In a spare white gallery strewn with wooden tables and chairs, sits an ensemble of actors—all urgently attempting to relay messages to unseen, offstage recipients. A furrow-browed man murmurs into a black telephone receiver; a couple argues quietly as they scrawl missives on sheets of notebook paper. Panning across the room, the camera finds a wide-eyed woman pecking cheerfully at typewriter keys, then rests on another pair dictating hopeful phrases into a tape recorder.

This short video preserves a live staging, by Chicago’s Rooms Productions, of Caryl Churchill’s 10-minute play Seven Jewish Children. Since the play’s 2009 premiere, at London’s Royal Court Theatre, many versions of it have circulated internationally, both live and online. Among the available interpretations, Rooms Productions’ version renders the play’s themes particularly tangible: here, actors furiously deploy communication technologies...
to perform a story about the dissemination of historical messages. A series of sparse scenes, with few stage directions and no character names, *Seven Jewish Children* stages seven generations’ stuttering attempts to convey the modern Jewish and Israeli experience to their progeny—from the Holocaust to Israel’s independence to the 2008–2009 Israeli war in Gaza. “Tell her,” begins one line; “Don’t tell her,” rejoins the next. These words become a transhistorical refrain, marking the inherited ambivalences and fraught semantics surrounding each successive crisis in a violently contested past. In the Chicago production—now enjoying a second life on YouTube—Churchill’s phrases echo from one anonymous voice to the next, building to cacophony: overlapping injunctions transmitted live, by phone, on paper, and in projections on gallery walls.

Just below the video’s frame, on the YouTube page that guarantees this staging’s perpetual preservation in cyberspace, a larger context for the performance comes into view: echoes and distortions of *Seven Jewish Children*’s charged ideologies and its contagious poetry. Pages of comments offer congratulations, historical quibbles, political objections, and vitriolic outrage over Churchill’s rendering of the Jewish and Israeli past. Many of these responses spew self-righteous fury at the play—and tellingly, the angriest commentators often mimic the language of the play itself, twisting Churchill’s dramaturgical formulations to their own ends. “Don’t tell her that over ONE MILLION MUSLIMS live as Israeli

*Miriam Felton-Dansky* is a doctoral candidate in the Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism program at the Yale School of Drama, where she won the John W. Gassner Memorial Prize for criticism. She is an Associate Editor of Theater, and has also written for PAJ and Theatre Journal. She is a regular contributor to the Village Voice’s theatre section. miriam.felton-dansky@yale.edu

---

Figure 2. Rooms Productions’ *Seven Jewish Children*, with performers delivering a scene by video. Performers cycled through the scenes simultaneously, with audience members wandering among them. From left: Ryan Puckett, Jenni Cheers, Adam Todd, Jessica Manley, Cody Crawford, Cassie Holland Kasper. Onscreen: Vince McClelland, Heather Durham. (Photo by Todd Frugia)
citizens,” writes one incensed commentator. “TELL HER SHE NEED[S] TO KNOW THE TRUTH,” writes another (Rooms Productions 2009). Repeating and distorting both Churchill’s rhetoric and her theatrical form, these comments function as ever-tinier versions of Churchill’s play – restaging Seven Jewish Children, in miniature, on an internationally expanding virtual stage.

This particular video constitutes just a single iteration of Seven Jewish Children, among many circulations and revisions. The play’s international presence began in the critical controversy attending its 2009 London premiere; subsequent productions in the US, Israel, England, and elsewhere prompted a flurry of virtual and live responses. Many of these performances now play on in cyberspace — alongside new playtexts that draw on the original’s structure, but revise its rhetoric to reflect their authors’ own perspectives. If Churchill’s play frames, in microcosm, consecutive generations’ efforts to inculcate their descendents with particular historical convictions, its production history offers a 21st-century, media-enabled imitation of that act. The play’s text chronicles the viral spread of historical ideology; its public presence embodies the viral, audience-driven dissemination of performance itself: dramaturgy that mutates in the internet’s endless echo chamber.

The text of Seven Jewish Children is a series of conversations about conversations. Each short scene — they range from 6 to 37 lines long, laid out in sparse paragraphs — is a meta-discussion: although the lines are not divided among characters, their seesawing contradictions and quick reversals suggest dialogues rather than soliloquies. Through these internecine struggles, Churchill’s adult voices decide which facts their daughter must remember, which interpretive glosses she must internalize, in order to become a citizen in command of her national and religious heritage. The play’s first lines imply a frightened family hiding from the Nazis:

Tell her it’s a game
Tell her it’s serious
But don’t frighten her
Don’t tell her they’ll kill her
Tell her it’s important to be quiet.

(Churchill 2009:2)

The unseen girl at the center of this (and every) scene, the dialogue suggests, will be shaped by what she’s told, her understanding of home, family, and identity guided by these ostensible authorities. In the middle of the play, Churchill’s voices celebrate hard-won Israeli military victories, alluding to the Israeli War of Independence and the 1967 Six-Day War. The final scene suggests the aftermath of Israel’s 2005 war in Gaza, and as the text reaches the present, the voices harden, initially sighing with relief at their own survival, then justifying their claims to land and water, and finally spewing hatred at their unnamed foes.

Churchill’s stark verbal exchanges model, in microcosm, the loaded dissemination of political ideology and cultural bias from older generations to younger ones. (“Tell her we’re making new farms in the desert,” suggests one voice; “Don’t tell her about the olive trees,” warns the next [6].) As the play hurtles through the 20th century and into the 21st, Churchill’s text assumes the logic, and stages the mechanisms, of viral dissemination: compact revelations meant to expand exponentially, one whisperer at a time, until they reach millions.

This mechanism of ideological dissemination relies on the overlapping of public and private spheres — on conversations held in private, but meant to infiltrate public consciousness on the broadest scale. Each scene offers the most intimate kind of exchange, the whispered debates and barely voiced anxieties that unfold before a personal conversation even takes place. At first, these appear to be just the opposite of the media cacophony that, so frequently, buffets public opinion from one prejudice to the next. Here, there are no newspaper headlines, no radio broadcasts, no advertising campaigns intruding upon the shaping of the anonymous child’s views. Occasionally, Churchill lets us glimpse her voices’ defiant efforts to displace other media: “Tell her she can’t watch the news,” they advise in one scene (6), later warning, “Tell her you can’t believe what you see on television” (7).

But in narrowing her lens to a single medium of ideological transmission — conversation itself — Churchill also replicates, in miniature, the collective conversations of the imagined Jewish and Israeli publics at large.
Examining public responsibilities in the privacy of anonymous homes, Churchill frames those interior spaces as the smallest units in a broad public arena—each sequence portraying one family that is, implicitly, surrounded by millions of others, all holding conversations of political and historical import, and all, in this way, undoing obvious distinctions between historical and personal, public and private.

