Connecting

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Disconnected:

New Media Dramaturgy and Migrant Identities

in Virtual Migrant Theatre

Abstract

This thesis explores the connection between New Media Dramaturgy and migrant identities in virtual migrant theatre through *Bloodlines* (2022). *Bloodlines* is an interdisciplinary virtual artistic exploration of the Chinese identity by six artists across the Sinosphere. The creative group searches for the promise of "Chineseness" as an individual, cultural, and international identity connecting different parts of the world. *Bloodlines* is initiated by Cinthia Chen (Taiwan-American) and Sim Yan Ying (Singapore), along with four other Chinese from Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, and the US. This thesis maps the two major types of dramaturgies, New Media Dramaturgy and Dramaturgy of Migration, in attempt to establish a dramaturgical understanding of virtual migrant theatre. This thesis employs a theoretical framework that mentions the key authors across two fields, including Peter Eckersall, Steve Dixon, Yana Meerzon, Judith Rudakoff and Emma Cox. A dramaturgical analysis is conducted, following the relational approach proposed by Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx. By employing the New Media Dramaturgy as a major composition strategy to foreground the migrant identities in virtual migrant theatre, I intend to develop a dramaturgical framework that contributes towards the understanding of the virtual migrant theatre. This is formed by connecting the relationships between virtual theatre and migrant identities-related issues and spectators. For my central case study, *Bloodlines* (2022), I conduct background research with contextual analysis regarding the performers' in relations to the specific term "Chineseness". This work contributes to the field of performance studies by drawing connections between virtual theatre, "Chineseness" and spectatorship, as a dramaturgical idea of virtual migrant theatre. This research thus aims to contribute towards the contemporary art field by suggesting another possible way of connecting the disconnected and communicating beyond the boundaries in order to give voice to the silenced.

Acknowledgement

I still remember that on my first day of lecture in my logbook, I kept a note to myself: Before immersing in a high academic thinking mode and (maybe) falling apart, I would like to remind myself why studying theatre – it is all about love and sentiment. The time of this academic year has flown swiftly. Interestingly, while writing my application papers in Hong Kong, I also used 'the rise of virtual theatre in Hong Kong' as my sample research paper. Also, the reason I study here is closely related to my homeland. I was desperately craving for inspiration and seeking a way to deal with the 'future'. Indeed, this thesis is completely different from the sample research paper. But when I look back, I am surprised by how this last paper of my studies echoes my interest and motivation at the beginning. This journey has not been easy, yet is definitely worthwhile. And without these amazing people, I can never finish it:

I am grateful to have my supervisor, Laura Karreman. Her patient guidance and support have led my way throughout the process. It has been a challenging process for me to write the very first academic paper in the area of humanities studies. And I am truly glad to share such an unforgettable experience together with her.

Also, thanks to the fantastic artists in *Bloodlines* for giving such a meaningful piece. The leading makers, Cinthia and YY, thanks for their time for the nice interview and generosity in sharing all related materials. My studies and analysis have enormously benefited from the interview. Special thanks also goes to my talented friend, Kiwi Chan, for connecting me with Cinthia and YY. I would also like to thank my second reader, Evelyn Wan, for her input on the thesis plans. Also, my incredible editor, Sarah Lee, who has given me so much support on writing in academic English. I would also like to thank my beloved peers Maartje Boekestein, Vivian de Koning, Shiyuan Liang, Jasmijn Ooms, Sarah Goorhuis…for giving me comments and support. Thanks to my supportive friends from Hong Kong. Despite the distance, they always have my back. They have motivated me a lot throughout the process and have more trust on my ability than myself. I am very blessed to be around these amazing souls. Last but not least, I must thank my family for supporting me in choosing a different path from one that they once expected. Of course, it is never easy for us. But I am sure it will light up our lives in the end.

To me, the process of producing this thesis research has been most invaluable. Academically, it expands my knowledge of dramaturgies about new media and migration, as well as the thinking procedure of putting them into application. The process of researching "Chineseness" also raised a big question for me. As a local Chinese, it is too easy to take everything for granted and understand an issue with a direct instinct. This research process has taught me to look into a subject from both micro and macro views. In the future, I cannot be more excited to continue the research journey through applying the research ideas into my artistic practice ahead.

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Introduction

Under the influence of Covid-19 pandemic, theatre productions all over the from around the world turned to the online platform through various ways. Followed by social distancing, the spatial perception of theatre has spread to the virtual world globally. Meanwhile, millions of people from my homeland, Hong Kong, are moving worldwide as new migrants. According to the latest statistics conducted by the Hong Kong Government, 89,000 citizens left the city from mid-2020 to mid-2021.[1] This has been the second wave of migration in Hong Kong since 1997. As an international student in the Netherlands, the physical distance created from home inspired me to re-consider the meaning of theatre through the lens of its digital aspect. With the combination of (post-) COVID time and the new diaspora situation, I develop my research interest in virtual migrant theatre, as an artform that is free from geographical boundaries and its potential to offer a new platform for meeting, reuniting, and creative space.

Motivated by my cultural background, I would like to consider migration in the theatre field. The concept of migration has been a controversial topic worldwide, as people flee voluntarily or involuntarily from their home countries. According to International Organization for Migration (IOM), in 2020, there is a 3.6% of the world's population has migrated from one place to another, as it continues to be a trend that is increasing steadily throughout the past 40 years.[2] There are two forms of migration. Involuntary migrations include political violence, wars, natural disasters; voluntary migrations often take place as a result of labor and economic considerations. Although every migrant may have his or her own story, they are all exiled bodies living in-between cultures, which means that they have to adapt between culture of their hometown and their relocated living place.

In *Theatre and Migration* (2014), Emma Cox explores the migration issues in the theatre. She begins with the politics of bringing the migrations to theatre as a re-affirming community space for the newcomers. Then she addresses the concerns of theatre and migration in different aspects, including languages, homely relationship, artist and audience. [3] According to Cox, theatre is a place with expanding boundaries[4] that explores the relationship between communities[5]. She argues that "Theatre of migration pays attention to imagining the contact

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[1] The Government of HKSAR, "Mid-Year Population for 2021".

[2] International Organization for Migration. "World Migration Report 2022".

[3] Cox, *Theatre and Migration,* 3.

[4] Cox, *Theatre and Migration,* ix.

[5] Cox, *Theatre and Migration,* xii.

zone between those who arrive and those who lay claim to ownership or custodianship over a territory" (Cox 2014, 5). This "imagining contact zone" has offered a potential platform that is possible for communication, negotiation and hybridity between the original and new the cultures. According to dance dramaturg, Guy Cools, hybrid strategies "opens up a space of negotiation' [6], which is 'neither assimilation nor collaboration"[7]. And this negotiation includes an such adaptation is never easy for both migrants and locals.

Relocating place, relocating space

The concept of digital theatre first started in the 1990s during the technology booming generations. According to Steve Dixon. In *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation,* Dixon describes the theatre in cyberspace as "desktop theatres". He gives examples on the ancient myth narratives *LittleHamlet* (1995), comic tale *The Candide Campaign* (1996), and the face-to-face contact performance *Eight Dialogues* (1997). However, due to the slow speed of data, hardware and internet limitation at that time, the digital theatre was unable to become a popular trend. Dixon mentions that the main limitations of cybertheatre during the 1990s was the slow speed of networks, which had significantly restrained the visual format of live performance to the use of text[8]. Jessica Chalmers has noted, in 2007, that the new format of the desktop theatre has undoubtedly questioned the age of the new theatre world.[9] The technology has to be developed in order to satisfy the innovative ideas of the theatre makers. "The [online] medium promises great things—body transcendence and omnipresence—but in practical terms, this has usually translated into tedious rounds of clicking and waiting… Today's cybertheatre still has a way to go in its own scenario of romantic transport" (Chalmers: Dixon 2007, 511).

Since the 2000s, there has been a steady growth in the use of technology in theatre. Especially in the past two years, virtual space has been adapted to different contexts globally, including working, meeting, performance, and gathering. After several lockdowns, people become used to working from home, attending virtual classrooms, organizing cultural activities via the online space. Online communication tools like Zoom have become a portal for one to connect with

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[6] Cools, I*n-Between Dance Cultures,* 31.
[7] Cools, I*n-Between Dance Cultures,* 31.
[8] Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 490.
[9] Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 511.

people around the world through real-time interactions. This new form of hybrid application with physical and virtual places has immersed the participants in digital spaces of daily lives. Within the same context, theatre also have been developing. Without a live audience available in the room physically, the media itself has become a vital platform for connecting people with the theatre experience. Under this new norm, the theatre moves online, the phenomenon of online theatre and Zoom theatre emerged. As the virtual theatre is a new media that mediates the context and the spectators, I would like to imply the concept of New Media Dramaturgy in attempt to gain an understanding about the current developments in virtual theatre.

New Media Dramaturgy (NMD), as proposed by Peter Eckersall, Helena Grehan, and Edward Scheer, is a concept "linking dramaturgical innovations in the globally distributed field of contemporary theatre with theories and practices in media/visual arts" (Eckersall, Grehan and Scheer, 2017, 375). According to the official website, this dramaturgical innovation "describes both the composition of new media performances and their effects on an audience."[10] NMD functions as a lens to understand the adaptation of technology in relation to the audience by defining new media as a composition in performance and highlighting its effects on the audience. In my point of view, virtual theatre is not merely a substitute for the happenings of cultural activities during the lockdown between 2019 and 2022, it may be considered as a new way of re-thinking the possibilities of the spectatorship and composition during the production of a performance. Therefore, as my contribution to the academic field, I would like to suggest taking New Media Dramaturgy as a dramaturgical lens to look into this new form of theatre, namely the Virtual Migrant Theatre.

Virtual Migrant Theatre

According to my observation, Virtual Migrant Theatre has not been clearly defined in the academic field yet. Instead, there are serval practices in the UK that aim at connecting the migrants or new diaspora together to perceive new aesthetics, race and global justice through interactive media art.[11] Take *Virtual Migrant Association* as an example, it was founded in 1998, with the intention to bring together a range of artists who focused on adding artistic responses and perspectives on the

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[10] New Media Dramaturgy. "What Is NMD?"

[11] Koojchuhan. 2015. "About." Virtual Migrants. November 18. https://virtualmigrants.net/about/.

topics of race and globalization, as well as crossing boundaries between artists, theorists, activists and communities on the new media.

In *Political Cybertheatre* (2016), Christina Papagiannouli suggests the political potentials on cybertheatre and questions the boundaries between spaces and the spatial experiences produced.[12] By bringing the communication-engaging and participation of both the performer and the spectator in the online theatre space, it is suggested that the internet has turned into a political space that is an "in-between space for real-time cyber-adaptation", collaboration and engagement in performance making and staging. In *Virtual Theatres : An Introduction* (2004), Gabriella Giannachi coins that virtual theatre, the role of medium itself is actually to serve as a process of "remediation"[13], which means the medium of virtual theatre is also the context. Therefore, virtual theatre is not only a composition that provide a platform for the context and spectators, but the choice of using virtual platform is also a statement. In this research paper, I look into the dramaturgical understanding of virtual migrant theatre by thinking through the migrant identities performed on virtual theatre.

I employ *Bloodlines,* as a case study, to illustrate the dramaturgical concept of virtual migrant theatre. *Bloodlines* is a virtual migrant theatre using a virtual event platform, *Ohyay*, as their performance space to connect Chinese artists, as well as Chinese and non-Chinese audiences from all around the world. Facing both phenomenon of historical and on-going migration, Cinthia Chen (Taiwan- American) and Sim Yan Ying (Singapore) together with four Chinese artists from Taiwan, China, Hong Kong and the US, search for the meaning of "Chineseness" as an individual, cultural, as well as global identity sharing on different parts of the world. I conduct a dramaturgical analysis of the performance to illustrate how context, composition, and spectators are constructed in virtual migrant theatre. The three keywords, context, composition, and spectators, are employed from the relational approach to dramaturgical analysis proposed by Groot Nibbelink and Merx.[14] According to Groot Nibbelink and Merx, "dramaturgy" in the contemporary theatre, pays attention to the storytelling principle, as well as "how theatrical strategies are put to use to manage the attention of the audience, how these strategies create meaning and experience, and how theatre, dance, and performance relate to the 'world at large'" (Groot Nibbelink and Merx, 2021).

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[12] Papagiannouli, "Political Cyberformance", x.

[13] Giannachi, *Virtual Theatres: An Introduction*, 5.

