

# Experiencing Nationlessness: Staging the Migrant Condition in Some Recent British Theatre

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## The Border Crisis

Nations and ideas of nationhood are fenced by borders. They are the physical and metaphorical limits upon which those concepts depend. But although nations depend upon borders, borders do not simply separate nations. They separate, first, those who can stake a verifiable claim to nationhood from those who are nationless, and, second, they discriminate between the value of any such claim. The nationless, and those whose nationhood is considered undesirable, are impeded by borders in ways that those of us whose nationhood is privileged are not. In this sense, President Trump's infamous 'Muslim Ban' is not the unprecedented outrage it may appear: it is only a particularly egregious instance of a common exclusion. It is, indeed, so common that it has led, in recent years, to global crisis. *The Guardian* newspaper's migration correspondent Patrick Kingsley reported in 2016 that although "the world is currently witnessing the biggest wave of mass migration since the second world war", the much vaunted 'Refugee Crisis' is nonetheless "something of a misnomer" (4). By 2015, he calculates, the total number of refugees "amounted to only 0.2 per cent of the EU's total population". This figure leads Kingsley ineluctably to a damning conclusion: "[t]here is a crisis, but it's one caused largely by our response to the refugees" (7). Our global crisis, in other words, is not a crisis of refugees, but a crisis of borders.

Borders are also sites of another kind of crisis: a crisis of identity. Sophie Nield has analysed this as a consequence of the construction of the nation-state and as a crisis of appearance. The border, she argues, creates a doubled presence in which the traveller's face splits into two: the physical face and the face that is visible to the state in the form of a passport. At the border, therefore, "we must arrange our faces to resemble as closely as possible the faces demanded by the technologies of state. [...] We must fit into the template" (13). In other words, borders generate and insist upon a bounded conception of identity into which we must fit. Slippages between, ambiguities of, or transgressions from the template identity they require us to carry are not permitted.

In this essay, I want to use some recent British theatre as a means of thinking about borders and identity and related instances of structural violence. First, I will consider ways in which conceptions of identity that depend upon the notion of a border tend to re-enact the

structural violence of privilege that Kingsley argues has led us to our so-called ‘Refugee Crisis’. Second, I will chart some ways in which bounded conceptions of identity can be productively troubled by the figure of the migrant. I should pause here to note the slippage between ‘refugee’ and ‘migrant’ in my language. I do not intend by this either to collapse all instances of migration together, or to imply a hierarchy of need that privileges, for example, those seeking asylum above economic migrants. My use of the term migrant is intended simply to focus on the displacement shared by all of these people, and to focus attention on its ontological challenge to notions of identity and relations with the world that are predicated upon a situated or bounded conception of identity and nationality. In short, I want to ask not what theatre has to teach us about nationhood, but how it represents the nation<sup>less</sup>, and how such representations might help us to reframe identity not as the experience of containment within borders, but as a consequence of movement across them.

### **Migration, Containment and Exposure**

The anthropologist Tim Ingold has recently argued that

[t]hose of us affluent enough to live in an urban apartment or suburban house [...] tend to imagine that habitation can be contained. We live in *a world turned outside in* – [...] an inverted world – in which all that moves and grows, shines or burns, or makes a noise has been reconstructed within as a simulacrum image of the exterior. [...] Where the earth is, heaven knows – somewhere deep down we would rather not think about, accessible only to the utility men who come in when something goes wrong and when *the defences that hold our lives in containment* have been breached. (41)

Ingold goes on to assert that “the experience of containment influences our thinking about what it means to inhabit a world to an extent that even psychologists and philosophers [...] are ill-prepared to recognise” (41). There are, of course, important exceptions. We might point, for example, to Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the ways in which civilisation has undergirded its attempts to control the earth “by propagating myths of man’s sovereignty over nature” (Hughes 23). In Ingold’s terms, these myths are simulacrum images of the exterior, brought into the containment of (western) civilisation, so that the earth can be excluded. Jenny Hughes has woven this argument into her comprehensive analysis of the ways in which representations of terrorism both stand for and obscure the “chaotic violence and illegality” inflicted by western civilisation on, for example, Iraq (38). Hughes’ analysis also draws upon Julia Kristeva’s idea of

abjection. “Control over an estranging, invasive and threatening world, and its concomitant proliferation of abject presences,” she writes, following Kristeva, “is maintained by asserting a border between the inside and outside of the body. The abject haunts order and order defines itself by expelling the abject” (49). Ingold’s “world turned outside in”, likewise “defines itself by expelling the abject”, though in his argument, the abject presence is that of the earth itself.

