

## ***On Stories of Love and Hate***

A discussion by the Burramatta River, in the dark ...

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### ABSENCE

AC\_let's talk about 'absence'...

FF\_ alright we were previously talking about absence, and it's a funny notion, because in absence there's always an assumed opposition to it of presence – but i think absence as itself, as a phenomenological entity, it still has a presence about it – like absence is there, you can feel absence like it has a tangibility – we were talking about before, about Indigenous sovereignty in a sense, being effaced from narratives, from stories, our everyday stories, our everyday conversations ...

AC\_when we were seeing the rehearsal, or watching the performance, were you acutely aware of the absence of Indigeneity, or the Indigenous foundations of the whole race framework? Or was it on reflection afterwards?

FF\_it was on reflection afterwards, and what triggered it for me, was how *place* played an intimate part in all of these stories – there was an attachment to place – but that attachment, how it came out was very self-reflective in all of the interviewees' words – but how that attachment in itself is a very tentative notion – because we are on unsettled ground in the first place... like here (*pointing to the ground*) we've got Aboriginal dot paintings, and so on, on the ground, but it's still not recognised as Indigenous ground as such – when I'm saying 'recognised' it's like *politically* not recognised on a larger national framework – that's what triggered it for me\_ how is Indigeneity attached to place?

AC In “stories of love and hate”, there is, on some level, a focus on the ‘Arab subject’ through the personal narratives – so there's an awareness of the ‘humanizing’ of the usually demonized Arab subjects, whereas, just in the same way that we who are acutely aware of our own demonization, or exotification, how we can be acutely aware of... that it is so normalized, that it becomes invisible... unless I am carrying that acute awareness of Occupation on every level, of Indigenous Australian Land and People – unless I carry that acutely, then *I* become implicit in making that invisible as well... So what you're talking about – invisibility – becomes normalized. So the ‘absence’ in these “stories of love and hate”, is *normalized*.

### PLACE

AC\_What were the narratives that struck you as being really grounded in ‘place’? What do you remember?

FF\_obviously I remember the most poignant one – the one with the old Lebanese man going back to Beirut. He has these vivid recollections – and his recollection and what he termed ‘in his own dreams’ – in his own stories to his children – and how they decorated and furnished it in their minds – and the physical reality of Beirut – and that struck me about these geographical textures – against your own sort of psychic imaginings of what Beirut is ...

And at the same time you had the two young kids on the right side, was Katia and Mohammed – and how they were saying\_ “We'd *never* leave Punchbowl” – remember? – with promises of their father and all of that... and Punchbowl being how it's normally demonized as an ‘unsafe *place*, and their conceptions of ‘safety’ went against mainstream views of what Punchbowl is – and it's because there's mates, and you know everyone, “hey, how you goin?” and all of that – like it had a human sensuality about it... I remember these two especially with ‘place’... and ‘space’...

AC\_ The way it's set up in an artwork, as such, it sort of creates this binary between Arab and non-Arab, and, male and female, and suburb, *landlocked* suburb, and water, *waterside-living*, waterside suburb...

AC\_ a sense of place is in relationship to\_ the *body* and the *water*, the *body* and the *sand*, and um, the lived experience of the body, that in general we don't experience in Australia, we as migrants, wogs. We are not embodied in the same way, in relation to sea and sand and bush, um, whereas there is that sense of 'ownership' – of the body being related to the surf, and of the body being related to the sand – um, so there's a sense of place, and ownership there – and that goes back to your point about the 'ownership', elides and covers the sovereignty of the original custodianship, as opposed to even ownership...

### PERMISSION TO NARRATE

AC\_ I have experience of being involved in cultural productions or work, where, sometimes you can be severely critiqued, for what you omit, whether it's conscious or unconscious...

And on some level, when you're making a specific work, you focus because sometimes you can't say everything.

And as some of us say, that politically our shoulders often feel a burden of responsibility and that we have to say everything in its widest and deepest spectrum, *and* we have to tell everything from the beginning as *Edward Said* narrates so well. Like, so I know the dilemmas of making work where there are so many stories to tell and ultimately, you have to make some *choices*, to have a focus, to have a cogent, a coherent experience of storytelling or performance...

