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Body Mapping: Homing Bodies through New Technology in Jasmin Vardimon Company's *Yesterday*

Introduction:

In this study I shall examine the performance of *Yesterday* by Jasmin Vardimon Company, a UK based exponent of dance-theatre. To this end I shall use three theoretical frameworks: the medical practice of 'body-mapping', Marianne Hirsch's concept of second generation 'postmemory' and Susan Sontag's construct of 'illness as the other'. My intention is to shift the term 'body-mapping' from its medical context and situate it within the sociological context of migration and its impact upon corporeality (Foster; 1996).

'Body-mapping' in medicine is a form of diagnosis used by employers in workplaces to observe common patterns of illnesses and discomforts within workers. Employees are asked to identify areas of discomfort in their own bodies by marking corresponding parts on an outline of a human body. Jocelyn Dorrell explains,

The technique [was] developed in the 1970's [...] to encourage workers to report ill-health symptoms. The technique involves workers creating a "body map" of health problems by sticking flags on an outline diagram of the human body to indicate any areas where they are experience pain or discomfort. (2007)

Acknowledging its medical origin, I shall use the term 'body-mapping' to theorise the process by which a migrant's body is written onto and into the landscape of a host culture as it negotiates its embodiment of home. Helen Grehan raises this very question and asks, "[...] how is the body marked or inscribed by this journeying and how does the diasporic subject inscribe him/herself within/on the landscapes s/he traverses?" (2003:229). Through this paper I wish to demonstrate how this physiological mapping of pain on the human body can translate into a sociological mapping of trauma as experienced by a migrant body's dislocations. In other words I believe that 'body-mapping' can be used as both a physiological *and* a sociological lens through which to examine and understand a body's condition and identity. To illustrate how this dual concept of 'body-mapping' fructifies in practice, I shall analyse sections of *Yesterday*, a ten year retrospective dance-theatre performance by Jasmin Vardimon Company.

Jasmin Vardimon Company:

Jasmin Vardimon Company, founded in 1997 by the Israeli choreographer Jasmin Vardimon and based in London, is an exponent of British dance-theatre. Vardimon is an influential artist within this context and her role as Associate Artist of Sadler's Wells since 2006 is testimony to this. She is recognised for,

[...] her uniquely theatrical choreographic and directorial style combining physical theatre, quirky characterisation, innovative technologies, text and dance. [...] Vardimon accentuates her work with an acute observation of human behaviour.
(2009)

Yesterday:

Yesterday, a meditation on memory is the company's recent ten year retrospective performance. It re-contextualises material from *Justitia*, *Park*, *Lullaby* and *Lurelurelure* amongst others, and creates a new performance text that simultaneously references the past while forging a whole new piece. *The Times* newspaper review of the performance says of *Yesterday*,

Packed tight with striking images and fierce, sometimes funny and rarely tender actions, this production is both a distillation and an edgy, extremely clever refashioning of much of the work she has made to date. (Hutera; 2008)

One of the strategies deployed in *Yesterday* to congeal its fragmentation between old and new material is the use of technology via live camera projection. In keeping with the company's aesthetic of combining live and digitised imagery Vardimon embodies Phillip Auslander's seminal postulations on liveness. *Yesterday*, "[...] emphasizes the mutual dependence of the live and the mediatized" within contemporary performance practice, and, "challenges the traditional assumption that the live precedes the mediatized." (Auslander; 1999, 11). It thus becomes an illustration of an emerging performance epistemology which not only incorporates technology but whose liveness is mediated by and a product of technology itself. (Auslander; 1999).

Mapping of Body and Home:

The section of *Yesterday* that I have chosen to analyse is a product of this new language, where the relationship between the live and the mediatized is fundamental to the semiological reading of the piece. This intermediality also unifies the otherwise fragmented

nature of *Yesterday* through a recurrent motif which continues to develop in form and content through the duration of the performance until it reaches a dramatic climax. A brief description of this motif is vital at this stage.

