Avant-Propos - Foreword

Depuis 1978, la société RADAC (Recherches sur les Arts Dramatiques Anglophones Contemporains) promeut le théâtre anglophone en France. Avec ce nouveau projet éditorial *de Coup de Théâtre,* Xavier Lemoine, Claire Delahaye, et Christine Kiehl ont non seulement mis à l'honneur le théâtre étasunien mais ils ont également invité leurs contribut.rice.eur.s à croiser les perspectives catégorielles et à considérer les multiples formes spectaculaires : cette ouverture sur les arts de la scène et les épistémologies minoritaires dans une approche dynamique (puisqu'il s'agissait de mettre en avant les agencements entre les processus politiques et poétiques de subjectivation sur les scènes des États-Unis) est à l'image de l'effort de notre société savante qui souhaite créer des ponts entre différents sites de création au croisement des préoccupations contemporaines.

Ce très beau volume est le fruit d'une hybridation fructueuse entre différentes initiatives, le produit d'une rencontre scientifique et humaine. En effet, l'idée de ce numéro *Performing Gender, Sexual and Racial Dynamics on the US Stage* consacré à l'agentivité de groupes définis comme minoritaires, comme rappelé dans l'introduction, émane de deux évènements scientifiques : l'atelier "Theatre and Minorities" organisé par Christine Kiehl (Université Lumière Lyon 2, France), Serena Guarracino (Università dell'Aquila, Italy), et Vesna Tripković-Samardžić (Mediterranean University, Montenegro) à l'occasion du congrès ESSE (European Society for the Study of English) de 2021 et soutenus par RADAC ainsi que le colloque international Institut des Amériques - Université Gustave Eiffel "Gender, Sexual and Racial Dynamics in the Americas" de 2020 porté principalement par Claire Delahaye (Université Gustave Eiffel, France) et Xavier Lemoine (Université Gustave Eiffel, France).[1]

La diversité des contributions est à saluer : *Performing Gender, Sexual and Racial Dynamics on the US Stage* propose non seulement des articles de haute volée mais également des entretiens avec des personnalités majeures du monde artistique et universitaire, et une pièce. Depuis plusieurs années, RADAC a mis en place un Prix Master afin de valoriser la recherche de la jeune génération et les travaux de l'heureuse lauréate sont présentés dans *Coup de Théâtre*.

Je tiens à remercier très chaleureusement Xavier Lemoine, Claire Delahaye, et Christine Kiehl pour leur fabuleux travail de coordination, les rapport.rice.eur.s pour la finesse de leur expertise, ainsi que les autrices et auteurs qu'iels soient chercheu.se.r.s ou/et artistes pour leur précieux éclairage sur un sujet et enfin l'Université Gustave Eiffel et le LISAA (Littérature, Savoirs et Arts) pour son soutien financier.

Je vous souhaite à toutes et tous une très bonne lecture.

Emeline Jouve, présidence de la société RADAC.

---

[1] Le comité d'organisation comprenait Sylvie Bouffartigue (Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines), Gersende Camenen (Université Gustave Eiffel), Claire Delahaye (Université Gustave Eiffel), Laurence Gervais (Université Paris Nanterre), Xavier Lemoine (Université Gustave Eiffel), Caroline Lepage (Université Paris Nanterre), Guillaume Marche (Université Paris-Est Créteil), et Josephine Marie (Université Gustave Eiffel). Le programme est consultable en ligne ici, https://ameriquesgsr.hypotheses.org/

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 rethink 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 nourrish 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 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 opon 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.

WORKS CITED

ALLEN, Jafari S. *There's a Disco Ball Between Us: A Theory of Black Gay Life*. Duke UP, 2022.

ANZALDÚA, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 1987. Aunt Lute Books, 2016.

—. and Cherríe MORAGA, editors. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 1981. SUNY P, 2015.

BAILEY, Marlon M. *Butch Queen Up in Pumps: Gender Performance and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*. U of Michigan P, 2013.

BEY, Marquis. *Black Trans Feminism*. Duke UP, 2022.

BRIGHTWELL, Laura. "The Exclusionary Effects of Queer Anti-Normativity on Feminine-Identified Queers." *Feral Feminism* 7, 2018. feralfeminisms.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2-Laura-Brightwell.pdf. Accessed June 9 2023.

CRENSHAW, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241-99.

CREMIEUX, Anne, Xavier LEMOINE, and Jean-Paul ROCCHI, editors. *Understanding Blackness through Performance: Contemporary Arts and the Representation of Identity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

DeFRANTZ, Thomas and Anita GONZALEZ, editors. *Black Performance Theory*. Duke UP, 2014.
DOLAN, Jill. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. U of Michigan P, 2005.
DUGGAN, Lisa. *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Beacon P, 2003.
HALBERSTAM, Jack. *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. U of California P, 2018.
JOHNSON, E. Patrick, editor. *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*. Duke UP, 2016.
—. and Ramón H. RIVERA-SERVERA, editors. *Blacktino Queer Performance*. Duke UP, 2016.
—. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. Duke UP, 2003.
—. and Mae HENDERSON, editors. *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*. Duke UP, 2003.
JONES, Amelia. *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance*. Routledge, 2021.
KONDO, Dorinne. "(Re)Visions of Race: Contemporary Race Theory and the Cultural Politics of Racial Crossover in Documentary Theater." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2000, pp. 81-107.
MANALANSAN IV, Martin F. "Messing up sex: The promises and possibilities of queer of color critique." *Sexualities*, vol. 21, no. 8, 2018, 1287-90.
LORDE, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Crossing P, 2007.
MARCHE, Guillaume. *La militance LGBT aux Etats-Unis : sexualité et subjectivité*. PU de Lyon, 2017.
MICHLIN, Monica and Jean-Paul ROCCHI, editors. *Black Intersectionalities: A Critique for the 21st Century*. Liverpool UP, 2013.
MUÑOZ, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. NYU P, 2009.
NORIEGA, Jimmy A. and Jordan SCHILDCROUT, editors. *Fifty Key Figures in Queer US Theatre*. Routledge, 2023.

NYONG'O, Tavia. *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*. NYU P, 2019.
PUAR, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Duke UP, 2007.
RIVERA-SERVERA, Ramón H. *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics*. U of Michigan P, 2012.
SCHNEIDER, Rebecca. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. Routledge, 2011.

---

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. 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. 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.

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

Lara Cox

Abstract: As debates about the decolonization of theatre come to the fore in the post-pandemic world, in France, scholars are turning increasingly to director, Jean-Marie Serreau (1915-1973). I explore the only US plays in his repertoire: Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) and Edward Albee's *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1959). I argue, with the help of the archives, that these productions cannot be assimilated neatly into Serreau's work on Francophone Négritude writers or the anti-racist avant-garde of the Black Arts Movement in the United States of the 1960s. Rather these productions encapsulate a negative universalism that reflects the director's interest in the Theatre of the Absurd. This aesthetic is mobilized in the service of highlighting the intersectional struggles of Black women.

Résumé : A l'heure où le débat sur la décolonisation du théâtre prend de l'ampleur, le travail du metteur en scène Jean-Marie Serreau (1915-1973) attire de plus en plus d'attention. Cet article s'attache à étudier les pièces étatsuniennes de son répertoire : *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) d'Adrienne Kennedy et *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1959) d'Edward Albee. A l'aide d'un travail sur les archives, nous avancerons l'idée selon laquelle ces mises en scènes ne peuvent pas être réduites à l'intérêt que portait Serreau pour les écrivains associés au mouvement francophone de la Négritude. Il n'est pas pour autant possible de les aligner avec l'avant-garde anti-raciste du *Black Arts Movement* aux États-Unis des années 1960. Ces mises en scène semblent démontrer un universalisme négatif qui correspond au travail de Serreau sur les pièces du théâtre de l'absurde. La mobilisation de cette esthétique sert à mettre en relief les discriminations intersectionnelles de femmes noires.

Keywords: Jean-Marie Serreau, Adrienne Kennedy, Edward Albee, decolonization, Black Arts Movement, Theatre of the Absurd, intersectionality.

Mots-clés : Jean-Marie Serreau, Adrienne Kennedy, Edward Albee, décolonisation, Black Arts Movement, théâtre de l'absurde, intersectionnalité.

In recent years, there has been renewed scholarly interest in the work of French actor and theatre director, Jean-Marie Serreau (1915-1973). The Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris 3) launched, in December 2022, a major new collaborative research project (*vaste chantier*) on the director reputed to have given Samuel Beckett his first big break on French stages. Serreau's early career was dominated by the White European playwrights who were associated with Martin Esslin's label of the "Theatre of the Absurd", applied retroactively (in 1960) to the avant-garde theatre of Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov—all of whom wrote plays that Serreau would direct. However, recent critical literature has turned to his interest in decolonization. As Serreau specialist Sylvie Chalaye hypothesizes, his encounter with wife and actress Danielle Van Bercheycke (Chalaye 355-356), whom he met in 1962, likely intensified this interest.[1] Serreau began exploring this subject in 1958 when he produced Kateb Yacine's *Cadavre encerclé*, on the French repression of anti-colonialist demonstrators during the 8th May massacre in 1945 in the Algerian towns of Sétif and Guelma.

Throughout the sixties and up until his death in 1973, Serreau not only continued to direct plays associated with Esslin's "The Theatre of the Absurd"; he was active in promoting playwrights concerned with staging decolonization, including the Martiniquais Aimé Césaire, Ivorian Bernard Dadié, and Haitian René Depestre. This combined articulation of the Absurd and the political was a specificity of Serreau's approach (Livingston 180); his development of what editors of the

1986 anthology on the director Élisabeth Auclaire-Tamaroff and Barthélémy call "a theatre of decolonization" (110) can be understood as an extension of a long-standing commitment to social, particularly class-based, issues. From his earliest forays into the field of directing, Serreau engaged with the Marxist model of Bertolt Brecht (staging *The Exception and The Rule* in 1947, 1950; *Man Equals Man* in 1954; and *Hommage to Brecht* in 1956). Whether or not one agrees with the idea of a White man as being a creator of "a theatre of decolonization", there is no doubt that Serreau was an important figure in raising awareness among his French avant-garde followers about colonialist corruption, racial injustice, and the urgency of anti-imperialism—and this concurrently with the fall of numerous Francophone imperial regimes on the African continent.

What has been overlooked in recent scholarship, however, is the question of the intersection of gender-based and race-based discriminations in the director's output. What cultural debates and aesthetic practices would have informed Serreau's approach to intersectional discrimination? The only two plays by US playwrights in his repertoire provide fertile ground for examining this question because they do not just build a platform for "the cause of Black Americans"[2] as Chalaye states (361); they highlight more specifically the struggles of two Black women: Sarah, the fictional biracial character of African American playwright Adrienne Kennedy's debut play, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) (henceforth *Funnyhouse*), and Bessie Smith, the real-life blues singer who tragically lost her life at forty-three after a car accident, and whose death is reimagined in White American playwright Edward Albee's *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1959) (henceforth *Bessie Smith*).

Serreau staged *Funnyhouse* in 1968 at the annex theatre of the Odéon, on Paris's Left Bank, a stone's throw from the epicenter of the students' and workers' riots, which occurred two months later in May 1968. He subsequently directed *Bessie Smith* for the SIGMA festival in Bordeaux and during a tour of Languedoc-Roussillon in 1970. *Funnyhouse* revealed the riven mindscape of Sarah, whose mother is White and father is Black. Several Black and White characters from history (for

example, Queen Victoria, Patrice Lumumba) wander disparately on- and off-stage, repeating themselves often. The non-linear style reflects the heroine's inability to reconcile parts of herself, and her torn state eventually drives her to suicide. *Bessie Smith*, less Expressionist in style, reimagines the final moments leading up to the death of the blues singer as a result of a White nurse who refuses to admit her to hospital. Like *Funnyhouse*, the Black and White characters of *Bessie Smith* (two White nurses and a doctor, the nurse's father, a light-skinned Black orderly, Bessie's lover) are unable to communicate meaningfully. This prevents a satisfying ending—and survival of the eponymous character.

This article is structured around a cultural as well as aesthetic contextualization of the director's work on these two plays. My methodology is archival and draws out common patterns by investigating production documents from the Jean-Marie Serreau holdings at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris (BnF) and the National Archives in Saint-Denis—without claiming to provide a comprehensive approach. The first part of this article presents Serreau's selection of *Funnyhouse* and *Bessie Smith* as a distancing from the principles of the Black Arts Movement (henceforth, the BAM), led by Amiri Baraka, prominent among the African American theatrical avant-garde in the late sixties. Serreau's choice can be read in the light of the Gallic critique of US Black revolutionary politics at the turn of the seventies, fitting with a wider French view of the cultural tribalism of the United States. The male-dominated BAM was also criticized for downplaying the issue of gender. The very play that Serreau staged, Kennedy's *Funnyhouse*, was deemed too pessimistic by BAM figures. A corollary (albeit unintended) of Serreau's turn to playwrights outside of the BAM's sphere (Albee was also jettisoned) is his exploration of the issue left by the wayside in the US cultural movement: the complex intertwining of sexism and racism in the lived realities of Black women. The second part of the article considers the plays in terms of Serreau's interest in the chiefly Paris-based aesthetic that had come to be known (after Esslin's coining of the term in 1960) as the "Theatre of the Absurd." The nihilistic strain of Absurdism, as we shall see in the third part of the article, allowed the director to stage a double destruction of gender- and race-based

hierarchies—a kind of negative universalism that brings into relief, and perhaps even empowers, Black women.

The Cultural Context: Not the Black Arts Movement, Not Francophone Négritude

The director's preparatory documents for *Bessie Smith* include an excerpt from an analytical article (one copy of which is handwritten and a second of which is typewritten) on US Black revolutionary politics of the late sixties and early seventies. The excerpt analyzes the Black Panthers, the political branch of the Black Power movement that was founded in 1966 as a more militant and separatist form of anti-racist and anti-imperialist organizing in the wake of the perceived failings of Martin Luther King Jr.'s policies of Black-White integration and non-violence that had dominated the question of civil rights in the early 1960s. In this excerpt, the Panthers' emphasis on Black nationalism is condemned, and framed as a "Manichean vehemence" that was "more mystical than Marxist" in the end (archival document, *La Mort de Bessie Smith* 1970). The fragment was originally taken from an article written by Jean-Marie Domenach in a special issue of the renowned French Marxist publication, *Esprit*, published in 1970 and addressing "The USA in Revolution."

The document is in fact symptomatic of the French perspective circulating in theatre in the late sixties and early seventies. The cultural branch of Black Power, the BAM, was similarly viewed with skepticism in France. This designation was coined retrospectively in 1968 by Larry Neal but the movement had begun when dramatist Amiri Baraka (formerly named LeRoi Jones) cofounded the Black Arts Repertoire Theatre School in 1964. The BAM foregrounded "a black aesthetic" and Black pride at a time when virulent racism continued unabated and KKK violence was intensifying (despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964) (Blec 2019). By the mid-sixties, Baraka's plays had been imported to France via the *mises-en-scène* of Antoine Bourseiller in Paris and Avignon. Many French theatre critics judged Baraka's *Dutchman* and *The Slave* too aggressive and violent (Falb 83)

just as Domenach had condemned "Manichean vehemence" in the 1970 article in *Esprit* that Serreau had consulted to mount *Bessie Smith.* Baraka's work combined Dadaist nihilism (Wong-Gu Kim 2003) and a fervent anti-White sentiment.[3] Serreau not only never staged the best-known ambassador of the BAM; his reference to Domenach's condemnation of Black Power's "vehemence" also indicates the director's wariness of the movement and its values. Serreau would not have been ignorant of Baraka's work. Several actors and crew members who had worked for Bourseiller, Baraka's French director, also participated in Serreau's productions. This shared network suggests that Serreau would have at least been aware of Baraka's œuvre.[4]

Serreau's distance from the foremost representative of the BAM is elucidated by his alignment with the Francophone Négritude movement and the latter's tensions with the American BAM. Martiniquais playwright Aimé Césaire, whose work Serreau had staged multiple times throughout the 1960s, complained of the BAM's lack of Marxist analysis (like Domenach with the Black Panthers) while Baraka could not abide what he viewed as a form of false nostalgia for a "pure" and unified Africa, before colonial times, that the Francophone movement extolled.[5] Négritude leader Léopold Senghor championed a "civilization of the universal" where African cultures and societies fragmented by colonialism would seek out their common ground rooted in pre-colonial mythology; a restored and common "Négritude" could then be used in the service of uniting with European and wider cultures beyond the African diaspora, again in terms of these cultures' shared values. Schooled in France, Senghor innovated a corrective to the original concept of French Republican universalism, which overlooked the history of empire and racism. Downplaying ethnic, religious, and cultural particularism, modern French universalism has, since the Revolution of 1789, conceived equality and human rights as bound up in people's essential sameness in the eyes of the law (Schor 2001). Senghor's vision aligns with an alternative genealogy of universalism developed by Francophone Négritude intellectuals and artists during the mid-twentieth century, described by philosopher Nadia Yala Kisukidi (2020) as fueled by a "dynamic of hope" (*espérance*)

against the "story of domination" of White French Universalists.[6] Serreau's stance chimed with the universalist ethos of Négritude; he was known as the "messenger of inter-racial union" (*messager du métissage*) (Auclaire-Tamaroff and Barthélémy 107).[7]

It is thus no surprise that an article condemning the anti-White separatism of the African America avant-garde, the BAM, may be found in Serreau's production notes for *Bessie Smith*. By the time he explored the realm of US theatre in 1968 (with *Funnyhouse*) and 1970 (with *Bessie Smith*), Serreau's view on decolonization had been shaped by writers of the Négritude movement: he staged Algerian Kateb Yacine's pro-independence play *Cadavre encerclé* in 1958, and went on to mount work authored by the Martiniquais Aimé Césaire (in 1965 and 1967) and Haitian René Depestre (in 1968).

However, it would be misguided to assume that Serreau's US cycle falls neatly alongside his work on the Francophone Caribbean and Africa continent. He prepared *Funnyhouse* for the "USA season" organized by the Petit Odéon theatre (directed then by Jean-Louis Barrault). The Parisian theatre hosted works by both Black and White writers from the US theatrical avant-garde, including Sam Shepard's *Chicago* (1965) that ran in a double bill alongside *Funnyhouse*. These plays aimed to denounce the American political establishment, dominated by McCarthyism and its aftermath in the shadow of the Vietnam War (Carmody 258).

In this context of rising tension, of double-edged antipathy toward what "America" stood for and sympathy for its struggling vanguardists, *Funnyhouse*, for *Paris-Normandie* theatre reviewer Yves-Marie Choupaut, was about as far away from the Francophone Négritude movement as could be. The torn psychological state of the heroine Sarah, as the daughter of a White mother and a Black father, illustrated "a whole people uprooted from their original continent and locked into a Blackness (*négritude*) which cannot, in the socio-economic context of the USA, open onto the *civilization of the universal* so dear to Léopold S[é]dar Senghor" (my emphasis) (23). Radically different from the universalism "of hope" (*espérance*) adhered to by a number of decolonial Francophone intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century (Yala Kisukidi

2020), the heroine of *Funnyhouse* is a cipher for a devasted population, "a whole people uprooted" (Choupaut). In part three of this article, we shall see that this may not be as hopeless as Choupaut makes out, as both *Funnyhouse* and *Bessie Smith* gesture toward a negative form of universalism that foregrounds Black women. But Choupaut encapsulates a perspective that many held at the time: that the US brand of "Négritude" signaled a people deprived of their pre-colonial past on the African continent by slave trade; only a Francophone "Négritude" could hope to counteract this. A poem by Senegalese writer Younousse Seye, delivered at the Pan-African Festival of Algiers the following year in 1969, similarly decried the "racial segregation" that had reduced the lives of Black Americans (*le Noir-américain*) and insisted on the rallying call of Francophone "négritude" as a salve.[8]

The gulf signaled by Choupaut between *Funnyhouse* and the output of the proponents of Francophone Négritude must be qualified, even if his judgement of the differences remains valid. Serreau may have turned to *Funnyhouse* in part because it featured Patrice Lumumba. He staged Aimé Césaire's *Une Saison au Congo*, also depicting the Congolese revolutionary, the year before *Funnyhouse* in 1967 at the Théâtre de l'Est Parisien. Nevertheless, Kennedy's Lumumba is not the equivalent of Césaire's. He is a reduced, bit character in *Funnyhouse*, one of the alter egos of the heroine Sarah. Far from presenting audiences with the inroads that Lumumba made into Congolese independence, it is the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo's unfortunate end fate—his death by a Belgian-supported firing squad—that is dwelled on. The (putative) suicide of Sarah's father is repeatedly described as happening concurrently with Lumumba's murder. Unlike the fantasized extension of the heroine's father in *Funnyhouse*, Césaire's play revisits Lumumba, the play's central character, in the last days of his life, showing him as a flawed leader but poetic visionary, complex, all-too-human, but ultimately an agent of revolution.

I would argue that the two plays that Serreau selected for his US cycle were focused more on the destructive effects of US racial segregation on Black Americans than they were on links to the Pan-African Négritude

movement. Sarah of *Funnyhouse* hangs herself in the midst of an irresolvable tension between White and African American heritages; caricatured versions of historical figures—aristocratic (a balding Queen Victoria and Duchess of Hapsburg), religious (a hunchbacked Jesus Christ), and political (a Lumumba aligned with her self-hating father)—wander through her internal psychical drama, as fragmented "one[s] of herselves" who can never unite (Kennedy 1). An equally tragic victim, Bessie Smith, the eponymous Blues singer of Albee's play, dies at the hands of White supremacy, after she is denied admission into the emergency room of a White hospital during the Jim Crow era, following a car accident. Both heroines perish under the poisonous effects of US segregation, the very antithesis of Black-White union and a universalism of "hope" *(espérance*) (Yala Kisukidi 2020) of Francophone Négritude.

In looking to the US, Serreau was drawn to two plays that neither privileged the principles of Francophone Négritude, nor those of the BAM. Indeed, it is the distance from the latter that potentiates an intersectional re-reading of the productions. Both Kennedy and Albee were placed at a remove from the BAM. In Larry Neal's seminal 1968 article on the US cultural movement, Albee's theatre was cast as amounting to nothing more than a flight from reality made to ease the discomfort of White middle-class audiences, a *mise-en-scène* of the latter's "sick white lives" (33).[9] We need only think of the web of lies created by Martha and George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* for an example of this. While Albee was dismissed for encouraging White escapism, it was for gender-related reasons that Adrienne Kennedy found her work underappreciated; the suicidal, self-doubting heroine of *Funnyhouse* was deemed to embody neither Black self-determination nor the strength of African Americans, qualities central to the BAM's vision of the Black Revolutionary subject (Barrios 201-202). Critics have pointed out the masculinism (and homophobia) lying behind the BAM's view of the ideal agent of Black liberation. Like many Black women, Kennedy was unable to establish a place for her theatre in a movement that downplayed intersectional issues of racism and sexism, and that was dominated by heterosexual men.[10]

Funnyhouse and *Bessie Smith* foregrounded the very issue left on the sidelines of the BAM: the mutually constitutive nature of sexism and racism in Black women's lives. Yet this is not the reason that Serreau would have been drawn to them. Rather, it is their aesthetic links to the Theatre of the Absurd that most likely stoked his interest.

The Aesthetic Context: America, the Absurd

During the 1950s, Serreau brought Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett to renown in France even before Martin Esslin catapulted the two playwrights to fame with *The Theatre of the Absurd* (published in 1961). Kennedy and Albee earned critical recognition as Absurdists a decade later in the late fifties and early sixties. Esslin compared Albee's impugnment of "American optimism" (312) in his début play, *The Zoo Story*, to Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape,* an alignment facilitated by the Provincetown double bill production in 1958. Kennedy's non-linear theatre would later be interpreted by critics as Absurdist because of her association with Edward Albee, with whom she had workshopped *Funnyhouse* at the beginning of the 1960s (Hatch 388).

The *Fonds Jean-Marie Serreau* underscore Albee's relationship to Absurdism. In a document entitled "Analysis" dating probably from the early dramaturgical explorations of *Bessie Smith*, Beckett and Ionesco are mentioned. Another document from this dossier, named "The Play", dwells on the "incommunicability between beings in this country of Babel." Esslin, too, favored the trait of linguistic "incommunicability" to describe the Absurdists, for instance describing Ionesco's *The Chairs* as "the incommunicability of a lifetime's experience" symbolized by the progressive proliferation of empty chairs on the stage (151). The characters of *Bessie Smith* are unable to listen to each other: the White nurse ignores the numerous cries for help over the telephone following Bessie Smith's accident; her cantankerous father rejects the care offered by his daughter, instead judging her as sexually promiscuous; a mixed-race male nurse is repeatedly berated by the nurse; a naïvely romantic White doctor is unable to see the poverty around him and the privilege within himself. The United

States, the so-called nation of immigrants and of the melting pot, is a Babel-turned-battleground destined for failure.[11]

Concerning *Funnyhouse,* photographs in the archives indicate the influence of the Theatre of the Absurd, and in particular a Beckettian aesthetic, on the production and its marketing. In Figure 1, the Odéon theatre billboard demonstrates that Beckett's *Happy Days* (*Oh, les beaux jours*) ran simultaneously with the double show *Funnyhouse* (*Drôle de baraque*) and Shepard's *Chicago.* Beckett's show was staged in the Odéon theatre's "petite salle" and the Kennedy-Shepard double bill in the sister theatre of the Petit Odéon. The presence of "Matias" (full professional name), who worked as a scenographer for all three shows and was a Beckett favorite, also suggests the imprint of the Absurd on the Kennedy show.



Figure 1. The Odéon Theatre billboard February-March 1968. Center: Beckett's *Happy Days* (*Oh, les beaux jours*). Bottom: the double bill *Funnyhouse* (*Drôle de baraque*) and Shepard's *Chicago.* Both productions ran in March 1968 and all three featured a scenography designed by Matias. Archives of the Département des Arts du spectacle, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. (Reproduced with the kind permission of Coline Serreau).

As a Beckett scenographer, Matias had carved out a trademark in the onstage creation of fragmented bodies, ranging from Winnie (played by Madeleine Renaud) buried in a mound of mud in *Happy Days*, to the three heads floating in funeral urns in Beckett's *Play*, which he worked on with Serreau in 1964, 1966, and 1969 (Auclaire Tamaroff and Barthélémy 207-208). Similarly, a body deprived of its limbs fills the photographs of *Funnyhouse*. Queen Victoria, represented by an imposing bust (equally present in Kennedy's text), figures in four of the ten images of the production. This enormous object, made from clay cast in a mold, wrapped in fiberglass (highly resistant to distortion) and resin (a varnishing agent that weighs down its objects), then painted white,[12] connotes rigidity and intransigence, an immobile feature of the set also implied in the sketched mockup of the stage seen in Figure 2. By contrast, the Victoria statue has a more fleeting presence in Kennedy's text, a whole-bodied "sitting figure" (Kennedy 22), who watches over the end scene while Sarah commits suicide as a reminder of the stain of colonialism and empire on the heroine's fragile psyche.

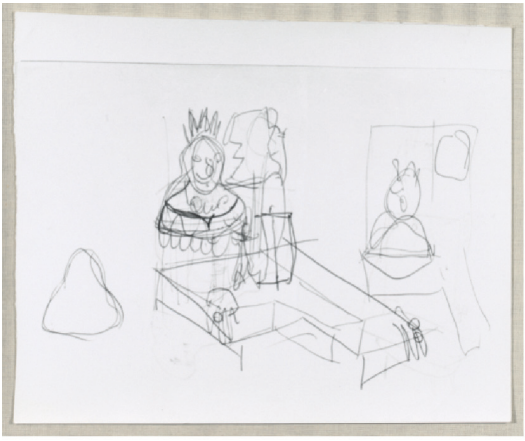


Figure 2. Sketch of the set for *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (*Drôle de baraque*). In the center: a sketch of the Queen Victoria bust hanging on the back wall; on both sides of the L-shaped stage, two hands can be seen. Archives of the Département des Arts du spectacle, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. (Reproduced with kind permission of Coline Serreau).

