

## CULTURAL IDENTITY AND PERFORMANCE

Helena Grehan, *Mapping Cultural Identity in Contemporary Australian Performance*, Brussels: Peter Lang, 2001.

Emerging from a PhD thesis, *Mapping Cultural Identity* is a study of representations of authentic cultural identity through performance. Or, on a more personal level, a description of Grehan's quest of achieving a sense of 'belonging' which combines a desire to feel connected to a new environment with a longing for past places. It is a discussion of 'implacing' cultural identity both within contemporary performance and within the Australian landscape and history in general. To do so, Grehan develops a theoretical framework for interpretation which enables her to engage critically with four artistically innovative solo productions by women artists from the 1990s. The works are Sarah Cathcart's *Tiger Country*, Ningali with Ningali Lawford, *The Seven Stages of Grieving* with Deborah Mailman and *The Geography of Haunted Places* with Erin Hefferon.

In the first chapter, following the 'spatial' turn in theoretical cultural studies, a series of key theorists and concepts are investigated to come to a 'mapping' methodology.

This 'mapping' is based on the idea of the performer functioning as a 'nomadic subject' as understood by Rosi Braidotti (informed by her reading of Deleuze and Guattari). A nomadic subject holds an open and flexible position; is fluid and contradictory; and both inscribes and is inscribed by the performance. The performer is the performing subject as well as the performed persona(e). He uses his organic body as a site of interplay of all sorts of forces and engages in repetition and even contradiction without losing a sense of the cultural and social climate in which he operates. Here Grehan disagrees with Braidotti in that Grehan believes that a nomad always exists with 'lost homelands' (history, memories, a past) and that these homelands consequently inform the nomad's wanderings. Some boundedness always remains, she argues. Places are being described and remembered and a layering of story, memory and text is created. The nomadic subject maps his performance on/within the landscape of the performance space in an attempt to trigger an emotional connection in the spectator in response to the work, and consequently include the spectator in the interactive process. The spectator is invited to (re)consider his own 'implacement'. It is the way in which the performer uses techniques such as ambiguity, autobiography, layering and inscription that creates the eventual mapping process. If a spectator becomes emotionally

involved with a performance and reflects about how certain meanings generated in the work can be extended out to his own life, he will embark on what Deleuze and Guattari call 'lines of flight'. These are subjective, alternative ways of responding to a performance (an image, an idea, a sound), points of interaction between performer and spectator which may cause a shift in perspective.

Hence, 'mapping' is about the ways in which connections and intersections between performer and spectator are created. The spectator can become involved in the process of the performance (and the mapping process an sich) through certain points of connection after the performer as a nomadic subject has opened up the site of the performance.

Chapters two to five provide the reader with an in-depth engagement with four works about land and identity, based on textual analysis and on Grehan's own reception of the plays in different venues during the 1990s. Each performance is concerned textually with the idea of place and belonging, and examines female experiences of displacement and alienation. Grehan retells the narratives, discusses the performances and the mise en scene, reports about the critical reception of different audiences and even includes interviews with the actors and directors. She describes the immediate theatrical experience created by performers embodying different roles and her own emotional response to this confrontational atmosphere of intimacy.

In chapter two, Grehan discusses *Tiger Country*, the story written by Sarah Cathcart and Andrea Lemon about four white women in the Australian desert landscape (other plays by these authors are *The Serpent's Fall* and *Walking on Sticks*). Each of these four non-Indigenous women questions her response to (or 'inscription' within) the harsh landscape and tries to chart her way of life in Australia. Louisa, a colonial migrant, perceives the landscape as alien and is unable to achieve a sense of place. She feels empty and sad and longs for her homeland. She fails to connect to her present situation, to inscribe herself onto the land which envelops her. Iris is the stereotypical remote Australian who labels anyone either as 'Same' or Other than herself. She has a very static, unsophisticated idea of place and cannot see beyond it. Stella lives within a fenced community and takes a more existential approach to her location. She moves beyond the fence, out to the universe in order to escape her literal landscape and situation. The only character that evolves is Barb, a city woman who marries a station owner and moves to the station. She embarks on a journey of inquiry and is transformed into someone who embraces her place within a landscape which appeared 'hostile' at first. This transformation can be largely attributed to her friendship with Lucy, an Aboriginal woman who helps her negotiating and understanding this new terrain.

