

# Editorial — Migrant theatre and the aesthetics of identity

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## Abstract

Looking at the terminology developed by criticism to analyze the diverse sociocultural contexts and the various historical phases of literature over the past twenty years, we cannot ignore the emergence of a vast geographical concern. Notions such as nomadism, exile or deterritorialization are multiplying. They all reflect a modern need to explain the major changes experienced by human beings. Spaces are multiplying, expanding, or even existing virtually and it is becoming difficult to define a new sense of being in the world. At the same time, the notion of identity has become more vague, either rendered in simplistic terms or opened to multiple interpretations. The ever-changing notion of character in contemporary theatre represents a precious tool to analyse the multiple notions of identity. In this publication, I offer to demonstrate how Migrant theatre, a dramaturgy based on the inadequacy between human beings and the spaces they live in, deals with identity in postmodern terms. Oscillating between a perfect neatness and an embarrassing vagueness, this new theatre, represented by the works of playwrights such as Marie Ndiaye (*Rien d'humain*) or Abia Farhoud (*Les Filles du 5-10-15c*), outlines the hesitations, the confrontations and the experimentations of the world that surrounds us and that shapes us.

The world is filled with terms like 'national identity', 'cultural identity' and 'political identity'; all pointing to a collective dimension, while the word identity still refers to a notion of uniqueness. To overcome this initial contradiction, I propose to create a firm, though possibly reductive, analytical framework. Nowadays, identity is perceived as resulting from multiple constructions and strategies, "not a fact but a dynamic" (Camilleri, 1996-1997, p.32). However, this post modern concept of a fragmented identity remains theoretical and does not take into consideration the daily pressure experienced by those experimenting with a profound change in their own identity. This is particularly the case for migrants, who are constantly trying to link what they were *back home* with what they are becoming *over here*. In the specific case of *migrance* (Smith, 2006), the difficulty with defining one's identity could be reduced to two main factors : firstly, living in a world that is constantly and rapidly changing, or in places that are non-concentric and discontinuous, weakens the sense of being rooted in one identifiable place. As David Kolb (2007) explains, "there is a *spaciousness* about our inhabitation (of the world) that forbids solid identity." Therefore identity must be considered in relation to space. Secondly, contemporary Western society constantly demands us to define ourselves through the paragon of the white male: eternally young, thoroughly active and belonging to the middle-classes. As new members of

society, migrants are particularly sensitive to the model of *whiteness*, otherwise perceived as both neutral and normative by Westerners. Thus identity must also be considered in relation to society.

In their respective plays, Farhoud and NDiaye work on the implications of a multiple identity. They do so by focusing on characters who are subject to a fundamental instability, whether it be the consequences of a physical displacement from one socio-cultural sphere to another in Farhoud's *Les filles du 5-10-15c* (referred to as *LF51015*) or the inclination of the character to feel out of place in an environment that should be familiar in NDiaye's *Rien d'humain* (referred to as *RDH*). First of all, I would like to demonstrate that theatre has specific ways of exploring the concept of identity. Then I offer to concentrate on the way both authors highlight the subtle connection between space and identity by using the techniques of migrant writing, a theatrical form built upon "a sense of dislocation, of feeling foreign and out of place, longing for what is familiar and the ability to communicate and to be understood – *in short the sense of exile*." (Khordoc, 2004)

## **Identity and Migrant theatre: defining the sense of exile**

The issue of identity is complex. To analyse this complexity, it is helpful to look at the origins of the concept, at its most basic definitions. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica (n. d), there are four meanings for the word identity. For the purpose of this essay, two of these definitions will be examined. Firstly, identity is "the distinguishing character or personality of an individual" and therefore can be related to the concept of individuality. Paradoxically the Latin *identitas* means sameness, "a sameness of essential or generic character in different instances".