In Figure 2, it is also possible to make out two disembodied hands emerging on both sides of the L-shaped stage, made from the same material as the bust,[13] limbs of the undead rising out of the ground as a visual metaphor of the English Queen's creeping stranglehold on the heroine's mental state. Added to this is a final white headpiece, which we see in Figure 3. This headwear is of a rigid quality, resembling the material composition of the bust upstage and the hands downstage. This weighs heavily on the head of what is most likely the Duchess of Hapsburg, played by Danielle Van Bercheycke. In Kennedy's text, the Duchess's "*kinky hair spring[s] out from under*" (16) this headpiece, which is meant as a skull cap that masks hair loss. In Serreau's production, it is replaced with white tentacles of an accessory that inflates the Duchess's head to unreal, almost extraterrestrial, proportions. These tentacles are somewhat removed from the "persistent sign of the real body beneath the mask" (59) described by Kennedy's dramaturg Faedra Carpenter.



Figure 3. Photograph from the production of *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, directed by Jean-Marie Serreau. From left to right: (probably) Danielle Van Bercheycke as the Duchess of Hapsburg, Toto Bissainthe as Sarah, (probably) Emmanuelle Parèze-Belda as Sarah's Mother. Archives of the Département des Arts du spectacle, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. (Reproduced with kind permission of Coline Serreau).

Indeed, color is more prominent than weight in Carpenter's dramaturgical assessment of the play, with "haunting and perverse images of whiteness" (57). In Serreau's production, judging by the photographs, size and density seem to prevail over color as lasting impressions. The imposing bust, freakish hands, and monstrous prosthetic skull cap imbue the scene with a sense that the two Black actresses inhabit a space constrained by the accoutrements and synecdoche of White culture. The Theatre of the Absurd is rife with such shrinking and crowded-out spaces as is exemplified by the colossal cadaver in Ionesco's *Amédée*, *or How to Get Rid of It* (1954), the so-called "fetish play" (Auclaire-Tamaroff and Barthélémy 72) of Serreau's theatre company, since the director returned to staging it time and again throughout his career. In *Amédée*, the growing corpse ends up occupying the entirety of the stage at the expense of the eponymous character and his wife. Shrunken by Matias's monstrous white sculptures, the actresses from *Funnyhouse* similarly connote the Black body threatened with crushing by Whiteness.

The Kennedy and Albee plays provided Serreau with a chance to connect his taste for the Theatre of the Absurd (its themes and scenography) with his growing interest, throughout the 1960s, in a theatre of decolonization.

Absurdism as an Opportunity for Intersectionality: The Double Negation of Black Men and White Women

According to Chalaye, Serreau started to decolonize the stage and the perceptual habits of the audience not simply by staging the plays of writers associated with the Francophone Négritude movement. The Theatre of the Absurd occupied a central, if not pioneering, role in this endeavor. In 1963, Serreau cast Toto Bissainthe and Danielle Van Bercheycke, who both later featured in *Funnyhouse*, in Jean Genet's *The Maids.* The year before, these two women played in Ionesco's *The Picture* and Beckett's *Play.* Chalking these "polychromatic casts" up to Serreau's encounter with Danielle Van Bercheycke in 1962, Chalaye positions these *mises-en-scène* as the "real innovative and visionary force

of Jean-Marie Serreau", proof of a "plural theatre where differences are mixed together" (355-356).

Funnyhouse and *Bessie Smith* are best considered in the lineage of these earlier Absurdist plays. The Theatre of the Absurd, as a label Esslin developed in response to the common themes and aesthetic emerging from theatre mostly in Paris in the mid-century, was attributed a universalist ethos but in a different sense to a decolonized universalism "of hope" (*espérance*) (Yala Kisukidi 2020) that, as we saw in part one of the article, many Francophone Négritude writers engaged in. In *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) Esslin repeatedly alluded to the Absurdists' concern for the existential crises of the common "Man" in a humanist (albeit gender normative) idiom. But, unlike Senghor's view, this did not constitute the building blocks for the new beginning of a future "civilization"; rather, the Absurdists' placed emphasis on a common ending to civilization—"a world that won't finish finishing" (*monde qui n'en finit pas de finir*) (Auclaire-Tamaroff and Barthélémy 68) as Serreau termed the apocalyptic meltdown of language, God, and political ideologies that he found presented in Ionesco's, Genet's, and Beckett's plays.

The Absurdists' take on the mutually assured destruction of different cultures seems to have figured in Serreau's dramaturgical reflections on *Bessie Smith*. Another part of Jean-Marie Domenach's article on the revolutions in the USA, a copy of which is found in the Albee dossier, turns to "Women's Lib" (486), in a document that Serreau or his team retitled "'Pink Panthers' and the feminine revolt in the USA." The excerpt highlights the wage inequalities at stake in the second-wave struggle. The choice to rename "Women's Lib" the "Pink Panthers" recalls the popular cartoon character but also positions feminism alongside the "Black Panthers" (the latter being roundly critiqued, as I pointed out earlier). Another document states the production's intention to bring to the fore this "America of yesterday" with "especially [the America] of today." We might venture then that Serreau sought not simply to contextualize the Albee play with regards to the Black Panther politics of the late 1960s and 1970s, which he condemned,

but also, seven years after Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963), with regards to second-wave feminist politics. There is no reason to suggest that Serreau would have been any more positive about the "Pink Panthers" than he would a Black counterpart. In Albee's text, it is the White nurse, an irascible and intolerant character, who most closely articulates the class-focused version of the second-wave feminism pointed out by Domenach: she laments her piteous salary and limited economic prospects in the Depression era 1930s when the play is set.

The double distance that these production notes assert from US antiracist and feminist movements resonates with the Theatre of the Absurd's loss of faith in salvatory political ideologies—what Esslin earlier described as the "shatter[ing]" of "the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages" such as "faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies" brought about by the horrors of the Second World War (23). Recontextualized in the social movements of the late sixties, this Absurdist loss of faith in political ideologies potentially highlights what Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) describes as the "location that resists telling" (1242) that Black women are often relegated to—between White-dominated second-wave feminist and male-dominated Black nationalist movements. A possible interpretation of Serreau's production notes is that Bessie Smith cannot rely on either "the Black Panthers" or the feminist counterpart of "Pink Panthers" to save her.

Bessie Smith indeed seems to approximate the idea of a "location that resists telling" (Crenshaw 1242) in Serreau's production. In the text, she remains offstage and has no voice of her own (unlike Sarah in Kennedy's *Funnyhouse*, it must be added). Yet in Serreau's production this invisibilization is brought into relief. According to Jacqueline Cartier, who reviewed the Albee production for the SIGMA festival in Bordeaux in 1970, tension emerged during the show through a juxtaposition of Bessie Smith, rendered in an "effigy" by the "play of lighting" and the technique of "projections [already so] dear to Jean-Marie Serreau" with the physical presence of Michelle Moretti

in the role of the White nurse (Cartier 1970). Though I cannot find further details of what Cartier means by Serreau's much-loved resort to "projections", two copies of the same photograph of Bessie Smith in the archives (Figure 4) imply the reproduction on the stage of this image in an enlarged format. Elegant and joyous in this photograph, with her bob haircut of the roaring twenties, the huge ostrich feather on her pearl-encrusted bandeau, Bessie Smith, projected like this, might have been the ghost who haunts the dramatic action, an absent presence and polar opposite of the embittered, physically present, "unsatisfied, avid" (Cartier 1970) White nurse.



Figure 4. Bessie Smith. This image, found in the Albee dossier, was a possible source of inspiration for a projected image of the singer during performance. Image also found in the archives of *La Mort de Bessie Smith*, directed by Jean-Marie Serreau, 1970. (Reproduced with kind permission of New Orleans Jazz Museum).

Similarly, Serreau's *Funnyhouse* staged a double negation of cultures—this time in relation to Sarah's Black father and, significantly, her White mother. Closer examination of Figure 3 indicates that Sarah's suicide is accompanied by another woman's fatal ending. The latter is found hanging to the right of the image as if having jumped out of a window, her long blonde hair and clothing emphasizing and extending her Whiteness. This was likely Emmanuelle Parèze-Belda, who played Sarah's mother. Pierre Humbourg, reviewer for *Nice Matin*, confirms the significance of this detail: "[W]e become very afraid when seeing a lady, not at all black doing acrobatics…an accident so quickly happened" (23). The hapless gymnastics described by Humbourg constitute Serreau's addition to *Funnyhouse*. In the play-text, symbolic allusions are made to the heroine's Black father who "diseased my birth…killed my mother" (21), but no stage directions indicate the physical materialization of a fatal accident.

Critics remain divided over whether Sarah's suicide is the result of the heroine's inability to "unify . . . Victorian, Christian, and African avatars and doppelgangers" (Bower 8) or whether it is a more targeted act of assassination against her Black origins represented by her father (Wilkerson 72). The play-text indicates that Sarah's father "shot himself" (9), "hung himself in a Harlem hotel" (8) when Lumumba was assassinated; yet it also denies the father's suicide at the end of the play, hinting that it was a tragic invention of Sarah's mind that pushed her to her own self-annihilation. On the other hand, Sarah fantasizes a moment, when "the room will grow bright and [her] mother will come toward [her] smiling" (Kennedy 22), just before her own suicide. This could signal a ghostly apparition of the heroine's White mother—the mother's symbolic death—conjuring the metaphor of the flooding of consciousness with divine light just before death.

It seems likely, given the additional accident which befalls the White woman, that Serreau's production opted to tell Sarah's story as a suicide of both her Black and White sides. To cement the idea of White death, the bust of Queen Victoria, watching over the action,

collapses under its own weight. *Le Figaro* theatre reviewer Jean-Jacques Gautier describes:

> A bunch of hair falls to the ground. . . . Tzim-tzim, bang-bang, choo-choo, atchm, crash, bang, wallop! The orchestra creates a wild fracas that prevents us from hearing the slightest thing. Again, the falling hair and…to finish, the plaster-cast of Queen Victoria falls to the ground. (Gautier 11)

Queen Victoria haunts Sarah's imagination throughout the dramatic action and her death signals the end of imperialism that the monarch represented. Yet, together with the mother's death, it is not Whiteness in general but White women specifically who are targeted for destruction. Whereas Sarah finds it impossible to link together the disparate personages of her mind in "a logical relationship" (Kennedy 7), the double accident of the Serreau production (of the mother, of the Victoria bust) implies a metonymical relationship between the White women of the play that could also have extended to the third Caucasian woman in Sarah's psychological repertoire, the Duchess of Hapsburg.

Through their respective strategies, *Bessie Smith* and *Funnyhouse* create opportunities to counteract the double marginalization of Black women pointed out by intersectional feminism. In the former, Bessie Smith is de-centered, her subordination to the White nurse is made palpable by a projected photograph that cannot speak or move. On the other hand, Sarah in Serreau's *Funnyhouse* is at the heart of a wasteland of destroyed figures: the White Queen Victoria bust and mother, the heroine herself through her suicide.

Though I would caution against idealizing the heroine's demise, before the play's culmination Sarah appears to have more agency than Bessie Smith. Serreau invited Adrienne Kennedy to participate in rehearsal by paid invitation (financed by the Odéon theatre) in December 1967. Cayotte Bissainthe, sister of Toto who was cast as Sarah, played the role of translator. As Kennedy recounted, Serreau nodded along approvingly as the playwright read out some of her heroine Sarah's lines. At one point, she cried out, vocally resistant to the forces that would quash Sarah. Kennedy would recall with fondness

the director's respect for her input: "Serreau gave me the impression that everything I said was of importance, crucial: at the same time, I felt that he was studying my physical sensations, my emotions" (qtd in Auclaire-Tamaroff and Barthélémy 113). The director's collaboration with Kennedy focused on the power of the voice and words of three Black women—the character Sarah who finds restored agency in her voice, her creator Kennedy who had enacted this, and the translator Bissainthe who bridged the language gap between playwright and director. This reverses, quite literally, Black women's consignment to a "location that resists *telling*" (my emphasis) (Crenshaw 1242).

In this article, I have sketched out how Serreau's distancing from the BAM and Francophone Négritude, to embrace the negative universalism of the Theatre of the Absurd, potentially shone a spotlight on the intersectional nature of the discrimination facing Black women. In *Funnyhouse* and *Bessie Smith*, there appears a mutually assured negation of Black men and White women (particularly in the Kennedy production) and the social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s that developed around the question of their rights (in the Albee production). With *Funnyhouse,* I have argued, the Black heroine may have emerged as a visible and vocal opposite of the "location that resists telling" (1242) pointed out by Kimberlé Crenshaw.

This article's comparison of the two US plays in Serreau's repertoire leaves us with several questions. Given Sarah's vocal agency in *Funnyhouse,* to what extent would Serreau's strategy of reinstating Bessie Smith in the form of a static, silent photograph (if my hypothesis is accurate) have worked to empower the eponymous subject? This question is especially pertinent given that the production process seemed not to have involved (in any archival or anecdotal evidence I have found) the intervention of Black women, unlike in rehearsals for *Funnyhouse*. We might wonder how the characterization of Bessie Smith would have differed had a Black woman been involved in the theatre-making process.

Alternatively, could Serreau's earlier encounter with Kennedy have nourished the director's approach in *Bessie Smith*? The archives indicate

a double bill of *Funnyhouse* and *Bessie Smith* that suggest the former's influence on the latter. A series of contracts with cast members, an itinerary, several inventories for the reservation of hotel rooms, and a double synopsis of Kennedy's and Albee's plays (presumably for the purposes of marketing) demonstrate that *Funnyhouse* was revived in 1970 alongside *Bessie Smith* on a tour of southwestern France between the 2 and 11 December. Serreau invited several of the actors who had played parts in the 1968 *Funnyhouse* (Toto Bissainthe, Danielle Van Bercheycke, Marie-Claude Benoît, Douta Seck, and Akonio Dolo) for this tour, which was hosted by the Théâtre du Midi, a network of theatres in the Southwest headed by Jean Deschamps until 1975.

It is, however, crucial not to read too much into this detail. Contrary to how it has been officially remembered,[14] *Bessie Smith* was also a standalone production at the SIGMA festival in Bordeaux a full month before the Kennedy-Albee double bill. It should equally not be forgotten that the aesthetic paradigm that drew Serreau to both plays—the Absurd—was dominated by White names. Negative universalism may contain potential to highlight and even destroy the gendered and racial ideologies constricting the lives of Black women, as I have suggested, but its distinction from the universalism "of hope" (Yala Kisukidi 2020) propounded by the intellectuals and artists of Francophone Négritude must not be elided. Black women, though sometimes active participants, seem still not to be "the privileged subject" (Yala Kisukidi 2020) in the Absurdist articulations of universalism adumbrated in this article. It behooves us, finally, to avoid hagiographic re-tellings in moves to recuperate both Serreau and the plays connected with the Theatre of the Absurd as potential enactors of intersectional feminism.

WORKS CITED

AUCLAIRE-TAMAROFF, Élisabeth and Barthélémy. *Jean-Marie Serreau, Découvreur de théâtres.* L'Arbre Verdoyant, 1986.

BARRIOS, Olga. "African American Women in the Performing Arts." *African American Women's Literature,* edited by Danille Taylor. Cambridge UP, 2009.
BLEC, Yannick M. "Réinvention de la mémoire noire étatsunienne dans les récits du *Black Arts Movemement.*" *Babel : littératures plurielles,* vol. 40, 2019, journals.openedition.org/babel/8168. Accessed 11 August 2021.
BOWER, Martha Gilman. *"Color" Struck under the Gaze: Ethnicity and Pathology of Being in the Plays of Johnson, Hurston, Childress, and Kennedy*. Praeger, 2003.
CARMODY, Jim. "Creating the theatrical museum: theatrical visions of an alternative America; cultural politics and the Festival d'Automne." *The Paris Jigsaw: Internationalism and the City's Stages 1972-2000,* edited by David Bradby and Maria M. Delgado. Manchester UP, 2002.
CARPENTER, Faedra. *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance*. U of Michigan P, 2014.
CARTIER, Jacqueline. Press Cutting. Dossier *La Mort de Bessie Smith*, 1970.
CHALAYE, Sylvie. "Jean-Marie Serreau, l'architecte d'un rêve aux couleurs d'Afrique." *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre*, vol. 260, 2013, pp. 351-64.
CHOUPAUT, Yves-Marie. "*Drôle de baraque* d'Adrienne Kennedy, *Chicago* de Sam Shepard." *Paris Normandie*, 22 March 1968. Press reviews on Adrienne Kennedy's *Drôle de baraque* and Sam Shepard's *Chicago*, BnF Archives, p. 23.
CRENSHAW, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1989, pp. 1241-99.
DOMENACH, Jean-Marie. "L'Explosion." Special issue: "Les États-Unis en révolution." *Esprit*, vol. 10, 1970, pp. 483-94.
ESSLIN, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd.* Penguin, 1961.
FALB, Lewis. *American Drama in Paris, 1945-1970*. U of North Carolina P, 1973.

GAUTIER, Jean-Jacques. "Spectacle Shepard-Kennedy." *Le Figaro,* 11 March 1968. Press reviews on Adrienne Kennedy's *Drôle de baraque* and Sam Shepard's *Chicago*, p. 11.
HATCH, James. "From Hansberry to Shange." *A History of African American Theatre*, edited by Errol Hill and James Hatch. Cambridge UP, 2003.
HUMBOURG, Pierre. "Moins comestible." *Nice Matin*, 17 March 1968, Press reviews on Adrienne Kennedy's *Drôle de Baraque* and Sam Shepard's *Chicago*, p. 23.
KENNEDY, Adrienne. "Funnyhouse of a Negro." *In One Act.* U of Minnesota P, 1988.
LA Mort de Bessie Smith. 1970. Dossier in the archives of the Fonds Jean-Marie Serreau. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Arts du spectacle. 4-COL-32(6).
LIVINGSTON, Robert Eric. "Decolonizing the Theatre: Césaire, Serreau and the Drama of Negritude." *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance*, edited by J. Ellen Gainor. Routledge, 1995, pp. 182-198.
SCHOR, Naomi. "The Crisis of French Universalism." *Yale French Studies*, vol. 100, 2001, pp. 43-64.
NEAL, Larry. "The Black Arts Movement." *The Drama Review TDR*, vol.12, no. 4, 1968, pp. 28-39.
WILKERSON, Margaret. "Diverse Angles of Vision: Two Black Women Playwrights." *Intersecting Boundaries: The Theater of Adrienne Kennedy*, edited by Paul Bryant-Jackson and Lois More Overbeck. U of Minnesota P, 1992, pp. 58-75.
WONG-GU KIM, Daniel. "In the Tradition: Amiri Baraka, Black Liberation, and Avant-garde Praxis in the US." *African American Review*, vol. 37, no. 2/3, 2003, pp. 345-63.
YALA KISUKIDI, Nadia. "The Universal in the Bush." *Esprit*, vol. 1-2, 2020, pp. 47-59. https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.northwestern.edu/dist/d/5576/files/2021/06/Luniversel-dans-la-brousse_ENG.pdf. Accessed 14 August 2023.

[1] Owing to the limits of the archive, and in particular the absence of actors' voices in theatre memorialization, there is limited scope to extend reflections here on Van Bercheycke's impact on Serreau's productions. See: Antoine Verger, "La Mémoire des acteurs", paper given at "Jean-Marie Serreau : Architecte d'un rêve théâtral," Théâtre de la Tempête, Cartoucherie de Vincennes, 11 December 2021.

[2] All translations of archival documents and French-language scholarly resources are my own.

[3] Baraka explained that the Black Arts Movement's anti-Whiteness was a consequence of being "tied up so publicly" (xxv) with Whites, who had only disappointed and betrayed African Americans, in the period before. Qtd in William J. Harris. "Introduction." *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, edited by William J. Harris. Thunder's Mouth P, 1991.

[4] Robert Liensol and Corinne Gosset, for instance, worked on both Bourseiller's and Serreau's shows.

[5] For an insight into the tensions between the BAM and the Francophone Négritude movement, see Amiri Baraka's comment on Aimé Césaire in *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, pp. 322-32.

[6] As the recent exhibition *Senghor et les arts. Réinventer l'universel* (February-November 2023) at the Musée du Quai Branly (Paris) has shown, Senghor did not assume this tenet of French Republicanism unquestioningly but rather adapted it to the goal of decolonization. His writings and speeches revealed his conviction in the pluralistic promotion of African arts as a form of cultural diplomacy with and in the Western world. Nadia Yala Kisukidi similarly describes proponents, such as Senegalese intellectual Aloune Diop, at the 1956 World Congress of Men of Culture developing an alternative vision in which Africa would debunk Europe from its position of the "privileged subject of enunciation" of universalism (8). It would additionally be erroneous to assume that all Négritude leaders agreed about universalism's place in the anti-imperialist fight. Frantz Fanon criticized Senghor, during the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome in 1959, for not placing a praxis of national liberation at the heart of the decolonialist project. For Fanon, the idea of a common humanity and a renewed universalism would only follow on from, and not precede, the will of the people galvanized in national liberation movements. See: Nadia Yala Kisukidi, "Vie éthique et pensée de la libération. Lecture critique des usages senghoriens de Marx à partir de Fanon". *Actuel Marx*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2014. https://www.cairn.info/revue-actuel-marx-2014-1-page-60.htm. Accessed 11 August 2023.

[7] Though dictionaries may translate "métissage" as "inter-" or "cross-breeding", I have opted for "inter-racial union" as a deliberate alternative to these

animalizing terms. “Métisse”, used to refer to someone who has parents of different racial identity categories, is commonly used in the French language, and is additionally more neutral than the American “miscegenation.”

[8] *Senghor et les arts. Réinventer l’universel* (February-November 2023), Musée du Quai Branly (Paris).

[9] This latter play was, incidentally, a phenomenal hit with Parisian audiences in the 1960s (Falb 69).

[10] This is not to say though that there were no women artists in the BAM. Audre Lorde, Ntozake Shange, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Sonia Sanchez counted themselves among the movement’s ranks. The BAM’s women protested not just White supremacy in US society at large but also male domination in the Black Power movement. See, for instance, Cheryl Clarke, *After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*. Rutgers, 2005; James Smethurst, “Retraining the Heartworks: Women in Atlanta’s Black Arts Movement”, in *Want To Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*. New York UP, 2009, pp. 205-222.

[11] The Albee dossier’s reference to a failed Babel could also constitute an ironic reference to the Théâtre du Babylone, founded by Serreau in 1952 with Éléonore Hirt. According to Sylvie Chalaye, this theatre was proof of a “Babylonian utopia” (*utopie babélienne*), as it played host to Serreau’s first productions with actors from the French Antilles and from Francophone Africa (Chalaye 351).

[12] These details have been obtained by cross-referencing the production with an estimate for the production décor, found in the French National Archives’ holdings on the Odéon theatre. Anonymous, “Devis Estimatif pour la pièce Victoria,” 6 February 1968. Dossier 4 “Activités Diverses.” Archives Nationales, Saint-Denis. Fonds 55 AJ: AJ/55/403.

[13] As is detailed in the estimate housed at the French National Archives. “Devis Estimatif.” 6 February 1968.

[14] In *Jean-Marie, Serreau, Découvreur de théâtres,* Élisabeth Auclaire-Tamaroff and Barthélémy state that *Funnyhouse* was reprised alongside Albee’s play at the Bordeaux SIGMA festival in 1970, on dates which no archival evidence backs up (208).

Democratic Rhetorics and Anti-Black Realities in US Improv Comedy

Michel Büch, PhD.

Abstract: Improvisational theater and democratic political practice share the assumption of a universal, Humanist egalitarianism. However, improv's overwhelmingly white demography and recurring instances of on-stage anti-Blackness suggest there are specifically anti-Black modes of exclusion that cannot be grasped within this idealist framework. The essay recognizes the urgency of a more profound and structural theoritization and argues in the Afropessimist tradition that anti-Blackness is structurally constitutive of modern Human subjectivity, which is required for egalitarian play in improv as well as political participation. It also addresses the (un)conscious and embodied structures of feeling that govern the white, intuitive decision-making so essential to the performances and practices of improv and democracy. Engaging with three accounts of anti-Black instances on the improv stage, the essay zooms in on the racial epistemological and affective ground for Humanist intuition, reveals the shortcomings of concepts like "stereotype" or "misrepresentation", and suggests different routes for analyzing the presence of (anti-)Blackness in improvised performance in and against the dehumanizing paradigm of modernity. Analyzing improv as a *pars pro toto* case study, this essay reaches far beyond its immediate object by addressing its core political assumptions, questioning the liberal belief system of teleological and hopeful improvement of (and naming its complicity in) the anti-Black condition in which Western subjects and non-subjects continue to exist.

Résumé : Le théâtre d'improvisation et la pratique politique démocratique partagent l'hypothèse d'un égalitarisme humaniste universel. Cependant, la présence majoritairement blanche des acteur.rice.s du théâtre d'improvisation et les exemples récurrents de racisme anti-noir sur scène suggèrent qu'il existe des modes d'exclusion spécifiquement anti-Noirs qui ne peuvent être compris

au sein de ce cadre artistique idéaliste. L'essai reconnaît l'urgence d'une théorisation plus profonde et structurelle et soutient, dans la tradition afropessimiste, que l'anti-Noirceur est structurellement constitutive de la subjectivité humaine moderne, qui est pourtant requise pour un jeu égalitaire dans le théâtre d'improvisation aussi bien que dans l'engagement politique. L'article aborde également les structures (in)conscientes et incarnées des affects qui régissent la prise de décision intuitive fondée sur la blanchéité qui est si centrale pour la représentation de la pratique du théâtre d'improvisation et de la démocratie. En explorant trois récits anti-Noirs joués sur une scène d'improvisation, l'essai se concentre sur le fondement épistémologique et affectif racialisé de l'intuition humaniste, révélant les lacunes de concepts tels que le "stéréotype" et la "distorsion représentationnelle" afin de suggérer différentes voies pour analyser la présence de la (anti-)Noirceur sur scène, à la fois au sein et contre le paradigme déshumanisant de la modernité. Analysant l'improvisation comme une étude de cas *pars pro toto*, cet essai dépasse son objet initial en questionnant ses présupposés politiques fondamentaux et en remettant en question le système de croyance libéral et sa foi en l'amélioration téléologique et optimiste (et en dénonçant sa complicité avec celle-ci) de la condition anti-Noire dans laquelle les sujets et les non-sujets occidentaux continuent d'exister.

Keywords: Antiblackness, Humanism, critiques of Modernity, improv comedy, popular culture, intuition, democracy, play

Mots-clés : Anti-noirceur, Humanisme, critiques de la modernité, comédie d'improvisation, culture populaire, intuition, démocratie, jeu

Author's Note and Trigger Warning

The following is a condensed version of the book-length study *Whiteface*, an extensive anti-racist academic examination of anti-Blackness in improv (Büch). *Whiteface* addresses how the fundamentally racial axioms of modern Western Humanism[1] play out in US popular culture generally and improv comedy specifically. Based

on interviews with practicing improvisers, the multidisciplinary work mobilizes neuroscience, psychoanalysis, Afropessimist theory, humor studies, popular cultural studies, performance studies, Frankfurt school critical theory and several other disciplines to lay out how global anti-Blackness functions discursively and affectively as a structuring principle for the continual, lasting, and autopoietic procedures of re-making the white modern subject as enslaver.[2]

This essay discusses racist acts on the improv stage. They are reproduced here as related and authorized by the Black-racialized performers who suffered them.