Michael Warner seizes upon just such a paradox in his essay “Public and Private,” where he demonstrates how—despite natural inclinations to view these terms as a social binary—they are frequently overlapping and intertwined. Warner explains, quoting from Hannah Arendt, that, while the domestic sphere might appear to be just the opposite of broader society, in fact, compelled by public opinion, “people suddenly behave as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbor” (in Warner 2002:61). The family’s private life—especially in such an ideologically fraught society as Israel—becomes, not an escape hatch from the pressures of public citizenship, but an extension of them. Churchill’s figures personally replicate the ideological formulations of the public sphere—repeatedly displacing the swirl of global media, only to scrupulously reproduce its messaging in the safety of home.

Conditioned by this convergence of the communal and the personal, Churchill’s fragmentary conversations direct themselves to two kinds of publics at once. Her voices rehearse addresses to a tiny public—an audience of one—but they are also shaping the messages that this younger generation will, in turn, transmit to unknowable future audiences. This is one of the constitutive elements of public speech that Warner identifies in “Publics and Counterpublics,” where he argues that speech becomes public by virtue of its intention to address not only known listeners, but unidentifiable strangers, whose participation in any given public is established in the moment they decide to pay attention (72–75). In the case of Seven Jewish Children, the adults’ political prescriptions—their admonishment to “Tell her again this is our promised land,” for instance (5), or the impulse to “Tell her it’s our water, we have the right” (5)—are calibrated so obsessively because the speakers’ national legitimacy relies on the continued transmission of their message to future generations.

In one particularly telling exchange, the voices parse the meanings of the loaded word “home.” “Tell her this wasn’t their home,” offers one of Churchill’s speakers—and the reply rejects even that terminology, cautioning, “Don’t tell her home, not home” (4). This debate distills the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to its most succinct semantics, while also reflecting the kinds of real political discourse that have surrounded just such subjects. In 2001, for instance, CNN directed its reporters to stop referring to the Israeli town of Gilo—constructed near Jerusalem on land conquered in the 1967 war—as a “settlement,” and to call it, instead, a “neighborhood” (Fisk 2001). The next year, the Israel Broadcasting Authority attempted to ban news organizations from using the word “settlement” at all (Ayalon 2002). If the voices in Churchill’s play can lay sole claim to being a group that lives in “homes,” the kind of public that organizes itself into “neighborhoods”—the kind of public that transmits its own history through conversations—then members of the other group (the Palestinians, offstage and unnamed) are not only excluded from the public Churchill depicts, but from being a public at all.

The more imaginary Israeli voices the play proffers, the more the specter of a Palestinian national perspective takes shape. This dynamic emerges most fully in the last scene, when rules of conversation break down, and the discourse swerves away from rhythmic, tempered exchanges, erupting into a furious monologue. As the historical trajectory barrels into the present, one voice forgets to parse political logic into phrases, instead stringing words together into one run-on paragraph:

Tell her, tell her about the army, tell her to be proud of the army. Tell her about the family of dead girls, tell her their names why not, tell her the whole world knows why shouldn’t she know? Tell her there’s dead babies, did she see babies? tell her she’s got nothing to be ashamed of. Tell her they did it to themselves. (7)
Abandoning rhetorical poise and vestiges of compassion all at once, this speech mimics the motion of a military operation spinning out of control. The previous exchanges—ideologically charged, but written in the form of vacillating debates—give way to an anti-conversation that tumbles paranoias together into a frenzied wall of text (in the printed version, this is also the only section formatted in single-spaced font, without line breaks). Ideology bursts the bounds of its conversational form.

In straddling the dynamics of public and private conversation, Churchill’s whisperings also function like geopolitical gossip—private intonations meant for private ears, but intended to spread, citizen to citizen, past private spaces and into public ones. These messages function as viral media writ small: knowledge, or presumed knowledge, that self-replicates on the most intimate scale.

In production, Seven Jewish Children rode an international gust of viral media writ large. The play opened at London’s Royal Court Theatre on 6 March 2009, for a two-week run; performances were free but a collection for the organization Medical Aid for Palestinians was taken up at Churchill’s request (these became the terms under which she subsequently offered the production rights to the play to all companies). Some reviewers praised the play, while many protested what they saw as a vicious attempt to erase the distinction between the worldwide Jewish community and the state of Israel, and a dramatic resurrection of all the old stereotypes about Jews. One blogger denounced it as a “ten-minute blood libel” and charged Churchill with writing a modern version of medieval mystery plays (Phillips 2009). The Board of Deputies of British Jews objected to the play, and 60 prominent members of the British Jewish community signed an outraged letter to the Daily Telegraph. The BBC refused an offer to air a broadcast of the play, explaining that the network intended to “remain impartial” (Dowell 2009).

Though the entire piece proved provocative, it was the final scene, with its frantic unleashing of vitriol, that drew the greatest anger. Jeffrey Goldberg, writing on the Atlantic Monthly’s website, declared that “the mainstreaming of the worst anti-Jewish stereotypes— for instance, that Jews glory in the shedding of non-Jewish blood— is upon us” (2009). Before the month was out, American theatres were producing readings and stagings of Seven Jewish Children—the Rude Guerilla Theater Company in Los Angeles and the New York Theatre Workshop had both presented the play by the end of March—and in the same short time, it had become a catalyst for controversy everywhere it went.

But as the outrage against Churchill proliferated, versions of the play proliferated as well. The brevity and sparseness of Churchill’s text made it easy to copy and disseminate, so the Guardian published the entire play online and posted a video, made with Churchill’s consent, of actress Jennie Stoller performing all seven scenes (Churchill, Stoller, and Smith 2009). The New York Times posted a link to the Royal Court’s web site (“Is a Play About Gaza Anti-Semitic? Read the Script,” the headline challenged readers [Mackey 2009]). Soon, such readers weren’t just perusing Churchill’s text—they were rewriting it. Playwrights and bloggers around the world began borrowing Churchill’s form, and changing her dialogue to reflect alternate interpretations of the same history.

American playwright Deb Margolin composed a dramatic response called Seven Palestinian Children, while Israeli playwright Robbie Gringas wrote The Eighth Child; both plays, as well as Churchill’s original, were read aloud at Washington, DC’s Theater J. British actor Richard Stirling wrote a theatrical disquisition, dubbed Seven Other Children, accusing Palestinian adults of fanning the flames of anti-Semitism among their children. “DRMIKE,” an angry blogger on a website called BlueTruth.net wrote a self-proclaimed “Islamophobic” rendering, entitled Seven Muslim Children (Bluetruth.net 2009); another blogger, Elder of Ziyon, composed a riff called Seven Arab Children (Elderofziyon.blogspot.com 2009). One blogger, in a metatheatrical flourish, posted an anonymous replica play called The More Things Change, which substitutes for Churchill’s seven historical moments seven instances of anti-Semitism in the theatre itself, from medieval passion plays to The Merchant of Venice. Here, Seven Jewish Children enters on
cue as the trajectory’s final installment (“No Jews appear in the play,” insist the stage directions—these anonymous speakers are directors and literary managers—a parody of Churchill’s own opening directive, “No children appear in the play” [Einhorn 2009]).