Kristeva and Ingold’s thoughts meet at the border. Kristeva describes “the border of my condition as a living being” as a site where “wastes drop so I might live” until, at the point of death, “my entire body falls beyond the limit” (3) and “deprived of world, I fall in a faint” (4). Ingold’s borders are the walls of an apartment or house that exclude “all that moves and grows” in order to sustain an inert equilibrium on the inside until “the defences that hold out life in containment have been breached” (41). Kristeva is concerned, in the most positive sense, with “borderline subjects” (7), with the “deject”, who “strays, instead of getting his bearings”: “a deviser of territories, languages, works, [who] never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines [...] constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh” (8). Likewise, Ingold’s critique of containment seeks, in the most optimistic terms, to expose, or, in his words, to “restore the world’s inhabitants to the fullness of earth and sky” (77). I want to argue here that the migrant condition contains the possibility of such a restoration to exposure and is akin to that of Kristeva’s “deject” who must “constantly question his solidity and [...] start afresh”. I am aware, of course, that Ingold’s positive account of exposure brings with it the danger of romanticising that condition, and even of fetishizing woundedness. I hope, nonetheless, to develop, in my three examples, a positive and not panglossian account of the condition of migrancy and nationlessness as an alternative to a view of the world predicated upon the condition of containment.

### **The Abjected Refugee: *How To Hold Your Breath***

Zinnie Harris’ play *How To Hold Your Breath* (Royal Court, 2015) incrementally exposes its protagonist, Dana, to the condition of a refugee as she travels towards Alexandria in an inversion of current migrant routes. Nonetheless, *How To Hold Your Breath* is a play that seeks not to expose the condition of migrancy so much as the structural violence of privilege. Its depiction of refugee status is always set against the wealth and safety to which Dana (and, by extension, its audience) expect to be entitled. It therefore positions the refugee as a kind of “bare life” in relation to the “sovereign power” (Agamben 7) wielded by its anti-hero, the ‘devil’ Jarron. He is able, in the play’s final scene, to restore Dana’s corpse to life and undo the exposure that has

been enacted upon her as part of his job at the UN, leaving no doubt as to whose interests, in this play at least, that organisation is designed to protect.

The cast of Vicky Featherstone's Royal Court production notably featured a number of extras, cast as anonymous figures in dark clothing. They were used particularly effectively at the moment of Dana's drowning in a boat off the African coast, which was staged with more than a nod to Géricault's 1818-19 painting now known as *The Raft of the Medusa*. Géricault's canvas was an attempt to depict the plight of the 150 real people who were abandoned at sea on a raft which was cut loose by the captain of the ship Medusa from a lifeboat containing the more privileged survivors of its wreck. Géricault did so by fusing the scale and figures of the neo-classical tradition with the freer and more emotional representation of human experience then familiar from paintings responding to historical or contemporary events, such as Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat* (1793). The combined effect draws on the viewer's sympathy (as a more realistic treatment would), but elevates it to a symbolic critique of sovereign power, and the enforced sacrifices of those subjected to it, that stands in stark, implicit contrast to the heroic sacrifices of the neo-classical tradition. These extend beyond the victims of the wreck of the Medusa. Géricault's prominent depiction of a black man at the top right, waving to a distant ship, umbilically connects the imperative to rescue these survivors to the abolitionist cause.

