

Re-Constructing Asianness in Australia: Yumi Umiumare, Owen Leong, and the Remobilisation of Monstrosity

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In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Australia's relationship with its Asian neighbours has been the subject of ongoing aesthetic, cultural and political contestations. As Alison Richards has noted, Australia's colonial legacy, its Asia-Pacific location, and its 'white' self-perception have always made Australia's relations with Asia fraught¹. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the paradoxes inherent in Australia's relationships with and within the Asian region became a dominant theme in debates about nation, nationhood and identity, and prompted a shift in the construction of 'Asianness' on Australian stages. On the one hand, anxiety about the multicultural policy of the 1970s and 1980s, and then Prime Minister Paul Keating's push for greater economic, cultural and artistic exchange with Asia via policies such as the *Creative Nation* Cultural Policy (1994), saw large numbers of Australians latch on to the reactionary, racist politics of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party². As Jacqueline Lo has argued, in this period Asian-Australians were frequently represented as an unassimilable Other, a threat to Australia's 'white' identity, and to individual Australians' jobs and opportunities³. On the other hand, during the same period, a desire to counter the racism in Australian culture, and develop a 'voice' that would distinguish Australian cultural products from European theatrical traditions, combined with the new opportunities for cross-cultural exchange that came with the

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¹ Alison Richards, "The Orient and its Dis/contents: images of Japan as oriental 'other' in Australian drama 1967-1997" in Rachel Fensham and Peter Eckersall eds., *Dis/Orientations: Cultural Praxis in Theatre: Asia, Pacific, Australia* (Melbourne: Monash Theatre Papers 1, 1999), 137-57, 138.

² Ibid. p. 138; Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, *Performance and Cosmopolitanism: Cross-Cultural Transactions in Australasia* (Houndsmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 15.

³ Jacqueline Lo, "Disciplining Asian Australian Studies: Projections and Introductions," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 27, no. 1-2 (February-May 2006), 11-27, 17.

Creative Nation Cultural Policy to produce what Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo have characterised as an Asian turn in Australian theatre⁴. The construction of Asia, Asians and Asianness in the Australian cultural imaginary – often as a site of trauma as a result of war, migration or other forms of conflicted cultural exchange⁵ – found new expression in plays by non-Asian Australians (including John Romeril's *The Floating World* (1974), *Love Suicides* (1997) and *Miss Tanaka* (2001), Jill Shearer's *Shimada* (1986), Daniel Keane's *Cho Cho San* (1987), and Noelle Janaczewka's *The History of Water* (1992)), plays by Asian Australians (including Duong Le Quy's *Meat Party* (1995), and Binh Duy Ta's *The Monkey Mother* (1998)), and solo performances such as Anna Yen's *Chinese Takeaway* (1997) and as William Yang's *Sadness* (1999). Australian artists also began to train in Asian theatre techniques, such as Suzuki, butoh and bodyweather⁶, to extend theatrical forms thought, as Rachel Fensham and Peter Eckersall have argued, to be trapped in naturalism⁷.

In this article, I consider the way two contemporary Asian-Australian artists, Yumi Umiumare and Owen Leong, use their aesthetic practices to intervene in debates about the way Asia, Asians and Asianness have been constructed as 'Other' in the Australian cultural imaginary. In considering the work of these contemporary Asian-Australian artists, my aim is not to survey shifts in the way Asia is represented on the Australian stage – such a survey has already been offered by Gilbert and Lo in their remarkable *Performance and Cosmopolitics* (2007). I do, though, share Gilbert and Lo's interest in the way identity constructs can unravel at the moment they are embodied or enacted onstage, as spectators are confronted with the presence of the racially marked 'Other'⁸. Umiumare and Leong both create compelling examples of this unravelling. Their works reference the experience of being racially other in Australia, not in order to give a straightforward account of alienation, trauma and tragedy, but, in a sense, to fracture or traumatize the very representation systems that have defined them as racially Other, and bring spectators into the uncertain space they so often find themselves inhabiting. Though their practices differ – Umiumare is a performance artist, Leong is a visual and video artist – both use a critical remobilisation of racist symbols, tropes and stereotypes to contest the legacy of racism that has historically characterised Australia's, and indeed many individual Australians's, attitudes towards Asian immigrants. Both replay the stereotypes by which Asian-Australian bodies are constructed as Other across their own Asian-Australian bodies in striking ways. In particular, Umiumare and Leong both mobilize the trope of the monster, and the monstrous, to comment on the way their Asian-Australian bodies are figured in the white Australian cultural imaginary.