These four women never meet and are all performed by Sarah Cathcart who functions as a nomadic subject, creating the characters and stories layer upon layer, using different postures and vocal ranges. She raises questions and calls on the spectator to interrogate his own position and responses to living in the out-back landscape of Australia.

Chapter three deals with an autobiographical work written by Ningali Lawford, Angela Chaplin and Robyn Archer, entitled *Ningali*. The input of two non-Indigenous authors already suggests that this is a rather complex story: it is the story about Ningali's life so far and about the lives of her family and her community, and of 'all the people who have lived the way I've lived' (p. 71). *Ningali* is a layered performance concerned with the contrast between the traditional and the urban Australian world to which this contemporary Aboriginal woman belongs.

*The Seven Stages of Grieving* was written by Mailman and Wesley Enoch and depicts several responses to grief and loss. Through techniques such as layering, stand-up routines and ambiguity, Mailman becomes an Aboriginal 'everywoman' who moves between texts and bodies, lingers between stories and personae, wanders through statements, ideas, photographs and slides. While responding to the concepts of reconciliation and belonging, Mailman handles an intimate as well as a more distant style as she moves in and out of scenes, using her body in a myriad ways as a site of inscription and an inscriber of meaning, as a carrier of messages and a connection to the set. This play combines a post-modern edge with a political focus, and its issues of race encourage spectators to reconsider their understandings of the concepts of grief, history and reconciliation.

*The Geography of Haunted Places* by Josephine Wilson was first performed in Perth in 1994 and reworked in 1997 for its most recent tour. Grehan defines Wilson's complex text as a serious political and social commentary in which the audience is challenged to re-negotiate the concepts of possession, desire and discovery. She praises Erin Hefferon as a distant narrator as well as an impassioned performer, who tries to deconstruct the idea of woman as object (in terms of colonial occupation: exotic, desirable, consumable) in favour of the ideas of woman and land and woman and nature. Through direct confrontation, gaps and silences creating uncomfortable moments of uncertainty, the spectator is invited to think critically about discovery and conquest. Hefferon refuses to adopt any singular position and uses different styles of costuming to inscribe new meanings onto her own body – meanings that cannot be interpreted literally though, as the performer clearly indicates. Grehan adds that this refusal of easy identification, together with a different range of reception codes, and a different political, social and cul-

tural context of reception, has resulted in a mis-translation and some negative reviews when the play was performed in London.

Each of these four works shares a concern with Australia as a complex concept, inviting people to reconsider their own location within this terrain. In terms of Grehan's mapping methodology, each work negotiates a new place for contemporary performance in Australia and a new approach in (re-) imagining notions such as landscape and identity.

Grehan concludes that her mapping methodology might provide a possible framework for analysing these and other works (especially other one-person performances but potentially also other types of performance works). She revisits the idea of mapping and questions concepts such as nomadic subjectivity and emplacement. She investigates the possibilities of mapping within other performative sites and discusses its relevance, as one of many possible techniques, to Australian cultural production in general. She adds that this mapping definitely requires an understanding of the social and cultural conditions in which a performance is produced and received. Moreover, she emphasizes that mapping is a flexible concept, demanding a progressive sense of place and a performer who has the ability to both inscribe and be inscribed in the context of the performance. This nomadic subject should create spaces in the performance so that spectators can respond to what they experience on an emotional and rational level. Via techniques such as ambiguity, layering, inscription and autobiography, a fluid process with lines of flight will encourage the spectator to open up for the multiple levels of meaning liberated by the performance.

Finally, in the contemporary, post-colonial country of Australia, the concern with belonging and emplacement is still very important, Grehan points out. She notes that the unresolved tensions surrounding Aboriginal land rights and the dubious positioning of a number of oppressive conservative (Liberal) politicians towards the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population still leads to continuing oppression nowadays. She wonders how the complex relationships between settlers, migrants and exiles are being translated or negotiated today. Without proposing a singular answer or having the intention to 'solve' the issue of belonging, she does plead for an integration of the 'how we belong'- question into our daily routine. This questioning, which accommodates memories as well as a feeling of connectedness to new surroundings, requires reflexivity and stimulates change. Contemporary performance, Grehan concludes, remains a productive site for the interrogation of these issues of belonging and cultural identity in Australia.