Introduction

Theater is often described as a democratic art form. The aesthetic links up with the political based on a shared sociality constituted by equal subjects both on the stage and in the audience. Further, it provides an aesthetic space for the negotiation of conflicting ideas among those political subjects, facilitates a communal experience, and trains the audience in empathy for different viewpoints, as Oscar Eutis, Artistic Director of the Public Theater (New York City), has stated in a widely received TED talk: "The idea that truth comes from the collision of different ideas and the emotional muscle of empathy are the necessary tools of democratic citizenship" (2:43). This relates to post-postmodern theorists like Rancière, who describes aesthetic experience as

> a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in and the way in which they are 'equipped' to adapt to it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible. (72)

Improv as a genre claims to have stepped up to the democracy game since the 1950s, and this ideal remains part of its self-image today. Consider this description from Paul Sills, founder of The Compass Players and The Second City:[3]

> Improvisational theater is the closest thing you'll find to democracy in the theater. It opens up the possibility of play between the people in the group, and play is an expression of our equality. The crowd I work with regard themselves as equals. (qtd. in Sweet 20)

Differing from aesthetics aimed at direct political impact—like Brecht's or Müller's—improv mobilizes a more traditionally Humanist notion of a democratic practice that does not immediately prompt a Ranciérian pluralism. Rather than foregrounding the ideal of conflicting ideas or staging multiplicity, improv practice is built around the concept of agreement: actors are to say yes to each other to the point where they appear to achieve what improv guru Del Close has called "group mind" (92), which is believed to lead to deeper and more substantial truths than an individual could know or articulate. Sills describes improv as an attempt "to go into the possibilities of human development," stating that "theater is responsible for the image of the human [and] the concerns of the artists are the concerns of the people" (qtd. in Sweet 17-18). This image of the Human includes the possibility of play and holistic development among equals, linking Humanism and democracy ("the people") via improv.[4] But who makes up "the people" with whom "the artists" are concerned, and which bodies qualify as Human? Seham asked this long ago: "When the group works as one mind, whose mind is it? How does the seeming rightness, inevitability, and spontaneity of improv mask the unmarked power of hegemony" (65)?

In this essay, I discuss how US improv comedy mobilizes democratic-theatrical idealism to continuously manufacture white ignorance of an observable, racially exclusive reality. I reroute the debate about onstage racialization beyond (mis-)representation or stereotypification to address the axiomatic discursive frameworks and libidinal economies of improv as a social practice. Improv's ongoing racializing practices (on and off the stage) can be read as symptoms of the theater-as-democracy ideal itself, and racist reality sometimes irrupts on the stage. Dewayne Perkins, Black improv artist, shares one such experience:

> I did a show … in which a guy initiated a scene with me. He was a white male. He initiated the scene by, "Ok, now put on this noose." And I was

> like "Whoa, in real life how would I respond to this?" And I was like … "I don't think you're being really sensitive to my cultural background, so I am not gonna do this." It was a response in character but also like, "How would I as a human in this situation respond to this?" (personal conversation)[5]

Drawing on Perkins and two other accounts from Black improv artists in the US, I argue that improv offers a case study of the dehumanizing anti-Blackness that structures modern artistic and political subjectivity. At the center of this discussion lies the concept of a culturally specific white intuition that governs white people's imagination and immediate perception of as well as their reactions to the world—often beyond conscious intentions. In the first half of the article, I lay out the axiomatic and affective ground for intuition not as a conduit of higher truths or social alternatives, but a pathway into "the same universal consciousness" even enabling "prophecies" as improv producer Charna Halpern expressed it (93). I read it rather as a vehicle for the structural anti-Blackness inherited from US theater history and modern subjectivity per se. I then consider the three accounts by practicing improvisers that demonstrate its appearance on the stage.

Black Absence, Democracy, and the Primal Scene of US Theatrical Entertainment

Despite its association with art forms specifically marked as Black (jazz, stand-up comedy), improv has always been overwhelmingly white. Black absence poses an intricate problem for contemporary improv because the latter's discursive autopoiesis thrives on seemingly non-racial concepts like equality, a welcoming community, relatability, the assumption that marginalized voices can be made equal via humor, and even the possibility of social healing. The (putatively paradoxical) Black absence in improv has long been a source of occasional unease for its white practitioners. When asked in 1976 why there were "so few Blacks in improvisation," Roger Bowen, an early producer of improvised theater, described improv as a "cosmopolitan phenomenon" and improvisers as "sufficiently liberated from their

ethnic backgrounds to identify with whatever is going on throughout the world," whereas Black people were "not at that point yet [because they were] more ethnic in their orientation" (qtd. in Sweet 40). Bowen's statement exemplifies both how improv's whiteness is configured—namely, through the propagation of a general Humanity from which Black-racialized bodies are excluded—and how an essentialist blaming those absent for their ascribed insufficiencies serves to maintain improv's integrity. Such immediate insight is rare today: left and liberal sentiment, moralism, and investments in redemptive politics veil the view of the *a priori* anti-Blackness that not only structures US popular theater practice but also creates the sociopolitical grid which makes it possible to be left, liberal, or both in the first place.

Building on Hartman, I read "the theater of the marketplace that wed festivity and the exchange of captive bodies" as the primal scene of US popular theatrical entertainment (Hartman 1997: 37). The spectacularized staging of enslaved, Black-racialized bodies predetermined the use of Black bodies in the two theater genres of the time, minstrelsy and melodrama:

> Despite differences between their respective conventions and stylistic devices, the uses made of the black body established continuities between minstrelsy and melodrama that surpassed their generic differences … The terror of pleasure – the violence that undergirded the comic moment in minstrelsy – and the pleasure of terror – the force of evil that propelled the plot of melodrama and fascinated the spectator – filiated the coffle, the auction block, the popular stage, and the plantation recreations in a scandalous equality. (Hartman 1997: 26-32)

In recognition of the fact that anti-Blackness transcends genre and moralist intentions, all US popular performance must be read in this historical trajectory. This holds especially true for the niche of amateur theater: in 1930, Carl Wittke, "an unabashed minstrel enthusiast," lamented the disappearance of the American minstrel show "except as a vehicle for amateurs" (qtd. in Watkins 98). If improv communities today were to understand their doing as part of this trajectory, Black absence would appear less paradoxical to them.

The same blind spot applies to democracy as a concept, which presupposes that those participating in it regard themselves (and qualify) as political subjects—a status from which modernity has always already precluded people racialized as Black. Ever since ratio-centric modernity invented *race* to fill "the matrix slot of Otherness," which had been occupied by infidels and heretics in the theocentric descriptive statement of the Middle Ages, Blackness served as the reassuring (b)order against which the white, bourgeois, political, Western subject could define itself (Wynter 2003: 265-67). The modern self cannot be separated from the violent, colonialist, and enslavist dehumanization of its colonized and racialized Others and requires their banishment from civic society up to this day:

> through chattel slavery the world gave birth and coherence to both its joys of domesticity and to its struggles of political discontent; and with these joys and struggles the Human was born, but not before it murdered the Black, forging a symbiosis between the political ontology of Humanity and the social death of Blacks. (Wilderson 2010: 20-21)

If it is suggested nowadays that theater may help "to educate the demos in the deliberative reason, critical judgment, and civic values that undergirded political life" (Halpern 545), this "political life" has no bearing whatsoever for those positioned as socially dead within the anti-Black enslavist regime that is Western modernity.

White subjectivity rarely recognizes itself as being of and representing a specific cultural context, failing to see that whiteness is not universal and—though it *entitles* them—does not *enable* its subjects to undergo universal experience or speak universal truth. Yet, improv discourse abounds with ideas of "breaking down barriers" of cultural limitations (Frost and Yarrow 199), of an imagined *subjectlessness* (Lösel 172). The assumption that a subject can voluntarily transcend the laws of its own subjectivity is symptomatic of the ways in which Western Man "overrepresent[s] itself as if it were the human itself" while making this historically specific modality invisible to those who understand and experience themselves through it (Wynter 2003: 260). Humanism has diminished the modern discursive framework

to a "racial fantasyland" (Mills 18) in which white subjects feel, think, speak, act, emote, intuit in their culturally specific ways.

Race, then, does not denote a feature or avenue for discrimination. As a structuring principle of the very Human sphere that white people inhabit politically, emotionally, and psychologically, race and Blackness are "fundamentally the issue of the genre of the [modern] human" (Wynter 2003: 288). Blackness is a pre-social, pre-political structural marker that divides the civic space of modernity from its non-civic surroundings and thus *creates* that political space by delimitation. It does not refer to a cultural core with an origin and telos but is an arbitrary signifier of an abject space outside of civil society. Accordingly, when we speak of democracy or political negotiability in general, we are rhetorizing in a specifically anti-Black tradition that grants status, capacity, and democratic participation to whites only.

Play, Performance, Intuition

These enslavist, capitalist affective configurations shape social, political, and aesthetic practices that are never just "in themselves," as David Pasquesi, a well-known, white-positioned improv veteran suggests:

> inclusion, acceptance, and embracing differences are helpful in improvisation … so I think the problem with discrimination in improvisation lies more in the administration and business hierarchy and not in improvisation itself. (personal conversation)[6]

Yet improv, like other forms of performance art (or play), realizes itself only through practice or content. It does not exist *in itself* as an abstract or ideal in any meaningful way, given that this ideal is always already undermined by its own actualization. And because improv thrives on free, on-the-spot decision-making, that content is predisposed to re-present modes of being in the world that its mostly white actors embody, thus undercutting its abstract democratic ideals. Improvisers do not have the time to carefully weigh the pros and cons of a specific decision but rely on what their intuition makes them feel and do. This means that by necessity they draw on affective and discursive configurations always already in place within and without them.

Neuroscience has shown how intuition helps us short-circuit the complex rationale our body goes through when deciding on "the next best thing to do" (Claxton 10). Before a thought reaches consciousness, the whole body has always already decided upon the best behavior in any given situation. Damasio names various biochemical processes operating "outside consciousness [as] the source of what we call intuition, the mysterious mechanism by which we arrive at the solution of a problem without reasoning toward it" (191-92). Claxton reminds us that intuition is based on experience and is therefore fallible (278). *Experience* here refers to any acquired knowledge or language system and does not mean that, for example, phobic Blackness is based on actual experiences white subjects had with Black-racialized people. It does, however, involve the fact that by way of embodied cultural codification Blackness both structures and is being mapped onto the abjective sensation in the white body. The white subject experiences itself "a good man or woman of one's kind" (Davis qtd. in Wynter 2003: 271) through anti-Black abjection. The desire to know and feel oneself as this *good, white, coherent, sociable, and fully Human subject* is achieved *qua* anti-Black abjection and can predetermine the "next best thing to do" vis-à-vis Blackness in the heat of the improv stage. I am following Broeck's use of the term *abjection*

> in the post-Fanonian vein in which it appears in Saidiya Hartman's and Hortense Spiller[s]'s work [as] a theoretical concept to discuss the underside of white Western modernity's terms of human sociability and subjectivity. (13)

White subjects do not passively undergo abjective states—as Kristeva's use of the concept implies—but act as agents of anti-Black abjection in all its violent and dehumanizing forms for their own jouissance as well as biopsychological maintenance. Anti-Black abjection is, then, central to the "libidinal economy of civil society" that structures and drives the psychosociality of white modernity writ large (Wilderson 2010a: 15).[7] The axiomatic framework and affective ground of this psychosociality shape white, intuitive reactions to and imaginations of Blackness on and off the stage fundamentally.

Because white improvising subjects are psychologically predisposed to anti-Black abjection to maintain their coherent "sense of self" (Wynter 2001: 54) as a homeostatic ideal, their repertoire for encounters with people racialized as Black cannot be fully addressed within the rhetorics of stereotypification, misrepresentation, or discrimination. Instead, a more vertical analysis of the affective structures that lead to dehumanizing improv scenes with Black performers is required. The white improviser's sense of self is tied to the non-subjectivity of bodies racialized as Black. It must actively remind itself of its codified but biologically marked anti-Blackness by imagining, addressing, or acting against Blackness within the terms of the conclusively anti-Black modern matrix of sociality, among them propertization, enslaveability, killability, and materiality. White intuition does not "stereotype" Blackness but continually dehumanizes it through these terms for its own self-preservation.

Audience, Actors, and the Abrogation of Polysemy

Improv's aesthetics differ from those of scripted theater fundamentally because there has been no prior planning in terms of content—no motion, gesture, sentence is premeditated. Lacking this planning and usually performed on a bare stage with no props, improvised acts are "both *specific*, defining itself by its own parameters . . . and *polysemantic*" (Frost and Yarrow 208): it is assumed that at the top of a scene, anything can happen and anybody can signify anything. Frost and Yarrow argue that to allow for and make use of this assumed polysemy of onstage bodies and events, "the practice of improvisation works initially to *free* the producer of meanings, both as an individual and in the network of relationships in which he or she operates" (187). Describing the improviser's ideal state of mind, Frost and Yarrow draw on Lecoq's *disponibilité*:

> a charged and sensual state [in which] the actor is fully inhabiting the world outside and within his body . . . *poised* between all possibilities [and thus has] more chance of avoiding the trap of cliché. (197)

Not only is the improvising self putatively "liberated both psychologically and semiotically" (204) but the improv audience "is active,

too – more than usually when watching something improvised" (208). While it is a truism that aesthetic reception in general involves "the creation of new, often unsuspected or unintended, meanings from the signals received," improv is indeed a special case. In a neuroscientific study Engel and Keller (2011) have shown that audience knowledge (or assumption) of a performance being improvised changes brain activity in comparison with the reception of preconceived ones: the audience quite literally plays along with the performers as they always see and know as much as they do. This leads to a heightened identification with the performers on the level of play. Therefore, the ideal of *disponibilité*, the acceptance of fluid, dynamic, and unstable meaning-making also applies to the audience. However, such claims for "neutral" perceptive states are a luxury entailed by the white default of modern Humanism; when it comes to Blackness, the much-cherished potentiality and polysemy are abrogated immediately.

In the following, three anecdotes by Black-racialized improvisers demonstrate the need to reconfigure how we think about Humanistic play as performance beyond stereotypical misrepresentation.[8] They also provide entry points into different ways of theorizing what happens on the improv stage when white performers rely on intuition. Consider this first example, related by improviser and comedian Joel Boyd:

> There will be scenes where just because one person in the scene is black, it changes the tone of the entire scene. I definitely know there are scenes that I have done, in which I got a laugh—or not a laugh—because I was black. I remember a scene in a freeze tag jam. I tagged out somebody who was on the ground, and I was on my knees. The first line from the other two people, who were my friends, they didn't mean to do this, but they said: "Oh, he's ours now." And I thought I was being an animal. I wasn't even thinking a racist thing; I was being an animal that they found. And then immediately, the crowd goes "Ooooooooooh." And then we realized what they saw. They thought it was a slave scene. It just comes up in weird situations like that. (personal conversation)[9]

Black enslavement enters this scene although the players are unsuspecting, even unconscious of it. When Boyd, as an improvising Black body, enacts an animal on all fours and white improvising bodies lay

property claims to that Black body (however fictional), the scene becomes something different. For the audience in this setting, it is more plausible that Boyd is portraying an enslaved person than a dog. The enslavist interpretation of this scene makes the most immediate or "intuitive" sense, regardless of what the actors intended to signify. The audience feedback determines what they have seen and immediately minimizes the polysemantic potential the scene had in theory. The "democratic" assumption that everyone can be everything in improv, the "increased capacity for meaning, which means that additional levels or possibilities of significance are opened up" (Frost and Yarrow 208) present themselves as false in view of a Black body's a priori overdetermination actualized on the stage. While white improvisers can act as trees, spoons, tables, or dogs, Black performers—by way of white, collective intuition—most immediately represent "being owned." Even if unintended and only realized through the audience reaction, the intuitive framing of a Black character as literal property is not a stereotype about the character, but a self-reassuring, solipsist gesture for and by the white subject. Restaging the figures of the Black slave and white master reenacts the racial distinction necessary for the white subject's continued autopoiesis. In a regime that conflates personhood with un-ownability, performing ownership over Others is a mode of self-actualization.[10]

The notion of propertizing bodies also resonates at frequencies other than Boyd's overt example of enslavement. In improvised theater, "making somebody a prop" means exercising control over one's scene partner, reducing their creative options, constraining them to an unchangeable function in service of the propertizer's creative interests, rendering the former inflexible, foreclosing their potential agency as improvisers. Very much like the actual, theatrical prop, which "never loses contact with its materiality" (Rokem qtd. in Sofer 14), making someone a prop in improv often happens by way of foregrounding the materiality of the body, thus diverting attention away from its cognition and creativity. The improviser is treated as mere matter without the capacity to control their own signification, stripping them of the autonomy so essential to democratic free play. Consider this anecdote from Black-racialized improviser Kimberly Michelle Vaughn:

> I did a jam at Second City . . . with teachers and new students. We did a scene, and it was in German, we were all doing German accents and whatever. I was the main person, and apparently, they were scientists. Then they said: "Ok, we're going to strip off your skin, and put a white skin on." These are teachers. White teachers, telling me they were gonna put someone's white skin on me. You could already feel the audience gasping. I was like, "You are not going to strip off my skin as a white person." And the white doctor scientist was like, "No, we're going to strip off your skin because we want you to be no longer insecure. We want you to blend in with society." This is going on onstage. And then I was going on: "No. It must be so hard to be white, with all that privilege." And one of the other scientists went on: "Oh, it's so hard being vite, because ze guilt, ze guilt…" (personal conversation)[11]

In Vaughn's experience, the intuitive default of treating a Black-racialized scene partner exclusively in terms of Black flesh speaks to Wynter's elaboration of the anti-Black matrix, in which Blackness becomes pure matter without the rationality or spirit of a fully-endowed Human being. When a Black body is "made a prop" in improv, it becomes a "will-less actant" in Saidiya Hartman's term (1997: 62), manipulated by white, creative agency. Because the Black body is "seen as paradigmatically a body" (Mills 51), Black improvisers are always at risk of being "made a prop" *qua* the foregrounding of their bodies' materiality as it is *constantly intuited by white subjects*. More, the foregrounding of this specifically female body has nothing to do with stereotypification. It is an act of male anti-Black abjection that lacks the core necessary for a stereotype: a potentially non-stereotypical subject beyond anatomy. Spectacularizing a female racialized body, this scene speaks instead to the obsession of white people with Black physicality, and evokes the use of Black bodies as matter by and for Western (white) science without consent (see Savitt; Davidson). Whether in these cases or on the contemporary improv stage, anatomy and materiality are not stereotypes, because they explicitly do not assume (or require) a stereotypable, i.e., simplifiable or reducible, but principally complex Human being or character behind or within that anatomy.

Grounded in what can be termed *white, intuitive play*, improv proves a dangerous field for Black performers and audiences. Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott conceptualizes "play" as an essential mode of identity formation and maintenance. Central to his theory is the concept of "transitional objects." Transitional objects function as the first *possessions* of a child and are "both created and discovered [yielding] freedom and joy to babies and *all who were once babies*" (Winnicott xi-xii, my italics). Play, for children and adults alike, involves aggression and can be related to fantasies of self-making through fantasies of destruction and ownership claims. I suggest that in adult play, the terms and objects for those claims are tied up with modern anti-Black subjectivity: given the cultural specificities of the *languaging*, adult, white modern subject, Blackness is discursively mapped onto this fantasy of possession, linking the jouissance of play as embodied by the infant to a cultured abjective jouissance *qua* dehumanizing, propertizing, anti-Black abjection. This has little to do with Humanist imagination of play among equals. White, adult play is the culturally specific performance of personal self-assurance based on the destruction of ownable, killable, and fungible (Black) transitional phenomena.

The introductory anecdote from Dewayne Perkins exemplifies how this self-assurance plays out in improv. Right at the top of the scene, when allegedly anything is possible, the presence of a Black improviser causes his white scene partner to open with a fictional lynching, the most brutal and horribly iconic element in the US "cultural repertoire" (Markowitz). Once again, what Sills calls "possibilities of play" are not evenly distributed, and the level playing field of democracy proves a fiction. Moreover, consider the uncanny summary Winnicott gives of the special qualities in the relationship between the individual and the transitional object-phenomenon: "the infant [white subject] assumes rights over the object, and we agree to this assumption" (7). In this scene, property claims are made by a white subject over the Black improviser's body, which he assumes is available as an unowned resource and site for gratuitous violence. This imagined and ascribed lack of autonomous will on the part of an otherwise externalized transitional Black phenomenon enables the white subject to experi-

ence that object's dehumanization, propertization, and destruction: "The subject says to the object: 'I destroyed you,' … 'I love you.' 'You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you'" (121). Whiteness creates a transitional Blackness not only to imagine itself in omnipotent, magical control over these external "me-extensions" (135), but to be able to imagine itself at all. Both the violent abjection and its affective effect are sociogenically inscribed into the subject-bodies of the modern West as their subject-making principle. Within the sociability thusly created, a Black-racialized body can only exist "as fungible object" (Wilderson 2010a: 56), not as an agent of play. Approached with the opening statement, "Now put on this noose," Perkins is not stereotypically depicted as a representative of another culture. He is imagined and treated as an enslaved, propertized, thingified, and killable body, as "that walking destruction which became known as the Black" (Wilderson 2010a: 20). Death is not a stereotype. There are no stereotypes outside of Humanity.

Improv stages do not always feature examples like the above, even though such moments do occur with disturbing repetitiveness. What matters in these moments is their very possibility and their intelligibility: they can happen at any time and are immediately intelligible within the anti-Black default of white, modern meaning-making, spontaneous or not. They are no more absurd, grotesque, or violent than what Black-racialized people endure every day in different shapes and forms. And again, they transcend concepts like stereotypification, which are still mobilized to address such events. When Boyd is intuitively and collectively interpreted within the enslavist imagination politically and libidinally grounded in the auction block, when Vaughn is told she will have her "skin stripped off" by white German scientists, when Perkins is defined as a lynchable body at the top of the scene, these are not matters of a culture being misrepresented. These moments are caused by the neurological and biophysical experience of culturally prefigured on-the-spot intuition through which white subjects approach bodies that they read intuitively as non-Human entities available for gratuitous violence of all sorts, as Black first and nothing second.

It cannot be stressed enough, however, that the epistemological pessimism driving this analysis addresses Black-racialized improvisers' discursive capacity for agency, not their individual *capabilities*. Sexton reminds us "that nothing in afro-pessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and the world that the world lives in." (28) In each of these examples, the performers can be understood to persevere: Boyd *endures* a situation that perhaps no one enjoyed but everyone was caught up in. Vaughn says "no" to an offer by a fellow improviser and is satisfied in hindsight that she "stood [her] ground" even though it was *uncomfortable* (in a world that proclaims mutual support and safety).[12] Perkins calls out the racism and reminds himself of his own being human, *laboring* extra hard to prove it to the present audience. What meanings do these performances of refusal hold for "the world that the world lives in?"

When Winnicott talks about the ongoing destruction of the transitional object, he notes that the subject's ongoing re-creation of itself "depends on the object's capacity to survive [which] in this context, means 'not retaliate'" (120). Whenever Black improvisers speak back, "stand their ground," and reject propertization and dehumanization, this to some extent does qualify as retaliation and thus transgression against the white sociality that can imagine this kind of agency only under the oxymoron of "rebellious property" (Judy 225). Self-possessed property does not make sense in any Humanistic way. More, it fundamentally threatens the subject of Humanism because, as Judy writes, it "exhibits the groundlessness of the sovereign individual [indicating] the identification of human with thing, that the human can only be among things, cannot be beyond or abstracted from things" (225). However, for the white subject, whose existence is tied up with the presence of its negation, this recognition is both unbearable and necessary. It thrives on the very existence of this paradox, which they—we—work hard to both ignore and uphold (Mwambene).

Obviously, the argument proposed here takes into focus the white perpetrators of anti-Black abjection and thus applies primarily to

encounters between white improvisers and audiences with Black improvisers (or imagined Blackness among whites only). Positioned as a white scholar, I cannot meaningfully speak about what it might mean to live Blackness, about strategies of refusal and survival in a world that holds no place, structurally. Only this: in the last decade, there have been a growing number of all-Black groups on the scene, most prominently Astronomy Club (NYC), whose self-titled Netflix series brought them to global attention, and 3Peat, who have long been performing in Chicago, some of its members having gone on to greater success in the comedy and entertainment business—Perkins being one. I have had the pleasure to see both high-quality groups perform live and them playing to their collective strengths rather than having to deal with racist lines thrown at them by white improvisers is great to watch. However, the roles that these groups have vis-à-vis the mainly white community at large mirror those of individual Black-racialized improvisers in an otherwise white group: they stand out, are perceived on racial grounds, and cannot afford to fail.

In conclusion, then, improv is certainly highly reflective of both democracy and Humanism, albeit in ways other than the ideal traditionally imagined. For Black improvisers, the improv scene in general does not provide safer spaces than the world outside it. Engaging with or existing within improv comedy's anti-Black structures cannot exceed the analyses of and "wallowing in the contradictions" (Wilderson 2010b). Structurally speaking, it offers no alternative spaces or stretches the limits of racialized culture. In fact, Perkins treats improv practice as a training ground for the racism within and without the scene:

> I know that certain of my peers get so mad about it – but I understand why people of color progress quicker. Because they have to do more work, but it's not even spoken about … You have to be quicker. If I am always constantly paraded with these race things, I have to be able to counteract quickly. That just makes me quicker at responding. (personal conversation)

So when white improvisers cherish improv for being *like life*, this holds also true for Black improvisers in the very different ways highlighted here. Improv performs the *longue durée* of enslavement,

including its anti-Black dehumanizing and propertizing gestures. Instead of changing "the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible" (Rancière 72), it crystallizes the ways in which the culturally specific, axiomatically anti-Black foundation of modern subjectivity—especially its affective dimension—predetermines what white subjects' bodies are capable of saying, seeing and signifying. The onstage results of modern intuition demonstrate the epistemological limits of what Humanism and democracy mean in civic society today.

WORKS CITED

BROECK, Sabine. *Gender and the Abjection of Blackness*. SUNY P, 2018.

—. "Legacies of Enslavism and White Abjectorship." *Postcoloniality – Decoloniality – Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, edited by Sabine Broeck and Carsten Junker, Campus Verlag, 2014, pp. 109-28.

BÜCH, Michel. *Whiteface: Improv Comedy and Anti-Blackness*. De Gruyter, 2022.

CAILLOIS, Roger. *Man, Play and Games*. Translated by Meyer Barash, Illinois UP, 2001.

CLAXTON, Guy. *Intelligence in the Flesh: Why Your Mind Needs Your Body Much More Than It Thinks*. Yale UP, 2015.

~~COLEMAN~~, Nathanial A. T. "My Journey In Our Struggle (Guest Post)." *Biopolitical Philsophy*, 3 June 2020, biopoliticalphilosophy.com/2020/06/03/my-journey-in-our-struggle-guest-post/. Accessed 29 May 2023.

DAMASIO, Antonio R. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. Vintage, 2006.

DAVIDSON, James M. "'Resurrection Men' in Dallas: The Illegal Use of Black Bodies as Medical Cadavers (1900-1907)." *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2007, pp. 193-220. JSTOR, jstor.org/stable/20853130. Accessed 27 May 2023.

ENGEL, Annerose and Peter KELLER. "The perception of musical spontaneity in improvised and imitated jazz performances." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 2, no. 83, 2011, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2011.00083.

EUSTIS, Oskar. "Why Theatre is Essential to Democracy." *YouTube*, uploaded by TED, 25 Jun. 2018, youtube.com/watch?v=-5foou7mIA0w. Accessed 28 May 2023.
FROST, Anthony and Ralph YARROW. *Improvisation in Drama*. 2nd ed. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
HALPERN, Richard. "Theater and Democratic Thought: Arendt to Rancière." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2011, pp. 545-72.
HARTMAN, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection*. Oxford UP, 1997.
—. *Lose Your Mother*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.
HUIZINGA, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Angelico P, 2016.
JUDY, R. A. T. "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity." *boundary 2*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1994, pp. 211-230. *JSTOR*, doi: 10.2307/303605. Accessed 26 Marc. 2020.
LÖSEL, Gunter. *Das Spiel mit dem Chaos*. Transcript, 2013.
MARKOWITZ, Jonathan. *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory*. Minnesota UP, 2004.
MILLS, Charles. *The Racial Contract*. Cornell UP, 1997.
MWAMBENE, Mbene. "White Promise: Performance Artist Mbene Mwambene in Conversation." Interviewed by Michel Büch, *De Gruyter Conversations*, 31 May 2022, blog.degruyter.com/white-promise-performance-artist-mbene-mwambene-in-conversation/. Accessed 25 July 2023.
PATTERSON, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Harvard UP, 1985.
RANCIÈRE, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Translated by Gregory Elliot, Verso, 2009.
SAVITT, Todd L. "The Use of Blacks for Medical Experimentation and Demonstration in the Old South." *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 48, no. 3, 1982, pp. 331-48. *JSTOR*, doi.org/10.2307/2207450. Accessed 27 May 2023.
SCHILLER, Friedrich W. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Translated by Reginald Snell, Dover, 2004.
SEHAM, Amy. *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?: Beyond Second City*. Minnesota UP, 2001.

