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**Four thoughts on place and *The Jungle***

ABSTRACT

*The Jungle* (2018), by Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, is a play that focuses on the experiences of the residents and volunteers of the refugee camp known as the Calais Jungle, where London audiences experienced a recreation of this camp in a West-End theatre. This intervention discusses the ethics surrounding the theatrical recreation of such places which are associated with conflict and displacement. Considering the positionality of the audience and the creators of the play, as well as analysing its institutional framing, the piece examines the issues inherent within recreating places at a distance.

KEYWORDS: place, mapping, refugee, migration, *The Jungle*

*Distance is  
a geography of coercion.  
—Thousands of miles separating two cities.  
You left your clothes on the clothesline in the first  
and in the second you extend your hands in the air  
to collect your clothes from the balcony in the first.*

Widad Nabi

**1. Recreating place**

There is something tactile, immediate and familiar about being offered food or drink during a performance. I remember that I burnt my tongue, I remember the shape of the cup I was given and the hurried way it was handed out. I recognise the form the taste takes in my mind and I settle on that image. The image, of course, is blurred and altered by what I see around me as I sit in the theatre. Drinking the sweet tea, I realise the purpose of this cup: to prepare me, to include me and introduce me to somewhere.

I missed the performance of *The Jungle* at the Young Vic (2018), so I have come to the run at The Playhouse Theatre, just off the Strand in central London. This performance is not an ‘immersive show’, according to *Time Out* magazine, but it does offer a ‘meticulous recreation’ (Saville 2018: n.pag.) of an Afghan restaurant run by Salar, which had its home in The Jungle, the Calais camp where migrants waited in hope of crossing the English Channel to the UK. I feel an initial uneasiness about walking into a ‘meticulous recreation’ of the camp, but the experience is faithful to this description.

On entering, audience members pass through a backstage area of both the theatre and the recreated camp, taking the form of a kitchen, an MDF structure complete with hobs and saucepans. Walking a little further, a recognisable theatre space suddenly opens up, design elements surrounding the stage evoking the Calais Jungle. The literal physical uprooting of the camp confirms my unease: in my seat I occupy a privileged position, viewing a replica of something that was in its original form organic and precarious. Yet here, I witness it as a stable recreation, a memory-museum of the structural elements of the camp built for a British audience.

Frequent references in the script to the word ‘theatre’ signal that this is clearly a *play* that we experience in a *theatre*. Our seats surround the stage and the actors, for the most part, perform out to us, so I am acutely aware that I am watching, guided through the passageways and alleys of the camp by the arranged narrative. Our guides for this evening are Salar, Safi, Sam and Beth, the characters that direct the narrative onstage. However, their roles have been crafted by two tour guides that we don’t see: Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson. The ‘two Joes’, as they have become known, set up the Good Chance Theatre in Calais, returned to the UK, conceived of and wrote *The Jungle,* a place recreated, seen through their eyes. Are we supposed to forget them in the play’s conceit? I don’t forget them.It is through their eyes that we walk these passageways and alleys, and they are the custodians of the stories, the builders of the construction and environment that I see, owing much more of their aesthetic to the West End than the original site.

Created from the ‘two Joes’ experiences in the camp, *The Jungle* is the physical realisation of a personal geography of memory, constructed by two people.[[1]](#endnote-1) Aesthetically, the desire to maintain the accuracy of the original location is apparent and as a result the recreation comes close to an exoticisation: a social imaginary of two westerners’ cultural experience. The ethics of positionality is ill-considered: pick up a programme and it is easy to see that the ‘two Joes’ are overt in their role as observers and playwrights. Coupled with the emotional narrative arc of the play itself, it is clear that the piece is designed to evoke empathy from audiences.

Perhaps in the stark and uncomfortable contrast between the recreation of the camp with the West End awnings and plush foyer, *The Jungle* is trying to be overt in its understanding of itself as a cultural offering that embodies self-reflexivity. The very execution of this place-imitation means that the audience is drawn into a comfortable, imagined, theatrical place, consisting of familiar dichotomies that we understand overtly as audience/performer, volunteer/refugee, writer/subject, us/them. As we watch we may feel empathy, but we are familiarly cushioned in the knowledge that this is a ‘meticulous recreation’, and that after the play finishes, we can walk outside; we can leave.

**2. Mapping distance**

As I am walking out of the theatre, an audience member is blocking the walkway through to the exit door. He has his arm up on the wall and he’s casually talking to a friend. In his hand is his ticket, the flyer we were given advertising a meeting occurring in the opening scene of the play and a map of the London Underground. His hand is resting on another map of The Jungle, a tangible plotted representation executed as part of the set, referred to in the play. This moment feels jarring, leaving aside my immediate, clenching instinct not to touch the artwork, the overlaying is acute. Map on map, city on city, both items point to a transition or continuation. The man will continue his night and his journey onwards and the map will exist for the run, ready to be packed up and transported onwards.

For Alison Jeffers, discussing theatre productions in relation to migration and travel, ‘locates them within a geopolitical frame that enables the travel of some people, while limiting the mobility of others’ (Jeffers 2012: 79). Jeffers’ statement is intrinsically linked to power, held by some and not others, and it is clear that *The Jungle* manifests an inherent power nexus; it is a map drawn out through information curated and words ordered by the ‘two Joes’. The map thus created is used to chaperone British audiences through the alleyways and passages of the camp, offering moments of connectivity with a collective chuckle about Green Energy or the *Daily Mail*, allowing us to relocate and re-navigate ourselves. Perhaps we see ourselves through the character of Sam, the anti-hero of the volunteers, mapping out the camp in a move to help the French authorities, his earnest nature shrouding quasi-colonial, cartographic ambitions of planning and place-making.

