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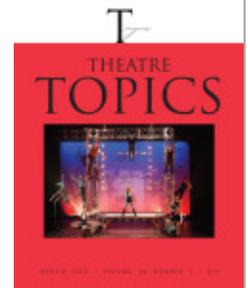
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Explored through Third Culture Classroom Spaces

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Teaching Worldmindedness in a Mixed Majors and Nonmajors World Theatre Course: The Work of Rabindranath Tagore Explored through Third Culture Classroom Spaces

Drew Chappell, Jocelyn L. Buckner, and Maxie Lankalingam

Acknowledging the subjectivity of students is at the heart of pedagogy intent on cultivating students' worldmindedness.¹ Creating a classroom that gestures toward what Homi Bhabha calls a "third space"—"a space . . . of translation: a space of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the constructions of a political object that is new . . . properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition in the moment of politics"; such a space enables instructors and students to engage more fully with diverse cultural artifacts and vantage points (25). Current pedagogic texts like the *Longman Anthology of Drama and Theatre*, *Theatre Histories*, and *World Theories of Theatre* work to decenter a Western approach to studying theatre. Yet, there is also a need for pedagogical exercises that facilitate further disruption and displacement of hegemonic colonial narratives. This note from the field offers one methodology for achieving this goal.

Drew Chappell and Jocelyn L. Buckner, the American faculty authors of this piece, seek to help students from differing backgrounds understand the specific historic and cultural contexts of dramatic works by first learning to acknowledge their own perspectives and responses, then working to decenter their positionalities to create critical space in which to consider alternate sociocultural perspectives. We share our efforts to facilitate third space pedagogy in the Theatre in World Cultures class at Chapman University through a unique assignment known as the "visceral response exercise." Our coauthor, Maxie Lankalingam, is an international student from India who embodies Bhabha's third space in her daily life.² As a student in the Theatre in World Cultures course, she contributes to this piece by sharing her positionality as a third culture individual, as well as detailing how her experience in the class and the visceral response exercise influenced her study of a dramatic text from her country of origin.

For Lankalingam, the course and assignment offered an opportunity to enact her third culture identity. She chose the World Cultures course during her freshman year because she stopped considering herself Indian; she is also not American. She now considers herself a third culture individual, someone living outside of the culture of her parents or the culture in which she was raised, but not yet fully belonging to another culture. She wanted to learn about other cultures through the lens of her greatest passion, theatre. In college she tackles all the plays from other cultures just like the other students do, but from a third culture perspective. Coincidentally, however, in World Cultures she was assigned a visceral response project for a play written by a playwright from her home country. This project challenged her to critically analyze the culture in which she was raised through the perspective of a third culture adult.

Visceral Response Element 1: Associational Material

Drew Chappell (DC) and Jocelyn L. Buckner (JLB)

This visceral response assignment is adapted from Anne Fliotsos's exercises on visceral reactions, associational materials, tableau, and intuitive response in her *Interpreting the Play Script: Contemplation and Analysis*. She offers ways to "open up the realm of examining scripts by incorporating alternative perspectives to counter and/or complement intellectual analysis" (1). Such analyses are beneficial when introducing students to unfamiliar material, particularly if the theatre classroom itself is an unfamiliar environment. This exercise decenters and complicates what Awam Amkpa calls "colonial modernity"—a modernity semantically, culturally, and politically synonymous with European values and institutions," and in doing so opens up space for more nuanced understandings of the hierarchies of culture that frame our individual perspectives of the world (6).

For the first portion of the assignment, the in-class associational material presentation, students are asked to read the assigned play and note any major feelings, images, and/or sensations experienced encountering the work. Next, they should determine an associational material that best represents, or symbolizes, this visceral response. The material can be anything: for instance, an image, a smell, a food with a particular flavor, an heirloom, a souvenir from a vacation where they perhaps experienced similar feelings. Students bring these items to class and share them in an informal though organized presentation.

In facilitating this assignment we have encountered a wide range of associational materials, including film clips, songs, items of clothing, and entomological displays, as well as students moving beyond associational materials by creating performances to encapsulate their reactions, such as singing opera material and performing Suzuki movements. Fliotsos notes that "abstract associations provoke interesting discussion and discoveries that may otherwise never come to light" (26). These items help students grasp their own reactions to unfamiliar material while providing faculty and fellow students glimpses into the respondent's life experience, thought process, and individual creativity—things not always apparent in a mixed-majors classroom. This expression fosters additional exchanges and sharing, creating deeper personal connections to the work, among students and with instructors, and the participants then begin to view one another as multifaceted individuals. If the link between associational material and text/textual culture of origin is unclear, listeners may ask questions of the respondent to clarify their understanding of that student's choices and to uncover further connections.

