

Root Map: *Embracing the Border as Method*

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Abstract

The year 2015 began with the greatest number of displaced people across the globe since the Second World War. More than ever, those of us who have lacked the luxury of a place to call “home” yearn for stories and performances that connect us across conflicted borders. In response to this global crisis, I joined forces with a group of international performing artists, whose work centers around topics of migration and crossing cultural barriers. On that project, I got to know Dr. Debaroti Chakraborty. Together we co-formed a performing-arts collective with whom we have, to date, created eight multilingual plays and performance pieces that grapple with border topics and forge profound cross-cultural connections. We tour our shows to multiple sites of border strife. In each location, we invite community members to share their stories so that we might pay them homage on stage, thus evolving our project as we move through diverse communities. As we travel, our stories, our language(s), and the very rhythms of our lives intersect and deepen. “*Root Map: Embracing the Border as Method*” is an exploration of one in a series of methods that Dr. Chakraborty and I have developed to engage with intercultural performance practice. This article serves as a methodological case study of our first collaborative project, *Root Map*. Via Praxis as Research (PAR), “*Root Map: Embracing the Border as Method*” argues that, in order to connect people across cultural and national borders, we must embrace performative realities that emerge from the rhythms of migration, diaspora and border spaces.

Introduction

This article will present a single case study of a collaboratively created intercultural play called *Root Map* and how this project exemplifies the engagement of a particular method of intercultural performance creation. Because of the migratory state of our production, it was during *Root Map* that we began to discover overlapping and shared series of border and migration-related impulses, images, and ideas. In this article, I will outline our process of creating *Root Map*. I will describe how our process and ever-evolving performances embodied the spirit of the migratory paths and border spaces in and from which it was created. I will outline how our process of cross-border co-creation and performance taught us to follow a now primary first step in our outlined methodology: to embrace and accept the border as a method and to embrace/surrender to the (sur)reality of transit/migration as (dis)organizing principle of performance.



Figure 1– Somdutta Roy, *Root Map*, Kolkata, 2016 (left)



Figure 2– Rosalie Purvis, *Root Map*, Ithaca, 2017 (right)

In order to do so, I will outline the process of creating and touring the project. I will describe how particular attributes of the border space emerged within the creation of the piece, and

how each of these resonated within an emerging tradition of border-based performance. I will also describe how the dominant structure of the border and the migratory perspective create an affective, theoretical, technical, aesthetic, and narrative lens.

Prologue: Somdutta Sings at the Border

This is the moment the border sheltered me. Or maybe this was the moment I crossed the border. Or maybe this was the moment I stood, suspended on the border, leaned into the border, and sought respite. I stood on one side of the wall of boxes we had created to represent a border wall. On the other side, Somdutta Roi sang her song. The melody rose over the wall, Bangla lyrics greeted me more resonantly than words in my own language, unencumbered and intimate, superseding their own “meaning,” bonding me to Somdutta.

Somdutta, though we had never spoken, was deeply familiar from the moment our eyes locked across the room and she smiled at me.

I had watched her settle into the room, onto the small rug, wrapped in her shawls. I had noticed the way she had arranged each shawl with the fluent, locally tacit language of draping, so new to me.

And now I heard her sing.

I couldn't see her now, as this wall stood between us. Yet I thought of laying my face in her skirts and weeping, but we had never spoken. The border of language. I laid my cheek against the wall and closed my eyes. This was the closest I could get to her. I wept into the wall.

The wall itself was familiar, reminding me of all the border walls I had contemplated, touched, dreamed of, wept over.

As this makeshift wall could not actually take my weight, I feigned leaning. This wall, like so many others, was symbolic, yet conjured the sublimated tears of memory, of separation, of search and longing.

Here, on stage, by this replica of all the borders we could envision, we were not alone in our respective exiles. Here we were free to weep for the borders together.

Root Map – Background

In the spring of 2016, I received a message that would change the course of my life. I was working on my PhD in Performance Studies at the time, and the message came from my academic advisor at Cornell University, Dr. Debra Castillo, inviting me to join forces with a group of international theatre practitioners to co-write a play about migration, and then to take this play on tour to several national borders. For this project, five of us on the American side, hailing from four respective continents, would partner with a group of Kolkata-based performing artists. We would collaboratively write the play via email and Skype. Then, in order to stage the play, we would all meet in India.

I jumped at the opportunity, and indeed we wrote and performed our play, the process of which I will describe in this article. What I did not know when I received that initial message was that this one project would prove the first of many collaborations between me and these performers in Kolkata, particularly Dr. Debaroti Chakraborty. After twenty years of directing and performing in and around NYC, I found my artistic home halfway across the world, in South Kolkata. Over the past four years, Debaroti and I have staged six projects together, all of which grapple with migration, borders, comparative diaspora, interlingualism and the very intimate losses and gains of living in cultural multiplicity.

Creating Performance Through the Lens of the Border

Collaborating on *Root Map* prompted us to delve into the spaces of borders and migration that have shaped and continue to shape our lives. To this day, when Debaroti and I create performance relating to migration and/or borders, aspects of transit, division, and hybridity shape both our process and our aesthetic. Our work wholly observes and

incorporates the multi-faceted reality of migration and transit. This means that, in our work, we do not seek to remedy the ambiguity, the foreignness, the culture shock, the innate complexity of uprootedness. Instead, we absorb these elements into the very blood and bones of our work. Rustom Bharucha (2000) often says that intercultural performance tends to begin with “the trauma of having to obtain a visa” (30). This was certainly so for our *Root Map* collective, as we encountered a range of obstacles to cross-national mobility. Other defining features of our collaborative border space: distortion of online communication, travel fatigue, linguistic disorientation, and the unpredictability of always being in a state of movement and/or a space deemed a no-man’s land. All of these elements shape our lives, our process and, by extension, our creative process. We cannot fully address migration and border crossing if we deny the pragmatic and aesthetic impact these experiences have on our work.

At the same time, it never ceases to amaze me how profoundly we find ourselves connecting on and through borders when we center them in our performance work. Stripped of parts of, if not all of, our languages, we resort to non-rote, unhabitual ways to convey and communicate. Inhibitions fall away. The whole body tends to awaken to the act of translation as we find ourselves moving, gesturing, and perhaps even singing to communicate. Unhindered by our cultural shells, we somehow tell each other things we might have never told anyone in our own language. Ultimately, while we tend to fixate on it as an obstacle, in many ways, the border also represents an unfettered state, a space of deepened truth. The very process of crafting performance in and about migration offers us opportunities to deconstruct and shift the violent performativity of national borders and to generate productive models of reimagining the possibilities of a global existence. In a global political climate that hardens national and cultural borders, we aim to transform borders from sites of conflict and terror to productive spaces of intimate understanding.