Through this process of distribution, replication, and revision, Seven Jewish Children “went viral.” Just as each of the play’s scenes offers a model for disseminating ideology—the voices revise and reiterate historical interpretations, and the offstage child is meant to repeat them—these response plays also disseminate and distort, replicating Churchill’s dramaturgy. But the media-enabled proliferation of Seven Jewish Children also alters and contradicts the types of ideological dissemination modeled within the play. In Churchill’s whispered histories, individual voices struggle to justify and repeat dominant political doctrines; in the rush of theatrical responses, new media like blogs and YouTube—as well as public performance venues such as town halls and conference centers—constitute the platform for clamorous communal reformulations of history. No longer is the public a secondary recipient of one-way messages, an offstage audience for the ideologies proffered by the play. Instead, audience members are participants in an endlessly mutating international conversation, with their own dramas and ideologies imitating and revising Churchill’s play.

Just as Churchill framed her dialogue as the conversation of fictive Israeli voices, each of the response plays—some poetic, others manic or furious—puts words into the mouths of its imagined foes, revising both the original text and its imagined public. In Margolin’s Seven Palestinian Children, adult voices contemplate various traumas in Palestinian history, wondering how to parse them for a young boy. In one scene, they debate the relative merits of learning the right words to participate in Israeli conversation. “Tell him to smile and say shalom,” says one of Margolin’s voices, then, two lines later, thinks better of it: “Don’t make him say shalom,” they conclude (2009). If the original purported to portray Israelis speaking to Israelis, illuminating, by its absence, a Palestinian point of view, the responses deliberately distort Palestinian and Muslim perspectives—multiplying the play’s implied publics, both fictive and real.

And as they do so, each of the response plays mimics Churchill’s elegant, spare arrangement of text, assembling brief lines of text into synopses of crucial historical moments. Each retains her emblematic verbal formulation—“Tell her,” “Don’t tell her”—phrases so compact and memorable that they aid the drama’s reiteration. Each retains similarly sculpted lines of poetry, shaped into short scenes. The viral diffusion of Churchill’s play, then, is fueled not only by provocative politics, but also by its contagiously replicable dramatic form.

Not only has Seven Jewish Children gone viral online; in its proliferating live versions, Churchill’s play has become part of real-world public debate, inserting itself into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the text of political demonstrations. In relying on its multiple publics to reshape and manipulate its politics and its aesthetics, Seven Jewish Children deliberately
invites production by amateurs and nonactors. Its formal simplicity tailors it for inexperienced performers and unlikely performance spaces; there are no requirements for cast size, age, or gender, and the piece calls for no theatrical effects not compressed into Churchill’s charged poetic text.

The text is, thus, written to go viral—a phenomenon that relies on the transformation of audiences into performers and the mutation of private viewers into public participants. Just as *Seven Jewish Children* chronicles the erosion of barriers between world-historical ideologies and personal convictions, its productions dismantle distinctions between performers and spectators, enclosed theatres and open public spaces.

A visit to YouTube reveals a spectrum of production videos, many of them staged by activists: on a street in Washington, DC; at a cultural center in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The first Israeli production (from June 2009, also available on YouTube) was directed by an Arab Israeli artist who finished the job remotely after being placed under house arrest for his involvement in protests against a right-wing Israeli official (Shohat 2009; Jabbarin 2009).

In this version, a woman wheels a baby carriage around a strip of sidewalk near Rabin Square in downtown Tel Aviv. A pile of burlap sacks buttresses her from a chorus of commentators, who call out Churchill’s lines over the divide (Jabbarin 2009). With passersby milling around in the background, some pausing to watch, the performance begins to feel like a scripted embodiment of Israel’s contentious public debate.

In each new version, Churchill’s text takes on the tenor of local dialogue and reflects the predilections of its growing roster of performers. One particularly telling video, filmed in Washington, DC, in May 2009, presents members of the American anti-war organization Code Pink preparing to present *Seven Jewish Children* to the delegates at the annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). What we see here is their rehearsal: like the play itself, this filming captures the conversations before the conversations. Standing by a busy street, the Code Pinkers are arrayed in a row for the camera, bundled against the cold in parkas, scarves, and hats, one of them swathed in the red-and-white *keffiyeh* so often used to signal solidarity with Palestinians. They cycle through Churchill’s lines, one by one. Occasionally, someone inflects a line with particular vehemence; other times, someone loses the thread and needs to be reoriented. Mostly, though, these activists aren’t acting—mostly, they’re just reading (Hughes 2009).

And as they read, they briefly alter the rules of the public sphere. Once they bring their traveling performance to the convention center, AIPAC delegates—who generally exert a strong influence over American perceptions of Israel—will be cast as audience members, not actors. Public discourse, suddenly, will not consist of an exchange of slogans, or a battle of press releases, but of public acts of reading. For those conference delegates who even inadver-
tently attend to part of these activists’ performance, the act of forging public messages will be replaced by the act of listening. The tenor of the debate will shift, from political certainties to shuffling, tentative interpretations, as the pro-Israel public sees itself in a deliberately distorted mirror. In this way, Churchill’s play about Israeli ideologies becomes the text of future political debates in one of the very sites where those ideologies are forged. And even if no one at AIPAC is listening, this iteration of the play joins the many proliferating versions that circulate, through texts, live performances, and online, virally spreading the conversation to future publics beyond.

References


Links

Rooms Productions’ version of Seven Jewish Children: Part One: www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0BA30Ax51s; Part Two: www.youtube.com/watch?v=gV3iAskZqkg

The Guardian’s video of Seven Jewish Children, performed by Jennie Stoller: www.guardian.co.uk/stage/video/2009/apr/25/seven-jewish-children-caryl-churchill

Theater J’s web page about Seven Jewish Children, including links to pdfs of Robbie Gringas’s “The Eighth Child” and Israel Horovitz’s “What Strong Fences Make”: http://washingtononcjcc.org/center-for-arts/theater-j/on-stage/middle-east-festival/tj-sevenjewishchildren.html
The Armchair Traveler
Küba on the Move

Fiona Wilkie

Artworks travel. This is nothing new, and the impetus to travel—in the familiar form of exhibition and performance tours, or of cinema distribution—often comes as much from funding requirements as from a wish to disseminate the work. Indeed, a history of performance and art written from this position might be very revealing of the economic, political, and technical structures that are intricately intertwined with practices of artistic production and reception. But in some cases, the literal journey undertaken by the work invites closer examination as a central strategy through which its meanings are created. One such case is Küba (2004–2010), an installation by the Turkish artist Kutluğ Ataman, in which the relationship between the exhibition tour and issues of mobility and displacement inherent in the work seems crucial to its reception.

