



PROJECT MUSE®

The Sea Is Not a Highway: Performing Maritime Histories in
the Not-Quite-Global City

Ella Parry-Davies

Theatre Journal, Volume 71, Number 4, December 2019, pp. 437-453 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/746765>

The Sea Is Not a Highway: Performing Maritime Histories in the Not-Quite-Global City

Ella Parry-Davies

At the peak of the reconstruction that followed Lebanon's 1975–90 civil war, then Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri reportedly declared his vision for the nation to transform itself as the "Singapore of the Middle East."¹ During Hariri's premiership, a \$100-million investment in the Port of Beirut planned to return Lebanon to its role as a "leading eastern Mediterranean entrepôt," and the prime minister promised growing "cooperation between Lebanon and the American businessman."² Although this comparison may be surprising, Hariri's aphorism curiously reveals the related conditions and concerns for performance in Lebanon and Singapore, which, I suggest, are tied to the contested relationships that these disparate locations have with their respective seas.

Hariri's postwar regeneration concentrated disproportionately on the capital, Beirut, perhaps explaining the slippage between coastal nation and island city-state implied in his allusion to Singapore. Both small nations that obtained independence from European colonizers in the mid-twentieth century, Singapore and Lebanon are built around their ports and shaped by histories of mass migration, with multiethnic, multi-religious, and multilingual populations. At the time of Hariri's speech, Lebanon had recently emerged from a fifteen-year civil war, with illicit port traffic financing violent conflict under the

Ella Parry-Davies is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London. Her PhD was jointly funded by the National University of Singapore and King's College London. She is a BBC New Generation Thinker and an editor of Contemporary Theatre Review Interventions. She is a founding co-convenor of PSi's working group on Performance and Critical Social Praxis, and the research collective After Performance. Her work involves practice with collaborators in the UK, Lebanon, and the Philippines, including co-convening Beirut: Bodies in Public, a three-day program of public performance and research in Beirut in 2014.

I am grateful to generous readers, including Maria Delgado, Tony Fisher, Paul Rae, Jen Parker-Starbuck, E.J. Westlake, and *Theatre Journal's* anonymous reviewers and editorial team. Kéline Gotman and David Teh offered valuable insights into earlier work, and I thank the London Theatre Seminar for inviting me to deliver an early version of the essay. My thanks to Karine Wehbé for discussing her work with me over several years, and to colleagues at Esplanade Theatres on the Bay, the National Archives of Singapore, National Library Singapore, and the British Library for their kind assistance with archival materials and image permissions.

¹ Sam R. Hakim and Saad Andary, "The Lebanese Central Bank and the Treasury Bills Market," *Middle East Journal* 51, no. 2 (1997): 230–41.

² "Special Report on Shipping: Beirut Bounces Back from the Abyss," *Middle East Economic Digest*, March 27, 1992; Rafik Hariri, "On the Reconstruction of Lebanon: Achievements and Impediments," speech to the World Affairs Council, Los Angeles, December 18, 1996.

control of sectarian militias; elites such as Hariri were keen to brand the nation anew as a pivot-point in above-board transnational economic circuits. Conversely, capitalizing on its own *entrepôt* history and early preparation for containerized shipping as a regional transshipment “load centre,” Singapore by the 1990s was widely perceived as an exemplary “global city.”³ This term had in fact been used (and likely coined) by Singapore’s then Foreign Minister Sinnathamby Rajaratnam as early as 1972, the same year in which Singapore’s first container terminal opened at Tanjong Pagar. “The sea is all highway,” announced Rajaratnam in the same speech.⁴

That Rajaratnam would claim to have figuratively tarmacked the ocean at the very moment the term *global city* was born indicates both the importance of the sea to the making of a global city, and the ways in which the very discourse of the global would seek to disregard the sea’s materiality. As this essay will explore, their intimate relationships with planetary waters mean that Lebanon and Singapore are both *not-quite* and *more-than* global cities in Rajaratnam’s sense of the term. While the inconsistency is more glaring in the case of Lebanon (a nation that consists of rural areas and multiple urban centers), this in turn helps to reveal that Singapore also constitutes both less and more than the global city signifier can capture. The performed representations of the sea discussed in this essay pinpoint this discrepancy, demonstrating how, as the inconvenient reality of the coastal “global city,” the sea makes possible a specific critique of late capitalist discourses of globalization by insisting on material, embodied histories of maritime dwelling and travel.

Presaging the later work of theorists such as Saskia Sassen, Rajaratnam defines the global city by its prolific interconnectedness in a “network” of other global cities.⁵ The network functions coherently as a visual metaphor only when pictured from above, necessitating a level of abstraction from the lived conditions it schematizes—a reduction of the harbor to resemble the stock market, in Allan Sekula’s formulation.⁶ Yet (as Sassen would affirm) the network depicts transnational practices to which *material* connections over-, via and under-seas—not to mention “offshore”—are crucial.⁷ In Singapore’s case underpinned by the fast, cheap, and “nearly frictionless” technology of containerization, Rajaratnam’s statement reveals how, both materially and discursively, the networked global city paradoxically depends on the minimization, if not negation, of the sea’s contingency.⁸ Moreover, the network imaginary produces the *local* as globalization’s co-constitutive opposite, in many cases instrumentalizing performances of coastal and island “heritage” that symbolically resist globalization, even as they service it economically. As the art critic Lee Weng Choy states in his essay “Just What Is It That Makes the Term ‘Global-Local’ So Widely Cited, Yet So Annoying?”: “My problem with the term is that, for the most part, the global-local tensions it refers to are already subsumed by the logic of globalization and late capitalism. It

³ Christopher Airriess, “Export-Oriented Manufacturing and Container Transport in ASEAN,” *Geography* 78, no. 1 (1993): 32.

⁴ S. Rajaratnam, *Singapore: Global City* (Singapore: Ministry of Culture, 1972), 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*; Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: London, New York, Tokyo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), and “Introduction: Locating Cities on Global Circuits,” in *Global Networks, Linked Cities*, ed. Saskia Sassen (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁶ Allan Sekula, *Fish Story* (London: MACK, 2018), 12.

⁷ See John Urry, *Offshoring* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014).

