

Seeking Asylum in *The Cassette Shop*

Performing, Receiving, and Circulating Magical Futures

Asif Majid



Whose future matters? Which ones get to be staged? And perhaps more crucially, which ones get to be imagined? These are the questions that animated a devised and applied theatre project that I facilitated with Washington, DC–based asylum seekers, henceforth the Storytellers, from 2021–23. The process resulted in the April 2023 world premiere of *The Cassette Shop*, an original production based on the Storytellers’ lived experiences, collaboratively created characters, and future imaginings. Indeed, imagined magical futures were an essential part of both the devising process and the production itself, delicately moving the Storytellers between their present realities and what they imagined their lives could be.¹ This process raised important questions: 1) what

1. Invoking magic in theatre tends to elicit questions or criticisms of escapism and dreaminess. However, there are different ways that this did or did not occur for the Storytellers, particularly through their own reflections on and assessments of the process.

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was the role of the magical or imagined future in *The Cassette Shop* as a production; 2) how did *The Cassette Shop* perform those futures, how were they received, and how did they circulate; and 3) what does it mean to frame the position of the asylum seeker as a future-looking, rather than past-escaping, experience?

As a playwright and deviser, I was charged by Theatre Prometheus, an all-volunteer and primarily white theatre organization in Washington, DC, to facilitate a process with the Storytellers. My own position as a Muslim American child of immigrants also came into relief at key moments in the process, as did my position as a community- and practice-based researcher. I thus look at this process from the inside, not as someone who was invited in to be a fly on the wall of a rehearsal room as other researchers have (see McAuley 1998, 2012), but rather as someone who was commissioned to make theatre and now takes a critical eye to that work. That in-between positionality mirrors the in-betweenness of many of the Storytellers' experiences. The show, initially titled *In Limbo* by Theatre Prometheus (before I was brought onboard) as an homage to the perceived and stereotyped helplessness of the asylum seeker's position, ultimately found its temporal place in the future because the Storytellers' pasts were too painful and their present was too uncertain. From what many of them told me in casual conversation during the process and more structured interviews afterwards, it was better to imagine a healthy, happy future than to dwell in the land of unspeakable trauma and helpless waiting.

All of this reveals an important aesthetic that I call "asylee futurism": a cultural and political aesthetic that integrates fantasy and historical memory with asylum seekers' current experiences by means of imagining the future, experimenting with narrative, and building solidarity. Simultaneously holding and negotiating the past, present, and future, asylee futurism connects to community organizer adrienne maree brown's "displaced diasporic seed" that exists in "the face of extinction" (2017:161–62). *The Cassette Shop*'s development, performance, reception, and circulation is a strong example of asylee futurism, which emerged as an aesthetic in the process of making the show.² Drawing on interview data, field notes, script excerpts, participant observation, and production photos, I treat the process of making and staging *The Cassette Shop* as an ethnographic field site. In so doing, I tease out the political, cultural, and artistic threads that make asylee futurism possible, speaking to the power, limitations, and potential of this aesthetic form.

2. Other examples include the Futures Literacy Theatre Lab for Refugees run by UNESCO in 2019 (Future Narratives 2019); Malmö Community Theatre's 2016 production of *Dreamlands* (Mikkman, Petterson, and Larsdotter 2018); and the Presencing Institute's "Puzzle Project," which took place in central Italy from 2017–19 (George et al. 2019). Interestingly, all of these projects occurred in Europe, which may be less about Europe excelling on these issues and more about the continent's greater access to financial and documentation resources.

Figure 1. (previous page) Kartika Hanani as Luciar, immersed in the magical world of the cassettes. World premiere performance of The Cassette Shop at Anacostia Arts Center in Washington, DC, May 2023. (Photo by Asif Majid)

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Development

Theatre Prometheus's original title *In Limbo* drew directly on the company's relationship to asylum seekers, commonly thought to be "in limbo,"³ mediated by then-managing director Sarah Priddy. Priddy was the project's dramaturg while also serving as development and engagement manager for AsylumWorks, a social support organization in Washington, DC, that connects asylum seekers with housing, employment, social, and therapeutic support. Along with Priddy, other Prometheus staff, including artistic director Tracey Erbacher, wanted to develop a show involving asylum seekers, particularly after the "We See You, White American Theater" demands for antiracist action issued in June 2020 after the police murder of George Floyd (We See You 2020). As a majority white theatre company, Prometheus asked itself how it could support such efforts. Priddy's connection to AsylumWorks was the answer.

