

Studio practice *for* intercultural understanding: Singaporean creativity

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the possibilities held by engaging in culturally conscious studio practice within research. The authors draw on a studio-based case study from Singapore which highlights the importance and opportunities of intercultural approaches to deepen understandings of both creativity and culture. Reflecting on this performative phase of a multi-sited international study into creativity in education and industry in Asia Pacific, the authors unpack the development of intercultural understanding made possible by engaging in collaborative, co-creative, arts-based studio practice. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate how “Cross-cultural understanding is core to a nuanced appreciation of creativity and its socio-cultural functions” (Harris 2017, p. 123).

KEYWORDS

Singapore; creativity; culture; performance; process; studio; devising; verbatim; intercultural; collaboration; embodied.

INTRODUCTION: Creativity and Culture

The body of literature on creativity and culture shows that, “As far back as Stein (1953) and more recently in Rudowicz (2003), scholars have argued that the meeting of creativity and culture is a two-way exchange” (Harris 2017, p. 123). Others (including, for example, Lubart and Sternberg, 1998; and Niu and Sternberg 2001) have written about the “culture-based and co-constitutive differences in both definitions of, and ways of doing, creativity. Cross-cultural understanding is core to a nuanced appreciation of creativity and its socio-cultural functions” (Harris 2017, p. 123).

In this essay, we draw on our shared experiences of co-devising a verbatim performance in Singapore which highlights the importance and opportunities of intercultural approaches to deepen understandings of both creativity and culture. This studio-based case study highlights what cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1999) has articulated as the embeddedness of creativity in cultural flows through his heuristic of ‘scapes’, his notion of a *capacity to aspire* and attention to global flows, and his *social imaginary*, an extension of Benedict Anderson’s *imagined communities*--all of which can be synthesised in the notion of ‘*creative imaginaries*’ (Harris 2017, p. 1). The intentions of this part of a larger study were to engage in embodied, collaborative performance-making in a process-oriented studio experience to highlight the

cultural and affective basis of creativity. Marshall McLuhan and Walter Benjamin also theorised the culturally-constituted nature of creativity and creative arts practices, including considerations of reproducibility (Benjamin) and sameness by Adorno (Harris 2014, p. 160). More recently, Terry Flew (2010) and other creative and cultural industries scholars have attended to the importance of cultural aspects of creativity studies. Contemporary creativity studies too often elide the specifics of time and place in service to globalised generic creativity discourses:

Attention to cultural context in the measurement of creativity is helpful in isolating the culturally situated aspect of creativity that too often go unremarked in present creativity debates (see Wang 2011 for a comparison of US-Taiwanese student teachers and creative thinking). As noted by Bilton (2010) in defining the culturally constituted turn in policy endorsements and definitions of creativity around the globe, since the 1990s the consensus in scientific and academic studies of creativity has shifted definitions of creativity from an individual trait to a collective social process....concerned with sociocultural context, systems theories, networks and organisation. (Harris 2017, p 68)

While Lubart (1999, 1990) has perhaps most prominently written about cross-cultural variations of creativity, “O’Connor and Gibson (2014), Collins (2010), and Runco (2010, 1999) have all suggested a more culturally situated and place-making approach, but have not explored them in sufficient depth, certainly not from outside of the northern states or western culture paradigm” (Harris 2017, pp. 27-28). We take Lubart’s assertion that all forms of creativity are informed by cultural practices and contexts (1999), as are all studio practices and process-oriented scholarship on the topic. Devised work, or any collaborative embodied work based in studio spaces and practices resists a mono-directional approach to creativity and arts-based research and practices. In this essay, we look at the relationships between culture and creativity through the co-creative lens of studio practice.

CREATIVITY RESEARCH: SINGAPORE

The Australian Research Council-funded study “Creativity in Education and Industry in Asia-Pacific”, consists of six sites with two phases at each site. Phase 1 in Singapore took place in March 2019, and, like all other sites, comprised 25 interviews with participants from across the arts, creative and cultural industries, and higher education, as well as 100+ surveys with university students in a range of disciplines (a standard mixed-method approach). However, soon into the study, Anne and a Singaporean colleague brainstormed a way of returning to each site to incorporate a performative arts-based component (which became ‘Phase 2’), as a necessary additional step toward retaining a more collaborative, creative and embodied aspect to the work. One participant at a leading Singaporean (higher education) arts institution agreed to host us in their dance studio for our second experience of Phase 2 (the first being in Hong Kong previously), which focuses on devising. The spacious dance studio, about the size of two regular university classrooms, was perfect for the work: a sprung floor for shoeless rehearsal, artefacts from classes and previous performances including an upright piano, prop and costume items, and wheeled flats painted black on one side and mirrored with mounted horizontal ballet barres on the other, were evocative and called us into performance attention.