SEXTON, Jared. "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism". *InTensions*, no. 5, Nov 2011, doi: 10.25071/1913-5874/37359. Accessed 11 December 2023.
SOFER, Andrew. *The Stage Life of Props*. Michigan UP, 2003.
SWEET, Jeffrey. *Something Wonderful Right Away*. Limelight, 2004.
WAISANEN, Don. *Improv for Democracy: How to Bridge Differences and Develop the Communication and Leadership Skills Our World Needs*. State U of New York P, 2021.
WASSON, Sam. *Improv Nation: How We Made a Great American Art*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.
—. "Improv Nation – Sam Wasson." Sam Wasson. www.samwasson.com. Accessed 29 May 2023.
WILDERSON, Frank B. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Combined Academic Publishing, 2010a.
—. "Wallowing in the contradictions." Interviewed by Percy Howard, *A Necessary Angel*, 9 July 2010b, percy3.wordpress.com/2010/07/09/frank-b-wilderson-"wallowing-in-the-contradictions"-part-1. Accessed 20 July 2023.
WINNICOTT, Donald W. *Playing and Reality*. Routledge, 2005.
WYNTER, Sylvia. "Toward the Sociogenic Principle." *National Identities and Socio-Political Changes in Latin America*, edited by Antonio Gómez-Moriana and Mercedes Durán-Cogan, Routledge, 2001.
—. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2003, pp. 257-337. Project MUSE, doi: 10.1353/ncr.2004.0015. Accessed 15 Aug. 2020.

---

[1] I use the upper case for Human, Humanity, and Humanism when I refer to the cultural specificity of the modern subject, drawing attention to its status as a semiotically arbitrary and politically motivated discursive construct that can be historicized. Even though I am not interested in a universally applicable biological (or other) category with truth value, following Wynter (2003), I do not capitalize when I refer to "being human" as a praxis. In this logic, modern racialized Humanism is a culturally specific "genre" of being human (307).

Similarly, I capitalize Black, Blackness, and terms that include these words

to mark their reference to a discursive construct rather than an empirical existence, which is not to say that those do not reciprocally affect each other. I refer to a signifier created by white people that, in my usage, has no ontological or essentialist content value and denotes no empirical referent. Again, this is not to say that people racialized as Black (Nathaniel ~~Coleman~~'s formulation) are somehow unreal or that this racialization means nothing in reality—quite the contrary. It is a situated decision: as a white scholar, I am epistemologically restricted to analyzing the creation and functioning of the signifier, not those signified. I do not intend to make existential or ontological statements about what it might mean to live Blackness. I can, however, make such statements about whiteness, so I use lower case for white or whiteness.

2 Using terms like *enslaver* or *enslavism*, here borrowed from Broeck (2014), to denote white subjects today (or the regime that creates them) forces us to keep in mind and reckon with the longue durée or "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman 2008: 6), i.e., the many ways in which what is commonly framed as a historically distinct period in American history has been actively maintained and is still inhabited today—economically, politically, philosophically, libidinally.

3 Paul Sills (1927 – 2008) was one of the most influential improv coaches and producers, so the way he understood, described, and institutionalized improv greatly affects how it is perceived and performed today.

4 See, for example, Huizinga and Caillois, and of course, Schiller's Enlightened dictum that "Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and he is only wholly Man when he is playing" (80). Contemporary treatments that link improv practice to democracy include Waisanen (2020) and Wasson (2017). The latter is advertised with an excerpt from a *Publisher's Weekly* review that reads, "Wasson makes a thoroughly entertaining case that improvisational comedy has 'replaced jazz as America's most popular art' and represents the best of democracy" (see Wasson's webpage). See Chapter 4.1, "Circulating aesthetics of vitalism" in Büch (2022) for a more thorough treatment of the complex but no less violent, abjective, and obliterative ways in which improv in general fashions itself after both the practice and the language of jazz improvisation while at the same time presenting itself as less "ethnic" and more "American."

5 Dewayne Perkins is an improviser and comedian. He has written for *The Break with Michelle Wolf* (2018, Netflix), *Saved by the Bell* (2021, Peacock), *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2021), and *The Amber Ruffin Show* (2021). His feature film *The Blackening* was theatrically released in 2023 and became a box office success (Lionsgate). Our conversation took place in March 2015 in Chicago. Perkins authorized the material used here via email on 7 October 2019.

6 David Pasquesi is an improviser, actor, and voice-over artist. The most recent of his many film and TV credits include *She-Hulk* (2022, Disney+), *Book of Boba Fett* (2021, Disney+), and *VEEP* (2013-19, HBO). Together with his partner TJ

Jagodowski, Pasquesi has been performing the award-winning fully improvised *TJ & Dave* show for many years. Our conversation took place in March 2015 in Chicago. The authorized material used here is drawn from a follow-up email exchange in October 2019.

7 Wilderson defines libidinal economy with Sexton as "the economy, or distribution and arrangement, of desire and identification (their condensation and displacement), and the complex relationship between sexuality and the unconscious" (49), further arguing that "whiteness is parasitic because it monumentalizes its subjective capacity, its lush cartography, in direct proportion to the wasteland of Black incapacity" (2010: 45).

8 By *Humanistic play* I refer to play as a social practice that is culturally specific to modern Western Humanism rather than to an assumed anthropological constant.

9 Joel Boyd is an improviser, writer, and stand-up artist. His writing credits include *Hot Date* (2017, PopTV/Netflix), *Earth to Ned* (2020, Disney+), and *The Many Saints of Newark* (2021, HBO Max). Our conversation took place in March 2015 in Chicago. Boyd authorized the material used via email on 15 November 2019.

10 Hartman asks rhetorically: "If white independence, freedom, and equality were purchased with slave labor, then what possibilities or opportunities exist for the black captive vessel of white ideality?" (1997: 62)

11 Kimberly Michelle Vaughn is an improviser and actress. Her acting credits include *Chicago Med* (2019, NBC), *North of the 10* (2022, BET+), and *Unseen* (2023, Paramount). Our conversation took place in March 2015 in Chicago. Vaughn authorized the material used in this project via email on 8 October 2019.

12 Vaughn's "no" resonates all the more in an improv world that cherishes the agreement of the "yes, and-" principle, which advises the improviser to agree to what has previously been established ("yes") and then add more information or advance the scene in another way ("and"). Improvisers will state that the "yes, and-" rule still applies to the word *no* if it maintains the base reality of the scene and integrity of the character, but in this case, Vaughn's "no" forestalls the advancement of the scene at the moment of utterance, so even an apologetic reading would have to reckon with this moment of irritation.

Postmemorial Dramaturgy of the Armenian Catastrophe: *The Armenian Question*

Sebnem Nazli Karali

Abstract: This article presents a pioneering analysis of theatrical representations of the Armenian Catastrophe, applying Marianne Hirsch's postmemory theories. It unveils the intricate connection between generational memory transmission and the dramatic structure of *The Armenian Question*, a two-act documentary courtroom drama co-written by Armenian-American director Anna Antaramian. Through a formal analysis of the script, supplemented by insights from correspondences with Antaramian and the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, archival research, and play reviews, this study reveals how *The Armenian Question* translates real-life survivor interviews, the co-writer's personal history, emotional responses, and processes of imaginative remembrance, into its documentary framework. It identifies dramaturgical elements that illustrate Hirsch's concept of postmemory and demonstrates how theatre effectively communicates traumatic narratives of the past to the audience. This research deepens the understanding of traumatic events for both American and Armenian audiences, offering a more nuanced and subjective perspective. By bridging theory with practical insights, it contributes to the broader discourse on postmemory, trauma representation, and the transformative potential of theatre to engage with and reflect upon the legacies of collective suffering.

Résumé: Cet article présente une analyse novatrice des représentations théâtrales de la Catastrophe arménienne en appliquant les théories de la post mémoire de Marianne Hirsch. Il révèle l'interconnexion complexe entre la transmission de la mémoire générationnelle et la structure dramatique de *La Question arménienne*, un drame documentaire en deux actes co-écrit par la réalisatrice arméno-américaine Anna Antaramian. À travers une analyse formelle du texte de la pièce, complétée par des informations issues de correspondances avec Antaramian, du Diocèse oriental de l'Église arménienne d'Amé-

rique, de recherches archivistiques et des critiques de la pièce. Cette étude révèle comment *La Question arménienne* explore les réponses émotionnelles et les processus de mémorisation imaginative dans le cadre documentaire grâce à des entretiens avec les survivants et l'histoire personnelle de la co-auteure. L'analyse identifie les éléments dramaturgiques qui illustrent le concept de post mémoire de Hirsch et démontre comment le théâtre tente de communiquer les récits traumatiques du passé au public. Cette recherche approfondit la compréhension des événements traumatiques à la fois pour le public américain et arménien, offrant une perspective plus nuancée et subjective. En établissant un lien entre la théorie et des perspectives pratiques, elle contribue au discours plus large sur la post mémoire, la représentation du traumatisme et le potentiel transformateur du théâtre questionnant les héritages de la souffrance collective.

Keywords: Armenian, Catastrophe, postmemory, theatre, Marianne Hirsch, dramaturgy, female survivor, documentary, *The Armenian Question.*

Mots-clés : Arménien, Catastrophe, post mémoire, théâtre, Marianne Hirsch, dramaturgie, survivante, documentaire, *La Question arménienne*.

Introduction

In remembrance of Armenian Martyrs Day, Anna Antaramian and William Rolleri co-authored *The Armenian Question*, a two-act courtroom drama that debuted at the Armenian Church of America in New York on 24 April, 1977, before making its way to Off-off Broadway within the same year. Over time, the play has undergone revisions, including updates following the events of 9/11. The story revolves around a fictional appeal by the Turkish government from the United Nations Famine Relief Agency (UNFRA) during a global drought. Three survivors of the Armenian Catastrophe, comprising two women and one man, alongside their African-American attorney, have embarked on a journey from America to Paris to confront the

Turkish Deputy Prime Minister, the General, in court. In their quest for justice in exchange for food relief, they demand that Turkey officially acknowledge the Catastrophe and provide an accurate account of the nine million Armenians who were either murdered or unborn, as documented in the census report. Despite the compelling survivor testimonies, supported by non-fictional historical documents, eyewitness accounts, and photographic evidence of the Catastrophe, the General endeavours to persuade the UNFRA Committee to provide food relief without acknowledging the Catastrophe.

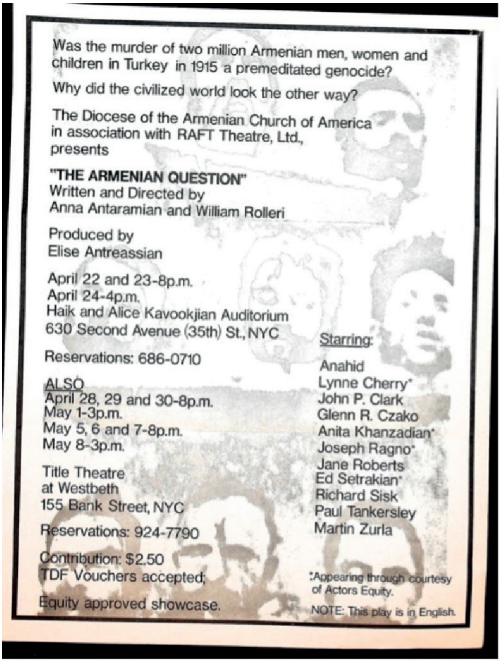


Image 1: The 1977 poster of *The Armenian Question*. Image courtesy of Zohrab Information Centre, Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern).

The Armenian Question, co-created by Armenian-American Anna Antaramian, exemplifies what Marianne Hirsch describes as "post-memory": the relationship that the generation following those who

directly experienced cultural and collective trauma maintains with past events. This connection is forged through stories, images, and behaviours present in the upbringing of subsequent generations, known as postgenerations. These familial elements are mediated by widely accessible public images and narratives, adding historical and cultural context to the personal and familial intergenerational link (2008: 106-107). Antaramian's incorporation of photographic evidence illustrates this "*generational* structure of transmission," strongly grounded in archival materials (Hirsch 114). "I am still emotionally bound to the visions of my ancestors, my family, and all their suffering. The pictures still come back at times," Antaramian states (Karali par. 2). Remarkably, *The Armenian Question* expands the notion of postmemory by focusing on firsthand memories of those who lived through the Catastrophe, highlighting the heterogeneity of experiences and memories of two female survivors, each undergoing equally valid processes of remembering and imagination. Through these survivors, the play establishes a new and expanded community of postmemory that conveys traumatic experiences to postgenerations through historical archives, the survivors' embodied memories and narratives. Notably, the play exclusively features survivors and does not incorporate postgenerations as traditional postmemory subjects, who would ultimately comprise the audience, including postgenerations. It offers deep insights into the Catastrophe and its enduring impact on survivors, emphasising the importance of recognising both their suffering and that of postgenerations for the purposes of mourning, healing, and reconciliation.

Creative Process of a Documentary Play

"It began when I was asked by Archbishop Torkom Manoogian to do something theatrical for Martyrs Day April 24, 1977," recalls Antaramian about the genesis of *The Armenian Question* (Karali par. 3). Archbishop Manoogian had a keen interest in advancing Armenian arts and culture among both American and Armenian audiences through English-language plays (Parlakian 12). He specif-

ically requested an English-language drama that would function as a means of commemoration, aimed at ensuring the ongoing remembrance and honouring of the "over 200 Armenian leaders" who were detained in Istanbul in 1915—a "prelude to a general extermination" (Kambourian par. 2). Antaramian reflects on the play's origins:

> While searching for a play, I also researched the genocide. After a month or so I mentioned my project to a friend of mine, Bill Rolleri, who suggested I write a play since there seemed to be nothing available. He was a playwright, was excited about the material I was researching, and volunteered to work with me. That was the beginning of *The Armenian Question*. (Karali par. 3)

The playwrights attempted to quantify the Catastrophe with numerical figures, sparking controversy between the General and Freeman, the opposition attorney:

> GENERAL. […] the government had to relocate some 400.000 people […]
>
> FREEMAN. The number of deportations we have is 2 million. […]
>
> GENERAL. […] 15.000 perished on the road from…
>
> ANAHID. More.
>
> GENERAL. Disease took another 25.000 […]
>
> ANAHID. Many more.
>
> GENERAL. Only 40.000 out of 400.000 died. That is why this woman's statistics are false. Based on the facts, if 2.000 people left Sivas, 1.800 arrived in Aleppo.
>
> FREEMAN. We'll be more than happy to play the numbers game a little later […] (Antaramian and Rolleri 291).

The dispute over the number of Armenian deaths has been a longstanding issue, with estimates ranging from 600,000 to 2 million (Hovannisian 15). Nevertheless, some scholars argue that the Armenian population could not have exceeded 600,000, intensifying the ongoing debate (Dündar 194). Adding to this discourse, the play introduces a novel fictional figure, derived from scholarly research by

a former UNFRA member: nine million "dead" and "never-born" Armenians who, hypothetically, "would be living in Turkey" "if they had never been touched or disturbed in any way," and "if they had been permitted to reproduce in a normal manner" (Antaramian and Rolleri 307). The demand for the subtraction of this figure from Turkey's census report casts doubt on its "accuracy," influencing the Committee's decision regarding the allocation of surplus grain for Turkey (Antaramian and Rolleri 318).



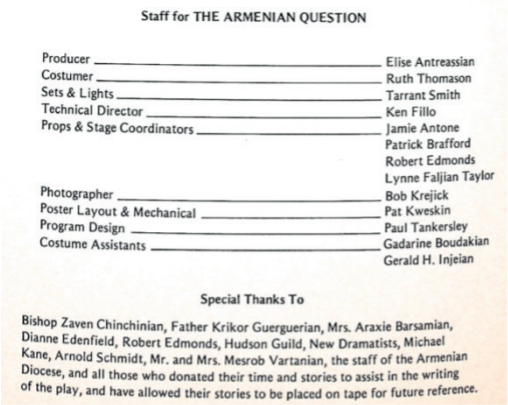
Image 2. Confrontation between the Turkish minister and the opposition attorney. Image courtesy of *The Armenian Church* quarterly, Spring 1977.

Before finalising the script, auditions were conducted, and actors were recruited. Antaramian engaged the Armenian-American community in the process:

> We set up interviews with Armenian survivors in the New York/New Jersey area and with the help of those Armenian actors who were fluent in Armenian and Elise Antreassian [the producer], we were able to get many eyewitness accounts of the marches without a language barrier.
>
> We began with previously scripted dialogue at rehearsals and discovered that most of the actors wanted to know more about the Armenians, the marches, and the deaths. They began to research materials we were able to supply for them. With the script and the information they brought in we had a series of improvisational rehearsals that were taped; we transcribed the tapes and worked some of the dialogue into the script. It was a living moving force. (Karali par. 5)

These survivors' memories provided a human and emotional dimension to the play, one that could not be conveyed through mere numbers and statistics. By combining these traumatic memories with the actors' research and improvisations, the play transformed into what Antaramian describes as a "living moving force," capable of communicating the pain and suffering endured by the Armenian people during the Catastrophe. These "epic horror stories" of the survivors were instrumental in infusing "pathos" and a "sense of outrage" into both the theatre crew and the eventual audience (B. Rolleri 2-3). Furthermore, the incorporation of these memories served as a means of recognising and validating the experiences and memories of the survivors, those that had long been silenced and denied by the Turkish government. Freeman's response to the General's emphasis on numbers, when he states, "We'll be more than happy to play the numbers game a little later," clearly reflects his refusal to accept that numbers alone could adequately capture the full impact of the Catastrophe. This underscores the importance of recognising the personal and emotional dimensions of the Catastrophe that extend beyond statistical data.

Rehearsals for the play were held nightly at 7.30 pm in the Haik and Alice Kavookjian Auditorium of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America in New York (Shahinian par. 2). The authors integrated the "most powerful" improvised courtroom scenes with the "best" pre-written material, resulting in a play that they believed to be unprecedented (Church 7). The autobiographical accounts of the survivors were "synthesised" into the testimonies of the survivors presented in the courtroom (W. Rolleri 280). This approach gave rise to a postmemorial dramaturgy rooted in the "facts themselves as [initially being] mouthed and recorded by actual survivors," rather than being an "artist's re-creation" (Parlakian 28). The authors regarded the 1977 production of *The Armenian Question* as a "truly collaborative work" that brought together the theatre crew and the Catastrophe survivors, whom they referred to as "seekers of justice" (W. Rolleri 280). The playbill for the 1977 production acknowledged these survivors:



Staff for THE ARMENIAN QUESTION

Producer	Elise Antreassian
Costumer	Ruth Thomason
Sets & Lights	Tarrant Smith
Technical Director	Ken Fillo
Props & Stage Coordinators	Jamie Antone
	Patrick Brafford
	Robert Edmonds
	Lynne Faljian Taylor
Photographer	Bob Krejick
Poster Layout & Mechanical	Pat Kweskin
Program Design	Paul Tankersley
Costume Assistants	Gadarine Boudakian
	Gerald H. Injeian

Special Thanks To

Bishop Zaven Chinchinian, Father Krikor Guerguerian, Mrs. Araxie Barsamian, Dianne Edenfield, Robert Edmonds, Hudson Guild, New Dramatists, Michael Kane, Arnold Schmidt, Mr. and Mrs. Mesrob Vartanian, the staff of the Armenian Diocese, and all those who donated their time and stories to assist in the writing of the play, and have allowed their stories to be placed on tape for future reference.

Image 3. Special thanks extended to the Catastrophe survivors interviewed for the production. Image courtesy of Zohrab Information Centre, Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern).

The Armenian Question employs a fictional courtroom setting as the backdrop to showcase the survivor testimonies. Anna Antaramian explains the selection of a "modern courtroom," highlighting that "the courtroom drama genre logically suggested itself" (Kambourian par. 3; Karali par. 4). This courtroom milieu provides an "arena" for a "head-on confrontation" between "truth" and "falsehood" and offers a platform for resolving international conflicts with the support of the United Nations, functioning as a "convenient 'umbrella' organisation" (B. Rolleri 2004: 1). However, it is crucial to note that the Committee members explicitly state that it is "not a court of law" but rather a "formal hearing" or a "court of reason" (Antaramian and Rolleri 285-306). While some reviewers classify *The Armenian Question* as a courtroom drama, others observe that it does not strictly adhere to this genre (Messina 2-3; Parlakian 28). Instead, the formal courtroom ambiance serves as a "theatrical 'container'" to merge the real experiences of the survivors with the fictional storyline (W. Rolleri 2004: 280). The structured format of the formal hearing allows the characters to present their testimonies while encouraging the audience

to critically engage with the historical events presented. This engagement is facilitated through survivor memories and archival evidence, rather than attempting a literal enactment or mimetic reproduction of the atrocities. This diegetic or narrative reproduction of the events not only circumvents the ethical dilemmas associated with representing trauma on stage but also challenges the audience to confront their own biases and assumptions about the Catastrophe. It prompts them to question the ways in which history is constructed and remembered. By adopting the diegetic trial form, the play actively involves the audience in interpreting themes of truth, justice, and accountability. This approach represents a holistic approach to theatre that challenges conventional mimetic theatre.

The Armenian Question illustrates the potential of documentary theatre in constructing postmemorial narratives and providing a platform for contemplation on the representation of traumatic histories. The play presents a fragment of reality drawn from life, relying on documented evidence and survivor testimonies to educate the audience about the injustices suffered by the Armenians. Instead of making claims of direct access to the truth regarding whether the Armenian deportations in 1915 constituted a *genocide*, the play aims to establish a "model schema" that highlights the aftermath of the Catastrophe, delves into its historical and political discourse, and underscores its enduring repercussions (Weiss 383). The play serves various objectives of documentary theatre: it "reassesses" two distinct historiographical accounts of the Catastrophe; "reconstructs" an inquiry courtroom to scrutinise the historical and political discourses surrounding the Catastrophe; "investigates" the contentious nature of the massacres; "intermingles" history with autobiography through survivor interviews; "celebrates" Armenians as a minority community in the face of oppression; and "disseminates" information to both community members and those less acquainted with the Armenian plight (Martin 22-23; Paget 227-228).

Following the 9/11 attacks, the original script underwent a series of staged readings. These readings benefited significantly from the

dramaturgical guidance of Ed Shockley, the former artistic director of the American Concert Theatre, the insights from Nishan Parlakian, a prominent figure in Armenian-American theatre, and the feedback provided by Philadelphia's InterAct Theatre Writers' Group. Antaramian revealed that these readings prompted several changes in the script:

> In the first production there were four women: Arpine Garabedian, Anahid, and Siranoosh Atamian, witnesses and Jennifer Goldsmith, UN. When the readings were done in 2002 and 2003 several changes were made and Siranoosh was one of the characters cut. Two male characters were also cut: The Turkish Ambassador and a witness Tavit Tavitian. (Karali par. 6)

Critiques of the original script characterised it as "preaching to the choir," suggesting that it was "pretty straightforward and predictable," with Armenians "providing evidence of genocide" and Turks "denying any wrongdoing" (W. Rolleri 280; Thomasian 2). However, the revised script has become "more sophisticated" embracing "both conflict and evidence," representing a notable shift in how "Genocide denial" had been addressed over the past 25 years (Thomasian 2). The play incorporates a wealth of archival, scholarly, and legal evidence related to the Catastrophe and juxtaposes it with Turkish counter-arguments. Under the direction of Shockley, the play was presented as a staged reading at its original venue, the Haik and Alice Kavookjian Auditorium of the Eastern Diocese, on May 30, 2003 (Association pars. 3-4).

Sites and Sights of Postmemory

Within the tragically Armenian world of *The Armenian Question*, three Catastrophe survivors, namely Anahid, Arpine, and Gerard, symbolise what literary critic Lorne Shirinian characterises as "living links with the pre-diaspora past" (21). Notably, only the female survivors offer their testimonies, while Gerard, who has financed the entire journey to Paris and covered the legal expenses in his quest for recognition and justice, remains on the sidelines of the testimony process. Anahid conveys this when she informs the Committee: "He

is a friend, he is… Armenian, but he is not going to…" (Antaramian and Rolleri 287). Antaramian clarifies this choice:

> The Arpine and Anahid characters (also the Siranoosh character in the original) came from the women we interviewed enhanced with written material we had. They are extremely important as the main survivors of those marches were women and children. The men were killed before they started. Several of our interviewees had been small children. One should not see or experience what they did. Therefore, women survivors were significant in the project. (Karali par. 7)

Scholars have explored the sexual violations, massacres, abductions, and Islamisation of Armenian women and children during the Catastrophe (Miller D.E. and Miller L.T., 1991; Sanasarian, 1989). These "women and children" were often classified together as "innocent people" in literature on the Catastrophe until the mid-2000s (Ekmekçioglu 186). With the absence of male family members, who had already been murdered, Armenian women and children became particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse, exploitation, abduction, and forced assimilation through practices such as adoption, intermarriage, and Islamisation (Derderian 1-15). Some children were adopted and assimilated into mainstream Turkish society, while others were placed in orphanages following the murder of their families (Dadrian 428-435).

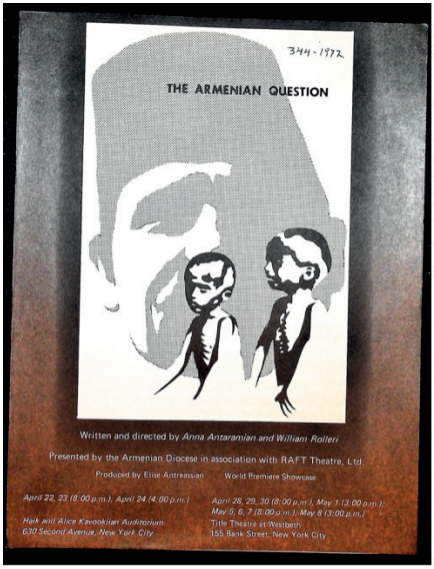


Image 4: The 1977 playbill of *The Armenian Question*. Image courtesy of Zohrab Information Centre, Diocese of the Armenian Church of America (Eastern).

Understanding the experiences of Armenian women and children is pivotal in gaining a comprehensive grasp of the scale of the massacres and deportations, especially considering the widespread elimination of male Armenians. *The Armenian Question* emphasises the dramaturgical significance of women and children to highlight the "utter senselessness" of a destruction like the Catastrophe, as illustrated by the images of starving children on the playbill cover, symbolising both "vulnerability and innocence" (Hirsch 1999: 12-16). In the play, Freeman, the attorney, presents archival evidence of the Catastrophe, including an official appeal by the United States to the Turkish government to halt the massacre of "innocent Armenians" and a warning from the French government to the Turks about being held accountable for the wholesale massacre of "innocent Armenians" (Antaramian and Rolleri 322-323). In a moment of remembrance, Gerard evokes the image of the innocent Armenians, describing how

"bodies float in the river, women, children, babies" (Antaramian and Rolleri 337). One of the female survivors, Anahid, exhibits exceptional concern for all children, Muslim or Christian alike, expressing. "We do not wish to see innocent people suffer, least of all the children" (Antaramian and Rolleri 291). The postmemorial dramaturgy of the play accentuates the narrative of the unprotected innocent people, to evoke the relentless brutality, hatred, and unfathomable horror of the Catastrophe.