Küba is a traveling project that deals with experiences of home. It consists of 40 DVD interviews,1 each displayed in a “talking head” format on its own television monitor, in which residents of an Istanbul shantytown (the Küba of the work’s title) talk about family and neighbors, work and leisure, realities and aspirations, domestic arrangements and hopes for escape. The result generates “a portrait of a place as able to be extracted from the memories and hopes of its inhabitants” (Horrigan 2005:n.p.). Küba the place, lovingly documented by Ataman in this work, is described by the artist on the project website:

1. We never see the interviewer, Ataman himself, in these videos, and only rarely do we hear his questions.

Fiona Wilkie is a Senior Lecturer in Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies at Roehampton University, UK. She has published on various aspects of British site-specific performance in a number of journals and in Blackwell’s Concise Companion to British and Irish Drama (2008). She is currently working on a book that considers performance in relation to mobility theory, Performance, Transport and Mobility: Making Passage (Palgrave, forthcoming). f.wilkie@roehampton.ac.uk
Küba came into being in the late 60s as a shantytown where left-wing militants would conceal their weapons and themselves from the army and the police. [...] As left-wing militancy faded away in time, other marginal elements moved to Küba and eventually formed an alternative society where everyone is considered “free.” (in Artangel 2005)

Artangel adds, on the same website, that the area now "comprises a few hundred makeshift clapboard dwellings that are still home to non-conformists of diverse ethnicity, religion and political persuasion united in their defiant disregard for state control" (2005). The name itself is a marker of elsewhere, setting up a fantasy version of the island republic of Cuba in relation to which this marginalized, mostly Kurdish, community might understand itself. In an essay about the work, Ataman emphasizes the strong sense of shared identity that comes from living in Küba, aiming to find ways of capturing this in his installation (2006:21).

*Küba* was commissioned by the London-based organization Artangel and curated in partnership with the hosts on each stage of its journey. It was first presented at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh (October 2004–March 2005), where it was awarded the 2004 Carnegie Prize. It has since traveled to Stuttgart, Sydney, Vienna, Antwerp, and Köln, as well as, in the UK, to London, Preston, and Southampton. Along the route it has taken up temporary residence in gallery and corporate venues as well as such sites as a disused sorting office, a railway carriage, a courtroom, and a river barge in transit. In the latter, *Küba* was positioned at the heart of a larger project, *Journey Against the Current* (May–September 2006); the work traveled along the Danube on the Negrelli barge, and at each stop was presented alongside another specially commissioned artwork by a local artist. Together, the works aimed to challenge dominant versions of European identity.

---

2. The artists involved were Matei Bejenaru (Romania), Nedko Solakov (Bulgaria), Želimir Žilnik (Serbia), Renata Poljak (Croatia), László Csáki and Szabolcs Pálfy (Hungary), Anetta Mona Chisa and Lucia Tkáčová (Slovakia), and Emanuel Danesch and David Rych (Austria).
In an essay accompanying edited transcripts of the Küba interviews in a ring-bound photo album-style catalogue, US curator Bill Horrigan notes that “Ataman has seen Küba from the start as a shape-shifting organism, both transient and transitory, with each presentation along its itinerary fundamentally reconstituting itself as though for the first time” (2005). It is certainly true that, as is often claimed for touring artworks, Küba inhabits each location slightly differently and therefore invites its viewers into a range of different relationships to the work. However, I am not sure that each manifestation is experienced in complete isolation from the others. Instead, I want to suggest that the fact of the tour itself (made explicit in much of the advertising material and commented upon in many reviews) is fundamental to the project’s larger significance, creating a complex tension between notions of home and travel, as these are constituted in contemporary debates around mobility. It is interesting in this context that the project is couched from the start in a terminology of travel and home: Artangel’s website, for example, describes Ataman’s interviewees as “residents” who were “[i]nitially uprooted in October 2004” (referring to the displacement of the Kübans in digital form from Turkey to the US), and labels the exhibition tour a “global journey” to be followed by a “return [...] home to Istanbul” (Artangel 2005). Just as Ataman’s chosen title is simply the name of the geographical area represented through the narratives, so too much of the discourse around Küba relies on conflating the real inhabitants of Küba with their video images. The poetic suggestion, then, is that the project enables these 40 men, women, and children, representing Kübans as a whole, to embark on a journey.

Experiencing Küba

London and Southampton

I visited Küba, the installation, at two points on its journey: the former postal sorting office in London (March–June 2005), and the disused Magistrates’ Courts in Southampton (January–February 2007). By reflecting on my experience at each site I hope to explore something of the work’s modes of inhabiting, before considering how this inhabiting connects with the work’s sense of traveling.

Perhaps “trespass” is an appropriate word to describe the position into which the spectator is invited in Küba’s London presentation. Taking up squatters’ rights, the work uses graffiti to announce its presence in a derelict sorting office in central London. By following the title and arrows painted onto the walls, the visitor is led from the street and through a maze of stairways and corridors before arriving at a vast, open space in which the 40 television monitors are arranged on mismatched cabinets, each with its own battered armchair from which to view the work. The entrance and means of getting to the installation itself within the building ensure that the experience, as Adrian Searle found in his Guardian review, “begins as a distant roar” (2005). In fact, the sense of the voices as a cumulative noise, a sound track to the experience, rather than as distinct storytellers continues in the installation room itself; the sound level on each monitor is set low, and most visitors follow the narratives through the English subtitles.

My movement around the work, along with that of my fellow visitors, resembles a chess game (with all players on the same side, facing the same direction). The rules of the game might read something like this: find an empty chair in which to begin; listen/read/watch for as long as this storyteller interests you; identify

---

3. It is worth noting, however, that, in its first manifestation in Pittsburgh, the context of the Carnegie exhibition seemed to obscure the larger context of the project’s later journey, so that Küba here was read in relation to other works in the exhibition. This resulted, for example, in Katy Siegel’s unenthusiastic review for Artforum International: “[W]alking through the museum, the visitor gets a sense of individuals locked in their own psyches and practices without much reference to each other, or to whatever it is that we mean when we say ‘the art world.’” Many of these artists tend to look inward rather than project out, and curatorial choices amplify the rather dispiriting feeling. For better or worse, the Ataman installation really does announce the show: forty voices that, rather than acknowledge the viewer or engage in a larger discussion, remain separate in the end” (2005:175). The lack of connection felt here is certainly not reflected in later reviews. Adrian Searle in the Guardian, for example, finds that, “the longer you listen, and the more you meander from chair to chair, the more you gather that these stories are entwined, in betrothals and blood feuds, jail-time and dead time” (2005).
another empty chair, perhaps just as it has been vacated, and usually an easy sideways, diagonal, or forward move away; stand and move to the new chair and begin the process again. The experience of each story is on a one-to-one basis, with the viewer sitting and the narrator also seated for the interview, and with the monitor positioned approximately at eye level with the viewer; very few visitors cluster around the same monitor, and almost nobody spends much time standing within the installation. Some do, however, retreat to the edges of the space, standing back from the individual stories to view the overall effect created, and to be positioned as an outsider again before responding to the invitation to come back in. Paradoxically, then, it is from the edges of the space that the intimacy of the experience becomes clear. Küba invites its trespassing visitors, perhaps only for a short while, to make themselves at home, while always maintaining a space in which they are reminded of being out of place.

