

Harmonic Reveries: The Intercultural *Significance* of *Lear Dreaming*

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Article abstract

Lear Dreaming (2012) is an offspring of, and sequel to, the (in)famous multi-cultural pan-Asian collage *Lear* (1997), in which director and creator Ong Keng Sen employed a diversity of Asian performance traditions to reimagine and reconceive Shakespeare's tragedy. The soundscape of *Lear Dreaming* reverberates with the (dis)harmonies and dissonance of electronic synth sounds, gamelan music, pipa songs and Korean *jeongak*; it places modernity, tradition, contemporaneity and custom in auditory confrontation. With only one actor surrounded by eight musicians, this acoustic interplay is further interjected with the oral patterns of Noh speech, the musicality of Mandarin Chinese and sonorities of *Bahasa Indonesia*. As a piece of postdramatic "music theatre", I demonstrate how *Lear Dreaming* advances intercultural theatrical practice as a sonic performative. In its interplay of Asian performance cultures in/as sonic space, the production posits an alternative performative mode where the intercultural is the acoustic. This paper critically examines the acoustic strategy employed by Ong and analyses the soundscape of *Lear Dreaming* – the harmonies, harmonics, distortions and discordance – to consider issues of signification, representation, *significance* and the sublime in the performance of Asian inter-culturalisms.

Harmonic Reveries : The Intercultural *Significance* of *Lear Dreaming*

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In Scene 4 (15 : 30)¹ of Singaporean auteur-director Ong Keng Sen's intercultural "music theatre" performance *Lear Dreaming* (2012), four gamelan musicians appear on the stage and sing spiritedly about the deteriorating state of affairs in a kingdom whose ruler (known as the Old Man) has vacated his throne to his Older Daughter and left on a journey with his Loyal Attendant. The gamelan ensemble dance animatedly as they incant a song that censures the Old Man's foolish decision. Like the Fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, whose wisdom contradicts his comic demeanor, the musicians urge the Old Man to return promptly, for something is rotten in his state – "the palace is burning" and the Old Man is "doomed and damned by betrayal".² Accompanied by the ukulele, violin and dulcimer, the lyrics of this song of foreshadowing, sung in *Bahasa Indonesia* by gamelan musician Suyoto Martorejo, counterpoint the atmosphere of revelry engendered by the playful strumming of the ukulele, melodically motivated laughter, upbeat tempo and lively dance. As satire, the musical and lexical tension critically underscore the prevailing theme of both Shakespeare's play and Ong's adaptation, exemplified by a repeated line in the song : "words make fortune and misfortune". A performative response to the interconnected themes of language and love, and the language of love – the signifiers of filial piety, the iconic silence of affection, the indexes of deceit and deception – *Lear Dreaming* abandons words and communicates primarily with music, sonority, sound and song.

Having premiered at the Singapore Arts Festival in 2012 and staged most recently at Théâtre Des Abbesses in Paris, as part of the *Singapour en France - le festival 2015*, *Lear Dreaming* is a radical re-visioning of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and a rejoinder to Ong's critically acclaimed (and critiqued) intercultural spectacle, *Lear* (1997). *Lear* was Ong's first intercultural Shakespeare production that saw the experimentation of different Asian performance traditions, performance languages and ethnic languages; it was a radical dramaturgical strategy set against the conventions of Western intercultural works produced by Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine and Robert Wilson. In a radical re-visioning of *King Lear*, Ong's *Lear* adapts the plot of Shakespeare's play but purposefully rewrites it both syntagmatically and semantically. Under the pen of prominent Japanese playwright Rio Kishida, *Lear* has become "the ultimate Asian tragedy" (Saludo 1999 : n.p.). The performance is most remembered for its collective negotiation and juxtaposition of heterogeneous Asian performance traditions, styles and aesthetics on the stage, and for its performance of discordance and dissonance. While the characters are seemingly 'Shakespeare's and the plot could be traced to that of *King Lear*, Kishida rewrote Shakespeare's text into one of patricide : the Older Daughter (a composite of Goneril and Regan, performed in the style of Beijing Opera), murders the Old Man (*King Lear*, performed in the style of Japanese Noh). Other characters in *Lear* were further transformed into archetypes of Asian cultures : Cordelia, presented as an androgynous Thai *Lakon Fai Nai* dancer, is renamed the Younger Daughter; Gloucester and Kent are reduced collectively to become the Loyal Attendant while Edmund is reinvented as a lascivious Retainer who practices a hybridized contemporary version of *Pancak Silat* (a form of traditional Indonesian martial arts). *Lear* saw the employment of these traditional genres of performance that interacted with modern and stylized performance forms. This intercultural spectacle further challenged the boundaries of conventional modes of performance by having each performer speak and/or sing in their own native tongue (Mandarin, contemporary and Noh-derived Japanese, Bahasa Indonesia, and Thai).

An adaptation of *Lear*'s adapted script, *Lear Dreaming* departs from the dramaturgical complexity of its predecessor and instead communicates a story of "the connection between humanity and power that originates within families" (Porter & Watson 2013 : 89). It does so using various Asian performance traditions including Japanese Noh, Chinese pipa music, Korean court form *jeongak* and Sumatran Minang music-dance-martial-arts theatre *randai*. These are furthermore accompanied by gamelan music and contemporary electronica. In addition, *Lear Dreaming* is spoken in multiple languages : Japanese, Mandarin, Hangzhouese, Bahasa Indonesia and Korean, all translated into English as surtitles on a screen. Discarding most of Shakespeare's plot, except key events, and reducing the text to threadbare themes while reimagining the play in Asia, circumscribed by "Asian" concerns of family, filiation and

fidelity, Ong juxtaposed different acoustic spectrums, sonic signatures and vocalic densities to communicate the intercultural through – and as – acoustic experience. *Lear Dreaming* shifts the performative mode from a visual to an aural involvement with a cacophony of varying frequencies and acoustic densities, transforming Shakespeare’s tragedy of words into a “work of music” (“Director’s Notes”, *Lear Dreaming* programme 2012 : 6).