Anahid Siroonian, Survivor and Activist

Anahid, a ten year-old living a "peaceful and loving" life in Sivas, Turkey, had her life turned upside down when her male family members were conscripted into the Turkish army overnight (Antaramian and Rolleri 288). One week later, Turkish soldiers returned to kill all boys aged ten and older, and forced women, children, and the elderly out of the town. On the way to Aleppo, Syria, Anahid was initially sold as a slave to an "Arab," who later sold her to her uncle in Merzifon, Turkey. There, she was raped:

> ANAHID. My rainbow dress … my mother gave me that dress for my tenth birthday. It was covered with blood.
>
> GENERAL. Grown men, away from their wives, evil thoughts …
>
> ANAHID. It was torn to shreds …
>
> GENERAL. Men who normally would never dream of …
>
> ANAHID. It started to rain.
>
> GENERAL. Oh, please do say it aloud, Madame.
>
> ANAHID. I died here in the rain in that …
>
> GENERAL. So I can deal with it.
>
> MOURADIAN. She died.
>
> GENERAL. Say it!
>
> ANAHID. No!

GENERAL. Now!

ANAHID. It was a clear night. I was in the street, lost. Alone, I don't know why. I couldn't scream. He … the stars were shimmering … heaven was trying to catch her breath, I lay there wondering if God … if God even cared. The blood was inside me. My life was over sixty years ago! I have no children. I never married. (Antaramian and Rolleri 295)

Anahid's description of her traumatic experience using euphemisms like her "rainbow dress covered with blood" and being "torn to shreds" casts a shadow over post-generations. Her use of these euphemisms might be influenced by the imposition of "narrow" and "rigid" Armenian "religious" and "patriarchal values" surrounding female sexuality. These values can exacerbate "feelings of shame" and lead survivors to withhold their experiences, reflecting the absence of open discussions about surviving sexual abuse during the 1960s (Okoomian 235). Anahid does not necessarily refrain from sharing her experiences but rather cloaks the act of sexual violation in euphemistic terms. The irony here lies in her reluctance or fear to explicitly utter the word *rape*, which parallels the General's refusal to acknowledge the term *genocide*—the R-word versus the G-word. Despite the General's repeated interruptions and her own vulnerability, Anahid weaves together the personal and the historical in a way that reflects the experiences of countless Armenian women. With her unwavering presence and resilience, Anahid explores themes of violation, loss, and hope, becoming a vessel for the voices of others who have endured similar trials.

Anahid's journey from California to Paris to attend the hearing signifies her quest to raise awareness about the catastrophic history of Armenians and to seek acknowledgment for the pain and suffering endured by both herself and her people. As the central character, she occupies a pivotal role as a female survivor of genocidal rape who has dedicated her life to political activism. Anahid brackets the play as the first witness to speak and the last to command the spotlight. Her story resonates with the emerging identity politics of the 1970s, which focused on trauma and traumatised survivors within American culture,

evident in the portrayal of traumatised Vietnam veterans in films like *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) (Luckhurst 58). Furthermore, the Holocaust gained renewed attention through television miniseries like *Holocaust* (Marvin J. Chomsky, 1978). Simultaneously, feminists began addressing the traumas of sexual violence. Anahid represents this new focus on trauma and feminist advocacy, as she embodies the traumatised female body and speaks out about the experience of sexual abuse, albeit using euphemisms. Her political activism becomes a critical component of the collective memory of the Catastrophe, as she endeavours to draw attention to the suffering of survivors and advocates for justice and healing to move beyond the traumatic past.

Postmemorial theatre experiments incorporate multiple forms of "texts," ranging from "accounts of official histories inscribed with words and visual images" to "archival-repertorial forms performed through speech acts, gestures, movements, spatial relationships and sensorial expressions" (Hellier-Tinoco 35). Anahid draws upon fragments of these various texts, both oral and written, to embody her personal memories and connect them to the collective experiences of the Catastrophe. She reads aloud an archival telegram dated 1915, issued by Talaat Pasha, the Minister of the Interior, instructing the Governor of Aleppo to be ruthless towards women, children, and the elderly: "No regard must be paid to age, sex or conscientious scruple" (Antaramian and Rolleri 309). Furthermore, Anahid reads a series of real-life telegrams, which were smuggled and brought to court in the play by Armin Wegner, a historical German eyewitness to the Catastrophe. Anahid also introduces "The Ten Commandments," a set of "tactics" employed in the execution of the Catastrophe (Antaramian and Rolleri 320-321).

Anahid reads aloud each written document to everyone present, disconnecting the words of violence from their original source and recontextualising them as spoken memories of her personal ordeal as a survivor. Through this act, she merges her own body with the collective corporeal body of the Catastrophe, forging a connection between her personal memory catastrophic experience and the collective trau-

ma of all Armenians. The spoken telegrams, originally death warrants for all Ottoman-Armenians, unify Anahid's body with the bodies of other Armenians, whether living or dead. This communion creates a sense of collective trauma that transcends individual experiences. By speaking out about the Armenian suffering and recontextualising the catastrophic past, Anahid challenges the narrative of the oppressor and the unjust status quo. She lives out her own resistance and survival. Her actions unite fellow Armenians in collective resistance and survival, creating a powerful force against continued repression and injustice.

Anahid stands up in protest against the Committee's decision to demand a new census supervised by the United Nations in Turkey and close the hearing:

> ANAHID: (On her feet.) No! This hearing is not closed! Not while children starve!
>
> FREEMAN: (Grabs Anahid's arm.) Anahid!
>
> ANAHID: (To Goldsmith.) Please listen to me for one moment, I …
>
> GOLDSMITH: (Hesitates.) We have already listened to you, this hearing …
>
> ANAHID: This decision, Madame … people will … children will … this will bring shame to our cause, you make us all bear a terrible guilt.
>
> GOLDSMITH: That is not my cause, Madame, and it is not my shame.
>
> ANAHID: Please, listen, listen to me: We all stand here. We are all adults. It is the adults who make important decisions about what will be and what will not be. But who pays?
>
> HEINMAN: We all pay.
>
> ANAHID: We pay nothing. Infant. The old and the sick. They will be the first to die. Please, not again. I appeal to the mother in you. The mother I could never be. Do you feel nothing? (Antaramian and Rolleri 340)

Anahid's concern lies in the Committee's decision that prolonged the suffering of the innocent people like infants, the elderly, and the sick in Turkey, while also tarnishing the reputation of their quest for justice with shame and guilt. Her plea of "please, not again" harks back to the catastrophic past of the Ottoman-Armenians, where innocent people bore the brunt of consequential choices. Anahid is determined to prevent another catastrophe, performing both ethical care and resistance. Her embodiment of care and resistance prompts a re-examination of official narratives and power dynamics surrounding scenarios of destruction and compassion. This re-evaluation invites a new perspective on the image of starving Armenian children on the playbill, extending empathy to all children, including Muslim children. Anahid's performance of motherliness and her unattainable motherhood revises and reproduces the historical reality of the Catastrophe. Anahid's corporeality and survivor memory bridge personal past experiences with global political structures and processes. This connection between personal and global catastrophes offers a chance to revise historical circumstances and probe potential realities for a different future. Consequently, the personal dimension takes on both political and international significance in the play.

Arpine Garabedian, Survivor

Arpine, in her twenties in 1915, hailed from the town of Divriği in Sivas, just like Anahid. Arpine was older than Anahid, who was a teenager at that time. When Turkish soldiers came to eliminate the Armenian residents of the town, Arpine already had her baby, Zabel. Arpine recalls that the Turkish soldiers were given specific instructions to kill the Armenians in a different way, using the phrase "*Oldermek farkli*," because burning the bodies would "stink up the city for weeks." This phrase has left an indelible mark on Arpine, and she believes it will haunt her even beyond her death: "Those words will echo in my tomb. Kill different" (Antaramian and Rolleri 301).

Arpine's account provides a harrowing account of the atrocities committed against Armenians during the Catastrophe, including

various methods of torture and execution, such as foot whipping and nailing horseshoes into whipped feet. She also infuses a personal dimension into her narrative:

> ARPINE. […] Zabel. My princess. I was holding her. A soldier tickled her. She giggled. I remember thinking maybe he has a little baby at home, and he … he asked if he could hold her. I told him she would cry, and then she did just that, she started to cry, and he told her to stop crying, why are you crying, little one, do you think the big, bad Turk would harm you, no, no, no, stop crying, little one, I said stop … […]
>
> He took my little princess in one hand by the ankles, he wrenched her away from me, he swung her around singing some insane Turkish song and then he bashed her brains out against a rock. There, he said, she has stopped crying. She has stopped … (Antaramian and Rolleri 303)

In this account, the image of the "big, bad Turk" emerges as the "symbolic opposite" of Armenians, conjuring up the atrocities committed against Armenians (Shirinian 258). Zabel and her murder serve as an analogous symbol for Ottoman-Armenians and their Catastrophe, respectively. The "big, bad Turk" is depicted as a bloodthirsty killer, standing in stark opposition to the defenceless Zabel and, by extension, the Armenian minority of the Ottoman Empire.

As Arpine remembers Zabel, she becomes lost in her own thoughts, cradling an imaginary baby in her arms and humming a lullaby to soothe her:

> FREEMAN. Mrs. Garabedian?
>
> ARPINE. (To Freeman.) Don't you think she's beautiful?
>
> FREEMAN. Uh … yeah. I, uh …
>
> ARPINE. Maybe just to me she's … she does have her father's ears. Such big ears my baby has, but to me … she looks like an angel who just left the arms of God, an angel He sent to us …
>
> GENERAL. The woman is lost.
>
> ANAHID. We should let her go.

FREEMAN. Arpine? Mrs. Garabedian?

ARPINE. (Holds baby forth to Freeman.) My little baby girl. Just twenty days old. Isn't she beautiful?

PENSAR. Mon Dieu. (My God.)

GENERAL. Madame, the poor woman is hallucinating. She's repeating herself, rambling on and … She should be excused, she is not even here. (Beat.)

FREEMAN. She'll be all right.

ARPINE. Are you blind? Look at her.

GENERAL. Mrs. Garabedian, do you know where you are? See? That look in her eyes?

ARPINE. He sends these little angels to teach us how to love. (Antaramian and Rolleri 303-304)

Arpine experiences a vivid visual hallucination of her deceased daughter, Zabel, a beautiful twenty-day-old baby with big ears—a visceral description. Arpine's interaction with this imaginary child extends to holding her and singing to her. She asks Freeman and indirectly the audience to acknowledge the existence of the hallucinated baby. This blurs the boundary between the reality of the play and the imagined world of the character, creating a sense of ambiguity and challenging the linear time sequencing of the narrative. Arpine's hallucination fragments her narration by bringing the past into the present, blurring the line between what is real and what is imagined, and is consonant with postmemory, emphasising the lasting impact of trauma on memory and perception. Zabel's invisibility and silence symbolise the broader world's non-recognition, ignorance, and indifference toward the Catastrophe, rendering Armenians incomprehensible and voiceless. Arpine's hallucination symbolically represents the dispossession of Armenians from their old country and the resulting anguish.

Arpine interrupts the courtroom procedure to engage the audience in a reflective conversation. She is experiencing a disconnection between her past experiences and her current surroundings, as evidenced

by her hallucination of Zabel. Her traumatised memory of Zabel is intertwined with her testimony of the murdered baby, causing her to feel a profound sense of loss. Despite physically being present in a municipal hall in Paris, Arpine is mentally transported back to her home country, which no longer exists in the same form, further complicating her experience. Her hallucination blurs the lines between reality and memory, making her feel as if she is holding Zabel in the present moment. However, this is ultimately an irretrievable experience, as both the baby and her hometown have been lost forever. Arpine is trapped in a perpetual cycle of reliving her traumatic past and struggling to reconcile it with her present existence. She is unable to escape the past and constantly moves between past and present.

Cathy Caruth's trauma theory describes trauma as an "overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations" (11). Arpine's hallucination of her deceased daughter is an example of the "inability" of her "mind" to "avoid an unpleasurable event, "the gruesome murder of her baby, which she cannot comprehend (59). Her hallucination signifies the "very incomprehensibility of [her] own survival" during the Catastrophe, an event that resulted in the death of her daughter and countless other Armenians (64). Arpine's inability to make sense of her survival is at the heart of the Catastrophe, illustrating the survivors' experience of catastrophic trauma and the difficulty in understanding their own survival.

Arpine's embodied and sensory memory of the Catastrophe transforms her body into a living archive of history. Her skin contains the traces of Zabel's death and other traumatic experiences she endured. Her "terrifying distortions" serve as the sites and sights of her mental and corporeal fragility (Antaramian and Rolleri 305). When Arpine cradles an imaginary baby and hums to her, her gestures become vessels through which the past is brought into the present. Her movements and gestures embody the collective trauma of the Catastrophe, and she acts as a repository of memories that connect individual and

collective suffering. Arpine's act of remembering serves as a bridge between personal and collective trauma, and her physical embodiment of the past becomes a means of preserving the catastrophic history of the Armenian people. Her memories bear witness to all Armenian children who were killed during the Catastrophe and whose bodies were left unburied. Thus, Arpine's body becomes a conduit through which the collective history and trauma of the Armenians are experienced and transmitted to both the audience and postgenerations.

Conclusion

This article has harnessed Marianne Hirsch's postmemory theories to pioneer an analysis of the theatrical representations of the Armenian Catastrophe. It has shed new light on the intricate connection between the generational structure of memory transmission and the play structure of *The Armenian Question*. By delving into dramaturgy, often overlooked in postmemorial media, this research has revealed how this documentary play effectively translates intimate processes of remembering and imaginative re-creation into its dramatic framework. As a result, it brings both Armenian and non-Armenian audiences closer to a deeper understanding of the traumatic narratives of the past.

The choice of the courtroom genre has emerged as a potent and formal platform for conveying survivor testimonies, rooted in real-life interviews, while also juxtaposing them with Turkish counter-arguments. This approach invites the audience to question singular notions of truth, justice, accountability, violation, resilience, and hope—all grounded in the postmemory of the Catastrophe. Within this analysis, four pivotal components of the Catastrophe's postmemorial dramaturgy stand out: survivor interviews, the Armenian-American version of the ancient quest pattern, gender-specific aspects of the massacres and deportations, and the representation of the Turk as the antithesis to the Armenian.

This article hopes to offer a more nuanced and subjective understanding of how theatre communicates the enduring impact of collective historical trauma. It encourages not only reflection on the

catastrophic history of Armenians but also stimulates further research into the complexities of postmemory in contemporary media and its broader implications for both scholarly and practical contexts.

WORKS CITED

ANTARAMIAN, Anna, and William ROLLERI. "The Armenian Question." *Contemporary Armenian American Drama: An Anthology of Ancestral Voices*, edited by Nishan Parlakian, Columbia UP, 2004, pp. 283-342.

ASSOCIATION, Armenian Students'. "The Armenian Question." *New York ASA*. asainc.org/newyork/events/event_the_armenian_question.html. Accessed 13 September 2023.

CARUTH, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

CHURCH, The Armenian. "'The Armenian Question.'" *The Armenian Church*, 1977, p. 7.

DADRIAN, Vahakn N. "Children as Victims of Genocide: The Armenian Case." *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2003, pp. 421-37.

DERDERIAN, Katharine. "Common Fate, Different Experience: Gender-Specific Aspects of the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1917." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2005, pp. 1-25.

DÜNDAR, Fuat. *Crime of Numbers: The Role of Statistics in the Armenian Question (1878-1918)*. Transaction, 2010.

EKMEKÇIOĞLU, Lerna. "Scholarship on the Armenian Genocide as a Gendered Event and Process." *New Perspectives on Turkey*, vol. 53, 2015, pp. 185-90.

HELLIER-TINOCO, Ruth. *Performing Palimpsest Bodies: Postmemory Theatre Experiments in Mexico*. Intellect, 2019.

HIRSCH, Marianne. "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy." *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Dartmouth College, 1999, pp. 2-23.

—. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2008, pp. 103-28.

HOVANNISIAN, Richard G. *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide*. Wayne State UP, 1999.
KAMBOURIAN, Steve. "'The Armenian Question' – New Drama on the First Genocide of the 20th Century." *The Diocese of the Armenian Church of America*, 5 April 1977, New York City, New York.
KARALI, Sebnem Nazli, and Anna ANTARAMIAN. "Inquiry on 'The Armenian Question.'" 12 Feb. 2023.
LUCKHURST, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. Routledge, 2008.
MARTIN, Carol. "Bodies of Evidence." *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, edited by Carol Martin, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 17-26.
MESSINA, Giuseppe Dennis. "An Analysis of William Rolleri's and Anna Antaramian's Play 'The Armenian Question.'" *GRIN*, grin.com/document/378787. Accessed 13 September 2023.
MILLER, Donald E. and Lorna TOURYAN MILLER. "Memory and Identity Across the Generations: A Case Study of Armenian Survivors and Their Progeny." *Qualitative Sociology*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1991, pp. 13-38.
OKOOMIAN, Janice. "Becoming White: Contested History, Armenian American Women, and Racialized Bodies." *MELUS*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2002, pp. 213-37.
PAGET, Derek. "The 'Broken Tradition' of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance." *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, edited by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 224-38.
PARLAKIAN, Nishan. *Contemporary Armenian American Drama: An Anthology of Ancestral Voices*. Columbia UP, 2004.
ROLLERI, Bill. "Voices of the Children: The Development of The Armenian Question." *Armenian Dramatic Arts Alliance*, armeniandrama.weebly.com/uploads/2/2/4/5/22453962/voices_of_children.pdf. Accessed 13 September 2023.
ROLLERI, William. "The Voices of Children." *Contemporary Armenian American Drama: An Anthology of Ancestral Voices*, edited by Nishan Parlakian, Columbia UP, 2004, pp. 279-81.

SANASARIAN, Eliz. “Gender Distinction in the Genocidal Process: A Preliminary Study of the Armenian Case.” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1989, pp. 449-61.
SHAHINIAN, Sandra. “Rehearsal of ‘The Armenian Question.’” Received by Garbis Bogosian, *The Diocese of the Armenian Church of America*, 21 March 1977, New York City, New York.
SHIRINIAN, Lorne. *Armenian-North American Literature*. Edwin Mellen P, 1990.
THOMASIAN, Ruth. “The Genocide That Belongs to the Whole Wide World.” *Armenian Reporter International*, 19 April 2003, pp. 1-4. *ProQuest*. Accessed 13 September 2023.
WEISS, Peter. “Fourteen Propositions for a Documentary Theatre.” *World Theatre*, vol. 17, no. 5-6, 1968, pp. 375-89.

"Cause Not Enough Niggas Rap and Be Gay": Redefining Black Queer Masculinities Through Intersectional Dynamics and Performativity in Contemporary Rap

Yannick M. Blec

Abstract: This paper addresses several elements to be found in hip hop culture regarding the antinormative performativity of Black masculinity/-ies by African American LGBTQ+ rappers. It focuses on the emancipative catharsis at the center of much of hip hop culture. With the examples of rappers Kevin Abstract, Lil Nas X and singer Franck Ocean, I explore the queer intersectional position of U.S. hip hop queer music and probe the LGBTQ+ dynamics that have come into the spotlight. Through their music videos, their onstage performances, and the very content of their lyrics, I analyze both form and message to assess their impact on their audience. In this respect, the interpretation of YouTube "Reaction" videos is a precious measure of the reception of these messages by people of African American descent. These performances and responses are addressed as phenomena, namely as objects reflecting the emancipative goals of the performers in their decisive relation to their audience.

Résumé : Cet article interroge plusieurs éléments concernant la performativité anti-normative des masculinités noires de rappeurs LGBTQ+ africains américains. En m'arrêtant sur les rappeurs Kevin Abstract, Lil Nas X et le chanteur Franck Ocean, j'analyse la position intersectionnelle queer du hip hop étasunien et j'examine les dynamiques LGBTQ+ qui en émanent. Au travers de leurs vidéo-clips, leurs performances scéniques et les paroles de leur chanson, j'étudie à la fois la forme et le message et je mesure leur impact sur le public. Les vidéos de réaction sur la plateforme YouTube sont une mesure précieuse de la réception de ces messages par les Africains Américains. Ces performances et les réponses qu'elles engendrent sont analysées en tant que phénomènes, c'est-à-dire en tant qu'objets reflétant le but d'émancipation des *performers* dans leurs relations au public.

Keywords: Black masculinities, Hip Hop, homosexuality, hypermasculinity, intersectionality, performance, Queer Black men, rap

Mots-clés : Hip Hop, hommes noirs queers, homosexualité, hypermasculinité, intersectionnalité, masculinités noires, performance, rap

On January 19, 2020, Pastor Troy, founding member of the gangsta-hardcore rap group D.S.G.B. (Down South Georgia Boyz), went on a homophobic rant on Twitter where he criticized both younger generation rapper Lil Nas X and Applebee's because of the time he saw two gay men having lunch there. In his attack, he used a language rife with homophobic signifiers that indicated animosity particularly against African American same-sex relations. He claimed that homosexuality weakens the representation and strength of the Black[1] race—i.e., of Black men especially. He wrote:

> "Welp, Guess I won't be winning a GRAMMY…If this what I gotta wear. They love to push this shit on Our Kids!! The other day @applebees had some punks kissing and laughing eating mozzarella sticks. First Thing My 14 yr old Son said was, 'F**** Applebee's' And It Brought Joy to My Heart!! He sees it…their agenda to take the masculinity from Men, Black Men Especially. Some may say, 'He Making Money!!' Rupaul do too, but I ain't bumping his CD!!! Integrity is Priceless. Y'all Better open that 3rd Eye and let your Sons know What Is Real…Or They Ass Gone Be Headed Down That Old Town Road Foreal!!~P.T. #TheyGoneRiiiiiiddddeeeTiltheycantnomore #BlackOwnedandIndependent #NotMySons #ItAintWorthIt #Taketheroadlesstraveled #Youwillstillgetthere #DSGB #Wontbeonmypagelong

This tweet and the account were later erased given the controversy that erupted after the post.[2] It was not the only time Lil Nas X was criticized for his outfits, as I will show below. Yet, this post is important as it allows us to understand what Pastor Troy considers to be an inherent opposition between African American masculinity

and homosexuality. It shows a tension between "us" and "them" and uses a vocabulary that could be linked to conspiracy theories when it goes on about a supposed queer and White "agenda" designed to undermine Black men. It is not new, but this example suggests the shortcuts that can be found to supposedly define masculinity in Black communities—namely, the notion that a Black man *cannot* be a part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Research suggests that the antagonism between Black and LGBTQ+ identities is set in a parochial understanding in which the vision that each community has of the other is biased and based on stereotypes. Scholar bell hooks in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, despite some moralizing passages, defines Black masculinity as a way of conforming to White patriarchal societies' mores. She writes:

> Whereas an unconventional perspective on masculinity had given black males alternative grounds on which to build healthy self-esteem, the embrace of patriarchal masculinity meant that most black men measuring against the norm would also be less than a man, failures, unable to realize the ideal. (14)

Furthermore, sociologist CalvinJohn Smiley along with mental and public health professor David Fakunle explain that, after being portrayed as "foolish" (352) during the institution of slavery, Black males became a threat to the White dominant society during the Reconstruction period (353). The menace epitomized by the Black male is at once physical, political, and economic, but above all one of power and domination. The two scholars demonstrate how, throughout US history, there has been a transformation from the benevolent African American male individual toward the criminalization of Black men in US society, dating from the 1900s (Smiley and Fakunle 353-354). From the mid-twentieth century onward, the socio-economic context has made it harder for these men to start and maintain a nuclear family, as young Black men are more often incarcerated and/or subject to police brutality than any other racial group of the US population (Hoston 26-27).

The association of racism with the socio-economic environment, the responses to the stereotypes of race and gender, as well as the contemporary lives of these Black men in the urban spaces of the big cities has created another cliché depicting these urban individuals as tough and hypermasculine. As stated by sociologists Kamesha Spates and Brittany C. Slatton when they analyze the construction of Black male identities:

> Contemporary men of color face a unique challenge. They dwell in a place where it is virtually impossible to live up to socially constructed notions of masculinity and sexuality. Stereotypes about black men, such as being hypersexual, hyper-masculine, dangerous criminals are commonplace in the minds of many Americans. Thus, an integral part of black male identity formation often includes attempts to counter these conflicting and impossible definitions of manhood. (2)

This struggle is characteristic of the formation of African American male identity insofar as the latter necessarily includes race, gender, class, and sexuality as co-constructed aspects of these individuals' identities in U.S. society.

From the 1970s (and until now), a growing number of young Black men started to adopt the codes of the street, something bell hooks argues comes from a depiction of a supposed Black masculinity in the mass media culture (26). In this environment, hypermasculinity was correlated with the Gangsta culture that endorsed easy money obtained by the selling of drugs, hustling, and the affiliation with street/ghetto gangs (25). These images were amplified through the emergence of hip hop in the 1970s and more particularly of gangsta rap in the 1980s—a style that ultimately became archetypical of the musical genre in White America (Kehrer 5).

When DJ Kool Herc created and spread hip hop in 1973, it was synonymous with celebrations. Very soon, MCs (Masters of Ceremony or Microphone Commanders) became more prominent than DJs (Disc Jockeys), and this musical genre attracted a large audience. By the late 1980s artists politicized further the genre,[3] as the group Public Enemy with their committed track "Fight the Power" (1989). Thenceforth,

hip hop has become a means for minority communities to express their struggles and to protest, as well as a place of emancipation against discriminations and racism. Simultaneously, many critics have labeled rap as violent, misogynistic, and homophobic because of the way women and LGBTQ+ people have been depicted in numerous tracks by gangsta rappers. In addition, several prominent rappers have denied the presence of non-male artists in the industry (Kehrer 14). Not only have they tried to push out women, but also queer and gender non-conforming artists from hip hop culture.[4]

Due to the predominance of gangsta rap in the 1990s, images of hypersexual and hypermasculine Black male gangsters in hip hop culture are widespread, namely: Tupac Shakur, Snoop Dogg and 50 Cent who play on the stereotypes of the gangster and the pimp; Jay-Z who, along with Kanye West and P. Diddy, signify the commercially successful rapper; or younger artists such as Wiz Khalifa, Drake, Kendrick Lamar or even Kid Cudi. Although the last two have shown much sensitivity as they address their therapy and depression in their lyrics, their (Black) masculinity is almost never questioned.

More recently, alternative visions of Black masculinities have surfaced in the rap genre. Changes in gender depictions within the African American/Black communities can be observed in these musical styles. In his 2019 book, XinLing Li tackles the presence of Black gay men in hip hop, he explains that "[f]or gay rap music to build a mass audience it would require ultimately the de-heterosexualisation of our collective superego, that is, to make same-sex experience as relevant to the heterosexual as the heterosexual experience is to the homosexual" (155). His analysis mainly focuses on underground gay rappers, explaining his assessment that Black gay/queer rappers cannot be accepted or are limited to repeating sterotypes if the heterosexual norms remain predominant (151). Yet, just one year later, he would be proved wrong with the success of young rapper Lil Nas X. Lauron Kehrer further showed the limits of Li's argument when writing:

> The proliferation of online and print articles in the mid-2010s profiling openly queer and trans rappers such as Big Freedia, Le1f, Mykki Blanco,

> Zebra Katz, and others, as well as more recent writing on Lil Nas X, suggests that the success of these artists is newsworthy because they are anomalies. (19)

The amount of press coverage is indicative of a shift in the exposition of those gay/queer rappers. The irregularities do not reside in the number of stereotypes of gay/queer Black men that are brought into the discussion, but in the reappropriation of existing codes and, above all, of the assertive embrace of sexual and gender identities. These changes reflect interrogations about the dynamics of intersectional identities in contemporary rap and hip hop, and I intend to bring forth some of them to deal with the construction of the Black queer identities of several twenty-first century rappers, expanding on Kehrer's and Li's works.