Writing in the Telegraph, Alastair Sooke finds the legacy of this site woven through the installation: “it is as if Ataman has conjured the spirit of a sorting office. Letters passed through this building until the 1990s, and the setting turns each screen into a kind of alternative postcard, dispatched from a rundown part of Istanbul” (2005). For me, however, it was not until I visited Küba at the former Magistrates’ Courts in Southampton, for the final part of its journey, that the site’s history and the installation’s effect became so explicitly intertwined. Here the setting turns the Kübans’ tales into multiple testimonies, endowing the viewer with a corresponding responsibility to consider all of the available evidence. In place of armchairs, the original court furniture is used to hold the monitors and to seat the viewers. The result is that the storytellers face all directions, inhabiting the well and the side desks, the judge’s bench and the witness stand. And now some of the testimonies seem to speak to or compete with one another, positioned in pairs or groups of three sharing a table along the sides of the courtroom or behind the dock. Connections — bonds of kinship and friendship — become apparent, as do points of dispute. A theme of the need for escape emerges: from the small-scale immediacy of Nejla’s “I want to get some air, I feel constrained already” (played in the witness stand) or Erol’s tale of dodging security guards by means of a rooftop getaway, to numerous plans of elopement and escape by education, marriage, and prison sentences. The sense of claustrophobia is enhanced by the fact that all of Ataman’s...
interviewees have been filmed indoors. All, that is, except one: Hatun, shown on a hefty monitor placed at the judge’s seat, speaks from an outdoor courtyard.

A key feature of Küba’s inhabitation of this courtroom site is its marking out of potential hierarchies to be navigated by the viewer. Because the positions of the screens in this space carry very different status implications, it is difficult not to attach significance to the arrangement. Hatun, referred to by some of the other Kübans as “Mother Hatun,” seems to occupy the position of village elder, a position staged here explicitly as her image presides over the courtroom. She, we learn, was one of the original members of the community when it came into being in the 1960s, and in place of a lost political solidarity, Mehmet tells us, “she holds us together here.”

To watch Hatun’s story requires a decision by the viewer to take on the position of the judge within this courtroom, albeit temporarily. That is to say that it is not only the Küban narrators that are hierarchized by the curatorial decisions here, but also the viewers themselves. And the seats themselves — hard, tall, and upright — engender a more urgent kind of viewing than the armchairs of the London showing. This is a space in which, as at the sorting office, neither the Kübans nor those listening to their stories belong; the installation and, in most cases, its visitors have no prior connection to either site. Here, however, there is a sense of a temporary official sanction. The imperative is for the narratives to perform the actions required by the space — to bear witness, to represent (that is, to speak on behalf of others), and to judge — and we are called upon to be a part of this process.

Tensions: Home/Travel

Much of the literature and theory dealing with mobility stages a tension between traveling and returning, between the space of the journey and the space of home. This is evident in a range of work from classical narratives such as The Odyssey to W.G. Sebald’s novel Austerlitz (2001), from the theatre scholar Una Chaudhuri’s “geography of modern drama,” Staging Place (1995), to the anthropologist James Clifford’s analysis of “complex histories of dwelling and traveling” in Routes (1997). The return might form a neat narrative closure (indeed, for some, the journey with its return is itself “a symbol of narrative” [Curtis and Pajaczkowska 1994:199]), but it might equally be messy and disappointing, merely imagined, or completely nonexistent. Nonetheless, a concept of home, to which one may or may not be able to or wish to return, seems necessarily entangled with attempts to understand practices of journeying.6

6. I do not want to suggest, however, that one is a prerequisite for the other, that the idea of home always precedes the act of traveling.
I have signaled here some of the writers who have been thinking through questions of movement and stasis because this is a context in which we might productively consider Ataman’s installation. Küba operates through precisely these tensions of travel and home, and it does this by foregrounding what might be described in conventional analytical terms as a content/form/place relationship: between what is told, how it is told, and where it is told. It is concerned with emplacement (in a neighborhood that commands strong and contradictory emotions), displacement (from that home, via the installation tour and via the narratives of escape that the work tells), and taking place (in a series of sites that themselves have intricate histories of inhabitation and movement).

Of course, the relative force and significance of these terms—emplacement, displacement, place—is contested. At the beginning of the 21st century the discourse of mobility is arguably employed more than ever before: in debates about globalization, in anthropological studies, in political rhetoric, in cultural geography (a new journal entitled *Mobilities* was launched in this field in 2006), and in visual arts and performance. The art scholar Miwon Kwon writes of the “nomadic narrative,” arguing that the site of art is now more likely to be an itinerant than a map (2000:46). But she reminds us also of the dangers of the way in which nomadism, and the ambiguity and impermanence associated with it, has become fashionable and seductive. Kwon points to the exciting potential of nomadic artistic practices to produce a concept of the site as “an intertextually coordinated, multiply located, discursive field of operation” (2002:159), while warning against the romanticism that is often associated with “the image of the cultural worker on the go” (160).

Elsewhere, media scholar David Morley rightly points out that “all discussions of mobility necessarily tend to have moral overtones of one sort or another” (2000:228); in this moral framework, home occupies a privileged position and vagrancy is denigrated, even while a generic sense of mobility is romanticized in contemporary theory. That we need to distinguish between different forms of mobility is evident from the way in which rootlessness seems to be pathologized, diagnosed as a disorder (33), while the itinerant experience of place can be celebrated as in flux, productively shifting concepts of the boundary. The celebration of movement through and between spaces that is implied by much recent scholarship might seem to obscure the need, felt acutely by many people across the world, for a place of one’s own.

*Küba* enters this discussion when Eda announces, in an echo of Virginia Woolf’s famous edict, that “my only dream is to have a house of my own. Even a room would be fine.” Caught up with the project’s motif of escape, then, is a concept of belonging, a concept connected for many with questions of home and migration (see Sarup 1994; Morley 2000). Morley writes of place as “a generator of cultural belongingness” (212), often sedimented through generations. In Küba, only established some 40 years before Ataman’s engagement with the place, such “cultural belongingness” is defined not primarily in terms of generational history but through a curious mix of defiance and disenfranchisement. Many reviews and articles discussing the work quote from Ataman’s project proposal the idea that “Küba is first and foremost a state of mind,” indicating a shared adherence to an ideological (rather than geographical) position. Some commentators (for example, Horrigan) emphasize an explicitly intentional link with Castro’s Cuba, though it seems from the video interviews themselves that this is not always agreed upon as a reference point. In any case, the radical politics of the original Küba seem to have been somewhat diluted (in her interview, Arife tells us, mournfully, that “it’s not like the old days, we’re not resisting”), to leave a sense of collective disregard for authority and a group united by belonging nowhere else.