In this performance of music as the performative vanguard, what is aurally resounding in *Lear Dreaming* is the prevailing dissonance, not just of musical modes, oral patterns, and vocal densities of the performed Asian styles, but of modernity and tradition. The soundscape of *Lear Dreaming* is composed of electronic effects, sound synthesisers and digital drums interjected and, at times, intermixed with the vocal modulations of *utai* (Noh chanting), *bagurindam* (singing in *Randa*) and *jeongak* (Korean court music), the metallic reverberations of gamelan gongs and sharp strums of the pipa. These discordant sounds of cultural difference interact with a “luminous and ultramodern scenography” (Martin-Lahmani 2015 : n.p.), comprised of laser lights and geometrical rays as well as spectacular costumes that resemble science-fiction versions of traditional garments belonging to the performers’ respective disciplines. For example, Naohiko Umewaka, a prominent Noh master performer and scholar who plays the role of the Old Man, was dressed in a costume that resembled a hybrid of the traditional *shozoku* and a modern suit. He also wore a mask, as the *shite* does, but it was distinctly not a conventional *omote*.

The aesthetic juxtaposition, the visual and aural interplay of heterogeneous East Asian and Southeast Asian forms and contemporary modes is intentional because, similar to many of Ong’s intercultural Shakespeare adaptations such as *Desdemona* (2000) and *Search Hamlet* (2002), *Lear Dreaming* is a performance operating at the seams of intersecting cultures and performance traditions, inhabiting “the fault lines of interdisciplinary intercultural work” (Ong in Laera 2013 : 247). For Ong, an “Asian interculturalism” (one that distinguishes itself from the Euro-American models), needs to reject coherence and consistency while foregrounding difference and contradiction, in order to underscore the diversity in a commonly misconstrued or poorly imagined geo-political territory that is “Asia”. Consider how Ong reflects on *Lear Dreaming*, “I was concerned primarily with symbols and representations of new Asia with all their ambivalences” (2014 : 172). This paper, consequently, will consider how *Lear Dreaming* moves beyond visual-spatial metaphors of culture to the construction of an Asian self-image negotiated in and as acoustic space, an image in which culture and “inter-culture” is signified sonically.

In this paper, I will examine the soundscapes of *Lear Dreaming* in order to show how the performance rejects *significations* of Asia. For Ong,

intercultural works are processes of world creation, or *mondialisation* – a term adopted from Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Creation of the World, Or Globalization* (2007) – and not a recirculation of conditions subscribed to by existing signifiers of culture and composition. I will also reflect on the notion of the “sublime” as it comes forth when listening to the varied and contesting musical traditions and sound types. Discussing his vision for the play, Ong describes the experience of *Lear Dreaming* as a necessary journey into a “sublime space” that is beyond intellectualization (in Porter & Watson 2013 : 87). Such a space is a space beyond signification, which Roland Barthes posits as *signifiante* – “a signifier without a signified” ([1971] 1987 : 61). More specifically, I will analyze how *Lear Dreaming* offers an experience of an acoustic sublime and of intercultural experience as *signifiante*.

* * *

With its themes of hauntings, power and the disintegration of the family, *Lear Dreaming* is structured as a sonic dreamscape of memories dreamscape; it performs memory fragments of two of the play’s protagonists : the Old Man , and the Older Daughter. Having betrayed her father, usurped the throne and murdered her sister, the Younger Daughter,³ the Older Daughter is an isolated figure scorned and rejected by those around her. Through music and song, the emotional journey of the Older Daughter is recollected as fragmented memories expressed in melody. Through such moments of affection and estrangement with the Old Man, her ruthless ambition and loneliness are performed as musical interactions and confrontations. Now in his twilight years, devoid of clarity of judgement, respect, power and authority, the emotional trials and travails of the Old Man are presented in the play as symbolic dreamscapes. Discarding temporal unities and narrative coherence, the performance shifts between poignant explorations of memory and psychology to flashbacks of the Old Man’s expulsion, his imagined union with the deceased wife (the Mother), the violent blinding of the Loyal Attendant, and his dramatic death.

Postdramatic in its performative aesthetic, the fractured and fragmented dramaturgy of *Lear Dreaming* seeks to rectify the beautiful whole of his 1997 adaptation, *Lear* . As Ong recounts,

the 1997 production was gorgeous, complete and very material. How can it be so easy to say something so complex? What faces one at the end of life? How can we suggest the salvation, the humanity in a dictator, an authoritarian father, an oppressor? What has been oppressed? The blood lines that continue, the legacies that we inherit, that we resist - how do we open up a discussion without reducing it to a didactic ‘good’ and ‘bad’ judgment? How do we allow resistance to be ambiguous, real and problematic? How do we manifest this ambiguity in the work? (“Director’s Notes”, *Lear Dreaming*

programme 2012 : 6)