⁸ Marc Levinson, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 4.

signifies the further penetration of global capitalism into the 'local,' then presents this 'local' as *authentic*."⁹

Drawing on six years' research and periods of living and working with artists in both locations, this essay will bring Singaporean and Lebanese performance works into dialogue, exploring what comes to light if we take seriously Hariri's assertion that there is something comparable about these very different nations at opposite extremes of the Asian continent. More specifically, I examine what this dialogue tells us about how performance might contest the role of the sea in coastal global cities of the late twentieth century. Both Singapore and Lebanon have been home to a range of artworks concerned with challenging instrumental narratives of maritime cultures and the (often detrimental) effects of global economies on the sea. However, this essay will focus more substantively on two pieces that work together to demonstrate the specific ideological critique that the sea makes possible in these settings: Kuo Pao Kun's play *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (1995), and Karine Wehbé's multimedia *Tabarja Beach* project (first exhibited in 2008). Although an unusual selection given their distinctive genres, themes, and chronologies, examining these works together serves to highlight the ways in which each explores speculative maritime prehistories that precede the global Singapore and Lebanon of the late twentieth century, and excavates the discourse of networked globality itself. Centralizing works from two non-EuroAmerican contexts, the juxtaposition calls into question Eurocentric teleologies of globalization, aiming to "displace a hyperreal Europe from the center toward which all historical imagination currently gravitates" and to undo the "catachresis" in which "[North] American knowledge production is equated to global knowledge production."¹⁰ *Global* and *local* are revealed as problematic and incomplete signifiers within both contexts.

At stake in both performances is a part-historical, part-imagined maritime experience that predates, and unsettles, the global city discourse from within. Crucially, these works make visible the specific critique that the sea and its representations might leverage. Kuo's and Wehbé's speculated prehistories do not "resist" the global through recourse to the local; rather, in looking to the sea as the well of personal and collective memory, each presents a fundamentally transcultural experience that both implicates and exceeds those categories. As in Diana Taylor's understanding of the term (which draws primarily on Indigenous and colonial relations in Latin America), the *transcultural* here indicates asymmetrical, multidirectional, and shifting patterns of "cultural transference": "rather than being oppositional or dialectical, [transculturation] circulates."¹¹ In these pieces, the sea is ambiguously remembered, powerfully affective, and semantically unstable—emphatically, it is *not* a highway.

The essay will most substantively address works from Singapore and Lebanon distinctly so as to offer sustained analyses and preserve attention to contextual specificities. One key comparator between Kuo's and Wehbé's pieces is worth forecasting,

⁹ Lee Weng Choy, "Just What Is It That Makes the Term 'Global-Local' So Widely Cited, Yet So Annoying?," in *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 12 (emphasis in original).

¹⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 45; Naoki Sakai and Hyon Joo Yoo, eds., "Introduction," in *The Trans-Pacific Imagination: Rethinking Boundary, Culture and Society* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2012), 34.

¹¹ Diana Taylor, "Transculturating Transculturation," *Performing Arts Journal* 13, no. 2 (1991): 93; 101 (emphasis in original).

however, since it is prismatic of the related ways in which these artists question discourses of globality. In both, the *ideal* inhabitants of the “global city” are present, yet only in partial and disembodied ways. In Wehbé’s *Tabarja Beach* project, “Jet Set” is the name of a now-derelict and dilapidated seaside nightclub, outside which women displaced by civil war stand around in incongruous party outfits. In Kuo’s *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, characters dressed in corporate office wear are never named, but are referred to by director Ong Keng Sen in the original production’s program as “Shentonites,” after Shenton Way in Singapore’s central business district.¹² Both the Shentonites and the Jet Set represent the elite international mobility of bodies and capital (notably, primarily associated with air travel). Yet both groups are incorporeal, the Jet Set alluded to only in the broken signage of a closed nightclub, and the Shentonites evoked through costume that is gradually shed during the performance. In contrast to this stand the artists’ intimately sensorial and affective presentations of the women who inhabit coastal resorts during wartime (for Wehbé), and the intensely depicted physical sensations of the eunuch admiral and his “descendants” (for Kuo). In both works, then, a global elite is dramaturgically displaced by bodies for whom maritime dwelling and travel is vividly corporeal and at times violent. This shared treatment of physicality grounds the lived realities that emerge through histories of the sea and coast in both Kuo’s and Wehbé’s works, and in so doing brings to light the abstracted, disembodied discourses of an iconic globality that can never, in fact, be realized.

Remembering the Indian Ocean

A 2012 exhibition guide to the work of Charles Lim Yi Yong, a Singaporean artist and sailor, reproduces a contemporaneous advertisement for the Singapore Navy:

We all take the sea for granted. But that wouldn’t be possible without the advanced naval technology that is deployed around our shores. Take the multi-function radar installed on our frigates. Conventional radar can only help with surveillance. Multi-function radar also controls the Aster anti-missile system and helps target aircraft and low-flying missiles. In combat, when every second counts, it makes all the difference.

But what’s the best thing about this radar? It makes sure you don’t even have to think about the sea. Ever.¹³

Reminding Singaporeans of the sea, only to assure them that (thanks to extensive militarization) they can continue to forget about it, this piece of state promotion constructs Singapore’s islandhood not through its relation to the sea, but in spite of it.

Both the navy’s advertisement and Rajaratnam’s highway metaphor reflect the state’s position that Singapore’s precarious economic success is contingent on transcending its small size and lack of geographic resources in an era of recent decolonization.¹⁴ A related emphasis on economic pragmatism through embracing globalization exists in tension with the defense of local and national identity—in Rajaratnam’s (pathologized) register, through producing “anti-bodies” and social “immunity” in order to

¹² Mok Wai Yin, “A Talk with Director Ong Keng Sen,” in *Programme: Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (Singapore, 1995).

¹³ Reproduced in David Teh, *Charles Lim’s Informatic Naturalism: Notes on SEA STATE 2* (Singapore: Future Perfect, 2012).

¹⁴ Paul Rae, “Singapore on Sea,” *Issue: Art Journal* 1 (2012): 46.

resist global influences.¹⁵ In response, a number of artists including Kuo have sought to explore critical maritime histories that imagine alternative postcolonial formations, to work against anthropocentrism, and to restore experiential relationships to the sea; in other words, to address the specific politics of the sea that have arisen within the context of the late-twentieth-century Singaporean global city.