AC\_ *but*, is it the case that sometimes there *must* be a story that's told all the time? Does that mean that, if it doesn't 'naturally' appear amongst the narratives that you have gathered, you know, in the research process of finding people, interviewing people – does it mean you need to ask those questions? Or you need to seek out those voices? And I think that's a dilemma for people with political conscience in making a cultural production. And I think in terms of making art, that framing cannot be contrived, it needs to be organically part of the process to have a *truth* about it, artistically, performatively. So I think, in terms of making work we make choices; and we make choices in the kind of selections we make and the kind of questions we ask, or the kind of questions we don't ask!?!?

FF\_ that's it; like it doesn't have to be tacitly verbalized as such, or explicitly acknowledged, but I'm saying, even in it's absence, it's felt, and it's interesting in how you talked about *Edward Said*, and when he wrote that seminal essay "Permission to Narrate"

I mean, here we have these narratives, and of course *Said* is talking about a different subjectivity, but, I think it was during the Lebanese Civil War and the subjugated Palestinian Nation, and who narrates for the nation, and so on, and the permission that hinges on unequal sovereign powers, like who has permission to disrupt the Israeli narrative of\_ "this is our land..." But, in *this* context, it seemed that there were various groups of people who were melded in, and it takes us a while to figure out each character, distinctively. But they all had a space to narrate, ah, it was interesting to see how they were not seamless narratives, 'cause you switched from one to this to the next but it was interesting how the actors embodied these people's narratives without coming off too contrived and it was interesting how narratives have a life *through the body*?

### LISTENING

AC\_ There you're moving into the territory of the *very medium* of this show, in terms of the embodiment of the narration, and the way that the body of the actor becomes a 'medium' – medium in the esoteric sense of the word 'medium' – it's like, their body channels for us somebody else's story who is *absent*, but the way that they channel makes that story *very present*, don't actually see it as 'making it more authentic', because it's a highly crafted piece of work, the method is very polished in it's detail, and I don't mean polished in that it has a 'veneer'.

In walking in to a performance space, there's an unspoken agreement between who's in the audience and who's sitting / standing / moving in front of you, and so there are tacit agreements going on. It

doesn't mean that you always trust, but this production lays itself bare in a particular way, that facilitates you to trust more easily. But, it's not adorned and over-designed; you have people who start by adjusting their sound levels...

They permit us to enter into the edifice of the performance, in the opening scene, of how one of the characters Mohammed plays, he has the headphones on, and, there's a soundtrack going on, and "is this happening in real time?" No, there's like, there's a recording that's going on in a previous lifetime of this show – so there's layers and layers of previous lifetimes.

## LOSS

FF\_ I'm interested in, what about the rest of the interviews? Like, what didn't get said, or what didn't make it through the show? But again then it talks back to how there's decisions made... in our lives, in our stories... in how we present ourselves.

And what gets said, and what gets left out, and it's always there's this common tendency of finding, or looking at migrant narratives through... you know, this filter... of finding *nostalgia*, finding, *return to homeland*, or *in between two homes*, between here and there, and they were present in the narrative, but there was sort of an abiding honesty about all of these narratives, especially with the young Lebanese kids and how their own battles of trying to decide on which words to choose? Lebanese, Middle Eastern or Wog? and the manoeuvres between. The sense of loss, there's a deep sense of pain even in the happy narratives where there are moments of laughter, there still is some pain behind it. I think what brought them together, not universally, but there is a denouement that connects a thread between all of them, but I think they share the economies of pain, and they keep on circulating and circulating...

AC\_ when you say 'they' share the economy of pain, is that only in relation to the Arab...? ...with everybody?

FF\_ no, no... with everybody. Like there was the loss about, for example, a nostalgic loss about 'this is how The Shire used to be' or 'this is how Beirut is' for example... So like there's loss and lamentations of different kinds, in different temporal moments, but they collide with each other...