Ong's rhetorical litany reveals a desire to escape simplistic binaries and suppositions expressed in, and about, intercultural works. Performing (as) "memory", "the "Asian way" as Ong believes (Ong in Chin 2012), is the solution to Western intercultural modes. This "Asian way" of performance done through memory is Ong's postdramatic approach : "It's abstract. Though more imaginative, it is less realistic" (*ibid.*). Like memory that lacks coherence and linearity, the production's narrative splinters perform a mnemonic of Asian self-images. In this re-examination of Shakespeare's classic tale, the "translation of text into music" (Porter and Watson 2013 : 83) as a measure to cultivate "a shared language" (*ibid.*) between the performers, is also Ong's dramaturgical (and acoustemological) strategy of "performing" Asia for Asian performance traditions have always emphasized the integration of music, song, dance and drama. The rhythmic, tonal and timbral tensions, such as those of the gamelan gongs and Yamanaka's strident electronic sounds, form the musical directive that portrays the Old Man's universe of dreams, memory, and Asian diversity.

The turn to performing the intercultural as sound is not only an attempt to feature the integral nature of music and dance in Asian performing traditions, it is also a desire to express the sublime, a condition where meaning is found in the affective quality of the (acoustic) experience. In an interview, Ong expresses the aesthetic experience of *Lear Dreaming* as a "space that we [go] into, it's like when you're following a singer up to sublime space or a dancer to a sublime space, and for me, *Lear Dreaming* was very much about that. There are spaces that we still cannot intellectualize" (in Porter & Watson 2013 : 87). While the term "sublime", as Ong employs it, remains ambiguous given its many contested understandings in aesthetic philosophy, he seems to be articulating a condition beyond signification, beyond representation – an experience that is unspeakable and inexpressible. Such an understanding seems to be in accord with Lyotard's take on the sublime. Building on Kant's idea of it as a mixed feeling of pleasure and pain in the presence of something with great magnitude, the phenomenon overwhelms the imagination's capacity to comprehend it.⁴ Lyotard extends this notion of the sublime to convey the *differend* – "the encounter of the two 'absolutes' equally 'present' to thought, the absolute whole when it conceives, the absolutely measured when it presents" (1994 [1991] : 123). This "*differend* is to be found at the heart of sublime feeling" (*ibid.*). While Kant's designation indicates an experience of the limits of reason, Lyotard's posits that the *differend* exposes the limits of language games, reason and representation. It is encompassed in the experience of striving to explain something that cannot be expressed, a commingling of pleasure and pain, a desire to "present the fact that the unrepresentable exists" (1984 : 78). In other words, the sublime exceeds rational semiosis and intention, and is expressed in the "dissimilitude

of signs and instances” (Lyotard 1993 : 60).

In *Lear Dreaming*, this sense of the sublime, this experience of intercultural exchange as that which exceeds signification and rational semiosis, finds expression in music and song. Musical affect also offers the possibility of the experience of Barthes’ concept of *signifiance*, or meaning that is “sensually produced” (1975 : 61), attained not by reducing a “Text to a signified, whatever it may be (historical, economic, folkloristic or kerygmatic), but to hold its *signifiance* fully open” (Barthes [1971] 1987 : 141). By *signifiance*, Barthes does not mean “significance” since the former, by definition, cannot be reduced to representation. The concept “seems to open the field of meaning totally, that is infinitely” (*ibid.* : 55), positing a “signifier without a signified” (*ibid.* : 61). Ong’s pursuit of the intercultural is conceived as affect that permits an opening to the infinite and an expression of the intercultural as *signifiance*. Speaking with Margherita Laera, Ong expresses how “emotions could be seen as the lowest common denominator in a transnational environment” (Ong in Laera 2013 : 248). The desire to effect a response can only be achieved through affect, for affect “is very inclusive” (Ong in Laera 2013 : 248). Ong’s intercultural strategy is thus one of musical affect. In so doing, *signifiance* is produced and meaning is freed from the entrapments of diverse cultural signifiers and languages; it is only then that the (acoustic) intercultural is fully experienced.

One of the most affect-laden experiences can be found in the singing performed by the Mother character. Introduced in this performance as an exploration of gender power – the presence of the feminine – and as a response to the absent mother in Shakespeare’s play, Kang Kwon Soon adopts this role in the style of a traditional Korean court musical form : the *jeongak*.⁵ A classical form that literally means “right” or “correct / proper” music (Song 1999 : 43), *jeongak* employs the vocal style of *kagok*, a long lyric song and a genre considered the best of the *jeongak* tradition (Song 1999 : 45). In Scene 6, the Mother is introduced as a solitary ghostly figure who is a thread spinner. Unlike traditional *jeongak* performances, where *kagok* is accompanied by an ensemble of instruments, Kang enters the stage and sings a cappella. Her drawn vowels, extended breath patterns, vocal modulations and vibratos, done in consonance to *u-jo* (or *u* mode) – a gapped pentatonic scale formed on E-flat (*h-u ang jong*) (Rockwell 1972 : 76) – create intense emotion and conjure the haunting and evocative atmosphere of the netherworld. The lyrics of her song, which speak of willows becoming threads as a nightingale spins, become immaterial to the *signifiance* opened in the vocal patterning and fluid densities of Kang’s voice. The meditative singing that “causes the audience’s hearts to be purified of the toxicity of power” (Ong in Porter & Watson 2013 : 86), engendered from Kang’s “expression of emotion from pure voice” (Ong in Porter & Watson 2013 : 86), is an encounter with the acoustic sublime, the *signifiance* lurking in the grain of the voice.