⁴ Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, 17-18, 82-111.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 82-111.

⁷ Rachel Fensham and Peter Eckersall, "Introduction," in Rachel Fensham and Peter Eckersall eds., *Dis/Orientations: Cultural Praxis in Theatre: Asia, Pacific, Australia* (Melbourne: Monash Theatre Papers 1, 1999), 3-13, 6.

⁸ Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, 12.

As Rosi Braidotti has argued, race has frequently been figured under the rubric of the monstrous⁹. A cultural fascination with the monster, the ‘anomalous’ being that breeches the boundaries of the human, is an all-too-familiar manifestation of cultural anxiety about corporeal difference, including racial difference. Indeed, theorists such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson have provided compelling histories of the way racialized bodies, normal in their own cultural milieu, have been displayed alongside disabled bodies in freakshows, sideshows and carnivals as concrete manifestations of the ‘monstrous’¹⁰. Umiumare and Leong’s works test the idea that the monstrous may be a productive site for deconstructing ideological assumptions about difference, and destabilizing the centrality of the white, male self in symbolic systems, that has emerged in the wake of Mary Russo’s work on the grotesque¹¹ and Donna Haraway’s work on the cyborg¹². What interests me is the risk inherent in Umiumare and Leong’s mobilization of the monstrous as a means of commenting on the way they, as Asian-Australians, are Othered. In their work, engagement across cultures, and engagement with the characters, images and theatrical conventions Australian audiences associate with Asia, is complex, complicated and conflicted. These artists are not interested in the abstract, aestheticized engagement with ‘Asianness’ as a means of enriching Australia’s theatrical vocabulary that Lo has called a “happy hybridity.”¹³ They are not, in other words, interested in what Lo calls ‘thin’ form of cosmopolitan interculturalism¹⁴ that presents a mix-and-match fusions of diverse cultural influences mainly for their aesthetic qualities. Instead, their work tends to be characterized by unresolvable conflicts and confusions, foregoing integration in favour of the disjunctive tensions Fensham and Eckersall call dis/orientations¹⁵. It does, however, invoke images of Asian-Australians as exotic, erotic or alien. There is, therefore, a risk that spectators, confronted with the more or less recognisable stereotypes Umiumare and Leong use to construct images of their own Otherness, will misrecognise these images as part of the phenomenon they are trying to

⁹ Rosi Braidotti, “Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Differences,” in Janet Price and Margaret Shildrick eds. *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 290-301, 292.

¹⁰ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Introduction: From Wonder to Error – A Genealogy of Freak Discourse,” in Rosemarie Garland-Thompson ed. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 1-19.

¹¹ Mary Russo, “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory,” in Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury eds. *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 319-36.

¹² Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991).

¹³ Jacqueline Lo, “Beyond Happy Hybridity: Performing Asian-Australian identities,” in Ien Ang and Mandy Thomas eds. *Alter/Asians: Asian? Australian Identities in Art, Media and Popular Culture* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 2000) 152-68

¹⁴ Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, 8-9. See also Rachel Fensham and Peter Eckersall, 5.

¹⁵ Ibid. 11.

challenge. In this paper, I draw on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of faciality to unpack the ways in which Umiumare and Leong's mobilization of the many monstrous 'faces' of the other is, in fact, a complex theatrical strategy designed to destabilize some of the most entrenched stereotypes about Asia and Asianness.