At this point, in January 2021, I received a seemingly random message from Lauren Patton Villegas (on behalf of Prometheus) through my New Play Exchange (NPX) account. Already a member of Prometheus's team, Patton Villegas later directed *The Cassette Shop* and became Prometheus's coartistic director with Erbacher. Prometheus was "seeking a playwright with experience in devised, interview-based, and/or monologue-based work for an interview-based project centering the experiences of asylum seekers in the US." This was "a paid opportunity, with a payment of \$2,000 for a process that will take place over two seasons, culminating in a fully mounted in-person production" (Prometheus 2021a). I expressed my interest and was asked to submit a resume, short statement of interest, and 10-page writing sample before being invited to interview. During the interview, as I got to understand Prometheus's motivations and Priddy/the company's existing connections to asylum seekers, I also learned that Prometheus was committed to supporting DC, Maryland, and Virginia communities, hence their outreach to me, a Maryland native. I suggested that a show could be developed using collaborative character creation as in applied theatre in prisons (Thompson 1999) and in my own practice (Majid 2018). This approach, which I have elsewhere referred to as creating "characters of solidarity" (Majid 2025) and describe in more detail below, limits the risks of retraumatizing asylum seekers. Prometheus also thought this was important, indicating that the selected "playwright will also be provided training on how to approach interviews to avoid retraumatization of any kind for the asylum seekers, known for this project as the Storytellers" (Prometheus 2021b). For a company unfamiliar with but excited by devising, my suggestion threw a kink into Prometheus's timeline, leading to two follow-up interviews to understand how I would work with a Storyteller-centered approach rather than Prometheus's playwright-centered one. My approach was a welcome shift for them, and I was offered the job in February 2021. In contract negotiations, we added an additional \$800 payment for me to lead a devising process beyond just writing the show's script. By March 2021, I had already begun working with Priddy and the Storytellers, a group of approximately 10 individuals who, per Patton Villegas's email, "had generously agreed to share their time and stories with us" (Villegas 2021).

In some ways, it was a fluke that I became Prometheus's playwright, as I had moved from Maryland to California during the Covid pandemic and had forgotten to update my NPX account. Nonetheless, my location was moot as the entire devising process was conducted over Zoom

3. On the notion of asylum seekers as "in limbo" see Thunborg et al. (2021); Seitz (2017); and Vo (2016). The UN refugee agency UNHCR only reinforces this tendency by defining an asylum seeker as "someone whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed" (UNHCR n.d.). Embedded in this characterization is a not-quite-yetness, emphasizing the unknown. It orients toward an undetermined reality that may or may not come to pass, problematically implying a stuck helplessness. In this definition, the asylum seeker asks a relatively simple question—"Can I stay here?"—and the response from the state, federal government, and receiving community is pending; with nothing to be done in the meanwhile.

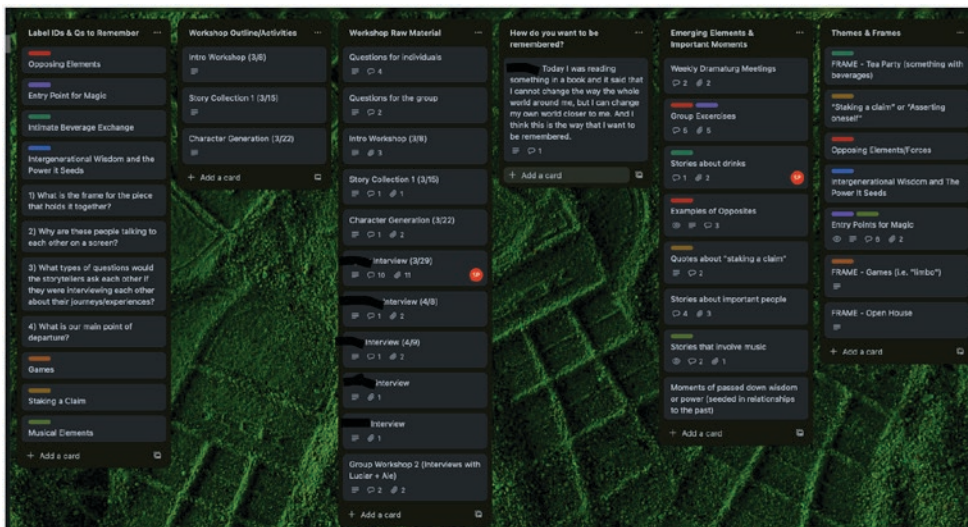


Figure 2. Screenshot of the Padlet used by the creative team to generate *The Cassette Shop*. (Screenshot by Asif Majid)

throughout the pandemic.⁴ My concern for participant welfare was soon resolved: Patton Villegas’s 19 January email was ambiguous at best (“generously agreed”) and potentially exploitative at worst, so I was relieved when I learned that Prometheus would in fact be paying each Storyteller a stipend of \$500 for their time, interviews, and involvement in the devising process.⁵ An initial meeting with Priddy and the Storytellers in March 2021 revealed that all the Storytellers had come to the meeting based on recommendations from their AsylumWorks caseworkers or through knowing Priddy. I do not know exactly how those invitations were framed. But what was clear from that first meeting with the Storytellers was that AsylumWorks and Prometheus’s organizational power were only enough to get folks into the Zoom room. It was my job to keep them there and engaged, despite not meeting them in person. My racialized position as a Brown, Muslim American child of immigrants was a huge part of earning the Storytellers’ trust. One Storyteller, a man from Eritrea in his early to mid-50s who I will call Gebre,⁶ was grateful that Prometheus had come back to the Storytellers with a theatre-maker and facilitator who “gets it” and could understand the complex sociopolitical, racial, and religious position of the Storytellers. At that initial meeting were Storytellers from China, Egypt, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iraq, Syria, and Venezuela—most of which have significant Muslim populations.