As evidenced below, such discussions reflect some of the challenges of creating classroom and intellectual third spaces, motivating us to continue to seek ways to structure the assignment to encourage students toward the desired balance of awareness of self and others. Nonetheless, the visceral response exercise encourages them to own their positionalities while also respectfully hearing those of other students with widely varying life experiences. These exchanges reflect Bhabha's explanation of how "in our cultural capacity to speak of and judge others we necessarily 'place ourselves in their position,' in a kind of relativism of distance" (36). For example, a US student focused on *Autumn in the Palace of Han's* epic storyline and its echoes in *Romeo and Juliet*, while a student with roots in East Asian culture found her connection in Korean soap operas and their similarities to the romance in the Yuan-period play.

Maxie Lankalingam (ML)

The exercise helped me relate to a text that initially felt distant despite its Indian origins. For me, the experience of reading and researching Tagore's *The Post Office* held unique significance.

Although I experienced a temporal dissonance between my own lived experience and the world of the 1912 play, the barriers of space and culture were less intact for me. One of the rules of living in my village, serving the Divine, is the story behind my three related associational materials that represented my visceral response: a necklace with a pendant of a Hindu goddess, a Buddha head figurine, and a healing crystal. When I was 14, my mother, who was trying desperately to help me become a traditional Hindu, bought me a necklace with an image of a deity, Lord Ganesha, on the pendant. I wore it every day as a symbol of hope that one day I would be able to connect with the culture around me. This necklace relates to the theme of hope in the play, as Amal desperately wishes to be like all the other neighborhood boys playing outside his window. For my 16th birthday my sister bought me a Buddha figurine, and I continued to practice Buddhism for several years. In the play, Amal waits for a letter from the king, but instead receives a mockingly blank letter from the headman. Buddhism was my blank letter, something to keep my hopes lifted, until I was truly spiritually awakened. The summer before my last year of school, my aunt, who is a Reiki healer, presented me with huge healing crystals, teaching me to meditate, to feel and balance energy, to breathe. My aunt guided me to the Divine Consciousness. Amal was in search of the Divine. I searched for the Divine and found it. I found a way to cope with the isolation of my marginalization in a rigid caste system.

Through the associational materials component of the assignment, I was able to articulate my visceral response to Tagore's play and its resonance with my perceptions of my positionality within the context of the Indian caste culture in which I was raised and in relation to the spiritual and global realms opening up around me.

Visceral Response Element 2: Group Tableaux

DC and JLB

The visceral response exercise also includes a small group component wherein group members come together to share their responses with one another, develop discussion questions with which to help lead the larger class conversation about the piece, and finally to attempt to physically embody the group members' various reactions to the piece in tableaux they present to the class. These tableaux may be beginning/middle/end images related to character and plot, or more abstract/thematically linked images. This element of the assignment is inspired by Fliotsos's observation that "the body is a valid avenue of script exploration that is utilized by actors in rehearsal, but rarely used in an academic setting to study the script. . . . Although many theatre groups and directors have privileged somatic knowledge with their techniques . . . few teachers incorporate the body into script interpretation" (22).

We task students to work with their group to decide how to develop a series of three tableaux that represent group members' responses to the play as inspired by their chosen associational materials, and to address a particular theme or issue in the assigned reading. Students then present and share their tableaux with the class and receive audience feedback, then discuss the inspiration for the pieces and their collective approach to the script. Such physical embodiment and performance of other students' visceral responses to plays throughout the semester gestures toward a third space, challenging students to negotiate beyond their own realm of experience to reach a more multifaceted understanding of the culture and cultural product being studied.