I am going to focus on three "out" artists who self-identify as cis-gender male gay/queer artists to discuss the intersectional dynamics to be found in their respective works. The choice is made on account of their fame, of their advocacy for the redefinition of Black masculinity in its intersection with queerness, as well as of the way their discourse is brought forward by various media to represent some kind of change in hip hop culture. In doing so, I will address the connection of several aspects of hip hop culture with the performativity of black masculinity/-ies by African American LGBTQ+ artists and the antinormative characteristics that result from said performances. I also want to focus on the emancipative parts at stake when these queer artists display their iconoclast masculinities in their lyrics, in their videos, on social media, in the interviews they give, and even in the attire they wear in their public lives. My analysis will rest upon the lyrics of some of their hit tracks, some of which aroused much controversy at the time of their release. In that way, a semiotic approach using the diverse tools of African American studies, queer studies, and cultural studies at large will allow a better grasp of the construction of intersectional Black and queer identities in the case of those rappers. The choice of Lil Nas X, Kevin Abstract, and Frank Ocean is also due to the ultra-contemporary aspect of their work in a U.S. society that, after

the election of Barack Obama, was supposed to be post-racial and post-queer,[5] and set in or after Donald Trump's term.

Since hip hop art has often been grassroots committed art, integrating social factors of racial existence in U.S. society, the entrenchment in urban, individual, as well as community-based realities and experiences that are fixed in that racialized environment can be found in the music made by rapper Kevin Abstract and R&B singer/rapper Frank Ocean. As for rapper Lil Nas X, he inscribes his rhymes in a more personal setting, creating a completely different universe. Their songs nevertheless have striking similarities when they mention their struggles, the ordeals they have faced, or even sometimes their hopes to have better lives and that are transcribed in their lyrics and music videos—something that is quite common to every rapper, whether straight or queer, in hip hop culture (Li 12). Each artist expresses his own experience in his own fashion, thus leading to various ways of enacting intersectional dynamics in hip hop culture—that is, intersectional because they are at once Black, male, queer/gay individuals, who often come from single-parent and/or working-class families, and who used to live in the "ghetto."[6] They use their songs as media to encode these intersections in their on-stage and off-stage performances.

When I use the word *performance*, it ought to be understood as the artistic routine of an artist directed to an audience. Yet, the term will also refer to the concept demonstrated by Judith Butler in her seminal book *Gender Trouble* in which she explains that:

> acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (185)

Consequently, I will interrogate the discourses of these performers both in terms of lyrics and interviews, but also of physical presence, including clothing. In hip hop culture, rap is to be delivered to an audience by an MC (the rapper) and, although in this article I will primarily deal with the content of the tracks and videos, I will always

have the audience response in mind. Accordingly, I will end by tackling the reception of the different messages by the public.

Changing the Game: Queering Masculinity and the Genre(s)

In addition to lyrics, the representation of Black masculinity in rap is particularly noticeable in the various music videos that accompany the rappers' rhymes. One of the artists who reinforce this specific depiction of Black heterosexual men most is 50 Cent, for instance in the track "P.I.M.P." from his 2003 debut album *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*. This song and its video exemplify the hackneyed hypersexual and hypermasculine facets of Black men that are repeated throughout hip hop culture. Although he is a "pimp," 50 Cent does not have the stereotypical perm and Cadillac that represent these procurers, and the latter are presented as objects of ridicule. Even though there seems to be an underlying criticism of a particular haircut, which is demonstrated in the work thanks to the interlude skit with Fiddy's (another name for 50 Cent) introduction to and subsequent enthronement in the Pimp circle, the position of panderer is the desired one as it involves multiple female partners (a harem that is visible in the film) as well as social and economic success. This is perceptible in Snoop Dogg's verses when he raps, "I got my niggas[7] in Queens, I got my bitches Uptown / I got my business in Manhattan, I ain't fuckin' around." Though stereotypical, the commodification of women as well as the position as dominant Black males in this song and its video reinforce the commercially solipsistic, one-sided vision of African American men as womanizers and gangsters. Those attitudes are thus encouraged in the various recipients of this song, and this image of African American male identities will continue to disseminate as the only possible behavior to be expected from young Black men (Clay 1355–1356). However, non-heteronormative and anti-patriarchal songs are more and more conspicuous and some hit songs such as Beyoncé's "Run the World (Girls)" (released in 2011) or Megan Thee Stallion's "Shots Fired" (2020) are merely two illustrations of this evolution in representations of previously utilized minorities[8]—although it is still possible to interrogate their impact.

This is also what gay rappers Kevin Abstract and Lil Nas X do in their respective ways in the lyrics of their songs and the images they broadcast in the accompanying videos.

In December 2018, Lil Nas X, born Montero Lamar Hill, released "Old Town Road"—a song that is defined as "country rap," namely a mix of two allegedly antithetical genres. After the re-release of the track by Columbia Records in a remix featuring Billy Ray Cyrus in April 2019, when it had been at the top of the charts worldwide for some weeks, the rapper decided to come out on Twitter on June 30, 2019, the last day of Pride month. This decisive moment can be considered performative given that it became a discursive foundation of Lil Nas X's public queer identity.[9] As he was topping the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart, his decision to come out was made in a moment when his commercial value was high but could have instantly crumbled because of the desertion of more traditional hip hop listeners. On the other hand, announcing his homosexuality was an act of confrontation showing that a Black gay man could be commercially successful in rap, in complete opposition to the reifications that are presupposed by the industry and to the expectations of what the sexual and masculine identity of a Black man should be. By embracing the rainbow flag (symbol of the LGBTQ+ communities) in his tweet and by revealing its presence on the cover of his EP, Lil Nas X sought to combine masculinity with queer identity. Because his success at that time was relying on the song "Old Town Road," the reading of its lyrics associated with its "official movie" video still show a rapper who demonstrates a form of virility linked to the symbol of the cowboy.

In a semiotic interpretation, the character depicted by the rapper in the video insists on his Americanness as an original founder of the "Frontier West,"—a bandit and a hustler to be sure, yet a hero of the construction and expansion of the United States. Jeremy Agnew writes, "The mythic cowboy also has to have various guns, including revolver, carbine, rifle, or shotgun, to back up his virility and toughness, to resolve physical conflicts, and to bring order to the frontier" (91). Though in this role Lil Nas X does not have a weapon and is

all smiles, the figure of the bandit/hustler ought also to be linked to the image of the gang member and the thug, anchoring him in a representation of Black male rappers that is founded on a hypermasculinity based on violence, theft, and easy money. Furthermore, by playing on the image of the cowboy, Lil Nas X adds up to the presence of Black people in the conquest of the West and their partaking in the construction of the symbol of the virile hetero-patriarchal man (Allmendinger xi, 95). Signs of this hypersexuality/hypermasculinity are further demonstrated in the lyrics when the artist rhymes, "Cheated on my baby / You can go and ask her." The use of a pronoun referring to a cis-gender woman apart, the possession of the female body is displayed as the rapper flaunts 1) the fact that he cheated on her, becoming a womanizer just like 50 Cent and Snoop Dogg, 2) that he is the powerful, masculine member of the relationship who can do as he pleases and who will always be accepted when he comes back.

Although two other singles followed "Old Town Road," it was in his hit "HOLIDAY," distributed in 2020 and the first not to be included in his EP *7* (therefore that was released after his coming out), that Lil Nas X responded to the criticism that he received. It is not a diss track,[10] still he addresses the questions of his sexuality, of his success and, while he does this, he reemploys masculinist codes that are however queered. Just like in subsequent singles ("MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)," or "INDUSTRY BABY," for example), the rapper uses his songs to mark his position in the music industry—as a successful artist as well as a young Black gay man. His rhymes become performatively political in the sense that they convey the positions which he defends as far as his identity and his art are concerned.

In the track "HOLIDAY," he raps the following:

> Ayy, it's a holiday
> I got hoes on hoes and they out of control, yeah
> Ayy, this another one
> All my niggas on go and I hope that you know it …
> I might bottom on the low, but I top shit (But I top shit),
> Switch the genre on you hoes, do a rock hit (Mmm)
> I got the biggest damn song, fuck the charts, sis, I don't need 'em.

In addition to the transformations that he contributes to making in hip hop (the genre is mixed with country music in "Old Town Road," "F9mily (You & Me)" mixes it with pop punk, there are R&B and pop in "C7osure (You Like)," etc.), the references to sexuality are telling of his decentering hip hop from heterosexuality, but also of his queering masculinity. In this extract, he uses a lexis that originates from the (Black) LGBTQ+ community and uses it to refer to sexual practices. These references are combined with his position in the music industry and reveal the importance he gives himself in hip hop culture. In that manner, the verbs "bottom" and "top" respectively refer to the person on the receiving end of a (gay) intercourse and to the one who is on the giving end. Thus, Lil Nas X elaborates on the fact that a Black man can "bottom" and still be the leader, consequently queering hyper-masculinity in his performance. In the song, he addresses an audience made of "sis" and not "bros," at the same time as he disparages them as "hoes" whom he cannot control. The music video is going further by starting a trend that the rapper will continue in following videos, namely he focuses the point of view on his own persona.

Setting the plot in the future (dated Christmas Eve 2220), all human characters are performed by Lil Nas X in a high-tech Santa Claus's abode, office and factory. When he talks about having "got hoes on hoes and they out of control," it is a group of robots that are on the screen. Even if the fictionalization implies the pretense as an actor, the subtext abounds with explicit details that are to be correlated to the performance of his sexuality while changing the established codes. Along with this vocabulary proper to gay sexual experiences, he employs the slang used by self-identified "straight" Black men who have intercourse with other men. Jessie Heath and Kathy Goggin explain "the Down Low (DL) encompasses more than just clandestine same sex relations. In the media, it has been described as a subculture unto itself; a secret, dual sexual lifestyle practiced predominately by young, urban, hyper-masculinized African American" (17). Consequently, Lil Nas X's private life and sexual behavior are linked to his insertion in the hip hop world that he eventually dominates both as the powerful person in his sexual intercourse and the dominant artist in the genre.

The discursive significance is important because it imposes the presence of gay men in a hypermasculine and hypersexual environment that is no longer only heterosexual. Furthermore, I argue that the presence of queer identity is conveyed by the ungendered robots that make up Lil Nas X's harem—one where gender is not commodified anymore, intermixing hip hop culture with more LGBTQ+-oriented praxes. The vernacular that is used by Lil Nas X is obviously one that will be understood by his fans and the other people familiar with hip hop, creating new perspectives and epistemologies.

Marvin Carlson, in his seminal book *Performance: An Introduction*, explains that gay performance:

> involved shifting the performance of identity from the stigma itself (homosexuality) to what Esther Newton in a 1972 book on female impersonation calls the "halo effect," the violation of culturally standardized canons and gender-coded canons of taste, behavior, and speech that normally signal sexual orientation. For men such violations might include "effeminate" or overly "delicate" speech or behavior, an "aesthetic" orientation, an interest in fanciful or decorative costume, unseemly concern with personal appearance, and so on. (136)

This is what the rapper does in his music videos and in his public appearances. He is also notable for his effete conduct and his outfits that have garnered a lot of praise but still more criticism. Instead of the customary urban streetwear worn by many male hip hop performers, Lil Nas X favors skin-tight, futuristic couture garments that queer hip hop culture in its fundamentals.

Kevin Abstract, another gay rapper who has strong artistic and friendly relations with Lil Nas X, is one more example of a gay Black rapper who enacts and flaunts his sexuality in his tracks. His first album revolved around a straight, closeted performance of himself, something that is relevant of an "epistemology of the closet," wherein the closeted person is safe but always subject to being found out. Talking about this closet, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick signals that "The closet is the defining structure for gay oppression" (71). In order to succeed in the hip hop industry, Kevin Abstract (just like Lil Nas X

in "Old Town Road") repressed his sexuality. Hip hop culture, as was previously said, is linked to a physical and lived experience environment, namely that of the (urban) Black community in the United States, the community's aspirations and the stereotypes that were created about them. By performing as a straight rapper, Abstract, on the one hand, responded to the expectations of what a Black male rapper ought to be, and on the other hand can be considered trapped in the oppressive system of living in a given community, that is the ghetto and its underlying significance—therefore he was trapped in the closet generated by these milieus. However, starting from his second studio album, *American Boyfriend: A Suburban Love Story* released in November 2016, he talks about being gay and relates it to his heritage as an African American man. His lyrics reveal the tensions that he feels because of his pertaining to two minoritized communities and his need to advocate for the existence of LGBTQ+ African Americans. The overdetermination of Black gay men is further criticized in the video "EMPTY" where the rapper is being fellated by a person who at first seems to be a woman but then appears to be a White man who will die by suicide at the end, once more shifting the stigma from the Black individual to one who, if the doxa were true, should have been inserted in a progressive, thus accepting and benevolent, community.

In his track "Miserable America," Abstract deals with the intersection of his Blackness and his homosexuality when he rhymes, "My boyfriend hates me, won't let me meet his parents / Says my skin might scare 'em, not afraid of my appearance … / They love gays but they hate niggas / What else are we to do rather than talk and paint a picture?". Earlier, in the first verse of the song, he raps, "My boyfriend saved me, my mother's homophobic / I'm stuck in the closet, I'm so claustrophobic / I just want help if, my best friend's racist … / I'm so claustrophobic, I just wanna know shit / Well, we all love Young Thug." Within these lines lies an illustration of one shared experience of the way a young Black gay rapper can be torn between his racial and sexual identities. Abstract presents the underlying myths of a homophobic Black community and a racist White group, with on the one hand, his mother who does not recognize him as gay, and on the other

hand, his White in-laws who, although they are progressive enough to accept their son's homosexuality, cannot bear that his boyfriend is Black. This way, Abstract shows how young Black gay men (and rappers) are stuck in an overdetermined position, where they have no choice. As a Black rapper, he ought to rely on his masculinity to represent his race, something that frightens his boyfriend's parents. As a gay man, he should be effeminate, something at odds with his own identity and the construction of the latter in a Black environment. The reference to rapper Young Thug—who is well-known as a heterosexual, cis-gender, male rapper who nevertheless publicly wears eccentric clothing that is generally defined as female's (i.e., dresses, skirts, etc.)—adds to the ironical denunciation that Abstract is doing. The image of the closet is striking as it can once more be linked to Sedgwick's "epistemology of the closet" when she decries the binaries of sexuality and of representations, which Abstract is doing here as well.

Additionally, the esthetics and themes of the music video are indicative of the ambivalence that Abstract criticizes in the track. The plot revolves around the young man as he is undergoing a conversion therapy, hanging upside down in the front room of a seemingly lower middle-class, supposedly Christian fundamentalist White man's house. Surrounding the rapper are six Black women who are lasciviously dancing around him, until one of them grabs a shotgun and kills the hostage taker. As the liberated hostages celebrate their newly acquired freedom, the images reveal several underlying symbols. First, there is the condemnation of the fact that a Black man should only be attracted to Black women and partners. This in turn questions the binaries since the trapper and symbolic villain is a White religious man. That it is not Abstract who kills that man but one of the Black women who is as trapped as the rapper may be a way to insist on the rejection of these binaries as a female is as powerful as a male person. While the narrative unfolds and the White man's victims celebrate, the characterization of Abstract frantically dancing in the background while the women are sitting on a couch and drinking champagne, not even paying attention to him, shows the acceptance from both

parties and their mutual respect. Indeed, the women have understood Abstract's suffering given that they suffered like him and with him during their ordeal.

This is developed further in the lyrics of the song "JUNKY," released with his collective BROCKHAMPTON when he states:

> He gave me good head, peepin' out while the windows tinted…
> Is it homophobic to only hook up with straight niggas?
> You know like closet niggas, masc-type?
> Why don't you take that mask off?
> That's the thought I had last night
> "Why you always rap about bein' gay?"
> 'Cause not enough niggas rap and be gay
> Where I come from, niggas get called "faggot" and killed
> So I'ma get head from a nigga right here
> And they can come and cut my head off, and
> And my legs off, and
> And I'ma still be a boss 'til my head gone, yeah

By mentioning his fantasy about being attracted to "straight niggas," Abstract may also be referring to the Black men on the down low, even *trades*, namely, to use a definition from *Urban Dictionary*, "young hyper-masculine looking gay [men], usually black or latino in urban contexts." This hypermasculinity is moreover queered as Abstract is in the dominant position as this man "gave me good head, peepin' out while the windows tinted." In this text, the rapper contributes to the process of disidentification developed by performance scholar José E. Muñoz. In the introduction to his book, Muñoz explains:

> Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (31)

In that way, for Kevin Abstract, those "closet niggas, masc-type," because of the concealment of their sexuality to the general community, are wearing masks that the rapper thinks it is time to shed (which he also applies to himself). That is the reason why his rap is political, as he performs his sexuality that he considers is co-constructed with his Black identity.

Abstract discursively performs his stance when he links it to the geographical place of the ghetto that he essentializes as homophobic and where "niggas get called 'faggot' and killed" because of their homosexuality. He chooses to expose that sexuality to his public because he is gay *and* Black and understands the risks he is taking ("So I'ma get head from a nigga right here / And they can come and cut my head off, and / And my legs off, and / And I'ma still be a boss 'til my head gone"). In keeping the discourse centered on the sexual act, Kevin Abstract purposely does not talk about sentiments. He knows that this is going to be interpreted and homophobically excoriated and he awaits the criticisms. He defends non-heteronormative rap in hip hop culture in several interviews, just as when he tells Chris Mandle:

> "I'd see negative comments and forget [being gay] was a big deal to some people, that some people hadn't heard it before," he says. "My goal is just to normalise it. Straight rappers talk about their sexual relationships without warning me. And they are more explicit and violent. I have to express myself and who I am."

In another interview, while talking about LGBTQ+/BIPOC fans to *LA Weekly*'s Artemis Thomas-Handsard, Abstract adds, "I want to speak for people who can't speak; they're afraid to speak . . . They can play that song and sing it back and feel empowered." Consequently, Abstract—just like Lil Nas X does—implants queerness within the long-established hip hop conventions and performances to advocate for himself and other marginalized people.

Intersectional Identities: Binaries, Fluidity, Representations and Reception

By acting out of their queerness and Blackness, these artists "diss" their homophobic counterparts and put LGBTQ+ people within hip

hop culture in the spotlight. Even if Lil Nas X's celebrity has outreached the intimate circle in which he started to become a worldwide phenomenon (his song "MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)" that overtly depicts homosexual intercourse briefly reached #1 in Saudi Arabia (Lang)), and although Kevin Abstract and his supergroup BROCKHAMPTON were in the lineup of the 2022 Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival (Veneziano), not everyone in the mainstream audience is as familiar with them as they are with Jay-Z or Kendrick Lamar. However, some have reached a certain prominent position in the hip hop industry and a singer like Frank Ocean—whose songs are rather well-known and who collaborated with Tyler the Creator, Jay-Z, Kanye West (a.k.a. Ye), Pharrell Williams, Diplo, Calvin Harris and Migos, or A$AP Rocky—also performs his sexuality in his songs.[11] His being close to more mainstream and more traditional rappers echoes the changes that are progressively observed in the genre and the culture.

Ocean had already started to address his sexuality and expose it, although in an indirect way, with the lyrics of his song "Thinking Bout You" and then more straightforwardly in the open letter he posted on *Tumblr* on July 4, 2012. In his coming out letter, the rapper says that he looked for an answer from God about his sexuality, something that Lil Nas X also dealt with almost a decade later in his song "SUN GOES DOWN" as he "prayed God would take [these gay thoughts] from me." The search for a divine answer to same-gender loving attraction can be related to the importance given to religion in many African American communities and these Christians' rejection of homosexuality (Griffin 111). Yet, one could argue that, often, Christianity leads to a binary perception of the world.

In his single "Chanel," Ocean sings, "My guy pretty like a girl / And he got fight stories to tell / I see both sides like Chanel / See on both sides like Chanel," expressing his ability to perceive how representations of identities cannot be Manichean. Because he enunciates his idea in Janus-faced terms, it is often considered that the singer expresses a question of binaries, which is not what he articulates. Ocean's letter

explicitly deals with his feelings. Talking about Kanye West who also shows emotions in the track "Put On," Matthew Oware writes, "This level of emotional outpouring contradicts current media portrayals of black manhood," (59) thus reaffirming the deeper meaning to be found in rap songs. Here, Ocean's implication in hip hop culture is paradigmatic of the intermingling of the rap and R&B categories into one.[12] The feelings he shares in his letter are of a first love which is obviously not reciprocal, and this crushes his heart. While he wonders about this event in his life, he writes, "It was my first love, it changed my life. Back then, my mind would wander to the women I had been with, the ones I cared for and thought I was in love with," insisting on the ambivalence of his emotions, but also opening a possibility toward not just binary, but the prospect of fluidity in the performance of the self and of identities.

On March 15, 2017, journalist Chris Mench addressed the presence of queer themes in Frank Ocean's lyrics in an article which he somewhat erroneously concludes, "All of this brings us back to 'Chanel,' which continues *Blonde* and *Endless*'s themes of duality, challenging notions of masculinity, and being unafraid to include strikingly queer lyrics in a major release." The notion of masculinity, from a hip hop point of view, is further challenged when the singer makes use of his falsetto voice to express his emotions in his songs. This is particularly relevant when listening to him pouring his heart out in "Thinkin Bout You" as he once again talks about his love interest. It is exactly this masculinity that is reenacted, remodeled from a renewed mold when it is performed by these three Black gay/queer male artists.

The interviews given by Kevin Abstract and Frank Ocean, as well as the tweets posted by Lil Nas X, indicate the omnipresence of audiences in their art. Recognizing this singular relationship between the rappers and their public leads to a greater appreciation of what rap is and how it falls within a more general Black culture. Imani Perry writes:

> Rap music fits within the call-response trope in a number of critical ways. First, the intertextuality of black musical texts lies at the heart of rap on

> both an oral and musical level. Hip hop's great dependence on the music of an earlier generation, the music artists often recall from their youth, combined with the reconfigurations of that music and its offering back to the general public, constitutes a kind of conversation with the black musical tradition. (34)

This conversation entails sharing the same language, often articulated through "Signifyin'" which literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines as "a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master tropes), and also hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis" (52). Thus, Signifyin' is a way of constructing a coded meaning to a text that is understood only by those who can decipher it—which emphasizes the strong link between the artists and their audiences. In addition, "Part of the unspoken pact between MC and audience is that the MC is authentic, that what he or she is saying is sincere or real" (Bradley 154). Oftentimes, fans look to their favorite artists as idols. Yet, as Bradley adds, "Rap has proved itself quite skilled at toeing this line, of balancing its audience's need for idols with its desire for connection" (197). Because of this correlation between authenticity, idolization, and position as witness, the call-response trope is fundamental to the analysis of Black queer Masculinities in contemporary rap.

In fact, when they rhyme, Black gay/queer rappers mainly address a group of fans who will find echoes of their own experiences in their tracks. Even though Lil Nas X, Kevin Abstract, and Frank Ocean have their faithful fans, their music is also broadcast to more and more people thanks to social networks such as *YouTube*. This, in turn, gives way to reaction videos that can be found on this platform. Among them can be located positive reviews (Lost in Vegas's for instance) while others are plainly negative to those expositions to LGBTQ+ lives and desires (see the video by The CartierFamily). However, the point is not to satisfy the requirements of those traditional listeners watching the music videos or listening to the songs, but to make them understand that the hip hop community is more diverse than usually thought—something that Lil Nas X does when he trolls his detractors,

especially in his various responses to attacks on Twitter that compare him to more "traditional" rappers.[13]

The use of digital social media in the relation between artists and listeners is not new, though the contemporary utilization must be above all related to the new generation of rappers and listeners. They are part of Generation Z (Gen Z), namely they correspond to people born between the mid-to-late 1990s and the early 2010s—which is the case of Lil Nas X and Kevin Abstract who were born in 1996 when Frank Ocean was born in 1987. "Gen Z" also refers to people who have always lived in a world with digital media and computers (Palfrey and Grasser). Talking about rapper Fly Young Red's track "Throw that Boy Pussy," Eguchi and Roberts write, "Social media's capacity for spreading 'Throw that Boy P***y' to a large audience through Internet sharing has further contributed to disrupting and quaring[14] the traditional capitalist approach to controlling the production of mainstream music (i.e., record labels)" (153). Therefore, they show the transformation of the record industry, and the way younger artists manipulate their image and the communication with their audiences.

Additionally, because of the margins that many critics and listeners put on the genres, they miss the opportunity to enrich the culture they defend; an argument that all three artists have voiced in their various songs, videos, and conversations with the press. In an interview with Melissa Bradshaw, Frank Ocean gives his opinion about the limits imposed when trying to define a musical genre (here, with the term "Alternative R&B"), saying, "you're limiting it. And that's why I always say that about the genre thing, because that's what it does. When you say 'it's that', you listen to it in a certain way. And you might not necessarily miss it, but it's just inaccurate, and you'll miss a couple of things, contextually." Although it may be considered only a remark about musical genres, it can be extended to the queering of hip hop and R&B. For the three artists, these types of music must not be circumscribed to their commonly accepted boundaries. The latter must be pushed to include more diversity and, by doing so, to encourage reconsideration of the intersections of identities of the

artists and the listeners. The labeling of identities is politically questioned given that these markers are bound to exclude some features that are however present in the corresponding individual. Therefore, by disrupting the expectations of the hypermasculine Black man, heteronormative artist, mixed-genre track or again the ghetto as one of the prominent containers of the cultural identity of the urban Black community, Lil Nas X, Kevin Abstract, and Frank Ocean impose the presence of nonconforming individuals and interrogate—as several female rappers did before them—the monolithic vision of rappers, Black men, hip hop culture, and so on. The music and images they create first represent their own personal experiences but, as they stand as spokespeople of a category that is barely known, they progressively become representations/-tives of this community of the margins where African American LGBTQ+ men are relegated.

In *Hip Hop Heresies: Queer Aesthetics in New York City*, Associate Professor of Black Studies Shanté Paradigm Smalls explains the need for Black queer artists to use their own platform and not let other dominant voices speak for them. Smalls later argues that letting others address the presence of queers in hip hop culture "shapes the queer as threatening to dominate Black masculinity and produces a discursive visual archetype of the gender variant queer that should be avoided by those adhering to authentic hip hop Black masculine ideals" (139). I contend that while the Black male figure is decentered and made queer, and that therefore the traditional clichés should collapse, it is only to be replaced by other stereotypes. The performance of African American non-heteronormativity in hip hop allows many circulations and hybridizations (whether of the genres or in terms of intersectional identities), but it also generates a great deal of interrogations about the reception of the music and its lyrics, the videos, and the rappers' performances by members of the Black communities and/or by the (White) mainstream audience—something that, despite some studies such as XinLing Li's *Black Masculinity and Hip-Hop Music*, Shanté Paradigm Smalls's *Hip Hop Heresies* or Lauron Kehrer's *Queer Voices in Hip Hop* (among a few others), still necessitates further analysis, at the

same time from the point of view of the rappers, that of their Black queer fans, and of Black queer people in general.

WORKS CITED

@LILNASX. "can y'all please stop spreading this! spread this one instead, it's a much better angle." *Twitter*, 27 September 2021, 8:12 p.m., https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1442552653750231040?s=20&t=r5I-9yoqrHoV5SKm3wVcIuw.

—. "some of y'all already know, some of y'all don't care, some of y'all not gone fwm no more. but before this month ends i want y'all to listen closely to c7osure. 🌈😍✨." *Twitter*, 30 June 2019, 10:28 p.m., https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1145428812404068352.

—. "this is not fair youre comparing a legend who has changed music forever to 50 cent." *Twitter*, 26 March 2023, 5:07 a.m., https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1639826381965078528.

@YOYOTRAV. "Pastor Troy went on a long, homophobic rant & somehow convinced himself that it's the reason why he doesn't have a Grammy." *Twitter*, 19 January 2020, 5.37 p.m., https://twitter.com/yoyotrav/status/1222559450952798213.

"BROCKHAMPTON- JUNKY (REACTION!!!)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Lost In Vegas, 4 September 2017, https://youtu.be/BA2189L2btI.

"BROCKHAMPTON'S Kevin Abstract Explains His Iconic Videos." *GQ,* 24 June 2019, https://www.gq.com/video/watch/brockhampton-s-kevin-abstract-explains-his-iconic-videos. Accessed 17 April 2023.

"HOLIDAY (Official Video)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Lil Nas X, 13 November 2020, https://youtu.be/9vMLTcftlyI.

"Old Town Road (Official Movie) ft. Billy Ray Cyrus." *YouTube*, uploaded by Lil Nas X, 17 May 2019, https://youtu.be/w2Ov5jzm3j8.