Returning to Singapore (and each of the six sites) for the Phase 2 studio component allows engagement with local actors in a collaboration loop to performatively present a sample of Phase 1 interview data, an informal process experience of iteratively sharing the data, rather than any sort of conclusive rendering of ‘findings’. Doing so allows for creative, multi-modal collaboration through which to share and reflect on the emergent themes, identify resonances

and differences between sites, and engage the diverse cultural knowledges so richly present and which so deeply inform the different ‘creativities’ at each of the six sites (Singapore, Hong Kong, Taipei, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne). Through this multi-sited ethnography (Gallagher 2014), we extend Appadurai’s articulation of a social imaginary that flows via ‘ethnoscapes’, the global cultural flows that typify contemporary creative and educative work and subjects (1999). By recognising both the global mobilities as well as the unique local experiences of today’s global citizenship and creative practice, we together explored a ‘*creative imaginary*’ (Harris 2017, p. 1) made up of interview transcripts, inter- and transcultural bodies, national borders, similar and different approaches to studio and creative practice, and our own subjectivities. The devising studio sessions include a range of approaches including site-specific brainstorming with actors, improvisation, soundscaping, blocking, and script development. In addition to the rich analytical value for researchers, the goal of the three-to-four-day process is to create 30 minutes of performance work to share with an invited audience of study participants, guests and the public.

We do so informed by the view that ‘culture is never a finished product, but is a growing, changing, organism; therefore, culture is in constant creation, definition, and reflection of itself’ (Turner, 1985, p. 203). As such, rather than seeking to ‘represent’ Singaporean creativity in one 30-minute performance, we work toward a theatrical snapshot of this particular data that serves as an iterative, intercultural performance for deepening the enquiry. In sharing this performative ‘draft’ of multiple voices, the primary purpose is to raise questions and provoke further discussion about creativity in Singapore, in situ, adding an affective dimension to the mixed methods data. This performative approach to undertaking situated creativity research resists positivist goals of representing or generalising about this culture or these practices; rather, it seeks to extend the creativity conversation beyond the study limits into the public domain, and highlight the investigation as relational, evolving, and open-ended.

We sought experienced local actors with whom to collaborate. Requirements were for actors with the training and skills to work quickly; the artistry of an actor to express themselves vocally, physically, symbolically and metaphorically; to link the intellectual with the physical and expressive; and lastly, it was important that the actors have first-hand experience as Singaporean locals that can anchor the performance in time and place in a way that we - Anne and Kelly - as foreigners could not achieve alone, and provide insights that we otherwise might overlook. That lived experience of locals’ sights, sounds, customs, speech and cultural knowledge helps paint a sensory portrait of Singapore that enriches the interview data. By working in this collaborative manner, we thread lived experience of creative professionals, creative practice, actors’ skills, physical and narrative performance techniques, providing, as Canadian playwright Sharon Pollock says, “the opportunity to light up—if not the whole diamond—a larger portion of it than possible with a single writer” (Pollock 1991, cited in Lea 2012, p. 62).

SCRIPTWRITING PROCESS

Like many verbatim¹ playwrights (Valentine 2007; Kaufman 2001), Anne analyses the 25 interviews at each site for both thematic emergence and dramatic potential. Converting a site

¹ Verbatim is a form of documentary play that uses actual interview transcripts as the primary content for the work. Depending on country, discipline, and time, these works are also commonly known as documentary theatre, ethnodrama, tribunal plays, research-informed theatre, and more). Unlike in this study, verbatim theatre is a form most often used for political or highly controversial and emotional events, which lends historical and ‘factual’ drama to the text-heavy form. Using verbatim as a form for a topic like creativity presents interesting challenges and tensions in both research and dramatic ways.

snapshot into a 'performable' script involves searching for performative qualities in addition to resonant quotes, common themes, and rich, site-specific resonance. While Anne is highly experienced with this process and with staging the resultant playscripts/performances, these are usually from more emotional, affective topics in ethnographic studies, including for example refugee experiences, the stories of LGBTIQ+ teachers, lived experiences of adoptees, and other "vulnerable populations". Dramatising data about creativity, especially in a culturally different context, posed additional challenges.