Belonging emerges not only as a theme of the stories told but also as something at stake in the presentation of the artwork itself. By means of its tour, the work can be understood as occupying a series of sites in which it (and perhaps also its viewer) does not belong, with its effect a

---

7. The question “Is Küba a place or a state of mind?” was used as the starting point for a one-day symposium hosted by Artangel on 7 May 2005 to accompany the London showing of the installation.
result of the tension thus produced. In the context of a disputed and continually renegotiated Europe, to deliberately place a work where it does not belong might constitute a political act. Ataman himself, quoted in the *Times* review, has conceived of his project in these terms:

After London, we will take the project to Stuttgart, Vienna, Sydney, bringing it to other cities where our perception of ‘the other’ is so singular and threatening. We are hoping to put the entire installation on a barge and have it travel along the Danube from Bulgaria to Vienna, the heart of old Europe, in the hope that it infects the pristine European narrative there. Hopefully, through this barbarian story, there is a new Europe that’s going to be created. (Armstrong 2005)

Bill Horrigan makes similar political claims for *Küba*: “village by village, legally and illegally, Turkey is absorbed into the European Union” (2005).

But the tour also resonates at the level of the personal journey. I have commented on the way in which much of the discourse surrounding Ataman’s project makes a rhetorical connection between the people interviewed for the installation and their video images. In this way, one response is to see the escape longed for by many of these speakers as enacted by the artwork: these inhabitants are on a journey. Another version, however, might take the speakers as representatives of their wider neighborhood: thus *Küba*, the place, is not escaped from but is itself “uprooted” and taken on a journey. When Bozo, in one of the video testimonies, asserts, “someone is going to make it out of Küba. No one has, but he will,” we are reminded that the inhabitants become migrants only in their video manifestations; the people themselves remain at home.

What is at stake in the project, therefore, is not only the versions of Europe that *Küba* might contest but also the agency of the Kübans themselves. Ataman’s resembles in some ways an ethnographic project (not least due to the artist’s lengthy—two year—period of residence in Küba as he researched and prepared the work), and therefore negotiates many of the problematics of power, privilege, and representation debated in this discipline. And as ethnography works to represent its informants as inhabitants (as opposed to travelers; see Clifford 1997:23–24), so *Küba* offers a portrait of people at home. In part, then, the discrepancy between the *traveling* of the artwork and the *residing* of its subjects invites reflection on the nature of being at home in a context of mobility. Similarly, in developing connections between roots and the *Routes* of his title, James Clifford suggests that, if travel “becomes a kind of norm, dwelling demands explication. Why,” he asks, “with what degrees of freedom, do people stay home?” (5). And David Morley, discussing Clifford, adds that we might also usefully consider, “how, in a world of flux, forms of collective dwelling are sustained and reinvented” (2000:13). This, it seems, is exactly what *Küba* investigates: the collective dwelling of these social outsiders and the modes of alliance and kinship through which it is sustained against complex, and often violent, challenges.

---

8. Ekrem, for example, says “I’d like to live somewhere where there was nobody. On an island for instance. Quiet. No distress, no sorrow. A place far from people. At least to be far from the shantytown. I’d like to live that way.”

9. Ataman’s relationship to his subject matter, however, is not as simple as this might imply. The artist himself was born in Istanbul and exiled from Turkey in the 1980s as a result of the political material used in his art; for Horrigan, “his work in its instincts continues to find its way home” (2005).
However, the travel/home tension should not be taken as a straightforward dichotomy. Though Ataman’s work might produce a problematic illusion of travel, a model that sees the Kübans as always (and uncomplicately) at home while their video alter egos travel ignores the entrenched and subtle movements that already make up a Küban notion of identity. These include the initial movement, itself a kind of exile, away from a more “legitimated” Istanbul society and into the shantytown, as well as the complex movements between families, often via marriage, that are narrated on the screens. And the name adopted for the shantytown, with its hints of another place, suggests a version of traveling, albeit, perhaps, armchair traveling. As the cultural theorist J. Macgregor Wise reminds us, “home is not a static place. [...] Home is always movement (even if we never move, if we spend our whole lives in the same room)” (2000:305).

**Armchair Traveling**

In his bestselling enquiry into why we travel, Alain de Botton writes of the value of traveling in the imagination: “[I]t seems we may best be able to inhabit a place when we are not faced with the additional challenge of having to be there” (2003:23). His comment is part of a wide literature on the armchair traveler, who is variously represented as a privileged surveyor of the world (Kublai Khan in Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*), a dreamer lacking the means to travel in reality (the child Jane Eyre; the station porter Adele in David Greig’s play *Europe*), or an insular figure of derision (J.K. Huysmans’s *Duc des Esseintes*). As I sit in a series of threadbare armchairs listening to (or more exactly reading, in subtitles) the narratives of *Küba*, I am constantly reminded that “the additional challenge of having to be there” would, in this case, be significant.

Previewing the Southampton appearance of *Küba*, the *Guardian* suggested that “the experience is like being invited into the homes of these inhabitants” (Lack 2007), an impression presumably evoked by the domestic settings of the videos, the conversational tone of the narratives, and the provision, in London, of armchairs from which to view the work. But of course, in many obvious ways, it is not like this at all. Part of the impact of the work relies on a recognition that this is not my experience of home and that I remain apart from it; Ataman affords an insight into what for most visitors will be another world, without asking them to negotiate the complex, dangerous, and foreign space of the neighborhood itself. Perhaps, then, there is an extent to which the relationship set up between viewer and screen exoticizes the stories and by extension the narrators, encouraging us to be tourists even though they are traveling while we are “at home.”

But it is not only the installation’s viewers who might be positioned here as armchair travelers. The virtual travel/actual travel tension enacted by the work is echoed in the narratives themselves. Despite Ilhan’s assertion that “here we never make plans to go to the movies or the show theater” because “living here is theatre enough,” Soner, a young man filmed in his bedroom surrounded by posters, makes sense of his life through the British and American films that he sees at the local cinema. Of one, he tells us:

> The title of the movie was *Notting Hill*. How should I put it? I felt strange while watching that film. Because the scenes come back to back. Unrealistic things happen. A famous person buys a book from a bookseller; they fall in love and start to be together. After a long while, the press learns about it. Then the press gets all excited about it. The book seller gets disturbed a bit. The film is a bit sentimental. Julia Roberts’s performance is perfect. Hugh Grant is too. The film woke something in me, because I too have someone I love very much. [...] I really loved her a lot, but this film made me understand it a bit. She’s a basketball player, and I’m someone who has a hard

---

10. *Invisible Cities* (*Le Città Invisibili*) by Italo Calvino, 1972 (English translation 1974); *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, 1847; *Europe* by David Greig, 1994; *A Rebours* by J.K. Huysmans, 1884 (translated into English as *Against Nature* or *Against the Grain*).

