows what change we could provoke.

## Concluding Thoughts

Through my sensory journey into the Middle Ground, I have created a series of five performances interweaving the multiple shades of my voice with diverse languages and practices. The analysis and creative contextualisation of my processes of collaborative interweaving—through the development of the framework, or creative methodology, of Wandering (Travelling), Twilight (Immersing yourself in the Middle Ground) and Sensing (Reawakening the Senses)—was primarily inspired by Trinh T. Minh-ha’s work. Illuminating both the processes and the resulting performances, it can be used to look at the work of other artists and, I believe, also as an inspiration for those wishing to better understand or develop their own practices of interweaving.

The performances I have created document how my artistic practice responds to and engages with the cultural and political landscape in new ways, by creating multilingual, multimobile, multisensory twilight spaces. These have allowed me to tell stories from a place where music, body and a dramatic understanding are interdependent from the outset. They show how processes of interweaving, through an underlying ethos of play and reflection, can extend to encompass any kind of linguistic or artistic practice—not tied down by dogmatic concerns, but respectful and

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<sup>400</sup> Ibid., 72 (Original italics).

truthful to the particular languages, cultures and practices they engage with. The work I present here is, for me, the beginning of a new exciting process, of developing, deepening and expanding these twilight spaces. Creating a full performance of *Moonlarking* will only be the start. I also see the need to further research the inherently political nature of the work, especially within my links to the Middle East, exploring both its inspiring utopian and disruptive potential.

As I explored the pluralities of and gaps between cultures, identities and languages, the overriding gap I ultimately addressed was between us and the intoxicating transcendence of nature. I realised that, through foregrounding our inner worlds of imagination and sensing, I began to aim beyond connecting us to each other to connecting to something outside of us—to interweave our incomplete, incongruous, beautiful ruptures with the rapture of the universe. I found the most beautiful summary of this unity of our inner and outer beings here, in Goethe's *Epirrhema*:<sup>401</sup>

### Epirrhema

Müset im Naturbetrachten  
 Immer eins wie alles achten.  
 Nichts ist drinnen, nichts ist draußen;  
 Denn was innen, das ist außen.  
 So ergreifet ohne Säumnis  
 Heilig öffentlich Geheimnis!  
 Freuet Euch des wahren Scheins,  
 Freuet Euch des ersten Spieles!  
 Kein Lebend'ges ist ein Eins,  
 Immer ist's ein Vieles.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>401</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Epirrhema," in *Poetische Werke* Band 1–16, (Berlin: Berliner Ausgabe, 1960) 545-546.

<sup>402</sup> When contemplating nature, you must  
 Regard one thing as you regard all things.  
 Nothing is inside, nothing is outside,  
 Because what is inside is outside.  
 So, seize, without delay,  
 The holy, official (public) secret.

Enjoy truthful illusion,  
 Enjoy serious play  
 Nothing that is alive is one,  
 It is always manifold.

(This (literal) translation is mine).

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# Appendix

## Permissions: Swimming Between Shores

Hello Merit,

I hereby give permission for the film of *Swimming Between Shores* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purpose of your PHD.

Richard Oakman, 11/9/19

Dear Merit

I hereby give my permission for the film of *Swimming Between Shores* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purposes of your PhD.

John Cummins, 11/9/19

Dear Merit,

I hereby give my permission for the films of *Swimming Between Shores* and *Thumbelina* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purposes of your PhD.

Morag Galloway, 11/9/19

Dear Merit,

I hereby give my permission for the film of *Swimming Between Shores* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purposes of your PhD.

Best wishes,

Katie Wood, 11/9/19

Hi Merit,

I hereby give my permission for the film of *Swimming Between Shores* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purposes of your PhD, Merit Ariane Stephanos.

All the best

Nilufar Habibian, 19/9/19

Dear Merit,

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Warm regards,

Dan Hodd, 20/9/19

Hi Merit,

To confirm that:

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Chris Leedham, 20/9/19

I hereby give my permission for the film of *Swimming Between Shores* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purposes of your PhD.