Yumi Umiumare



fig. 1: Matt Crosby, Yumi Umiumare, and Ben Rogan in *DasSHOKU Hora!!* (Photo by Jeff Busby, courtesy of Yumi Umiumare)

Yumi Umiumare¹⁶ is a Japanese-born butoh artist who migrated to Australia in 1993, having previously worked with well-known Japanese companies like Dai Rakudakan. While Umiumare's work is wide-ranging, butoh has always been always an important influence for her. She has developed and delivered her own distinct style of butoh through lectures, workshops, and performances – including her most renowned piece, the Greenroom Award winning *Fleeting Moments* (1998) – over many years of practice. Since moving to Australia, Umiumare has also had the opportunity to perform with noted Australian playwrights like John Romeril, and with noted Australian theatre and dance companies like NYID, Chunky Move, Handspan Theatre, and Wulin Dance Theatre. Much of Umiumare's work concentrates on her own feelings of confusion at

¹⁶ Umiumare's website is located at <http://www.yumi.com.au>.

being marginalized as a body that no longer belongs in Australia or Japan¹⁷, and the complex combination of pain, trauma and strangely liberating power this Other status can bring. It finds power in that “confused state”¹⁸, in confronting audiences with that confused state, and with the prejudices they hold. Umiumare works in multiple forms. Some of Umiumare’s works deploy the intense, imagistic playful butoh of Ono Kazuo to portray an abstract sense of the Oriental. Amongst the most well-known of these are *Kagome* (1993/1998), a piece which brings a lilting soundscape of shakuhachi music together with moving images of a caged woman escaping from and to her childhood, and the *How Could You Even Begin to Understand* series (1996-2010), more than 20 powerful, poignant works characterized by simple, spontaneous and poetic images and lively interaction between Umiumare and her collaborators. In *How Could You Even Begin to Understand? Version 9-12* (2001), for instance, she and dancer Tony Yap embody the abstract yin-yang principles to explore perceptions of Asianness in Australia¹⁹. In other works, Umiumare deploys the more theatricalised butoh of Dai Rakudakan, comedy, and shock cabaret to satirize stereotypes of Japan. In these cabaret style works Umiumare combines her dancerly skill and discipline with comic, playful characteristics, and satirisations of characters – everything from Hello Kitty to Ninjas – to confront herself and her spectators with some intensely personal identity issues. *DasShoku Hora!!*, for instance, is the third in a series of these sort of works Umiumare has been producing since 1995²⁰ – Umiumare calls this the DasSHOKU series or DasSHOKU repertoire, which includes *Tokyo DasSHOKU Girl*, *DasSHOKU Cultivations!*, *DasSHOKU Hora!!*, with another work, *DasSHOKU SHAKE* in planning for 2012. *DasShoku Hora!!* is about figurations of Japanese culture in the Australian cultural imaginary. The title plays on the English and Japanese connotations of the term *DasShoku Hora!!*. In Japanese, Umiumare says, “dashoku means to bleach, to strip away the superficial colour”, while “...‘hora’ means ‘look out’²¹. In *DasShoku Hora!!*, Umiumare mobilizes ‘horrific’ aspects of Japanese culture via what Georgina Boucher has called a series of monstrously hybridized, fetishized images of Japanese femininity²², hoping to strip the gloss from these stereotypes. The performance takes place in a cabaret setting, spectators sitting around a slightly raised stage, at tables, drinking liquor, in a smoky environment. Umiumare and her two male collaborators, Ben Rogan and Matt Crosby, emerge from Neanderthal beginnings to become

¹⁷ Georgina Boucher, “Yumi Umiumare,” *Peril: Asian-Australian Arts and Culture Magazine*, 3 (June 2007), <http://www.peril.com.au/edition3/yumi-umiumare> (accessed December 30, 2010).

¹⁸ Yumi Umiumare cited in Georgina Boucher.

¹⁹ Yumi Umiumare and Tony Yap, *How Could You Even Begin to Understand? Version 9-12?* in *Mixed Metaphor* [Program] (Dancehouse: Melbourne, 2001), 7.

²⁰ Jo Roberts, “Which Way Reality from Here?,” *The Age*, 1 November 2005, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/arts/which-way-reality-from-here/2005/10/31/1130720476172.html> (accessed December 30, 2010).