Just as Géricault's painting mobilised the victims of the wreck of the Medusa to attack the inequality that necessitated their 'exposure to death' (to borrow Foucault's phrase), Featherstone's production used the figure of the refugee as a foil to the privileges of its central characters. Designer Chloe Lamford created a set resembling a furniture showroom which was gradually stripped away to nothing, and billboards of lifestyle imagery and advertising that were removed to reveal a tattered public information poster from the 2014-2015 Ebola outbreak. Whilst I would not wish to detract from this critique of the imbrication of consumerism and structural violence, when the same logic was applied to human beings, in the form of the refugee-extras, it produced bodies whose subjectivity had been hollowed out.

Therefore, the dramaturgical logic of *How To Hold Your Breath's* trenchant critique of the global north abjected the figures of refugees, casting them as dark and fearful Others. I use the term 'dark' with a full awareness of its ethnic connotation. It was notable that while Dana, her sister, Jarron the devil, and the Librarian who follows Dana dispensing self-help books were all cast white, the ensemble roles were played by Danusia Samal (who has Kurdish and Polish heritage), Neil d'Souza (who has south Asian heritage), and Siobhán McSweeney, who is Irish.<sup>1</sup> These actors doubled the parts of interviewers for Dana's job with the characters she encounters on her travels, who threaten her security, and indeed her life. The ensemble's othered identities

thus served as a middle ground between the named and fully-realised white characters and the unidentified ‘extras’, who, although not all cast non-white, were nonetheless associated strongly with darkness and facelessness (they often wore hoodies and/or turned upstage). I am not suggesting that either Zinnie Harris’ play or Vicky Featherstone’s production were attempting to articulate the experience of a refugee or the condition of migrancy, but we should not allow its thoroughly justified critique of the structural violence of global inequality to obscure its abjection of racialized migrant-figures. Indeed, we must acknowledge that this danger is endemic to any depiction of the refugee crisis from a position of white privilege.

### **An Orthogonal Dramaturgy of Migration: *A Man of Good Hope***

The same danger of abjection hung over the South African Isango Ensemble’s adaptation of Jonny Steinberg’s book *A Man of Good Hope* (2016), directed by Mark Dornford-May, and commissioned by David Lan at the Young Vic in co-production with The Royal Opera, the Repons Foundation, the Brooklyn Academy of Music and Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg: three white men, and some notably white and privileged institutions. *A Man of Good Hope* tells the story of Asad Abdullahi, who became a refugee as a child in Mogadishu, when his mother was killed by a militia in front of him. His journeying takes him across the African continent, with time spent in particular in Kenya, Ethiopia and South Africa, and he is played by four different performers: Zoleka Mpotsha, Ayanda Tikolo, Siphosethu Juta and Luvo Tamba. As Asad travels and ages, his hopes fix increasingly on emigration to the United States, which he achieves at the end of the play (Abdullahi now lives in Kansas City). On one level, therefore, Asad’s story is a hero’s quest, offering a linear account of movement across a landscape marked by poverty, violence and insecurity to the desired end of stability and prosperity in the global north. Its episodes feature an array of supporting characters, all of whom conclude their roles with the line “I never saw Asad again”.

The play’s last line, however, offers a rebuke to this linear dramaturgical scheme, as a chorus figure, addressing himself to the book’s author, asks “Hey Jonny! Who will tell the other stories?” At this point, an alternative dramaturgy is suddenly revealed, and the emphasis of the refrain “I never saw Asad again” is retrospectively shifted. Asad is reframed as a supporting character to the many migrants he has met whose journeys do not fit the racialized narrative of escape from a traumatic (black) landscape to an optimistic (white) future. These characters inhabit the condition of migrancy without hope of (and, arguably in some cases, desire for)

escape. They live along lines of migration that run orthogonally to the trajectory of escape charted by Asad's journey.

Asad's form of migration follows the path of globalisation: he is a refugee from Somalia, then an economic migrant in Kenya and South Africa, before becoming an immigrant in America. Such routes, as geographer Doreen Massey has argued, represent a paradoxically "*aspatial* view of globalisation", because, in them, "spatial differences are convened under the sign of temporal sequence" from "undeveloped" countries, through their "developing" neighbours, to the "developed" world of the global north. Thus, she argues, "the essential multiplicities of the spatial are denied":

Because space has been marshalled under the sign of time, these [undeveloped/developing] countries have no space – precisely – to tell different stories, to follow another path. (Massey 82)

Those other paths, occluded by narratives of globalisation, were hidden in plain sight in the dramaturgy of *A Man of Good Hope*, in the life-lines of those characters who "never saw Asad again", which cut across and looped around the apparently dominant trajectory of the hero's journey.