The members of Lankalingam's group recognized the play's varied significance to each person as they developed their discussion questions about it and determined images for their tableaux of scenes from the play. For their tableaux they chose three key images: Amal looking out of the window at the boys playing; Amal receiving the blank letter; and Sudha offering flowers after Amal has passed. The group members chose these scenes because they believed these images had the

greatest significance in the play, as well as representing universal ideas. To them, Amal was a young man searching for his purpose beyond human limitation; the other characters were blinded by the illusion of freedom because of their health. Hence Amal is the only character in the three tableaux who yearns for something beyond his reach; the others simply accept their position in the world. This theme of longing for one's greater purpose despite the surrounding mentality connected the major scenes of the play. When they presented their tableaux to the class, their classmates observed a hierarchy of limitations represented by the level at which each character was represented. For example, Amal always lay down or sat on the floor; Sudha knelt to offer the flowers; and the headman stood erect. Presenting the tableaux to the class extended the learning process, thus enabling larger group discoveries.

ML

I brought a unique perspective to the group collaboration portion of the visceral response project for *The Post Office*. In addition to my own spiritual connection to the piece reflected in my associational materials, I was also able to connect the play's themes to many current issues of oppression in India, including female infanticide, government corruption, and illegal homosexuality. In contrast, my classmates' visceral responses reflected a struggle to decenter themselves from American perceptions of the rest of the world. One student presented a video of a travel show in which a white host goes into a store where all the products were made from cow manure. The documentary alienated the culture rather than attempting to reach an understanding of Hinduism and why cow manure is so valuable to the locals. Another student showed a tapestry that her aunt brought from Egypt, not India. It seemed as though she was relating India to Egypt because to her, that was a foreign culture with which she had a more personal experience. At the same time, her description revealed an essence of mystifying the Egyptian culture as some often do with India, which is perhaps why she grouped the two together. Group members also expressed to me that they had never left the United States. Their attempt to understand a culture that is different from their experience in America through the lens of the play was challenged by previous cultural encounters that only seemed to cater to the foreign idea of India: namely, an adventure to have once in your life, not a home to billions.

This idea of India did not frustrate me; in fact, I knew it too well. In high school most of my teachers were American. They came to India to explore and teach for a few years before moving away. Even though some of them lived in India for a long time, it was hard for them to treat the country as anything less than an experience. I believe that the only way to truly have the Indian experience is to live in an Indian household and in some cases experience the expectations families have on Indian women. So when it came to other students interpreting the play, I knew that they were only going to rely upon what they had been exposed to. However, changes can be made in small ways, and it was clear that through the group presentation I had changed the class's mind, or at least affected them, with an insider's view of what it actually means to experience India.

DC and JLB

Group discourse and the process of embodying one another's responses to the play encouraged Lankalingam and her classmates to recognize the engaging potential of Tagore's work, and how his words apply differently to people everywhere in one way or another. This is because Lankalingam's relations to the play did not invalidate those of her classmates, but allowed for the other students to recognize and validate hers. The conscious performance element of the visceral response project tableaux attempts to synthesize and embody the reactions of self and other into a collective corporeal representation of reaction and meaning derived from the text at hand, shifting these ideas from performative, individual, and internal to performed, collective, and externalized.

Visceral Response Element 3: Small-Group Discussion

DC and JLB

The third element of the visceral response assignment engages the discussion questions devised by members of the small groups. Group members who have closely read the text, selected associational materials, and prepared tableaux become facilitators of larger class discussions. As these discussions occur we visit each of the small groups, dropping in and offering observations as well, while leaving space for both the group leaders to ask questions and their peers to participate in the discussions.

ML

As my group created its discussion questions based on themes, style, and plot, my initial assumption that Tagore's work was solely based on serving God dissipated. Instead, I realized the effect that every character had on Amal's life and the themes of human limitations and chasing dreams. For example, Madhav represents the inner empathy of the average man, Sudha stands for childhood purity, the headman symbolizes the social power of authority, and the boys playing outside personify the illusion of freedom. I was able to articulate these discoveries in the final component of the assignment, a personal reflective paper.

Visceral Response Element 4: Reflective Paper

DC and JLB

In the final portion of the assignment, students document how their response to the work changed (or not) after processing the text and their knowledge of the play's cultural context and origin. Students consider whether they were surprised by their first response, whether they made assumptions that were proved wrong (or right), and articulate how they came to terms with the barriers of time, space, and cultural understanding between their own lived experience and the piece.

ML

I was raised in a small, conservative village in southern India. As a child my mother used to read Tagore's stories to me in Tamil, my native language. At the end of the story my mother would always make up her own moral, as though to instill values in me. Usually, she used symbolism to make connections between the story and Hinduism. So after my first reading of *The Post Office* for class, I automatically assumed the stigma that I had associated with Tagore's works: namely, that this was another opportunity to shove God and Hinduism down my throat. To me, the character of the king represented God, and Amal represented the person trying to reach God despite human limitations. When I first read the play my painful memories of living in India returned.