"P.I.M.P. (Snoop Dogg Remix) ft. Snoop Dogg, G-Unit." *YouTube*, uploaded by 50 Cent, 17 June 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDApZhXTpH8.

"Reaction To Lil Nas – 'Montero'." *YouTube*, uploaded by CartierFamily, 29 March 2021, https://youtu.be/I1xtWaP2OVs.

"Run the World (Girls) (Official Video)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Beyoncé, 19 May 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBmMU_iwe6U.
"Shots Fired [Official Audio]." *YouTube*, uploaded by Megan Thee Stallion, 20 November 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8jNPawT-aM.
ABSTRACT, Kevin. "EMPTY." *YouTube*, uploaded by BROCKHAMPTON, 21 September 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RSQaVG7_QI.
—. "MISERABLE AMERICA." *YouTube*, uploaded by BROCKHAMPTON, 28 July 2017, https://youtu.be/QPRV2O1t5Tw.
AGNEW, Jeremy. *The Creation of the Cowboy Hero: Fiction, Film, and Fact*. MacFarland, 2015.
ALLMENDINGER, Blake. *Imagining the African American West*. U of Nebraska P, 2005.
BLACKDIAMONDMINT. "Trade." *Urban Dictionary*, 1 January 2019, https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=trade. Accessed 17 April 2023.
BRADSHAW, Melissa. "'Imagery, And A Little Bit of Satire': An Interview With Frank Ocean." *The Quietus*, 22 November 2011, https://thequietus.com/articles/07450-frank-ocean-interview. Accessed 27 December 2020.
BRADLEY, Adam. *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*. BasicCivitas, 2009.
BROCKHAMPTON. "JUNKY." *SATURATION II*, Question Everything, Inc. / Empire, 2017. *Spotify*, https://open.spotify.com/track/7ujucw8kFBPIy9mz7DlmAq?si=d19d4dee31474b08.
CARLSON, Marvin. *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2018.
CLAY, Andreana. "Keepin' It Real: Black Youth, Hip-Hop Culture, and Black Identity." *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol.46, no.10, June 2003, pp. 1346-1358. DOI: 10.1177/0002764203046010005.
EGUCHI, Shinsuke, and Myra N. Roberts. "Gay Rapping and Possibilities: A Quare Reading of 'Throw that Boy P***y'." *Text and*

Performance Quarterly, vol. 35, no.2-3, 2015, pp. 142–157. DOI: 10.1080/10462937.2015.1025820.
GATES, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford UP, 1988.
GRIFFIN, Horace. "Their Own Received Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches." *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, edited by Delroy Constantine-Simms, Alyson Books, 2000, pp. 110-121.
HEATH, Jessie, and Kathy GOGGIN. "Attitudes Towards Male Homosexuality, Bisexuality, and the Down Low Lifestyle: Demographic Differences and HIV Implications." *Journal of Bisexuality*, vol. 9, no.1, 2009, pp. 17-31. DOI: 10.1080/15299710802659997.
HOOKS, bell. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. Routledge, 2004.
HOSTON, William T. *Black Masculinity in the Obama Era: Outliers of Society*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
JOHNSON, E. Patrick. "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from my Grandmother." *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol. 21, no.1, 2001, pp. 1-25. DOI: 10.1080/10462930128119.
KEHRER, Lauron J. *Queer Voices in Hip Hop: Cultures, Communities, and Contemporary Performance*. U of Michigan P, 2022.
KOMANIECKI, Robert. "Vocal Pitch in Rap Flow." *Intégral*, Vol. 34, 2020, pp. 25-45. Online: https://www.esm.rochester.edu/integral/34-2020/komaniecki/. Accessed 19 July 2023.
LANG, Nico. "Lil Nas X Tops Charts in Saudi Arabia, Where Gay Sex Is Punishable By Death." *Them*, 13 April 2021, https://www.them.us/story/lil-nas-x-tops-charts-saudi-arabia. Accessed 19 July 2023.
LI, XinLing. *Black Masculinity and Hip-Hop Music: Black Gay Men Who Rap*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
LIL NAS X. "SUN GOES DOWN." *MONTERO*, Columbia Records, 2021. *Spotify*, https://open.spotify.com/track/6btdl1Vl6Ta5lUwUSOFW2H?si=aa4f5a6d1daa495a.
MANDLE, Chris. "We Played Football with Your New Favourite Band Brockhampton." *Shorlist*, 26 September 2018, https://www.

shortlist.com/news/interview-brockhampton-boyband-masculinity-kevin-abstract. Accessed 10 January 2021.
MENCH, Chris. "A Lyrical Analysis of Queer Themes in Frank Ocean's Music." *Genius*, https://genius.com/a/a-lyrical-analysis-of-queer-themes-in-frank-ocean-s-music. Accessed 27 December 2020.
MUÑOZ, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. U of Minnesota P, 1999.
OCEAN FRANK. "Thinkin Bout You." *channel ORANGE*, The Island Def Jam Music Group, 2012. *Spotify*, https://open.spotify.com/track/7DfFc7a6Rwfi3YQMRbDMau?si=2ad2e7a826a04875.
—. "Chanel." Blonded/Sony Music Publishing, 2017. *Spotify*, https://open.spotify.com/track/6Nle9hKrkL1wQpwNfEkxjh?si=03cb80ff138844fb.
—. "thank you's." *Tumblr*, 4 July 2012, https://www.tumblr.com/frankocean/26473798723?source=share. Accessed 27 December 2020.
OWARE, Matthew. *I Got Something to Say: Gender, Race, and Social Consciousness in Rap Music*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
PALFREY, John and Urs GASSER. *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*. Basic Books, 2008.
PERRY, Imani. *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. Duke UP, 2004.
RAINTUBE. "Diss Track." *Urban Dictionary*, 22 September 2018, https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Diss+Track. Accessed 14 April 2023.
SEDGWICK, Eve K. *Epistemology of the Closet*. U of California P, 1990.
SMALLS, Shanté Paradigm. *Hip Hop Heresies: Queer Aesthetics in New York City*. NYU P, 2022.
SMILEY, CalvinJohn, and David FAKUNLE. "From 'brute' to 'thug:' The demonization and criminalization of unarmed Black male victims in America." *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, vol. 26, no.3-4, 2016, pp. 350-366. DOI: 10.1080/10911359.2015.1129256.

SPATES, Kamesha, and Brittany C. SLATTON, editors. *Hyper Sexual, Hyper Masculine?: Gender, Race and Sexuality in the Identities of Contemporary Black Men*. Ahsgate, 2014.
THOMAS-HANSARD, Artemis. "Kevin Abstract Raps About His Bisexuality to 'Speak for People Who Can't Speak'." *LA Weekly*, 14 December 2016, https://www.laweekly.com/kevin-abstract-raps-about-his-bisexuality-to-speak-for-people-who-cant-speak/. Accessed 10 January 2021.
THÚY NGUYỄN, Ann and Maya PENDLETON. "Recognizing Race in Language: Why We Capitalize 'Black' and 'White'." *Center for the Study of Social Policy*, 23 March 2020, https://cssp.org/2020/03/recognizing-race-in-language-why-we-capitalize-black-and-white/. Accessed 19 July 2023.
VENEZIANO, A.J. "From Coachella: BROCKHAMPTON Goes Out With a Bang." *The Harvard Crimson*, 25 April 2022, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2022/4/25/brockhampton-last-performance-coachella-2022-review/. Accessed 19 July 2023.
WACQUANT, Loïc. "Ghetto." *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, 2nd edition*, edited by James D. Wright, Elsevier, 2015, pp. 121-126.

---

1 In the course of this article, I will capitalize both the words "Black" and "White" when they refer to races. I contend that races represent groups of people, their cultures, folklores and traditions, their histories; therefore it includes "Whites" not in order to put the race on a pedestal, but to cover the entire meaning behind the referred group. In that sense, I will quote Ann Thúy Nguyễn and Maya Pendleton writing for the Center for the Study of Social Policy when they explain their reasons to capitalize the word: "we intentionally capitalize 'White' in part to invite people, and ourselves, to think deeply about the ways Whiteness survives—and is supported both explicitly and implicitly." The rest of their argument is available online: https://cssp.org/2020/03/recognizing-race-in-language-why-we-capitalize-black-and-white/. I will also use the terms "gay," "queer," and "LGBTQ+" to define sexualities and identities. When I use "gay," I refer to men whose sexuality is defined in terms of same-sex relations. "Queer" is used when referring to identities that do not fit the patriarchal and heteronormative society. At last, I use the acronym "LBGTQ+" (for Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay,

Trans, Queer, and more) as an umbrella expression that includes people whose sexualities and identities do not necessarily correspond to the (straight) norms established in US society.

[2] This quotation comes from a screenshot that was posted by Twitter user Ronald Isley (@yoyotrav) on the same date.

[3] Harking back to poet Gil Scott-Heron's spoken-word poem "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" in 1970.

[4] The presence of female, of queer, and of gender non-conforming artists in hip hop culture is quite ambiguous. In many male rappers' music videos and lyrics, women are commodified and sexualized (with the major exception of mothers and grandmothers; see Perry 143). Yet, some female rappers have succeeded both commercially and in their inclusion in the genre. Musicologist and ethnomusicologist Lauron Kehrer explains that for them and for queer and/or gender non-conforming rappers, to reach this position, there is a constant negotiation of gender, sexuality, and representation (5, 50–66).

[5] On these subjects, see for instance: Ruffolo, David V. *Post-Queer Politics*. Ashgate, 2009, and Tesler, Michael. *Post-Racial or Most-Racial?, Race and Politics in the Obama Era*. U of Chicago P, 2016.

[6] The use of the term "ghetto" in this article is indebted to Loïc Wacquant's definition in which it is described as both a physical and symbolic place. Wacquant argues that the forces of confinement of the ghetto are there to comfort a dominant White population when, at the same time, it is a "protective device" that has allowed the making of a rich culture and where communities have built their own cultural identities (123). However, as he further elaborates, the negative symbolic of the ghetto generates "sentiments of self-doubt and self-hatred" for its dwellers, contrasted with a feeling of "collective pride even as it entrenches the stigma that hovers over it," thus leading Wacquant to call it a "tainted identity machine" (125).

[7] Throughout this article, I will use the iterations of the n-word, b-word, f-word, and other derogatory or crude words in direct quotes of song lyrics, and interviews only in order to preserve the words of quoted persons.

[8] Both songs were released by dominant women in the music industry. The artists tackle the empowerment of women in the music/hip hop industry. Thus, Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, showing intersectional identity as a Black woman, mother and entrepreneur, sings, "I think I need a barber / None of these niggas can fade me / I'm so good with this / I remind you I'm so 'hood with this," before adding "smart enough to make these millions, strong enough to bear the children, then get back to business." Megan, in her rap, talks about the attempted feminicide that she lived through and how the experience made her a stronger woman: "You shot a 5'10" bitch with a .22 / Talkin' 'bout bones and tendons

like them bullets wasn't pellets / A pussy nigga with a pussy gun in his feelings," before adding later, "Who you takin' shots at, goofy-ass bitch? / Watchin' me succeed from your knees, suckin' dick / I know you want attention from the niggas that I get / I'm a steak, you a side plate, shrimp, stay in your place."

9 On January 10, 2023, Lil Nas X came out as bisexual. However, because the songs I am analyzing were released before that date, I will contextualize them and examine them from the point of view of a rapper who had come out as gay.

10 On *Urban Dictionary*, contributor RainTube explains that a diss track ("diss" is an abbreviation of the word "disrespect") is "A song full of insults meant to insult or personally harm another singer or person." Diss tracks often make existing feuds between artists more visible to the public. A recent example is rapper Eminem's "Killshot" in 2018 as a response to Machine Gun Kelly's "Rap Devil" (already a play on Eminem's 2013 "Rap God").

11 Because the singer has refused to label his sexuality as to whether he is gay, bisexual, or otherwise (something that conforms his point of view about "labels," and that I will tackle shortly), I will use the adjective *queer* to refer to him.

12 One can also refer to Robert Komaniecki who underlines the blurred lines between R&B and rap since the latter's initiation: "Since rap music's advent, there have been artists that blur the line between rap and R&B genres, splitting their time in a verse between less purposefully pitched rapping and more precise singing" (37).

13 For example, when he is compared to Tupac wearing a white tuxedo, Lil Nas X is wearing a wig and a purple dress/suit. To the criticism that reads, "Rappers then / now," he answers back, "can y'all please stop spreading this! spread this one instead, it's a much better angle." In another example, when pictured next to a beefy, shirtless 50 Cent, his tweet is uncompromising, "this is not fair youre *(sic)* comparing a legend who has changed music forever to 50 cent."

14 In his essay "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," E. Patrick Johnson argues that "quare" "not only speaks across identities, it *articulates* identities as well. 'Quare' offers a way to critique stable notions of identity and, at the same time, to locate racialized and class knowledges. … Quare studies is a theory of and for gays and lesbians of color" (emphasis in the original, 3).

"*Six degrees of segregation*": les voix noires et gay des Pomo Afro Homos

Charalampos Keivanidis

Abstract: Focusing on three skits from their shows *Fierce Love* (1991) and *Dark Fruit* (1992), this article examines the work of San Francisco-based troupe Pomo Afro Homos, to highlight a double exclusion: on the one hand, the homophobia the performers suffer within their black communities, and on the other, the racism they are confronted to in gay environments. In addition to these, effeminacy takes the exclusion even further, reserving them only supporting roles in blockbusters such as *Angels in America* (1991/1992) and *La Cage aux Folles* (1983). The creations of Pomo Afro Homos comment on the failure of theater to pursue an inclusive role, like the ballroom that these two plays constantly evoke.

Résumé : Cet article porte sur le travail des Pomo Afro Homos, une troupe de San Francisco, en particulier sur trois sketches tirés de leurs spectacles *Fierce Love* (1991) et *Dark Fruit* (1992) pour mettre en lumière une double exclusion : d'une part l'homophobie que subissent les performeurs au sein de leurs communautés noires et d'autre part le racisme auquel ils sont confrontés dans les milieux gay. À ces deux grands axes d'exclusion s'ajoute l'efféminement qui les cantonne à des rôles secondaires dans des grandes œuvres tel que *Angels in America* (1991/1992) et *La Cage aux Folles* (1983). Les créations des Pomo Afro Homos commentent l'échec du théâtre dans son objectif de remplir un rôle inclusif à l'instar de la *ballroom culture* que ces deux pièces évoquent constamment.

Keywords: homosexuality, homophobia, racism, AIDS, trans identities, ballroom culture

Mots-clés : homosexualité, homophobie, racisme, sida, identités trans, *ballroom culture*

À partir des années 1960, le théâtre américain a joui d'une plus grande liberté d'expression quant à la représentation de l'homosexualité, notamment avec l'explosion de off-off-Broadway (Stone). Le théâtre a réussi à mettre en voix des discours que la télévision et le cinéma (à cause du code Hays) ne pouvaient ou ne voulaient pas (encore) articuler. Il s'agissait cependant le plus souvent des voix d'une Amérique blanche, de la classe moyenne et cis,[1] même s'il y a eu quelques exceptions occasionnelles, comme *The Toilet* de LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka (1964) ou *The Madness of Lady Bright* de Lanford Wilson (1964).

Les Pomo Afro Homos, abréviation de "Post-Modern African-American Homosexuals," ont tenté de remplir ce vide représentationnel avec leurs créations au début des années 1990. Cette troupe basée à San Francisco a été fondée sous l'influence du documentaire de Marlon Riggs, *Tongues Untied* (1989) auquel deux des trois membres ont participé : Brian Freeman en tant que producteur exécutif et Djola Bernard Branner en tant qu'interprète/intervenant. *Tongues Untied* se concentre sur deux thèmes : d'une part l'homophobie que subissent les homosexuels noirs au sein de leurs communautés et d'autre part le racisme auquel ils sont confrontés dans les milieux gay blancs. Les sketches des Pomo Afro Homos prolongent cette double exclusion et insistent davantage que *Tongues Untied* sur la représentation de l'efféminement.

Afin de mieux saisir ces mécanismes complexes qui combinent les questions raciales, de sexualité, et de genre, cet article se propose d'étudier quelques scènes représentatives de leurs créations. Précisément, nous analyserons un sketch sur les onze qui constituent le spectacle *Fierce Love: Stories from Black Gay Life* (1991) et deux sketches sur les sept qui structurent *Dark Fruit* (1991/1992). Ces extraits permettent d'interroger tout particulièrement la façon dont les Pomo Afro Homos ont dénoncé et dépassé les différents niveaux de discrimination auxquels ils ont été confrontés afin de proposer une nouvelle dynamique spectaculaire noire et résolument *queer.* Nous analyserons en premier lieu la forme de leur écriture qui constitue la base de leurs créations

pour ensuite commenter la dynamique d'inclusion/exclusion des communautés noires au théâtre sur Broadway. Celle-ci mènera à une analyse des formes alternatives de représentation des communautés noires et *queer*, et, finalement, une analyse de leur contre-discours : l'homophobie noire.

La structure de l'écriture

L'écriture des Pomo Afro Homos, basée sur des micro-épisodes, se rapproche beaucoup de celle de *Tongues Untied* qui alterne récits autobiographiques et/ou militants (contre le racisme), chorégraphies et scènes comiques. Les sketches des Pomo Afro Homos, davantage diversifiés, incluent de la parodie et des *reads*[2] inspirés de la *ballroom culture*. Dans la mesure où cette dernière joue un rôle capital dans les sketches que nous analyserons, la définition de Marlon M. Bailey, auteur d'un des ouvrages de référence sur les pratiques des *balls*, nous permettra d'esquisser un panorama de cet univers :

> Contemporary ballroom culture, sometimes referred to as the "house/ball community," is a community and network of Black and Latina/o women, men, and transgender women and men who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, straight, and queer. The Black and Latina/o queer members of this community use performance to create an alternative discursive terrain and a kinship structure that critiques and revises dominant notions of gender, sexuality, family, and community. Ballroom culture consists of two inextricable dimensions: houses and balls. Houses are familial structures that are socially rather than biologically configured. Although in some cases houses serve as homes where members live and congregate, by and large, houses are social configurations that serve as sources of support for the diverse membership of the ballroom community. […] Another important role of houses is to organize and compete in ball events. Members of houses produce and participate in these competitive and celebratory performance events on a national scale. House parents recruit, socialize, and prepare their protégés to compete successfully in categories based on the deployment of performative gender and sexual identities, vogue and theatrical performances, and the effective presentation of fashion and physical attributes. Participants compete against one another vigorously

> on behalf of their respective houses and, at times, as individuals, or as what members refer to as "free agents". (Bailey 367-68)

On constate aisément que les problématiques que nous avons évoquées à propos des Pomo Afro Homos sont déjà avancées dans la définition de Bailey. Ajoutons à celle-ci que certaines catégories de défilé des *balls* dépendent de ce qu'on appelle "realness", autrement dit de l'effort des participant·e·s d'imiter/incarner à la perfection un thème donné. Cela peut être la "féminité" ou la "beauté" pour les femmes trans ou encore la capacité d'infiltrer le monde blanc avec des catégories comme "executive realness", où l'enjeu est de convaincre les juges que l'on peut "passer" (*pass*) pour un cadre supérieur dans une entreprise dominée par les blancs. Il ne s'agit pas seulement d'une manière de "vivre", ne serait-ce que très brièvement, le privilège blanc, mais également d'une parodie des normes dudit privilège, comme si les participant·e·s soutenaient que l'habit *fait* le moine. La performance du privilège blanc concerne également les conditions théâtrales de Broadway, comme nous le verrons avec l'analyse de "Aunties in America".

La dimension spectaculaire des *balls* a suscité récemment un regain d'intérêt et une certaine intégration dans la culture populaire. Le documentaire de Jennie Livingston *Paris Is Burning* (1990) demeure une œuvre de référence majeure de la *ballroom culture* (Hilderbrand). En termes de fiction, la série américaine *Pose* (2018-2021), très bien documentée, participe également à ce phénomène : en empruntant des éléments à *Paris is Burning*,[3] elle présente les problématiques raciales et *queer* comme inextricables de l'explosion du VIH, ainsi qu'une minorisation/réappropriation des aspects de la culture afro- et latino-américaine/*queer* tel que le *voguing*[4] par la culture pop blanche (notamment *Vogue* de Madonna en 1990).

Dans un esprit postmoderniste, comme leur nom l'indique, les Pomo Afro Homos s'inspirent aussi de la culture populaire, comme le cinéma et la télévision, mais aussi, et surtout, de la *stand-up comedy.* En effet, cette forme convient tout particulièrement à leurs sketches car elle permet un langage courant et des adresses directs au public,

un jeu d'acteur simple et une hyper-concentration d'éléments dans une forme brève pour diffuser des messages clairs. Et pour cause : *Fierce Love* et *Dark Fruit* sont des condensés de l'expérience de l'homophobie noire et du racisme gay qu'ont subis les trois performeurs ; c'est précisément cette intersection qui anime leur travail. Ainsi, ils ne peuvent pas s'exprimer en tant que porte-paroles de l'une ou de l'autre communauté, car leur appartenance aux deux les exclut mutuellement. Au-delà de l'adresse au public, cette politique de la représentation permet aussi une critique oblique de la *queer theory* et de ses limites, notamment son cadre racial souvent unidimensionnel (blanc) : à l'instar de la critique *queer of color*, les Pomo Afro Homos soutiennent une intersectionnalité pour rendre la structure de la *queer theory* plus inclusive pour ce·ux·lles qui appartiennent à plus d'une communauté marginalisée. Dans ce sens, le choix de la *stand-up comedy* n'en est que plus pertinent, puisque sa considération par la critique comme un genre mineur renvoie à sa dimension minoritaire, définitionnelle du *queer* (Lemoine 4).

L'échec représentationnel du théâtre

Bien que la formule de leur militantisme passe surtout par le rire mêlé à la réalité du racisme et de l'homophobie pour en accroître l'impact chez les spectat·eur·rice·s, les Pomo Afro Homos ne renoncent pas pour autant à la critique des pratiques théâtrales. Ils dénoncent, par exemple, le racisme de la pièce canonique *Angels in America* de Tony Kushner, et cela très rapidement après la création de sa première partie (*Millennium Approaches*) en 1991. C'est le premier sketch de *Dark Fruit*, monté, lui aussi, en 1991, qui instaure un dialogue critique rare entre la côte ouest et la côte est, puisque les deux pièces coïncident temporellement à 5000 kilomètre de distance.[5] En effet, le personnage de Belize qui n'a quasiment pas d'histoire propre et n'existe qu'en rapport avec d'autres personnages (Minwalla 104-5), vient s'inscrire dans la longue lignée de personnages noirs subalternes du théâtre américain.

Mais au-delà de *Angels in America*, "Aunties in America: Epiphanies 'n Roaches!" critique aussi sur la récurrence de l'attribution des rôles auxiliaires aux personnes racisées de *La Cage aux Folles* (il s'agit d'une comédie musicale de 1983 dont le livret a été écrit par Harvey Fierstein) et de la pièce *Six Degrees of Separation* de John Guare (1990) : les personnages que le sketch emprunte à ces trois spectacles sont respectivement Belize, Jacob et Paul[6] et confirme l'emploi des personnages noirs gay dans des rôles secondaires et stéréotypés. Le style parodie la manière dont le théâtre relègue les personnages noirs au second plan et critique Broadway pour son sous-emploi des act·eur·rice·s noir·e·s, sans les mettre en valeur à la hauteur de leurs compétences :

> JACOB. I'm so over Missy Fierstein putting me through Butterfly French Maid McQueen eight times a week. I can live with the eye bugging and noble caretaker nonsense. But, children, it hurts my pride so bad, night after night, to put on heels and have to walk like the last Steppin' Jungle Bunny Fetchit! (She has a fit of hysteria.)
>
> PAUL. (Calming JACOB down) We know, girl. We know 'cause it ain't even a question that a black drag queen in her first pair of heels can out sashay/chante Naomi, Cindy, and Claudia—
>
> PAUL & BELIZE. No training wheels required! (*Dark Fruit* 324)

Depuis San Francisco, New York et l'industrie de Broadway constituent alors le statu quo théâtral qui reproduit et véhicule des stéréotypes pour assurer le profit des producteurs, trop frileux pour s'aventurer sur un terrain instable. Déjà dans les années 1930 des personnages célèbres comme Stepin Fetchit[7] s'alignaient sur la vision de l'homme noir qu'entretenaient les blancs, afin de les conforter dans leur vision tordue, fondée sur une représentation hautement stéréotypée se résumant souvent à celle de l'esclave ("jungle bunny"). Ainsi, dans les années 1990 les choses ont peu évolué selon Belize revu et corrigé par les Pomo Afro Homos : "[…] Missy Kushner has me up there every night reading these white kids' asses or wiping their butts" (324) et pour Paul les choses ne se présentent pas mieux : "You see,

Missy Guare has me up there with all these Upper East Side most worrisome white folks, processing all their yap-de-yap-get-a-clue-already angst. Then I have to feed 'em. Then I have to fuck 'em," (324) résumant ainsi son propre *pitch* de *Six Degrees of Separation*, que Jacob corrige parodiquement en *Six Degrees of Segregation.* Même à des niveaux différents, le rôle des trois caractères est de veiller aux besoins des personnages blancs (où les besoins biologiques se mêlent à l'angoisse existentielle pour déclencher le rire) dont ils dépendent dramaturgiquement. Comme on l'a vu, Belize est présenté·e comme médiat·eur·rice et comme interlocut·eur·rice occasionnel·le des personnages centraux blancs Prior et Louis (et aussi de Roy qui est cependant un personnage moins central). Contrairement à ce que soutient Framji Minwalla (104), son rôle est nécessaire dans l'économie dramatique car il permet de faire avancer l'intrigue, mais il s'agit plus de la référence morale de la pièce et par-là plutôt le vecteur impersonnel d'un contre-discours qu'un personnage à part entière. Seule la vision de Belize du paradis, qui semble terroriser Roy, véhicule ses propres désirs et s'aligne sur les idées des Pomo Afro Homos :

> […] everyone in Balenciaga gowns with red corsages, and big dance palaces full of music and lights and racial impurity and gender confusion. […] And all the deities are creole, mulatto, brown as the mouths of rivers. […] Race, taste and history finally overcome. (Kushner 209-10)

Ce qui dérange Jacob dans ce premier extrait, n'est pas de marcher en talons, comme le début de sa phrase le laisse entendre ("it hurts my pride so bad, night after night, to put on heels"), mais de tenir le second rôle quand il a le talent d'être en tête d'affiche. C'est précisément pourquoi les références à la *ballroom* sont convoquées ("out sashay/ chante") car ce n'est que sur la piste de la *ballroom* que Belize, Jacob et Paul pourraient prétendre occuper le premier rôle. Car, au fond, l'enjeu majeur de la *ballroom* était de renverser les codes représentationnels pour permettre à ses participant·e·s de vivre pleinement leur identité de genre, leur orientation sexuelle, l'identification à un personnage célèbre ou imaginaire (comme les Club Kids des années 1990), en bref l'aspiration au privilège blanc et l'indifférence à la non-conformité. Ce renversement des codes constitue une forme de résistance

qui permettrait une possibilité d'existence ; autrement dit, selon la contextualisation du *drag* par Judith Butler (précisément, en rapport avec *Paris Is Burning*) : "[…] drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes" (85).

Le seul *locus* à l'intersection des problématiques des Pomo Afro Homos est effectivement la *ballroom*, imperméable à l'homophobie, à la transphobie et au racisme, en somme une hétérotopie (Herbin 2) protectrice permettant des aperçus furtifs d'un monde idéalisé. Il faut noter tout de même que la *ballroom* dépend des régimes de pouvoir auxquels il s'oppose : ce sont précisément ces conditions qui l'ont rendu nécessaire, comme une petite structure *queer* dans un projet vaste (et utopique) de *queerisation* du monde (le… paradis) qu'anticipe Belize.