That first meeting gave way to a series of devising sessions. Before each, I would run my plan for the activities by Priddy, and then facilitate the session in Priddy’s presence. Priddy and I would have

4. As we worked through the pandemic, there was no way of knowing if or when we’d meet in person. We hoped, but never knew. I wasn’t 100% convinced that we’d end up doing anything in person.

5. These sums are paltry. Later, as the process moved from development to production and as some of the Storytellers became actors in the show, they received an additional \$500. I then applied for and won a grant, which I describe below, that increased actor compensation from \$500 to \$800. Though Prometheus did more than many theatre companies do in terms of paying community collaborators, I still had to advocate to Prometheus for the Storytellers to receive more for their work as actors than other creative team members because Prometheus was steeped in a color-blind racial model that prefers equality to equity.

6. Given the sensitive specifics of the Storytellers’ asylum cases, I have chosen to use pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity. I have also done so with the intention of anonymizing the Storytellers’ stories while giving them artistic credit as performers when they performed.

lengthy debriefs of over an hour after each hourlong session. The material generated—recordings of Zoom sessions, interview testimonies, audio/video links, and more—quickly ballooned on the shared Padlet board that Priddy administered. Priddy and I developed a close working relationship, which extended to the Storytellers; many of them tied their participation to our relationship with them. One Storyteller—a queer Indonesian woman I’ll call Bulan—indicated that “if it weren’t for you and Sarah, I wouldn’t be here.” Bulan was one of three women present at the first devising session I facilitated with Priddy; also present were a Venezuelan woman I’ll call Maria and a Chinese woman I’ll call Patime. We began with name games and icebreakers, before moving on to discuss the women’s stories. Ahead of time, Priddy and I had developed prompts that we hoped would spark conversation, seeking to draw out fond memories from the past that the Storytellers associated with significant people and places in their lives. As the women shared, loss and pain were their primary sentiments. Bulan came to tears when talking about making meatballs with her late mother; Maria wept as she described separating from a close friend during civil unrest in her country; and Patime cried at how much she missed her late father when narrating a time when he had secured a massive apple for her from an agricultural fair. After sharing their stories, all three women characterized their experience as cathartic. All three women also shed many tears. The session felt more like group therapy than it did theatre-making.

In our debrief afterwards, Priddy and I discussed the heaviness we felt in our hearts. If every session was like this, how could we avoid the real danger of creating a careless theatrical retelling of sad stories leading to participant retraumatization (see Liang 2016)? On the phone with Priddy, I paced around my apartment flummoxed by how to handle this challenge. Not only would we risk retraumatizing the Storytellers with such an approach, but any audience would potentially witness what has alternately been termed “trauma porn” (Yeboah 2020), “torture porn” (Hallam 2010), and “war porn” (Lea 2020). Then, it hit me. If asking about the past led to pain, then what if we asked Storytellers about their hopes and dreams for the future? What if we combined their responses with characters of solidarity they created who were both like them but not quite like them, asking instead about those characters’ hopes, dreams, and—to differentiate between Storytellers’ reality and characters’ fiction—magical powers? Would those temporal and fictional layers of separation, between the Storytellers themselves and the characters they created, provide a greater sense of safety?

This was the development process’s turning point, from looking at the past to wondering about the future. The next session’s icebreaker asked about folks’ favorite magical creatures, which immediately propelled an animated discussion about the pros and cons of griffins, phoenixes, mermaids, and more. The Storytellers enjoyed the imaginative question, which led to a well-received collective character generation exercise: “Create a character who could be in this room. Give them a name, determine their age, and generate five pieces of information about them. All information about them must be unanimously agreed upon.” The two crucial phrases in this prompt were “could be in this room”—which I explained as sharing the qualities of being an asylum seeker and not having English as a first language—and “must be unanimously agreed upon,” so that the ideas could create a sense of solidarity among the Storytellers and a sense of ownership of the characters they created. Once they developed Luciar, a queer, single, activist from Gay Land; and Alé, a straight farmer from Argentario who was married with children, I asked the Storytellers to figure out what magical powers each character had and what brought each one joy. In response, a 30-something-year-old Storyteller from Iraq who I’ll call Hashim, said this about Luciar: “I would imagine her having the most beautiful voice in human history [...], a healing voice [...] when she’s happy[...] And this is where the dilemma comes in. [Sometimes] she gets sad...and she’s not able to heal people [...because Gay Land was] a great place until the authoritarian regime came in.” Here, without Hashim naming it or perhaps even realizing what was happening, Luciar’s magical power became a vector for Hashim safely voicing his own experience of growing up in Iraq, which was “a great place until the authoritarian regime came in.”

After character generation, Priddy and I conducted interviews with each Storyteller individually, learning about their own lives. We then reconvened the group for a series of final sessions in which

Storytellers embodied Luciar and Alé through improvisation to discuss themes such as magic and asylum. Here, Hashim and another Storyteller were instrumental in furthering the stories of the two characters, developing an instant chemistry when put opposite one another. Having previously determined that Alé owned a cassette shop, this fact became central in the improvs:

LUCIAR: Alé?

ALÉ: Oh, hi! Hold on one minute...hold on one minute. Just let me... Hi Luciar! How are you?

LUCIAR: Good, how are you?

ALÉ: Good, good, just been busy. But all good. You?

LUCIAR: How's work?