[14] Groot Nibbelink, Lisebeth, and Sigrid Merx, "Dramaturgical Analysis. A Relational Approach".

Therefore, the dramaturgical analysis provides aspects on how the theatrical means are connected to create the experience for the audience.

Based on the aforementioned, my main research question is: How does *Bloodlines* as a virtual migrant theatre adopt New Media Dramaturgy and Dramaturgy of Migration to explore the migrant identities of Chineseness?

To answer this main question, I have three sub-questions to activate the discussion based on the dramaturgical procedures.

    a. How does virtual migrant theatre create a space to reflect on Chineseness in *Bloodlines*?

    b. How do spectators interact with the virtual migrant theatre platform in *Bloodlines*?

    c. How do spectators experience different forms of Chineseness in *Bloodlines*?

Methodology

To address my key research question, I construct a theoretical framework for analyzing virtual migrant theatre with New Media Dramaturgy and dramaturgy of migration. In order to form a trajectory between these two fields, I use the "planes of dramaturgy" suggested by Merx and Groot Nibbelink as my dramaturgical framework on virtual migrant theatre. To explore the related dramaturgical theories in this framework, I employ literatures across these two fields, including major authors such as 1) New Media Dramaturgy proposed by Helena Grehan, Ed Scheer and Peter Eckersall, and digital performance-related literature presented by Steve Dixon; 2) Dramaturgy of Migration contributed by Yana Meerzon, Guys Cools, Judith Rudakoff, Emma Cox from performance studies.

As mentioned above, in *Dramaturgical analysis: a relational approach* (2021), Merx and Groot Nibbelink suggest the "planes of dramaturgy" to address the "principles of composition, modes of addressing the spectator, and ways in which a performance may relate to a wider social and artistic context."[15] In other words, when a work is presented to the spectators, the choice on composition may generate specific meaning and experience due to various forms of audience address and the sociocultural or artistic context triggered within the performative events. They frame it as a relational approach, as the triad is equally and

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[15] Ibid.

fundamentally relational. [16] Three components are needs are always inter-connected and should be thought through all together.[17]

I choose this method as my structure framework and methodology to work on the analysis because it provides an overview on how the performance component are one-connected with each other. In fact, virtual migrant theatre is already a component of two fields by suggesting both a technology method and the migration content, and that both of them emphasize on the relationship with spectators. Moreover, as Groot Nibbelink and Merx suggest, the different starting point on the triad provides different perspectives over the understanding of the performance dramaturgically.[18] Hence, I apply the framework in "context-composition- spectator" direction to illustrate how the virtual platform creates space for the migration identities, interactions, and relations to spectators. In each element, I investigate the context as open space for migrant identities, composition as interactive platform for multicultural context as composition and spectators' co-presence among the participants. Using *Bloodlines* as my case study, I use this model to analyze my theoretical framework for virtual migrant theatre.

Despite the fact that *Bloodlines* is still a work-in-progress, it helps to analyze what it has done so far in the area of interactive virtual theatre with connection to Chineseness, and what can be improved in the future dramaturgically. The phenomenon of Chinese migration has a long history, and its identity varies according to the geographical difference. Nevertheless, the online meeting point has created a new space and experience for artists and spectators worldwide to bring their connections together. By re-thinking "Chineseness" and virtual theatre, I investigate how this affect the spectators' experience and the hybridity in culture as a whole. Personally, I attended the work-in-progress performance of *Bloodlines* in January 2022 and participated in the audience feedback session after the show. Also, I have conducted two separate interviews with the two key makers, Cinthia Chen and Sim Yan Ying, for 60 minutes each to collect the information regarding the performance. I have also acquired access to the performance platform test link, audience feedback answer form, and performance screen captures. In my studies, I start with introducing how *Bloodlines* works, and select some scenes for discussion based on its connection with Chineseness and its relations with the audience. For this analysis, I focus on the theatrical components such as, personal narratives, interactive elements, and audience communication platform.

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[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid.

Summaries

In Part 1, I focus on establishing the theoretical framework for defining the dramaturgical aspects of virtual migrant theatre. Part 1.1 introduces the New Media Dramaturgy and specifically identifies the characteristics in virtual theatre. Part 1.2 demonstrates the notion of dramaturgy of migration adapted by the authors worldwide, and thus theorizing the concept of 'hybridity' for the understanding of migrant identity. And Part 1.3 further elaborates how the dramaturgical aspects in two fields come together to contribute towards the theoretical framework of virtual migrant theatre.

Moving on from theory to application, I conduct a dramaturgical analysis with contextual research on *Bloodlines in* Part 2. In this part, I firstly introduce the performance and then go to the contextual analysis to provide the cultural background of Chineseness. I bring up the major discussions with the region mentioned in the performance, with Ien Ang and Lingchei Letty Chen as my key authors. Then, I further analyze the performance under the dramaturgical framework to examine how virtual migrant theatre foreground the migration context in virtual migrant theatre through the online interactions, as well as how spectators experience the migrant identity, Chineseness.

And finally, in the Conclusion, I leave space for discussion on projecting the possibilities of virtual migrant theatre. I substantiate my view that this is a form of theatre that breaks through the geographical limitations and expands the meaning of migrant theatre to the virtual world. Under the new normal of using hybrid ways of communication, both online and offline, I believe that virtual theatre is yet another possibility to connect the diaspora back to the home culture and achieve a more opened world in the foreseeable future.

Part 1 Virtual Migrant Theater:

Dramaturgical aspects of "virtual" and "migrant" in contemporary theatre

This part analyses the concept of virtual migrant theatre through identifying the dramaturgical aspects within. Taking the virtual migrant theatre as a type of theatre that addresses migrant concerns via a new media platform, I illustrate two aspects of dramaturgy. First, I introduce the concept of New Media Dramaturgy, referring to the virtual theatre. Second, I introduce the dramaturgy of migration to address the migrant identities in theatre. These dramaturgical aspects shall offer a more consolidated theoretical background to establish the dramaturgical analysis framework for virtual migrant theatre in the last part.

1.1 New Media Dramaturgy

With the rise of new media platforms for performance, the definition of and approaches to running a theatre have been transformed since the 1990s. In order to understand the concept of virtual theatre on a dramaturgical level, I define the characteristics of virtual theatre through the lens of New Media Dramaturgy.

On the official research website of New Media Dramaturgy (I refer to "NMD" below), researchers propose that "the merging of new media and performance calls for a different approach to understanding composition in performance-making and the spectator's role in performance reception."[19] This means that the emergence of new media invites different ways of perceiving media and its relations with performance. According to Helena Grehan, Ed Scheer and Peter Eckersall, NMD emphasizes on how the performance is formed and in what ways the content of the performance is addressed.[20] NMD focuses on analysing the relationship between the media and the performer, media and the spectator. On the New Media Dramaturgy website, Eckersall et. al states three interrelated aims of NMD:

1. To examine the use and the effect of new media technologies in contemporary theatre and performance, analysing the methods of composition in recent examples of significant performance works;
2. To critically analyse how these technologies are in turn informing or changing forms of performance;
3. To explore how the synthesis of new dramaturgy (Kerkhoven) and new media has changed the experience of live arts for the spectator.

(Eckersall, Grehan and Scheer, 2014) [21]

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[19] New Media Dramaturgy. "How new media transform the composition and reception of live performance".
[20] Eckersall, Grehan and Scheer, "New Media Dramaturgy", 375
[21] New Media Dramaturgy. "What Is NMD?"

Regarding these three aims suggested by Eckersall et. al, they analyse the relationship between technologies and spectators as a composition of the contemporary theatre artwork. The "New Dramaturgy" mentioned in the third aim is a term introduced by Van Kerkhoven (2009). Situated in the Flemish new wave, when artists would create works as fusions of dance, drama, and visual arts, Van Kerkhoven suggested a new way of perceiving the performance by taking a more active approach to understand the surroundings. As Eckersall et. al described, the dramaturgical way of thinking of Van Kerkhoven suggested is "an alternation between observation and immersion, between surrendering and attempting to understand". (Eckersall, Grehan and Scheer 2017, 7) This active approach, shifted from observing to immersing in performances, has altered the nature of the composition by inviting spectators to engage in the performance. Inspired by the same way of thinking, Eckersall et al. further established NMD as a dramaturgy that highlights the interactions between the human and media, the relationship established between them, and what effects the new media work may have over human experience.

In *New Media Dramaturgy,* it is said that "The actualizing of the construction and mediation of sensation and perception – the materiality of the experience – is vital to understanding this aspect of NMD" (Eckersall, Grehan and Scheer 2017, 101). Eckersall et al. state that the mediation in NMD is a crucial element to stimulate the sensation and perception of the performance. They believe that "seeing" is not enough. Through the experience in NMD performance, the spectator develops a "self-reflexive approach".[22] According to their case study, this approach is referred to Ole W. Fischer (2007)'s work. In Fischer's wordings, the experience of constructing the mediation of human perception is connected to the spectator with both being presence and active to approach. [23]

On the other hand, NMD is positioned in the context of drawing a relationship between humans and the new media, as opposed to the entities themselves. Therefore, the aesthetic choice in contemporary performance is about the connections between the "sensitive human" and "hypersensitive machines."[24] The object is no longer just a tool for human use but acting as a tool for human to experience the performance. As Eckersall mentioned in an interview[25], NMD is a turn to "visuality, intermediality, and dialectical moves in performance that show these expressions embodied and visualized in live performance space and time" (Eckersall

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[22]Eckersall, Grehan and Scheer , *New Media Dramaturgy*, 101.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Eckersall, Grehan and Scheer, *New Media Dramaturgy*, 11.

[25] Eckersall, Peter.. "Dumb Type".

2014, 375). To Eckersall et al., NMD is a way to view the expressions in the theatre in a compositional and dramaturgical way. Through visualizing the relationship in-between, NMD helps to show how the spectators are affected by new media artworks.

In light of the NMD is suggesting a turn in analyzing the relationship between the spectators and new media, it provides the key notions of thinking the virtual theatre as an expanded space, interactivity and co-presence of the spectators.

An expanded space through connecting the human and non-human machines

Focusing on how space is created between human and non-human, Eckersall et al. argue that the NMD means "the making of the work depends as much on non-human as on human agency, an agency that operates through – or often mobilizes collaborations between – artists and things" (Eckersall, Grehan and Scheer 2017, 4). Such collaboration includes the levels of making the relationship between human and non-human devices visible and as a way to reflect one's thinking. Therefore, in virtual theatre, the connection between human and non-human machine creates different space for communication through media. As a result, an expanded space is created with the mixed adaptation of human and non-human agencies.

In the chapter, "Online Performance", Dixon regards the internet as "the space", which has a sense of being at the "other space" as the action appears on the screen in front of the spectators.[26] In other words, the interface, as well as the media form online, have opened another space for communication within the virtual theatre. Dixon also connects the cyberspace with Zapp's notion, an "imaginary space". Dixon thinks the stage online as a transitory stage, which is between the "natural and the digital space". Hence, this expansion of space takes place between physical locations, hardware, and human bodies. It starts from the interaction between human and non-human activities, then expands to the imagination on the virtual space. To investigate how this expanded space works, I would like to introduce the next action in these communications, interactions.

Interactions: between human and the virtual space.

"Interactivity is a key concern of NMD"[27,] as Eckersall et al. states in the first place on his writing in "New Media Dramaturgy". From the performance making to the spectatorship experience, interactivity between machines and humans is highlighted. As Eckersall described,

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[26] Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 462.
[27] Eckersall, Grehan and Scheer, "New Media Dramaturgy".

the performance of NMD is a 'participatory art', which means the interactivity is a core connecting the sign between human and non-human agencies. For instance, it raises questions such as: "What job can or does the spectator do? What does it mean to them?" (Eckersall 2014, 376) These questions have existed since designing the work with new media and expand to the spectatorship experience.

In virtual theatre, the online platform adapted as a media allows spectators to participate in the performance, it connects the performers, performance, and spectators in real time regardless of each of their physical locations. In Dixon's writing, he takes chatbots in virtual theatre as an example. The chatbot function acts as an interactive new media agency that connects human and non-human machines. As humans program the machine, the performative interactions are designed by humans in advance. Within chatbots, human and non-human interactions can be found during the creation process. When chatbot interacts with the human spectators, it transmits the message programmed by humans before. Meanwhile, through the experience of interacting with this machine, a new spectatorship experience is created by human spectators: chatbots perform live with the real-time interactions of the audience. It engages a certain level of liveness in the process[28] and expresses the idea programmed by the creators.