11. Assuming, that is, that the majority of viewers saw *Küba* in or near their home city.
time just getting by. To me it’s a little bit like that film. It’s really a very good film.

Other inhabitants find their own cultural narratives through which they might travel: the girl who imagines herself as Cinderella, for example, or the woman who uses news reports to construct a critical sense of the world. The latter, Zübeysel, addresses the relationship between dwelling and knowledge. “I’m not an ignorant person,” she tells us in her interview:

Even though I live in the shantytown, I know about everything that’s going on in the world. About politics, about everything. I can talk about what will happen. They shouldn’t think just because we live in Küba we are ignorant. I think of myself as a cultured person. Talk about anything, and I’ll be able to form an idea about it.

Many of Küba’s narratives take a critical look at how life in the neighborhood is organized, thus reminding us that “[l]iteral travel is not a prerequisite of irony, critique, or distance from one’s home culture” (Clifford 1997:4). There is also the possibility that, in some situations, choosing not to travel marks a form of resistance (5), though it is the lack of choice that is the focus for a number of Ataman’s subjects.

Ultimately, perhaps, Küba operates through stillness: that of the Küba residents, spending long periods in front of Ataman’s camera telling stories of inhabiting this place; that of the installation’s viewers, invited to sit and listen; and also that of Ataman himself, barely noticeable behind the camera, patiently collecting his documentary material over a period of more than two years. But at the same time, it asks us to conceive of this stillness in relation to different forms of mobility. These include small-scale wanderings and large-scale escapes; movements bound by gender and economics, artistic tours, and real and imagined journeys.

References


For a month during February and March, all eyes were on Canada. The 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver enjoyed wide international coverage, from the cross-country torch marathon to the spectacular closing ceremony. The Paralympics have been held after the Olympics since the 1960 Games in Rome, but media interest in this sporting event has always paled in comparison to the Olympics, raising questions about the way the general public and the media portray popular sports. Distinctions between Olympians and Paralympians are solely centered on the body, or rather, the obsession with its perfection:

Commentators regularly refer to “stellar performances” as being perfect or faultless, yet perfection is in fact unattainable. No one, as the old adage suggests, is perfect [...]. Until recently media coverage of the Paralympic Games has been limited, in part because of the unwillingness of those who control the media to cover sport that is distinguished by its lack of perfection. (Howe 2008:101)

No one is perfect, everyone is imperfect, yet given the opportunity, everyone wants to be perfect, and modern technological advancements have made the pursuit of perfection as desirable as it is urgent. In the cyberworld, this urgency is manifest in alternate realities, where anyone with internet access can become another being in any given environment. This phenomenon affords endless possibilities, including making possible the seeming impossibility of experiencing parallel lives. Furthermore, in alternate worlds, users have complete control over their physical and psychological makeup and are able to adjust and “correct” the imperfections that are part and parcel of real life, all under the protection of complete anonymity.

The abstract quality of virtual lives can also impinge on real lives: the processes of creating and maintaining an alternate identity that,
in reality, is intrinsically tied to a real identity requires an immense amount of emotional investment. Because the experience of virtual reality strives to be as realistic as the real world (only more perfect), psychological adjustments between the two worlds are complex. As Baudrillard notes: “To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn’t have. One implies a presence, the other an absence” ([1985] 1994:3). Under these conditions, the optimal virtual reality experience calls for two contradictory but simultaneous acts: to simulate reality in the virtual world, one must dissimulate reality in the real world; reality, and all its imperfections, is temporarily made absent for a perfect virtual reality.

Kevin Kerr, the Lee Playwright-in-Residence at the University of Alberta from 2007 to 2010, attempts to bring some of these tensions and their social and moral implications to the forefront in SPINE, a play cocommissioned by the Vancouver 2010 Cultural Olympiad, coproduced with Vancouver-based theatre company Realwheels and performed by the 2010 graduating BFA acting class at the University of Alberta.

The scope of SPINE is immediately apparent from the time the actors take the stage. Four tableaux, each isolated from the other, play out on their own terms. The set at stage left is modeled after a laboratory run by two researchers, Darren (Darren Paul) and Sarah (Sarah Sharkey), as they conduct neurological experiments on a “willing participant,” Delia (Delia Barnett). The interior of an apartment takes center stage, and James (James Sanders), a quadriplegic, recently unemployed, and abandoned by his wife, shares this space with his attractive personal attendant, Mary (Mary Hulbert). A vertical structure separates stage right into two levels. The upper platform, approximately 10 feet from the stage floor, is modeled after a makeshift sky train, which has two passengers: Elliott (Elliott James), a glib pharmaceutical representative, and Hokuto (Nikolai Witschl), a technosavvy young Japanese man seeking to retrace his late grandfather’s past in urban Toronto. The lower platform is an “underground” realm of sorts, home to a group of actors who call themselves the Precursors. Throughout the play, the Precursors (Carmela Sison, Andrea Jorawsky, Tatyana Rac, Adam Cope, and Robert Markus) struggle to deal with the sudden absence of a fellow actor, Carmela (Carmela Sison), who has had an accident that left her a paraplegic. The friendship between Carmela and the Precursors is especially strained as they attempt to confront and cope with the immediate consequences of the accident. But when Hokuto discovers that the Precursors are occupying his grandfather’s ancestral home, he offers to help the disbanded actors by introducing to them the possibilities of a virtual reunion.

The common thread among the four narratives is not explicitly apparent at the beginning of the play though it becomes evident with Elliott’s observation about drugs and the Olympics:

ELLIOTT: I find it funny that the Olympics makes such a big deal about “doping” [...] Every athlete is modified by technology; performance-enhancing equipment, training techniques, dietary regiments. It’s a contest of technology [...] Look at me. I’m clinically depressed. Would you know it? [...] Because of these [referring to pills] I’m happy, successful, now in a very hot relationship. In charge of my life. Isn’t it a good thing?1

---

1. All quotations are from the unpublished script from the Edmonton production at Timms Centre for the Arts (University of Alberta), 4–13 February 2010.
Elliott’s speech calls attention to the equipment that paralympians with disabilities utilize to participate in sporting events and the immensely lucrative and innovative industry that caters to the demands of athletes with disabilities. Elliott is right when he remarks that the competition is really a contest of technology; competitors from privileged Western countries dominate the Games because they have more support from an industry with the resources to produce the most efficient racing wheelchairs and prosthetic limbs. In essence, through this technology, mechanical devices are developed to return “natural” function to that part of the body that is “damaged.” As the mechanical substitution for a body part “normalizes” that which is “imperfect,” it simultaneously “masks” the reality of the inherent “flaw” or “imperfection”—it simulates functional “normality” and bodily “perfection.” Elliott presents a similar but more psychological aspect of this notion when he proclaims that the drugs he takes repress and mask his psychological disability, and the effects are positive: he is happier, more successful, more in control.