ALÉ: It's good. I'm just cleaning...I have lots of cassettes. People move to CDs so I have to remove all of the cassettes and replace them by CDs so I took all of this cover down, all of this shelf down.

LUCIAR: I have good news.

ALÉ: Oh! Tell me.

LUCIAR: Well...they approved me.

ALÉ: Really? How do you feel?

LUCIAR: I don't know. I mean...

ALÉ: That's great news to hear but uh...it's amazing.⁷

Even with this progress, Priddy and I were still struggling with the frame that would hold the show together, how magic would feature, and what would be the vector through which the Storytellers' interviewed stories would be explored. That is, until our second-to-last devising session, in which Maria noticed the cassette shop as a common thread across the improvs. Immediately, the show's title, set, and context came into view, as did the interplay between music, magic, and object. The cassettes in the shop became magical vectors through which Luciar and Alé were transported into alternate worlds, where their histories and hopes—as well as the histories of the Storytellers—were recited.

With these materials and a structure now in place, I began threading together testimonies from interviews with Luciar and Alé's stories. A 15-minute preview directed by Patton Villegas was hosted online in July 2021, using actors Prometheus hired as they would for a staged proscenium production. I then produced the full script over late summer and early fall 2021, with a table-read held in November 2021 at Erbacher's home; this was my first time meeting the Storytellers in person. With a new position at the University of Connecticut in January 2022, the next month I secured a \$6,000 grant through UConn's relationship to the Open Society University Network's Center for Human Rights and the Arts for the scheduled full production of *The Cassette Shop* in late spring 2022. However, fears of a Covid resurgence intervened. Instead of the full production, we conducted a staged reading of an excerpt of the show at The Gathering, a space at Georgetown University in May 2022. It was directed by a collaborator of mine, Nikoo Mamdoohi, whom I asked Prometheus to bring onboard for the project. Then, a production with a 16-show run was scheduled to open on 28 April 2023, with the Storytellers rather than hired actors taking the title roles. As rehearsals began, Hashim got a major promotion at his job and had to back out of the

7. This is a verbatim transcript of a section of the Zoom session held on 20 August 2021, which almost word-for-word became the start of scene 18 in *The Cassette Shop*.



Figure 3. Staged reading of an excerpt of *The Cassette Shop* at the Gathering in Washington, DC, May 2022. (From left) Tameem Al-Talabani as Alé and Kartika Hanani as Luciar. (Photo by Asif Majid)

project. Prometheus sent out a public casting call and cast Shan Khan; Hashim worked with the actor to help him get into character. Kartika Hanani, another of the Storytellers, performed Luciar, despite describing to me her sadness that Hashim and Mamdoohi—who had moved abroad and was unavailable to direct the show—were no longer involved. Interestingly, Hanani initially did not want to participate in the process at all when it was first pitched by Prometheus but ultimately became the last representative of the process from the original group of Storytellers. To replace Mamdoohi, Prometheus hired Patton Villegas as director.

Performance

The Cassette Shop was staged in a 50-seat black box theatre at Anacostia Arts Center (AAC) in Washington, DC. Spectators entered the space from the lobby of AAC, a large community-based arts center with spaces for a rotating group of pop-up artists and owners of small businesses to sell their works and wares. Anacostia is a historically Black neighborhood in southeast DC that was and is experiencing rapid gentrification. The AAC was an appropriate place to stage *The Cassette Shop* because the changing fortunes of the neighborhood reflected the changing fortunes of the cassette shop and the asylum seekers. Audiences, masked due to Prometheus's Covid protocols, walked behind the risers upon arrival, passing through the set in order to find their seats. Set designer Dom Ocampo's design was warmly lit and featured browns, oranges, and yellows that brightened up the otherwise dark interior of the black box. A cheery desk, well-worn cash register, and old family photos greeted audiences as they arrived; behind were two wooden bookshelves filled with cassettes, pressed against the walls of the black box. Between them, a small multitiered coffee table covered with a yellow cloth was also stacked with cassettes, appearing both cluttered and clean at once. Two mismatched chairs set by the coffee table signaled neat disorganization. Further downstage were two brown poufs and a black chest covered with pink and gray cloths, as well as a haphazard pile of cassettes. All around the shop, cassette cover art—some about 5" × 7" and others nearly 24" × 36"—were plastered and projected on the shop walls, depicting diverse musical styles. Numerous articles of clothing were hung about—jackets, shirts, and sweaters primarily—integrating Alé's costumes into the set design. Soft music, specifically Buckethead and Meat Loaf, played from overhead speakers as audiences took their seats. Hashim described these artists as important to him during the devising process. When seeing the show, he commented that it felt



Figure 4. The set of *The Cassette Shop* at Anacostia Arts Center in Washington, DC, May 2023. (Photo by Asif Majid)

like they welcomed him into the space.⁸ After a preshow announcement, the lights went down and Khan as Alé entered the cassette shop with his guitar in hand. Hanani as Luciar followed soon after.