Co-presence experience

As discussed, the chatbot example shows the relations not only between human creators with non-human machines, but also brings the spectators together on the expanded space through interactions. NMD emphasizes on analysing how new media artworks affect the audience, how the audience interacts with the media agency and in what aspects would such factors may affect the interpretation of the work. These interactive designs have effectively facilitated the connections of the spectators with the performance, as well as the connections of the spectators with the audience as group. In NMD, as opposed to merely moving from watching the performance outside to stepping in the performance and immerse in it, it takes a step further by considering the spectators as part of the performance. According to Eckersall, Grehan and Scheer, the meaning of "spectator" is equivalent to the concept of "user" in the new media domain or the "participant" in visual art.[29] This is connected to the inter-relationship of new media work and its 'audience'.

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[28] Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 491- 494.
[29] Eckersall, Grehan and Scheer, *New Media Dramaturgy*, 161.

Dixon revived the concept of "presence" and "co-presence" in virtual theatre by thinking through the dialogue between the physical and the virtual bodies, as well as the physical and the virtual space.[30] Dixon employs the term "virtual" touch to describe "the moment of real contact and intimacy between actors and audience across the network" (Papagiannouli, 2016). Through these interactions between performers and spectators in both physical and virtual space, spectators' experience is shaped by the degree and satisfactory in this participation experience. In *XD: Reproducing Technological Experience,* Eckersall, Grehan and Scheer argue: "it (the experience) is directly related to the qualities of participation and effects: as we have shown, these qualities are an important part of NMD itself." (Eckersall, Grehan and Scheer 2017, 182) In this sense, the way the spectator or user participate in the performance plays a critical role in the performance within the concept of New Media Dramaturgy.

To conclude, the key notion of New Media Dramaturgy is suggesting a new way to look at the performance. NMD emphasies the relations of human and non-human machines and the human experience in new media performance. The NMD attempts to convey that the adaptation of new media is not only about the technology itself, but how humans approach the performative media as creators and spectators. By connecting the NMD to virtual theatre, it opens up the hybrid space through the human and non-human interactions between the virtual and the physical space. Also, since interactivity is a crucial concern when considering how spectators are addressed during the performance making process, the virtual platform acts as an important medium to connect the performance and spectators. Last but not least, through this experience of taking the spectators as part of the performance, the co-presence of spectators and performers facilitate the communication in virtual theatre. In Part 1.3, virtual migrant theatre, I further investigate the way the virtual theatre linking up with the spectators and migrant identities. As I mentioned in the Introduction, the choice of using virtual theatre is also a choice of being the message itself. To go further, I discuss how this space of otherness has become the void of virtual migrant theatre dramaturgically.

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[30] Papagiannouli, *Political Cyberformance,* xii.

1.2 Dramaturgy of Migration

Under the influence of globalization and post-colonialism, there are different debates over how cultures should integrate and co-exist. Different key authors are contributing their arguments on the topic of dramaturgy of migration. For example, Emma Cox's *Theatre & Migration* (2014) provides a blueprint for the connections between theatre performance and the migration context; Yana Meerzon's *Dramaturgy of Migration: Staging Multilingual Encounters in Contemporary Theatre* (2020) explores the function of language in the migration dramaturgy; Judith Rudakoff 's *Performing Exile: Foreign Bodies (2017)* examines a range of live performance created by exiled artists. And within the concept of dramaturgy of migration, I focus on the idea of displacement and hybridity, and the way that the exilic theatre deals with these cultural ideas in relations to different types of spectators.

From displacement to hybridity

No matter voluntarily or not, to migrants living in a new land with a new culture, their imagination is a mixture of memories and experiences. With landscape and memories placed differently in terms of culture, socio-economic, political, linguistic, as well as psychological sense, this creates a phenomenon of "displacement"[31]. According to Meerzon, a direct displacement means being away from the original way of living, which may be a result of a loss of livelihood. For internal, displacement deals with a person's nomadic consciousness.[32] Also, such consciousness is a status of searching for a home and a new identity. From Indian theatre Indu Jain's observation, the notion of "displacement" is "opening up a space for resistance by depicting these subaltern identities." The internally displaced people may relate to the minorities in the city. They may undergo unstable circumstances of otherness and economic and political concerns.

Back in the 19th century, during the era of post-colonialization, Homi Bhabha was the first to coin the term 'hybridity' in transcultural thinking.[33] In order to deal with the cultural displacement within the post-colonial land, which is under the heavy influence of both local traditional and international culture, he argues that 'hybridity' is a movement "questioning and subverting cultural authority".[34] The individual living in-between more than one culture has its unique living culture other than any authenticity of the traditional or new culture. Bhabha

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[31] Meerzon, "On the Paradigms of Banishment, Displacement, and Free Choice", 19

[32] Meerzon,"On the Paradigms of Banishment, Displacement, and Free Choice", 24

[33] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

[34] Bhabaha: Cools, *In-Between Dance Cultures,* 31.

argues that this way of thinking challenges people's sense of "historical identity" as a homogenized or unified identity. Instead of an authentic past, Bhabha defends that the national tradition or identity should be "kept alive" among people.[35] Regarding the cultural identity in-between national tradition culture with globalization influence, Bhabha also suggests "hybridity" as a way to go beyond the polarity of one and the other cultures:

> The theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualising an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. It is the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture, and by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves (Bhabha 2004, 56).

Bhabha states that the exploration of "hybridity" in culture has led to a breakthrough of dual relationships. To migrants, this means that their culture is neither from the original place nor the new assimilated culture in the new land, but a hybrid state. Even to local people, the process of dealing with localization or globalization, traditional and contemporary influences also evolve in its own unique way of hybridity in culture.

In the contemporary world, dance dramaturg and scholar Guy Cools further develop the concept of "hybridity" in his work *In-between Dance Cultures: On the Migratory Artistic Identity of Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Akram Khan (2015).* Cools proposes the concept of "in-between" as a space of unstable oscillation[36], which means that culture has a shared/ unstable 'origin', with no fixed point for integrations or differentiation to take place. To him, the "hybrid strategy or discourse opens up a space of negotiation, which is neither assimilation nor collaboration" (Cools 2015, 31) This means that all cultures are equivalent, nobody is expected to sacrifice or be shadowed by one another. Employing the case of the dance fusion from Cools as an example, to Akram Khan, as a migrant, the concept of hybridity means that" the classical as father in his body", while "the contemporary work as mother", and him as a "creative folk dancer"[37]. In Khan's case, the idea of origin does not limit his tools of creation. By travelling beyond borders, the concept of hybridity creates unique forms of otherness as new creations.

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[35] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture,* 2.
[36] Cools, *In-Between Dance Cultures,* 37.
[37] Cools, *In-Between Dance Cultures,* 38.

Exilic Theatre as a voice for the foreign bodies

Thinking about the concept of hybridity as the migrant identity culture, similarly, in the theatre of migrants, it also brings along the travelling concept of being borderless. In *Performing Exile: Foreign Bodies (2017),* Judith Rudakoff, a Canadian dramaturg and scholar specializes in transcultural narratives, attempts to define the psychological state of foreign bodies.[38]Different from "migration", the term "exile" is not considered as a legal term.[39] Under the umbrella concept of international migrants, exilic bodies include temporary labour migrants, highly skilled and business migrants, irregular migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, forced migration, family members and return migrants. [40] Essays from different contributors share their inspirations about performing exiles, such as political, spectatorship, psychological and linguistics concerns. The combination of these chapters has provided a critical analysis and ethnography to investigate the meaning of exilic contexts in contemporary theatre. To Rudakoff, "exilic theatre" is a travelling art between culture, border, one that is free from the boundaries of ethics and borders.[41] Other than a specific identity from one's cultural background, artists create this space to explore their reflections between cultures. One of the contributors, Yana Meerzon, a Canadian theatre studies scholar whose research is grounded in migration cultural studies, has defined:

> Exilic theatre expresses borderlessness, flexibility, imbalance, and free movement between separate cultural, ethnic, and communal entities. In this sense, exilic theatre can be rendered cosmopolitan, built by the artists who are both the citizens of the world and its observers. (Meerzon: Rudakoff 2017, 29)

As Meerzon emphasises, the core meaning of exilic theatre is beyond ethnic and authentic cultures. It is a notion that beyond borders, ethics and cultures regarding the artist, or the spectators themselves. In Meerzon's contribution to exilic theatre and as well as her writings in *Dramaturgy of Migration (2020),* she argues that the exilic theatre "speaks to peoples' personal experience and collective memory".[42] This puts the spotlight on individual personal narratives and extends to a collective level of memory and culture. Since exilic theatre

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[38] Rudakoff, *Performing Exile*, 8.

[39] Meerzon, "On the Paradigms of Banishment, Displacement, and Free Choice.", 24.

[40] Castles, Stephen. "International Migration at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century".

[41] Rudakoff, *Performing Exile, 8*

[42] Meerzon:Rudakoff 2017, "On the Paradigms of Banishment, Displacement, and Free Choice.", 24.

deals with different cultural contexts in the same performance space, dramaturgy of migration often addresses "the relationship between personal and cultural identity"[43]. The identity of a body and its personal history with different cultural context is the key concern of exilic theatre.

As Rudakoff and Meerzon stated, the exilic theatre works with the borderless, flexible concept between cultures and form the unique personal identity. Especially in Rudakoff's notion, "exilic bodies" is connected to an individual's cultural, ideological and displacement sector. They include the foreign bodies physically and mentally apart from their homeland and culture but "with a nostalgic longing for an imagined place".[44] In other words, exilic theatre is a platform foregrounding the concept of travelling and promotes a sense of otherness with the hybridity and displacement culture mentioned above.

The presence of Spectators in Exilic Theatre
The above discussion focused on the cultural context and characteristics of exilic theatre and exilic bodies. Apart from that, spectators are also a critical aspect when thinking through the dramaturgy of migration.[45]For foreign bodies, they travel from one land to another, leaving their economic, social, political, cultural privileges behind. The attitude of the local people has a critical influence over the process and showing in theatre making. For example, the locals' openness towards the new culture would affect the cultural context and audience address in exilic theatre. According to Emma Cox, "In theatre and migration that concerns itself with more permanent forms of migration it is arguably even more vital that artists and audience think through dwelling. And part of this is the extent to which dwelling is helped/ hindered by hosts, who are already home (Cox 2014, 78)." Therefore, the vital topic regarding the migrant theatre is the reaction of the host audience who is "already home".

Considering the definition of the audience of exilic theatre, Meerzon mentioned the locals as a large group of audience and thus challenges their perception on the international and domestic levels. [46] Meerzon defines two types of audience, namely the diasporic audience who are outside of their home country and the audience from the performers' former home-countries.[47] This different degree of relations with the exilic performers may trigger different spectatorship in the theatre experience. To the locals, the spectatorship is an intellectual and emotional "social process" of understanding the migration, globalization and

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[43] Rudakoff, "I am a war, my voice is a weapon.", 104.

[44] Rudakoff, *Performing Exile*, 8.

[45] Cox, *Theatre and Migration,* 78.

[46] Meerzon:Rudakoff 2017, "On the Paradigms of Banishment, Displacement, and Free Choice.", 37.

[47] Ibid.

cosmopolitanization.[48] This process may also correct some of the imagination and relations to a specific culture of the audience.[49] Meanwhile, these different levels of relations between the spectators and the performers brings the local culture, and the diasporic cultures on the same page of communication. As Rudakoff mentioned, regardless of the socio-economic or political status, by recognizing the cultural "similarities within differences" in exilic theatre is empowering both "contributors" and "viewers".[50] By looking through the similarities in different culture, both the spectators and the performers can reflect further on their own local and the culture of others. As a result, through the understanding and reflection among both new and local cultures, the meaning of staging the displacement is in order to give voice to these people living in the margins and as well as provoking a sense of empathy from the audience.[51]

In conclusion, the concept of dramaturgy of migration suggests a way to look at the performance through the migrant identities by illustrating the hybridity and displacement, exilic theatre and exilic bodies, as well as the spectatorship experience. Focusing on the borderlessness in exilic theatre and rebuilding of migrant identity through hybridity in culture, the concept of dramaturgy of migration suggests a state of cultural negotiation. Through the process of negotiation, it opens up a communication space between the foreign bodies and those who are home. By staging the similarities and differences between more than one culture, it is suggested that the act of performing migration gives voice to the exilic bodies. Therefore, considering the theatre of migration as a space for cooperating with different cultures and identities, I suggest how these three angles works with the virtual space as virtual migrant theatre in the followings.