Charles Lim's work responds to the militarization of the sea suggested by the navy's promotional poster above through exposing its logistics in *SEA STATE*, a series of ten "chapters" initiated in 2005 that take varied forms, including modified maps of regional waters and islands; photographs of Singapore's water border markers; a speculative three-dimensional print of the seabed around Singapore; and embodied works involving the presence of the artist, other participants, or objects in the sea. Some of *SEA STATE*'s chapters are more explicitly ecocritical in stance, including a filmic investigation of the Jurong Rock Caverns, an underground hydrocarbon storage facility that is broadly invisible to the Singaporean public at the same time as it is crucial in supporting Singapore's position within a transnational carbon economy (*SEA STATE 6: phase 1*, 2015). Other works addressing the (often-hidden) ecological impacts of the global city include Tan Zi Xi's *Plastic Ocean* (2016), which exhibits over 20,000 pieces of refuse found in the sea; and ila's *air dicincang tidak akan putus* (2017), a vitrine of flotsam surrounded by seawater that the artist collected while working with a fishing community in Tanjung Uma. The erasure of practices of fishing and boat-making are the focus of artists including Dennis Tan, who has worked with the *kolek*, a traditional Southeast Asian sailboat, since learning to build it in Indonesia's Riau Islands in 2015; and Zai Kuning, whose extended focus on the Malay archipelago's *orang laut* (sea people), beginning with a TheatreWorks residency in 2001, is similarly concerned with attending to overlooked practices of archipelagic life and has been realized through oral histories and the creation and exhibition of large boats. Kuning's work emphatically situates Singapore within the Malay archipelago, implicitly questioning national exceptionalism. Similarly, Ho Tzu Nyen's *Utama—Every Name in History is I* (2003) traces speculative histories of the Sumatran prince Sang Nila Utama, who is said to have named Singapore the "lion city" in the fourteenth century. This act has at times been reinscribed by histories that position the global city as a mechanism of pragmatic postcolonial survival, while paradoxically perpetuating imperial discourses of modernization that place Singapore in competition with its regional neighbors.

As is the case with Wehbé's *Tabarja Beach* project, Kuo's *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* was created from within the global city, but speculates a history that predates and complicates the discourses accompanying late-twentieth-century capitalism, and indeed questions the reliability of historicization itself. While *Descendants* shares thematic concerns with many of the works mentioned above, its extended dramaturgical exploration of maritime history makes it a particularly rich case study, which interweaves an affectively detailed (if part-fictionalized) personal account with a shared field of transcultural collective memory. In this work, the Indian Ocean affords a specific critique of the global city discourse that does not resort to the local, national, or even regional by opposition, but instead *circulates* on a planetary scale. Yet while Wehbé's recollections are situated on the eve of postwar Lebanon's 1990s reconstruction, Kuo reaches much further into the past to present a history of oceanic travel that predates

¹⁵ Rajaratnam, *Singapore*, 11.

European colonial figures such as Columbus and Magellan, and that comments critically on the discourses shaping collective memory in 1990s Singapore.

Kuo's *Descendants* was first produced by TheatreWorks at the Victoria Theatre in Singapore in 1995 in English, and its Mandarin restaging took place there two months later. Since then it has been regularly performed in Singapore and abroad, implying both its enduring relevance and importance in the canon of Singaporean playwriting. By the time of *Descendants'* 1995 production, Kuo was popularly considered the undisputed "Singapore theatre doyen," yet this belies a more controversial history.¹⁶ Earlier in his life, he made activist theatre and was detained without trial for alleged communist activities between 1976 and 1980 and stripped of his citizenship, such that when he was later awarded the state's Cultural Medallion in 1990, he was still effectively stateless.¹⁷ This contradiction is often explained through an interim conversion in Kuo's priorities away from politically radical theatre and toward what scholars C. J. W.-L. Wee and Lee Chee Keng have termed "humanistic work" concerned with the emphatically "multicultural" possibilities of "Singaporean theatre," a position that reconciles Kuo's later work with dominant histories of the multicultural nation-state.¹⁸ In Kuo's words, however, the detention was a "very deep education process [that] allowed us to purge a lot of illusions and unrealistic dreams," and it strengthened his critical commitment to challenging hegemonic narratives through theatre that is "reflective of the reality of life, of the people that you want to portray."¹⁹ Discrepancies between script and staging also suggest a more subversive reading of *Descendants*, with the opening monologue of one 1998 reprise by the original company adding that dreaming of the past is the only way "to stand up to . . . a place of insanity."²⁰

Descendants comprises sixteen short scenes, with the playtext providing no indication of character allocation, and the content shifting between dialogue, narration, history, and verse. Ambiguously, speakers dream, or imagine, that they are reincarnations, or descendants, of a real historical figure, the Ming dynasty Muslim Chinese seafarer Zheng He. The dates (1405–31) and destinations of Zheng He's voyages are recited in lists; legends and rumors about him are recounted; and scenes from his travels are described from the eunuch admiral's first-person perspective or in the style of eyewitness accounts. Many of the stories that make up this composition are disputed among the speakers; various forms of history and testimony thereby prove to be unreliable.

Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral remembers the sea and Singapore's oceanic cultural circulations through staging a maritime history to which European colonialism and late-twentieth-century globalization are historically subsequent and thematically peripheral. Panduranga, Quilon, Cochin, Ormuz, al-Ahsa, Aden, Mecca, and Mogadishu are listed in the play among other place names (some anachronistic), a reminder that the Indian

¹⁶ Koh Boon Pin, "Productions Bring Cultural History to the Fore," *Straits Times*, May 15, 1995.

¹⁷ K. S. Sidhu, "The Red Plot . . ." *Straits Times*, May 28, 1976.

¹⁸ C. J. W.-L. Wee and Lee Chee Keng, eds., "Breaking Through Walls and Visioning Beyond: Kuo Pao Kun Beyond the Margins," in *Two Plays by Kuo Pao Kun* (Singapore: SNP Editions, 2003), 13, 17, 22 (emphasis in original). On multiculturalism in Singapore, see Daniel P. S. Goh and Philip Holden, "Postcoloniality, Race and Multiculturalism," in *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore*, ed. Daniel P. S. Goh et al. (London: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁹ Kuo Pao Kun, qtd. in Jacqueline Lo, "Theatre in Singapore: An Interview with Kuo Pao Kun," *Australasian Drama Studies* 23 (1993): 141.