Before considering these internal contradictions, it is necessary to interpret the first definition, especially to the words "distinguishing character" as it brings us to some theatrical terminology. In a play, the character, derived from the Greek *kharakter* - an engraved or written mark — is conceived as the defining qualities he or she is given by the playwright. For that reason, all the elements we consider regarding the characters of a play are biased and depend on the amount of information the author is willing to give. Properly speaking, a character is not a person but a set of written elements and cannot have an identity although she/he can present elements of identity. Furthermore the character does not have a body. Technically it is a no-body. But in drama, contrary to the novel where the character remains a being of paper, this "no-body" will gain substance. It will appear on stage, move and talk, love and die, all in front of an audience. To exist materially, the character has to be embodied by an actor who himself or herself accepts to put his or her own identity aside while on stage. Actors "necessarily fill the gaps left by characters" (Ryngaert and Sermon, 2006, p.20). The stage director will also influence the formation of the character by making cultural and aesthetic choices. But most importantly, it is the audience that will

participate in this process by giving a personal and emotional response to the characters, giving consistency to the character's identity. So far, we have listed four different influences that, each in their own way, bring forth the character's identity. It now has a body to progress into a space with specific aesthetic references and a voice to articulate the text. A safe conclusion will be to posit that the character is born out of the representation and the confrontation with an audience: it is no longer a virtual, disjointed being but begins to appear more as a person. However, here lies the trap of identification that has been so virulently denounced by playwrights at the beginning of the 20th century. Following Artaud's intuition and Brecht's prescriptions, many playwrights became suspicious of the traditional character and its closed subjectivity. In post dramatic theatre, drama does not stand as a mirror of reality anymore and this directly affects the character. In fact the subject as a character is generally conceived as a virtual individual but is also thought of as based on a real person. This definition is no longer acceptable. On the contemporary stage, neither inter-subjective relationships nor intra-subjective relationships are simple. Not only does the subject have difficulty communicating, he also barely recognises himself as a self. Authors such as Valère Novarina, Noëlle Renaude or Philippe Minyana, moved away from the concept towards ideas of *figure*, *voix* or *vestige*, generating a fragmented subject.

Let us once again take advantage of etymology. The word "person" is derived from the Latin *personae* — a character in a drama, a mask — thus restoring the initial conundrum about the possibility of an identity on the theatre stage. Theatre, perhaps more than any other art form, provides a fascinating field of analysis because it is built upon the constant tension between nothingness and presence. The migrant as a theatrical character is particularly interesting because her/his identity is based on fragments of identity: she/he evolves on the threshold of two societies, the one she/he left and the one she/he is trying to inhabit. This fundamental *in-betweenness* generates a dynamic process: her/his identity is mobile.

But let us not forget the initial inconsistency that derives from our understanding of the word itself. The second definition of identity evokes the idea of sameness. How is it possible to link the idea of individuality, of "distinguishing characters" with the idea of sameness? The theorist Anne Ubersfeld (1996) does not pretend to resolve this ontological issue but proposes to look at it from an alternative angle. From the beginning of her book, *Lire le théâtre III: Le dialogue de théâtre*, she argues that any theatrical statement is produced by two speakers, the author and the character, and is received by two addressees, because although the character of theatre addresses another character, it also addresses, and even especially addresses, the spectator. Ubersfeld (1996, p.21) defines this phenomenon as *la double énonciation*, a double statement contained in all plays. In my personal opinion, the *double énonciation* has two implications. First it instigates a new sense of balance between all the participants, resulting in a sense of sameness, and of oneness that occurs during the time of the performance. Theatre is a place in the social world

where an emotional community is born (Fischer-Litche, 2010, p.4). This process is not based on one's capacity to identify with the Other's identity but an ability to leave a space to the other in one's own identity. The poet René Char (1962) wrote: "*Épouse et n'épouse pas ta maison*". This enigmatic fragment of *Les Feuillettes d'Hypnos* could play as a metaphor of the issue of identity in theatre. The "mental house" is based on a double movement that echoes the *double énonciation*. It offers the possibility of cohesion with oneself, with one's mental house, with one's "recognised" character and at the same time it illustrates a refusal of the dangerous exclusivity of a closed world, folded up on itself, encouraging one to get rid of the suffocating link of egocentricity. It is in the folds of this movement that a shared identity emerges. This shared identity can only exist in the specific space of theatre at the specific time of performance because, according to Ubersfeld, all participants are willingly taking part in the creation of the performance's significance. This shared identity also partly evacuates the threat of blind identification as all participants are aware of their own identity and are willing to welcome the Other, be it the author or the character, to integrate it to their own vision of the world.