As the show unfolds, Luciar and Alé first connect as customer and shopkeeper; their relationship is fleeting, stilted, hesitant, and uncertain. In time, and as Luciar continues to visit the shop out of loneliness, they realize that they have shared experiences as asylum seekers and musicians. Music ties them together, as they make plans for an artistic collaboration and—at times half-heartedly—try to write and perform a song together. The bulk of the show's scenes involve Luciar and Alé trying to make music as they try to learn and know one another. The two also come to understand that they both have magical powers. Regularly, as Alé and Luciar rifle through cassettes in the cassette shop, they are transported into different worlds. The stage directions tell what happens then:

Without warning, the cassette opens and she [or he] is pulled into it. There is some movement and some magic. She [or He] becomes the cassette cover and begins reciting lyrics while moving through the space; perhaps lyrically, perhaps stilted. The lyrics are read as if a spoken word poem.

8. After seeing the show, Hashim described to me how he loved the nostalgic and old-timey feel of the cassette shop. By contrast, Khan, a younger actor, didn't know what cassettes were when he was cast for the show; he was quickly brought up to speed. Hashim was saddened by the show's penultimate scene, in which Alé takes down cassettes and replaces them with CDs, which for Hashim depicted the passage of time and the fraughtness of a person who can't fully keep up with changing times. Hashim mentioned the game *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar Games 2010), which he similarly understood to show a cowboy's way of life eclipsed by industrial society. At work in Hashim's conceptualization of both *The Cassette Shop* and *Red Dead Redemption* is a yearning for an impossible past, a condition experienced by many asylum seekers.

Magic was not prescribed, but rather was left open to Patton Villegas's interpretation. These are moments where I often inserted experiences of the Storytellers into the text, a shift in space and time that projection designer Nitsan Scharf underscored by morphing the walls of the cassette shop into an ethereal world. Versions of Bulan's meatball story and Patime's apple story both ended up in *The Cassette Shop's* final script, as did a story of Hashim's two dogs, Maxey and Hero, pets he had to leave behind when he left Iraq. A version of this story was voiced by Alé:

ALÉ: (*Softening*) I used to take pictures of my house. Pictures of Hero and Maxey, my dogs. And so I have these reflections, like, wow, like we had to leave them. We have to leave and I don't remember saying goodbye. It was something really quick because goodbyes are painful, right. I just left and I just gave them their meal and just left. I didn't have the courage and I don't think I will ever have the courage to say a proper goodbye. You know, I don't think I'll ever— (*cutting himself off*). And I'm fine with that. You can say, yes, I'm fine with that, so it's one of the things I reflect, would I go back in time and say goodbye. I, I wouldn't just leave, you know, but I'd I—

LUCIAR: —let time heal itself. (Majid 2022:51)

When I interviewed Hashim after he saw the show, he referenced this moment particularly, stating that “no one” knows this story. Yet, hearing Khan perform it both “felt weird” for Hashim and reminded him how he never said goodbye to his dad and that he still has a picture of his two dogs. Others remarked on the moment referenced in the previous section, when Luciar learns that her papers have been approved, with one Storyteller describing having the same reaction as Alé in that scene. Hearing this, the Storyteller was happy for Luciar and the hope that moment represented, but internally went “back to the cassettes and wonder[ed] when will it be my turn” (51).

In this, there was pain for the Storytellers who attended the final production. Yet there was also hope and laughter, and therefore a balance. About one-third of the way through the show, Luciar begins to lose hope that she can retain a sense of herself throughout the grueling process of seeking asylum. Alé tries to comfort her, through myth:

LUCIAR: I don't feel like I am myself. I don't feel like I'm the Luciar that I used to know. Sometimes, I lose my hope.

ALÉ: But what are we without hope? What are we?

LUCIAR: Nothing.

ALÉ: So, we have to have hope right?

LUCIAR: Yeah, hope makes us alive.

ALÉ: Exactly. (*Beat; energy shift*) Have you heard about the Pandora's box story?

LUCIAR: No, tell me.

ALÉ: You know I might get this wrong, but, Pandora was the daughter of a god, in, I think, Greek mythology. They told her don't open the box, never open the box, the box has bad spirits, and everything. But Pandora opened that box and all the spirits were flying all over the world and they got into the people, giving them desperation and sadness. And once the box was empty, there was a very small light struggling at the end of the box, just struggling to move. And since it was a light, Pandora picked up the light and called her hope. And she put the light in her heart saying, “I hope one day I take all the sadness of people away and put it back in the box.” (*Beat*) So until now, there is hope.

(*Beat*)

LUCIAR: That's an amazing story, Alé.

ALÉ: I always remember that story when I lose hope, you know. So that's the box, I guess. So we have to have hope. There's no other option.

LUCIAR: Mhm.

ALÉ: I'm telling you before I tell myself, but I also tell myself with you; to remind us both. We must have hope. (Majid 2022:19)

This dialog was lifted directly from a conversation in the devising process between Hashim as Alé and Bulan as Luciar. Hashim, when he sat with me and reflected on seeing *The Cassette Shop*, told me that seeing the scene reminded him of how he had put that story forward when Bulan, as Luciar, was spiraling into less and less hope during the improv.