These life-lines differ from the dominant journey undertaken by Asad not merely in their direction, however, but in their nature. To borrow from Tim Ingold, whereas Asad's migration moves *between* the terminals of African countries, and *between* those countries and his ultimate destination of America, the paths of those he meets and from whom he parts live in the *in-between*:

In the in-between, [...] movement is the primary and ongoing condition. Where between is liminal, in-between is arterial; where between is intermediate, in-between is midstream. (Ingold 147)

Ingold is articulating, here, the difference between crossing a river and flowing with its waters "*in-between* its banks" (151). He observes, too, that "the air we breathe is of the in-between: it does not lie between us, but is the very medium in which our lives are mixed and stirred. But [...] in the history of modernity, this in-between was converted into a between, when the world was turned outside in and boxed inside the theatre" (149).

Ingold likens this theatrical “world turned outside in” to the modern city in which “urban pedestrians have to negotiate a maze of passages flanked by walls or high buildings”, which “puts all the emphasis on the traveller’s intentions” and in which, “wrapped up in the space of his own deliberations, he is perforce absent from the world itself” (131-2). Ingold contrasts this maze-walker to the “labyrinthine path-follower” whose movements are “not so much intentional as attentional” and whose mind is “immanent in the movement itself rather than the originating source to which such movement may be attributed as an effect” (133). Those characters in *A Man of Good Hope* whose paths crossed Asad’s represented Ingold’s labyrinthine wayfarers: mercenaries, bus-drivers, traders and shopkeepers, for whom, to borrow from Ingold again, “there is no point of arrival, no final destination, for every place is already on the way to somewhere else” and therefore “attention comes not from having arrived at a position but from being pulled away from it, from displacement” (135). This is the (black) chorus’s rebuke to the (white) author: who will tell the other stories? In these stories, displacement is not a ‘between’ to be bridged or forded, but an ‘in-between’: a constant condition of living.

### **Living Displacement: *Nine Lives***

John Berger wrote of the displaced (male) economic migrant as a divided figure: “he has the impression that his own image and those of his previous life are hurtling through space, like stars travelling in different directions, so that the distance between them is becoming ever greater” (Berger and Mohr 175). As a consequence, Berger argues, “Events occur, things happen, but they do not enter his life’s time” (183) because, “[w]hile working he lives only the present of things exterior to him” and, when he clocks out, he “does not re-enter his own present” (190). Thus, for Berger, “[t]he migrant worker sacrifices the present for the future under circumstances which continually confound his sense of continuity” (191). This description chimes with the experience of the Zimbabwean asylum seeker Ishmael in Zodwa Nyoni’s play *Nine Lives*:

This conveyor belt of a system moves us from place to place. You'll never know who you'll find here. You'll never know how long they have been here, in these concrete cocoons where we live in limbo.

[...]

They don't tell you how long the wait will last. The hands of the clock have gone limp from my avoidance. There is no use in keeping time. (*He picks up his jacket.*) I start taking walks. (Scene 1)

As Ishmael takes his walk, his condition echoes Ingold's wayfarer, whose "attention comes not from having arrived at a position but from being pulled away from it, from displacement" (Ingold 135).

