

Introduction

Introduction: Performing Gender, Sexual and Racial Dynamics on the US Stage

Gender, sexuality and race, as historical, ideological, social, cultural and political constructs, have become crucial epistemological markers to decode our contemporary world and reevaluate past events. This new issue of *Coup de Théâtre* positions on the frontline of theater and performance analysis minoritized groups dedicated to building their agency, their collective voice and their epistemological regime—breaking away from dominant systems of knowledge and representations.¹ “Performing Gender, Sexual and Racial Dynamics on the US Stage” explores the expression of dissenting plural voices on the US stage and especially focuses on groups discriminated against on the grounds of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and race through an intersectional methodology (Crenshaw, Michlin and Rocchi) that crisscrosses two or more subjective and social positions. It works within the framework of both contemporary and historical transdisciplinary and pluridisciplinary perspectives articulating gender, sexual and racial issues, including (but not limited to) trans*, queer, feminist, and intersectional lenses. Elaborating on the paths opened by recent works like, *Blacktino Queer Performance* (Johnson and Rivera-Servera) *Understanding Blackness Through Performance* (Crémieux, Lemoine and Rocchi), *Black Performance Theory* (DeFrantz and Gozalez), or *No Tea, No Shade* (Johnson 2016), this issue intends more specifically to highlight where gender and ethnicity, or queer sexualities and race become defining critical axes.

Focusing on the meaning of gender, sexuality and race in performance has repeatedly been made necessary due to the current backlash experienced by marginalized groups in the United States as in many other places of the world. On August 16, 2019, the United States Department of Justice filed briefs to the US Supreme Court arguing that “sex discrimination” did not legally protect LGBTQI+ employ-

ees. The Trump administration attacked LGBTQIA+ rights, especially excluding trans* from the military, education, health care and sports.² Similarly, attacks on women's rights have recently been intensifying in the United States. By 2019, nine states had passed bills to limit abortion rights, including Missouri, Kentucky, Alabama and Louisiana.³ By June 2022, the super conservative Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favor of the pro-life movements, overturning *Roe v. Wade*. In recent years, Republicans in state legislatures across the country have been pushing anti-critical race theory bills, attempting to censor the ways teachers tackle racism in the classroom and limiting access to history. In the United States, among other nations, the demand for a return to a white, heterosexual, patriarchal order, and praise for nationalism, capitalism and colonialism are inseparable from gender, sexual and racial dynamics. If the intersectional prism has come under healthy criticism (Allen 34-38; Bey 7-8, 58-60), it remains a pivotal strategy to oppose the concreteness of these multifactorial oppressions. How can theater and performance further the exploration of those tensions and attempt to resist and create imaginary solutions? Can theater, as an institution swayed by the politics of representation, provide means of resistance and resilience to the traumas of erasures and violence suffered by subaltern subjects? As Jill Dolan has argued with many others, can drama create a lifeline, even if ephemeral, through "utopian performatives" (2) to provide spaces to fight against oppressive normative forces that deny innovative configurations of being and performing?

Gender, race and sexual dynamics are thus central to cultural, social and artistic issues on contemporary Anglophone stages, despite clearly diverse and differing situations.⁴ While some theatrical esthetics and praxes advocate normalizing gender, sexual and racial diversity, others keep working to deconstruct the very normative representations that underpin those categories through constant efforts to offer new creations. Similar tensions and limitations of feminism or gay and lesbian activism have been highlighted, for instance, through the exclusion of racialized women and queers as early as the 1970s, and forcefully deployed in the 1981 collection *This Bridge Called My Back*