If the devising process created characters of solidarity through which the Storytellers expressed their experiences, then it also created solidarity *between and among* the Storytellers themselves, a solidarity that was rehearsed and reproduced when *The Cassette Shop* was staged. It was thus tricky for Hashim when someone else performed Alé, because choosing to cast both Storytellers and non-Storytellers changed the performance's affect: it no longer constituted Storytellers performing for each other. Indeed, Khan, who isn't an asylum seeker, and Hanani, who is, had different relationships to the text. Khan was able to demonstrate subtle affective changes in his acting that resonated with critics. But Hanani told me that she felt that she had to separate herself from Luciar as a character in order to deliver on the technical aspects of the performance, perhaps losing some of the emotional gravitas of Luciar's character in the process.

Luciar and Alé spend a lot of time in *The Cassette Shop* envisioning an alternate future, one based on the magical powers of Luciar's healing voice and Alé's lyric writing that predicts the future. These quickly transition into the dream of US citizenship, which they lay out early in the show:

ALÉ: Oh wait, do you want to sing?

LUCIAR: Yes!

ALÉ: You want to form a band?

LUCIAR: Let's get into it.

ALÉ: Oh nice! That's cool. Yes, let's do it.

LUCIAR: I mean, my voice is a gift, Alé.

ALÉ: Yes, I bet. And we have to put it to use, right?

LUCIAR: If we are famous, we don't have to be waiting anymore.

ALÉ: Yeah we can buy our passports. We just go to USCIS and throw our money at the table and say "give us our passports right now please, thank you."

LUCIAR: That's true, that's true.

ALÉ: And not just us; let's buy everybody passports. All of them! What do you think? Once we're famous?

LUCIAR: How about we buy online?

ALÉ: From Amazon.

LUCIAR: Fly us to space, Jeff!

(beat)



Figure 5. Alé immersed in the world of the cassettes in the world premiere performance of The Cassette Shop at Anacostia Arts Center in Washington, DC, May 2023, featuring Shan Khan as Alé. (Photo by Asif Majid)

ALÉ: We need passports, you know? In the US. *(Beat, slow realization)* Yeah actually that could be something. *(Beat)* You know, I have a plan. I think we will be famous and the White House will invite us to sing and when we are there, we say, fix it, fix it right now. Citizenship.

LUCIAR: That really cool, Alé.

ALÉ: Yeah, if we keep this as our goal, we will reach it.

LUCIAR: Fix the broken things. Fix the broken beings.

(Beat)

ALÉ: But the question is: Are you ready? Are you ready for that, Luciar?

(Beat)

LUCIAR: I don't think so, Alé. I don't think I am. (Majid 2022:14–15)

In this moment, Alé and Luciar draw on their magical powers—Luciar's voice, in particular—to undertake this envisioning, rendering their magic as the key to solving a real-world problem: their lack of US citizenship and its related documents. The possibility of successfully negotiating the bureaucracy of their present reality is ignored and sidestepped in favor of an imagined future. Luciar and Alé are under no illusions that they live in a utopia or that their circumstances will change. Rather, they see their magic as making possible what their current reality has not yet realized. This occurs through a particular type of futurity—what the Indigenous Futures Institute characterizes as not “an abstract concept focused uncritically on potentiality” but rather “an act of relational accountability and transformation” (IFI 2020). In Luciar and Alé's envisioning, asylum seekers in the US attain citizenship. Musical magic of the past becomes a vector leading this futurity to becoming a current reality.

In this moment, three components of time—past, present, and future—move as one. But troublingly, Luciar is not ready for the imaginative leap in which all asylum seekers can be given passports solely through Luciar and Alé's magic. This dislocates her future imagining, echoing the semi-stuckness of the nostalgic space of the cassette shop. Asylee futurism is limited. Luciar and Alé do not envision a new system where borders cease to exist and passports are irrelevant. But that is because doing so would result in them losing their own power to question and prod and poke the behemoth that is, in this case, the US government. Asylum seekers—in a world without borders and passports—are, in a political sense, nothing; they cease to exist as a political category. *The Cassette Shop* demonstrates that their very existence, as a category, is *dependent* on the neoimperial system of borders that *requires* them to seek asylum rather than wander freely in an anarchist society. I must be clear here: I am not condoning borders and their patrols, detention camps, visas, or even passports. What I am saying is that asylee futurism is limited in scope, because of the constraints placed on those who are doing that imagining by the asylum system. The *type* of future that can be imagined is, at present, restricted.

Afrofuturist filmmaker Ytasha Womack confirms this phenomenon: “there's an unconscious game of trying to remember a memory, time, or space when and where these familiar oddities [of powerful Black women, a Black president, and so on] weren't so bizarre” (2013:105). Asylee futurism, by contrast, only exists because neoliberal capitalist imperialist heteropatriarchal regimes of statehood and citizenship have reified a migration system into haves and have-nots. Asylum seekers are in between. Without border and migration systems, they do not exist. By imagining a future without borders or passports or visas, therefore, they would blow their asylum-seeking selves into oblivion. Perhaps this is why asylee futurism orients more towards magic than technology, for it is only in a fantastical, magical world that an asylum seeker can be free to move while also retaining complex connections to homeland, family, loss, and hope amid imperialism and border regimes.

