

Performing Memory:
Amores Pós-Coloniais [Post-colonial Love]
 by Hotel Europa

Francesca Rayner

Universidade do Minho
 Centro de Estudos Humanísticos da Universidade do Minho - CEHUM
frayner@ilch.uminho.pt

This performance constructed a series of relationships between the two terms in its title. It acknowledged explicitly that postcolonial love might be an impossibility given the violence and oppression that have characterised Portuguese colonial history. It was centred on interviews with white soldiers during the colonial war who formed relationships with black women in those colonies that were criss-crossed by personal and political tensions. It also included more personal stories from the generation that grew up after the colonial war that illustrated the continuing legacy of racism in contemporary Portugal.

The word missing from the title was ‘Portuguese’ and the question of the specificity of the Portuguese colonial experience was hinted at here without being developed. The performance referenced Paul Gilroy’s 2006 notion of postcolonial melancholia, for instance. Might such a notion also apply to contemporary postcolonial Portugal? With the discrediting of concepts such as luso-tropicalism and the idea of Portugal as a ‘good’ colonial power that encouraged racial intermixing rather than promoting violence and marginalisation, the work of artists like André Amálio and Hotel Europa, Grada Kilomba and Joana Craveiro has been to contribute to creating new discourses about the Portuguese colonial past that recognise the ways in which violence and oppression inflected personal and political relationships and that explore the legacy of this past in the present in order to create alternatives for the future. This sense of the refashioning of a legacy is essential in order to create a diverse multicultural society rather than reproduce the hierarchies of difference that have constructed some as more equal than others on the basis of skin colour or religious and cultural beliefs.

This objective was materialised in the performance ensemble itself, with its balance between three white performers and three black performers, three of whom were women and three of whom were men. Within this, it also questioned the categories of white and black themselves by illustrating how both terms contain a series of variations that construct black and white, or lightness and darkness in the terminology of Kim Hall (1995), along a continuum rather than as binary opposites. Each performer in the ensemble had their own physical and vocal specificity and the different performance formats – from individual

speeches or songs to shared dialogues or dances to full ensemble moments – emphasised the interconnections between the personal, the interpersonal, the social and the collective in the postcolonial experience. In many ways, the performance echoed the diversity of materials of a performance lecture with its ability to bring together the academic, the fictional and the personal in ways that do not attempt to create a linear narrative. Yet the physical presence of the ensemble onstage and the virtual presence of those whose stories they told onstage rendered this performance a much more collaborative, social event.

Oral testimony from soldiers and their lovers collected by the ensemble during their eight-month research period was relayed through headsets to the performers, setting up an interesting tension between the script for performance and the physicalisation and verbalisation of that script by the performers. In telling these stories, performers also attempted to capture the characteristic speech patterns of those for whom they were standing in on stage. There are, evidently, ethical and political questions relating to the performers ‘standing in’ for those they interviewed as the boundary between what was given as testimony and its artistic reworking onstage was not clear. However, the performance staged these stories less as the ‘truth’ of events and more as contributions to a debate that included those who had told their stories, the performers and the audience.

The stories in the performance ranged from the harrowing account of a soldier burning down a hut with his pregnant girlfriend inside to destroy evidence of their relationship, to the semi-comic accounts of the black women who returned with their lovers to Portugal and the prejudices they encountered, to the complex feelings of the young black boy adopted by the soldiers after his mother was murdered and his attempt to juggle a sense of gratitude to these soldiers with the knowledge that they were also responsible for his mother’s death. The varied performance formats ensured that the presentation of this material was not overtly repetitive. Music, songs and dances broke up and extended the narratives. Performance games enabled different physical relationships to emerge within the ensemble. Visual images of chests filled with letters, photographs and projected images of individual letters provided complements to the verbal testimony. These letters and images told stories of ordinary lives and also introduced new angles on the lives of more famous figures. Both Agostinho Neto and Amílcar Cabral, for instance, had relationships with white women. As these stories were being told, I found myself thinking what the black women involved in the independence struggle might have thought of this. Did they feel this was a betrayal? It was a characteristic of this performance that they simply presented the material without judgement, although with some of the narratives it was clear that there was a degree

of reprobation. However, there were moments like this when more of a perspective on the material, whether personal, political or artistic, would have been welcome. In ethical terms, the fact that these stories had been ‘given’ to the performers militated against value judgements on those stories. Yet there are other ways of creating a perspective on these events, from emphasising more the consequences for the present to thinking about the performativity of oral testimony itself.

In scenic terms, there were economical and imaginative solutions to the difficulties of staging oral testimony. Particularly effective were the strips of netting which were joined together by the performers in a line at the front of the stage behind which the performers told their stories. They later formed a smaller, more claustrophobic cage-like space with the performers inside. In another sequence, performers lifted some of the blocks covering the stage to uncover a makeshift stream. As they hummed a hypnotic song together, they thrashed rhythmically pieces of white material against the ground to evoke women washing clothes in the stream. The staging of some of the other stories was less successful. I was somewhat perplexed by the use of a women called Rosita at various moments of the performance. These moments seemed to point to the absence of representations of black women in European and North-American culture but it was not clear here what point the performance was trying to make. Similarly, while the personal love stories told by the performers at the beginning of the performance, ranging from an inter-European love affair to love for one’s children or mother were intriguing and vividly narrated, the definitions of love at the end were somewhat hackneyed and seemed less imaginative.

There was a strong pedagogical and political focus in the performance on recovering voices and experiences that have been invariably absent from Portuguese history for the present and future. Even within postcolonial history, the focus has conventionally been on leaders and their political programmes and military campaigns. The focus on love in this performance enabled an exploration of these politics from a different, more personal perspective. Multicultural ensembles remain few and far between in Portuguese theatre. Precisely for this reason, more of an emphasis on the ways in which the colonial past has shaped the postcolonial present might also have been productive. When Romi Anauel sang about how the shame of racist interpellation had given way to reclaiming pride in her identity and Laurinda Chiunge spoke onstage a series of terms of racist abuse, there was both passion and anger. Similarly, Júlio Mesquita told a powerful story about witnessing abuse against his mother on public transport and when André Amálio acknowledged that this was a story that had moved him, this hinted at the possibility of a politicised empathy leading to greater social

justice. The paradox is, of course, in that recovering the marginalized voices of the colonial past, the newly-marginalized voices of the postcolonial present become lost. *Amores Pós-Coloniais* attempted to bridge both these generations and in Hotel Europa's sustained commitment to a politicized documentary theatre, some of the performance remains of this particular engagement might well become the centre of the next.

References

Kim, Hall. 1995. *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*. Cornell University Press.

Paul, Gilroy, 2006. *Postcolonial Melancholia*. Columbia University Press.

Biographical note

Francesca Rayner is Assistant Professor in the area of Theatre and Performance at the Universidade do Minho. Her research centres on the cultural politics of performance with a particular emphasis on the performance of Shakespeare. She has published widely in national and international journals in this area and edited several international journals and collections. She has been Head of the English and North American Studies and helped to set up and run the University's Theatre course. She is currently involved in projects on the European impact of Shakespeare and Women under the Portuguese dictatorship and coordinates CEHUM's Research Team in Performance Studies.

Orcid Id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3601-815X>

Morada institucional: Campo de Couros, Rua de Vila Flor 4810-453 Guimarães