Charlotte Watson, 22/9/19

## Permissions: After Yeats

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Alcyona Mick, 9/11

Dear Merit,

I hereby give my permission for the films of *After Yeats*, *Thumbelina* and *Moonlarking* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purposes of your PhD.

Sincerely, Jason Emberton, Eastern Industries, 13/9/19

Dear Merit

I hereby give my permission for the film of *After Yeats* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purposes of your PhD.

wish you all the best

Nehad el Sayyed 20/9/19

Hi Merit,

To confirm that:

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Chris Leedham, 20/9/19



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Kind Regards, Annemarie Sand, 12/9/19

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Sincerely, Jason Emberton, Eastern Industries, 13/9/19

## Permissions: *Woman at Point Zero*

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Merass Sadek, signed and approved, 11/9/19

I hereby give my permission for the film of *Woman at Point Zero* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purposes of your PhD. Miloš Milivojevič, 11/9/19

To Merit Ariane Stephanos

I hereby give my permission for the film of *Woman at Point Zero* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purposes of your PhD.

Carmen Troncoso Recorder Performer, 11/9/19

NB: Carmen gave me permission to quote her from rehearsal video: 'Yes please use that quotation because I remember having said that from my very inside me.' Text message to the author, 19/9/19.

I hereby give my permission for the film of *Woman at Point Zero* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purposes of your PhD.

Bushra El-Turk, 12/9/19

Dear Merit,

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Raphaela Danksagmüller, 13/9/19

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Sabrina Mahfouz, 24/9/19

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I hereby give my permission for the film of *Birdsong & Borders* and *Woman at Point Zero* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purposes of your PhD.

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Kind regards

Hyelim, 29/9/19

NB: Hyelim gave me permission by whatsapp to quote her from rehearsal video on 19/9/19.

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 and digital format for the purposes of your PhD

Fijnaart. The Netherlands  
 19 September 2019

Naomi Sato 佐藤 尚美

NB: All collaborators and musicians signed a contract at the beginning of the project, agreeing that they were happy for films of rehearsals and performances to be used for advertising, funding and broadcasting purposes. I also asked them individually if they were happy for me to use these materials as part of my PhD research. I am not sharing videos from the rehearsals but have asked the musicians whose words I am quoting directly for permission.

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Luke Eddowes, 11/9/19

I hereby give my permission for the film of *Moonlarking* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purpose of your PhD. Jessie Rodger.

Jessie xxx

I hereby give my permission for the films of *Thumbelina* and *Moonlarking* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purposes of Merit Ariane Stephanos's PhD.

Kind Regards, Annemarie Sand, 12/9/19

Hi Merit

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Torbjörn Hultmark, 13/9/19

Hi Merit,

I hereby give my permission for the film of *Moonlarking* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purpose of your PhD.

Best,

BC (Brett Cox), 25/9/19

Dear Merit,

I hereby give my permission for the films of *After Yeats*, *Thumbelina* and *Moonlarking* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purposes of your PhD.

Sincerely, Jason Emberton, Eastern Industries, 13/9/19

Dear Merit,

I hereby give my permission for the films of *Woman at Point Zero*, *Moonlarking* and *Birdsong & Borders* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purposes of your PhD.

Kind regards

Hyeim, 29/9/19

Hello my dear,

I would like to declare that:

I hereby give my permission for the film of *Moonlarking* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purposes of your PhD.

And I'm very glad to have been a part of it,

Hannah Moore, 23/9/19

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Hi Merit

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Best wishes

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Dear Merit,

I hereby give my permission for the films of *Woman at Point Zero*, *Moonlarking* and *Birdsong & Borders* to be submitted in hard copy and digital format for the purposes of your PhD.

Kind regards

Hyelim, 29/9/19

## Permissions: Caroline Bergvall's Work

Hi Merit

I hereby grant you formal permission to use my work and quote from it as outlined for your PhD thesis.

Good luck on completing,

best wishes

Dr. Caroline Bergvall, 24/04/2020

Merit,

Congratulations on finishing your dissertation.

And yes, happy to grant permission for you to quote from Caroline's Nightboat titles in your thesis.

Very best,

Stephen Motika, Director & Publisher, [Nightboat Books](#).

24/04/2020