Receiving and Circulating Magic

Postshow discussions revealed confusion about what *The Cassette Shop* was about. Attending the night of a talkback, my father—himself an immigrant from Pakistan born two years after the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan in 1947—noted that the word “asylum” is absent from the play. He asked: “How do I know that this isn’t about someone like me? A lot of it felt very familiar” (Majid 2023). I responded by saying that the version of the text at a table read during the development process twice used the word “asylum.” At that reading, Mamdoohi offered feedback that these mentions seemed a bit too on the nose, and so they were removed. Hashim, also a participant in the talkback, mentioned that he “like[d] that asylum isn’t mentioned anywhere” because its absence goes some way towards normalizing the Storytellers’ experiences.

Nonetheless, my father’s question raises an important issue for immigrant audiences engaging with *The Cassette Shop* and other asylee futurist works. Specifically, how does migration status affect one’s aesthetic choices? A man who came to the US for education in the late 1970s, my father’s immigration story isn’t dissimilar to those of many of the Storytellers or indeed Luciar and Alé. They all miss home, deal with challenges of adapting to a new culture, and try to find a new place to be in the world. There are, however, two crucial differences. The asylum seeker is forced to leave because of catastrophe. And my father, unlike Bulan, Hashim, Maria, and the rest of the Storytellers, can return to Pakistan at his leisure, so long as he can save enough money for a ticket and get time off work. When my father discusses his past with me—old friends, classmates—he is nostalgic. He longs for and appreciates his birthplace, remembering fondly the days of his youth at a cadet college in Pakistan, a postcolonial outpost of British imperialism. Of course, he, too, has experienced pain, talking less frequently about the death of his mother and the fact that he could not return to Pakistan in time to bury her.

But if any of the Storytellers were to return to their home countries, they would likely face mortal peril. Bulan’s lesbian identity and problematic family dynamics make returning to Indonesia out of the question. Hashim cannot return to Iraq for political reasons; his family is now scattered across the globe in the UK and Jordan. Maria’s human rights activism in Venezuela also makes her a political target. As a result, the *imaginative* solution becomes as close to the real one—of visiting and staying connected to one’s homeland and people—as the Storytellers can get. Maria made this particularly clear. Often using Google Translate to keep up with what was going on in our devising sessions, where English was the primary language, Maria spoke through a translator in her one-on-one interview. During that interview, as we were discussing magical powers, she said: “Oh, I wish I could fly.” When asked why, she said: “Today is my sister’s birthday. I wish I could fly to Venezuela and be with her and come back.” She continued: “You can avoid all sorts of problems by flying.”⁹

Maria did not want to go back to Venezuela to stay. She did not want to avoid the problems of her current location and pending asylum case. Rather, she used the magical power of flying to imagine celebrating her sister’s birthday. The colonial and imperial limitations of borders, citizenship documents, and visas were magically rendered irrelevant. By flying in alignment with the winged Pegasus, her favorite magical animal, which she had named at the same group session when Luciar and Alé were created, Maria magically abolished the distance separating her from her sister. Her wish to fly was seeded in her relationship to homeland and to family, not in passports. Two spaces, Maria’s current location and her homeland, existed simultaneously. By virtue of her not being in Venezuela at that moment, its geography became something to imagine. Holding both at once became possible, but only through magic.

Skeptical readers might wonder if this imagining worked, if it actually made Maria feel that she had visited her sister. Such a question problematically prioritizes, as applied theatre scholar James Thompson argues, effect over affect in a way that disregards “people’s tenacity and endurance” in

9. This is a verbatim transcript of an interview held with one of the Storytellers on 15 April 2021.

times of trial, “a form of resistance that is too rarely acknowledged or taken seriously” (2009:2). At issue here is not whether Maria’s imagining worked in a tangible, practical, and real sense. What matters is the fact that *she was able* to imagine, to simultaneously hold the pain of not being present at her sister’s birthday while envisioning the magical possibility that *she could be* there. Social worker Resmaa Menakem describes this as the difference between “clean pain” and “dirty pain,” in which clean pain is “pain that mends and can build your capacity for growth” when “you have no idea what to do; when you’re scared or worried about what might happen; and when you step forward into the unknown anyway, with honesty and vulnerability” (2017:19). “Dirty pain” is, by contrast, “the pain of avoidance, blame, and denial” in which folks respond to trauma by “becom[ing] cruel or violent” or “physically or emotionally run[ning] away” (20). Maria’s pain was “clean,” for she moved towards the difficulty of missing her sister’s birthday by means of imagining something magical. She did not disavow that she missed her sister, nor did she avoid the problematic feelings it might raise. Instead, she herself introduced the possibility of flying as something that, as Menakem describes, allowed her to go against the pain of missing her sister’s birthday, “grow[ing]” by “walking into” that “pain or discomfort—experiencing it, moving through it, and metabolizing it” (20). She moved towards healing.

Holding onto both hope and pain was not limited to the devising process. Bulan, when she reflected on her experience of the show with me, described something similar. In *The Cassette Shop*, she found magic that invoked both the past and the future. Relative to the past, magic helped Bulan “think different[ly] about pain,” imbuing painful *memories* with a sense of hope and balance.¹⁰ As an example, Bulan described how hearing Luciar tell the story of Bulan making meatballs with her mother helped Bulan see that painful past differently. Luciar’s lines characterizing the loss of her own mother—or is it Bulan’s mother at that point?—bring “me so much pain...you cannot do anything...just cry.” At the same time that the “one story,” the story about making meatballs, “brings me joy” (Majid 2022:55, 56), by comparison, Bulan told me that magic related to the future “changes [my] voice to something that [can] speak,” transforming a painful reality into the possibility of a different future that could be beautiful. Here, Bulan’s example was the moment when Alé and Luciar dream together about their magical voices earning them and all asylum seekers passports from the White House, a moment I referenced above. In both cases, Bulan shared with me that magic had a transporting and transforming effect¹¹ on how she understood her own self, in terms of the past, her current situation, and the risks inherent in both.