Intercultural Performance Practice and Theory

Engaging *Root Map* as a case study, this article will speak to a particularly salient method of intercultural performance practice: embracing the lens of borders and migratory spaces as “gaze” and organizing principle. In order to identify and analyze this method, I

have turned, first and foremost, to the perspectives of my collaborators, especially my primary collaborator, my partner in all my work, be it performance, pedagogy, or scholarship: Debaroti Chakraborty. In addition, I credit the now thirteen-year-old Totini Mukherjee for her artful and sophisticated explanations of culture, language, and mythology, without which many pathways to intercultural understanding would have remained closed. In this sense, I consider her teachings to be a largely uncite-able primary text that has provided a foundation for my own process in creating intercultural performance practice, particularly in India.

One of my primary theoretical role models in the pursuit of intercultural performance is Rustom Bharucha, who has written extensively on the complexity of border crossing in performance. His work takes on numerous examples of Western performing artists who have claimed to create intercultural works of performance, particularly in his own native land of India, but who, instead, have used and abused Indian culture as their own spiritual-artistic amusement park. On the one hand, I engage with his work as a collection of cautionary tales for me, as a Western artist. I have pored over his detailed explanations of how intercultural rifts develop, from the perspective of his own nation's border conflicts, and how this can expose potential pitfalls into the intercultural artistic process.

Furthermore, Gloria Anzaldúa's (2012) *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, provides my most generative example of a text that embodies a border aesthetic and structure. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* has gifted me a model not only for how to write or create work about borders, but also for how to hold space for the border itself to dictate the very shape and genre of the work. In addition, her essays, in particular her process writing, offer additional metacognitive support to the process of creating a style of border text that resonates with me as authentic to my own experience of borders.

Finally, José Muñoz (2000) offers perspectives on “flipping the lens” from majoritarian to minoritarian identity. In creating performance, Debaroti and I utilize this theoretical intervention as a practical one, continuously questioning what “gaze” is governing our creative impulses. Often, we discover that, while this view is partially inauthentic to our

reality, we work encumbered by a pressure from a gaze that is not our own: a male gaze, a heteronormative gaze, a white gaze, or a colonialist/colonized gaze. Most importantly, the migratory process and the border itself offers a radically different lens than the default assumption of mono-culturalism and colonialist culture as superior. Part of our striving for intercultural collaboration involves “relensing” our perspective to honor the gaze from the migratory journey and from the border, itself.

In my collaborations with Debaroti and my colleagues in Kolkata, we aspire to the ephemeral goal of intercultural collaboration. The word “intercultural” has proven a challenging term to define. In his 2016 talk in Zagreb published in *Rethinking Interculturalism*, Rustom Bharucha sets the term against the oft used term “multicultural.” Comparing the terms helps to clarify “interculturalism.” As Bharucha points out, *multiculturalism* means that *multiple* cultures exist alongside one another. However, “multi” simply indicates this multiplicity but does not speak to whether any engagement exists among those multiple cultures. This is one reason that the goal of multiculturalism has proven insufficient to, on any level, resolve or even acknowledge cultural strife. Simply gathering representation of multiple cultures into a single space meets nothing but a cosmetic goal and, when one investigates the impact of cultural inequity innate to most multicultural environments, sets the stage for tokenism and other toxic systems.

In contrast to “multiculturalism,” “interculturalism” speaks to interactivity between cultural groups. Idealistically, Debaroti and I aspire to the creation of work that is intercultural both in terms of process and product. Even more idealistically, we aspire to our intercultural collaborations yielding positive outcomes, such as confronting inequality and nurturing connection and compassion between otherwise separate or even divided cultural groups. Unfortunately, one encounters many obstacles on the road to interculturalism. Some of these obstacles are geographic, as in the physical distances that separate us. Other obstacles are economic, such as prohibitive costs of travel or unreliable internet connectivity. Some of these obstacles are political, as in the restricted mobility between various nations and territories. Other obstacles to interculturalism might be

linguistic, cultural, aesthetic, and ideological, and these can intersect, and manifest in both overt or covert ways.

In his talk, Bharucha also emphasizes that intercultural performance is “at once necessary and impossible.” While we agree that interculturalism may ultimately prove impossible to achieve, Debaroti and I continuously travel towards it. Perhaps Bharucha is right that interculturalism is “impossible” and thus perhaps even the word “idealistic” is an understatement to describe our aspirations. Furthermore, if interculturalism is an impossible or virtually impossible goal, then this would imply that no one has achieved it. If this is true, no one can claim to know what interculturalism looks like. Therefore, it would be impossible to ever know if and when interculturalism has, in fact, been achieved. As one might imagine, the notion of interculturalism’s ultimate impossibility feels quite discouraging to an arts collective such as ours. Yet Bharucha also emphasizes that intercultural performance is necessary.

Auto-critical Perspective

One of the first notions I abandon, particularly in the context of intercultural engagement, is that one can assume an “objective” perspective. Any semblance of alleged objectivity falls apart in the face of a differing or far-flung cultural point of view. For this reason, instead of attempting objectivity, I aim to acknowledge my multifaceted subjective position, embracing it fully, and in doing so, exposing as much of its limitations as I am, at this moment, equipped to perceive. In her essay “On the Process of Writing *Borderlands / La Frontera*,” Gloria Anzaldúa (2009) instructs us “to figure out, literally, where your feet stand, what position you’re taking” (193). In this article, I take Anzaldúa’s recommendation to heart; before conveying my methods and case studies, I attempt to identify precisely “where I stand.” I do this by beginning my writings on any performance PAR case study with a personal account of a revelatory moment pertaining to each case study. I do this to reveal, in the most palpable way, how I am situated in regard to the project in question. I distinguish these accounts from the rest of the writing both in tone and also by italicizing them. The personal moments I describe tend to reveal the problem or impetus that led to my discovering and/or developing each method. Since I worked on

and co-created each performance project in the role of theatre practitioner, my own artistic involvement inspires an intimate relationship to each project, and also each method. This duality of personal artistic stake and critical analysis of both inquiry and method renders this article, at its core, a documentation of “Praxis as Research,” which merges my perspective as artist with my perspective as scholar. I present these opening personal accounts as a way to introduce each method. By exploring these moments via my artist’s perspective, I seek not only to offer transparency as to my subjectivity, but to open the doors wide into what resides within my particular subjective position.