A woman walks up to the front of stage-right, lies down, and looks straight into a video camera. The camera is placed at floor level and is linked via a live projection system onto the cyclorama behind her. She begins to mark her face with a black felt tip pen starting at the forehead and draws a line down the alignment of her nose, her chin, down her neck and to the top of her chest where her vest top starts. The trace left by the pen leaves her face and neck demarcated into halves. At a later point in the piece, she continues the marking of her body. What begins as mere lines gradually transform into maps, borders and boundaries. She draws them down the length of her right shoulder, her right arm, her right leg and her right foot. When the right side of her body becomes fully marked, she moves onto her left foot and continues upwards through her left leg, her left arm and her left shoulder until she returns to her neck and her upper chest. The vulnerability of marking her body is emphasized not only through her live presence but also through the amplified projection behind her. There is something disturbingly confessional about the use of the video camera to not only document her act but to simultaneously mediate it in such a large scale manner, for the audience, her witness. Every tiny detail on her face and her body, its birth-marks, imperfections and contours becomes a vivid and breathing extension of the maps that cover her skin. From a sociological perspective her mapping demonstrates two conditions at once as already raised by Helen Grehan (2003). We witness the body being marked by the intricacies of the landscapes it journeys through. We also become aware of the way in which the body writes itself onto this landscape simultaneously because after a point the maps

and the body become inseparable. We begin to read her as a new entity growing before our eyes and transformed by the journeying that is now a part of her.

From a medical perspective her mapping is equally intriguing. She starts at the head, the body part associated with rationality, thought and memory. When she reaches her foot, she draws a tiny map of the UK on it, perhaps suggesting this is her current base and that she is grounded onto this landscape through her feet. The medical process of body-mapping starts by “creating a [...] grid over the body” (2009) and goes beyond locating physical pains and discomforts by attempting to also identify, “the emotion or the memory that may be related to a particular area, feature or part of the body.” (2009) We therefore witness a simultaneous mapping of her sociological and physiological self.

For the final time she returns to resume the marking of her body and takes off her vest top and continues to draw on her stomach. This time the maps and borders assimilate into the image of a home with two windows, a chimney, a door and a winding path emerging from it. The home is enmeshed onto her belly, the very source of stability, shelter and nourishment. She repositions the zoom of the camera to focus just on the home so that the live projection becomes a magnified image of the home. And then this one dimensional home comes alive through the bodies of two other performers. A man appears at the upstairs window through the split screen of the cyclorama and waves to a woman who comes out of the door to water the garden outside. Signs of happy domesticity are played out, on and through the projection of the home and give it a tangible three dimensionality. As the image of the picture-perfect picket fence existence fills the space the audience are reminded of course that this happy home is embodied by and indistinguishable from the woman whose body is

the surface on which this home was landscaped. And that the permanence and safety of this home is entangled within the impermanence of the body that created it.

We have already learnt that this woman's body is in transience, constantly transforming to reflect the landscape she journeys through. The happy home is therefore short-lived because it *is* delible and gradually its clean lines start to blur and disappear as she begins to erase the markings with her hands. The maps and lines remain, but the home disappears, leaving its black cloudy remnants permanently scarred onto her skin. The projection screen amplifies the erasure of the home and the happy couple, who had once enacted their domestic bliss to bring the home alive, now deal with the trauma caused by the destruction of their home. The woman rubs her face on the black ink left on the stomach of the other woman until she herself is scarred. What follows is a disturbing duet which captures the breakdown of the couple's relationship because of their inability to cope with the decimation of their place of belonging and the identity that accompanies it. The personal and the political collide and conflate into a devastating commentary on the reality of the politicisation of home.