All this accords with psychological research on storytelling and trauma: “individuals who are able to actively express their experience of both negative and positive emotions in the trauma narrative have more successfully emotionally processed the trauma memory than those who are not able to do so” (Jaeger et al. 2014:478). Using magic in the devising process, which carried over into the production of *The Cassette Shop*, allowed for Storytellers to both “actively express their experience” and present “both negative and positive emotions in the trauma narrative” by balancing hope and loss, joy and pain, creating a “more successfully emotionally processed” memory of trauma.

10. Some critics understood the complex position of painful memories in *The Cassette Shop*. One wrote: “Many of the stories featured in *The Cassette Shop* are not about the process of seeking asylum but instead focus on memories from home countries, defining people by the lives they have lived and are living, rather than by the legal status they are seeking. Majid’s script does an effective job of blending those interviews with the story of Alé and Luciar, communicating the experience of feeling stuck between lives via embodied memories” (Cansler 2023). The reviewer noted this as one of the show’s strongest points, even though my and Priddy’s work in the devising process tried to decenter memory as much as possible.

11. Magic was also a crucial part of how critics understood the work: “stunning projection [...] translates the transportive effect of music into a visual format” and “evocative lighting design [...] helps to differentiate the realism of the main story from the emotive world of memory” (Cansler 2023). Another critic affirmed this: “Projections by Nitsan Scharf also help lend more depth to the performance as a whole and give it that quasi-magical, other-dimension feel” (Valentino 2023).

Indeed, in the talkback, Hashim described the process of making the show as “therapeutic” because it enabled him to work through and heal difficult past experiences, despite possibly being denied asylum and deported.

These multiple temporalities—the simultaneous holding of past, present, and future—push beyond static and linear Western notions of time, allowing for what Anishinaabe and Indigenous futurism scholar Grace Dillon characterizes as “narratives of biskaabiiyang, an Anishinaabemowin word connoting the process of ‘returning to ourselves,’ which involves discovering how one is personally affected by colonization, discarding the emotional and psychological baggage carried from its impact, and recovering ancestral traditions” (2012:10). By introducing magic and playing with time, *The Cassette Shop* enacts asylee futurism both by simultaneously holding and negotiating the past, present, and future and by connecting to and recalling the previously cited “displaced diasporic seed” that exists in “the face of extinction” (brown 2017:161, 162). And, if as brown further writes, “Imagination is one of the spoils of colonization, which in many ways is claiming who gets to imagine the future of a given geography” and that “losing our imagination is a symptom of trauma” (2017:163), then the Storytellers’ spatiotemporal envisioning of a magical future, present, or past attempts to reclaim the imagination as a radical departure from the colonization of an individual’s and community’s mind and geography. Indeed, asylee futurism can lead asylum seekers and others towards alternative futures.

Closing

Turning towards the future, as *The Cassette Shop* does, shows how asylum seekers with “agency from marginal positions” refuse the roles of waiting and being out of control (Ghorashi et al. 2018). Asylum seekers look to the future not only *despite* their past traumas but *because* of them. Trauma yields hope. The opportunity to bounce back better, as it were, shifts the aesthetics of asylum seekers’ art from traumatic rehashings to creative possibilities. If Luciar and Alé can have magical powers, then they can also become musicians who “will be famous and the White House will invite us to sing and when we are there, we say, fix it, fix it right now. Citizenship.” Or, better still, become individuals with enough influence to “go to USCIS and throw our money on the table and say ‘give us our passports right now please, thank you.’”

These characters are more than fictions. They are proxies for the Storytellers’ as-yet unfulfilled hopes of gaining asylum. It is for this reason that *The Cassette Shop* continues to be a point of departure for the Storytellers. Further panels, including one at the Leicester Human Rights Arts and Film Festival in December 2023, continued to describe the experience the Storytellers had while making the show, addressing how they have moved through and beyond the “asylum seeker” label and category. Thus, the asylum seeker is no longer someone in limbo, despite this project’s original title. Instead, she is someone transported into an ethereal world of magic cassettes and buying passports.¹²

Ultimately, asylee futurism reclaims the power to reveal the system’s flaws. If the power of other futurisms like Afrofuturism and Indigenous futurism is to envision a future without the neocolonial emperor, then the power of asylee futurism is to show the current emperor—and all his subjects—that he has no clothes. Asylee futurism, therefore, wields its aesthetic power as an activist politic that refuses the status quo and, instead, seeks what could be.

12. If current debates around “golden passports” in the European Union—in which wealthy investors can “acquire a new nationality based on payment or investment and in the absence of a genuine link with the naturalising country”—are any indication, then at least half of this world is already here (European Commission 2022). Asylee futurism’s line between reality and fiction grows ever thinner.

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