Ong's acoustic intercultural strategy goes beyond the individual parade of Asian traditional sounds. It is found in the soundscape of the performance and particularly in the musical-linguistic tensions *between* the characters. Against the ambient electronic sounds and gamelan reverberations that form contextual sounds and direct the narrative, characters in *Lear Dreaming* interact sonically – meaning is engendered and communicated not merely by what is said but by what is heard sonically in expression, as musicalised speech, or as music. Apart from the Old Man and the Older Daughter who speak in Japanese and Chinese Mandarin (and, at times, in Hangzhounese) respectively, conversations and interactions are portrayed as sonic engagements between sound types and instruments, forms and styles. In Scene 11 (53 : 25), for example, the blinding of the Loyal Attendant is accomplished by the Older Daughter plucking aggressively on her pipa to variations on a popular folk tune *Month where Lights Are Ablaze* (*deng yue jiao hui*).⁶ Here the violence is realized sonically. Even when characters speak, it is the (differing) musicalities and tonal qualities of their language that perform : Japanese spoken in the registers of Noh *utai* – slow, deep, basal and paced – and Chinese Mandarin with its four-tone structure or *sheng diao* in an interplay of difference and division. The most evident examples of such a vocalic interplay belongs to the conversations between the Old Man and the Older Daughter. In Scene 2 (see 04 : 10), after his Loyal Attendant confronts the Older Daughter and sings a song warning of her treachery and wickedness, the Old Man moves slowly onto the stage in the characteristic Noh style of *suriashi*. With ominous tensions created from the increasing tempo of violin strings pulled across a single note, the Old Man relates how he was awakened from the “sleep of the dead” and questions who he was long ago. In silent response, the Older Daughter plays a mellifluous tune on her pipa, plucking in *tantiao* pattern, a style intended to produce a full and bright tonality. This method involves only the use of the index finger and thumb to strike the strings in an alternating outward and inward manner. The tune is performed in the *wu* style or martial style, presumably with dramatic intention, a pattern that is more rhythmic, vigorous and aggressive and often used in traditional pipa pieces to depict war scenes. It features faster tempi and percussive textures, punctuated by hard plucks and strums of the strings (see Myers 1992 : 32). In addition to such a style of play, Wu in conversation reveals that her pipa had been tuned to lower registers that were more akin to those played in the Tang dynasty (Wu 2015). This was also done intentionally to match the Old Man's deep basal vocalities. The result of such an aggressive playing pattern and deeper vibrations is a vivid portrait of the ambition and strength of the Older Daughter.

Surtitles on the screen appear and one is led to recognize that the tune has replaced her voice; music has become speech and a sign of her being. The pipa music is the Older Daughter and the tunes are her expression of emotion and intention. The Older Daughter further

articulates, through melody, her undying loyalty to “[t]he being who created [her]”. There is then a subsequent shift in tonal radiance, a consequence of the altered playing technique, to that of *lunzhi*. This technique involves the use of all five fingers striking the strings in a successive and circular fashion. It is a method used to express the lyric tune and produces a distinct tonal quality that is often implemented to emphasize important segments in a song. The increased intensity in mood this causes signifies the Older Daughter’s three inner selves of obedience, purity, and innocence. In this extended tune that sees changes in the tonal quality created by the changing patterns of play, the Older Daughter turns flattery into harmony as she further expresses her disdain for the Younger Daughter who only “keeps silent”. Silence becomes an evident feature in the performance, particularly at this juncture, for it becomes an indexical sign of the absent Cordelia who is markedly present in spirit though never seen materially on stage apart from a poignant scene (Scene 13) where the Old Man carries a bound white cloth across his forearms as he moves slowly toward the audience. The white cloth is distinctly symbolic of the murdered Younger Daughter, for in *Lear* (1997) the Younger Daughter is dressed in an all-white outfit, with a headgear similar to a turban; in the scene of her murder, this white turban is unwound by the Older Daughter’s lover, the Retainer, and used to smother her.

This scene underscores the pervasive presence of silence and of the failure of language. What is memorable in this musical-dramatic exchange, the first encounter of the primary characters in the play, is the aurality of the performance. The multilingual aesthetic, the conversations of musicalities and musical forms, exemplify the ways in which, as seen in Shakespeare’s play, words are dislocated signs and empty signifiers as they do not gesture to the signifieds of love and filial piety. The decision to have the Older Daughter converse with music gestures to the possibility of music’s affective quality and its *significance*. The distinctive modulations and tremolos of nylon strings in vibration *become* the Older Daughter : her actions, intentions and her psychology *are* the music she plays. It is also in the basal reverbs of Umewaka’s chant patterns where intention and emotion are communicated, not merely in what is said. The relationship between the Older Daughter and the Old Man is therefore conveyed primarily as sonorities and timbral quality; the acoustic schisms and incongruence reify the fragmented relationship between father and daughter.

If the sublime is that which is inexpressible, it shares many qualities with silence – a phenomenon prevalent in both Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and Ong’s adaptation. Silence is a present absence and a haunting reverberation that is itself *significance*. The differing languages, both linguistic and aesthetic (musical), the clashing sonicities, and the resultant discordance in sonority and sense, exemplify the failure of signification. In their sonic intersections and confrontations, these sounds open the

space of silence which can then be heard. In the first encounter between the Old Man and the Older Daughter, which I described earlier, one can posit that music, if considered as sign, with its accompanying semantics of emotional tenor and register, fails to signify “truth” as meaning – of familial love and piety. With the Older Daughter’s pipa tunes, there is an infinite play of (empty) signifiers since the relationship between the tunes – their patterns of play, tempi, timbral quality, musical lyricism – and the screened surtitles are completely arbitrary; musical sounds, as notes performed, gesture to linguistic signifiers that are themselves dislocated signs. This double dislocation underscores the recurring importance of silence as that which, perhaps, is the only means of comprehending an emotional truth – the love between a daughter and her father is found not in sound and speech but in silence, a sublime silence in which meaning is revealed.