²¹ Yumi Umiumare cited in Jo Roberts.

²² Georgina Boucher.

contemporary characters – complete with help from spectators to get the men’s pants on. Umiumare then morphs her way through a variety of increasingly monstrous personae, from Yamamba, the mountain-hag of Japanese mythology who gives birth to two cave creatures who grow to be scientists and businessmen, to a spray-tanned blonde GANGURO girl, to Mujina, the faceless girl of a Japanese legend (or faceless woman from old Japanese stories/Kwaidan), to a cute, pink, sexualized Hello Kitty schoolgirl. Rogan and Crosby morph around her, from her babies, to businessmen, to scientists involved in strange experiments. The personae are exaggerated, surreal, and their presence is punctuated by stories, myths, urban legends and a constant questioning – ‘What the fuck?’, as the surfer-girl puts it – to call attention to the stereotype of Japan as exotic, consumerist, high tech and high stress²³. *DasShoku Hora!!* concludes with a darker, more sexualized incarnation of the Hello Kitty schoolgirl character dancing in a mirror box, descending to devour a cake, becoming a dribbling creature of horror. Things start to come apart, and the gloss has indeed been stripped from the stereotypes as this decayed, deviant and monstrous creature concludes the performance. The combination of the comic, political force of cabaret, and the discomfoting shock of butoh, is far from the ‘happy hybridity’ theorists like Lo have criticized in some Australian cross-cultural works. Instead, as Boucher argues, the combination confuses spectators, confronting them with the instabilities that characterise Umiumare’s hybridized subjectivity²⁴. And, of course, doing so in the productively live, intimate and at times interactive space of this cabaret-style performance, so both Umiumare’s and their own identities are in question.

Owen Leong



fig. 2: Owen Leong (courtesy of Owen Leong)

²³ Hilary Crampton, “DasShoku Hora!!,” *The Age*, 5 November 2005, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/arts-reviews/dasshoku-hora/2005/11/04/1130823401668.html> (accessed December 30, 2010)

²⁴ Georgina Boucher.

Owen Leong²⁵ is a Melbourne-based visual and video artist. His work also continually references the experience of being an Australian born Chinese-Australian, “visuali[sing] the structures that mark out bodies through race, gender and colour”²⁶. In particular, Leong’s work references the structures that mark out Asian Australian bodies as different in a country that, whatever its history, has, as Richards noted, held a ‘white’ self-perception. Leong uses sculpture, installation, video, and what he characterises as ‘simple’ performative gestures to comment on “the physical, social and cultural framing”²⁷ of his body, and “blur the boundaries between real and fictional selves”²⁸. Leong imag(in)es his body in a vulnerable, animal, abject and alien, yet also queerly beautiful, way. In *Second Skin* (Video, 2004), Leong manipulates his face as honey drips down onto his head in slow motion, the colours and movements metaphorically referencing relationships between ‘white’ and ‘yellow’. In *AUTOEvacuation* (Video, 2005), he laps up milk with a set of white antlers on his head, face scared, hands bandaged²⁹. Leong looks fragile, almost childlike, and strangely alien in a work in which the simple gestures of his hands and tongue become strangely mesmerising and evocative. In *Milk Ring* (Video, 2005), Leong stands in a ring dripping milk down around him, his hands struggling to free themselves of what he calls a ‘puzzle’ of honey³⁰, the “yellow” liquid again a reference to the racist structures of “white” and “yellow” that define, contain, constrain and complicate the status of his body in Australian culture. In *White Noise* (Video, 2006), Leong is absolutely alien. His skin is scarred, his slitted eyes are completely black, making him look like the common stereotype of an extraterrestrial being, and a small surgical tube enters his nostrils. There is a strong sense of Otherness, and, in this work in particular, the surgical tubes also seem to invoke very clearly the idea that Otherness is construct, created by the hands of man, an intervention in the body that both defines it and demonstrates its fragility. In *Hole* (Print, 2006) and *Bleed* (Print, 2007), a truncated body – presumably Leong’s – appears in historical dress, white funnels held to black holes in the surface. As these descriptions demonstrate, the hybrid, alien and abject is the common theme throughout Leong’s work³¹. The staging of his body – the light, shade and noise of the scenes, the symbols such as antlers, wounds, honey

²⁵ Leong’s website is located at <http://www.owenleong.com>.