After reading and analyzing the play more deeply and searching for emotions within myself, I found that Amal's story had a tremendous connection to my life. There were two social rules in my caste that affected my adolescence: first, to live in my village one must serve the Divine Consciousness, meaning that every family must lead a life that in some way is a service to God. To accomplish this my family practiced Hinduism, a religion with which I never connected. The second rule applied only to women. When a young woman achieves her first period a ceremony is held for members

of the community, indicating that this girl is now fertile and eligible bachelors may approach her father for her hand in marriage. She is then not allowed to leave her home without the accompaniment of her father or her husband. For this reason my grandmother had to drop out of school in the seventh grade.

Cultural shifts eventually allowed some leeway for women to be educated. I was driven to a school that was an hour away from my home, and I was immediately taken home once school was over. When not in school I would stay at home with my mother. My father traveled for work, and I had no husband to escort me outdoors. I refused to be married at the age of 19 as my mother and sister had. Menstruation was considered a taboo in my village; no one was allowed to speak of it. Once women had achieved menstruation they were confined within the walls of their homes. I was not even allowed to open my windows, because the neighbors could then see my activities. My confinement mirrored Amal's life. In Amal's case he was not allowed to leave the house because of illness; in mine, it was because I had come of age. Just as Amal planned his future on getting better, I eagerly fantasized and plotted my escape to America.

In my essay for class I offered this final summation of my experience:

The reason I am able to connect so strongly to *The Post Office* is because Tagore did not underestimate the power of hope. Amal carried hope in his heart all the way until he died. This brought him divine peace and love despite his tragic conditions. Through this assignment, I was able to depict Amal with my team and draw parallels between his character and myself. Even though a part of my life seemed so bleak once and my future seemed set up for me, like Amal, I was bold enough to dream of a better reality.

DC and JLB

In *Interpreting the Play Script* Flitsos suggests journaling and interrogating visceral responses in terms of subject position, personal experience, and media influences. In the World Cultures course, as Lankalingam's experience exemplifies, students take the additional step of interrogating the ways in which they attempted to broach the cultural, spatial, and geographical barriers between themselves and the texts they read. The practice of negotiating the in-between from a variety of vantage points gestures toward Bhabha's articulation of the utility of the third space as a fruitful location of cultural exploration and self-recognition.

ML

Despite the positive spiritual experiences that I mention throughout this note, I have always questioned some of the traditions of my caste.³ I am from a more conservative part of the country, Chennai, where the castes that individuals are born into determine the rules they live by, what their values are, and whom they marry. I belong to a caste (that I choose not to name here) that was originally formed as a guild of merchants and traders who had to rise up to achieve the higher status that they have today. As my father's name was popular in the caste, my parents complied with traditional views in order to preserve the family name within the community. Throughout my childhood I faced various forms of oppression for being a woman; I found myself questioning why my brother had more rights and privileges than me. The answer was always "because he's a boy."

Most of the women I knew seemed to have simply accepted their position within the caste. But I was prepared take charge of my own higher education and run away to a place more accepting of my radical nature and my womanhood. I applied to Chapman University, a mid-sized, private liberal arts institution in Southern California with reputable theatre and film programs. When I

was accepted with a scholarship I packed up my things and left. Even though my family thought I was making a mistake, as they believed it was immoral for a woman to live for and serve herself, I knew I would figure the rest of my life out when I arrived in America.

I believe that this exercise helped me engage with and process my experience of India, as an Indian person who is now distanced from the situation I was once surrounded by. The exercise allowed me to look back on my past life from a distance and determine what being Indian truly means to me. A part of my upbringing, like my spirituality and love for my community, will always remain with me. However, by attending college in the United States I now have the freedom to choose my own path. I have the tools to create a means of life for myself abroad that is separate from India, while still having a part of Indian culture within myself. Coming to terms with my own culture through this class was my first step.

Implications

DC and JLB

The exercises that engage students with unfamiliar material from multiple vantage points, such as the visceral response assignment, have wide and significant implications in theatre classrooms with both majors and nonmajors. When we introduced the assignment to this course we did so to encourage students to explore and process their reactions and connections to texts from other cultures. But as we continue to engage with the assignment and a variety of students, we now realize that the former also creates space for students to reflect on their own culture from a new vantage point. Indeed, as colleges and universities become more international and students seek ways to communicate across traditional barriers of backgrounds, values, and experiences, the assignment may provide a model for self-discovery, group achievement, and challenges to widely held assumptions in a variety of liberal arts course settings.