This consciousness leads us to the second implication of the *double énonciation*. Even if the dialogue is based on the model of conversation, it is a totally different process because the pronoun "I" becomes the catalyst of the performance; it no longer stands for the character alone but embodies all the participants of the *double énonciation*. The 'I' who proceeds from the theatrical text has to produce an effect on both character and spectator. The *double énonciation* opens up the theatrical space by including the spectator in the creation of the sense, as the 'I' of the character is enclosed in the 'I' of both actors and stage director who are themselves wrapped in the 'I' of the spectator.

Finally, it is necessary to explain that our comprehension of identity is inscribed in a theoretical framework known as migrant writing. Nepveu lets us consider the term 'migrant' as a new type of writing that insists more upon "the movement, the drift, and the multiple crossings which are resulting from the experience of exile." The adjective 'migrant' "has the advantage of already pointing towards an aesthetic practice, a fundamental dimension for current literature." (Nepveu, 1999, p. 234) Contrary to the experience of exile that can only be lived in the flesh, this sense of exile can apply to both immigrants and non-immigrants. In both cases, the feeling of displacement arises from the relationship an individual has with space. The body is the physical frame of identity and it is through the body and its physical connections to the outside world that an individual will begin to define his or her identity. In the case of immigrants, these daily habits are subject to considerable alterations. Everything will begin to change: the smells, the sounds and one's relationship with one's body. This physical connection to identity also allows each individual to position him or herself in a definite geographical location and within a particular social setting (Shankar Saha, 2009). This corporal belonging to a geographical space generates cultural practices and emotional connections. "Basically", as Amit Shankar Saha (2009) explains, "they (human beings) live in 'spaces' that have either physical presence

or are born out of such concrete parameters into conceptual presences: geographical and social spaces fall into the former category whereas cultural and emotional spaces belong to the latter.” To understand these external spaces, individuals need to communicate with them. In order to do so, they will use their internal and mental space (and this is why the sense of exile defined by Khordoc (2004) has to be considered as a subject of psychological origin). The sense of exile translates the inability of the mind to reconcile its differences with the world and to identify with it. In migrant writing the aesthetic of identity is therefore systematically combined with an aesthetic of space. As defined earlier, this sense of exile applies to both immigrants and non-immigrants but obviously it does not have the same implications. Through the analysis of two plays, *Les filles du 5-10-15c* by Abia Farhoud and *Rien d’humain* by Marie NDiaye, I will now demonstrate that theatre never stops asking the question of “what is identity?”

## **Abla Farhoud and the complementary identity**

In *Les filles du 5-10-15c*, Abia Farhoud chooses to write about the sense of exile of an immigrant, the young Kaokab. Both Kaokab and her older sister Amira are born in Lebanon but their parents decide to move to Montreal when they are still very young. They are introduced to Canadian society by very conventional means: they go to a Francophone school to get an education that would not have been given to them if they had stayed in Lebanon. This access to education guaranteed, at least for a time, brings a sense of balance in the two girls’ lives. It generates a real, if tenuous, stability between a link with their origins, the private sphere, and affiliation to a social context, the public sphere (to Canadian society). However, this fragile equilibrium is irreversibly broken when the two girls are forced to work in the family’s shop to pay for the studies of their only brother, Mounir. Furthermore, their parents do not speak French. While Amira does speak Arabic, Kaokab, the main character, has a limited understanding of her parents’ native language. The parents cannot play their natural role as links with the culture of origin and guides into a new cultural setting, so it falls to Amira to act as a mediator between them and her younger sister. However, her position in the family is not different from Kaokab’s. Whereas Amira seems resigned and refuses to fight, the younger Kaokab is deeply wounded both by this injustice and by the incapacity of her family to be rooted. Throughout the play, she vehemently tries to assert her right to education thereby questioning her place within the familial structure, which represents the old cultural heritage, but also tries to assert her own identity as a means to find her place in Canadian society, the new cultural environment. Farhoud is going to translate this struggle by interweaving the issue of the identity of her character and the way this character relates to theatrical space.

The playwright questions the construction of identity on two levels: Kaokab has to be considered first as an immigrant, then as a teenager. In fact, Kaokab quickly puts the issue

of immigration forward.