²⁰ Kuo Pao Kun, *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (video recording), directed by Ong Keng Sen, August 21–22, 1998, Hamburg International Summer / TheatreWorks.

Ocean connects Singapore not only to the Malay Peninsula, but also to parts of South Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa. These are regions whose material participation in Singapore's globality—for example, through precarious migrant labor—has typically been marginalized in state narratives of Singapore's transition “from Third World to First” (one title in its longest-serving prime minister's memoirs).²¹ Positioning diverse intra-Asian and Afro-Asian transculturation as a critical foundation for Singaporean collective memory, the play complicates discourses of the global city whose consummation in Singapore coincided with its staging in the 1990s. In Taylor's terms, this is a way of “linking the peripheries without reinforcing the center.”²² I read the play as a creative ally of scholarly projects that seek to disrupt the discourse of the abstract and disembodied global network with material histories of oceanic circulation, seeking to “provincialize” Eurocentric teleologies of globality through restoring memories of world cultural systems “before European hegemony.”²³

The way in which *Descendants* operates as a history play is elusive and counters other examples in which the state has staged performances of local and national “heritage” that reconcile national identity with capital mobility. In his speech at the 600th anniversary celebration of Zheng He's first voyage, then Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo emphasized Singapore's claim to the Zheng He history insofar as it legitimated the nation's status as an exemplar of multicultural “globalization,” elsewhere describing the Indian Ocean as the “original internet.”²⁴ Yet Yeo obscures the imperialist implications of Zheng He's expeditions (alongside his comment that British colonizer Stamford Raffles “created” Singapore in 1819). Zheng He provides an affirmative historical precedent for Singapore's twenty-first-century economic and diplomatic globality. On the other hand, a number of scholars have argued that Zheng He's missions endeavored to secure the empire's military control of the Indian Ocean, and the glowing history of the eunuch's missions is explicitly questioned in the play and in contemporaneous reviews.²⁵ “Had he really done nothing evil or untoward as a trusted lieutenant of a powerful emperor well-known for his cruel and scheming nature?” one speaker asks.²⁶ Such questions are speculative rather than conclusively answered. Coupled with the play's competing, unreliable forms of narrative, they underscore the uncertainty of Zheng He's history and question its explanatory power as a basis for global Singapore's heritage.

²¹ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: the Singapore Story, 1965–2000* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

²² Taylor, “Transculturating Transculturation,” 102.

²³ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Janet Lippman Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System, A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

²⁴ George Yeo, “Speech by George Yeo, Minister for Foreign Affairs, at the Official Launch of the Singapore Zheng He 600th Anniversary Celebrations on 30 June 2005,” available at <https://www1.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2005/06/Speech-by-George-Yeo-Minister-for-Foreign-Affairs-at-the-Official-Launch-of-the-Singapore-Zheng-He-6>; and “Speech by George Yeo, Minister for Foreign Affairs at the Launch of the ‘Rihlah-Arabs in Southeast Asia’ Exhibition and Conference on 10 April 2010,” available at https://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/overseasmission/cairo/press_statements_speeches/embassy-news-and-press-releases/2010/201004/press_201004_1.html.

²⁵ Geoffrey Wade, “The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment,” *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series* 31 (2004): 1–27; Ho Sheo Be, “New Version of Play to Be Staged,” *Straits Times*, 28 July 1995.

²⁶ Kuo Pao Kun, *Two Plays by Kuo Pao Kun: Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral and The Spirits Play*, ed. C. J. W.-L. Wee and Chee Keng Lee (Singapore: SNP Editions, 2003), 51.

The paradox in the play's title also forecasts its unstable memory work. A eunuch, by definition, cannot have descendants, and paradigms of inheritance and heritage erode through the characters' inconsistent relationships to Zheng He. During the opening sequence, the speaker(s) describe disturbing dreams of Zheng He at sea, and the growing sense that "the more I discover, the more I am convinced that we were related, closely related—so closely related that I had to be a descendant of the eunuch admiral."²⁷ Later, however, they recount a dream in which vivid descriptions of the ocean frame the sense that "it began to dawn on me . . . that actually one of my former lives was none other than that of the great Admiral Zheng He himself."²⁸ The characters commune with Zheng He when finding themselves *at sea*, both physically and cognitively. Affectively charged dream states, simile, metaphor, allegory, first- and third-person narration, substitution, and reincarnation all emerge at various moments of the play as entangled mnemonic acts, layered over the undetermined multi-roling, such that the relationship between the contemporary and fifteenth-century "characters" is subjective, slippery, and at times paradoxical. Through these vivid yet unstable depictions, the ocean sustains a form of memory not containable by linear paradigms of national "heritage."

The play addresses the eunuch admiral's ocean voyages not only in symbolic but also in *material*, even profane ways. Its treatment of castration has often been read as an allegorical comment on the state of the nation (primarily concerning the cultural sacrifices that Singaporeans have made for the nation's economic success), a presentist hypothesis that privileges the symbolic over the material and the national over the transcultural.²⁹ Yet alongside graphic first-person accounts of the young Zheng He's painful castration at the hands of his tearful father (for the purposes of securing employment as a eunuch), interspersed scenes detail increasingly insidious methods of sterilization, which range from amputation to pleasurable testicular massages given by a specially trained nanny. It is my argument that the play's emphatically corporeal (even grotesque) treatment of castration—and of the severed penis as a physical object (which, for example, was dried and deep-fried in oil to prevent it from rotting)—emphasizes material implications that should not be overlooked by an allegorical reading; that is, castration is also presented as a historical bodily practice and condition of maritime labor.

As such, speakers debate in vernacular conversation whether the eunuchs would have taken their severed penises to sea—"Come on, lah, be practical," would there be space on the ship?—concluding that while the penises were important "national treasures," their everyday objecthood meant they would be placed alongside the "food, drinks, medicines, laundry, . . . tools and sundry supplements" required to maintain daily life on the ocean.³⁰ This logistical speculation as to whether Zheng He carried his amputated penis around with him until his death causes the speakers to reflect on "how temporary and transient the power and authority of these people occupying

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁹ See Rachel Leng, "Kuo Pao Kun's Zheng He Legend and Multicultural Encounters in Singapore," *Southeast Asian Studies* 5, no. 2 (2016): 287–303; and Susan Philip, "Kuo Pao Kun's *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* and the Myth of Modern Singapore," in *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social, and Political Perspectives*, ed. Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal (New York: Routledge, 2010).