Malts pub. Full pint glasses at eleven a.m. Laughing. St Bartholomew's. Stained-glass windows. Pink tracksuits, red tracksuits, black tracksuits. Young girls on phones, babies on hips and pacifiers in mouths. Mike's Carpets boarded up. Fridges dumped in streets. [...] I want to learn everything. I want to remember it. I want it to remember me. I want it to climb inside me and build a home. I don't want to feel strange and distant in this place. I don't want the nightmares of the past. (Scene 1)

Nyoni's play is called *Nine Lives*, and features only one performer, but the title's multiple existences do not only reflect Ishmael's experience of displacement from himself recounted here. They also refer to the dramaturgical decision to cast one actor (in Alex Chisholm's 2014 production, Lladel Bryant) not only as the character of Ishmael but as the mesh of Ishmael's life as he feels his way along its tangled lines. As Ishmael sees and hears, he absorbs and plays the people he encounters, feeling his way towards an understanding of his new surroundings by incorporating them, as in this exchange between the proprietors of Cath's Café:

*He stands and changes to Cath.*

*(Calls out.)* Bri, you're not gonna believe it. Listen to this, grandma falls in love with long lost grandson. There are some right sickos out there? I bet they're Americans.

*Changes to Brian.*

Yes, love. They can only be Americans.

*Back to Ishmael.*

They go back and forth arguing about who guessed it first.

*As Cath.*

I mean, what you doing falling in love with your grandson? Jeremy Kyle's low but that'll even be too sick for him. There's gotta be a limit even for the bottom feeders.

*Back to Ishmael. He sits. The sound effects fades.*

He tells her not to be so judgmental. They start back up arguing again. Cath's Café has been open for twenty years. (Scene 2)



Ishmael's identity is thus rendered explicitly both plural and relational. Indeed, his role begins and ends with (and returns regularly to) a refrain that casts him in the first person plural:

Some of us leave pieces of ourselves,  
In all the places that we've been.  
Some of us are still counting  
How many battles we have to face.  
Some of us, are just at the beginning;  
Hoping to call somewhere,  
Home again. (Scene 6)

Nyoni's representation of Ishmael's migrant condition does not, however, simplistically oppose its exposure to the containment of 'home'. Among the characters he meets, and fleetingly embodies, is Ricky, who robs Ishmael with the help of his dog, Blade, causing him to retreat to his flat for eight days. But he also meets Bex and her toddler, Bailey, to whom he introduces himself as Sam, before going with them to their flat, and fleeing from hospitality, just as he did from assault.

I didn't know what to say. How would I explain Sam being trapped by Ishmael? Sitting in her flat with her truths laid out in front of me, made my lies a heavy stone in my heart. [...] I tasted something that I was not allowed to have. I quietly slipped out of her flat. (Scene 3)

Tellingly, though, Ishmael is returned to himself by being brought out of himself. At a club, he encounters a drag queen, Miss Marie Monroe (played by Bryant in high heels), a queer figure who, like Kristeva's deject, "strays, instead of getting [their] bearings" and is "a deviser of territories, languages, works, [who] never stops demarcating [their] universe whose fluid confines [...] constantly question [their] solidity and impel [them] to start afresh". Miss Marie Monroe tells Ishmael to 'just let it all go' and he responds: "I'd been holding it in for too long. It needs to come out, to break out. I give in. Let it be, let me be me" (Scene 5). Thus, Ishmael exposes himself to life. In Ingold's terms, he *submits* to it:

in the labyrinth, as in life, submission leads and mastery follows: education as exposure precedes education as attunement. Rather than a commanding mind that already knows

its will trailing a subservient body in its wake, out in front is an aspirant imagination that feels its way forward, improvising a passage through an as yet unformed world, while bringing up the rear is a prehensive perception already accustomed to the ways of the world and skilled in observing and responding to its affordances. (Ingold 140)

Ishmael opposes this experience of “aspirant imagination” and “prehensive perception” by which he lets “me be me” in the club to the form of identity offered by the official letter confirming that he is seeking asylum:

This letter says I'm a reference number. I'm an applicant. I'm circumstances. I'm categories. I'm outcomes. But it doesn't say that I'm real. It doesn't say that I exist. [...] Everything has been out of my hands. Everything still is out of my hands, but for that moment I tasted it. [...] Waiting to be allowed to live is like flickering in and out existence. Sometimes you're not even sure if you are real. (Scene 6)

In the play’s final moment, Bex says hello to Ismael for a second time: “Hiya Ishmael. Nice nice to meet yah, I mean properly yah” (Scene 6). Thus, *Nine Lives*’ final moment does not contain Ishmael within the false security of a home, but leaves him suspended in a moment of hospitable exposure to a hoped-for home. It is also a moment of mutual exposure: the awkward stutter of Bex’s line reaches forth in uncertain hope, and its hospitable embrace encompasses the other and the self and the self-as-other: Bryant/Ishmael/Bex reach both out to each other and into themselves in the one gesture. Nyoni’s play thus creates a fluid dramaturgy of identity, continually in negotiation, and always on the move.