For example, in previous studies, Anne created mostly character-driven narratives that often involved compelling narratives to move an audience, give us an 'insider' experience of the topic, and move us to action. Creativity research is different. What should be the organising principle - colourful characters? 'Crafting' an over-arching narrative about 'creative Singapore' that may or may not make claims to representation and truth? Compelling stories, controversial themes, or vivid imagery? It was hard to know. We tried a range of approaches at the first site of this study, Hong Kong. Some sites offer more emotional interviews due to-- as in Hong Kong--the approaching protests against mainland China's influence in local life. Some other sites offered a predominance of statistical information, economic commentary, or individualised accounts that didn't really reflect on the national, regional and international focus of this study. Perhaps most challenging, some of the best 'data' in terms of the study's focus, was the least 'dramatic' for translation onto stage.

There are lessons here for how to conduct multi-modal (and intercultural) studio work that has a range of (at times diverse) outcomes. It's important to remember, too, that researchers must honour the artform in which they are working. If it's film, film audiences have some basic formal expectations; the same is true for drama, visual art, and dance. As with Appadurai's social imaginary, which he describes as the image, the imagined, the imaginary...the imagination as a social practice, we use the verbatim and devising process as an imaginative social practice. While this project's Phase 2 played in wonderful ways with 'messing with' those expectations, we respect the forms in which we are working and want that to be apparent to audiences.

For Singapore, Anne returned to creating composite characters to whom the audience could attach. In other sites, the lack of character-based dramatisation left audiences feeling alienated and as though the performance was just a kind of cold gamification of the data, onstage, but not dramatic.

This time, Anne created three composite characters:

- 1: *Eurasian dancer /choreographer / professor*
- 2: *Chinese theatre director*
- 3: *Malaysian fashion designer*



Image #1 - First script re-through

Each character is a composite of multiple participants' voices and represents the three categories across which the participants were drawn. The script includes 'chorale' moments, in which the three characters speak in unison, a technique that Anne uses regularly in her own performance work and verbatim work. The purpose of this technique is to bring a musical, rhythmic quality that joins the sometimes-separate characters, in ways that are resonant and highlight key terms in the data/text. Chorale offers punctuation and moments of ensemble to the text-heavy verbatim scripts. This provisional script, as in other sites, forms the basis for the co-devised studio work, and continues to evolve throughout the rehearsal process. In Singapore, the characters introduce themselves like this:

CHARACTER 3: *I'm Malaysian, and I'm what we call Chindian (I'm half Chinese and half Indian). My husband and I are designers – I'm a fashion designer, and he's a tailor. We had a shop for about four, five years. Then we decided to fold because rental in Singapore is very expensive. That's probably one of the reasons why we moved back across the border to Malaysia to set up a space and so we work out of there a few - well, when we can until we start new projects. Then we'll come back to Singapore. And it's not too far. I mean, it's 30 to 45 minutes' drive across the border.*

CHARACTER 2: *I'm 62. Male. I'm Chinese. Singapore Chinese. Forever. Since I was born. I've lived in Singapore for 62 years and been an artist for 30-something years. When I first opted for theatre, it was about being competent in skills, for example, in playwriting, acting or directing. But I think over the years, what happened was I became more interested in thinking about the ideas behind the work. I'm very - how do you say it? I think about the context of my work a lot more than I used to. So creative skills. There are a lot of factors that feed into my creative space. Seeing the paradigm shift in the way theatre, or art in general, is being made or produced, seen, exhibited. It's about what art is. Singapore has transformed over the past 30 years. It's a creative space.*

CHARACTER 1: *Okay, so gender male, age range is...I'm 44. Nationality is easier, I'm Singaporean. Ethnicity is I'm of mixed parentage, so that's – culturally I will be known as Eurasian, culturally, yeah. I've lived in Singapore all my life. The big one now for me is presence, and that of course is huge on so many levels. It's physical, it's psychological, it's emotional, it's virtual. But really, because I do practicum, I go into schools and watch teachers, somebody walks into a room and they have **presence**, and of course this is an actors' thing, right? Students respond. **In all forms and guises**. So, what comes with presence is a range of things: focus, energy, confidence, stillness, voice. How to understand, how to read the space, all kinds of things.*

The characters embody prominent or recurrent themes. For example, the tension between Singapore's very structured culture and its relationship with creativity returns time and time again, as in this excerpt:

CHARACTER 3: *When you look at artworks from the Philippines or Indonesia or Thailand, you can recognise where it's from. I think in Singapore, there is still quite a global look to the artwork. Some of our regional countries have more identifiable traits. For example, Philippine art tends toward a lot of social commentary, especially about poverty. I can't say that Singapore has quite the same signifiers, and they're not particularly unique or identifiable, unless the artwork had specific scenes from Singapore, like food, flats or something. Ours is – I don't want to use the word Western, because it's blurry, between Western art and what comes out of Japan, what comes out of Korea, what comes out of China today.*

Of course, even verbatim scripts are curated by the writer. Anne chooses the excerpts and curates them in a particular kind of way that paints particular pictures of Singapore. In addition to arranging the words and creating character through-lines, Anne also writes bridging refrains such as, '*we return to the body*', a recurrent theme in the data set, as a way of understanding and articulating creativity in this place, at this time. Anne finds it powerful in its specificity as well as its use as a counter-narrative to some pervasive stereotypes of Singapore as a site of more reproductive kinds of creative industries.

The twenty-five interview excerpts can certainly be sorted, selected and curated in an infinite number of other ways. For the interculturally-conscious researcher, this power of curation matters a great deal, and should always remain transparent. Just because a verbatim script presents the 'exact words of the participants' does not mean it is entitled to truth-claims. Even quantitative studies, as is now widely noted, can be challenged on their truth claims and supposed objectivity.

Following Lubart's assertion that all forms of creativity are informed by cultural practices and contexts (1999), it became important to Anne to expand the standard mixed methods approach of the overall study to include an intercultural collaborative component, and to apply her skills as a performance ethnographer. An iterative process of returning to each site in order to make transparent the intercultural room for misunderstanding became a creative and accessible way of addressing cultural difference, and for expanding creative collaboration that sits at the centre of this study. Once the provisional script is created, it is still open for development in the collaborative studio process. The week of devising then becomes time for discussing the actors' impressions of the portraits created in the script, of adding additional personal narratives about being locals, and allows Kelly to work with the actors to create the devised sound- and body-scapes that bring the words to life.

IMPROVISING AND CO-DEVISING PROCESS

Kelly begins the first day of co-devising by giving the actors prompts for generating improvisations informed by the sights and sounds of Singapore. Doing so is both a well-established devising technique and also establishes a culture of collaboration within the studio. Kelly asks the actors to populate a whiteboard with sights and sounds of Singapore. This free-association brainstorming is an effective first step in drawing on the actors' personal knowledge, as well as encouraging them to work together to build a collective image of Singapore. Next, each actor is asked to select one or two sights and sounds to embody and incorporate into a moving soundscape. One actor begins onstage, repeating a sound and physical movement that expresses their selection. Gradually the other actors enter the space, performing their embodied representations until the studio is alive with sights and sounds of Singapore. Traffic police, youths playing video games on handheld devices, and people rushing fill the stage, juxtaposed with sounds of a train announcer, the nightly light-show of Marina Bay Sands, local bird-song and cab-drivers asking 'Have you had your dinner, lah?' together form a nuanced, energetic portrait of the city from the vantage point of the local actors.