Root Map



Figure 3 – *Root Map*, Kolkata, 2016

The *Root Map* Playscript

Root Map started with the impulse to join forces across the globe towards crafting a play about migration, as well as national borders. Our company collaborated over the course of several months before we came together in Kolkata to rehearse and stage our project for the first time. By the time we all met in person, the co-created script consisted of a series of thematically connected scenes. Two primary, intentionally fractured storylines weave the script together. One story speaks of two women who remember one

another from childhood but have been separated for a long time, by migration and borders. The other story shows a group of migrants journeying through time and space, meeting for a period of time at a border wall, where border guards create various rituals to hinder their crossing. Various other episodes break up these two primary stories. At one point, a group of animals are trying to board a bus to cross a border, and conflict ensues when a coyote demands precious payment from one of the most vulnerable travelers, a mouse. At another point, one of the migrants presses herself against the wall, hoping to hear some sign of her long-lost friend, a circus clown. She flashes back to times when she was a young child when the circus came to her village. At another point, a cow sings a wordless moo-ing song about uniting the world. The play ends with the guards demanding one of the migrants, an artist, reveal what weapons he is hiding on his person. He insists that, since he is an artist, he has no weapons, only his dreams. The guards, not believing him, trap him inside a burlap sack and drag him away. In their frenzied search for some unnamed weapon, the guards inadvertently tear down the very wall they are there to protect. The wall transforms into a pile of colorful feathers, where the migrants are reunited, including the two women from the first storyline.



Figure 4 – *Root Map* Finale, El Paso, 2017



Figure 5– *Root Map* Company, Kolkata, 2016

The *Root Map* Company

Border Studies scholar Dr. Debra Castillo was the founder of the project, and by the time she invited me to join, she had assembled a core team of artists. When we began the project, most of us were students of Dr. Castillo’s at Cornell University. Dr. Castillo established herself in a role of producer and facilitator, entrusting the creative process to the team. She participated in all exercises and creative processes, as member of the collective, though she did not write or direct any of the script, or perform in any of the productions. Behind the scenes, she supported the process in all ways from fundraising, arranging travel, and sewing costumes, offering us words of encouragement when needed, helping to delegate tasks. While Dr. Castillo was the initiator and practical leader of the project, she positioned herself in a wholly co-intentional manner and did not ever assert herself in a position of artistic hierarchy.

Our initial group changed over the course of the year. Many different collaborators entered and then exited the process. By the time we met in person to rehearse our first draft of the *Root Map* script, a final team had established itself. Our core members hailed from India and the Americas.

Debaroti Chakraborty and Debashish Sen Sharma, two founding members of Chaepani, an arts collective, remain based in Kolkata. Debashish is a filmmaker and stage director. Debaroti is a dancer, actor, and scholar. From the United States, Rosalie Purvis and Carolina Osorio Gil are both theatre artists and scholars. Each collaborator has experienced a complexity of heritage and place. Debaroti and Debashish both are descended from Bangladeshi refugees to India. I (Rosalie) grew up traveling between my two native countries, the US and the Netherlands. My mother's parents are Jewish Holocaust survivors and had resettled in the Netherlands after their liberation. Carolina migrated from Colombia and across the US border when she was three years old and grew up in the US.

Later in our process, we were joined by Alejandra Rodriguez, an actor/dancer who grew up on the US-Mexico border in Brownsville, Texas. Her mother immigrated there from Mexico. We were also joined by Elaigwu Ameh, a performance studies scholar and playwright, who temporarily and partially resided in the US for his studies but lived primarily in his native country of Nigeria, where he spent significant time working in displaced persons camps. In El Paso we worked with Gabriela Tellez, a singer who lives between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, Texas, and her son Octavio. In our final production in Akwesasne, we were joined by Abe Thomas Francis who, as a member of the Mohawk nation, grew up in Akwesasne, which stands divided by the US-Canada Border.

Additionally, we were joined by many temporary members, including Gloria Majule from Tanzania, Rocio Anica from Southern California, and J. Michael Kinsey, who grew up in the southern part of the United States. Each temporary company member left behind some imprint on the creative process.

The Process of Creating, Touring, and Re-Creating *Root Map*

The creating and writing of our *Root Map* script was a seven-month process that began with three months of artistic community building. During these early months, we generated stories and images, and an overarching aesthetic began to emerge. In the beginning stages of development, our team would meet in hybrid form, two or more groups assembling themselves from their respective locations, online. Our first meetings revolved

around narrative exercises that are designed to create patterns of equitable exchange and vulnerable, co-intentional creation. We themed these exchanges primarily around the topic of borders, though we also addressed “beauty,” in order to establish a deeper understanding of our respective aesthetic impulses. Our stories revealed patterns in our experiences, both firsthand and ancestral, of national borders.

Sharing our stories and creating artistic homages to one another’s stories created a sense of trust and intimacy in the core group. Undeterred by the technical limitations of Skype, we also conducted various acting exercises and games. When screens froze or voices got distorted, or when a lag set in, we embraced this as part of the activity. Eventually, the logistics of working at a distance became a shaping method in and of itself. In spite of our geographic distances, a common world began to emerge among us. Initially we spoke of how surprising this seemed, but we came to find comfort in the similarities within our border- and migration-related experiences.

In meetings, we began to ask one another what parts of the script development writing we each were drawn to facilitate. While several group members wrote scenes or monologues, Debashish and I decided we would each like to collaborate on weaving the stories together. We would each write and connect scenes, send one another drafts, with very little if any explanation, and then add on, and edit one another’s drafts. Each time I received the document with new information, I found the process of shaping and adding on to emerge intuitively and organically. We continued to share drafts with the group, holding online readings when needed. Other group members would offer up ideas, new lines, even new stories.

As the script emerged, we began to embrace, rather than remedy, a kind of disjointedness that emerged by way of patchworking stories together, interrupting them, and weaving them together in parts. We often spoke as a team about how this pieced-together script, with seams visible, reflected our own experience of migration, and the way memory shifts, while in transit, or while in a border space. This fractured structure was enhanced by the fact that the play was multi-lingual. The number of languages spoken in the play changed

depending on where we performed, but at its height, the piece included fourteen languages. To us, this multilingual space felt familiar, even comforting. In nearly every space we traveled, not one person ever questioned the multilingualism in talkbacks or interviews. Only once, when we performed in a more monolingual, English language-dominant space, several people expressed discomfort encountering untranslated foreign words. Up until that moment, we had not articulated that we took multilingualism for granted as a core experience of migration and the border space.

Closer to our first performance, our group shifted once again, and new participants joined. Reflecting back, I can see that it was more difficult for new members to integrate into the group, without having shared the past months of community building. At that juncture, we were so preoccupied with logistics of travelling across the globe and adapting to new spaces, we lost some of the initial devotion to team-building. Eventually, as we traveled and performed together, new bonds formed within that process.