Kaokab: Si au moins on nous avait mis à l'école anglaise en arrivant ici, on serait comme eux autres. Mais non! Là, on est toute seules. Pas d'amis canadiens français, pas d'amis libanais. Juste notre famille perdue au milieu d'étrangers." (p.16)

By using the double negation “no French Canadian friends, no Lebanese friends” she emphasises her sense of loneliness as an immigrant and also underlines the impossibility of a return. She cannot identify with either group because in both cases she is confronted with an otherness that she cannot overcome. Moreover, the only social structure she can rely on is the nuclear space of family. However, this space does not stand as a safe haven. On the contrary, it is defined by its insularity, “*Juste notre famille*”, and a concept of loss, “*perdue au milieu d'étrangers*”. Considering Kaokab has a very limited understanding of Arabic, even her interaction with her family, both as a cultural and social anchor, is very restricted. In fact, the cultural barrier is the first obstacle she encounters. Her father forbids any kind of relationship with French Canadians because he is obsessed by the notion of *sharaf*, honour, and hopes to marry off his daughters to Lebanese immigrants. However, most of them do not speak French.

Because she can access neither her school, a physical space which symbolises the key to the new culture, nor communicate with her family, a mental space that traditionally passes on a cultural heritage, Kaokab is consumed by a deep feeling of displacement and cannot reconcile the tensions and negations that constitute her identity. As mentioned early on, she is also sixteen years old and is going through another identity crisis: adolescence. Adolescence is a period of transition for all individuals, a transition between an age in which parents remain the principal vectors of cultural identity but which is also constructed around the discovery of Otherness. In the end, the adolescent will reach a compromise, building her- or himself on representations of the world. Kaokab is forced to define herself on an uneven basis, both as an immigrant and as a young adult.

To exteriorise her uneasiness, Kaokab is tempted by two solutions: communication and violence. Throughout the play, Kaokab uses an old tape recorder, not only a tool to speak with her parents (Farhoud, LF51015, Scene1, pp. 5-7) but also as a means to retain traces of her past (Farhoud, LF51015, scene 6, p.28). This theatrical prop could therefore be considered as having a positive dimension, symbolising Kaokab's wish for a better future. However, her use of the machine becomes more and more erratic: she cries each time she turns it on, and she systematically removes her speeches as if, by repeatedly erasing her own voice, Kaokab is erasing part of herself. The functionality of the tape recorder is symbolically interesting: each time Kaokab presses the rewind button, she goes back on her own speech, at the same time erasing it and rebuilding a new speech on top of the old one. This represents the way she organises her quest for identity. She is constantly trying to rebuild herself on an unfinished and inoperative basis.

Both speakers and addressees are affected by these subtractions as it prevents them from

defining a fixed image of the character, of its identity. They are constantly forced to rebuild the theatrical sense of the pronoun 'I'. It also shows that Kaokab is conscious of the ineptness of words and systematically turns to violence to fight her sense of emptiness.

The physical seclusion of Kaokab echoes her mental confinement. On stage, it is symbolised by the progressive reduction of the main theatrical space (the shop) and its contrast with a fantasised though very limited outside (the pavement) (Farhoud, *LF51015*, 'The set', p.4). Throughout the play, boxes full of goods for the shop keep piling up, constantly reducing the theatrical space. This treatment of space creates an intense sense of claustrophobia both in psychological terms; Kaokab is trapped in her own mind, and in physical terms; she is trapped in the theatrical space. At the same time, the spectator bears witness to the progressive disappearance of the character. The gradual passage from communication to violence is described by Farhoud herself in a lengthy stage direction at the beginning of the play (Farhoud, *LF51015*, scene 1, p.6): Kaokab breaks pencils and tears up a notebook. This constant use of violence illustrates the young girl's difficulty in building her identity but also demonstrates her will to assert herself. Throughout Farhoud's play, violence helps the character regain control over the theatrical space, as if by destroying her surroundings, the character could extend her subjectivity. But Kaokab's power is limited and very soon, the space is filled to the point of bursting. Quiet Amira, who until then emphasised the need to tidy and organise the shop, is also getting drowned amongst the cardboard boxes: "*Amira marche le long des comptoirs. Sa démarche est lente, ses épaules rentrées. Les boîtes se sont amoncelées dans les allées (...)*" (Farhoud, *LFD51015*, scene 9, p.6)" as if she were abandoning her initial role. Amira refuses to be a link anymore and this rejection permanently breaks the connection of both girls with the outside, whether it be the fictional pavement or the off stage theatrical space.

