

“The Chorus of Refugees”: Individuated versus Collective Experience in Naomi Iizuka’s *Anon(ymous)*

Naomi Iizuka’s stage play (which premiered at the Children’s Theater Company in Minneapolis in 2006) adapts Homer’s *Odyssey* in broad strokes. Much like the Coen brothers’ *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* or Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the *Odyssey* provides a framework to explore the notion of a journey home. The main character, Anon (although he goes by many other names), is a refugee separated from his mother, Nemasani, during a storm at sea while they fled a war-torn homeland. She is the home that he is seeking. The play explores the idea of refugee as a collective status (as the script includes the Chorus of Refugees) made up of non-integrated particulars (the Chorus lists the smells of home each speaking in turn “lemongrass, horchata, coconut milk, pho...”). The universality is at times effective, Iizuka has a Chorus of Sewing Ladies (workers in what the owner emphatically insists is “not a sweatshop”) who list what they make and, upon seeing the owner harassing Nemasani with proposals of marriage, list the countries from which he supposedly has a mail order bride. In these moments, the history of exploitation that shifts from one place to another with economic fortunes and colonialist tastes sets up a clear set of parallels. When Pascal, another refugee that Anon briefly travels with, asks about Anon’s mother, he follows up by providing most of the descriptions himself, Anon’s agreement presents a universalized mother-figure. Anon’s identity is fluid (he shifts his name in virtually every scene and seldom gives any personal details) but he is not completely adrift. The familiar structure of the *Odyssey* lends cohesion to this abstract play. This paper examines the tension between a useful idea of collective identity and experience and a more troublesome tokenism and essentialism that may emerge from attempts to create a collective subject in theatrical depictions.