

When Traces Become Stories

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“Life is a perpetual to and fro, a dis/continuous releasing and absorbing of the self. Let her weave her story within their stories, her life amidst their lives.” – *Trinh T. Minh-ha*

“Stories bring us together, untold stories keep us apart.” – *Elif Shafak*

While London and most of world was in lockdown during the Covid-19 outbreak, I was gifted a short book by the British-Turkish novelist Elif Shafak: *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division*. The book was the perfect companion for those dark moments where divisions were exacerbated by enforced distancing. Individually and collectively, we felt deprived of agency over our own journeys. It was a time when we were locked in ourselves and locked out of our lives.

We are made of stories – those that have happened, those that are still happening at this moment in time and those that are shaped purely in our imagination through words, images, dreams and an endless sense of wonder about the world around us and how it works. Unvarnished truths, innermost reflections, fragments of memory, wounds unhealed. Not to be able to tell your story, to be silenced and shut out, therefore, is to be dehumanised. It strikes at your very existence; it makes you question your sanity, the validity of your version of events. It creates a profound, and existential anxiety in us.¹

Shafak’s words stayed with me. They resonated profoundly when I, later, joined a series of pilot workshops run by artist and researcher Lucy Orta at the beginning of 2020. *Traces: Stories of Migration* is a community project through which Orta and her collaborators brought together communities from across East London. These stories of personal or family migration are told through the artistic making of textiles; story cloths.

As the political ecology of migration in the UK has expanded into a hostile environment² where immigrants are denied access to work, housing, services, and education, and more generally exposed to discrimination and suspicion, *Traces: Stories of Migration* offers a space for people to share, recollect, give voice, and be heard. It is in the act of coming together. Here stories are experienced as a collective sense of shared history and are celebrated in their diversity.

Embroidery, stiches, crochet, ribbons, appliqué, all evoke a domestic and feminine environment that so quietly and yet so powerfully awakens a sense of belonging. A space to resist the hostile environment migrants are living within. To echo bell hooks, it is about ‘making home a community of resistance’³, while home is (dis-)placed, and reclaimed through shared



Traces: Stories of Migration, community workshops, 2021-2022.



journeys and shared stories, as reclaimed are the pieces that make up the story cloths.

Embroidery, stiches, crochet, ribbons, appliqué, all enable a new way of knowing – a way of holding what has been lost but is still present. They become a practice of listening to echoes, stories, imaginations, a practice of living with those stories, with “ghostly matters” as Avery F. Gordon has called them. The past and present inextricably intertwined, haunting us at every journey.

Traces: Stories of Migration thus become a journey in itself, a journey where fragments of memory take shape, voices are heard and in a collective sharing we, individually, make sense of who we are, where we come from and where we go.

Drawing on the tradition of the portrait yet subverting its historical significance and power relations between hierarchy and subordination, Lucy Orta’s response to and engagement with all the stories of migration take the shape of a meaningful ‘Community Portrait Gallery’. Here each portrait accurately reflects the singular personal trajectory through life, recognising the creative value of diversity through each persons’ lived experience. The process is collaborative: from the initial photograph taken, the translation into line drawing and pattern template, to the use of different textile and craft techniques. Each portrait is testimony of present lives and past stories. Layers of fabrics used by the artist to trace the features of each portrait and to capture their presence, are enriched in meaning by the inclusion of personal elements taken from the participant’s story cloths.

Lucy Orta’s portraits enshrine the traces of lives and loss, the traces of relations and resilience, and those traces must be honoured “because they provide a different sort of knowledge, a knowledge of ‘the things behind the things’”.⁴

1. Shafak, E (2020) *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division* London: Profile Books, p.9
 2. ‘Hostile Environment’ specifically refers to a set of policies introduced in 2012 by then-Home Secretary Theresa May, with the aim of making life unbearably difficult in the UK for those who cannot show the right paperwork. www.jcwi.org.uk/the-hostile-environment-explained
 3. hooks, b (1990) ‘Homeplace: a site of resistance’ in *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press, p.42
 4. Radway, J (2008) Foreword. In: Gordon, A. F., *Ghostly Matters. Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. (2nd edition) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. ix