1.3 Virtual Migrant Theatre

To demonstrate how NMD connect the migrant identities in the virtual migrant theatre, I adapt the dramaturgical model, "planes of dramaturgy", as suggested by Sigrid Merx and Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink. In an interview with Eckersall in 2014, he called the NMD "an expanded dramaturgy" to describe a theatre "that is always showing in the production of art, the dramaturgical idea and trace of its process." (Eckersall 2014, 4) The audience is highly aware of a "dialectical process of creativity" during the aesthetic dramaturgical process. As mentioned above, NMD acts as the dramaturgical function that connects the technology with the content

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[48] Rudakoff, *Performing Exile*, 78.

[49] Meerzon, *Dramaturgy of Migration,* 17.

[50] Rudakoff, *Dramaturging Personal Narratives, 3.*

[51] Jain, "Representing the migrant body and performing", 86.

of the performance. In other words, NMD is an "expansion of dramaturgy", addressing the interactivity between the human and non-human object in the performance making and the final presentation process. To connect the virtual theatre to migrant identity, I suggest employing the dramaturgical model for virtual migrant theatre with reference to the "context- composition- spectators" planes.

Context: Expanded space with hybridity in culture

The "context" plane suggested by Groot Nibbelink and Merx refers to both "societal" and "artistic context". "Societal context" includes all social, cultural, economic and political factors relating to the world. [52] Meanwhile, the artistic context refers to "the artistic environment in which a work is made" (Groot Nibbelink 2019, 24). This refers to how artists work on their materials according to the political concerns and recurring theme within its context. Applying to virtual migrant theatre, the fundamental questions for this context are: What kind of space does the virtual theatre create? How are the hybrid migrant identities presented within a virtual theatre setting?

Matthew Causey mentioned the relationship between identity and technology space in his work *The Screen Test of the Double: The Uncanny Performer in the Space of Technology*. "…Theatre, performance, film and new media studies seem to share similar concerns and aesthetic gestures regarding the collapse of the real into the virtual and the construction of identity in the space of technology..." (Causey1999, 387). He suggests that even though the screen may create a sense of isolation, the presentation of the works still creates an illusion of "transparent". In other words, the viewer is sitting behind the screen, the interface of the machines allows them to think like they have a "direct access" to the world behind the screen.[53] This integration of technology and the physical reality has opened a hybrid world between the physical and virtual world through human and non-human interactions.

Moreover, in Dixon's theory, this hybrid world is a space of otherness.[54] Firstly, the process of human accessing the online platform is a kind of "transportation"[55], from the physical world to the virtual world. He refers to a digital artist, Susan Collins's perception of cyberspace as "a common desire to collapse time and space and exist in another space at the

[52] Groot Nibbelink, *Nomadic Theatre*, 24.
[53] Causey, "The Screen Test of the Double: The Uncanny Performer in the Space of Technology", 386.
[54] Dixon,*Digital Performance*, 488.
[55] Dixon,*Digital Performance*, 462.

same time, to create a portal".[56] In other words, through the act of moving from the physical world to virtual word, "new portal" is created accessing to the other space and time. And this "new portal" also connects us to other locations, spaces, and cultures. By freeing from the physical limitation of space and time, cyberspace has created a "distinct location and meeting point". [57] In this sense, creators and spectators from all geographical locations are connected on this other space.

Connecting the "hybridity" concept from Homi Bhabha, by exploring the in-between space other than two polarly cultures, a new way of articulation in culture is formulated. In virtual migrant theatre, the use of virtual platform has provided an expanded space other than the original and the new locations of the participants. Referring to the dramaturgy of migration, displacement appears when people are taken away from their original livelihood, this has resulted in awakening one's sense of being nomad. To people, including the performers and spectators who are away from home, this meeting point is a space other than the original space and time. In this other space, every individual comes with their personal history and identities. Referring to Meerzon's definition, the exilic theatre speaks to peoples' "personal experience and collective memory"[58]. By carrying alongside the personal narratives of each individual migrant, the virtual migrant theatre makes the performer's personal history visible, creating the collective memories.

In the virtual migrant theatre, on this context plane, the virtual migrant theatre is an expansion of space with hybridity in culture. Transporting from offline to online as a new meeting place, the hybridity of the migrant identity is highlighted through the interactions between two worlds. In my case study, I focus on analyzing how the virtual migrant theatre as a space of otherness mediates the hybridity in migrant identity. With the complex of one's hybridity in nature, I am also curious on the way the participants interact on the online platform. So, on the next plane, I focus on the interactive platform of virtual migrant theatre.

Composition: A virtual interactive platform for multicultural context
Referring to Groot Nibbelink and Merx, this expansion of space is opening up the dramaturgical function related to the term "Composition". On this plane, dramaturgical concerns a focus on time order, structural logic, key tools, and stylistic means in the

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[56] Dixon, *Digital Performance* 2007, 459.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Meerzon:Rudakoff 2017, "On the Paradigms of Banishment, Displacement, and Free Choice." ,24

performance and how they communicate with the audience.[59] In the negotiation of culture, virtual migrant theatre brings together people from different cultural backgrounds on this common and mutual virtual stage. By thinking through more than one culture in theatre, people can look into the differences and think beyond the duality, and hence seeking for hybridity. Therefore, my dramaturgical questions on this plane is: How does the virtual migrant theatre design for the interactivity between migrant identities?

As mentioned above, works under the notion of NMD are regarded as "participatory art"[60], which emphasizes on the interactions between human and non-human machines for both performers and spectators. The virtual migrant theatre allows cultural negotiation through the interactive platform design. In the "Interaction" chapter by Steve Dixon, the word "interaction" can be explained in different ways in virtual theatre: navigation, participation, conversation, and collaboration. According to Dixon's definition, the first level of interaction, "navigation", is operated by a simple click with the options appeared on screen.[61] The second level, "participation", requires participant's contribution through making choices and preferences, as their choices may reflect the happenings on the narratives itself.[62] The third level is "conversation", which requires a real time relationship between the performers and the audiences. At the same time, the negotiation of culture operates on a "trust, cooperation, and openness" base.[63] The last level is "collaboration". In this level of interaction, the play should be improvised in response to the audience reaction immediately. On this level, both the performers and the audiences are contributing towards the play.

Translating this to the virtual migrant theatre, given that the performers and the audiences are coming from various background and identities, their experience between the interactions on virtual migrant theatre is very important. Following the personal narratives mentioned on the context plane, I further develop the composition of virtual migrant theatre as an interactive platform for establishing hybridity in culture. In this composition plane, different degree of interactions between cultures may form different degree of understanding and cooperation towards the hybridity among the participants. During the negotiation process, no cultures should be given in for the others.[64] For example, to the audience, through the

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[59] This composition plane is referred as "the staging of actions and elements, the organization of space and the structuring of time" (Groot Nibbelink 2019, 22).

[60] Peter Eckersall, Helena Grehan, and Edward Scheer, "New Media Dramaturgy", 376.

[61] Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 568.

[62] Ibid, 579.

[63] Ibid, 591.

[64] Cools, *In-between Dance cultures*, 31.

navigation and participations, they can learn more about the culture presenting if it is different to their own. During the interaction process, they can look for the similarities and differences comparing to their own cultures. For the conversation part, it invites the audience to reflect on their own experience and further contribute towards the performance. In the meantime, they can also understand the cultural identity of the others through the exchange process. In the collaboration part, which is the highest level of engagement, by capturing the ideas in its own space, the collaboration process of virtual migrant theatre maps out the personal experience as a collective memory.

To conclude, on the "composition" plane for virtual migrant theatre, it is a virtual interactive platform containing multicultural context. Through the presentation online, different cultures from an individual can be brought together regardless of the perception and limitations created by the physical environment. And ideally, this interaction process works towards to the next level of cultural hybridity through the interactions between cultures. As a result, the virtuality of the migrant theatre may create a new space for communication: virtual migrant theatre provides a platform for interaction for audiences from different parts of the world with their cross-cultural stories and identities.

Spectator: the co-presence of audience and performers with hybrid culture

The third plane is "audience address"[65.] As Groot Nibbelink explained, instead of being a group of people merely looking at the performance, the audience is a group of spectators being precisely positioned. Referring to the "spectator" plane, I suggest that this plane is about the interactive experience in relations to the hybrid culture. Through the interactivity between the human and non-human machine, the performers and audience are "co-presence"[66] on this virtual space across the culture. I suggest that the dramaturgical questions are: Who are the spectators of virtual migrant theatre? How does the interactivity on virtual migrant theatre make both spectators and performers from different culture background visible? How does the co-presence experience help the spectators understand different forms of migrant identities?

In NMD, the spectators play a critical role in the performance of the new media. In the virtual theatre, the way interactivity bringing the audience presence is a key concern. In Dixon's words, through the digital media, the spectator's participation not only closely connects the audience with the performance, but it also makes the spectators "visible"[67]. Dixon also

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[65] Groot Nibbelink, *Nomadic Theatre*, 22.
[66] Leeker, *Performing the Digital*, 30.
[67] Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 509.

regards this co-presence is created from the dialogue between physical and virtual, space and bodies. In virtual migrant theatre, this dialogue and moment of "virtual touch" [68] is created by the real time interaction of people from different background. Different from physical migrant theatre, spectators do not have to appear in the same specific location in order to get in touch with each other. In fact, spectators are experiencing the interactive journey regardless of their location in real time. To show the co-presence between performers and audience, or even between audiences, liveness is a crucial element. In the interactive model suggested in the composition plane, all of them need to be conducted in real time. Even for navigation and participations, while the materials can be pre-recorded, the spectators are still reacting with the questions in real time during the performance. For "conversation" and "collaboration" parts. they require a high involvement between the performers and the audiences. The audience can also see the interactions in real time, causing their participation to become part of the performance.

Martina Leeker, a scholar of digital cultures and theatre, suggested the term "co-presence" [69] in her book *Performing the Digital (2017)*. She suggested that the actors and the audience are mutually producing roles and performance bodily.[70] In this sense, the way that the performance play with the non-human on virtual platform to simulate the "co-presence" of both performers and the audience becomes the main part of the spectatorship and performance design concern. Since everyone brings their cultural background in the virtual performance, the virtual migrant theatre is also creating a new dialogue for the cultural negotiation between the performers and audience, as well as among the audience. Followed by how the interactive platform is created, I focus on how the "co-presence" on virtual migrant theatre can lead into the hybridity in culture.

Connecting to the dramaturgy of migrants, originally, the spectator of exilic theatre has the differences between locals and exilic bodies, which may also include people from the performer's homeland. But on the virtual migrant theatre, the definition of local and foreign bodies can be redefined. Since the geographical borders have changed, there is no clear location mark for the "locals". It brings back to the root of one's identity in the process: there is no more locals and foreign bodies divided based on living or physical locations, but only people belong to that presented culture or not. For example, there is no difference between whether two local Chinese people are connected to the internet in Hong Kong or the US. The

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[68] Papagiannouli, *Political Cybertheatre*.

[69] Leeker, *Performing the Digital*, 30.

[70] Ibid.

identity of locals can be broadened beyond the geographical limitation. Therefore, on virtual migrant theatre, through the live interactions on this virtual meeting points, people of different cultures are also being seen with the performers and even with the other the audiences. In my case study, I look into how the spectators from various cultural background experience the different kinds of migrant identities with the "co-presence" feature in virtual migrant theatre.

In conclusion, the performance going virtual creates a new space for the virtual migrant theatre to evolve with the hybridity of culture. First, for the context, the virtual migrant theatre provides an expanded space that connects people from all over the world can come along with their migrant identities and stories. Second, for the composition, the virtual migrant theatre adapts different levels of interactivity to composite a borderless interactive platform for the performers and spectators can exchange their cultures. Third, for the spectator, the interactivity of virtual migrant theatre has brought along with the co-presence of the performers and the audiences. Providing that the geographical boundaries is declined on the virtual world, there is no differentiation between "locals" and "foreign bodies". In the following analysis, I discuss my case study, *Bloodlines,* with this dramaturgical framework.

Part 2 *Bloodlines*: A Virtual Migrant Theater about Chineseness

In this part, I attempt to adapt the theoretical framework, "context-composition-spectator" planes to my case study, *Bloodlines.* Firstly, I conduct a contextual analysis on Chineseness and discuss the way it is performed. And then, I introduce the composition of *Bloodlines* with a focus on how it engages the spectators through interactions. Next, I discuss the spectators' reviews and reactions based on my observation over the post-talk conversation, as well as the feedback forms filled out by the makers of *Bloodlines*. These comments have enabled me to dig into the question of how the audience experience the different forms of Chineseness. In addition, I reflect on the effectiveness of the way *Bloodlines* has been adapted into virtual migrant theatre under the "plane of dramaturgy" in order to explore Chineseness. Since *Bloodlines* is a work in progress presentation, a critical reflection also be conducted upon the limitation and suggestion of the piece at the end.