by women of color (Anzaldúa and Moraga). By 2005, Dolan focused on showing how “performing across cultural identities in the formalized space of theater might provoke utopian performatives that offer glimpses of how people can *be* together in a more respectful, care-full, loving human community” (Dolan 64). Yet, this hopeful vision has been (partially) dispelled by the rise of homonormativity (Duggan; Marche), homonationalism (Puar), queer normativity (Brightwell) or TERF (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist) activists. These trends demonstrate once again the urgent need to maintain scrupulous attention on the articulation of the manifold intersections between gender, race and sexuality so as to thwart renewed oppressive closures. The present efficacy of performance and its implication in performativity—at least in its world-making intent—requires a constant effort to reopen discussions, genealogies and conceptual clusters. Amelia Jones’s *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* (2021) does so by productively revising the lack of intersectional input in performance arts and queer theory (24-25, 188-192). She synthesizes the work of major queer of color performance scholars (Muñoz; Johnson; Rivera-Servera; Nyong’o; Manalansan IV), but also shows how much work is still needed to achieve, what we could call, after Muñoz’s “queer futurity”, an intersectional futurity. This issue of *Coup de Théâtre* hopes to contribute to this effort by exploring representational creativity based on plural identifications that suggest the possibility of a performative dynamic of gender, race and sexuality that can offer modes of resistance through politics and imagination. Futurity starts with the potent tension with the past that possibly results in the presence of the performance. Therefore, the significance of history and its complex processes is tackled by many authors gathered in this volume. US dramaturgy is heavily invested in reaching back, re-performing and re-imagining the past to grasp the meaning of our contemporary world (Schneider). Shaina Taub’s musical *Suffs*, performed at the Public Theater in 2022, is a recent example of the desire to re-envision the past struggles, here of the American suffrage movement, through performance. The play included a criticism of the domination of white suffragists by introducing the historic black

character Ida B. Wells and by hiring famed African-American choreographer Raja Feather Kelly, who was involved in many recent Black and Queer New York hits like *A Strange Loop* or *Fairview*. Such moves could confirm the prevalence of this theatrical hope to re-create a viable society thanks to the stage.⁵ A similar goal could characterize the thriving ballroom culture that has exemplified how queer Black and Latinx groups have managed to this day to intervene against their own literal and symbolic erasure thanks to social (“Houses” taking in homeless gays and trans*) and artistic (voguing; walking etc.) inventiveness (Bailey). These performances, by operating in the cracks of normativity, have proliferated throughout the world thanks to a variety of representational vectors (documentaries, scholarship, TV series), illustrating how hybrid and multivalent approaches create meaning and resilience through minority practices.⁶ These varied forms of contemporary theater and performance underline how intersectional perspectives generate spaces for deploying the dynamics of gender, sexuality and race.

As David Savran suggests in his interview in this issue, African American drama is one of the most powerful voices on the US stage today. Tellingly, Pulitzer Prizes were awarded to black women playwrights—Lynn Nottage in 2017 for *Sweat*, Jackie Sibblies Drury in 2019 for *Fairview*, Katori Hall in 2021 for *The Hot Wing King*) and queer men (Michael R. Jackson in 2020 for *A Strange Loop* and James Ijames in 2022 for *Fat Ham*—, underscoring the creative voices of racialized Blacks in the United States. The power of these plays might come from an irrepressible “rage” (Savran) but it also comes from their intent to think through the conundrums of our contemporary society thanks to esthetic experiments. Their creations of new idioms and forms counter the impoverished world of standardized and commodified language, representation and identities.

Undoubtedly, such creative powers were born from conflicting forces, resulting from rifts between minority and majority positions. Many questions remain to be addressed: To what extent can esthetic experimentations recreate openness, dialogue and agency? Do gen-

der, sexual and racial dynamics go beyond the limitations of static approaches or do they reinstate fragmented fixity? Can they help re-think political interventions, social dissidence and imaginary practices in order to create new modalities and reshape our perception of the world? Are they providing tools for a queer, feminist and decolonized utopian futurity (Muñoz)? Do they invent an open, practical and imaginary epistemology? These questions might offer some ways to deploy the critical potential of what here we call gender, racial and sexual dynamics articulated to the circulation of ideas and theatrical representations. The deep and complex connections between San Juan and New York City, as illustrated on stage by musicals, spanning from *West Side Story* to *Hamilton*, suggest how political, social, cultural and artistic perspectives can nourish networks between the Caribbean, South and North America. Decolonial, feminist and queer perspectives provide a critical momentum to denaturalize, deconstruct and resist binary alienations. Black Trans Feminism is a rising theoretical voice that brings contradictions to a number of ossified representations and starts feeding the work that trans* artists vibrantly convey to the stage.⁷ Detaching the body from essentialist demands (Bey 14) could offer a platform for imaginative and identificatory freedom to roam the world of ideas that befits the goals of art and subjective liberations. The work of trans* and non-binary collectives (Translab, Breaking the Binary Theater, National Queer Theater, see the interview of Adam Odsess-Rubin in this volume), in their guerrilla type theater in small theater venues, deregulates identities and conventional theater spaces to question established representational orders. The experience of facing traumas and joys of being and of performing differences is a challenge that feeds the core of what theater strive for in our contemporary society. A challenge brazenly taken up by the contributors of this issue.

