

Into the Arms of My Colonizer: Constructing the Hyphen

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Sleeping with Your Colonizer: When Love Takes You Into The Arms Of The White Man is an article from a lifestyle blog I found online. The article is centred around the author, Natalie Nichols' experience around dating a white man. She describes the guilt felt from loving her 'colonizer', as if it was something 'taboo' (Nichols, 2013), seeking approval from family and the general African American community which she was very part of. Although this tale of woe was told in a 'Fifty Shades of Black' way, I find her desire for her 'colonizer' insightful material. This melodramatic account evokes the question — what's wrong with desiring 'whiteness', and, is it really worthy of an article? Nichols felt so strong about this issue that the article describes moments when she would invite her Caucasian partner to her family dinner, where her father showed utter disdain for her chosen partner — to a point where he mocks Nichols. Her Mother was close to disowning her. Reminding me of a conversation my Father and I had one morning about relationships and dating: he sat me down and asked if I was dating at the ripe old age of twelve (very inappropriately). Rolling my eyes I told him that I wasn't even thinking about it. He replied "You need to date a white girl, only because they have money". His advice was problematic in many ways, me being gay and also the fact it was completely inaccurate.

Another aspect the article highlights is the construction of a diasporic identity; in conversations from Maori Academic and writer Robert Jahnke where he offers a solution by embracing an essentialist Praxis and returning to their whakapapa, to Nicholas Mierzhoff's call for transcultural engagement. There has been one area of exploration not ventured – the individual's desires. Throughout the various discourses around postcolonialism there is little mention that you can construct your own identity. It's always external forces: genealogical, geographical, historical, political – that inform your identity. The question then changes from "Who am I?" To: "Who I want to be?" Maybe within Glissant's reading of identity - which multiples do I want to be? Desire is the drive behind *Into The Arms of My Colonizer* (2016), where I begin to create my own Hyphen Space upon sand – referencing an autobiographical recount of peoples, songs, images and gestures. Each seven chapters in this work conjure 'multiples' that exist within this one diasporic artist. The Malleable nature of sand and its sense of infinite possibility, makes transformation effortless and potent stage for performance. Rather than searching or reclaiming the Hyphen, I have decided to construct the hyphen.

Chapter 1: Miss Aretha Franklin, “If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with”

A boy sits on his Father and watches his favourite movie. The Father is checking his phone for the latest updates on current events. Although they are not interacting, this does not make the moment less intimate.

This first chapter is a reference of storytelling, specifically of my Father’s stories. In my other body of work; *The Romantic Picturesque* (2016), one of the comments I received was “Are you trying to tell a story?” with the performance of my ‘red heroine’. At first I wasn’t quite sure how to respond, but as time past I realised that my practice is in fact autobiographical, so of course there should be some element of storytelling involved. I do recognise the hesitation within a fine arts practice, to be in danger of being too literal when dealing with narrative. Within this work, narrative is related to memory and restaged through performance. My intentions were to be direct about the content, whilst trying not to be linear. Predictability is not a word I would use to describe these works, rather ‘uncanny’ – both familiar and unfamiliar. As if the characters were archetypes that have been always a part of me.

“Love the one you’re with” — this chapter opens up numerous things in terms of my outlook on desire. To “be with” seems to be the underlying aim of my exploration for the Hyphen. I wanted to be in a space working with people I can relate to, who argue, who sing, who cry and laugh about the work. I am not seeking some sort of Utopian Paradise – just some form of relatability in our brokenness. The crew, the cast, the volleyball court, are all things I love and it made sense to incorporate them in this work. “Love the one your with” also implies an embrace of all the multiple versions of yourself and others.

The camera angle has been lifted to give a sense ‘looking in’; positioning the viewer to glance at different versions of myself. The point of view for the majority of the performers was the camera lens. This was done in order to seduce the viewer to become immersed in the space of the set. The viewer in my previous works were given total authority on the subjects they were viewing, similar to Kihara’s attempt to avert the gaze and regain the subject’s power. This is more apparent in the next chapter.