ML

The visceral response and associational material sections allowed me to creatively communicate my struggles as a young woman in India and share the story of how I developed my own spirituality. I have found a way to live and thrive in a third culture of my own definition. I was extremely happy to process my own emotions before collaborating with my group to interpret its responses to the play for the class. Likewise, my group was able to share its experiences with Indian culture based on members' own backgrounds. These opinions taught me about how people of other cultures view India. They initially generalized based on their exposure to the subject, just like I did about Tagore's work when I started reading the play. The diversity of experiences in this project made the entire group realize that encountering different cultures is an individual experience that varies by exposure.

DC and JLB

What we have learned from student experiences like Lankalingam's is to remain vigilant against discourses of cultural relativism, and to instead strive toward culturally specific understandings of texts and contexts, even as they encourage students to acknowledge their own positionalities in their initial encounters of works for the stage. At the same time, Lankalingam's experience warns against assuming that a student's cultural background equates to an easy identification with a text; as well, we should be wary of putting the onus of representing a culture onto any individual. While "multi-

cultural education should seek to draw on the knowledge, perspectives, and voices of the actual communities being studied,” it is critical to note that we do not place the burden on international students to “enlighten” US students as part of standard curriculum (Au 248).⁴ By creating space for personalized discussions through small-group work, embodied presentations, and question-and-answer opportunities in a safe classroom space, the later written components of the assignment yielded reflective analysis rather than traditional script analysis, which hopefully opens avenues for more frequent intercultural exchanges and understanding.

As we hope this note from the field demonstrates, international students are well-situated to make their own discoveries regarding identity, global/national/local cultures, and performance frames through examinations of their home and other cultures undertaken in third space classrooms, where they can move easily among multiple perspectives and approaches. All students make discoveries from their own cultural vantage points, taking steps toward material that initially may seem inaccessible or confusing to them. We hope that these steps, guided by the structure of the assignment, bring them closer to the world-mindedness described here and foster rich examinations of multiple spaces of belonging.

Jocelyn L. Buckner is an assistant professor of theatre at Chapman University. She is the editor of *A Critical Companion to Lynn Nottage* (2016), and serves as the book review editor for *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. She has published articles and reviews in *African American Review*, *American Studies Journal*, *Ecumenica Journal*, *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, *Popular Entertainment Studies*, *Theatre History Studies*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Theatre Survey*. She also works as a dramaturg and script reader supporting productions and new play development at Southern California regional theatres, including South Coast Repertory Theatre and Chance Theater.

Drew Chappell is an assistant professor of theatre at Chapman University, where he teaches courses in theatre studies, as well as theatre management and fantasy and science fiction. He has edited two books on play and performance with Peter Lang and Routledge. In addition to formal theatre, his research interests include theatre education, qualitative methods, and popular culture, in particular the Harry Potter series.

Malvika “Maxie” Lankalingam is a writer, director, dramaturg, and social activist. She is an undergraduate student at Chapman University, receiving her B.A in theatre in 2018. Through her theatre practice she fights for equal representation for women and people of color. Over the past two years she has directed and performed in shows concerning race, sexuality, and societal constructs regarding women. For her senior thesis she developed and produced a play about menstruation and coming of age to represent taboos in theatre and to stress the importance of creating controversial art to promote social awareness. After graduation she will work in theatre education and diversity outreach.

Notes

1. Educational researchers Merry Merryfield et al. write that “[w]orldmindedness often begins as global awareness and grows as individuals begin to appreciate the viewpoints, experiences and worldviews of others, especially those quite different from themselves. . . . It develops along with intercultural skills in communication and prolonged experiences in cross-cultural interaction” (7).

2. Although my birth name is Malvika Lankalingam, at a young age I changed my name to Maxie, because there was a small part of me that was embarrassed by the Indian culture I was raised in—a struggle I discuss throughout this note from the field.

3. I use the *caste* descriptor here rather than *culture*, because India has a broad spectrum of cultures that embody various traditions.

4. Moreover, not every class will include international students, and not all international students will be as comfortable as Lankalingam in sharing their experiences.

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