2.1 About *Bloodlines*

Bloodlines is a virtual theatre produced by Fault Line Theatres with the aim to explore Chineseness, namely the migrant identity of the Chinese population. Led by Cinthia Chen and Sim Yan Ying together with the other four Chinese artists from worldwide, the team attempted to search for the meaning of "Chineseness" in various contexts. The entire virtual performance is framed as a flight journey. In this journey, the audience go through five stages: luggage check, boarding check-in, on-flight journey, baggage picks up, and exit. Throughout the process, performers share their personal stories and creations based on their connection to Chineseness. Meanwhile, the spectators can interact with the performance via *Ohyay*, an online immersive event platform and experience the journey alongside the performers.

2.2 Contextual analysis: *Bloodlines* as an expanded space exploring Chineseness

"What is the Chinese identity?" is the main question driven throughout the performance. The six multidisciplinary artists are Cinthia Chen from Taiwan based in New York; Sim Yan Ying "YY" from Singapore; Andrew Chan Xiyong and Kiwi Chan from Hong Kong; Annie Jin Wang Chinese-American based in New York; and Sam Lu Chinese-Canadian based in Shanghai. Each of them has a unique art practice that is differ from one another, such as theatre creator, movement artist, sound artist, and dramaturg. In this collaboration, they share their reflection and artistic research on the identity of "Chinese" and the matter of "Chineseness" through online space. Referring to my theoretical framework, virtual migrant theatre as an expanded space with a multicultural context, is composed of personal history and thus turning into collective memories. Therefore, understanding where and in what context these performers come from is crucial when analyzing virtual migrant theatre. In the following paragraphs, I am going to illustrate the key notion of Chineseness and how *Bloodlines* makes use of the expanded virtual space in order to function as a meeting point among various migrant identities.

Chineseness as a hybrid identity

Throughout history, Chineseness has been negotiating with migration, local cultures, and foreign cultural influence. Ien Ang, a self-described "Chinese-Indonesian-Dutch-Australian"[71] who is a cultural studies professor, has illustrated the fact of "Chineseness" as an "outsider". She theorizes her autobiographical experience into the notable literature, *On Not Speaking Chinese* (2001), as a biological Chinese who speaks English, Dutch and Bahasa Indonesia but not Chinese. she observes the meaning of "Chineseness" in a diaspora context and digs into the issues of migration, multiculturalism, and the politics of identity and differences. For Ang, defining a single definition of "Chineseness" is difficult as one considers the huge cultural, political, and national content involved. "Chineseness is meant to illuminate the very difficult of constructing a position from which I can speak as an (Overseas) Chinese, and therefore the indeterminacy of Chineseness as a signifier for identity" (Ang 2001, 24). She suggests that "Chineseness" is a concept of "hybridization", one which included the 'authentic' Chinese culture, the transformed culture under globalization, and the colonial history. Therefore, Ang

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[71] Gabriel "'Migrations of Chineseness'", 130.

further defined the concept of Chinese by referring to the visual presentation model suggested by Lynn Pan from *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (1998).

According to Pan, the concept of Chinese can be defined into four circles.[72] The first circle (Circle A) refers to the core, which means China. Circle B refers to Taiwan and HongKong, as well as the aspiring migrants and students who go in-and-out of China are slightly decentered. And circle C is overseas Chinese, which includes all people of Chinese descent but whose citizenship is non-Chinese. And the outer circle, Circle D, is the 'assimilated Chinese'. People of this group have an ancestry of Chinese but are considered a group who has "melted" into the other political and cultural contexts. As Ang comments, the debate about being a Chinese/non-Chinese of this group has been unsettled.[73]

As Pan and Ang state, Chinese is already a hybrid identity according to its geographical differences and especially in the context of contemporary politics.[74] *Bloodlines* are co-created by six artists coming from Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, American-Chinese, Chinese-Canadian. For that reason, each of them possesses a very different identity of Chineseness as they interact on the virtual migrant theatre. Now, I introduce the background of each related identity, and how their identities are presented on this expanded virtual space.

A. Singaporean Chinese

In *Bloodlines*, Singaporean Chinese Yan Ying Sim explains her connection to Chineseness, "Chinese privilege", through an interactive quiz. As she mentions, the identity of Singaporean Chinese has been under the spotlight nationwide. In fact, Singapore has claimed herself as a country of multiculturalism, in which Chinese took over 70% of the ethnic composition in 2020.[75] *The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts/Asian Cultures* reveals that, contrary to the 'Western' values, Singapore has paid attention to establishing her voice as the 'East' or 'Orient' power with hybridity in culture. Under the pressure of establishing its national identity and values as being more Asian than following the Western capitalism idea, Ang refers to Geoffrey Benjamin, who put a note on the Singapore's multiracialism: "Chinese people under pressure to become more Chinese" (Benjamin 1976, 122). According to Ang's observation, the concept of multiculturalism, or multiracialism, emphasizes on the fact that

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[72] Pan, T*he Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas*, 15.

[73] Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese*, 86.

[74] Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese*, 3.

[75] Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. "The People of Singapore".

every race and ethnicity has its own unique style of cultures and communities.[76] On one hand, this creates a diverse society with a variety of cultures being recognized. On the other hand, this can potentially bring about a problem. Since "multiculturalism is understood by maintaining the boundaries between cultures"[77], this idea challenges the sense of togetherness of culture within a society. If everyone upholds his or her personal cultures, values, and spoken languages, it is practically impossible for these boundaries to neither overlap nor conflict with one another.

Sangeetha Thanapal, an Indian Singaporean activist has placed the concept 'Chinese privilege' into controversy by addressing the Singaporean Chinese of these days. She argues, "The PAP (government) believes in keeping the Chinese and their Confucian ethic at the helm, supposedly for our economic growth and success" (Thanapal, 2015) [78]. As the government promotes Chinese culture and provides special education and taxes policies, these measures have made Chineseness to become a superior ethnicity in Singapore, which is just under the Whiteness and followed by the Indonesian and Malaysian, as Thanapal said.[79]

In *Bloodlines*, starting from the idea of Chinese privilege in Singapore, Sim defines the audience as different kinds of privileges in the quiz in *Bloodlines*: Singaporean Chinese Privilege, Han Taiwan Privilege, Chinese-American Privilege and Han Chinese Privilege according to their answers. This is a multiple-choice quiz combined with daily conversations, traditional values and expectations from Chinese families, and political attitudes. For example, it deals with the "Chinese gaze" like Western Chinese movies *Crazy Rich Asian*s; Western actors playing Asian roles; "Chinese" expectations of education, dating partners, as well as career. After the quiz, there is an interactive chat box and a result chart to see which privilege the audience belongs to. Take Singaporean Privilege as an example, Sim and the team define it as the group of Singaporean Chinese taking advantage in policymaking, media, education, housing, and daily aspects as being the majority in the society. With different types of privileges shown, spectators can thus share their experiences in the chatroom, and hence exchange different views among the privileges.

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[76] Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese*, 14.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Koh, Adeline. "Chinese Privilege, Gender and Intersectionality in Singapore".
[79] Ibid.

B. Hong Kong Chinese

In *Bloodlines*, Andrew Chan Xiyong and Kiwi Chan explore what Chineseness meant to them in this cultural and political context. They reflect on their "mother culture" and the current political situation affected by the China government as a Hong Kong Chinese through video-streaming. Tracing back to the history of Hong Kong's hybrid culture, Hong Kong has been governed by the British government for over a century, followed by the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842. In 1997, Hong Kong was returned to China and became a Special Administrative Region (SAR). Under "one country two systems", Hong Kong can retain its own economic and administrative systems, but at the same time, China is expected to keep her Socialism with Chinese characteristics under the principle of "One China". Followed by the coloniality in Hong Kong history, the cultural identity in Hong Kong is of a hybrid form, one that is living in-between the traditional Chinese and the West.

Rey Chow, a Hong Kong cultural critic, specialising in 20th-century Chinese culture and postcolonial theory, observes that the unique location of Hong Kong has generated an ambiguous space to explore the cultural extension and ambivalence between China and the West. Moreover, the history of Hong Kong, as a post-colony from the United Kingdom and under the ruling of the Chinese Communist Party, has formed a unique way of understanding its existence: "a distantiation from the Chinese Communist regime; a resistance against colonialism but an unwillingness to see the community's prosperity disrupted" (Rey Chow 1993, 22).

According to the latest report from the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, the statistic shows a significant change in the sense of locality of Hong Kong people. They identify themselves as a race solely in the bloodline of Chinese instead of the migrant of Chinese who lived in Hong Kong generations ago.[80] Hong Kong as a city exposed to the traditional Chinese and global influence for more than a century, the culture transformation is in a hybrid state over the history. This also results in people of Hong Kong feeling a mixed of emotions towards China.[81] Consequently, this group of people formulated its own characteristics of postcoloniality culturally or ideological ideas about Chineseness.

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[80] In Jun 2022, three years after the 2019 Hong Kong protests, the highest percentage of Hong Kong citizens identify themselves as "Hong Konger + Hong Konger in China" (70.5%). The identity of the lowest percentage is "Chinese in Hong Kong" (10.9%). The other identities in the survey are: "Mixed Identity"(42.4%), "Hongkonger" (39.1%), "Hongkonger in China"(31.4%), "Chinese+Chinese in Hong Kong"(28.5%), Chinese (17.6%). Source from "Categorical Ethnic Identity." 2022. HKPORI. Accessed June 22. https://www.pori.hk/pop-poll/ethnic-identity-en/q001.html?lang=en.

[81] One of the most critical moment that shaped the difference between Hong Kong identity with mainland China is

Back to Chan's presentation in *Bloodlines*, Andrew Chan expresses their Sociopolitical Angst through a poem. He re-codes a news article about the establishment of the National Security Law in Hong Kong into a poem by highlighting some specific words. One of the re-written sentences is: "Everything is watching you. Be clever. Be safe." This way of re-writing is referencing the ancient Chinese rebellious group. The 'hidden messages', are like some secret code. People with similar ideology may be able to read the 'true meaning' behind an objective news. Showing the process of re-writing, it symbolizes the suppression on freedom of speech and white terror. Moreover, Kiwi Chan and Andrew Chan show their confusion about motherland by a contact movement with narrations. Taking "mother" as a metaphor, they adapt the movement video as their medium to perform their intertwined love-hate relationship on their "mother" identity, Chinese. "I hate my mother, but I also love her." said Kiwi Chan. She starts the narration from her relationship with mother and expand to the attachment of motherland, Hong Kong, or the origin of her ancestry in mainland China.

C. Taiwan Chinese

As Taiwan Chinese, Cinthia Chen elaborates on her identity and struggles as a local Taiwanese and a migrant in the US in *Bloodlines*. She starts by introducing her identity with a passport in a video. Then, she mentions that politically, Taiwan is not a "country", but the Taiwanese have their passport, which allows them to travel freely. Recently, its cover design has been renewed to "convey Taiwanese" messages. So, here lies her quest, what does "Taiwanese" mean?

Regarding to the cultural identity to Taiwanese, Lingchei Letty Chen, a comparative literature scholar, states that from the 1980s, the local Taiwanese began to establish their political influence and identity to understand decolonisation through personal practice.[82] Taiwanese, is originated from over 20 indigenous ethics people before Hans migration.[83] During the seventieth century Qing dynasty and WWII, a huge group of Han migrants fled to

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1989, the Tiananmen incident. Lingchei Letty Chen referred to Aihwa Ong's observations, "the 1989 Tiananmen incident marks a turning point in Hong Kong culture's expansion beyond its territory" (Chen 2006, 85). With the 'gloomy future awaiting 1997 in the 1990s, there was the first migration trend. As Natalia Sui-Hung Chan, a Hong Kong cultural critic, points out the cultural identity of Hong Kong is always orbiting the categories of 'Chinese' as 'Hong Kongese"(Chan 2001, 141).

[82] Originating from Taiwan, Chen published a comparative study of the Chinese cultural identity facing China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the US-Chinese and the West in Writing Chinese- Reshaping Chinese Cultural Identity. She establishes her argument based on the current debate on the hybridity and nationalism that took place in different locations and how different local writers showed them.

