

Chapter Two: The Colonising Gaze

Slow Boat to China

...Sometimes you suffocate when you think of the past; a life that never was, flashing up in sepia. Memory which is creamy-yellow, cracked; composed of protogallic acid, protosulphate of iron, potassium cyanide. Let's not get too technical. Not right now. It makes for too much exposure. Still in the dark, you remember Shanghai...Like this story. Like the way everything in history is always wrapped in a tissue; of words, of memories, of lies. Dancing. Now that's another matter. You have to have infinite patience with that. Time and timing. Grace and desire. Swaying back and forth like the tide until something is washed up; something always washed up. Shanghai-dancing...To cast a line from an old spool: it is the attainment of disorientation and instability...It is hard to track my father down. He stayed at this hotel once...the Cathay on the Bund. Brian Castro, *Shanghai Dancing*, 2003.¹



Figure 11a. Serge Ermoll and His Orchestra, the Cathay Hotel, Shanghai, China, circa 1930

...the new book demands the new writer. Ink-stand and goose-quill are dead...The printed sheet transcends space and time. The printed sheet, the infinity of the book, must be transcended...

*El Lissitzky*²

¹ Brian Castro, *Shanghai Dancing*, Giramondo Publishing, Australia, 2003, p3-6.

² El Lissitzky, "The Book: The Electro-Library, Topology of Typography", *Merz*, No. 4, Hanover, July 1923, in *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, Thames and Hudson, Great Britain, 1992.

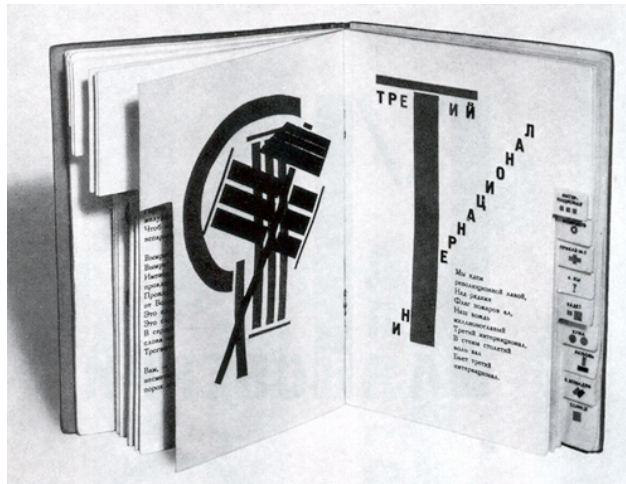


Figure 11b. Constructivist Mayakovsky's *For The Voice*, Soviet Russian poetry to be spoken³

My slow boat to China began with chance discoveries and curiosities which found their way into my writing and the production, methodology and theoretical concerns involved in creating an interactive multimedia work and articulating the negotiations involved in representation of ethnicity, gender and identity. This project of image making has another ideological agenda: to interrogate the "... colonial constructions of racial, cultural, and geographic difference...(examined) ...through the channels of photographic production and consumption."⁴ The parallel discourse weaving its thread through this creative work and writing is to make visible the construction of identity as a fragile relationship between observers and observed. The colonising/ dominant gaze conceives of the marginalised ethnicity of the subject as both racial inferior and object of fascination.⁵ In the famous words of Jean-Paul Sartre:

The picturesque has its origins in war and a refusal to understand the enemy: our enlightenment about Asia actually came to us first from irritated missionaries and from soldiers. Later came travellers – traders and tourists – who are soldiers that have cooled off. Pillaging is called shopping...the basic attitude has not changed...the aristocratic pleasure of counting differences is savoured. 'I cut my hair, he plaits

³ From El Lissitzky op cit p95.

⁴ (Eds) Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson, *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, Routledge, London, 2002, p3.