The desire for control crops up in narratives of James, the Precursors, and the researchers. James is immensely embarrassed when, in mid-conversation with Mary, he requests help with his catheter; Carmela is just as helpless and expresses her frustration in mock sarcasm when she urinates in her wheelchair. They have lost control of their bodily functions and require assistance to relieve themselves. If only—James fantasizes—they could change their fates: “We are all the heroes of our own drama and I’ve discovered I don’t like this hero. Recast this drama [...] Just switch parts for a while.” The desire to change fate through the creation of a new being with new abilities also preoccupies the rehab researchers, Sarah and Darren, as they experiment with sensory substitution; they conduct the experiment on Delia, demonstrating that lights, for instance, can be switched on and off when specific regions of the brain are properly stimulated. Their work promises to change lives, and by extension the realities of those lives.

SPINE plays on several planes of reality, and the audience is complicit in engaging this self-conscious work when the onstage Lee Playwright, played by Karyn Mott, directly addresses the audience and explains that everything they have witnessed onstage is really a creative reenactment of a play, possibly called SPINE, that was produced in 2010. She/he—Mott as the Lee Playwright—casts the present audience as future audience, making the performance of the play proper a play within a play. This technique does not entirely detach the play proper from the audience because, later, Mott, the actress who plays the Lee playwright, also plays the role of James’s avatar in Second Life. As the eponymous title suggests, Second Life lets gamers (users) create avatars (residents) in a virtual fantasy world where they can interact with other residents. Users custom build their avatar’s personality and traits, anonymously, with the freedom to be someone they are not. Second Life becomes especially important in the play when Hokuto suggests to the

![Figure 2. Darren Paul, Sarah Sharkey, Delia Barnett (in wheelchair with cap) in SPINE, directed by Bob Frazer, Studio Theatre, 4–13 February 2010. (Photo by Ed Ellis, courtesy of Studio Theatre)](http://direct.mit.edu/dram/article-pdf/55/3/164/1823950/dram_a_00107.pdf)
Precursors that they can use it to stage a virtual show that will reunite the wheelchair-bound Carmela with her fellow actors, and in this world, Carmela would take on the role of an avatar that can walk. However, Carmela is hostile to the suggestion and is convinced that her friends are unable to deal with the reality of her plight and that they pity her. As her unofficial peer counselor, James takes up a role in Second Life to meet the Precursors' avatars in hopes of persuading Carmela to be more receptive to the proposal.

In a virtual world where personal attributes are irrelevant and possibilities are endless, James chooses a female avatar (Karyn) when he plays Second Life. Anonymity allows him to shed his fears and anxieties; he can create what he believes to be a “perfect” representation of himself: Karyn has legs that function. That he chooses a female avatar is no surprise. Gabriel Weimann’s Communicating Unreality suggests that male users often prefer female virtual identities because of cultural pressure; they are able to freely express their “feminine” side without being judged, and users are more inclined to be accepting and tolerant with “females” (2000:350). At this point, the stage set changes and the actors are onstage as their avatars. James’s avatar, Karyn, goes on a quest to find the Precursors’ avatars, but is interrupted when a Panda (Hokuto’s avatar) falls in love with Karyn. The psychological effects of virtual reality become problematic when virtual emotions are taken for real emotions. Research in the field suggests that this condition may be due to the exaggerated sensations in the virtual world: “[Users’] residual memories and learning may even become distorted on returning to the real world” (334).

To rectify the problem that he has created in the virtual world, James sends Carmela to meet Hokuto at the Precursors’ residence so that Hokuto will not be crushed to discover that he has been infatuated with a man all along—inspiring the researchers to explore another form of virtual reality.

With a transcranial magnetic stimulator (headgear), they send the wheelchair-bound Carmela to Hokuto through Delia’s willing body. Sensations, thoughts, and feelings are transferred from Carmela to Delia and vice versa, as they both sit in chairs and don headgear. Through her headgear, Carmela feels what it is like to walk again, and in the Precursors’ home, all the characters are thrown into an episode of identity confusion when Delia, controlled by Carmela’s thoughts, explains that she is really Carmela, and not Delia. The Precursors cannot understand how this could be possible; yet everything that comes out of Delia’s mouth is clearly information that only Carmela would know. Overwhelmed and frustrated by the situation, Delia, who thinks she is Carmela, jumps out of her chair (headgear intact) and runs off to the top of the makeshift building—the scene of the accident that left her with a disability—and considers throwing herself (Delia’s body) off the roof. Fortunately, James talks her into removing her headgear and all chaotic identity mix-up is resolved when the thoughts of the two women return to their own bodies.

Figure 3. Mary Hulbert as Goddess, Sarah Sharkey as Vixious91, and Karyn Mott as Karyn (all Second Life avatars) in SPINE, directed by Bob Frazer, Studio Theatre, 4–13 February 2010. (Photo by Ed Ellis, courtesy of Studio Theatre)
The virtual experiment in *SPINE* attempts to negotiate an acceptable and practical formula that allows for the simultaneous existence of multiple realities. The failure to locate an area that can accommodate the desire for reality and perfection provides a social commentary about the dangers of redefining slippery boundaries between that which is real and that which is a simulation and representation of the real.

Jean-François Lyotard has observed these tensions and how they must change according to the modern moment: “Modernity, whenever it appears, does not occur without a shattering of belief, without a discovery of the lack of reality in reality—a discovery linked to the invention of other realities” (1993:9). The idealized body in *SPINE* can only be created in the inaccessible space of an invented virtual reality. Modern technology and innovations strive to perfect “imperfect” bodies, and as Elliott points out earlier in the play, further enhance the limitations of able-bodied athletes. The dialogue between *SPINE* and the Paralympics suggests that the idealization of “perfect” bodies can only be achieved through the intervention of technology. The connection, then, between *SPINE*, the Paralympics, and ideations of the body might point to an impossible desire for a (virtually) “perfect” body that is ultimately only achievable through the intervention of technology, and very possibly through virtual reality.

Virtual reality simulates and dissimulates according to different goals and purposes, perfecting that which is rendered or perceived to be “imperfect” within contextual assumptions of what comprises functional “normality.” The appeal of new and alternate realities becomes suspect because the modern moment does not discount the fact that, in spite of technological progress, reality continues to be the anchor of and determining factor in what we desire. The simulation of reality can only be invented from a single, unchanging structure of reality that resists mechanical manipulation, virtual simulation, and technological intervention; after all, the psychological impulse and desire for improvement and perfection are imprints of human markers that no technology can mimic. Technology becomes both a means toward and intervention of perfection, which in itself cannot be mimicked because once an “ideal” is achieved, a new marker is set in its place. Thus, we are all always already “imperfect” bodies within the “real,” always already replaced or, more specifically, replaceable, by a technologically mediated “perfect” body.

References