Silence features strongly in the play, for at the closing moments of the first scene the Old Man expresses his desire to take a journey and proceeds to ask what gifts both his daughters would present to him; it is a reenactment of one of Shakespeare’s better known scenes. The Older Daughter responds by plucking a spritely tune and delivers him “words of promise” in Hangzhounese; the absent Younger Daughter remains silent – a “silence [that] denotes endless darkness”; there is no interlocutor to utter words of affection and no frequency that vibrates with signifiers of love. Hearing this silent absence, the Old Man disavows his Younger Daughter, much to the delight of the Older Daughter. The Loyal Attendant chants lamentably as the dark tonalities of minang folk singing counterpoint with the pipa’s major melodic mode. The soundscape of interweaving minang chants and pipa tune, suffused with the supporting sounds of the gamelan and electronica, reify the silence that is beyond signification; words and music deceive. The condition where “truth” is located is found in the silence made audible from the inter-playing sounds. Loyalty, love and filial piety are found in the sublime silence – the *signifiance* – that is heard beneath the din of discordance.

Music, according to Simon Frith, “seems to be the key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective” (Frith 1996 : 110). If so, what Asian self-identity is heard in the collusion and collision of nationally and culturally appropriated sounds and sonorities? Unlike *Lear*, which was intentionally political and regarded commonly as an exploration in “[t]he politics of intercultural negotiations among Asians” (Ong in Laera 2013 : 244), *Lear Dreaming* is “more concerned with the complexities of human nature, the ambiguities of resistance and our ambivalence towards dictators” (*ibid.*). Ong posits that *Lear Dreaming* is not about “broad political statements” (*ibid.*), either of inter-nationalisms or inter-culturalisms, but rather about “‘this’ father and ‘this’ daughter” (*ibid.*). While one can certainly appreciate Ong’s desire to evade the hostile terrain of cultural and identity politics and transcend the disputes of cultural authority

and authenticity, one is left to wonder if the production inevitably subscribes to these inescapable tensions through the performance of its aesthetics. Is it possible to dream of an intercultural work *sans* politics?

In the introduction to *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures* (2014), Erika Fischer-Lichte asserts that the intercultural is necessarily political, for “in all cases of ‘intercultural theatre’, there is always also a political angle to the aesthetic, as the issues of cultural ownership clearly reveals” (Fischer-Lichte *et al.* 2014 : 10). Displaying cultures on the stage and featuring the preeminent modes of performance traditions always already is a political oeuvre, for art in such cases inexorably becomes signifiers of difference (or similarity). In the defining political economies of today, art and culture necessarily become appropriated as national (and nationalistic) signifiers; their significations are most salient in a consumer economy that yearns insatiably for difference in similarity (and similarity in difference), where cultural entertainment is concerned. The traversing performances that partake of the transnational experience, for example those on the global festival circuit, necessarily and always already are political, for the cultural forms performed on an international stage become signifiers of Otherness, of “them” and “us” when perceived in and as performance.

From this perspective, *Lear Dreaming* can easily be read as a sign-text of “Asia” in modernity with Asian traditions appearing in contemporary transformation. In a way it can be seen as a parade of Asia’s soft power. Noh (or Nōgaku) is arguably the next most globally known artform of traditional Japan, second to Kabuki. The enigmatic form engendered from strict ritual, custom and religion existing for over 700 years has not only attained UNESCO’s title of “Intangible Cultural Heritage” but also gained an international following, particularly with Western artists and scholars who are drawn to its difference and exoticness. Noh Masters are also few in number, which is why Naohiko Umewaka’s presence in playing the Old Man is important. The weight of cultural reputation becomes salient in light of the fact that the actor comes from a family lineage of the Kanze School which has performed Noh for over six hundred years; his father is the legendary Noh Master Naoyoshi Umewaka. The Chinese lute, the pipa, is also China’s national (musical) symbol. In the early to mid-1900s, in the face of growing Western influence, the Chinese sought to “reform” the pipa to more contemporary structures and playing styles. In that metamorphosis was the lute’s embodiment of tradition in modernity. The pipa was appropriated by nationalist agendas and became inscribed with a national-acoustic identity. As James Milward observes, “[t]he pipa is now the favorite example Chinese commentators on the subject use of a successful reform of a national (*minzu*) instrument [...] [It] is the most Chinese of instruments [...]” (Milward 2013 : n.p.).⁷ Wu Man is an important contemporary figure in the pipa tradition, and internationally “renowned virtuosic pipa performer” (“Biographies”, *Lear Dreaming* Programme Notes : 9) who is known for

having popularized the pipa in the West, playing not only the traditional repertoire of the *Pudong*⁸ school but also experimenting and collaborating with contemporary musicians such as Yo-Yo Ma, David Zinman and Yui Bashmet. Her hybrid compositions reverberate with contemporary rhythms and styles interwoven with the distinct nylon twangs of the pipa strings. Finally, while *jeongak* and *kagok* do not resound with such global popularity as Noh theatre and pipa music, they nonetheless belong to a nationally fostered musical heritage of Korea as distinct performance forms actively promoted by the South Korean government. *Kagok*, like the popular Korean vocal music tradition *pansori*, is listed as an “Intangible Cultural Property of Korea” by South Korea’s Cultural Heritage Administration.