⁵ Hight and Sampson op cit p1.

his...he uses chopsticks; I write with a goose quill, he draws characters with a paintbrush...”⁶

My paintbrush/ stylus is electronic and my canvas/ stage is networked, the objective is to interrogate these polemics through the production of an interactive creative digital text. In using new media to represent my own subjective ethno-cultural identity, as image-maker I am disrupting the subject/ object dichotomy, even if playfully. Simultaneously, by articulating my own hybrid *masala*⁷ mix, I am attempting to reveal the construction of racial stereotypes as a cultural, social and political fabrication.⁸ Inside this inter-textual work, fascination with the ‘spectacle’ of the Other is manipulated – through fetishisation and repetition where

...The image of the colonial Other becomes a trope of desire for the Western viewer...through repetitive, fetishistic dissemination of stereotypes, the colonized subject becomes “mummified”...⁹

In this artful game, the player/participant is encouraged to engage with a program that makes visible the artifice of representation.

Historically, the representation of the marginal can be traced back to essentialising “scientific” recording methods of physical anthropology, especially the hierarchical categorization of human specimens, to the popular commercial formats of collection and display: *cartes-de-visite*, tourist postcards, photograph albums, photographically illustrated books, and magazine advertisements... [pervasively used for the] symbolic and scientific uses of photography for the verification and justification of colonial rule, [addressing] the complex ways in which photographs assist in the construction of a colonial culture.¹⁰

blackBOX reflects on the construction of Nina’s hybrid East/West identity, through virtual classical Indian dance pieces, her father’s stories of growing up in Shanghai, Russian jazz music, and the modal

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, “From One China to Another”, Preface to “D’une Chine à l’autre”, by Henri Cartier-Bresson and Jean-Paul Sartre, Editions Robert Delpire, 1954 in, *Colonialism and Neo-Colonialism*, Routledge, London, 2001, p2

⁷ *masala* a Hindi Indian word denoting spice mix, having culinary usage.

⁸ (Eds) Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson, *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, Routledge, London, 2002, p3.

⁹ (Eds) Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson, *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, Routledge, London, 2002, p6.

¹⁰ (Eds) Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, Routledge, London, 2002, p2.

improvisational influences (*taximia*) that she experiences in fragments of *Rembetika* Greek blues music.

Some years ago I had the task of packing away my grandparent's possessions after their death in Punchbowl, Sydney. Overwhelmed by the idea of sifting through his father and mother's personal effects, my father Serge Ermoll Jr asked me to empty the house of family objects. In the process I discovered many valuable documents, musical scores that my composer grandfather had written, letters, portraits, family photographs and objects from their temporary home Shanghai, China.



Figure 12. Sergei and Xenia Ermolaeff on a city bus
Shanghai, China, circa 1930s

Shanghai had always conjured many emotions for me while growing up. It was an idealised space in my grandparent's eyes and many stories were passed down to me as a child about the metropolis, the struggle to survive and the ultimate expulsion. My grandparents were fortunate to obtain passage on the *Chan Sha* ship¹¹ to Australia with sponsorship through the International Refugee Organisation in 1950. It transported my grandfather Sergei Ermolaeff, his wife Xenia and their son Serge Jr (my father) via Hong Kong to Sydney.

¹¹ *Australia AdLib*, *Chan Sha*, Interview with Serge Ermoll Jr. by Jon Rose, Australian Broadcasting Corporation <http://www.abc.net.au/arts/adlib/stories/s877113.htm> [accessed 20 February 2005]