As Carmen Camilleri (Camilleri, 1995 cited in Bourquin, 2003, p.32), explains, "identity is constructed with relationships with others (... ) an interactive process of assimilation and differentiation, in which the definition of the self constantly intrudes onto the definition of the other." However, Kaokab is completely isolated, she does not have access to any other to compare herself with. As mentioned earlier, even though Amira does communicate with her parents, she is not listened to. She is not "other" but an older, subdued version of Kaokab. In this play, Farhoud reinterprets the archetypal symbol of the twins: the two girls become one. She creates a dialogical symmetry between the two characters. Kaokab is the one who can articulate her feelings but she is unable to do so in front of her parents while Amira, the nearly mute one on stage, has the ability to communicate with the parents but cannot express her angst. Moreover, the physical resemblance between both girls grows steadily, to the point that it becomes hard to tell them apart, as if they were mirroring each other's emotions and appearance. The playwright emphasises this similarity by dressing them in the same way and "impeccable" Amira will gradually become as "bedraggled" (Farhoud, *LF51015*, 'The set', p.4) as her younger sister. Farhoud creates a single and original character, an identity shared between two bodies, interwoven with the memories

of the older and the words of the younger. This symmetry can be found in the structure of their exchange: they very frequently rephrase each other's words but they also tend to finish each other's sentences (Farhoud, LF51015, scene 2, p.15):

Kaokab : Dans les vergers de mon villageY'a du soleil à volontéDans les vergers de mon villageY'a des oranges à volonté , (...)Moi, je me souviens plus. Je ne sais pas pourquoi, à chaque fois que je mange une orange, ça me fait penser au Liban. (...)  
Amira: Les oranges te font penser au soleil et le soleil te fait penser au Liban.

As a result, the theatrical statement becomes more complicated as it does not rely on the tetralogy defined by Ubersfeld (1996) anymore. On stage, the speaker becomes one with the addressee and this contamination of one term by the other could spread to the rest of the participants, erasing the traditional borders between stage and audience. Moreover, this merging of characters generates immobility: the identity, trapped between two characters, cannot unfold in the theatrical space anymore, a phenomenon which itself ensures that the theatrical space cannot expand beyond the limits of the stage. No matter how strongly the girls wish to escape, they are prisoners of the dramatic space and of the hermetical construction of the play, their situation echoing the entrapment of the immigrant between the new and the old cultures.

## Marie NDiaye and the symmetrical conflict

Marie NDiaye's play *Rien d'humain* (2004) can be described as the reverse picture of the sense of exile experienced by immigrants. The story describes two non-immigrant women: Bella, a recent divorcee who comes back to her country, and Djamila, a friend to whom Bella lent her apartment while abroad. Bella wants to get her apartment back to house her three children but Djamila refuses to return it, claiming it now belongs to her. Ignace, a neighbour in love with Djamila who is convinced she had had his child, is going to be an intermediary between the two women until he forces them to confront each other and loses everything in the process. In all her works, Marie NDiaye demonstrates "an added exactitude in her choice of words" (Lepape, 1994). This peculiar accuracy can first be observed in the names she chooses for her characters. In fact, the name Djamila means "the beautiful" and is the Arabic translation of the Italian name Bella. For attentive readers and spectators, the identical naming of two characters already points at something out of the ordinary. In his article 'Halo of Identity: The Significance of First Names and Naming', (2003), M.D. Tschaepé argues that "the 'regime' of first naming involves a judgement and type of psycho-sociological bondage, which sustains the personality and idea of an individual as a specific type of individual within the community in which one is named. Just as 'I is an order-word' in a general sense (Merleau-Ponty, 1923, p.84), so too is the first name an order-word, but in a much more specific sense. The first name, when placed within the individual, becomes a dictum that states, 'you are this' and 'you are not that.'" In regard