AC\_ Some of the most literal stories of loss that were romanticized were those late night song dedications, and that's about individual love, individual pain, individual loss

## VOICE & BREATH

AC\_ And it's like that relationship between that telephone-line, between those voices in the dark, how metaphorical, the DJ at night, the love god - [FF\_ the sultry voice] – The craft of the shifting mode with the microphone and evoking something so simple theatrically, that's what I loved about the production, like very complex things are evoked in ways that are laid bare. But these voices in the dark really epitomize loneliness and a reaching out to the stranger in the middle of the night – and some of those stories were about love and some of them were about pain and loss, and they were very touching, because it's like exposing a secret life, it's like if somebody makes those phone calls in the middle of the night. They're *really intimate moments* that are shared with a stranger in the dark. But yet, for people who listen to programmes like that, that voice, that DJ's voice is *no* stranger, he is in their *ear*, in their *lounge-room*, in their *bedroom*, on their *bedside table*, so close, more than most other voices in that person's life. So, when you hear a voice in the middle of the night like that, you have a very intimate relationship, it's like it's only you and them, I think without intending to make that analogy, in a sense, that's what happens with the way the show is crafted, because the four actors have got these ear-pieces, where their very breath, their very bodies, are echoing somebody else's story, and it brings an intimacy. The *word* that comes to mind is an 'intimate' experience of listening.

And I think that this is pretty rare, when we spend most of our time being disassociated from people whereas this performative experience, and if you can't feel an intimacy or a love to the politics that you are passionate about, then I think, in terms of cultural production and political work, if you don't have that love, then what are you doing?? What is nourishing you as a human being??

I've often found myself in recent years trying to talk about: well, what is *the politics of love*?

If we can't create a sense of love, in the work that we create, have a sense of love for the characters in the show in the 'stories of love and hate'... the way it's made engenders a sense of love, on some level – I don't mean love in the romantic sense – love in the political sense, love in the human sense – and that intimacy, creates that space for taking *that* in.

FF\_but I was interested in your meditation on love, because in academia, it's sort of become, not sort of become, *it is* a taboo subject [AC\_is it? I'm glad you're not saying it's become trendy...] that's the thing, that's the thing, like, how to construct the politics of love, or, how do you begin conversations about it, because it's always seen as sort of outside of 'the discipline', it's not tangible, with cultural work even though cultural work in itself is an embodied activity of love or with a group of people that come together but in academia, love becomes sort of something left behind, and that's abstracted out of these conversations, and I'm speaking, of my understanding of western academia, where we fall back on other terms like '*affect*', which love is part of, that you experience and vacillate between, love and hate, and there's a propensity and a capacity to love and hate in all of these stories. terms.

### LOVE...AND HATE

FF\_But love in itself is a touchy subject, because it has a deep intimacy about it, like I know a lot of work that talks about hatred, and how it's inextricably attached to fear, but what about fear and love? Or the vulnerability of love? And how it's moving beyond sort of the romanticized and aestheticized notions that we conceive of when we think of love?

AC\_Well, you were saying that in the academy, or intellectually - or the intellectual *baggage* that gets carted around the world – [FF\_intellectual suitcase – ha!] – The Intellectual Suitcases! – The Intellectual Refugee Who Unpacks Her Suitcase By The River!

You were saying the word 'hatred' can be used intellectually, in a theoretical way, without having to find other linguistic, or intellectual terms. Are there other linguistic devices to express what we might define as 'love', politically here, in the academy?

FF\_like a democratic language of love...

FF\_And I think it moved, like theatrically it was very sophisticated, and that's what drew me in even more, as the show progressed, and as we *fell in love* with some characters. I don't think I hated any characters, but I think I was cringing with some of the characters' remarks.

AC\_Even though it's a beautiful narrative, I hate having to re-experience some of that horrible violence, some of that horrible racist violence, and I don't deny, *such a show has to*, on some level, take you through some of the *filth*, so we don't forget, the filth and the disgust. I'm always torn between if we are creating stories and narratives in our own terms, how to tell those stories without re-igniting that *sick* feeling – it's a really physical feeling, it's a really tangible nausea and disbelief like, could this really be happening? And the intensity of that summer... That was a season of *not* anti-Arab racism or anti-Muslim racism, while both of that is implicit, but the word '*Lebanese*' was so disgusting... And it had a viral effect around the country. I hate that I have to feel that nausea, but the Work has to do that. The work has to do that...

FF\_Is that one of 'the bottom lines' that you were talking about before?

AC\_no, it wasn't one of the 'bottom lines'...

FF\_I am saying does it have to become one of the bottom lines that we have to re-experience and re-invoke all of these terrible experiences?

AC\_no, when I was talking before, in this context, a political bottom line is\_ 'humanizing of the Arab'; a political bottom line may be "Whose land are we talking about anyway?" – questioning 'ownership', acknowledging custodianship. They could be political bottom lines. It could be that "difference and conflict and ... acknowledging power", "that sharing or saving stories doesn't mean levelling to a sameness, that we are all equal – 'cause we are not all equal." So, when I was talking before, they're

the kind of political bottom lines I'm thinking of. I am not thinking of the need to expose that violence. That's a choice.