In part one of the essay section, “Crisscrossing Gender, Race and Ethnicity”, the authors show the significance of addressing historical processes of representation and how it can foster new perspectives on what can be seen and said on stage through gender and racial dynamics. The articles explore more closely the link between

history, production history and ethnic minorities' points of view. **Lara Cox's** "Black America in the Repertoire of Jean-Marie Serreau: Edward Albee, Adrienne Kennedy, and the Theatre of the Absurd's Role in the Decolonization of the Stage" meticulously analyzes the production history and context of French director Jean-Marie Serreau's staging of Albee's *The Death of Bettie Smith* and Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. She offers a nuanced esthetic and social account of the ways Serreau intervened in the representation, or lack thereof, of Black women through the ideologies of the 1950s and 1960s. Cox's focus on the Black Arts Movement, Négritude and the Theater of the Absurd allows her to unpack the dynamics at play through gender, race and esthetic. The article forcefully concludes on the potential of a "negative universalism" as an original contribution to the stage. Tackling the representation of Black bodies as well, **Michel Büch's** "Democratic Rhetorics and Anti-Black Realities in US Improv Comedy" zooms in on the irrepressible resurgence of racism actualized by the tradition of improvisational theater. Mobilizing "abjection" theory based on Hartman's analysis of the history of US slavery, Büch unmasks anti-blackness within the much-touted democratic and liberated space of improvisation. Based on conceptualization, but also interviews and peeks into the improv world, the author identifies a structural model of production and reception of racism that goes beyond stereotypes and wonders, to paraphrase Audre Lorde, if "the master's tools can dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 110-113). **Sebnem Nazli Karali** in "Postmemorial Dramaturgy of the Armenian Catastrophe: *The Armenian Question*" focuses on another traumatic memory rooted in the 1915 Armenian genocide. The author gives an account of the process used by the playwrights to construct their play *The Armenian Question*, staged in New York City. She explores how the principles of documentary drama and archival research can conjure up a theatrical reflection on the unspeakable. The author particularly details the ways theatre can help recreate and embody a traumatic memory thanks to Hirsch's postmemorial concept. The horrors of

genocide are conveyed especially thanks to the resilience of female characters providing hope across ethnic divides.

The second part of the essay section focuses on the contemporary crisscrossing of queer desires and racialized performances in US Culture across various media and epistemologies. Beyond traditional theater, **Yannick M. Blec**'s "Cause Not Enough Niggas Rap and Be Gay:" Redefining Black Queer Masculinities Through Intersectional Dynamics and Performativity in Contemporary Rap" tackles the world of Black queer rap as a major site of intersectional performance. Delineating the work of three successful contemporary artists from the US rap scene, the author highlights the way black masculinity is redefined by these queer artists. Thanks to close readings of their lyrics and an overview of the context of the musical industry, Blec reassesses the performance and reception of race, gender and sexuality through contemporary media (especially social media networks), not unlike Henderson's work about the representation of black women in rap videos (Crémieux et al. 159-179). Blec discusses how intersections and interactions of subjectivities and creativity can crack upon hegemonic normative social roles and reconfigure the rap genre. **Charalampos Keivanidis**'s "*Six degrees of segregation*": les voix noires et gay des Pomo Afro Homos" turns to a blazing African American theater troupe of the 1990s to demonstrate bluntly that the allegedly open-minded world of theater to queerness, after all, the 1990s is the "queer decade" (Savran), crashes on the realities of intersectional homophobia/racism. Selecting a few key skits from *Fierce Love* and *Dark Fruit*, Keivanidis shows how the Pomo Afro Homos pointedly intervened in the world of theater and performance to produce a healthy satire of the queer and Black theatrical communities. Tackling stereotypes featured in the celebrated progressive plays of the 1990s but also the inflammable topic of male effeminacy, the essay documents and theorizes the limits to and yet the necessity of an intersectional politics of representation. The essay section concludes with a pellucid philosophical essay on the erotics of queerness. "La performance queer : une expérimentation érotique" by **Antoine Alario** charts its own redefinition of queer

desire as a disidentified and radical form of desire by resorting to queer theorists José Muñoz and Renate Lorenz, but also to French philosophers Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The author's original input is to articulate the deterritorialization of desire, to borrow from Deleuze's terminology, with performance as the locus where queerness happens. By rehearsing theatrical works of lesbian performer Marga Gomez, gay performer Ron Vawter (long-time companion to the famous experimental New York-based Wooster Group) and a brief auto-ethnography of his reception of drag shows he attended, Alario construes highly operative concepts to connect dynamically gender, sexuality and race.