³⁰ Kuo, *Two Plays by Kuo Pao Kun*, 42.

high positions really are”: the idea that such a person could “end up so pathetically” (that is, buried without his penis in place) puncturing his symbolic transcendence as a figure of national prowess.³¹ Power, then, is dependent on physical infrastructure.

Castration also fulfills a material requirement for socially reproductive labor—namely, attending “to the nobility’s affairs such as eating, drinking, dressing, cleaning, pissing, shitting, and of course, copulating.”³² Characters narrate a myth that the severed penises were preserved in boxes in the Imperial Palace in Beijing, dangling from the ceiling with their height corresponding to the eunuch’s seniority. Yet the tone of the dialogue becomes playful as one “Shentonite” announces, “Now I’d like to share a funny thought with you,” commenting that the “network” of boxes resembles “the organizational chart of our companies or departments.” “What I mean is,” suggests the speaker, “don’t we look like a network of pricks?”³³ Productions such as Jeff Chen’s 2015 staging, which featured copious multicolored balloons blown into phallic shapes, emphasize that the prick has an almost ridiculous materiality in the play, grounding the conditions for global “networks” and (phallocentric) transnational power structures in the everyday concerns of corporate and socially reproductive labor, bodily functions, and histories of eunuch seafaring that sustained the growth of empire³⁴ (fig. 1).

As we will also see from Wehbé’s work, exploring ways in which the sea exceeds and problematizes the global city engenders (and indeed necessitates) attention to the material, embodied, and transcultural aspects of maritime histories. In both pieces, however, such histories emerge through subjective, affectively detailed narratives that telescope onto broader cultural memories not coterminous with national “heritage.” As *Descendants* recounts in verse, “Everyone’s a parent to the orphan / Every god’s a protector to the wanderer / Every land and sky and water is home.”³⁵ Kuo sees in Singaporean cultural memory an open-ended struggle for islandhood, rather than the teleological coming-to-being of a modern nation-state or a postcolonial global city. As he writes elsewhere, “the Chinese word for crisis is *wei ji*—‘wei’ means danger and ‘ji’ means opportunity.” While *crisis* is “the most sensitive and probably the most important word in Singapore, one that the country’s leaders have been reminding us of day in and day out,” for Kuo it results less in moral panic than in an opportunity to activate transcultural identifications:

The Government asserts that, “To preserve peace and prosperity among a motley of uprooted people with diverse cultures, languages, religions and communal interests, the arts must not be allowed to disturb the country’s fragile equilibrium.” The more enlightened Theatre artists think the reverse is true—that to consolidate a unity of pluralistic people, it is necessary to explore the complexity of life in greater depth and in greater vigor.³⁶

This state narrative of fragility works alongside the conjoined discourses of the global and local, whereby local heritage must develop “antibodies” to resist the effects of

³¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

³² *Ibid.*, 45.

³³ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁴ Kuo Pao Kun, *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, directed by Jeff Chen, April 30–May 3, 2015, Esplanade Theatres on the Bay, Singapore.

³⁵ Kuo, *Two Plays by Kuo Pao Kun*, 66.

³⁶ Kuo Pao Kun, “Uprooted and Searching,” in *Drama, Culture and Empowerment: The IDEA Dialogues*, ed. John O’Toole and Kate Donelan (Brisbane: IDEA Publications, 1996), 172.



Figure 1. A scene from *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (2015), presented by Esplanade Theatres on the Bay, Singapore, as part of *The Studios: Fifty*. (Photo: Tuckys Photography, courtesy of Esplanade.)

globalization, and island identity is sustained through the militarization of the sea. But for Kuo, boundarying local or national identity, either in support of or resistance to the global, is not at stake. Rather, *Descendants* insists on a material, oceanic condition that complicates the abstractions upon which both constructions rely.

Mediterranean Ideas on Tabarja Beach

If the materiality of sea travel underscores the transcultural experience articulated by Kun, it is equally important for many artists engaging with representations of the sea in postwar Lebanon. As Hariri's reference to Lebanon as the "Singapore of the Middle East" demonstrated, a nation modeled on the emblematic global city was key to the investments and practices of the postwar government, supported by international financial institutions (such as the World Bank) that saw a "window of opportunity" for privatization and economic growth amenable to global markets.³⁷ Daniel Goh's description of 1990s urban planning in Singapore is remarkably consonant within the context of Beirut: "Historical buildings and precincts were conserved to give character to the global city and adapted for new commercial uses catering to the new transnational elites," contradictions synchronized by spectacles of local heritage.³⁸ Histories of the Mediterranean Sea were reduced and recuperated into promises of a regenerated capitalist economy. Nowhere was this more explicit than in the reconstruction of coastal

³⁷ Najib Hourani, "Transnational Pathways and Politico-Economic Power: Globalisation and the Lebanese Civil War," *Geopolitics* 15, no. 2 (2010): 291.

³⁸ Daniel P. S. Goh, "Walking the Global City: The Politics of Rhythm and Memory in Singapore," *Space and Culture* 17, no. 1 (2014): 17.

downtown Beirut, under the slogan of the “Ancient City of the Future,” which couched the economics of new multinational shopping districts and privately held real estate in a mercantile past dating back 5,000 years to Phoenician seafarers.³⁹ This Phoenician reference, and the limited (yet heavily advertised) preservation of ancient archaeology, demonstrate what has been described as a civilizationalist discourse founded on the “Mediterranean idea” of seafaring links, to colonial France in particular.⁴⁰ This discourse bypassed the more recent role of the coast and militia-operated ports as the key sites of illicit trade,⁴¹ and co-opted the sea and coastline into a dialectic resembling Singaporean state narratives, whereby selective maritime histories underpin carefully delimited articulations of the local and national, while at the same time optimizing transnational capital mobility.