Analysis:

In a study entitled *The Politics of Home*, Rosemary Marangoly George (1996) suggests that beyond the geographical location that it evokes 'home' is a political concept that relies on patterns of inclusion and exclusion of different groups. It is an isolationist trope that engenders difference by creating notions of belonging for subjects. On this basis when one's home is erased or denied from a subject, she experiences a loss of identity and with it a sense of belonging. George says that historically home has been seen as, "[...] a desire that

is fulfilled or denied in varying measure to the subject [...] usually represented as fixed, rooted, stable – the very antithesis of travel.” (George, 1996, 2) She further postulates that in the current global climate if, “travelling is foregrounded as a cultural practice then dwelling, too, needs to be reconceived – no longer simply the ground from which travelling departs, and to which it returns.” (1996, 2) George attempts to dismantle essentialist ideas of home as a permanent geographical location and suggests instead that it is an ever transient condition that a migrant’s body constantly negotiates on its journey through landscapes. Here it becomes vital to distinguish between migration empowered by choice and migration that is imposed upon subjects through violent and often traumatic political circumstances. The uprooting and decimation of home which we witness in *Yesterday* would appear to belong to the second category of migration as enforced upon the couple. However, their relationship to the woman on whose body this home is created and enmeshed, deserves scrutiny as it is far more complex and provides opportunities for multiple readings. I interpret the woman who writes her body and home as a second generation migrant, embodying and projecting the trauma of dislocation experienced by her parents, the couple in the happy home.

In ‘The Generation of Post-Memory’, Marianne Hirsch theorises the second hand embodiment of trauma by the second generation. She writes,

Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (2008, 103)

Although Hirsch's concept of postmemory focuses on the second generation's remembrance of the Holocaust, it becomes a useful trope through which to understand similar instances of embodiment of trauma amongst second generation migrants. Hirsch writes that the 'post' in postmemory signifies more than a, "temporal delay" (2008, 106) and instead "reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture" (2008, 106) to enable, "trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience." (2008, 106) In this light, the woman who maps her body before the camera becomes more than a migrant traversing through landscapes. The trauma that is inflicted upon her body through the erasure of the home she constructs upon it, can be read as her postmemory of the violence and trauma that her parents endured through the decimation of their home and with it, their loss of identity and their sense of belonging. The sociological body-mapping we witness thus functions as a double edged sword. It signifies the present and on-going negotiation undertaken by the woman as she writes herself in and on the landscapes she journeys through out of choice. Simultaneously it is a haunting reminder of the past; as embodied within her mapping is the memory of her parents' violent and traumatic uprooting and enforced migration.

However it is important to realise that this condition of postmemory not only marks the surface of her body but also finds physiological manifestations within it. Inspired by Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1991), Vardimon wanted to portray a body under attack by infiltration of an outside 'other'. I propose that within *Yesterday* this 'outside other' is the condition of postmemory. However there is a subtle distinction to be made here. Sontag (1991) suggests that an illness is an agent that infiltrates the body from the outside, despite the fact that it originates in and festers within the body of the subject. The condition of

postmemory is diametrically opposite in that the trauma inflicted upon the second generation subject is not only internalised but also inherited. Through a disturbing metaphor that connects self, belonging, nationhood and health Sontag writes,

Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place. (1991, 3)

The good passport is held onto as long as possible when the outside agent attacks the body and pushes it towards the kingdom of the sick. However when the trauma of postmemory is manufactured within one's own self, one is obliged to identify with the kingdom of the sick as inseparable from the kingdom of the well. Despite this key difference, when the body of the subject experiences trauma and discomfort from either a physical illness or a sociological condition, the destruction manifests gradually as physical signs that eventually and accumulatively destroy the very body that homes it.

Conclusion:

In conclusion then, in *Yesterday* the woman embodying postmemory creates her home on shifting and diseased grounds. We are aware of the impermanence of this home because we know how easily it can be erased, decimated and burnt to the ground. We painfully await its fate as the home is brought alive through domestic paraphernalia, surface decoration and bliss that seemingly cover up its faulty and ill foundation. But the body never lies. The home's foundation eventually gives way and her body burns up from within from this metaphoric fire of postmemory that engulfs her present reality. Through this complex process the medical and pictorial mapping of her pain collapses into the sociological and metaphoric mapping of her trauma as she relives her postmemory of her parents' uprooting, dislocation and scarring through her own inherited body.

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