Once the script was complete, a group of New York-based company members traveled to Kolkata to rehearse and perform the play at several local theatres. A month later, members from the Kolkata team traveled to New York, where we re-developed the script with some local ensemble members and musicians. After that, the same core group from our New York performance traveled to El Paso, Texas where we spent two days recreating the script with a local group there. In each space we performed on these tours, we worked with immigrants and performers who live between border spaces.

Two months later, a colleague from Awkwasne, Abe Thomas Francis, who had seen one of our New York performances, asked if we might consider bringing the piece to his community. Awkwasne, he explained, is home to Mohawk residents who, unlike members of our company, were still living on the same land to which their ancestors were indigenous. However, as he explained, the United States-Canada border had shifted to cross their territory, breaking old treaties, and hindering day to day passage within the community. A group of our New York and Kolkata based performers made several trips to Awkwasne, where Abe introduced us to his friends and family, who generously shared

their border-related stories with us. We rewrote parts of our script to center around the perspective of borders crossing a community, set against the existing themes of migrants crossing borders. Several local community members joined our performance, which, at Awkwesasne, we performed outdoors, interspersed with local traditional rituals, dances, and music.

During each of these tours, the *Root Map* script adjusted itself to meet each new location and each new group of collaborators.



Figure 6– *Root Map* Company, Ithaca, NY, 2017

Once we moved into the all-consuming realities of touring and traveling, our group began to more clearly identify some themes of the migratory and border space. These themes included children crossing the border, trying to make sense of the disjointed, ever-changing world around them. Another theme was animals and ephemeral objects that elude the restrictions set in place by borders. Yet another was how the border enforces a rigid gender binary, with gatekeepers treating men and women very differently. Within the border binary, women are often viewed as “innocent” compared to men. We also each spoke to a longing to cross impermeable borders by impossible, imaginary means—by transforming into winged or invisible beings, by disarming the border itself, or even by the strength of simply willing the border to break open, if just for a moment, and let us cross. Connecting

all these common themes was a set of images that came to represent the spaces of migration and borders. In my notes, I began to refer to these spaces as “migrascapes” and linked them to the vastness, the uncharted-ness, and the unpredictability of migrating through borders. Rather than seeking a conventional narrative arc, we therefore facilitated a narrative structure that spoke to the altered time and thinking of the migration process. Rather than change the restrictions of distance, we embraced them, and collectively incorporated them into the piece. The intercultural space itself tends to take the many shapes of the border. In *Root Map*, we discovered that embracing the shape of border as a structuring principle created the possibility for more intimate intercultural dialogue and experience. Whenever we found ourselves in doubt, we looked to the border itself for answers. In this way, the border itself became our first method.

Below I will detail some primary attributes of the migratory and border space that shaped our first project, and that one can see emerge in much border- and migration-themed work. I will focus on the iconic landscapes of migration as aesthetic, or “migrascapes.” I will also speak to other tropes of the border and migration such as border guards, and women, animals, and children as disarming witnesses of border and migration experiences. Finally, I will address how the very process of the piece’s own migration across border spaces shaped the piece itself.

Migrascapes and Their Inhabitants

We discovered common perspectives on what I refer to as “migrascapes”; the at-times nearly iconic landscapes of migration. The bio-political, socio-political reality of most migrant journeys transform oceans, jungles, cities, border checkpoints into harrowing obstacles. Our common perspectives on these migrascapes united us in overcoming their challenges within the context of our performance. These migrascapes form the backdrop and also in turn shape the aesthetic of the nonfictional as well as fictional rendering accounts of migrant journeys. We can see these migrascapes emerge in *Root Map*, but also other migration-driven plays and films such as Elia Suleiman’s (2005) tri-lingual film *Divine Intervention* and Naomi Iizuka’s (2010) play *(Anon)ymous*. On the one hand, these texts create a somewhat universal understanding of migrascapes. On the other hand,

migrascapes shape and dictate their own aesthetic and structural tendencies and thus criteria.



Figure 7– Debaroti Chakraborty, *Touring*, West Bengal, 2017

While our team hailed from nearly every continent, all our border stories tended to include similar and related migrascapes and also the same casts of archetypal players who inhabit these migrascapes. Some of these players include children, women, and animals crossing the borders and, in contrast, the gatekeepers or guards.

Border Guards

As we created *Root Map*, we processed our many experiences of border gatekeeping, particularly in the form of guards who appear in archetypal form as authoritative but ultimately fallible figures, bearing some archetypal likeness to a Police Officer puppet in a *Punch and Judy* show. Throughout the course of the play, the guards gradually lose face. The first scene establishes the tenuousness of their authority:



Figure 8– *Root Map*, Kolkata, 2016

(The migrants are running about the stage now, lost, looking for a familiar face. Music plays and both in and against the rhythm, they approach one another, finding, over and over again, a sea of strangers. Carolina and Elaigwu have put on their guard uniforms and are attempting to organize the migrants into some sort of manageable system. Together, speaking over each other and/or in unison; Carolina blows her whistle in little toots along with music. They approach individual migrants and ask: Citizen or foreigner? Chicken or veg? (other questions)

The Guards USC facing audience. Carolina blows whistle to stop music and the two guards call out these categorizations. Note: these lines can be partially or completely improvised location-specifically. The migrants run across the stage, trying to figure out where they belong. Some of them may not even understand what the guards are saying and have no choice but to follow the other migrants as best they can, guessing about where they should be at any given moment.)

GUARD CAROLINA: Citizens to the left — foreigners to the right!

GUARD ELAIGWU: Foreigners to the left — citizens to the right!

GUARD CAROLINA: Boys to the Left — girls to the right!

GUARD ELAIGWU: Madchens to the right — Bambinos to the left!

GUARD CAROLINA: Cows to the left — peasants to the right!

GUARD ELAIGWU: Cat people to the right — Dog people to the left!

GUARD CAROLINA: Poezen to the right — Gatos to the left!
 GUARD ELAIGWU: Desert to the left — Jungle to the right!
 GUARD CAROLINA: Bus to the right — plane to the left!
 GUARD ELAIGWU: Birds to the left — Ornithologist to the right!
 GUARD CAROLINA: Pedestrians to the right — bicycles to the left!

(Carolina blows whistle.

*Talking over one another trying to make an orderly structure but
 honestly not sure what it ought to look like.)*

Line up against the wall!

Wait

Sit against the wall

Stand against the wall

Left hand up

Knees together

Toes apart

Chins down

Right hand to the belly

Eyes up

Keep chins down!

Ok fine chins up.