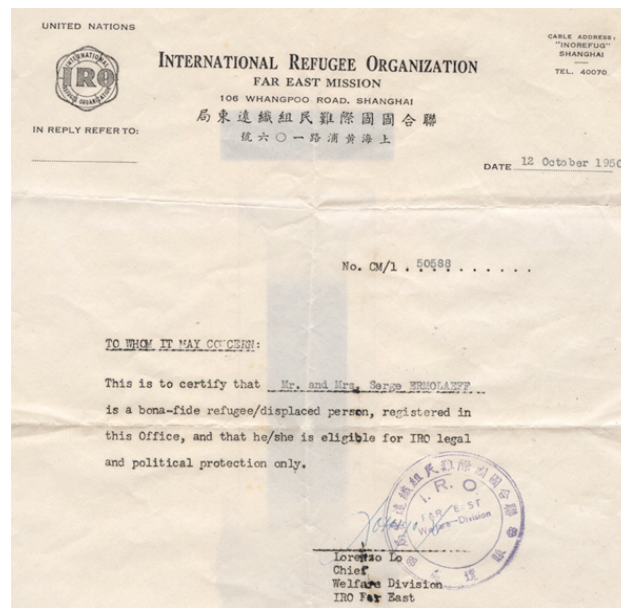


Figure 13. International Refugee Organisation Far East Mission (IRO) document granting Mr and Mrs Sergei Ermolaeff and son eligibility for legal and political protection as refugees, Shanghai, China, 1950

As I sifted through my grandparent's personal effects, photographs and documents, I realised that the stories I heard growing up were not the wild ramblings of senile refugees, who had been one too many times in and out of mental institutions. Xenia had received electro-shock therapy for depression following her arrival in Australia and Sergei had also been admitted to Callan Park Hospital (now known as the Rozelle Hospital), Sydney for depression. Rather, these vivid memories painted a picture of pre-revolutionary Shanghai. My grandfather's musical scores took on a more abstract patina, offering a window into a larger picture of twentieth century revolution and the quasi-colonial outpost of the International Settlement and concessions of Shanghai in China.¹²

¹² Discussion of Russian Jewish refugees in the International Settlement Shanghai bringing Western music to China, in the Kofman family story, *Menorah of Fang Bang Lu* online documentary (Andrew Jakubowicz, writer/producer, and Tatiana Pentes, multimedia design)
<http://www.cts01.hss.uts.edu.au/ShanghaiSite/rpath/rgetting/rgetting.htm>
 [accessed 10 July 2005]



Figure 14a. Russian from Shanghai - Sergei Ermolaeff Snr collage Sydney, Australia, c1980s

A personal collage on the wall of Sergei's Punchbowl home consisted of a photograph of Sergei with a cut out picture of Generalissimo Chiang Kai Chek pasted on to his heart. As an elderly man he claimed to have played with Whitey Smith's band at Chiang Kai Chek's wedding to Mei-Lie Soong.¹³ The piecing together of many old photographs from his Shanghai days became, in his old age, a means of expressing his displacement from China, which was a direct result of the communist revolution. Chiang Kai Shek represented the government prior to this displacement and this personal collage reveals Sergei's political inclinations.

For me, it was at that moment that Sergei's music and pre-revolutionary Chinese pop music became powerful articulations of these wider historical events, a Chinese modernity that was suppressed and resurfaced in contemporary times.¹⁴ I didn't know in what form or medium

¹³ Whitey Smith with C.L. McDermott, *I Didn't Make a Million*, Manila, 1956, p51-52. and *Tales of Old Shanghai*, www.earnshaw.com/shanghai-ed-india/tales/t-wedding.htm [accessed 10 July 2005]

¹⁴ "The Russian revolution sent thousands of White Russians in flight to China. In musical matters...the Russians were demonstrably less racist than most of the treaty port Caucasians. While the most impoverished of this group scandalized other Europeans by working as bodyguards and prostitutes for the Chinese, others supported themselves as musicians. White Russian bands played in Shanghai, Harbin, Qingdao. More classically minded players gave piano or violin lessons to young bourgeois Chinese When the

I wanted to represent this story; however, a discovery that coincided with my computer based art studies at University pointed the way.

At the University of Sydney Library, I chanced upon a book entitled *Shanghai: A Century of Change In Photographs*¹⁵. An uncanny event occurred, I opened the book and staring from its pages was a portrait of my grandfather and his orchestra pictured circa 1930 at the Majestic Hotel, Shanghai. I also found a copy of this photograph in Captain V.D. Jiganoff's *Russians in Shanghai*, 1936. At a later date, I traced the reproduction of this photograph to its original, which I discovered in my grandfather's possessions. The presence of this photograph underscored the historical fact that the Majestic Hotel was demolished after the revolution and no longer exists. Haunting the colonial hotel ballrooms, entertaining the foreigners, a foreigner himself, Manchurian Chinese born Russian, this photograph of my grandfather Sergei seemed part ethnographic relic and part Eastern Hollywood publicity still.