Such a political signification of Asian cultural “superpowers” on parade is recognizably evident and inevitable; a politicized textuality of the power relations between nationalized forms is equally (and easily) conceivable. In his review of the performance, Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco asks if it is “purely incidental that the Old Man (performed by a Japanese) is a tyrant and an aggressor and that the wife (performed by the Korean chanter) is submissive, or that the Chinese player is power hungry?” (Tiatco 2013 : 536). A deeper exploration (and listening) into the interstices of the interacting traditions, however, can reveal *Lear Dreaming* to be a performance of Asia understood as an embodiment of both difference and similarity : past and present, “East” and “West”, contemporary and traditional. It is an Asia that rejects (simplistic) representations in the way that the performance sought to continually interrogate significations and signifiers, either as speech or music. With the visual and acoustic texts in confrontational interplay, as well as the discordant frequencies of the diverse sound cultures, *Lear Dreaming* can be said to have performed a “fractured” politics of new Asia, one that is diverse, dissimilar and unrepresentable, consisting of signifiers without signifieds.

This Asia that defies representation is most evident in Scene 8 where the Old Man returns to his home to find that the Older Daughter now sits on his throne. It is a scene performed as a dreamscape and reminiscent of an identical exchange in 1997’s *Lear*. To the invigorative and rhythmic drumming of the *gandang sarunai*, a two-headed drum, and sharp resonances of the *sarunai*, a short bamboo flute used in *randai*, the older daughter appears on stage and “speaks” with her pipa tune played in the energetic martial style (*wu*); *hanzi* (Chinese characters) simultaneously appear on a large screen behind. The word “father” flashes on the screen and subsequently metamorphoses into “kill”. Wu’s tune is a variation on a popular pipa folk tune of the *Pudong* school *The King of Chu Doffs his Armour* (*ba wang xie jia*). While the energetic and “masculine” tune depicts the King of Chu’s defeat in battle in 202 B.C., along with the dejection that followed, the song played here expresses the emotional conditions of the Old Man even though it is the voice of

the Older Daughter. Almost poetically consonant with the deconstructed words on screen, the Old Man enters stage right accompanied by the Loyal Attendant who chants words of caution: “lies create death” (33 : 58). As this happens, *hanzi* characters metamorphose from “*yan*” (eyes), “*ming*” (bright) to “*meng*” (dream). A chorus of voices, performed by the gamelan musicians, consonant with the *randai* theatrical tradition, sing of how “the king is stupid [...] unable to recognise silence of the body and voice”. They caution that “speaking is poisonous. Speaking is powerful. Words triumph”. The haunting tunes of the chorus reify the prevalent concern about the power of words and speech as representation; linguistic signs as forms of representation distort reality. It recalls the importance of silence (of the body and the voice), the mutability and instability of the (linguistic) sign as signifier, in perceiving “truth” and its unspeakable aspect. More *hanzi* appear on the screen with “*hui*” (Return) becoming deconstructed as spinning boxes which then fall “off” the screen. As the Older Daughter asserts her usurped authority over the Old Man and casts him into the stables, the screen converses with the words “*wang*” (King), “*sheng*” (Born), “*zhu*” (Master), “*yu*” (Jade), then “*guo*” (Country). With the addition and removal of strokes, the Chinese characters morph from “King” to “Country” and back again. The soundscape reverberates with deep thunderous effects of electronica while the Chinese character “*li*” (Strength) falls diagonally across the screen and “shatters”; “*si*” (Death) appears and replaces the fallen character.

The poignant scene can be read as metaphorical ascriptions of Asian identities and representations of Asia. Visually, the deconstruction of Chinese characters performs a literal fracture, fragmentation, undoing and re-making of meaning in (metamorphosed) form. It enacts, distinctly, the instability of signs and underscores the shifting semantics of language games : the logograms demonstrate the dislocation of language as representation by displaying how an addition, removal or repositioning of a stroke alters meaning or evokes associative meanings in the context of the Old Man’s tragedy. Metaphorically, the scene gestures to the instabilities of Asian identities commonly ascribed as an imagined collective, monolithic and homogenous Other to the modern West. The “hybrid” and “hyper-modern” costumes, designed by Mitsushi Yanaihara, emphasize further the resistance to such misconceptions of Asia through stylized designs that accentuate both the traditional and the modern collocated in apparel. The visual frame, then, “support[s] the complex musical underscoring of the entire piece” (Porter & Watson 2013 : 89). The soundscape resists a “fusion sound culture” (Seidler 2003 : 407) but amplifies the discordance and dissonance as a performance of distinct Asian identities which are negotiated in acoustic space. The acoustic strategy of dissonance and dramaturgical strategy of discordance vividly perform Ong’s “fault lines” where the intercultural is not a “seamless fluidity” (Ong in Laera 2015 : 167-8) but multivalent, complicated and confounding. In many ways, *Lear Dreaming* is a performative resistance

to representations and significations of intra-Asian performance practices as immutable, “time-honored” traditions. Instead it demonstrates their adaptability while opening the space for multiplicity, mutability and change. As a political statement, Asia is and should be comprehended in and as the interstices of difference. It is, as Homi Bhabha purports, “in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (Bhabha 1994 : 2).