A map of absence also exists, the final cartographic layer of the triple palimpsest: London, the play and then the absent, original Jungle. The camp destroyed, where does the map direct us now? Televisions dotted around the set replay global media coverage of the camp, merchandise in the interval aspires to souvenir status and I am left wondering how *The Jungle* is helping me to understand what the place was at all.

Contrasts are made starker by the convergent qualities of the two theatres overlaid. The Good Chance Theatre in Calais, with its community build and diverse programme curated with camp residents, and then The Playhouse Theatre’s *The Jungle,* a West End venue where I paid £80 for the privilege of attending. As cultural outputs, both stem from a desire to make a difference in people’s lives, providing a platform for their voices to be heard. However, the patinas of these initiatives seem starkly different, each influenced by its locale and its external hegemonic pressures and institutions, in Calais acting in opposition and in London acting in concert.

**3. Viewpoints**

Recalling the physical layout of the theatre, what comes to mind is the literal division of the audience, with the ‘Cliffs of Dover’ overhead in the theatre’s circle and the Afghan Café where I was seated below in the ‘stalls’. From the circle above, *The Jungle’s* theatrical geography situates you in ‘the United Kingdom’, peering down on the recreated camp and able to secure the clearest view of the television screens that broadcast a mix of media footage and live recordings of the actors. In the Afghan Café below, you perch closer to the action. Both viewpoints embody an intended immersive aim to align the audience with a perspective of understanding. Physically my seat dictated an assigned geographic perspective for the night, but my experience did not convey this on a transformative or emotive level.

I am left instead with the impression that *The Jungle* possesses the aesthetic qualities and visual language of a photograph. Aside from where the audience sits, the directors’ staging choices appear grounded in theatrical semiotic representations of characterisation: ‘refugee’, ‘storyteller’, ‘volunteer’. I am too far removed to experience any intimate moments, too close to process comprehensively the bolder stagecraft (when the camp is destroyed), and the actors, text and lighting are not reminiscent of a film or documentary. As a static observer, my memories of the play are filed alongside other images, cross-referenced to visual photographic representations of conflict and displacement.

Emily Puthoff suggests that we often ‘experience “place” at multiple angles, interlaced with a split-screen live montage of current events half a world away’ (Puthoff 2006: 76). The duality present within this observation, both here and there at the same time, is pertinent to the linkage between *The Jungle* and photography. A photograph, both in your hands and pointing to somewhere else, is captured in that moment by the taker. Similarly, *The Jungle* is a catalogue of representative moments seen through the eyes of two people. What we don’t see is the original place replete with embodied histories, a plurality of nuanced narratives and contexts. What we do see: a position and subject chosen explicitly by the people who captured it.

In contrast, Jerome Phelps describes a map depicting the journey from the Turkish coast to Germany drawn by an anonymous Iraqi and disseminated by journalist Ghaith Abdul-Ahad. Seeing this as one of the most ‘powerful and exciting documents of the “crisis”’, Phelps (2017, n.pag.) notes that this map is a tool for *action* rather than an object of *contemplation*, and that it is the migrant who is doing the seeing. The immediacy of this rough sketch sits in stark contrast to the proliferation of mediated images of refugee and migrant experience. It is a sobering point, however, that this route to Germany is now all but closed, leaving only space to ask questions: what action can art incite? How can maps navigate people through routes that are closed to them?

**4. Embodying place**

In 2018, I took part in the Empathy Museum’s *A Mile in My Shoes* (2017)*.* Given a pair of sandals in my size, some headphones and a small mp3 player, I am invited to walk for one mile alone in any direction and listen to the shoe owner’s story: a Tamil man who had travelled from Sri Lanka to the United Kingdom is talking to me about his re-settlement process. With no visual indicators apart from his shoes, I am walking in London, but also, at the same time, nowhere. I take in my surroundings, as they blur past my body in motion, the images in my mind overriding the premise of the artwork. I see another person walking with headphones on and I feel a moment of joy, a paradox of solitude and communion.

Like Phelps’ discussion of the migrant’s sketched map, my borrowed sandals imply an action and a doing. The primacy of the site is not overlooked; rather I am invited to venture into the surrounding environment. The action of walking allows a glimpse through the eyes of the person telling the story, their face absent but their voice inciting a sensory and haptic quality of understanding. Alongside the autonomy of self-navigation, the artwork and action blend into one.

It is not my purpose here, through re-telling my journey of walking a mile in this man’s shoes, to privilege embodied action by a spectator or participant, nor to deny the meaningfulness of static audiencing. Nonetheless, creative endeavours and their respective aims and objectives are shaped by the institutional frameworks that represent them. An unfortunate but not uncommon consequence of more prolific or commercially successful artistic offerings is that they are influenced to a greater extent by neoliberal structures, creating distance from genuine understanding and connectivity. As routes of migration continue to close, as political blockades are forged, we must be wary of passivity, insular or one-sided orientations, even within the presentation of art.

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1. *The Jungle* at the Young Vic and The Playhouse Theatrewas directed by Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin, with set design by Miriam Buether. This article focuses on the play as a cultural offering created by the ‘two Joes’, from its inception in Calais, to the workshopping process and then finally the staging of the play for West-End audiences. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)