²⁶ Owen Leong, “About,” *Owen Leong* [Website], www.owenleong.com/artist_statement.html (accessed December 30, 2010).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Barbara Bolt, “Queer Spill,” *RealTime*, 72 (April/May 2006), 26.

³⁰ Naomi Gall, “The Taste of Race,” *Incubate Magazine*, 1 (Winter 2008), 52.

³¹ Owen Leong cited in “Man of Milk and Honey,” *BBC > Entertainment > Arts, Film and Culture*, 27 June 2007, http://www.bbc.co.uk/manchester/content/articles/2006/06/23/230606_owen_leong_feature.shtml (accessed December 30, 2010); Ella Barclay, “I Link, Therefore I Am,” *RealTime*, 66 (April/May 2005), 32.

and milk³² - metaphorically marks him as alien and monstrous. The yellow and white of the honey and milk, represents the racial categorization of his body as 'yellow' in a 'white' Australian world³³. The antlers represent the racial categorisation of his body as somehow less than human in a racist Australian culture. The black eyes of the alien take this to an extreme. The experience of viewing the works together, in an exhibition in a gallery space where a number of Leong's works were displayed, gives a clear sense of how Leong is harnessing diverse, powerful and provocative images in service of his stated aim of investigating, metaphorically, the social and cultural structures that mark out bodies and give them meanings. Throughout the works, Leong's body appears as a permeable, manipulable and often fragile, fractured or traumatized surface. Holes, hollows and fissures appear³⁴. Substances seep into, out of and onto him. They trap him. They are infectious, transmutative – nurturing fluids turned malignant. The works stage a struggle across the surface of Leong's body, turning him into something animal, alien and in-between. They speak to the inscription of Leong's Asian-Australian body, the sticky, shifting web of signifiers in which this inscription occurs, and the ways in which this web of signification locks him into or liberates him from the identity formations laid across his skin. The aim throughout, Leong says, is to “explore corporeal encoding and the disruption of hierarchical systems to elicit the diffuse, and often invisible, power of white hegemony.”³⁵ The works aim “to move beyond racial constructs”³⁶, and, Leong emphasises the fact that his own Chinese-Australian body is the surface across which the struggle to escape these constructs is staged³⁷.

Risky Remobilizations

Umiumare and Leong's representations of Asian-Australianness as monstrous are a product of culturally constructed perceptions of Asianness in an Australian context. Culturally constructed perceptions of Asianness that have real impact on the lives of those who are Othered by them, who become subject to the shame, humiliation and trauma of racial discrimination – often on top of other traumas associated with leaving one's home, family and country to start a new life. Both artists mobilize images of the monstrous to contest the ways in which race historically been displayed on the 'stages' of popular and political culture – in this case, Australian popular and political culture. Clearly, Umiumare and Leong are not the only artists who have used the trope of the monstrous to construct confrontational, politicized commentaries the way bodies marked by race, gender or disability are cast as 'Other' in the Western

³² Owen Leong, “About.”

³³ Naomi Gall, 52.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Owen Leong cited in “Man of Milk and Honey.”