Stand up

*(Carolina then gives the migrants instructions that resemble a
 popular dance such as the Macarena. The migrants follow, not
 knowing that they are engaging in this dance. Finally, Carolina
 signals for the band to play the Macarena and the migrants follow
 along again, still not aware that they are dancing for the
 entertainment of the guards.) (Chaepani Arts Collective)*

The scene reveals that, while they are expected to hold the power in the scene, the guards themselves are not sure how to engage with the rituals that their “unseen higher power” dictates. In fact, while they seem to know that rituals are required of them, they do not know what these rituals entail. Thus, the guards drift on their own instincts, which often prove guided by facile, personal motivations rather than larger political goals. Personal fears and desires emerge, and reveal the humanity of the guards, who fail to organize and control the migrants. The guards continue to issue orders, none of which seem to function as desired. Eventually, the guards follow the whims of their own entertainment when they teach the migrants the Macarena. This absurd and unauthoritative display of power reveals

the arbitrary nature of their orders and also emphasizes the aspect of the border “dance.” The guards find that they are not effective choreographers, which frustrates them. The migrants seem more than willing to follow the guards’ instruction, as they have not recognized the tenuousness of the border’s power. The fact that the guards cannot even effectively govern a willing group of migrants gives the impression of inexperience and even a new border and perhaps even a new migrant crisis. Indeed, *Root Map* responds directly to the recent unprecedented surge in migration the world over and the fact that we find borders straining at the seams to contain and detain those who flock there.

Women Crossing the Border

Root Map features multiple generations of women crossing or finding themselves separated by borders. While women don’t represent the degree of innocent understanding conveyed via the perspective of children and animals, their presence as archetypes reveals another layer of absurdity of the border’s political determination. In the face of an often patriarchal hegemony of borders, the women expose, often by their very presence, a contrasting mode of interaction that disarms our view of the border, particularly its gatekeeping systems.

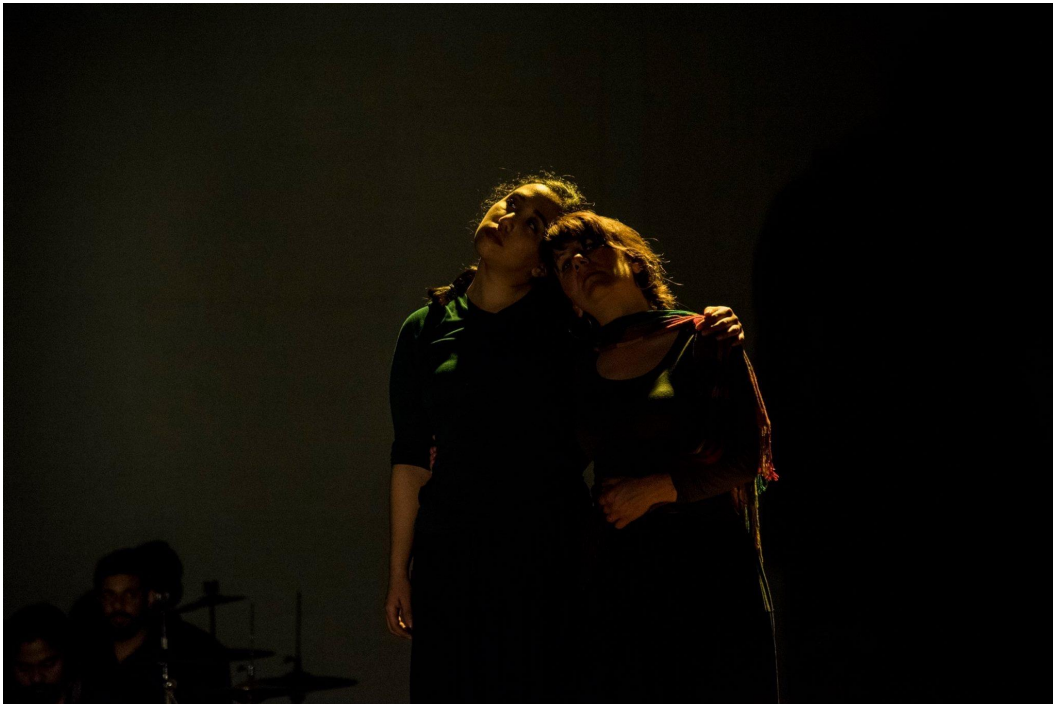


Figure 9 – *Root Map*, Kolkata, 2016

The themes of women at the border and the “femininity” of the border crosser set against the “machismo” of the guards comes up in nearly all of our generative narratives. In our script, the guards find themselves stumped by a female border crosser:

(The Guards pull Davanama out of the line and throw her onto the ground, where she kneels.)

BORDER GUARD 1: Name?

DAVANAMA: Pramōdavanamā Kō Barḍa

BORDER GUARD 1: Say it again?

DAVANAMA: Pramōdavanamā kō barḍa, sir.

BORDER GUARD 1: How do you write this?

DAVANAMA: I am sorry but I don't know in your language.

BORDER GUARD 2: What does it mean?

DAVANAMA: It means bird of paradise.

BORDER GUARD 1 *(guffaws)*: Your name is “Bird Paradise”? Let me see your papers.

(she pulls out a paper from her clothing and shows him)

BORDER GUARD 2: I can't read this. What do I call you? Bird?

DAVANAMA: My name is...my name speaks to the one we see in my country a lot.

(Music begins to play and Davanama dances a beautiful dance as she tries to show him with her body and dance the way a bird of paradise flower looks.)

There is the long body and then the head, the face, she unfolds like this, with red pieces she looks up as she unfolds...she...

(Two other female migrants join the dance, trying to help Davanama to communicate the meaning of her name.)

FEMALE MIGRANT 2: Blooms. She blooms. The flower blooms like this...

FEMALE MIGRANT 1: ...with the red...she blooms a fiery red.

(The music and dancing are beautiful and the guards find themselves carried away. But then they realize that they are not staying on task. Guard 2 abruptly interrupts the music and dancing trying to get back to business)

BORDER GUARD 2: Ok so it's a flower. I see. Write flower.

(Other guard laughs)

BORDER GUARD 2: Ok so that's not a good name. What's a good flower name?

BORDER GUARD 1: Poppy. A Poppy is a red flower. She probably means a poppy. Write that her name is Poppy.” (Chakraborty, Sharma, and Purvis 2020).



Figure 10– Davanama, played by Debaroti Chakraborty, explains herself to the guards with other migrants behind her, *Root Map*, Kolkata, 2016

In this scene, the guards use far more force than would be necessary to control this unarmed and un-dangerous woman. The exchange contains primarily verbal but also some physical violence, as Davanama is wrenched out of a line of migrants and roughly pulled to the front. Even though the Davanama is unarmed, the guards indicate that they fear her and put up a defense. In contrast to or perhaps enhancing their wariness of the Davanama, the guards find themselves carried away by the beauty of the emotion she expresses. At the same time, the guards do not seem capable of understanding what drives Davanama in her migratory process. The guards become carried away by the dancing and storytelling of the women but are sure to “snap out of it.”