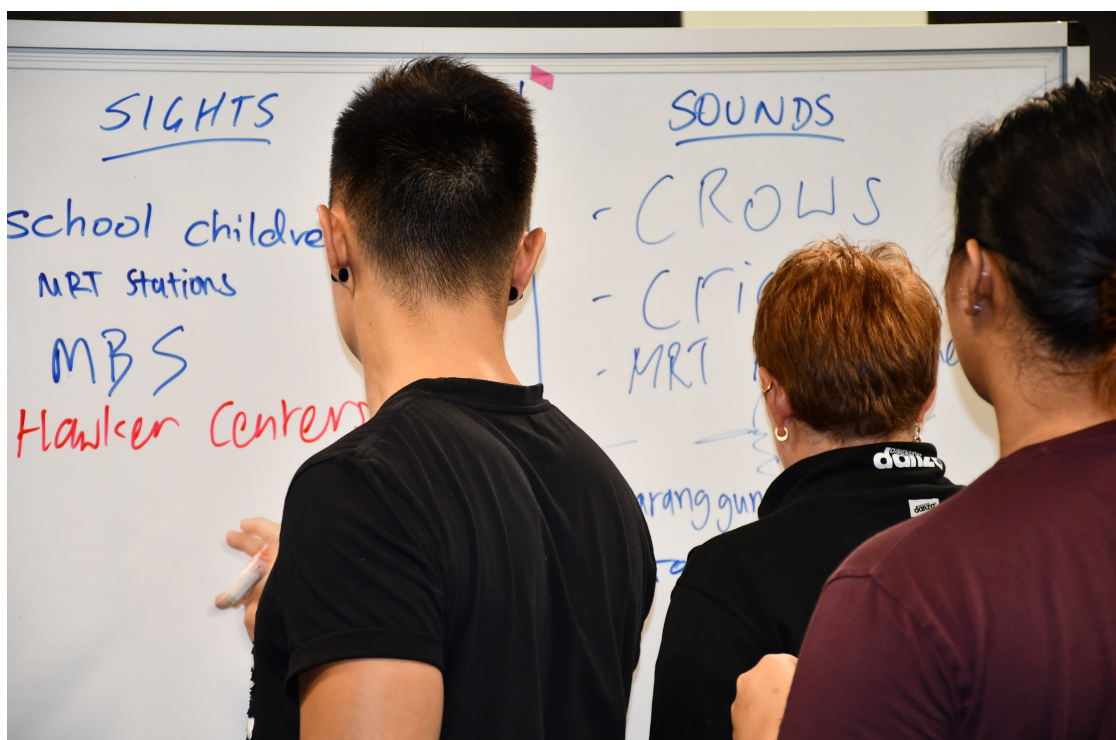


Image #2 - Collaborative brainstorming

A second improvised sound and body-scape is begun by Kelly prompting the actors to consider sights and sounds of Singapore *creativity*. In specifying this focus to the prompt, the actors are encouraged to consider the specific forms and outputs of creativity in Singapore, rather than just iconic but generic aspects of the city. This second brainstorm takes longer than the first, with the actors debating and discussing specifics while filling up the whiteboard (see Image 2). Their responses are wide-ranging and include expressions of creativity that represent a number of the ethnic groups that constitute the population of Singapore. As in brainstorm one, the actors are instructed to select one or two sights and sounds to layer into a moving soundscape of Singapore creativity: people waiting in line for hours to get food from an American burger chain; a father at a wedding elaborately pouring champagne whilst singing 'Yam Sing', a traditional Chinese cheer; the sound of a Kompang, a traditional Malaysian instrument; boiling soup; construction sounds; dancing in the Geylang area, known for its red light district. This second moving soundscape brings a greater sense of local specificity and

nuance to the embodiment of Singapore, one more reflective of the cultural melting pot of Singapore than the first.

With the rich material generated in the brainstorming process, and strong improvisation skills of the actors, Kelly leads the actors to combine more sights and sounds into short physical scenes. In one scene, two actors -- Robert and Maryam (all names here are pseudonyms) -- stand smoking with a generous space between them. Another actor, Matthew, approaches and tells them to 'stand inside the lines' - gesturing for them to stand inside the yellow painted squares on the ground in which Singaporeans must stand when smoking on the street. Robert and Maryam do so, with Robert complaining about how 'Every year the box is getting smaller', and Maryam exclaiming 'Excuse me!' as Matthew walks around them, painting the box smaller and the two becoming more tightly packed together. Neither Anne nor Kelly are familiar with the restriction of smoking within demarcated boxes, but the actors explain how commonplace it is in urban Singapore, as is the complaining. This sense of restriction imposed by government echoes a recurring theme that emerged from the interviews and which Anne included in the script, so we all agree that this short scene be incorporated into the performance.



Image #3 - Improvisation

Some of these improvised moments are incorporated in the final performances, serving to extend the verbatim script in multiple ways. The physical vignettes anchor the performance in physical and multi-sensory aspects of the time and place in which the data is collected. It aids in providing context for the voices and characters in the script. Using the physical skills of the actors in this way honours the artform of verbatim theatre which relies on the visual, aural, symbolic and bodily elements of theatre as much as it does the words of the participants. In privileging these other performance modes, we highlight the body as a site of knowing, in which, as performance ethnographer D. Soyini Madison argues, *"the intersection of bodies in motion and space...Meanings and experiences in the field [to be] filtered and coloured through sensations of the body - that is, through body knowledge. If we accept that knowledge has*

infinite origins and forms, we are able to accept knowledge from and of the body" (Madison, 2005, p. 195).