### **Nationlessness and Relation**

Nyoni’s fluid dramaturgy of identity offers a rare depiction of migration in recent British theatre. Rather than depicting the migrant from a position that normalizes and prioritizes containment, she finds, in Ismael’s migrant condition, an exposure that sits, implicitly, at the heart of social existence. That exposure is, of course, an exposure to danger, but also an exposure to possibility and the unknown. In short, exposure creates, for Ishmael, the possibility of relation, and thereby of an experience of self which was precluded by containment: “I'd been holding it in for too long. It needs to come out, to break out. I give in. Let it be, let me be me” (Scene 5). This account of migrant experience stands in stark contrast to the depiction of the

refugee as a partly-characterised Other in *How To Hold Your Breath*, or as a questing hero, defined by his search for the fulfilment of prosperity, in *A Man of Good Hope*. As the choral figure in *A Man of Good Hope* suggests, both of these narratives view the migrant from a position of contained and settled prosperity, and thus cast her as the dark shadow of white security, prosperity and identity. But Nyoni's inclusive and, I would argue, queer account of social interaction turns that narrative on its head. In *Nine Lives*, social existence is not settled but relational, and its experience is always viewed through the lens of migrancy. Here, identity is created not by the containment of borders, but by the exposure of crossing them. It therefore presents the productive challenge of the nationless to our contained world. In moving not only across borders, but along paths that run across and loop around the vectors of global power, the migrant re-spatializes globalisation and creates the possibility of telling different stories about the mutual entanglement of a truly global condition. Moreover, the exposure faced by such migrants exposes our containment and the structural violence it continues to inflict, and offers an alternative conception of identity, and perhaps of nationhood, that is created not in stasis, but in flux, by the relational proposition of displacement.

Nyoni's creation of the relational and displaced figure of Ishmael, then, is both an implicit rebuke to the othering of migrants and a remarkable response to *A Man of Good Hope's* closing question: who will tell the other stories? But this is a challenge not only to playwrights and the directors and producers of their plays. It is also an urgent question for researchers. When we create accounts, such as those contained within this volume, of theatrical representations of nationhood, we must ask ourselves who will tell the other[ed] stories. It seems to me no surprise that I have found those stories in the work of people of colour, whose experience of nationhood inevitably incorporates diasporic and intercultural identities, and yet those artists continue to be drastically under-represented in Theatre Studies in the UK. In his 2012 book *Trans-Indigenous*, Chadwick Allen argued that

The immediate question is not how to define clear criteria for which writers and works can be legitimated for Indigenous scholarship [...] but rather how to recognize, acknowledge, confront, and critically engage the effects of *differential* experiences and performances of Indigenous identities. (xxxii)

We might profitably borrow Allen's trans-approach to the study of indigenous cultures to address questions of the representation of nationhood in an intercultural context. We might thereby see that the challenge of addressing questions of nationhood is (following Allen) not

how to define clear criteria for which writers and works can be legitimated for national identity, but rather how to recognize, acknowledge, confront, and critically engage the effects of *differential* experiences and performances of national identities. In a culture as white and Eurocentric as the British theatre predominantly remains, the engagement of such differential experiences requires of us, as researchers, that we actively seek out perspectives from theatre-makers of colour. Without such perspectives, our conception of nationhood will remain impoverished, and inadequate to the times in which we live.

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst it may justifiably be considered controversial to imply that an Irish person is not 'white', the visible ethnic demarcation in the casting of this production brought to mind the common ethnic othering of Irish people (in, for example, posters proclaiming 'No Blacks, No Irish') and the fact that definitions of whiteness and its others have always been malleable in the interests of the ethnic majority.