Animals Crossing the Border

Root Map also includes another common theme in our stories of migration, which is that of animals crossing borders and the absurdity of the border in contrast with the

animals who do not understand borders as a concept. Both animals and children as witnesses of the border reveal the counterintuitive and arbitrarily crafted nature of the border itself.



Figures 11, 12 – The Cow, *Root Map* rehearsals, Kolkata, 2016

In the following scene where we see the guards in *Root Map*, they are not able to overcome the figure who crosses the border. In this case, the figure is an animal. The cow can cross the border in a way humans cannot. She demonstrates a power of persuasion that exceeds even that of the women in the Davanama scene:

(As the migrants are shuffled from side to side by the guard's orders, one migrant stays on all fours, unaffected. She is wearing a cow costume and chews her cud, staring contentedly off into space.)

GUARD ELAIGWU: Also, the cow is so peaceful. She stands there, staid. Noble really...

GUARD CAROLINA: Chewing her cud. Unimpressed.

GUARD ELAIGWU: What is your name?

GUARD CAROLINA: What is your name?

GUARD ELAIGWU: WHAT IS YOUR NAME?!

(The cow stops chewing. Pause. She swallows. Pause. She begins chewing again. While the cow continues peacefully chewing her cud, they speak over each other, crouching down on either side of her, with phrases like the following, including in French and Spanish.)

GUARDS: What is your name? Answer me!! Where are you going? Where do you come from? Are you a terrorist? Are you planning to kill the president? Give me your papers! Answer me!! ANSWER ME! You are a COW! I said YOU ARE

A COW! Do you hear me? You are a Stupid stupid cow! You are a stupid cow! Did you hear me, cow? What is your name!?! Stupid idiotic fool cow! STUPID! COW!

GUARD CAROLINA: GORUuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!

(The cow pauses chewing. Swallows. Stands up and turns in slow circle before coming back to C and kneeling down again. Slowly and calmly. With great care, brings her nose and mouth to the ground and takes another mouthful of grass and begins chewing slowly on this grass. She picks a handful of food from pocket and eats that. She reaches in other pocket and pulls out a small globe. Beautiful, passionate Music plays. The Cow stands up and sings with all her heart. She sings in cow language using “Moo” sounds and displaying the globe as if she is pleading with the audience to save the world. She ends her Mooing by singing the word “Mundo!” Everyone claps, including the guards, as she bows.) (Chaepani Arts Collective).

The cow, in spite of or perhaps because of her un-human-ness, is the only figure to win over the guards’ respect, symbolically disarming them. In reality, while governments build walls, fences, and bureaucratic structures to create and enforce national borders, animals cross borders daily, unscathed and generally unnoticed, heightening the powerlessness of the guards, inviting us to question what “higher power” they have been charged to serve. This struggle to identify and uphold power in the face of women and animals emphasizes the performativity of the dance of the border, and the subsequent disruptions of the border performance reveal how arbitrary they are and begs the question, as one of the migrants in *Root Map* asks: “What are these borders for?”

Children Witnessing and Exposing the Border

As we worked on *Root Map*, we found ourselves tending to view the border through the perspective of children and then, in turn, paint the border as it resonates with children. Media discourse on borders responds to and harnesses the impact of children in this discourse. When three-year-old Syrian/Kurdish Aylan Kurdi’s body washed up on the Turkish shore in September of 2015, the discourse of refugee protections shifted (Ahmad 35). While we may realize that hundreds of children die in political conflict and in

migration daily, the image of a child creates a barometer of ethical awareness, sheds light on a darkened conscience.

In the summer of 2018, media images of children in caged facilities at the U.S.-Mexico border awakened a frenzied response to U.S. immigration policy (Harvey). By the same token, government propaganda campaigns utilize images of children to endear the public to members of refugee groups they wish for the public to embrace and welcome.



Figure 13 – Rehearsal for *Root Map* with Totini Mukherjee, Kolkata, 2016

The ethics of this appropriation of the child as symbol holds a powerful but also a relatively one-dimensional, and at times exploitative, role in the discourse of borders. “The child” is relegated to a blank slate upon which adults project, render, and process their own charged relationship to the border “wound.” In order to involve the valuable perspective of the child, in our company, we privilege the voices and creative children in the process of making art. In contrast with solely responding to child as symbol, the process of collaborating with children in rehearsal and performance demands and creates subtle and complex intergenerational communication skills. Most of our rehearsals of *Root Map* include the presence of a multi-generational group of company members and their families. Time and time again, the participation of children in the rehearsals transformed the

conversations. As children observe our process or play alongside the work, their own exercising of storytelling and response begins to form in conjunction with the production.

Since so many of our own narratives of borders involved our own childhood memories and perspectives, *Root Map* introduces a child early in the story. In most of the productions, we placed the child in the audience or some other unexpected location and her appearance as a member of the play was a surprise. Often, we clad this child in lights so that she lit up and appeared as a beacon of hope, as well as a shimmering gaze into nostalgia.

In the Kolkata production, our child was played by Totini Mukherjee, who was already, at age nine, a seasoned performer with a substantial stage presence and utterly disarming singing voice. Her onstage instincts were sharply honed and mature, and she shaped the role of “the child,” leaving behind a legacy for each subsequent child. In rehearsal, she would often draw scenes and responses to the play. It was as if she became a participant in our process of story and aesthetic exchange, even though she was unaware of this herself. She drew a rendition of one scene where two women dance together and are ultimately divided by a barrier of religion. On her drawing she wrote: religion should not divide us. She also drew the new company members, as if she were getting to know them in this way. So steadfast and “magical” was her focus on the drawing process, we decided that she ought to draw throughout the play, sitting on the other side of our border wall.

Over tea, during rehearsal breaks, Totini would often take me aside and describe her drawings to me. “Look,” she would say. “Here are two girls. They love one another. But they are different religions and now they are not allowed to play together any longer.” One day, I remember how Totini drew the character of the artist crying inside the burlap bag where the guards had trapped him. She showed me the drawing but did not comment on it.

Totini’s drawn and described observation of the scenes in the play, all based on reality of borders, gradually made us aware that the perspective of the child watched over all of this—witnessed the absurdity, the grief and at times the terror of the border. Without our intervention, Totini’s point of view on the events on stage very much resembled our own—

the ones we had recalled from our own respective childhoods. In each production following, the role of the child as “witness” deepened.