Verbatim theatre and other forms of performed research value performers' bodies as rich sources of cultural knowledge, as well as the tools through which to express multiple meanings to an audience. With an appreciation of this, Kelly uses the craft of theatre to draw on the actors' cultural knowledge and craft opportunities for bodily expression to enhance the verbatim script. Emerging through improvisation, these devised moments allow symbolic and illustrative expression of important or recurrent themes in the script, providing multiple points of -- and means for -- engagement.

STAGING/INTERNATIONAL STUDIO-MAKING

A recurrent theme throughout the interviews is the tension between a sense of rigidity in Singaporean education and culture, versus a perceived need to break out, to disrupt, in order to foster creativity. This is linked, some respondents feel, with a generation of Singaporeans who have been trained out of thinking in divergent ways, including creatively. One of the participants, Linda speaks to this theme as a dance educator and dancer herself, so we invited her to be a part of the devising process. Neither Anne nor Kelly are experienced choreographers and see the potential for expanding the multimodal performance phase by incorporating diverse participants' skills.

In the early stages of the devising, the approach to exploring the role of movement in the piece is to have Linda physically respond to the text that the actors read. In some instances, Linda performs outward to an imagined audience, physically echoing sentiments being expressed by the character speaking. In other instances, the response is toward other characters, encouraging them to engage somatically with their physical body. We focused strongly on the somatic interpersonal possibilities. Early in the rehearsal process, the actors delivered their monologues by direct address to the audience, which Kelly blocked as standing in place and separate from one another. As Linda prompts each speaker through physical touch, they become more animated, and more relational with the others onstage. This minor change powerfully conveys that, despite the differences in perspectives being shared, they are interacting in a performative dialogue with each other and the audience about the culture of creativity in Singapore.

This work is so evocative that we decide to pause rehearsals for Linda to give us all an introductory lesson to somatic movement so that we can incorporate more of it. This work informs an extended movement section in the middle of the performance, where the characters, albeit with a greater sense of awareness of one another in the space, are still facing away from one another and not yet in dialogue. While devising the script and performance, and knowing we will work with a dancer, we include music for the first time. We choose music by Australian female composer, Charlie Chan, from her album *East & West*, which we layer over the soundscape sections to further layer the cultural and performative aspects of the piece. As the music begins, Linda enters the space and dances around the area occupied by the three actors. The three performers grow in awareness of Linda's presence and, as they do so, begin to respond by moving their bodies more spontaneously than they have previously. The increase in energy from their movements leads to them moving around the space more freely, almost symbiotically with one another. At the end of this extended movement piece, the performers deliver their first monologues with and to one another, showing interest in one another and sometimes nodding in agreement with a perspective that is shared. At the end of the performance, the actors sit alongside one another on chairs in a row facing the audience, so close that they are touching. Linda comes to sit with

them in the row, showing that she, too, is a part of the conversation into which the audience is being invited, albeit physically rather than verbally. This invitation is both figurative and literal, as the audience are themselves invited to take part in a post-performance discussion.

Linda's physical presence becomes a symbolic reminder of the centrality of the body in considerations of creativity and its expressions. The actor and character's identity as a Euro-Singaporean also serves, however, as representative of Singapore's demographics, and including her as a non-verbal actor was intentional to make use of her dance expertise but also to keep the text in the mouths of more long-term 'locals'. The post-show discussion acknowledged these very Singaporean performative and cultural tensions, including the possibility that Linda's role might be viewed as a negative reminder of the west's influence on Singapore, or suggesting a distracting -- albeit ubiquitous -- colonial history. All are fair observations and are included in this process-focused part of the study, in order to remain open to the vulnerabilities, and unique characteristics of the way creativity is embodied and understood in the Singaporean context. The entire devising team (Anne, Kelly and the ensemble) make group decisions about where Linda should and should not hold space onstage, to ensure the focus remains always primarily on the non-white actors and perspectives.

Such tensions are welcomed and form part of the work of this intentionally intercultural work. Just as we seek the multiple perspectives present in the interviews, so too does the project embrace the multiple cultural lenses and subjectivities of the performers within the studio practice with whom we undertake this co-devising process. By drawing on - rather than resisting - essentialising cultural perspectives within the studio practice at each stage of this project, we are able to remain committed to verbatim data, engaging performances, but also interpersonal and intercultural learning. This strengthens the ethic and iterative collaboration loop which ensures that this and other similar work remains a co-creative process of intercultural understanding, not just a 'performance' of 'findings'.

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