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## 7th June 2008: where we are allowed to tread

Posted by [rajni\\_shah](#) on June 7, 2008 at 8:29am

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These two notions, they captivate me:

1. translation
2. internal geographies

Dear Bobby

You too are looking at where you can tread, you nervously invited people of colour to respond to your ideas, and you nervously approach the idea of 'reworking' something you have already made with a different slant, for a different 'group'. I hope you will allow me to unpick some of these thoughts, from my perspective.

My work often sits on that line between stereotype and authenticity, it's something I like to explore. When I was making my most recent show, 'Dinner with America', I felt sure that at the start of the show I wanted to 'be' a busty blue-eyed blonde woman, a persona radically different from my own, and that I would work through layers and layers to reach my own body through the piece. Which is, among other things, what I do in the final show. But during the process of making that show, I had to ask myself the following questions:



\* What gives me the right to take on this persona, why is she completely 'up for grabs'? Why do I have no issues about my rights in this area?

and then

What if I had chosen to 'be' an African American at the start of the show instead?

Of course it's in part obvious because of the very different histories associated with 'white' and 'black' especially in the U.S. But there are also very complex questions tied in there about my own histories and the places where I personally 'draw the line' as it were, what I like to call my own internal geographies. I would feel extremely uncomfortable appropriating the stereotypes associated with African American culture whereas taking on a very stereotyped image from 'White America' was always in my mind available as an option, a place where I could ask questions and problematise fixed ideas, where I as an individual had the right to tread.

This also ties in somehow to questions that came up for me at a recent programme exploring socially engaged Live Art at the [Chelsea Theatre](#) here in London. There was a discussion led by [New Work Network](#) around socially engaged practice and responsibility. It was a wonderful and provocative discussion, but for me the key question at the end of it was still around whether we identify ourselves as an equal or an outsider with a group and when one or the other is helpful. Although I will always take responsibility for what I am doing in a socially engaged setting, I cannot bear to identify myself as an outsider. So to add to the above comments about internal borders perhaps I might ask:

How does one approach the idea of exclusion? As the 'artist' coming into a group, do you claim to be included in or acknowledge being excluded from the group, or is there something other into which you are included? What is that thing? And where is the line of acceptance?

Anyhow, this is all a bit of a jumble and I maybe should stop there. But it's helpful to start exploring some of these ideas. Not so that we can spend all our time talking/writing, but just because I feel that at the bottom of some of these seemingly obvious statements and questions lie a lot of tangles that trip us up in daily life. This, of course, is your area of specialism. And I look forward to talking more about it soon...

Till then,

rajni.x.

\*image from documentation by [Manuel Vason](#)

MORE READING:

<http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2003/10/alter...>

I recommend this hot article on race in performance at Alternate ROOTS (Pat Arnow, 2003)

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