The audience never saw the drawings she made. But I sensed that her commitment to her role as “witness” formed her own acting process, as well as mine.

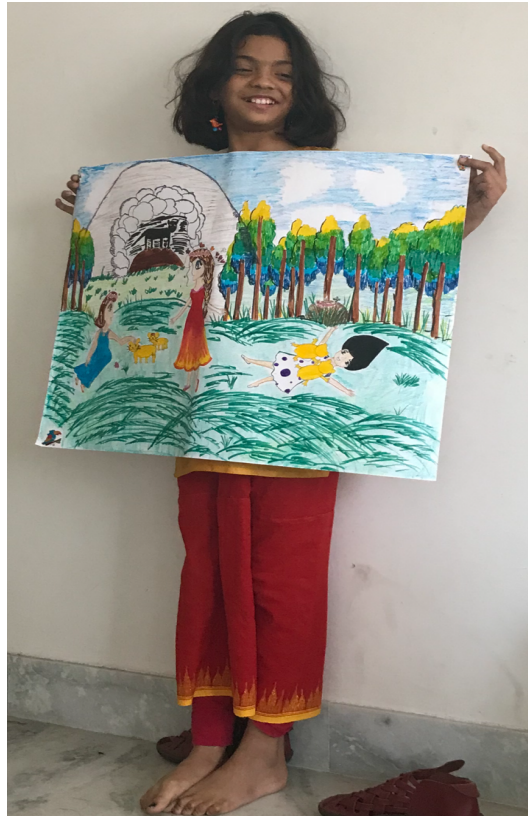


Figure 14 – Totini Mukherjee with one of her paintings, Kolkata, 2017

We finally absorbed the child’s role completely in our final performance of *Root Map*, in Akwesasne. There, the child, played by the daughter of a company member, stood staring at the actions of the guards. In this production, the guards see her and become both humbled and frightened by her gaze. It is the eyes of the child witness that finally send the guards away from the wall they have themselves destroyed.

Migrating with the Piece

Once we crafted our script, our virtual mediations that had become their own migrascapes had shaped the piece, and now our physical journey re-molded it. We

incorporated elements of the journey into the script. For instance, we absorbed into *Root Map* the questions that the passport control and security officials asked us at the airport in India. We took note of their tone and body language and also observed our own subtle behavioral patterns in response to theirs. All these cultural transitions influenced our dialogue and acting in the rehearsals. We had planned to rehearse the play intensively for a week in order to refine the script and establish staging, but we hadn't realized in advance how much of our work would inevitably mold itself around the experience of our non-Indian team members experiencing India for the first time. Some Bengali words and Hindi phrases wove themselves into the dialogue because we took note of them in ways our now “local” team members might not have. The guards added culturally specific considerations like “chicken or veg?” to their barrage of inquiries. The migrascape and landscape familiarity of the Indian team members contrasted dynamically with our lack of familiarity with the—for us—new culture.

When we traveled with *Root Map* to Akwesasne, we traversed the enforced border that runs through the Mohawk territory in two different ways. Once, we crossed, unseen by gatekeepers, via river ferry. The second time, we drove through the U.S.-Canada border. The former journey transpired without a hitch, but the latter proved full of challenges. As it turned out, Debaroti was not in possession of a Canadian visa. None of us had considered this aspect, since we knew we would be crossing that particular, to us seemingly arbitrary border, only in order to maneuver back and forth to our performance venue, which happened to be located on the “Canadian side” of Akwesasne. As it turned out, the border gatekeepers chose to detain Debaroti for several hours, interrogating her in a manner that eerily mimicked our fictional “Davanama” scene. At one point, the main interrogation guard asked Debaroti why she had wished to cross the border in the first place. She named the theater where we were to perform and explained this was her destination and she only intended to go there two afternoons. The guard asked her why she intended to go to this theatre.

“We are performing a show about national borders,” she told him.

“Oh really?” he asked, eyeing her with amusement and wariness. “Well, I should be the star of that show.”



Figure 15 – The *Root Map* core company meets in person for the first time, at the airport in Kolkata, 2016

Debaroti, in spite of her anxiety of being held in this semi-hostile no man’s land for an uncomfortably long stretch of time, made note of this. Later in rehearsal, we would add scenes in which one of our border guards continuously declares him or herself “the star of this show,” constantly trying to displace the migrants as protagonists, asserting dominance in this way, even narratively. And yet, ultimately, even in our script, the guards’ attempts to control the narrative inadvertently collapses and instead the repetitiveness and irrelevance of their questions, folds into the uncontrollable chaos of the border dance.

Once we completed our Kolkata tour and began to travel with *Root Map*, we made a conscious decision to allow each new destination to shape our production, so we incorporated the migration process into the script. In Kolkata, we had worked closely with local performers who were not part of the core team, but who joined rehearsals to play ensemble roles. We also worked with local musicians who created a sound score for the

play. This Bengali folk but fusion-world sound score shaped *Root Map* by infusing particular rhythms, pauses and emotional inflections. Once we traveled to Ithaca with the piece, we worked with new, Ithaca-based musicians whose genres ranged from Latin American folk to Celtic and 1960s American folk songs. We also cast actors from the Cornell University Performing Arts Department to participate in the play. The tone of the play changed considerably with these new actors and musicians.



Figure 16 – Somdutta Roy, 2016

While the script remained largely the same as in Kolkata and the music fulfilled similar functions in terms of rhythm and tone, I felt as if *Root Map* had left its birthplace and found itself in a foreign land, where the culture welcomed us kindly but where no amount of positive intention could replace what I now missed from the play’s early inception. This sense of Kolkata as “birthplace” of *Root Map* also resonated with me as inaccurate. After all, our piece had come to exist in transit and distance, and now, I noted that the perpetually homesick part of my diasporic self, now sought to root *Root Map* in one fixed location. I scolded myself for romanticizing “home,” which disputed the embrace of migration as lens. I grew to embrace the longing for the mirage of “home” as part of the migratory lens,

channeling this into how much I missed Somdutta Roy, whose singing from across the wall in the first incarnation of *Root Map*, had evoked layers of culture shock, illusory homesickness, complex memory, and ephemeral patterns of longing.

In order to devote myself to the migratory lens, instead of lamenting the loss of Somdutta’s singing during my monologue, and in turn distancing myself in future incarnations, I leaned into missing her. Now, without Somdutta, I used my missing of her voice to fuel my connection with the new singers in each new location. On the one hand, I was able to immerse myself into each new song and on the other hand, none could replace the voice I missed so much. In this way, the experience of “journey” and of losing or lacking the “homeland” and/or point of origin, folded itself into the production.