Chapter II: We are often the subject of intrigue and ridicule by our friends, family and general bystanders who feel the need to remark as loudly as possible, “You wouldn’t never catch me dating and kissing no white man!”

My Father told me once about his experiences as a LMS (London Missionary Serviceman). He would travel the world with other LMS and preach the word of God. Travelling to places like Hawaii, Egypt, Fiji, Australia and China (Hong Kong). He was known to embellish certain stories but I didn’t mind. One story I always loved was his time in China. He was based in Hong Kong for the majority of his two years there, but once in a while, he would travel to Beijing. Because China, being a communist state where it was illegal to practice religion, they needed a reason to enter the country. My Father and his fellowship decided to form a fake island cover band. Undercover they would book gigs at local restaurants whilst simultaneously smuggle bibles into Beijing. This band consisted of flares, guitars, afro’s and moustaches. To make matters worse my Father was the lead singer (totally tone deaf). They would sing Samoan songs and because majority of the audience were Chinese, it didn’t matter if they couldn’t sing or that the audience couldn’t understand. People were just amazed at the difference of culture on display.

In Chapter II introduces my own fake band made up of gospel singers. They are singing pop sensation Selena Quintanilla-Pérez’s hit *Como La Flur* (1992), which was popular in Samoa, in particular with my family. It was a regular song played at my family’s garage parties with the Uncles and Aunties, similar to the Chinese patrons in my Father’s story. I don’t think anyone understood what the song meant. The song is about estranged love and the title means “like a flower”. In my video this song’s performance is juxtaposed with oiled-up muscle men. The two men compete to seduce the viewer and it doesn’t matter from what standing point (sexually, racially, politically) — it is hard to figure out who is doing the better job. Both are extensions of my newly reconfigured ‘dusky maidens’, but not passively giving into viewers desires, more accurately, toying with the viewer. The title of the chapter echoes this playful courtship.

**Chapter III: Yet, as I began to seriously consider leaving the playing field to settle down with my brown sugar boo,
I found it was the brothers who were missing something**

Within any story there needs to be a love interest and this couple were the perfect match to be my protagonists. Chapter III introduces a hetero-normative couple, both European and beautiful, the male performer wearing a suit and the female performer wearing a long gown. Everything in this chapter was based upon a snow globe I had seen depicting a couple dancing. The performances and costuming were aimed to produce this effect. The couple are focused on each other's movements, removing any connection to anything outside of this waltz, creating a fragile glass sphere. A sphere that I find hard to penetrate, but if challenged, exposes the fractures within this artificial snow globe.

I was always wondering if I was missing out on something because this story of two white people, conquering all odds for the sake of their love, is an all too familiar story in mainstream media. I do find there is beauty behind their fragility and when they are ready to converse I am open to the idea. Until then, I will be over by the side of the band, whose sole purpose is to complete this picture-perfect imaginary. The song is a classic Beatles track *Because* (1969), performed in a capella style, similar to the previous chapter.

Chapter IV: Then there was my mother who had admonished me on more than one occasion as a kid growing up to stop thinking that I could act like those “white folks”

The child struggling to carry the this oversized white bunny demonstrates my somewhat comical interactions with ‘white fragility’. At high school I played in the school volleyball team and we would have breakfast at my captain’s house. Nick (not his real name) came from a family of Doctors (and eventually became a Doctor himself), and would ‘support’ our team and me in particular. Nick’s parents would ask me if I needed help with anything, I would politely say I was okay, they would eventually give money to Nick saying ‘make sure Chris gets something to eat as well’. This continued for a long time even though I was working a part time job, earning my own money. Both my parents and I would laugh and say ‘at least they are trying to help you?’ Being a minority in a largely Pakeha society has to have some benefits, I’m just worried that if they find out that I am not the charity case they hope to invest in, it may burst the bubble that we all lived in.