[83] 中華民國行攻院. 2016. "族群 (國情簡介-人民) ".

Taiwan from mainland China to escape wars. Therefore, the composition of the "Chineseness" in Taiwan consists of a mixed concept of different cultures. Due to its colonial history, Taiwan is heavily influenced by Japanese and American cultures. Chen argued that there are "anxieties over its culture's lack of authenticity and its need to establish a definite cultural identity." [84] After the traumatic decolonization period, Chen described the negative mental effects of postcoloniality over the people causes an "awakening".[85] Until now, debates on the authority of Taiwan as an independent country, anti- or pro-China, have been hostile in the current decades.

Focusing on the cultural and identity issues of Taiwan, under its close linkage with the Chinese, Japanese and American culture, the crucial question on Taiwan cultural identity is not about "which group possesses ethnic 'authority' on this island, but what the pivotal connection is between ethnicity and cultural identity in the contemporary world" (Chen 2006, 52). Rooted in complicated ethnic composition and historical factors, the Chineseness in Taiwanese is never pure but in a hybrid sense of dealing with the local and global.

Back to Cinthia Chen's story, owning to a background of escaping from the Chinese Communist Party, Chen describes the way her family embraced the identity of Taiwanese[86]. Chen shares the pain experienced by her family and how they endured in order to search for a democratic living environment for their future. Therefore, political issues are still a sensitive topic in the family, closely connected to the history of local Taiwan Chineseness. "I resign myself to always being homesick", Chen mentioned this sentence in her self-introduction video during the performance. To Chen, she not only has to deal with her identity as Taiwanese, she also has to deal with her diasporic status when living in the US. The unsettlement between mainland Chinese, Taiwan Chinese and Western culture has been hanging, as the history of Taiwan. For Chen's sharing as diaspora Chinese, I further explain in the coming paragraphs.

D. Diasporic Chinese

Bloodlines connects the diaspora Chinese to a common ground: Cinthia Chen and Jin Wang share their diasporic struggles through an interactive chatroom. In these chatrooms, the pop-culture videos and dialogues show confusion and stereotypes about Western and the authentic Chinese culture. Speaking of diasporic Chinese, overseas Chinese can vary in geography according to Ang. She argues that Chinese outside China cannot mean the same as inside. It

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[84] Chen, *Writing Chinese*, 63.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Chen, Interview with the author.

differs from location and is shaped by local conditions at different corners of the world where their Chinese ancestors have been setting up their new lives decades before. Therefore, the meaning of Chineseness of each place varies on the locality condition and adaptation of Chinese.[87] The first generation arrived in the new land, such as the US, Europe or any Asian place. The level of assimilation of different Chinese differs from the locality they live in. To the second generation of migrants, the identity as diasporic Chinese, is detached from the original culture and bonded by educational boundaries. To a certain extent, they live in an "imaginary" China created by the West, their parents' previous experience and the Asian culture in "China Town." [88] For instance, to Chinese Americans, cultural hybridity is deep-rooted in their cultural identity.

According to Letty Chen, this kind of cultural hybridity is more ambiguous than the postcolonial subjects, as they must deal with the geopolitical and social conditions under two hybridized issues and negotiate their origins simultaneously.[89] The interculturality in their notion of "Chineseness" is even more complex than the locations mentioned before. "A critical diasporic cultural politics should privilege neither host country nor (real or imaginary) homeland, but precisely keep a creative tension between 'where you're from' and 'where you're at'." (Ang 2001, 35) As a scholar situated long years of identity seeking and researching for the meaning of Chineseness, Ang notes the diasporic identity as an "in betweenness as an empty space"[90], travelling between the cultures and creating new opportunities.

By referring to this cultural background, *Bloodlines* creates a dialogue between Chinese with different diasporic experiences. Lines are half scripted in the chat room and the audiences are encouraged to discuss the challenge of growing up as Chinese diasporas. They can also just leave affirmation emojis and messages to others. At the same time, the scripted conversation also shows the confusion as to whether "being like other Asians" or "Chinese enough". They also embed their childhood memories and 'imagination Chinese connection' videos next to the chat window. The Western Chinese cartoons, old Hong Kong movies, ancient Chinese literature, Asian meme, and more are mixed together to create their imagination and impression of diasporic Chineseness. These fragmented elements also created a space for the audience to experience living in-between these cultures, with a mix between Western and Chinese, as well

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[87]Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese*, 12.

[88]Chen, *Writing Chinese*, 119.

[89]Chen, *Writing Chinese*, 99.

[90]Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese*, 12.

as the past and imagination. As Chen said in her introductory video, to diaspora like her, "Home is feet in two boats." The identities struggle of the diaspora cannot be settled.

Reflection

In this expanded space with various migrant identities, the spectators and the performers have been present in a mutually shared space. In *Bloodlines*, regardless of multicultural identities are included in the performance, there is no specification of physical location to host the performers and audience. The theoretical framework shows that virtual theatre is meant to be an expanded space without hierarchy.

Technically, since it is a virtual space without any interference from policy or location privileges or disadvantages, everyone is positioned in the same place as participants. Different forms of migrant culture can be addressed and discussed equally. However, when it comes to the practice, as one of the participants, I have some reservations. Chinese from different contexts come with diverse perspectives, it takes effort to achieve a real mutual space for sharing instead of a one-off theatre experience. Despite the open space with the inclusion of various cultures, the non-hierarchy status is an ideal level of communication. But in general, *Bloodlines* is a starting point working towards a mutual space for Chinese identity discussion.

On the other hand, the audience can also communicate with intimacy through this space. Regarding Dixon's observation on virtual theatre, the interaction between humans and machines has brought a certain level of intimacy. "The distance and anonymity provided by the 'artificially safe environment of the Internet short-circuited normal reserve and sensitivity and fueled more courage to reveal secret fears and fantasies" (Dixon 2007, 501). People get a certain distance from their real life in this artificial space, creating a certain sense of intimacy with the virtual space. Although in *Bloodlines,* the audience can see each other through a webcam, they can also choose to hide their name, turn off the camera, and just participate by texting in a chat box anonymously. This subtle relationship between the human and non-human machine has created a trusting space for individuals to voice themselves and even draw the issues closer to their real thoughts. Especially to Chinese in China, Chineseness is taboo to discuss with Taiwanese, Hong Kongers, or other overseas people.

All in all, the concept of "Chineseness" is never singular but an idea of inclusion. The adaptation of *Bloodlines* provides a space where every participant, including the performers and the audience, can interact and hopefully explore the new hybridity among the variations of each identity. As Sim said, *Bloodlines* has created a platform like nomadic land, a place of nowhere but also a place of everywhere. Here people try to put aside their boundaries in reality

but focus on the communication experience with each other. In the following paragraph, I explain how interactivity as composition in *Bloodlines* has deepened the understanding of Chineseness.

2.3 Composition of *Bloodlines*: an interactive virtual flight trip

For the composition plane, my concern is how this platform is designed for the interaction between the audience and performers with f different migrant identities. *Bloodlines* are framed as a flight trip on a virtual event platform called *Ohyay,* published by PineLabs LLC since 2021. Different from zoom or teams, *Ohyay* is a virtual event platform designed for the user to immerse themselves in the virtual space. It emphasizes a tailor-made experience designed by the presenter and real-time interaction with the audience. In this virtual meeting place, creators can have their own space with text and images designed. It also allows people to experience the setting and engage with the content through breakout rooms, chat, and question boards to "make them feel like they are actually there"[91]. In virtual migrant theatre, the performers and audience come from worldwide. Instead of choosing an iconic place to stand for "Chineseness", *Bloodlines* present a flight journey and invite the audience to join them in search of their connections with their migrant identity.

Furthermore, this flight journey not only acts as a composition for different migrant identities but also as a journey to prepare the audience for a higher level of interaction. The creative team has designed a journey to prepare them to engage in the performance step by step. When the audience login, there is a welcome box for them to register their name and select the video and microphone access option. It is an interactive website for the audience to explore the journey themselves. Referring to Dixon's model in interaction, navigation, participation, conversation and collaboration, *Bloodlines* is achieving the levels in different ways:

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[91] "The Best Virtual Events." 2022. *Ohyay*. Accessed July 17. https://ohyay.co/.

First Level: Navigation

At this level, a simple operation such as emoji, physical location, and material choice appears on the screen for the audience to choose their own answer.

Figure 1: The audience arrives at the Foyer. Screen Capture from *Bloodlines* creative team.

Before the performance, the audience arrives at the 'foyer' of a virtual airport. Here, the audience has ten minutes to click on the 'luggage' items on the screen and take a tour on personal memories regarding to Chineseness. For example, in the Hong Kong creator's luggage, a family photo, a song with collective memories, some literature, and a chilli sauce with local cuisine (fishball rice noodles) are shared. Meanwhile, the Taiwan artist shares her school photo, bubble tea, pictures of friends, local landscapes and soundscapes. And the Singapore artist shares her Chinese "elite" schools, family photos, and favourite food (SiuMei rice). During these 'luggage museum' tours, the audience can also interact with the website by choosing where they come from, emojis and sentences. In this process, every reaction, even the faces (if they turn on the camera), are visible to each other.

Transition video

Figure 2: Introduction video as identity check in. Screen Capture from *Bloodlines* creative team.

Followed by the interactive foyer, there is a transition video questioning "What is Chineseness?". Various topics on this theme, are covered, such as politics, ancestors, race, culture, biological appearance, and personal and collective memories. These elements connect with the question of migrant identity. Next, there is a 'check-in' session, in which each creator presents themselves as a visa-checking and their connections with Chineseness.

Second Level: Participation

At this level, different choices will lead to different results. This process includes choices of watching different materials or performances, as well as the small quiz in one of the performance sessions.
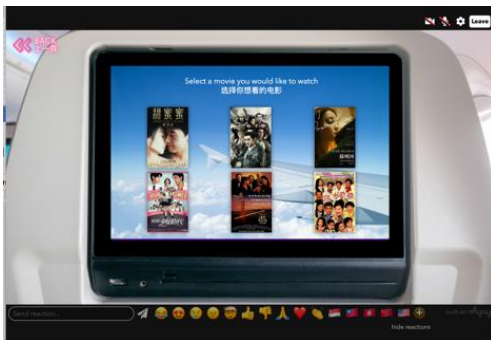

Figure 3: On flight movies selection. Screen Capture from *Bloodlines* creative team.

After 'checking in', All passengers (audience) are on board. A showcase of the movie that contains collective memories is presented on screen. Some are old movies from 1980-1990, like C*omrades: Almost a Love Story*. Audiences can get a glimpse of the cultural memories of the performers by choosing which clips to watch. According to Sim, this imitates the flight journey in which the passengers can choose their own movies. In this context, it is translated to the collective cultural memories designed by the performers.

Figure 4: 'Baggage' selection. Screen Capture from *Bloodlines* creative team.

Imagine that the passengers have been through a long flight, at the moment of landing, they have to identify their baggage. However, these 'baggages' are the burdens that the creators carry along with their identity of Chineseness. They are "Diasporic Struggles", "Sociopolitical Angst", "Chinese Privilege", and "Motherland". The audience's choice would directly led to which performance they watch.

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Each choice is created by each local creator(s). As mentioned in the contextual analysis, the performers a present their cultural identities and struggles in different formats, such as videos, chatroom dialogue and quizzes to the audience.
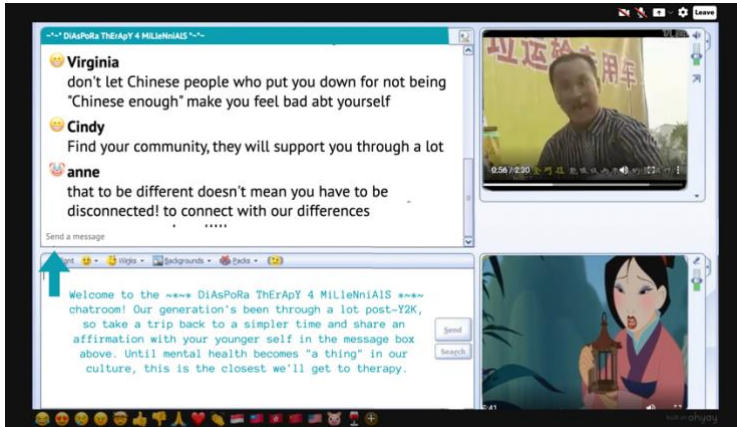
Third Level: Conversation

Figure 5: Diasporic Struggles Chatroom. Screen Capture from *Bloodlines* creative team.