Figure 17 – At a post-show gathering, Somdutta and Rosalie, 2018



Figure 18, 19: *Root Map* Company in El Paso, 2017; and at Akwesasne, 2017

(Comparative) Diaspora as Shaping Method

While we generally seek a kind of finality or end point in a script writing process, *Root Map* embodies a transitory space. In contrast with a more fixed document, our engagements with the script yield unpredictable, unsettling and even chaotic results. Yet, instead of seeing to “fix” its chaotic transitory nature, we absorb the elements of transit as truth into and of the work. We reflect and honor the complexity of travel—physical, technological, linguistic, metaphorical, or otherwise—within the work itself. When creating intercultural work, particularly work about migration, the truth of the migratory lens cannot be ignored or denied within the very roots of the very core of the work. To

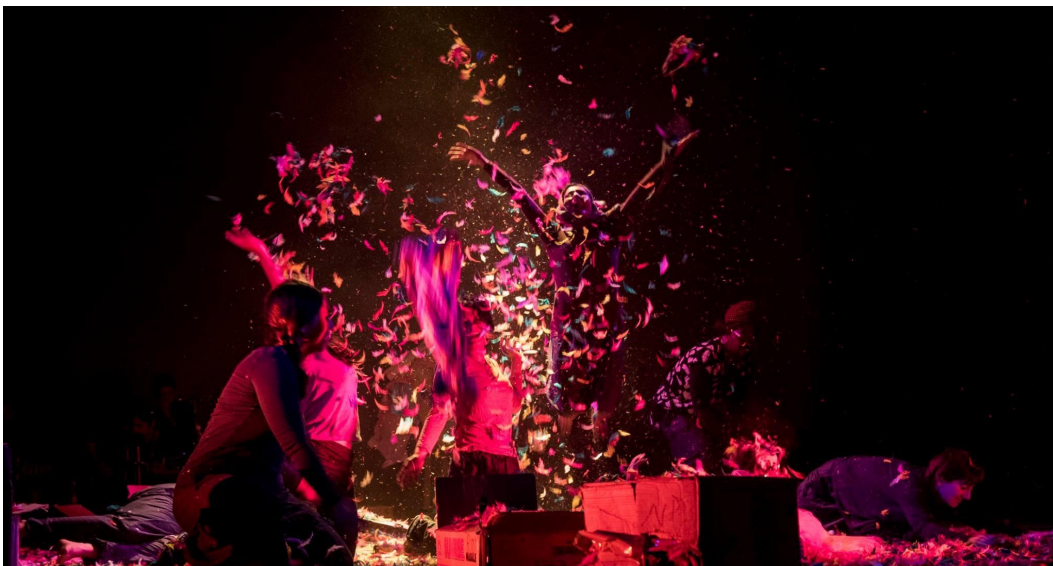


Figure 20 – *Root Map* Finale, Kolkata, 2016

deny the foundational reality of obstacle in intercultural movement denies the realities of interculturalism. Borders of time and time zones, borders of distance, borders of culture, jetlag, cultural shocks and confusion, movement, more movement, and the unpredictability of transit and migration, migrascapes all make up the process of our lives as artists who cross global and cultural borders. We cannot fully address the migratory if we destroy the evidence of the aesthetic and practical impact the border has on the work. To create border work on borders/migration and the complex reality of interculturalism, we must flip the lens and view the migration/diasporic AS method, AS aesthetic, AS (valid) process. In his work *Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's The Sweetest Hangover (and other STDs)*, José Muñoz (2000) creates a positioning of lens as it applies to Latino/Latina/Latinx culture and, in fact, minoritarian versus dominant cultural lenses in general:

Minoritarian identity has much to do with certain subjects' inability to act properly within majoritarian scripts and scenarios. Latinos and Latinas are stigmatized as performers of excess - the hot and spicy, over-the-top subjects who simply do not know when to quit. "Spic" is an epithet intrinsically linked to questions of affect and excess affect. Rather than simply reject this toxic language of shame I wish to reinhabit it and suggest that such stigmatizing speech permits us to arrive at an important mapping of the social. Rather than say that Latina/o affect is too much, I want to suggest that the presence of Latina/o affect puts a great deal of pressure on the affective base of whiteness, insofar as it instructs us in a reading of the affect of whiteness as underdeveloped and impoverished. (70)

Muñoz's powerful "re-lensing" theory can be applied to border versus mono-cultural, uncontested, "fixed" spaces. When we gaze via the lens of the border, the dominant cultural "homeland" perspective reveals its dearth(s) in its singularity of solution/resolution. From the perspective of the culturally dominant view of singular "homeland", the border aesthetic and structure may resonate as unsettled, unsettling, chaotic and relentless in its unpredictability. The dominant cultural perspective of a singular homeland dictates a singular narrative, a narrative structure that returns home, a singular linguistic mode, a "common" organizing structure that reads as "universal" through the mono-cultural lens. In contrast, to those of us who live within cultural multiplicity, there is no assumed

“universal” to take for granted. When viewed through the lens of the border, the elements of migration serve as appropriately dis-organizing aesthetic and structural principles.

The process of creating and re-envisioning *Root Map* in different locations, across barriers, mimicked aspects of migration and diaspora. The play took on traits of diasporic cultures, as its original narratives continued to evolve in transit, absorbing each transitory influence or story, technique, aesthetic, and language. This mode of creating performance about migration embraces, rather than remedies, the underlying shaping factor of migration, rendering migration into a lens and method in its own right. Via the dominant lens of the monocultural or securely and singularly-citizenized, non-migratory gaze, the migratory lens appears unsettled, unsettling, and chaotic. Yet via the lens of migration, of exile, or diaspora and even of innate cultural multiplicity, the visiting and revisiting of different migrascapes, the settling and unsettling in and of each migrascape, resonates as appropriately dis-organizing principle.

Our *Root Map* shifted continuously to answer the questions of each culture and location it documented. Like a culture in diasporic tradition, the play transformed its aesthetics, its musical language, its verbal language, its movement language, its process of creation and rehearsing and the spacing and staging and even storylines as it moved from place to place and changed hands from person to person. We observed, in all the changes, what stayed the same each time, what changed each time, what elements fit into one another unexpectedly or failed to merge and wound, instead, around one another or even clashed. Each time we did see the play emerge anew, surviving and, in its own way thriving in different tones, each time it was produced again. In fact, to our team, it still feels as if the play is underway. We haven't performed it in several years, but the chapter is always open. Like children of refugees, nomads, and exiled peoples, we surreptitiously hold onto the map of our escape route. The script remains a fluid document that, in its fluidity, observes and incorporates the affective realities of migration and the border.



Figure 21 – Debaroti Chakraborty, *Root Map* Finale, El Paso, 2017

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