### LOVING DIVIDED SELF

AC\_ But this show really does differ from so many of its predecessors, in the multiple narratives that are constructed, and they clearly choose to omit some of the most blatant symbols that have been regurgitated for the last three years. So that refines the work. It gives the work patience. It gives the work...[FF\_A maturity about it]

FF\_ you used that expression 'Lest We Forget'... [AC\_ Yes!] And the common meaning, especially in an Australian context, of the glorification of the Digger, the Soldier, the Anzac. And it became a territorial expression as well\_ Lest We Forget. It had this, or it still has this transnational reverberation and it's always attached to another territory, Gallipoli, or a Vietnam, whatever...but here, how you were using it, I was interested in *that* usage.

And the resistance term in a sense, and again it comes back to *forgetting* and *memory*.

AC\_ We do have to recall Ghassan Hage, I've heard him speak a number of times in recent years, well you know, at Arab events, so it's a very specific audience. I've heard him over a period of a couple of years talking about how racism, as it manifests, teaches us very well how to hate ourselves, on every level, physically, spiritually, on every level, and that we have to learn to *love ourselves*.

And, there have been times when things've felt very raw – in the rawness of the manifestations of racism that we've experienced in recent years sometimes those very simple words have been very important, about learning to love ourselves.

AC\_ So that gives me another twist on the title 'Stories of Love and Hate'.

Stories of love and hate can be about *me* as the Arab subject.

Me, the divided, schizophrenic.

*The schizophrenic Arab subject, um, in Australia.*

So 'stories of love and hate' doesn't even have to be this binary,

Wog and non-wog

Indigenous and non-indigenous

Black and white

Male and female

It can be the schizophrenic subject.

FF\_ that divided self, that now the self becomes objectified. It's a split object of love and hate, and that entangles, and moves between love and hate and all of the emotions therein.

It's a tough experience. Especially, for the young kids, like, I could see myself through them all the time, and how, what they love... and the intimacy, of the *car*, of the automobile, and like, Ghassan was speaking about 'our spaces', of our 'sovereign spaces'...

### THE HEART OF BASS

Like all of these spaces that do have a physical presence, or don't, where are they? And where are they marked in our lives? and what gives us *pleasure*?

And these objects that also evoke *loss* within us as well, like between love and hate there's a melancholic space...

FF\_ it was epitomized really, with the kids and the cars, that for me crystallized it as well, especially like with the heartbeat, like I love how it's a synonymous attachment to the symbol of the heart? But, like, the *heartbeat* that calibrates the system...

AC\_ "The Bass Can Kill You."

FF\_ But I was thinking, he must really love that system...Because I know when I bought my first system...

AC\_ You can listen to the stories that are narrated by the young male characters...

through your heart. It's not when you listen to those stories, you are not listening....like so when you've got the three characters in the car even so on some level there's a particular stereotype they fulfil not only about because of what they talk about but there's a very specific mode of language of Western Sydney young wog people.

FF\_ Yes.

AC\_ Male and female. There's a particular way of speaking. But it's about how you listen to their stories because. You're listening as an insider but you're also listening with your heart in a sense. And, heart is not an academic or intellectual term here but you are listening in a really direct way. You're listening to yourself, you're listening to your own heart, with your own heart. You're not listening with mind of the white journalist or the white anthropologist here. It's life...it's normalised. And there's a love and an affection for, and with the people who are telling us the stories on stage as well as the stories of the people who are being channelled to us.

### MAKING STORIES

AC\_ How do you structure something creatively? In the UTP discussion there was an amount of talk about the experience of the performers. There's a need for constant presence, being in the present moment. There's a really strong craft in the directing, in the performing, the craft of learning the script, in this kind of process, it's not a written script. It's about the politics of listening on some level in the broader sense for us but the script is what the actor has to listen to over and over again.

AC\_ Those four actors are hearing the whole soundtrack all the time. They are hearing all four voices, the four actors' voices, as well as the voices and sounds of the original narrative. So, as well, as hearing you own voice, as well as hearing the audience. So that really impressed me that in the earpieces there are multiple tracks happening and to me this is a metaphor for something else.