At this level, conversations between the performers and the audience are open. The chat room function is the key feature containing this cross-cultural conversation. For example, in the "diasporic Struggles Chatroom", there is a chatbot conversation as an introduction. Then the audience are encouraged to share their feelings as diaspora Chinese or with relevant experience. The performers also are there to respond immediately. From chatbot to chatting, the whole conversation is conducted in real time. Also, after the "Chinese Privilege" quiz session, there is chatroom session where audience can group together to share their experience during the quiz. The creator, Sim, is there to moderate the conversation among the participants. From my observations, some people ask about the details of the other privileges, while others also reflect on their quiz results and ask for further explanations. These two examples have shown a concrete conversation among the performers and audience on *Bloodlines*.

Fourth Level: Collaboration

At this level, both the performers and the audience contribute to the hybridity of Chineseness through real time improvisation. The performance ends with a few questions on an art jamming board. They include: 1) "What do your roots look like? Do you need roots?" 2) "What have you inherited from your parents? What do you wish to pass down?" 3) "What is Chineseness to you?" 4) Do you have any favourite Chinese things? If so, what are they?" 5) "Where do you consider home?" In this 10-minute jamming, audiences are invited to express their ideas across these five collative jam boards with photos, post-it, drawings, or music. As a whole, they are all contributing to the concept of "Chineseness".
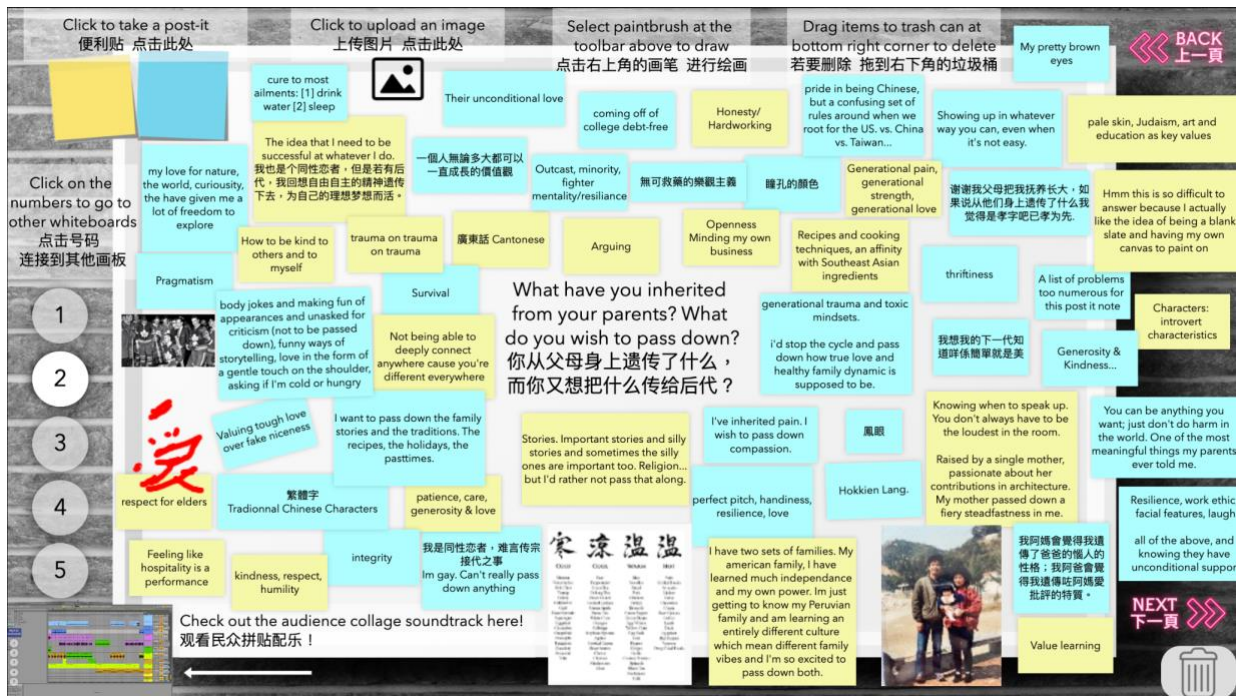
Figure 6: Art Jamming Board. Screen Capture from *Bloodlines* creative team.

Reflection

To people away from their homeland, they are all on the move. And the metaphor of this flight trip shows how they leave their homeland and go towards the unknown. As the makers said, this journey is a single way like everybody. To diaspora, they never know where they are heading. They are simply moving away from the motherland. The makers hope that through this interactive journey, the audience can go through the journey through the virtual space behind the screen.

Aside from the composition theme setup, *Bloodlines* has successfully created the journey to prepare the audience for the higher level of participation. And this design is also linked with Chineseness. In Chinese education and society, people are not used to speaking up for their opinion, not to mention interrupting the one speaking. There is a specific line between presenter and audience in schools, workplaces, society, and theatre. A typical example in daily life is that instead of speaking freely in class, students must raise their hands and wait for the teacher's approval before speaking. Since people have lived in a relatively passive culture for a long time, it is not easy to mobilize the audience to interact with the performance. Therefore, a designed journey in *Bloodlines* is helpful to prepare the audience for the interactions.

Regarding the "collaboration" part, although Dixon only suggests that this collaboration is between the performers and the audience, in *Bloodlines*, this "collaboration" also happens between the performers. According to Sim, *Bloodlines* provide an "open and safe" platform for the audience and performers' interactions. Technically, they set up a platform with a VPN to

make sure the communication is safe for everyone, especially for Sam Lu, who is currently located in China.[92] And mentally, they have community guidelines to make sure everyone feels free and safe to share their opinion and artistic practice in this virtual space.[93] They also have several procedures to ensure everyone's story is being heard: Firstly, they organize an open session for everyone to ask questions about each background. Secondly, they have a sourcing period on every performer's "identity collections", such as songs, videos, and family interviews. Thirdly, they hold a "content 101" presentation for every performer to briefly introduce their hometown or countries history, as well as how they perceive the place to others. And finally, they have a reflection period that shares their understanding of their culture and the others with their art practice. For example, Kiwi Chan holds a movement improvisation while Sam Lu leads a DJ session for the other artist to share their understandings and attachments to Chineseness. These interactions between performers across geographic locations are precious and necessary for the future to create a space with a multicultural context. As Sim said, in this virtual space, no matter where the creators or in what context they come from, they bring along the stories but put aside their prejudgments so they can communicate and collaborate in the performance. The process itself is already a space with a multicultural context.

In conclusion, connecting the intimacy of virtual migrant theatre suggested above, *Bloodlines* has created an intimate space for both performers and audience, especially for the rather restrained Chinese, to express themselves. This example shows that in virtual migrant theatre, apart from "What job can or does the spectator do? What does it mean to them?"[94], makers also pay attention to the migrant identities' by creating a tailor-made participation journey for the spectators. In the following plane, I further investigate *Bloodlines* from the spectators' aspects, especially on how they experience Chineseness in the virtual migrant theatre.

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[92] Sim, Interview with the author.
[93] Chen, Interview with the author.
[94] Eckersall, "Dumb Type – The Birth of New Media Dramaturgy", 376

2.4 Spectators of *Bloodlines*:

The co-presence of Chinese/ non-Chinese worldwide

Bloodlines creates an expanded and interactive space, leading to performers and audience "co-presence" along with their kinds of Chineseness. This co-presence suggests a new way of thinking about the migrant identities in theatre. *"Bloodlines* is for everyone."* Sim and Chen emphasized during our interviews. As the performance data shows, audiences watch from the US, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, China and the other continents. Most importantly, not all of them are "Chinese". According to the audience response, some of them are "white" and "Asian". The way they describe their nationality, ethnicity and location is also very multicultural. For example, a Japanese girl with Japanese and Chinese ethics watched the performance in Singapore. This echoes the thinking of each person as a unique individual with a "hybrid" background, suggested by Bhabha. [95] Specially referring to *Bloodlines*, this uniqueness not only appears to the cultural diversity of the performers but also extends to the spectators' level.

In *1.2 Dramaturgy of Migration*, I have mentioned that the definition of the audience suggested by Meerzon are the locals, diasporic people, and the audience sharing the same race with the performers. However, in virtual migrant theatre, I suggest that the theory can be transformed in a different way, in which the definition of 'local' can be redefined. Take "Chinese" as an example, the "locals" can be redefined as the body with their own connection to the migrant identity. Therefore, in *Bloodlines*, the locals can be people from Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, the US or any place they consider as "Chinese". In other words, the "local" is not strictly limited to the people living in a specific geographic area but translated to a concept of identity in virtual space. Similarly, to the people who do not share their identities with the performers, they can be described as "other ethics" or also "diasporic people with different races". Different from the original concept, the development of migrant theatre no longer depends on the reactions of the locals[96], but going back to the migrants themselves. Therefore, in this "nomad land" as Sim described, the definition of local changed, and so does the privileges.

From creating an expanded space to adapting interactivity between performers and spectators in that space, in the virtual migrant theatre, everyone can connect with Chineseness in different ways, regardless of their identity. During my interview with Chen, she shared that

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[95] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

[96] Cox, *Theatre and Migration*, 78.

there is an interesting phenomenon in the spectators' perception and experience of *Bloodlines*: For the "Chinese" audience, they focus on how the performance presents their own culture and conceive Chineseness in a micro way.[97] Meanwhile, "non-Chinese" or people who do not have much background information about Chineseness tend to focus on the bigger picture.

Take "Chinese" and "non-Chinese" as examples: A Chinese from Singapore shared that the emojis and discussion boards helped him to engage with the performance, in his term, like "watching a Twitch stream."[98] To him, this process of bringing people together is raising the identity for the collective. Another audience member mentioned that she was expected to understand the identity of Chineseness in a "geopolitical aspect"[99]. Nevertheless, she felt the play aimed to provide perspectives more diversely. In my opinion, this "diverse manner" means a comprehensive understanding of cultural, political, economic, ancestral and psychological aspects of the migrant identity. It differs for each individual, but at the same time, the diverse views map a bigger picture of Chineseness.

According to the spectators' comments, people from different backgrounds experience Chineseness from different angles through the interactivity of virtual migrant theatre. To non-Chinese, they understood *Bloodlines* as a map of Chineseness and travelled in-between. A girl from the US expressed that she never felt confused. "I enjoyed the interactive aspect of the show and that it felt like its own little world on the platform, while still engaging very much with the world outside the play." To her, she experienced the performance as a channel to get to know the other cultures of the world. At the same time, she also shared that the process of reading the definition of "home" of others made her reflect on her version.[100] Some of the other audience also connected to their own diaspora experience triggered by the personal narratives from the performance.[101] A Hispanic-Mexican-American also shared that he had limited knowledge of Chineseness and Asia. Yet, these Chinese personal family stories and history to him were provoking, and he would like to learn more about the culture.[102] Hence, the diaspora connections and struggles between home and migrant identity are not limited to Chineseness. It is a universal subject across cultures.

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[97] Chen, Interview with the author.

[98] Source from Audience Feedback form provided by the makers.

[99] Source from Audience Feedback form provided by the makers.

[100] Ibid.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid.

Moreover, with the clear description provided in bilingual, both Simplified Chinese and English, all spectators can follow the performance and access to each story easily. In the feedback session, a Singaporean man also expressed that it is an excellent opportunity to see the variation of Chineseness as a local, a migrant, an adapted, a diaspora and a ruling identity culture. Especially through the moving images and narratives in real time, the audience travels across the geography in the performance. To me, it is like a trip across time and landscape with the memories of the six performers. The mixed use of videos, live chat and co-presence of the audience creates an illusion of travelling through the past and present memory.

As shown above, the audience comes from all over the world and experienced Chineseness differently through the interactive platform. Different cultural backgrounds and personal stories become visible and co-presence through the real time interactions. Since the creative team also emphasizes the creative process in terms of cultural ideas exchange, they transfer the process into real time interactions, such as movie selection and chatroom, as well as art jamming board. As the comments reflect, the spectators understand the identity issues related to Chineseness and enjoy connecting through live participation. By connecting with the performers and among the other audience, they experience a sense of liveness in the performance. And throughout the experience, the audience are also engaged in the cross-cultural discussion referring their own connection to Chineseness or even to their own culture. And this engaging and co-presence process also makes them become part of the performance.