Lear Dreaming reflects Ong’s approach to performing Asia in a globalized state : it is a performance of the spaces-between, engendered by fault lines and discordance of “plurality and multiplicity” (Ong in Laera 2015 : 169). The performance is marked by “decontextualizing and recontextualizing to create a particular world onstage” (*ibid.*). Here Ong alludes to Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of *la mondialisation* as a reactive condition to globalization. In *The Sense of the World* (1997 [1993]), Nancy claims that “There is no longer any world [...] There is no longer any sense of the world” (1997 : 4). By this, he believes that we have arrived at an era that has lost its capacity to create worlds because there is a loss of assignable signification. We have already encompassed the world in our ability to ascribe signification. There is thus a crisis of sense and signification or of objective representation. Nancy intensifies this argument in *The Creation of the World, Or Globalization* (2007) by showing how globalization exacerbates the decay of views, certainties and identities of the world and of man (Meurs *et al.* 2009 : 31). Globalization “leaves us with a profound nihilism concerning the direction or the sense of the world” (*ibid.* : 34) because globalization destroys the world; there is nothing left to discover and there is a non-knowledge regarding what to do with this world that has been discovered. As François Raffoul and David Pettigrew explain in the translator’s note to Nancy’s work, “Globality does not open a path, a way, or a direction, a possibility; rather, it furiously turns on itself and exacerbates itself as the blind technological and economical exploitation, on its absence of perspective and orientation” (2007 : 3). There is only “a world without another” (Nancy 2007 : 43). The “world has lost its capacity to form a world [*faire monde*]” (*ibid.* : 34). Nancy thus urges for *mondialisation*, that is, for “world-forming” (*ibid.* : 44) as a reaction to globalization. *Mondialisation* is a determination of the world that recognizes the failure of signification (capitalism, capitalization of views) and an avoidance of the recourse to representations. It is the comprehension of the world through creation – a creation out of nothing, a “*nothing* growing as *something*” (Nancy 2007 : 51). To inhabit this condition of *mondialisation* is to enter the worldhood of the world, “the way in which the world symbolizes in itself with itself, in which it articulates itself by making a circulation of meaning possible without reference to another world” (*ibid.* : 53).

Discarding Nancy’s philosophical complexities, Ong adopts the

concept of “creating worlds” as a process of locating artists in a common space of performance and rehearsal where a “cultural, emotional, physical, spiritual world” (Ong in Laera 2015 : 168) is created, one where “everybody is actually shaping it, even the nuts and bolts of deciding how they want to be positioned in that space” (*ibid.*). For Ong, performance globalization is characterized by authorship; *mondialisation* redresses that tendency in intercultural theatre through a collaborative process of world creations on the stage, one that “would invite participants to engage without the need of ‘directing’ them and telling them how to engage” (Ong in Laera 2015 : 175). This method is marked by the shared interstice and “in-betweenness” of diverse traditions, forms, styles and sounds. Perhaps, without realization, Ong’s distinct underscoring of resistance to representations (of Asia, Asian identities, traditions, etc.), along with the performance of confusion and confrontation, aspires to Nancy’s philosophy of *mondialisation* as a worldhood of the world that resists references to “other” worlds. It is an attempt to understand the “outside” which entails an exclusion of structured representations. As Ong states regarding the intercultural experience,

The intercultural space is a space where all of us have to leave our comfort zone to go somewhere else and intercultural space is for me a space where in a sense we actually become equalized as much as possible because we are equally outside. No one is inside, in a way, we are all outsider and we deal with that difficulty (Ong in Porter & Watson : 82)

Ong’s intercultural philosophy of the “outside” space as a space of “equalizing” and “equality” echoes Fischer-Lichte’s concept of “interweaving”. In *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures*, Fischer-Lichte posits that the term “intercultural” is now inescapably laden with the burden of post/colonialism. The binaries that characterize postcolonial criticism continually haunt the creation and critique of intercultural works. She thus proposes that “interweaving” cultures become the new paradigm and a dramaturgical strategy to move “beyond postcolonialism”.⁹ For Fischer-Lichte, performances that “interweave” cultures can become experimental frameworks for experiences of “the utopian potential of culturally diverse and globalized societies” (2014 : 11), particularly through a “realizing [of] an aesthetic which gives shape to unprecedented collaborative policies in society” (*ibid.*). Thus, she writes,

[b]y interweaving performance cultures without negating or homogenizing differences but permanently de/stabilizing and thus invalidating their authoritative claims to authenticity, performances, as sites of in-betweenness, are able to constitute fundamentally other, unprecedented realities – realities of the future, where *the state of being in-between describes the ‘normal’ experience of the citizens of this world* (2014 : 12. My own emphasis.)

Is inhabiting this “site of in-betweenness”, as a means of comprehending inter-culturalism on (and off) the stage, possible considering its theoretical abstraction? Ong’s dramaturgies of dissonance are an

attempt to place the audience in these sites, to listen to the acoustemologies of (cultural) difference and discordant frequencies. Yet such audial experiences are often reactively confounding and challenging. Neurologically, dissonant musical chords interfere with one's innate sense of "harmony," and recent neuroscientific studies conducted at the Université de Montréal have suggested that it is the incompleteness of the harmonicity of consonant intervals that leads to a general rejection of dissonant musical structures. Posited in the study is the view that the brain enjoys consonance as the frequencies yield whole-number multiples, but when such multiples are not achieved in the harmonic intervals with regular and consistent relationships, there is an innate rejection of such sounds (see Cousineau *et al.* 2012).