For artists working in the years since the early 1990s, the Mediterranean Sea has offered various stimuli through which to grapple with this postwar transition. A closely linked generation of artists practicing in the immediate postwar years has been concerned with the politics of memory and the archive, particularly in the wake of a 1991 Amnesty Law that foreclosed the legal accountability of militia leaders and was part of a generalized state attempt to deliberately forget the events of the civil war.⁴² Walid Raad’s *Secrets in the Open Sea* (1994), consisting of six large prints of different shades of blue, was produced as part of the fictionalized archive of the Atlas Group. Its foreword stated that the prints had been found buried in the rubble of the downtown Beirut area and sent by the group for “technical analysis” in laboratories, revealing “small black and white latent images” of people subsequently identified to have been found dead in the Mediterranean during the war. The piece plays on the imagery of a sea that is at once open and closed, insofar as its opaque blues conceal the archives of violence. An urban presence that (unlike much of Beirut’s built fabric) endured the war, the sea becomes symbolic of the physical and discursive burial of wartime loss, a concern that Raad shares with many of his peers.

As the effects of postwar state practices materialized, however, artists working in later years became concerned with the privatization of the coastline, the pollution of the sea through waste dumping, and—in the wake of the post-2011 conflict in Syria—the significance of the Mediterranean as a passage for refugees. Dictaphone Group’s *This Sea Is Mine* (2013) meticulously documented the ownership and private exploitation of the coastline, producing a research booklet, soundwalk, and series of live performances that took audience members on a journey in a fishing boat along the coastline. Further site-specific performances took place as part of the *Beirut: Bodies in Public* program the following year, including Dima el Mabsout’s *Blatt el Bahr* (2014), a participatory performance on the seafront corniche in which passers-by were invited to build a wall from concrete and cardboard boxes blocking access to the sea. The site-specificity of these works underscores the material ways in which public relationships to the sea

³⁹ Saree Makdisi, “Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Soli-dere,” *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (1997): 660–705.

⁴⁰ Asher Kaufman, “Phoenicianism: The Formation of an Identity in Lebanon in 1920,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 1 (2001): 173–94.

⁴¹ Reinoud Leenders, *Spoils of Truce: Corruption and State-Building in Postwar Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

⁴² Sarah Rogers, “Out of History: Postwar Art in Beirut,” *Art Journal* 66, no. 2 (2007): 8–20. On the Amnesty Law, see Craig Larkin, *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: Remembering and Forgetting the Past* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012).

have been compromised. *A Ticket to Atlantis* (2016), a collaboration by Lebanese artist Lina Issa and Syrian theatre-maker Meyar Alaksan that took place on Ajram Beach, addressed the experiences of contemporary refugees, imagined through the utopian idea of the lost island city of Atlantis.

Of the same generation as Raad and yet coming to prominence as an artist only in the late 2000s, Wehbé straddles the concerns of these groups. Her extended project on the history of Lebanon's coastal resorts weaves the contemporary implications of Lebanon's postwar transition with a distinctly subjective representation of the coast that draws on Wehbé's own memories of the war. The series of works, which I collate under the title *Tabarja Beach*, was first exhibited at the Beirut Art Centre in 2008 as a set of photographs of documented performances, and realized more recently through a short film, *Summer 91* (with Nadim Tabet, 2014), and a book of essays and archival materials titled *Stop Here for Happy Holiday* (2018). The works point toward both the transnational economics of war and its aftermaths, and the transcultural expressions of lives lived during these periods. As such, the *Tabarja Beach* project stages a way of remembering the sea that neither upholds the discourse of the global nor resorts to localized nostalgia in a way that would dialectically "resist" it. Like Kuo's *Descendants*, *Tabarja Beach* offers a part-fictionalized prehistory of the global city, here recalling Lebanese coastal spaces on the eve of their postwar transitions. In so doing, it makes visible the particular critique that the sea affords within this context, as a passageway that necessarily exceeds the local and national and yet disrupts the discourse of the global "highway" with its material contingency and (as these works attest) affective and cultural saturation. While in its format and genre Wehbé's work may seem to have more in common with that of Singaporean artists like Lim or Ho, like *Descendants*, *Tabarja Beach* both attends to the sea's instrumentalization in the face of the global city, and restores its material and affective textures to view through depicting a speculative, subjective recollection that telescopes onto a shared field of collective memory.

In the photograph *Tabarja Beach 1: Pool* (2008), a document of one of Wehbé's first performative reenactments, two women sit beside a swimming pool (fig. 2). One leans back on her hands in a blue 1980s one-piece bathing suit and dark glasses, looking directly at the camera. The other, in red, with red painted nails, looks across the pool, her eyes half-closed, with a half-smile, more relaxed, her arms resting across her knees. She listens to music on a cassette player, a stack of tapes on the ground next to her. The warmth of the women's bodies and the bright red bathing suit stand out against the pale blues and grays in the scene behind them and the pool's bleak geometry. The stark juxtaposition between the relaxed, sensuous women and the dereliction of the space gives force to its formal oppositions of blues and reds, curves and straight lines, action and emptiness. The rusting parasol frames are skeletal; the sea and the sky are gray. The tiles of the swimming pool are cracked and dirty, and the pool holds nothing but debris, dust, an empty water bottle. The image resembles a strange negative of brightly colored tourist brochures for the Tabarja Beach resort of decades before, where smiling, swimsuit-clad women lounge on "the most luminous bay in the world" and enjoy "delicious French cuisine" served with "genuine traditional Lebanese hospitality."⁴³

⁴³ Brochure reproduced in Karine Wehbé, *Stop Here for Happy Holiday* (Beirut: Sharjah Art Foundation, 2017), 140.



Figure 2. Kariné Wehbé, *Tabarja Beach 1: Pool* (2008).