Figure 14b. Sergei Ermolaev, permit to drive an automobile in the French Concession, Shanghai, China, 20 October 1930

Another fortuitous event occurred in this journey. A friend and colleague of my parents gave me a book entitled *Sky High To Shanghai*

Shanghai conservatory was established in the 1920s, several Russians joined its faculty.” In Richard Curt Kraus, *Pianos and Politics in China: middle class ambitions and the struggle over western music*, Oxford University Press, 1989, p5.

¹⁵ Lynn Pan, *SHANGHAI: A Century of Change in Photographs 1843-1949*, Hai-Feng Publishing Co, Hong Kong, 1996.

by Frank Clune, an account of his Oriental travels in the Spring of 1938, when he visited Tokyo, Japan, Harbin, Manchuria and Shanghai, China. My friend had stumbled upon this book in a second hand bookshop and opened the pages directly to read this passage:

I salved Christian conscience by handing out a few *sen* [to the White Russian beggar] before entering the bright lights and blare of Serge and His Music Masters, who were hitting up Hot Cha Cha, with red-hot rhythm. If Jimmy Bendrodt was up this way, I'm sure he'd have grabbed Serge and His Music Masters for a season in Sydney. The Fantaisie Cabaret has a fame which goes back to the dramatic days of 1905, when the tsarist officers of high degree wickedly waltzed and merrily mazurka'd here with cosmopolitan *demi-mondes* while the defenders of Port Arthur waited in vain for the relief that came not. The cabaret is a large hall with tables surrounding the dancing floor to cater for cabareteers. No need to feel lonely here; a score of taxi-dancers are available...their fee for a dance is whatever you like to give them...Olga...This cultivated girl, and hundreds like her in Harbin, are at their wit's end to know how to sustain the fading courage of their hearts...The only difference she said between White and red Russians is that one has a passport and one has a soul...The cabaret got merrier and merrier. But I got more and more unhappy as Olga unfolded her tale of tragedy. Serge's Hot Cha Cha band hit up the rhythm and a singer with a splendid tenor voice made the Russian rafters rattle.¹⁶



Figure 15a. Sergei Ermolaeff and His Orchestra, The Majestic Hotel, Shanghai, China, circa 1930

My father told me that my grandmother Xenia had made her way to Shanghai via Harbin, with her three sisters from Moscow in the early 1920s, to find a husband. Sergei and Xenia met in a nightclub; there is a family story that she was a dancer or singer there. Thus *dancing* began to

¹⁶ Frank Clune, *Sky High to Shanghai*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1948, p197 –199.

connote for me a means of survival, performing, and a way of making a living. The ballroom of my imagination was becoming a space of economic exchange.



Figure 15b. Russian Taxi Dancers from General Jiganoff's, *The Russian of Shanghai*¹⁷

These vestiges of material history form an archive tracing the arrival of western modernity in China. Leo Ou-Fan Lee traces this “flowering of a new urban culture in China” in his publication *Shanghai Modern*¹⁸. Lee does this by investigating modern Chinese popular literature, film advertising, urban spaces, architecture, and fashion. He analyses the dialectics creating a unique Chinese modern culture, a melting pot of foreign influences of the west in the International Settlement of Shanghai, along with the impact of Chinese intelligentsia, commercialism, and traditional Chinese political and social culture. My grandfather Sergei's jazz orchestra contributed to this modern culture. Sergei; Chinese born and ethnically Russian, possessed no passport and was legally a displaced person, a liminal space occupied by many in those times.

¹⁷ Mr Sokolsky's Ballet, in Captain V.D. Jiganoff, *Russians in Shanghai*, (private publication). 1936, p272.

¹⁸ Leo Ou-Fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China 1930-1945*, Harvard University press, Cambridge, MAA, 1999.