The general reception of Ong's intercultural works, post-*Lear*, have been negative or lukewarm, particularly in Ong's home country as dissonance is disconcerting and spaces in-between, as material experience, remain indeterminate. Reflecting on *Desdemona* (2002), Ong believes that the strongly negative reaction was a consequence of the work being "ahead of its time" (Ong in Laera 2015 : 170) and audiences were not ready for a dramaturgy that would complicate and confound "seamless fluidity" (*ibid.*). Ong's opinion exemplifies the neuroscientific studies of dissonance : there is an act of "innate" rejection. Response to *Lear Dreaming*, in Singapore, was more positive but hardly overwhelming. While reviewers could appreciate the musical sophistication, multi-sensory quality and display of Asian traditions, some found the performance lacking in direction or meaning (Kapadia 2012; Tiatco 2013). Yet dissonance can be appreciated as a learned condition, as Diana Deutsch suggests while observing how modern rock music intentionally introduces roughness and dissonance much to the increasing delight of fans today (in Ball 2012 : n.p.). Consequently, *Lear Dreaming* challenges the audience to an attentive listening to the frequencies *between* oral and musical traditions that meet, intersect and, at certain moments, connect. It questions, through its performative acoustics, concepts of Asia and "Asianness" in contemporary globalizations, and posits the need to listen to worlds as it seeks to create new inter-cultural acoustemologies. Therein lies the *significance* that is not merely affect and emotion but the acoustic experience of Asian inter-culturalisms in and as *mondialisation* – forming worlds of signifiers without signifieds.

Notes

1. The complete performance can be found on the MIT Global Shakespeares portal, <http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/lear-dreaming-ong-keng-sen-2012/>
2. See 15:30 to 17:51 of the aforementioned video.
3. This episode was performed in the 1997 production of *Lear* but is omitted in this one. *Lear Dreaming*, at times, replays fragments from *Lear*, and at others is performed as a sequel to *Lear*.
4. See Kant, "Analytic of the Sublime" in *Critique of Judgement*, §25, 250 (1987).

5. It is also sometimes romanized as jeongga, chǒnggak or jungga.
6. I am indebted to Samantha Chua for assisting with the identification of pipa tunes in the play.
7. See Milward's paper, "The Pipa : How a Barbarian Lute Became a National Symbol", for a discussion of the transformations of the pipa and its appropriation as a national symbol.
8. *Pudong* is a district in Shanghai, China. In the developmental history of pipa music, there emerged different schools of playing, each with a different style. In the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), there were two major schools of pipa but these further developed into five main schools : *Wuxi, Pinghu, Chongming, Shanghai, and Pudong*. See Myers : 5-31.
9. This phrase is part of the book's title.

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Abstract

Lear Dreaming (2012) is an offspring of, and sequel to, the (in)famous multi-cultural pan-Asian collage *Lear* (1997), in which director and creator Ong Keng Sen employed a diversity of Asian performance traditions to reimagine and reconceive Shakespeare's tragedy. The soundscape of *Lear Dreaming* reverberates with the (dis)harmonies and dissonance of electronic synth sounds, gamelan music, pipa songs and Korean *jeongak*; it places modernity, tradition, contemporaneity and custom in auditory confrontation. With only one actor surrounded by eight musicians, this acoustic interplay is further interjected with the oral patterns of Noh speech, the musicality of Mandarin Chinese and sonorities of *Bahasa Indonesia*. As a piece of postdramatic "music theatre", I demonstrate how *Lear Dreaming* advances intercultural theatrical practice as a sonic performative. In its interplay of Asian performance cultures in/as sonic space, the production posits an alternative performative mode where the intercultural is the acoustic. This paper critically examines the acoustic strategy employed by Ong and analyses the soundscape of *Lear Dreaming* – the harmonies, harmonics, distortions and discordance – to consider issues of signification, representation, *significance* and the sublime in the performance of Asian inter-culturalisms.

Keywords : Significance; Interculturalism; Asian Shakespeare; Mondialisation; Ong Keng Sen.

Résumé

Lear Dreaming (2012) est à la fois un retour et une suite de *Lear* (1997), œuvre notoire du dramaturge Ong Keng Sen. Il s'agit d'une pièce employant une diversité de styles et de performances qui tiennent lieu de la diversité asiatique tout en réinventant la célèbre tragédie de Shakespeare. L'espace sonore de *Lear Dreaming* résonne avec des (dis)harmonies et des dissonances de toutes sortes: synthétiseurs électroniques, gamelan, pièces pour pipa, et musique *jeongak*. À travers la matière sonore, traditions et coutumes anciennes, modernité et contemporanéité sont confrontées l'une à l'autre. Alors qu'un seul acteur est accompagné de huit musiciens le jeu avec la dimension sonore se manifeste aussi par le langage et la voix: structures de l'énonciation propres au théâtre Nô, musicalité de la langue mandarin, sonorités du bahasa, la langue indonésienne. Œuvre postdramatique et théâtre musical à la fois, *Lear Dreaming* défend une conception interculturelle du théâtre comme performance sonore. Cet article analyse la pièce de Ong Keng Sen afin de montrer comment le dramaturge utilise la dimension sonore pour représenter l'Asie de manière interculturelle. Nous offrons un examen critique de l'ensemble de l'espace sonore – avec ses harmonies, ses harmoniques, sa distorsion, ses dissonances – dans le but de mettre au jour le jeu de la signification, de la représentation, de la *signifiante*, et du sublime dans cette performance interculturelle de l'Asie.

Mots-clés : Signifiante; interculturelisme; Shakespeare asiatique; mondialisation; Ong Keng Sen.

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