The striking theatricality of this image points toward the ways in which Wehbé's images both invite and challenge a similar gaze to that constructed by the scintillating brochures produced for Anglo- and Francophone tourists. The theatrical quality of the image alerts us to its self-reflexivity, a knowing comment on the false promise of local authenticity. Taken in 2008, *Pool* is not an archival photograph of the wartime everyday, but documentation of the artist's later reenactment of her wartime experiences. Wehbé appears in the image (in the blue bathing suit), which positions her authorial role not in taking the photo, but in its *mise en scène*. This is the case for all of the reenactment images, and in my view is crucial in articulating their critical positionality. On the one hand, the photographic medium evokes a canon of images of almost-nude women's bodies at leisure, associated with historic *odalisque* painting as well as the ongoing fetishization of Arab women's bodies. On the other, Wehbé seems to draw on the aesthetic specificity of performance, since in placing herself within the staged photo, she insists on looking back at the lens (and by extension the viewer) both literally and figuratively, evoking feminist and postcolonial interrogations of the Orientalist gaze. The theatricality of the reenactment embeds a certain alienation effect in the images, the performer commenting self-reflexively on her own act of representation. In *Pool*, this is signaled by the composition: the diagonal positioning of the women to each other and to the pool resembles conventional proscenium arch staging, and the perspectival lines traced in the parasols, the border of the pool, its dark blue rows of tiles, and the contour of Mount Lebanon in the distance draw the eye toward what could be a shower cubicle, but looks more like a doorway to nowhere, a misplaced scenery flat.

Further, if the *Tabarja Beach* images refer to the history of the civil war, the ruination of the resort would have been consciously misrepresentative to any viewer unfamiliar with its history. In fact, during the war, resorts like Tabarja Beach were built and inhabited prolifically, as wealthier Maronite Christian communities sought protection in resorts built along the Keserwen region coastline north of Beirut, which was under the control of Christian militias. Developers backed by militias took advantage of the public domain of the coastline and illegally privatized access to the beaches.⁴⁴ During the war, amid violent displacement and the national breakdown of public services, the resorts were thriving, self-sufficient enclaves, with water wells and electricity generators, supermarkets, nightclubs, and beauticians. Wehbé, who lived in Paris for most of the war, visited cousins who lived in a resort a year-round, for over a decade.⁴⁵ In the winter of 2008, when this photograph was taken, the Tabarja Beach resort lay abandoned, with more desirable destinations now built downtown as part of the postwar regeneration of Beirut overseen by Hariri.

Through this theatricalized chronological ambiguity, *Pool* undermines ruins' promise of access to local history and trauma—what Laurie Beth Clark has termed the “congruence of content to context.”⁴⁶ Here, the teleology of ruination is almost exactly reversed: the desolate pool is a result of postwar regeneration, while the sunbathing women index the era of conflict. Moreover, neither period is depicted as the ground for simply localized experiences, but is instead shaped by the transnational movement of bodies, capital, and goods. The coastal hotel resort is a particularly relevant focus for Wehbé's work, metonymic of both the servicing and regulation of transnational traffic through tourism and business, and iconic of the mid-century cosmopolitanism that led Beirut to be branded the “Switzerland of the Middle East” and the “Paris de l’Orient,” yet that was undergirded by extreme economic disparity that formed one of the key conditions for civil war.⁴⁷ Holiday resorts such as Tabarja Beach also anticipated gated apartments that have proliferated in Lebanon since the reconstruction of the 1990s, a construction industry buoyed by international investment. In this climate, the privatization of access to the sea has been a particularly important terrain for artist and activist practices (such as those of Dictaphone Group and Dima el Mabsout described above), with the sea and the coast holding an especially charged resonance as potentially communal spaces menaced by gentrification. This resonance saturates the images, even as Wehbé discloses her own participation in the prehistory of such an economy.

While resorts like Tabarja Beach were putatively self-contained, protected spaces during the war, their porosity has constant presence in Wehbé's work, such that their boundaries are in constant tension with the breaches afforded by the sea itself as well as the transnational routes of traffic that financed the war, and also characterized by the experiences of its refugees. In another photo from the series, the swimming pool characters reappear at night, in mini-skirts and high heels, outside the now-dilapidated

⁴⁴Georg Glasze and Abdallah Alkhayyal, “Gated Housing Estates in the Arab World: Case Studies in Lebanon and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia,” *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 29 (2002): 327–30.

⁴⁵Karine Wehbé, personal interview with the author, October 12, 2016.

⁴⁶Laurie Beth Clark, “Ruined Landscapes and Residual Architecture,” *Performance Research* 20, no. 3 (2015): 87; see also Ella Parry-Davies, “Stage Managing Ruins in Lebanon’s Borderlands,” in *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Politics*, ed. Peter Eckersall and Helena Grehan (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019).

⁴⁷Sara Fregonese, “Between a Refuge and a Battleground: Beirut’s Discrepant Cosmopolitanisms,” *Geographical Review* 102, no. 3 (2012): 316–36.

entrance of Jet Set nightclub, whose advertisements announced, in English, “If you are a jetsetter, the Jet Set nightclub is a must.”⁴⁸ A number of the club’s clientele (including the artist’s own family) would have been economically privileged in relative terms, able to leave Lebanon during the war to live as refugees abroad. From Paris, Wehbé dreamed of Lebanon and her summer visits, as the fragment of a letter she presumably sent to a friend or cousin reproduced in *Stop Here for Happy Holiday* describes.⁴⁹ Yet “jet set” connotes the desirability of travel in and for itself, jarring in this case—as the dereliction in this image of the nightclub reminds us—with the violent restriction of movement within Lebanon and forced displacement outside of it. Like the “Shentonites” of *Descendants*, the jet-setters are only spectrally present (referenced here in name alone) and eclipsed by the palpable realities of characters for whom transnational mobility is involuntary. The disembodied, abstract symbol of global networks of travel—and the connotations of wealth, regeneration, and capital mobility represented by the jet-setters and Hariri’s global city—are punctured by the material realities of where and how certain bodies can (and cannot) move.