to this conception and when confronted with the notion of identity, the deliberate choice by NDiaye is quite disturbing indeed. From the beginning of the play, we are aware that the two women are symmetrical in name, an essential symbol of identity. However, the playwright downplays this symmetry. Although the two women are the same age (NDiaye, RDH, scene 3, p.26), Ignace lyrically describes Bella as a beautiful woman (NDiaye, RDH, scene 3, p.22) with “eyes that remind (him) of the colour of the picking of mushrooms in the woods of (his) childhood and a neck as fine and flexible as the trunk of a young willow” (NDiaye, RDH, scene 6, p.38), Djamilia refers to herself as a “rock” (NDiaye, RDH, scene 6, p.42), she is “a person with venomous instincts” (NDiaye, RDH, scene 3, p.24). Where Bella exposed her whole life on stage and spoke of her children, those “poor little rabbits”, Djamilia is secretive and has a mysterious and invisible daughter. Bella is from the Bourgeoisie while Djamilia was born in a slum (NDiaye, RDH, scene 3, p.24). NDiaye opposes the circularity of Bella to the angularity of Djamilia, the triviality of one character’s existence to the nearly magical abilities of the other. But the more the play progresses, the less important these differences appear to be. Djamilia and Bella are not just old friends; they shared their childhood together. Djamilia was ‘saved’ by Bella’s family. But this generosity was an act as Bella’s father and brothers repeatedly abused the young girl. Djamilia knows she has been used, hence her desire for vengeance towards Bella, who remained a silent witness of the rapes. However, it is Bella who is going to describe these past events as if Djamilia’s rigidity and silence were compelling her to speak. Abrupt and vulgar revelations erupt repeatedly in Bella’s polished language and her constant apologies show that she does not control this process. The reason for Bella’s silence and the reason for Djamilia’s ‘adoption’ will only emerge at the end of the play when Bella confesses to her friend:

Bella. — Tu es mon amie, ils t’ont prise pour se préserver de me prendre, baisée pour éviter de me baiser, va, tu es mon amie. Il était préférable, il était moins grave que ce fût toi plutôt que moi, nous te devons beaucoup. Tu es mon amie.” (NDiaye, RDH, scene 6, p.40-42).

Djamilia was chosen to play Bella’s double in the perverted games of the latter’s incestuous family. To play her part to the point of perfection, she was shaped on Bella. To render the horror of the situation, NDiaye creates a strong symmetry between her characters, but while Amira and Kaokab were completing each other’s identity in Farhoud’s play, Djamilia and Bella are the two conflicting sides of the same coin. Their memories are merged together into a common past identity but those responsible for their pains will never pay. Therefore, it is not surprising that at the end of the play Bella, the weaker part of this identity, imitates Djamilia’s behaviour. The third character, the good, devoted Ignace, has been greatly confused by all the similarities between the two women and does not know who he is in love with anymore. He is never allowed into Djamilia’s apartment and Bella throws him out of his own apartment. Even though the spectator is confronted with an outside space, the threshold of Djamilia’s apartment, for most of the play, in the end both women

disappear in a mysterious interiority that the spectator, just like poor Ignace, cannot access. By merging the two women into one identity, NDiaye ensures that the expansion of the dramatic space is now impossible on stage. Just as in Farhoud's the *double énonciation* cannot operate anymore because space is now situated in a fundamental otherness, an unreachable *somewhere else* outside the stage. The characters disappear beyond the spectator's reach, denying him any interaction and refusing to identify with the outside world, henceforth embodying a sense of exile.

At first, the plays of Farhoud and NDiaye seem to follow the rules of a traditional dialogical system. However, by deconstructing and preventing the *double énonciation*, both playwrights build original theatrical systems. Without putting the concept of character through radical changes as other contemporary playwrights might have done, they still manage to underline the extreme volatility of the notion, highlighting the necessary connection between the identity of a character and the space it depends on. Through the analysis of these two plays, we find that the determination of identity is directly linked to the relationship the character has with space. Migrant theatre draws attention to the multiple influences that constitute an identity. By stating that the construction of identity is, at all times, geographically influenced, migrant theatre suggests that identity is never an arrested fact. On the contrary, it is a concept marked by a strong volatility. It also has to stem from an exchange between the migrant and the other and this exchange should not depend solely on migrants. Migrant theatre opens up the possibility of 'a multiplicity of identities' but also warns us that this possibility can only appear as the result of a shared effort. The instability of the migrant partly depends on the amount of space we, as Westerners, are willing to give her/him in our contemporary societies.

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