Virtual migrant theatre is an expansion and hybrid space with interactions, spectators and performers in this space are all on a single common ground. Moreover, this combination of spectators from different backgrounds has paved the way for the communication and co-presence of the migrant identities in virtual migrant theatre. Connecting this virtual journey as an "expanded space" defined by the NMD in virtual migrant theatre, the audience are "transported" to a live and imaginary space with different cultures. As described above, the platform is designed for the audience to participate and experience the content online. This connects them with a sense of liveness by bringing the audience and performers together. For instance, on the art-jamming board, the audience can immediately see the other's answer and respond and react. Also, in the chatroom, the audience can interact directly with each other and the performer in real time online. This instant dialogue creates a sense of intimacy through the shared space and time together.

With real time interaction, audiences are not only visible in the performance but also become part of the performance. In other words, as the audience can see each other online, they are simultaneously part of the performance in their spectatorship experience. Therefore, the

reaction and interaction from the audience become part of the performance itself. Thanks to the diverse reflection and live cooperation, the audiences' answers about Chineseness have contributed to the central idea of Chineseness: it is a concept that differs from person to person, but together they are creating a blueprint of this identity. And this process has also facilitated the cultural negotiation between different migrant identities and together to create an inclusive definition of Chineseness.

Reflection

My interviews with Chen end with a question: "What is your vision on Chineseness?" Chen shared that she once imagined *Bloodlines* as a virtual interactive town with Avatars, where people can experience their own "Chineseness" and get to know others. For example, audiences can watch their favourite movies together, share their memories and personal history, and discuss different issues that triggered them as Chinese. To her, the identity of Chineseness is a tree. Connected with the main stem of Chinese ancestry, different versions of Chineseness can be evolved. Under the influence of local or international cultures, they may be transformed by displacement, integration, assimilation, hybridisation or more. The concept of Chineseness will keep growing and enriched by all these variations.

In this sense, the co-presence of audience and performers in the same virtual space with their own cultural identities contributes to the hybridity of Chineseness. As Chen suggested in the interview, in the future, she aimed to include all those differences in Chinese culture and create a platform to communicate within. Taking into consideration that the medium is also part of the performance context[103], virtual migrant theatre is suggesting a new way of looking into the migrant identities in contemporary theatre.

To conclude, virtual migrant theatre allows viewers to connect and engage with one another online. The expansion of space brings along Chinese regardless background and even non-Chinese together in a shared space. Like Sim said, as a Chinese, *Bloodlines* helps her to know the Chineseness of the others. Meanwhile for the foreigners, it provides a blueprint of how diverse Chineseness can be. With the performance space and spectator's role change, there is no distinction between "local" or not. In virtual migrant theatre, every participant, including the performers and spectators are visible and co-presence online. In *Bloodlines*, all participants arrive a common and open ground to discuss their migrant identities, Chineseness, in spite of

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[103] Giannachi, *Virtual Theatres.*

their personal cultural background. Finally, although it is not fully achieved in *Bloodlines*, one of the makers, Chen has a vision of enriching Chineseness through cultural co-presence and exchange on virtual migrant theatre.

2.5 Critical reflection: limitation and suggestion for *Bloodlines*

Undoubtedly, *Bloodlines* has created a meaningful interactive virtual experience to explore the migrant identity, Chineseness.[104] *Bloodlines a*s a work-in-progress performance, I notice some limitations on this version of performance and would like to address them for future development.

From a micro point of view, regarding the context model suggested above, the hybridity of Chineseness shown in the performance can be further improved. The current version is mapping out the variety of Chineseness from the performers. For example, the "foyer" session (see Figure 1) shows all the "memories and luggage" from the audience. As a start of the performance, it is understandable that it provides the backstory of each performer. However, this presentation style lasts until almost the end of the performance, like the "check-in" self-introduction videos (see Figure 2), movies of the audience's choice, and the 'baggage' session (see Figure 4). Although in these sessions, the audience can identify the Chineseness regarding a specific story or culture depending on their choice, a complete picture or negotiation between the performers' identities is missing.

Furthermore, some identity struggles are across different forms of Chineseness. For instance, the "Sociopolitical Angst" is not only happening in Hong Kong. It takes place in at least China and Taiwan as well. The presentation about this topic can further consider how to incorporate the differences across the different kinds of Chineseness. Also, the "diasporic struggles" are shared by not only American-Chinese, but also others with diaspora experience. Indeed, the chat room has opened up a common ground for everyone to communicate based on the performer's memory and experience. It can also include more voices that are related to the issue. Since "diasporic Chinese" is a border issue connected to many people, I think starting from the creative process, it can be more inclusive. Meanwhile, even though there are different kinds of "Chinese privilege" addressed in the interactive quiz, the choices and ending

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[104] It has resulted in positive feedback from the audience, such as being described as an "interesting online interactive theatrical experience, mixed with cultural research, family history and personal stories", and a provoking experience of searching for the meaning of "being Chinese and what it means to be part of the diaspora". (Source from Audience Feedback form provided by the makers.)

explanations can be more apparent. Some of the audience also reflected that they were a bit confused about the choices provided in the quiz. To me, more connections and explanations can be provided after the result to show the comparison between each type of Chinese privilege. Through the similarities and differences, the spectators can get a more in-depth understanding of the big topic of "Chinese privilege" as part of Chineseness.

From a macro point of view, the audience have a complete experience with Chineseness through the virtual flight journey. They also get to know the variations of Chineseness from the performers' personal history and some of the common identity struggles. I would describe *Bloodlines* as a platform for showing the multiculturalism rather than hybridity in Chineseness. Compared to hybridity, multiculturalism does not work with negotiation between cultures. Instead, it discusses the different models of cultural plurality and addressing the shared space as a heterogeneous space to settle the differences by maintaining the boundaries.[105] According to Bhabha, 'hybridity' is transcultural thinking which breaks through the "the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity."[106] This means that an integrated, open, and expanding process should be included in the thinking process, especially the "differences".[107] In my interview with Cinthia, we also discussed the relationship between differences and hybridity:

> Leung: Everyone seems to be in their own room and expressing their thoughts. Of course, there are responses and discussions, the result is still representing an individual instead of cooperating with the hybridity of Chineseness. What do you think about developing the trajectory between the performers' notion of Chineseness?
>
> Chen: Interestingly, some audience members mentioned that they look forward to our 'conflicts'... Indeed, it is very 'peaceful' in our creation process… We have discussed a lot of the similarities and differences. In the future, we aim to work on the differences between us…

As Chen mentioned, the cooperation between the performers is about discovering the similarities and differences, which I call finding the boundaries between different forms of Chineseness. As a result, it is not surprising that the presentation shows a different form of Chineseness in a rather separate way, instead of achieving the negotiation between cultures. This observation also connects to one of the core aspects of New Media Dramaturgy, that

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[105] Toro, On Migration, 7.
[106] Bhabha, *Location of Cultures*, 56.
[107] Bhabha, *Location of Cultures*, 54.

the creation process is also part of the performance. And hence the performance does reflect the creation process.

In general, I understand that this is a work-in-process performance. And to break through the boundaries, the first step is identifying where the boundaries are. It is not an 'either/or' concept of achieving multiculturalism or hybridity. In fact, it is a process. Before moving towards culture hybridity, the first step can be identifying each culture's features. Then followed by negotiating between the similarities and differences, cultural hybridity may be able to achieve in the future. To Bloodlines, notwithstanding the lack of development with cultural hybridity, some attempts have been made to negotiate between different identities through interactions, such as the 'Chinese Privilege' quiz and the jam board at the end. Therefore, as with all the cultural hybridity processes, Chineseness is dealing with the differences between its land, between two places with Chinese people, and between Chinese and the globalization culture. Therefore, I think it takes time to achieve hybridity in virtual migrant theatre. And I look forward to seeing how the team deals with the differences among them in the future.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I attempted to examine the connection between the concepts of New Media Dramaturgy and dramaturgy of migrant in virtual migrant theatre based on my case study, *Bloodlines*. In Part 1, I explored the dramaturgical aspects of virtual migrant theatre. I explained the way that the virtual migrant theatre is formed by introducing the related dramaturgical concerns relating to New Media Dramaturgy, and dramaturgy of migration. I combined the two fields and established my dramaturgical model for virtual migrant theatre by employing the methodology of relational thinking, the "planes of dramaturgy" suggested by Merx and Groot Nibbelink. Part 2 focused on carrying out a dramaturgical analysis of the case study by using the dramaturgical framework I suggested in Part 1. In addition to the analysis, I conducted a reflection on the level of effectiveness of *Bloodlines* in adapting to the form of virtual migrant theatre, with the intention to search for the diverse identities of migrants.

Therefore, this study attempts to contribute towards the trajectory between technology and migrant identities. Reflecting upon my observations and research journey so far, I conclude that *Bloodlines*, as a virtual migrant theatre, has expanded the space for understanding different kinds of migrant identities. Through the real-time and different levels of interaction, co-presence is formed among the performers and audience. And hence, virtual migrant theatre has become a mutual space for the negotiating the cultural hybridity. The interactive virtual flight journey has created a unique experiences for each participant to reflect on their relations to the migrant identity, Chineseness.

In my interview with Sim, she has expressed that her greatest learning from this project is that Chineseness is an ever-changing concept. In Singapore, the government expects the Chinese to be more "Chinese" and provides them with different privileges; in Hong Kong or Taiwan, the definition of Chineseness is being shaped according to the political environment. To Sim, the final goal of addressing the issue of Chineseness across the various physical locations is meant to broaden one's understanding on the concept of Chineseness. Hence, the individuals can become more willing to reconsider, rethink and discuss the nature of such concept with others. Tu Wei-ming, the editor of The *Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today,* mentions "the fluidity of Chineseness as a layered and contested discourse, to open new possibilities and avenues of inquiry, and to challenge the claims of political leadership (in Beijing, Taipei, Hong Kong or Singapore) to be the ultimate authority in a matter as significant as 'Chineseness'" (Tu 1994, viii). Thus, the concept of "Chineseness" is a fluid concept with hybridity depending on each body's origin and living location.

Likewise, as I suggested in the last critical reflection, the center idea of understanding the hybridity over migrant identities through virtual migrant theatre is to highlight the differences between each individual and "challenges the unifying force". This is the way to keep alive the cultural tradition of the people instead of the power. [108]"Differences (are meant) to be productive and not problematic" (Sanders: Cools 2015,56). By referring to Cools, Sander's attempted to argue that the hybridity between cultures starts from the differences between cultures. And through these differences, they are giving voice to the individuals that participated in the virtual migrant theatre.[109]

In this paper, I draw connections between technology and migration field to establish the concept in virtual migrant theatre. However, I should admit that this research paper a some limitation. I adapted *Bloodlines* as my key case study to analyze virtual migrant theatre in this paper. However, it is only a single example within the whole field. In order to develop further discussion on virtual migrant theatre, I think more examples can be included. Especially when migration is a big topic around the globe, pieces from different race and ethnics can be included to enrich the research.

To conclude, virtual theatre, as a new medium, has offered a space that is full of possibilities and potentials. Apart from the limitations in *Bloodlines* that have been discussed in the analysis, the performance is a process that moves towards to the concept of cultural

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[108] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture,* 2.
[109] Cools, *In-between Dance Cultures*, 56.

hybridity via an interactive virtual experience. Virtual migrant theatre, as a space of 'nowhere', shifts freely and engages with the spectators in various ways, this enables further discussion and negotiation on the concept of migrant identities to be possible. To me, the trend of virtual theatre has never been a substitute of theatre during the Covid time. It is an inspiration to connect the disconnected, and thereby creates a rather borderless world. To migrants, whether they leave their hometown voluntarily or involuntarily, the emergence of virtual migrant theatre has created an expanded space for them to be virtually united, no matter how far they are from their hometown in physical world. After all, as Emma Cox observes:

> The act of making theatre is the act of recognizing, affirming, extending, imagining, and re-affirming a community or, possibly, communities. Metaphorically at first and then literally and tangibly, theatre is the creation of newly shared space on Earth. (Cox 2014, xii)

Indeed, the meaning of making theatre is exploring and extending the possibilities of space and culture on earth. In my thesis, the case study of *Bloodlines* has demonstrated the way that virtual migrant theatre works as a medium in search of the hybridity in migrant identity, Chineseness. In the future, I anticipate that the virtual migrant theatre can be further developed into a space for the diaspora to gather and to search for their roots and identities, as well as to enrich their cultural hybridity. Ultimately, I hope that virtual migrant theatre can contribute towards the contemporary theatre as a space with the "worlds open, eyes open, and hearts open"[110].

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[110] Cox, *Theatre and Migration,* ix.

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