Coup de Théâtre number 37 also features two interviews conducted by Xavier Lemoine in New York City that offer a transgenerational assessment of the production and reception of queer performance in the last fifty years. The perspectives provided by the seasoned theater scholar, on the one hand, and of a budding theater maker, on the other, chart a dense map of how performance praxis weaves gender, sexuality and race into a web of theatrical illuminations. In the first interview, "I really prize rage': 50 years of Queer American Theater with **David Savran**," through a personal account, we discover the world of New York theater from the 1970s to 2019 by a highly praised queer theater academic who has published many fundamental books on the US stage. This careful and intimate exploration of the main trends in queer productions is more than a history lesson; it is a lesson about life in the theater. The second interview is dedicated to the ideas and actions of what it means to make queer theater and performance in the late 2010s in New York City. In the "Arts *for* the queer community': Creating Queer Theater for a New Generation with **Adam Odsess-Rubin**," the artistic director of the National Queer Theater offers a vivacious portrayal of his work and principles designed to plant the seeds to make the theater of tomorrow grow queer and strong.

The "Performing Gender, Sexual and Racial Dynamics on the US Stage" issue proudly features the first print version of the play *the*

dance floor, the hospital room, and the kitchen table by **Lyam B. Gabel**, a careful and lively montage, rewriting and reperforming the haunting archival material of queer memories into a moving meta play. Revisiting the shock of AIDS in the gay, lesbian, trans* and colored communities, Gabel's piece suggests ways to reconnect with this past in order to learn how to fight in the present.

Coup de Théâtre 37 closes, as is now the tradition in this journal, with the Master's RADAC Award 2023. "Itinéraire d'un auteur vers une dramaturgie de circonstance: le théâtre politique pour jeune public d'Edward Bond" by Gaïa Richard-Bergereau, has impressed the jury by its mastery of Bond's theoretical corpus and the British context.

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¹ As Dorinne Kondo writes in her article about the work of performance artist Anna Deavere Smith, "I mentioned to Montoya that his comments about the enduring signification of Chicanismo reminded me of my own reaction to academic dismissals of race, gender, and sexuality as mere 'identity politics,' and I always wonder, 'Hello, from which site of privilege do you speak?'" (Kondo 103). We can highlight that Smith's early plays is a major body of work discussing the intersection of race and gender on the US stage.

² Sam Levin, "A critical point in history': how Trump's attack on LGBT rights is escalating," *The Guardian*, September 3, 2019. [theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/03/trump-attack-lgbt-rights-supreme-court](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/03/trump-attack-lgbt-rights-supreme-court). See, for further analysis: Marche and Servel, <https://journals.openedition.org/ideas/4363>. We use the inclusive term trans* after Halberstam's use in his book *Trans**.

³ "Abortion Bans: 9 States Have Passed Bills to Limit the Procedure This Year," K.K. Rebecca Lai, *New York Times*, May 29, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/us/abortion-laws-states.html>.

⁴ Omar G. Encarnación. *Out in the Periphery: Latin America's Gay Rights Revolution*, Oxford UP, 2016. In his interview, Savran also underlines this contrasted situation throughout the world. In the US there is also a rich history of theater deploying Black Theater, Women's Theater, Gay and Lesbian Theater, etc., which is the larger context of this current issue.

⁵ *The New York Times* review, however, sees this attempt fail specifically because of a failed relationship to temporality when Maya Phillips concludes her negative review with "You can't live in the past, present and future of our nation's politics all at once—at least not without losing your way." See, Maya Phillips. "'Suffs' Review: Young, Scrappy and Hungry for the Right to Vote", *The New York Times*, April 7, 2022, Section C, Page 1. [nytimes.com/2022/04/06/theater/suffs-review-public-theater.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/06/theater/suffs-review-public-theater.html). Accessed Oct 18, 2023.

⁶ From Jennie Livingston's famous documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990) to Marlon M. Bailey's thorough study *Butch Queen Up in Pumps* (2013) and the TV series *Pose* (Fox 2018-2021).

⁷ See for instance the trans* or non-binary artists Kate Bornstein, Will Davis, Ty Defoe and Taylor Mac presented in *Fifty Key Figures in Queer US Theatre* (Noriega and Schildcrout 26-34, 48-52, 53-57, 146-150) and the script in this volume by Lyam B Gabel.