### BREATH TAKING

AC\_ But, there was one angle I became obsessed with... After listening to what it feels like to perform...I became a little obsessed in the space of that hour with the breath...

FF\_ The breath...

AC\_ The pause. Breathing with that person. It's so subtle and the silences. So, this is what is really fertile for me now, intellectually, conceptually, artistically, about this form of work. I had a sense of excitement thinking that they are breathing with that person. They are drawing a breath when that person pauses, or mumbles or coughs, they are breathing and they are also taking their silences with them. There's something in that for me that's very fertile about the breath, the silence, the pause, the very music of someone else's voice, there's something in there that's very fertile for opening possibilities of listening with difference. Not to difference.

FF\_ Oh well you just speaking about it, has this almost very sanctified quality about it.

[AC\_ Sanctified?] Well, may be that's what theorists are lacking in a sense, it goes beyond listening to and a tokenistic respect. I can't find another word...but may be respect will have to do for this context. Like it's a real honest respect, where I can negotiate difference without having to revert to modes of authenticity and it goes beyond that. And remember one of the actors may be I'm channelling it from somewhere but they said 'I started dreaming in the voices'. That was a very powerful moment in that the body becomes subsumed in all of these voices, like the sensory experiences are totally heightened when you have four voices going on and the audience's reaction where this moment of affective intensity doesn't have to climax. But you're still in tune and still with the other person's utterances or their corporeal utterances of what gets said through the body. Your body betrays you or body speaks before you speak. And they had to channel in, may be go into like a deep metaphysical space for them to engage with these voices honestly. It was interesting how right at the end of the show the voice, the original voice came out momentarily the audience started to hear the voice clearly from like a loud headphone that encompassed us. So what you said a fertile ground – that metaphor in itself is probably a very exciting direction to head in of how to go about and create cultural productions or political work to engage with the 'others', or the others that live within us in our divided selves, or the otherness of the self.

AC\_ Because you can't create out of resentment or cynicism or hate! You can't! To create there needs to be a very strong element, of love to even expose hate or filth or degradation or the conflict or the schizophrenia or the pain working out of resentment or anger to me only has a certain number of dimensions.

FF\_ Yes it's a defeatist politics. But that's why I'm saying, the breath is also the life of the story and when you're listening with your heart like with their every breath, it doesn't descend into a mimicry. It's interesting how they all connect now with the heart, the beats and the breath because they're in tandem.

AC\_ I mean on a physical level, we have to oxygenate our bodies, we breathe oxygen that the heart physically processes from one chamber to the next and passes through various veins and lungs through our bodies. So, there is the whole physical analogy but we're talking about the breath in a metaphysical sense here.

FF\_ No, definitely. But they can't be separated because it comes back to the body as an opaque medium where the actors transformed it and transported all of these stories to us and this brings it back again into the meta, the physical and how they're inextricably part of each other. And, how that earpiece becomes part of the body it's like this bodily prosthetic, it's apart from it like it's detachable but it's still attachable .

AC\_ But the breath, the breath excites me and to me that's what brings intimacy into the space of the performance and the production. If I am so close to a story that I can feel the pause and feel the breath then I'm listening to that story in a really different way. That process, that form takes me *inside* the story, as well as listening on the *outside*. These metaphors as well as constructions can be extrapolated in terms of political strategies, for change, for action, for work, so I'm not going down the medical / the metaphysical path to move away from, the political / realpolitik- I have to constantly find ways of investing *subtlety* or *love*...

#### OUR OWN VOICE

AC\_ That's a really old question of mine and ours and of um...how do we speak when we are not speaking in resistance? in defiance? in explanation? or how do we speak when we are not speaking back? do we even know our own voice...?

FF: ...on our own terms. Definitely. It's a very politically tangible question at this time like is there a productive potentiality that emerges from a language of love...for Arabs...who can love themselves first...and love each other? A love that recognises war and oppression and racism because it's part of our experience, may be not speaking back but speaking to each other about our own, our own experiences...

AC: So, that is actually a potential response to that eternal question?!?! You're suggesting we speak to *each other* but it could also be about... *speaking to yourself*...

FF: yeah...

AC: Not just same / same, but the 'divided self'. There's ground there for exploration as well...

FF: And, speaking back without trying to reconcile the divided self.

AC: What do you mean 'without trying to reconcile'?

[FF: Long silence...]

AC: Remaining divided??