³⁷ Ibid.

cultural imaginary. As I have noted elsewhere³⁸, engagement with the monstrous characterises the work of many artists attempting to destabilize stereotypes, particularly artists working in a performance art paradigm. For instance, American performance artists Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Coco Fusco mobilize images of the racialized body as monstrous in works like *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...*, and English performance artist Mat Fraser mobilizes images of the disabled body as monstrous in works like *Sealboy: Freak*. In my earlier examinations of these remobilizations of the monstrous by artists marked by race or by disability, I have argued that these works adopt strategies similar to the works by women artists Rebecca Schneider examines in *The Explicit Body in Performance*³⁹. In that article, I examine Gomez-Pena and Fusco's *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit*, in which they place themselves in a cage surrounded by objects associated with Latin America as well as modern cultural detritus as part of a mock museum-style display of the 'savage', and Fraser's performances at Coney Island's *Sideshow by the Seashore* and later in *Sealboy:Freak* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, in which he remobilizes the historical figure of sideshow performer Stanley Berent who shared his condition of phocomelia or foreshortened arms. In such works, I argue, the artists make the identities Western culture assigns them all to "explicit", in Schneider's terms, by replaying them across their own bodies. Their strategy for artistic and political subversion is a brave one, because there is a chance spectators may see the 'savage' or the 'freak' in front of them as part of the phenomenon the artists are trying to challenge. I demonstrate, however, that the artists forestall this via commentary, counterposition, and productively live performances spaces, allowing spectators to both replay and reflect on their habitual reactions to Other bodies, and creating the conditions of possibility for what the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas would call an ethical face-to-face encounter with the Other. In their works, Umiumare and Leong replay the monstrous, animal, alien characteristics attributed to Asian-Australians across their own Asian-Australian bodies. In doing so, they too replay their culturally assigned identities "with a voluble, 'in your face' vengeance"⁴⁰, "a *literal* vengeance"⁴¹. Identity constructs are exaggerated, estranged, lifted out of their enabling cultural milieu. By making entrenched stereotypes of Asianness explicit⁴², Umiumare and Leong encourage spectators to *both* reinhabit *and* reflect on the specific, culturally prescribed ways of seeing that render Asians Other in the eyes of 'white' Australia. They confront spectators with the fact that the images of Asian-Australians as monstrous Others that populate the Australian cultural imaginary are not natural.

³⁸ Bree Hadley, "Mobilising the Monster: Modern Disabled Performers' Manipulation of the Freakshow," *M/C Journal*, 11, 3 (July 2008), <http://www.journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewARTcile/47> (accessed December 30, 2010).

³⁹ Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 100.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 109

⁴² *Ibid.* 109

They are, rather, the product of a performative social process played out across the stages of popular culture, a process that inscribes racist ideologies across supposedly 'suitable' flesh, and a process in which the spectator's are themselves complicit.

Still, as Gilbert and Lo argue, "it is a risky strategy to stage racism, or any other kind of discrimination, on the assumption that audiences will naturally identify and deplore it"⁴³. The recognisability of the stereotypes, and the Asian-Australian bodies that stage them, may mean that spectators watching Umiumare and Leong's work fall back into the familiar habits of reception and recognition that constructed Asian-Australians as monstrous in the first place. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argue, the racist scopoc systems that characterise non-white bodies as monstrous operate according to a logic of recognition, similarity and sameness, rather than a logic of difference⁴⁴. They delineate "degrees of deviance"⁴⁵ from supposed bodily norms. As Braidotti, following Deleuze and Guattari, puts it, "a normally formed human being is the zero degree of monstrosity"⁴⁶. A (supposedly) non-normally formed human being is the tenth, twentieth or thirtieth degree of monstrosity. This means monsters are not always the ruin of representation, as Barbara Creed would have it⁴⁷. Encountering the many faces of the monstrous – whether in Umiumare and Leong's work, or in the pop cultural images and media the work is based on – can in fact draw spectators into performative (mis)recognitions that manage the difference of racially marked bodies by positioning them along a continuum that ultimately reconfirms the stability of the symbolic order, and the centrality of the white, male self in it⁴⁸. Monsters may be marginal, and liminal, but they are also structurally central to Western cultural logic, as symbolic mechanisms that allow the centre to define itself by comparison to its margins. Monsters give a sense of the centre, and the edges, of the world – which is perhaps why references to monsters of the "here be dragons" sort become prominent as Western colonisers formed a map of the much larger world technology such as ships made possible in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, and why artists like Leong and Umiumare mobilise them again in their critiques of relations between different bodies, people and cultures in a modern globalised world which bears the legacy of colonialism and the traumas it has wrought. When Umiumare and Leong mobilize the many faces of the monster, then, there is a risk that spectators won't find their way into a twin consciousness, where they are (mis)recognizing the Other as a monster, but, at the same time, recognizing their own complicity in this

⁴³ Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, 144.