In language recalling Raad’s *Secrets of the Open Sea*, Wehbé reflects that when visiting the resorts in her teenage years, the sea “felt dangerous with jagged rocks, pollution and being a dumping ground for weapons and bodies. Threatening like the war, it held within it the unknown.”⁵⁰ *Summer 91* opens with the reported discovery of a corpse washed up on shore where the children of the resort were playing, a man apparently killed by members of the Syrian regime who, by 1991, were occupying Lebanon. “What could be more normal?” asks the narrator. “We’d been killing each other for fifteen years.”⁵¹ The narrator is an adolescent girl named Yasmina, a fictional character whose narrative overlaps with the women in Wehbé’s photos and some of the artist’s own biography. References to the war outside of the resort repeatedly infiltrate its boundaries and are woven into Yasmina’s personal recollections, situating a personal and gendered experience at the center of the geopolitical landscape. “I remember there was a lot of blood,” Yasmina recounts of 1991. The blood is not only associated with the war, however, but also with losing her virginity with Tarek, a young man living in one of the chalets. The film follows a teenage love triangle between Yasmina, her friend Amira, and Tarek, whose father is eventually arrested in the family chalet due to his involvement in trafficking weapons—an incursion of illicit and violent transnational economies into the apparently protected, serene architecture of the resort. The film’s plot is backgrounded by the lucrative trade of drugs and armaments abroad during the war, insinuating that the resort is itself financed by this industry and the militias profiting from it. In Yasmina’s narration, this context is subordinated to her first sexual experience, in the alcohol-fueled aftermath of the father’s abduction: the small stain of blood on the white sheet, around which these geopolitics are mapped. Embodied and gendered experiences are central to how the coastal resort is remembered and depicted. Neither are local nor static, but tethered to travel and trade. As in the case of *Descendants*, bodily experiences exceed both an abstract *global* and an essentialist *local*, instead indexing the logistics, relationships, objects and infrastructures, and forms of violence, labor, care, and sex that constitute specific histories of sea and coastal habitation.

⁴⁸ Advertisement reproduced in Wehbé, *Stop Here for Happy Holiday*, 48.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 120–21.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵¹ Karine Wehbé and Nadim Tabet, *Summer 91*, short film, Lebanon, 2014.

If in Wehbé's work women's experiences are crucibles of the circulations afforded by the sea, the traffic associated with the imagistic representation of female bodies is also a concern in my reading of her work. Captured between memories of civil conflict and a world of racialized beauty norms, the charismatic portraits of slim, epilated, and made-up women in *Summer 91*, *Pool*, and *Jet Set*—photographed in the style of Hollywood celebrities and European tourist brochures—complicate supportive feminist readings of the work. Clearly, the compelling glamour of the photos is inseparable from the legacy of an objectifying Orientalist gaze, and equally from the precarious position that the women inhabit in their relation to civil war and its aftermaths. Enlivened by a feminist perspective, it is tempting to seek some indication of resilience to conflict and displacement or resistance to transnational, racialized norms of femininity.

Studies of women's leisure practices in Lebanon, such as Laleh Khalili's ethnographic work with Palestinian women in coastal resorts, have similarly grappled with critical approaches to such practices and their representation. Khalili's analysis carefully negotiates varied understandings of leisure practices as constituting Lacanian *jouissance*—social safety valves, capitalist false consciousness, or within her ethnographic context, convivial activities that nonetheless reinforce piety and social propriety.⁵² Cognizant of their very different socioreligious settings, we might conclude with Khalili that “these pleasurable practices do not have to be acts of resistance for them to be meaningful or necessary,” especially given the militarized connotations of that term.⁵³ Wehbé's images also are portrayals of “homosocial conviviality,” or women's friendships, “of placing oneself within a collective and feeling—however fleetingly—a life lived in common.”⁵⁴ Crucially, this conviviality is not so much about resisting transnational traffic—material or aesthetic—as it is about a culturally polyvalent history connected to postcoloniality, tourism, illicit trade, refugeehood, and return. It is lived through a relationship to the Mediterranean Sea that is both intimate and estranged, desirous and securitized, personal and geopolitical.

Conclusion: Peripheralizing the North Atlantic

As an artist, to engage the sea or ocean as a source of cultural memory is to engage embodied histories of travel tied to the limitations and mobilities of planetary bodies of water. It is therefore inevitably to explore encounters that exceed and complicate teleologies of the modern nation-state and late capitalist globalization, tied as these are to territorial boundaries and network imaginaries that frequently privilege Eurocentric histories and neocolonial world configurations. At the level of scholarly methodology, to engage a dialogue between contexts that take waters other than the North Atlantic or North Mediterranean as a frame of reference echoes this peripheralizing of Euro-American-dominated worldviews. As a European, it would be disingenuous to position my work among scholarly movements that seek to provincialize the North Atlantic in favor of intra-Asian, Afro-Asian, Indian Ocean, or other comparative projects.⁵⁵ Yet

⁵² Laleh Khalili, “The Politics of Pleasure: Promenading on the Corniche and Beachgoing,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 4 (2016): 583–600.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 584.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 592.

⁵⁵ Examples include Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); and Moorthy and Jamal, eds., *Indian Ocean Studies*.

in juxtaposing Lebanese and Singaporean works, I hope to allow the transculturalisms of Kuo's and Wehbé's works to recur in an analytic project allied to articulating resonances (and dissonances) among non-Euro-American locations, artworks, and intellectual archives.

In the cases of Singapore and Lebanon, which are positioned geographically at opposite extremes of the Asian continent, this might speak specifically to Kuan-Hsing Chen's argument for Asia to be understood as a de-imperial conceptual method as well as an area of study. For Chen, "using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other's points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt."⁵⁶ Although Chen does not substantively include western Asia within this context, his invitation to construct Asia as a strategic imaginary raises generative questions about the possibility of expanding and deepening a continental frame of reference that might be explored through further multi-sited work in theatre and performance scholarship; and, in this case, is underpinned not only by a continental landmass, but by attention to the sea and the transculturalism on which it insists.⁵⁷ Further work stands to go beyond the affordances of analytic frameworks devised through North Atlantic histories and performance canons.

For both Kuo and Wehbé, the 1990s represented a period of economic transnationalism that was often presented in Lebanon and Singapore through a teleology of capitalist expansion and progression predicated on the promise of the global city. Here, a claim to the resistive authenticity of the local is asserted in opposition to globalization, even while spectacles of coastal and island heritage operate alongside and through capital mobility. In restoring the sea to the (not-quite) global city, both *Descendants of the Eunuuch Admiral* and the *Tabarja Beach* project are reminders of longer, thicker material histories of transculturation that are not reliant upon the global/local binary and do not necessarily invite us to identify resistance in their politics. Rather than rigid cultural identities canalized through bounded locality or nationhood, these works attest to the embodied, material, and imaginative circulations of the sea.

⁵⁶ Chen, *Asia as Method*, 212.

⁵⁷ For an exceptional reference to Iraq, see *ibid.*, 16.