Chapter IV is the middle point of this work and its fitting that I expose the hyphen space (by itself) in its entirety for the first time. It acts as the anchor to make sense of the other chapters, revealing an uncharted island. The moment the child leaves the frame, the yucca reveals is presented. This yucca helps me compose the picture. By having it placed in every frame, I start to centre the performances around this one focal point. The aim was to make it seem like everything grew out of this little tree, but there are times when its presence is lost. That is why this chapter is vital for the viewers reading of the of the overall work.

The Hyphen space is presented with no reference to water, culture, or time – the sand reminds us that this is a transitional space – meaning change is ahead.

Chapter V: It doesn't have to be a white guy; I am imploring you to cross cultural barriers and date an African man, a Mexican man, yes, even an Asian man!

Lulu was a character I made up when I was a kid (loosely based on my mother). I would dream about her swanning through life drinking gin and tonic and playing solitaire. Lulu was a beautiful singer, who would attend the RSA talent shows to earn money. Her repertoire mainly consisted of pop songs and musical films like *Grease* (1978) and *Sound of Music* (1965) wearing an amazing sparkly cocktail dress with large hoop earrings. She had two children and an estranged husband – who is still a mystery to this day.

Chapter V is an ode to Lulu for all those times she comforted me in my dream state. I have called upon the whole ensemble (minus the Father and the child) to partake in the celebration of her stardom. Each performer was tasked to outshine the other performers, what resulted was a visual/musical feast. Muscle men were asked to out muscle each other, the singers were asked to out 'Mariah Carey' each other, the couple were asked to not take notice of anything around them. All these aspects at full throttle make your eyes constantly divert across the screen, unable to keep up. This chapter is the climatic moment in this work and refuses to downplay its position as a catalyst for release. For all the pain, loss and misunderstandings of being marginalized and/or being the marginalizer – here is my fuck you, shut up and have fun. You're welcome.

Chapter VI: If you know in your heart that you are a passionate, loving woman who brings some strong credentials to the table, why not try reaching out to the other side?

The passing of cultural traditions and songs when you're a child is sometimes met with open ears. Unfortunately I was neither open and reluctant to the whole idea. I think it was probably because I was a brat, fortunately my subconscious was working over-drive and now I have an appreciation for knowing these cultural 'ornaments' – specifically the songs. The song *Tele I'a O Le Sami* (c.1954) is a Samoan nursery rhyme which talks about how there is plenty in love and nature. My Father would be so smug to realise that I reference these songs and stories as an adult, his frustration with my refusal to assimilate, like other nice Samoan boys, has been a constant battle for him.

In Chapter VI illustrates the triad of Father, Mother and child. This little trinity is my reservoir, a space to replenish my energy. This chapter doubles as a natural pause in the work, to release some of the hype from the previous chapter, and a poignant reflective moment in the piece. My aim was to remind the viewer the Father and child is still a key element in this story. The 'Dusky Maidens' extract a lot of the attention on screen, but the Father and child performances are flawless, non-pretentious and unassuming. This is due to the fact that they are not trained actors and there is no way of controlling their actions – and I wouldn't want to.

Chapter VII: So many of us are looking for love, yet if it ain't Boris, Idris or Will Smith, we are not interested

Working to the frame compositionally with all these components at my disposal is probably one of the biggest learning curves for me. I rarely work with a script and now I seem to solely work from my intuition. This is in stark contrast with my experience working in the film industry as an Art Director. Throughout *Into The Arms Of My Colonizer* (2016) I have been surprised by the combinations of gestures, costumes, performers and props. Although I recycled and isolated certain components, each time it felt new. A methodology I will probably work with in the future.

Chapter VII Lulu is back and now she is conjuring spirits both old and new. The lighting has changed, more limited and angled to highlight the different bodies. The song *Dark Moon* (2008) from Daniel Rae Costello calls this work to an end. The dance is the moment of liberation, no longer facing the her eyes to the camera, and in acknowledgement of 'Le Masina' (the moon). Here she summons the last bits of her energy reaching for enlightenment. She has lost her voice, but continues to perform. The others are relaxing around her maintaining the image, she refuses to be contained. The viewer is immersed and this conclusion just fades into black.