⁴⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 178.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 178.

⁴⁶ Rose Braidotti, "Mothers, Monsters and Machines," in Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury eds. *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 59-79.

⁴⁷ Barbara Creed, *Phallic Panic: Film, Horror and the Primal Uncanny* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005), xvii.

⁴⁸ Bree Hadley.

cultural logic of (mis)recognition that constructs the monster as the Other by which we define ourselves in the first place.

Certainly, Umiumare and Leong understand that their work may be collapsed back into the culturally ordained images of Otherness they criticize. As Umiumare has put it, “[a]t the extreme edge our work as performers[,] our performing bodies[,] may be exoticised, orientalised and fetished”⁴⁹. This potential for reductive reading came out in responses to the erotic spectacle of Umiumare’s flesh in *DasShoku Hora!!*. In the performance, Umiumare dances in a swimsuit (shaking her body) and in short schoolgirl style skirts (giggling, flirting, and flipping her hems), and these movements are reminiscent of forms designed to titillate such as strip shows. As one blogger put it, “it was great to see Yumi and cohorts writing all over people in the front row, shoving their crotch in the[ir] face[s]”⁵⁰, a comment which seems to have appreciated the spectacle, voyeurism and desire in *DasShoku Hora* without necessarily acknowledging the cultural politics Umiumare is pointing to. “[T]he monstrous is portrayed with such glee and exuberance that you can’t help being infected”⁵¹ in this blogger’s view. Here, then, the banter, and the brash interactions with the audience, risked rendering Umiumare’s critique a reaffirmation of stereotype.

Umiumare and Leong negotiate this risky terrain – the spectator’s response to stereotypes remobilized in service of a subversive political agenda – via the distinctive destabilizing strategies and frames that characterise their work.

In *DasShoku Hora!!*, for instance, Umiumare counterposes figurations of her own Otherness as monstrous with commentary on the way the Japanese body is seen in the Australian cultural imaginary. This is seen in the ‘what the fuck?’ comments from the Ganjero girl, as she describes Japanese culture, and “urban myth” about the excesses of Japanese culture such as stories about children injuring themselves climbing fences trying to get in to school because so much face is lost by not being on time, proper and perfect.. This is also seen in the way fellow performers Matt Crosby and Ben Rogan relate to Umiumare’s monstrous feminine personae, as Neanderthals, mad scientists, businessmen and peep-show patrons. As Boucher argues, Crosby and Rogan address the Mountain-hag, and the Ganjero girl she later becomes, as a mother, and as an object of desire, enacting an Oedipal gaze that comes “to represent a colonialist, patriarchal desire to ‘know’ the ethnic female personae”⁵². In a sense, Boucher is correctly suggesting, these characters show us how we the spectators see Asians and Asianness. For Boucher, then, “[t]he inclusion of Australian bodies in *DasShoku Hora!!* Deliberately jars this Orientalist gaze by inviting the Australian

⁴⁹ Yumi Umiumare cited in Peter Eckersall, “What Can’t Be Seen Can Be Seen: Butoh, Politics and (Body) Play,” in Peta Tait ed., *Body Show/s: Australian Viewings of Live Performance* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 145-153, 148.

⁵⁰ Born Dancin’, “The Nerve! The Shock!,” in *Atmospheric Harmonies for Loners* [Website], November 2005, <http://atmosphericharmoniesforloners.blogspot.com> (accessed December 30, 2010)

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Georgina Boucher.

audience to also view 'itself' in relation to naturalised cultural binaries of Self and Other"⁵³. The in-the-round cabaret staging, in which Sake-drinking spectators see each other seeing, also adds to this staging of the spectatorial gaze.

Whilst Leong, as a visual and video artist, cannot incorporate live destabilizing strategies into his work, he, like Umiumare, displays a tendency to return to the face, the skin, and the surface, as a site for staging the encounter with the Other as monstrous. Leong's works all show a fascination with the signifiatory capacity of the face, the skin, and the flesh⁵⁴. Similarly, the transformations of the female face are, as Boucher suggests, "[t]he core theme"⁵⁵ in Umiumare's *Das:Shoku Hora!!*. Umiumare's and Leong's emphasis on the face reminds us how much emphasis Western culture places on the face, as the primary means by which we identify, recognise, interpret and relate to each other. It also reminds us of the fact that the part the face plays in identity, interrelations and relationships has seen it repeatedly analysed in sociology – for example, Erving Goffman's work on face, front, and the dramaturgy of self in social relationships – and co-opted as a concept, figure or metaphor in philosophical meditations on human relationships – from Emmanuel Levinas's characterisation of the face as the source of the Other's ethical demands on us, to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's characterisation of the face as a source of rupture in signifiatory systems. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari use the face as one of many metaphors for describing the structure of representational systems. They suggest that the face, as a series of black holes against a white surface, is what makes signification possible against a specific social field or background⁵⁶. It is the faciality machine that detects deviances from the norms that operate within that social field – dark holes, shadows and shadings in spaces where they should not, according to social norms, be found. Leong and Umiumare both enact what they describe as an emptying⁵⁷, or an extracting of colour from⁵⁸, the surface of the racialised face. They bring the outside, inscribed inside, back to the surface. They bleed or bleach out the fixed, solid shadows that give the surface its signifiatory power. They break out in holes in all the 'wrong' places – literally in Leong's work, and both literally and linguistically in Umiumare's work. They imbibe or bleed fluids and foods from bodily orifices in all the 'wrong' ways. But, because their works are based on an unending morphing from one shadow or stereotype into the next, they represent a meltdown of the signifiatory system of the face, rather than an essentialising manifestation of an inner self behind the socially constructed signifiatory framework of the face. The face, in the face-to-face encounter with Leong and Umiumare's work, is monstrous not just because it is abject or alien, but because it is in-between, battling the limits of signification, becoming. This encounter with a being that is always becoming

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Naomi Gall, 52.

⁵⁵ Georgina Boucher.

⁵⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 168-9.

⁵⁷ Owen Leong, "About."

⁵⁸ Yumi Umiumare cited in Jo Roberts.

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something else destabilizes the spectator's position, including the spectator's perception of the monstrously familiar face of stereotype manifest throughout Leong and Umiumare's work. It destabilizes the spectator's perception of the face as one thing that, as Boucher notes, is supposed to be a stable identifier in the intersubjective encounter⁵⁹. Spectators have to keep re-recognizing the face of the Other, again and again, and, in the process, re-recognizing the structure of reality Leong and Umiumare comment on in their work.

Umiumare and Leong insert the many monstrous faces of the Other between self and spectator to create a crisis of meaning. They manipulate recognizable iconography, performance modalities and media to stage their 'Self' – or, more specifically, the many 'monstrous' faces with which their Self is always already inscribed in the Australian cultural imaginary – for spectators. Critically, though, their meditation on the ever-morphing faces of the monster makes it difficult for spectators to simply reinhabit the scopic systems that render Asian-Australians Other without, at the same time, reflecting on the way these systems function. This, ultimately, underpins the power of the reclamation of the monstrous in Umiumare and Leong's politicized stagings of the Asian-Australian self. Umiumare and Leong's mobilization of the many faces of the 'monster' throws a spanner in the works of Deleuze and Guattari's faciality machine, using their own bodies to stage an unraveling of the signifiatory systems it supports, and, in the process, confronting spectators with their own complicity in the cultural and scopic logics that prompt Australians to see Asian-Australian bodies as Other. The traumas staged here are not historical narratives from which the present generation of white Australians can comfortably claim some distance. They are, rather, an enactment of and commentary on signifiatory conflicts and trauma from which no spectator can comfortably abdicate responsibility.



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⁵⁹ Georgina Boucher.