Il reste néanmoins difficile de conclure avec certitude si le vide représentationnel des homosexuels noirs au théâtre de l'époque était dû au racisme ou à l'homophobie noire. Selon les Pomo Afro Homos il s'agit d'un mélange des deux ; de nombreuses références à la *ballroom culture* s'introduisent dans *Fierce Love* et *Dark Fruit* parce que la *ballroom* constituait, comme on a vu, un espace performatif où pouvait se matérialiser la construction des identités (orientation sexuelle, identité de genre, corporéité trans), à travers des défilés devant une communauté choisie ; c'est parce que la *ballroom* se substituait au rôle du théâtre quand ce dernier, même dans l'espace restreint accordé aux thématiques LGBTQ, ne dépeignait que l'expérience de la classe moyenne blanche, présentée comme universelle. En d'autres termes, l'inclusion y était limitée et conditionnelle.

Écrire son propre récit de soi

La féminité *queer*, caractéristique de la fluidité des performances de genre dans les *balls*, n'est jamais rejetée mais, au contraire, revendiquée ("out sashay/chante Naomi, Cindy, and Claudia"). Elle est aussi employée, avec un "*girl-talk*"[8] analogue à celui d'*Angels in America* entre

Prior et Belize, de manière à mettre en évidence une proximité avec les auteurs : "Missy Kushner", "Missy Guare", "Missy Fierstein"—surtout ce dernier qui a longtemps tenu le rôle d'une *drag-queen* dans sa grande pièce de la fin des années 1970 *Torch Song Trilogy*. Mais l'homosexualité, que les personnages partagent avec les auteurs, ne leur accorde pas plus qu'un rôle subalterne. Prenons l'exemple de *La Cage aux Folles.* Jacob, le *butler* atypique, noir et fortement efféminé du foyer de Georges et Albin, supplie Georges juste de l'*inclure* dans le spectacle du cabaret, car contester l'autorité d'Albin/Zaza—star absolue de la revue—et revendiquer son rôle n'est pas concevable—d'où son désarroi dans l'extrait qu'on a vu. La reconnaissance ne vient donc pas de la part des "allié·e·s" (qui seraient positivement disposé·e·s à leur égard sur la base d'une certaine "communauté gay"). De même avec la chanson *My Mammy* des années 1910, reprise par Liza Minnelli (icône gay) pendant les années 1970 qui conclut la scène :

> [*They start packing up and tie their napkins on their heads mammy style.*]
> […]
> [*Their napkins become headrags. Liza Minnelli's "Mammy" plays, a short dance. They smile at the audience, and the smiles become a minstrel grimace. They pull the rags off, drop them in defiance. Blackout.*] (*Dark Fruit* 325)

Dans cette chanson, Mammy, une esclave noire aurait élevé la chanteuse qui revient, plusieurs années après, témoigner son amour inconditionnel pour sa "mammy" et trouver du réconfort chez elle. Cependant son statut d'esclave n'est ni évoqué ni commenté. Même si les trois personnages refusent de s'aligner sur cette lecture ("*They pull the rags off, drop them in defiance*"), très proche des rôles de service aux blancs que le théâtre leur accorde, leurs perspectives sont déjà scellées par leurs prénoms, car le texte ne leur en donne pas d'autres que Belize, Jacob et Paul, faisant ainsi coïncider rôles et interprètes. Leurs prénoms les définissant, à l'instar d'Hamlet et d'Ophélie dans *Hamletmachine* de Heiner Müller (1977), ils ne peuvent pas échapper aux rôles qui leur ont été assignés. Ainsi le texte des Pomo Afro Homos semble reconnaître, voire suivre, les mécanismes de la perpétuation de la discrimination à travers les prénoms, mais la résistance loge dans le

discours différent—critique, acerbe, défiant—que *ce texte* leur permet d'articuler. Il leur donne, par exemple, l'occasion d'évoquer le *minstrel show*—une revue des XIXe et XXe siècles qui présentait les noir·e·s plus ou moins comme des primiti·f·ve·s stupides, initialement jouée par des blancs en *blackface*—et de dresser un parallèle avec leurs rôles d'aujourd'hui mais aussi de le jouer à l'extrême pour le vider de son sens. Comme le constate Jay Plum : "By occupying the racialized space in the gay community, the Pomos perform stereotypical roles to excess, challenging the process of signification through a reordering less stable than chaos" (126).

Le racisme n'est pas propre aux pratiques théâtrales de Broadway, comme en atteste "The Just Us Club," un sketch tiré de *Fierce Love*. Peaches, Pepper et Popcorn qui sont selon le texte trois hommes noirs, gay, efféminés et peu attirants, forment le très exclusif Just Us Club. Pepper et Popcorn appellent Peaches "Mother," et si ce titre, ainsi que les noms qui évoquent des *drag-names* et le sociolecte des *ballrooms*, nous amènent à penser qu'il s'agit d'une maison (*House*), cela est peu probable. Car, selon Peaches, les conditions à remplir pour faire partie du club sont : "Poor, Black, & Ugly!" (276), et ce défaitisme est aux antipodes de la compétition féroce des maisons aux noms flamboyants, tels que House of Xtravaganza. L'aliénation dont il s'agit là, est d'un ordre différent :

> PEACHES. See, Mother and her lovely daughters here had grown weary of the roles we were relegated to in "gay" society.
>
> POPCORN. At the clubs I was everyone's best girlfriend, nobody's dream date, and got real tired of "making do" with that two in the morning trade. I was the Millie Jackson of the Tenderloin. The clean-up woman. (*Fierce Love* 276)

Les "roles" dont parle Peaches ne sont pas aussi précis que ceux de "Aunties in America" et même si "The Just Us Club" est son précurseur, l'esprit militant y est limité. Mais en détaillant ces rôles, Peaches parvient à un constat qui peut s'appliquer à tous les cas dont l'identité et/ou la performance de genre sont non-conformes : "With our loud selves and nelly ways we was on the outside of a society on

the outside" (276). Chacune des exclusions possibles dans cette phrase croît dans un cadre précis, une interdépendance opprimante : il peut s'agir, comme on l'a vu, d'homophobie noire, si par "a society on the outside" on entend des communautés noires ; si, en revanche, il s'agit de communautés gay, l'exclusion devient multiple : homosexuel, noir et efféminé, sans même parler de "pauvre" et "laid." Dans le conseil du club qui clôt la scène, Pepper suggère : "I motion we reclaim voguing for the nellie sissies (277)" et la question de la représentation se pose de nouveau car ce niveau élevé d'efféminement ("nellie [*sic*] sissies") n'aurait pas d'écho positif dans les milieux gay obnubilés par la "masculinité".[9] Ainsi, le repli de Pepper, Popcorn et Peaches vers la sécurité relative de la *ballroom* paraît une évidence, dans la mesure où même le théâtre opère un forçage identitaire réducteur : Belize, par exemple, a abandonné le *drag* et est devenu·e infirmi·er·ère (*Angels in America*), faisant de lui/elle un personnage hybride, mi-*drag-queen* (en nom), mi-infirmi·er·ère.

C'est d'ailleurs en cela que le travail des Pomo Afro Homos est *queer* et intersectionnel : la jonction des identités noires et gay au théâtre ne suit aucun modèle préexistant (exclusion réciproque) et n'est pas présentée en tant qu'universelle, mais plutôt comme un champ de possibilités ouvert. Malgré cette résilience, *Fierce Love* et *Dark Fruit* n'ont pas séduit les communautés noires qui constituaient, pourtant, le public-cible des Pomo Afro Homos, pour combattre l'homophobie et par-là initier un dialogue sur le sida (Román 172) ; ironiquement, l'homophobie noire et sa politique de l'autruche quant au sida ont alimenté l'exclusion théâtrale des communautés noires, pourtant ravagées par le sida. C'est ce vide représentationnel qu'ont voulu remplir les Pomo Afro Homos et le format de leurs spectacles qui s'apparente à la *stand-up comedy* est pensé en fonction du public réservé qu'ils voulaient atteindre, même si le miroir qu'ils lui tendaient, dépassait parfois le comique. Comme le remarque Xavier Lemoine, "Le rire n'est . . . pas seulement un acte de résistance et d'opposition mais une tentative d'invention de nouveaux espaces et de nouvelles perceptions" (6), mais ceux inventés par les Pomo Afro Homos ont remué des sentiments homophobes chez les communautés noires, comme le

démontre l'exclusion controversée de leurs créations par le National Black Theatre Festival en 1991 et en 1993 (Plum 122).

Conclusion : de la fragilité queer et noire

"Doin' Alright" (*Dark Fruit*) conduit la problématique de l'homophobie noire jusqu'au meurtre. Un performeur raconte des souvenirs de son enfance à Boston, en partie partagée avec un autre garçon noir, Dennis. Il l'a perdu de vue lorsque sa famille a déménagé mais l'a revu quelques années plus tard, dans une boîte gay, en *drag* : Dennis s'appelait désormais Denise. Le performeur a continué, pendant des années, à croiser Denise lors de ses séjours à Boston et elle allait bien ("doin' alright"). Ensuite, un discours parallèle vient compléter la biographie de Denise :

> A year or so ago my cousin, one of the few black women in management at a Boston software company, told me about a funeral she had attended for the son of one of her coworkers. Now my cousin didn't know the son, but she went because the woman she worked with, a mother, had lost a child. Period. The mother was not glad to see my cousin. The mother could not look my cousin in the eye. You see, the undertaker had laid her son out as he lived. As a she. This young black male, my age, who his coworkers called "Denise," was as we say "in the life," lost his to one of the leading killers of black males: another black male. Minister said he died from being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but when you're poor, black, effeminate, and gay, life is wrong place, wrong time.
>
> There's a lot of Michael/Michelles, Stephanie/Steves, Charlie/Charlenes, and Dennis/Denises in this world and somewhere between black-boy bonding and dark diva disco dancing I never did catch Miss Thing's last name. So I can't say for sure this Dennis/Denise is the same Dennis/Denise that I knew. But then again—isn't she? (*Dark Fruit* 337)

Ce sketch développe en réalité la thématique du précédent ("The Just Us Club"), à travers la reprise de "poor, black, effeminate, and gay" mélangée à deux sources d'homophobie (la mère et l'assassin), pour soulever la question de la vulnérabilité de "Miss Things",[10] auxquelles le performeur (Brian Freeman) s'identifie. Mais, contrairement

à son usage le plus fréquent, ce terme ne concerne pas exclusivement les *drag-queens*. Effectivement, Brian Freeman commence son monologue par "Back when I was a very young Miss Thing […] (336)," où d'autres viennent s'ajouter—"I'm out one night, about fifteen years later, at the 1270, the working-class club for Boston Miss Things" (336)—, avant d'y inclure enfin Denise—"Miss Thing liked to party" (337). Sa propre apparence d'homme cis suggère une multitude de manières de vivre son *efféminement*—qui ne passe pas nécessairement par le *drag*—bref, une subjectivité au-delà des étiquettes quant à sa manière de vivre son genre. Cette appartenance commune prolonge leur lien depuis l'enfance ("somewhere between black-boy bonding and dark diva disco dancing"), mais l'insistance sur la couleur de la peau martèle l'appartenance ethnique commune qui les rend vulnérables : "This young black male"/"another black male." Cet effet miroir souligne la proximité inquiétante de l'Autre, vaguement soutenue par la honte de la mère ; de surcroît, il constitue à la fois un appel contre l'homophobie noire, une mise en garde obtenue par l'inadvertance quant à son nom de famille ("I never did catch Miss Thing's last name") et, par extension, l'extrapolation de l'expérience de l'efféminement de Denise et de ce que celle-ci implique ("isn't she?"). Par ailleurs, la répétition de "life/live" ("as he lived", "in the life", "lost his [life]", "life is wrong place, wrong time") réitère l'effervescence de "the life" (soutenue par une boule à facettes qui éclaire la scène), tout en suivant un parcours téléologique terrifiant. Transposés, les récits de soi deviennent alors un seul récit, communautaire, brutalement interrompu par des actes homo- et/ou transphobes.

SOURCES CITÉES

BAILEY, Marlon M. "Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2011, pp. 365-86.

BAKER, Paul. *Fantabulosa.* Continuum, 2002.

BUTLER, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. 1993. Routledge, 2011.

DE JONGH, Nicholas. *Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage.* Routledge, 1992.
FIERSTEIN, Harvey. *Torch Song Trilogy.* 1981. The Gay Presses of New York, 1988.
GUARE, John. *Six Degrees of Separation.* Dramatists Play Service, 1992.
HALBERSTAM, Jack. *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability.* California UP, 2018.
HERBIN, Frédéric. "De l'hétérotopie des *balls* à l'espace des studios." *Apparence(s)* doi.org/10.4000/apparences.2827. Consulté le 26 août 2023.
HERMAN, Jerry et Harvey FIERSTEIN. *La Cage aux Folles.* Samuel French, 1987.
HILDERBRAND, Lucas. *Paris Is Burning: A Queer Film Classic.* Arsenal Pulp P, 2013.
JONES, LeRoi. *The Toilet. The Baptism & The Toilet*, Grove P, 1966, pp. 33-62.
KUSHNER, Tony. *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes.* Theatre Communications Group, 1995.
LEMOINE, Xavier. "Naissance des comiques gays et lesbiens américains : le rire *queer* comme performance esthético-politique." *Miranda*. 2019. doi.org/10.4000/miranda.20106. Consulté le 22 août 2023.
MINWALLA, Framji. "When Girls Collide: Considering Race in *Angels in America.*" *Approaching the Millenium: Essays on Angels in America*, sous la direction de Deborah R. Geis et Steven F. Kruger, Michigan UP, 1997, pp. 103-17.
MÜLLER, Heiner. *Hamlet-Machine*. *Manuscrits de Hamlet-Machine*. Minuit, 2003, pp. 147-57.
PLUM, Jay. "Pleasure, Politics, and the Performance of Community: Pomo Afro Homos's *Dark Fruit*". *Modern Drama*, vol. 39, no., 1, 1996, pp. 117-31.
POMO AFRO HOMOS. "Dark Fruit." *Staging Gay Lives: An Anthology of Contemporary Gay Theater*, sous la direction de John M. Clum, Westview, 1996, pp. 319-43.

—. "Fierce Love." *Colored Contradictions: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Plays*, sous la direction de Harry J. Elam et Robert Alexander, Plume, 1996, pp. 257-85.
ROMÁN, David. *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture and AIDS.* Indiana UP, 1998.
STONE, Wendell C. *Caffe Cino: The Birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway.* Southern Illinois UP, 2005.
WILSON, Lanford. *The Madness of Lady Bright. 21 Short Plays*, Smith & Kraus, pp. 22-36.

---

1 À l'opposé de trans, on appelle une personne cis lorsque son sexe anatomique et son identité de genre coïncident.

2 "**read** verb: to (often publicly) unleash a string of unpleasant 'home truths' and insults upon someone" (Baker 185). Cf. aussi *Paris Is Burning*, notamment la partie intitulée "reading".

3 D'ailleurs Jennie Livingston était consultante sur cette série.

4 Le *voguing* est une forme de danse improvisée, hautement codifiée, qui constitue une partie importante des défilés du *ballroom.* Il s'agit d'une bataille entre au moins deux danseu·r·se·s, avec une série de poses inspirées de magazines de mode comme *Vogue* (d'où le nom) ou de la peinture égyptienne. Son origine n'est pas claire mais, selon différentes sources, Paris Dupree, une *drag-queen* new-yorkaise, l'aurait introduit et Willi Ninja, vogueur et chorégraphe, l'a enrichi pendant les années 1980.

5 La tournée de *Fierce Love* et de *Dark Fruit* a coïncidé aussi avec la production de la seconde partie (*Perestroika*), prolongeant ainsi temporellement la critique de *Angels in America*, toujours pertinente car il n'y a pas de changement notable quant à la condition de Belize dans *Perestroika.*

6 En plus d'être homosexuel, Paul est aussi mythomane dans le but d'obtenir de l'argent et probablement de percer dans la haute société. Il est alors traité par les autres personnages (tous blancs) de criminel, voleur, tueur potentiel et/ou trafiquant de drogue.

7 Lincoln Perry, plus connu sous le nom de scène Stepin Fetchit, "l'homme le plus paresseux du monde", était le premier acteur noir devenu millionnaire à travers une représentation stéréotypée dans les années 1930.

8 C'est le terme qu'emploie Prior dans *Angels in America* pour décrire ses discussions avec Belize où ils utilisent des expressions au féminin pour s'adresser

à l'autre: "All this girl-talk shit is politically incorrect you know. We should have dropped it back when we gave up drag." (Kushner 67)

[9] Même si les auteurs gay ont surtout parodié l'(hyper) masculinité (*A Perfect Relationship* de Doric Wilson, 1979, *Epiphany* de Lewis John Carlino, 1963, etc.), certains historiens de ce théâtre comme John M. Clum et surtout Nicholas de Jongh ont critiqué des pièces où selon eux les hommes sont "demasculinisés", comme *As Is* de William M. Hoffman (1984) (De Jongh 186).

[10] "**Miss Thing** noun: 1. a form of address for a camp, outrageous or haughty gay man. […] 3. a generic term of address by a drag queen or gay man with lots of attitude" (Baker 164).

La performance queer : une expérimentation érotique

Antoine Alario

Abstract: This article aims at defining queer performance in its specificity in order to give an account of its political efficiency. To do so, I rely on two queer aesthetic theories, namely Muñoz's disidentification and Lorenz's radical drag, in order to show that queer performances are political experiences to the extent that they are also ethical: they want to play with the limits of norms which define identities. This result is taken a step further to demonstrate that performances act at a foundational level that produces identity norms, that is to say, the deeply normative nature of desire, whereby desires are both products and producers of norms. By addressing our normative affects and seeking to transform them, queer performances can politically resist the norms shaping us. This result is finally understandable thanks to a spinozean-deleuzean conception of desire as a normative force of production, as opposed to a psychoanalytic conception of desire, and leads us to define queer performance as the experimentation on the normative limits of our desires, and queer as this *desire-other* of norms.

Résumé : Cet article a pour but de définir la performance queer dans sa spécificité afin de rendre compte de son efficacité politique. Pour ce faire, il part de deux théories esthétiques queer, celle de Muñoz sur la désidentification et celle de Lorenz sur le drag radical, afin de montrer à partir d'elles que les performances queer sont des expériences politiques dans la mesure où elles sont aussi éthiques : elles visent à tester les limites des normes qui définissent les identités. Ce résultat est approfondi pour montrer que les performances agissent au niveau de ce qui fonde ces normes identitaires : nos désirs dans leur nature profondément normative, nos désirs comme produits et producteurs des normes. C'est en s'adressant à nos affects normatifs et en cherchant à les transformer que les performances queer résistent politiquement aux normes qui nous traversent. Ce résultat est finalement intelligible grâce à une conception spinoziste-deleuzienne du désir comme force de production normative, contre une conception psychanalytique

du désir, et conduit à définir la performance queer comme ce qui expérimente les limites normatives de nos désirs, et le queer comme ce désir-autre des normes.

Keywords: Queer, performance, desire, erotic norms, politico-ethic experience

Mots-clés : Queer, performance, désir, normes érotiques, expérience politico-éthique

Introduction

Qu'il s'agisse des drag shows de plus en plus répandus depuis la fin du XIX^{e} siècle, des défilés de la *ballroom culture* notamment développés dans les années 1980, ou encore des *die-ins* spectaculaires d'Act Up sous l'épidémie du SIDA, les performances qui sont au cœur du queer semblent être et avoir toujours été profondément politiques. Les critiques notoires du mouvement queer ont largement soutenu cette idée : Butler affirme très tôt que séparer le théâtral et le politique dans les politiques queer contemporaines est une impossibilité (1993 : 232), Romàn montre que la performance a été un mode d'intervention politique privilégié pendant la crise du SIDA (1998), Muñoz consacre un ouvrage à la théorisation de la force politique des performances queer (1999) et Lemoine a déterminé ce qu'il y a de radicalement politique dans le rire queer occasionné par les performances comiques (2019).

Nous proposons de réfléchir à cette idée partagée, non pas pour la remettre en question, mais pour comprendre d'où vient cette force politique des performances queer. En interrogeant, à travers des outils philosophiques et esthétiques, notamment forgés par la théorie queer, la spécificité des performances queer, nous souhaitons définir ce phénomène artistique afin de comprendre d'où il tire son efficacité politique. Notre projet est en somme de proposer une conception philosophique des performances queer afin de rendre compte de leur capacité à subvertir les normes.

Rappelons tout d'abord que le queer renvoie, avec sa première conceptualisation philosophique par Halperin, à une position de résistance aux normes (2000 : 76). D'inspiration foucaldienne, cette définition suggère que le queer n'est pas une identité mais une position à partir de laquelle il est possible de problématiser les normes qui pèsent sur les identités, les normes qui définissent ce que sont et doivent être les identités. Le collectif anarcho-queer *Bash Back !* dit du queer qu'il est "une identité qui problématise les limites maîtrisables de l'identité" (Baroque et Eanelli 2016: 25). Il est un geste de transgression des normes identitaires, voire de renversement subversif de celles-ci ; dans ce geste réside la force politique du queer et de ses performances. L'introduction à la revue de 2015 par Wiegman et Wilson déconstruit l'idée selon laquelle le queer désignerait ce qui échappe aux normes, est en opposition à elles. En effet, si nous revenons à la conception foucaldienne des dispositifs normatifs, dont partait Halperin, il est clair qu'on n'échappe pas aux rapports de pouvoir qui nous traversent. Résister ne veut pas dire s'opposer, mais justement jouer avec les normes qui nous traversent, tenter de les subvertir du dedans. Le queer ne s'oppose pas d'ailleurs aux normes mais au straight[1], aux normes rigides et majoritaires ; il ne s'agit pas de se situer hors des normes, mais de problématiser les normes qui, par leur aspect hégémonique, génèrent des violences et excluent des modes de vie. Le queer est ce qui traverse les rapports de pouvoir, les normes majoritaires et hégémoniques, pour y résister du dedans.[2]

Il nous faut également préciser, de fait, ce que l'on peut entendre par norme, notamment dans la théorie queer : il s'agit d'un principe régulateur déterminé par des pratiques et des discours, qui est reproduit par des actions quotidiennes et auquel on s'identifie. Si ces pratiques et discours sont majoritaires, répandus et en position de domination, bénéficiant d'institutions de pouvoir qui les soutiennent, on parlera de normes hégémoniques.[3]

Le queer désigne ainsi un geste de déplacement voire de renversement des normes qui structurent nos identités, ces dernières étant

une construction à partir de normes de genre, de sexualité, de race et de classe principalement, et ce qui nous intéresse c'est d'analyser la manière dont la performance peut opérer ce déplacement. Le constat dont nous sommes partis pose en effet question : comment la performance, dans ce qu'elle a de temporaire, fragile, minoritaire, peut mettre à mal, voire renverser de grands mécanismes normatifs, produits par des dispositifs de pouvoir hégémoniques et majoritaires ? L'enjeu philosophique qui nous semble crucial est que cette efficacité politique est possible en tant qu'elle est liée à la subjectivité, puisque précisément elle cherche à travailler les normes qui déterminent les subjectivités. Les enjeux politiques des performances queer sont inséparables d'enjeux éthiques concernant la construction de soi par soi à travers l'identification à des normes, et la performance est le moyen privilégié d'articuler ces deux dimensions. Amelia Jones montre dès l'introduction de son livre que la performance queer rend indissociables résistance politique et construction performative des identités (Jones 1-33).

Proposons immédiatement un concept pour penser cette position de résistance qui n'est pas extérieure aux normes majoritaires, mais immanente, qui se joue à même les rapports normatifs en cherchant à en tester les limites. Tester les limites de ce que nous sommes, c'est cette idée que Nietzsche a le premier ramassée sous le concept d'expérience (*Gai Savoir*, §319), repris par Bataille puis par Foucault (Aeschimann 2018:77). L'expérience désigne le fait de tester ses propres limites, de jouer avec les limites qui nous constituent dans l'optique de les dépasser, et donc de se transformer. Peut-on penser les performances queer comme des expériences au sens où elles cherchent à transgresser, à jouer avec les limites des normes qui pèsent sur les identités ? Telle sera notre première interrogation, dans le but de mieux comprendre la spécificité des performances queer. Puis nous approfondirons cette idée en montrant que ce que les performances permettent d'expérimenter, c'est le désir comme fondement normatif de l'identité.

La performance artistique queer : tester les limites normatives des identités

Nous allons d'abord défendre non seulement que la spécificité des performances queer est qu'elles testent les limites des normes identitaires, mais qu'en plus cette thèse peut être élaborée à partir des théories queer qui traitent des performances.

La désidentification comme expérience politico-éthique

Parmi les grandes thèses contemporaines sur la dimension politique des performances queer, celle qui nous intéresse est celle de Muñoz dans la mesure où il associe cette dimension politique à une dimension éthique : les performances sont politiques dans la mesure où elles désidentifient, c'est-à-dire qu'elles permettent de se défaire des identifications majoritaires, et donc des normes qui permettent les identifications – et notons que l'identification est un processus éthique de subjectivation, de constitution de soi.[4]

Les performances queer créent en effet une désidentification d'avec les représentations mainstream ou hégémoniques (3). Pour expliquer, Muñoz prend l'exemple d'un moment dans la performance *Marga Gomez is Pretty, Witty, and Gay*, par Marga Gomez, où elle se remémore l'entretien de lesbiennes à la télévision, auquel elle a assisté lorsqu'elle avait onze ans. Elle partage alors le souvenir de ces lesbiennes butch dépressives, avec leurs manteaux de pluie, leurs lunettes noires, ces lesbiennes qui étaient montrées dans le but de susciter une représentation négative, une répulsion du public. Or, dans l'acte de se souvenir de cette interview lesbophobe, Gomez fait part de son attraction pour ces subjectivités qui, à travers son regard, deviennent érotiques (33). Loin d'éprouver la répulsion attendue par la mise en scène dévalorisante, Gomez a éprouvé du désir pour elles. Cette performance est l'exemple paradigmatique de ce que Muñoz entend par désidentification : il s'agit de se déprendre, à travers une représentation nouvelle (celle d'un désir lesbien pour ces lesbiennes), des représentations homophobes mainstream qui servent d'identifications hégémoniques. Et notons que la performance est le moyen

privilégié pour réaliser une telle désidentification, puisqu'elle est une action par laquelle l'artiste joue avec son propre corps, ses propres limites, les normes qui le traversent.[5] Gomez témoigne à la fois, grâce à sa performance, des normes lesbophobes dans lesquelles elle a évolué, et de la manière dont elle a par son désir résisté à ces normes. Précisons que si Muñoz se concentre sur l'analyse d'artistes *Latino/a*, c'est parce qu'être une minorité raciale rend ces normes homophobes encore plus oppressives, comme le veut la logique intersectionnelle[6]. Ainsi le modèle normatif de la beauté blanche participe d'une répulsion homophobe et raciste vis-à-vis des lesbiennes non-blanches, dont Gomez rend compte à travers la performance sur son propre désir de lesbienne latina.

Bien comprendre ce concept suppose d'entendre la subjectivité comme une "fiction" (5), c'est-à-dire le produit de représentations normées, de récits historiques, d'images qui construisent un idéal normatif de la subjectivité.[7] La subjectivité n'est rien d'autre qu'un jeu d'identifications : la subjectivité états-unienne hégémonique est la fiction produite à travers l'histoire majoritaire de l'indépendance, de la fin de l'esclavage, de même que la subjectivité masculine en Grèce antique est la fiction produite par le récit des guerriers victorieux et courageux, de l'individu libre et modéré, maître de ses pulsions. Mais toutes ces fictions identitaires ne sont commodes que pour les sujets majoritaires, les straight notamment : qu'en est-il des sujets queer et racisés, auxquels pense Muñoz ? À quels récits se référer pour construire sa subjectivité en tant qu'américaine mais lesbienne et noire, et non hétérosexuelle et blanche ? Pour construire de telles subjectivités queer, en marge du majoritaire, il existe en soi deux possibilités : soit se fondre dans les représentations majoritaires, tâcher de se conformer aux normes mainstream,[8] et alors ne pas mettre à mal leur hégémonie ; soit tâcher de contester cette hégémonie. Et c'est cette deuxième possibilité qu'on est en droit d'attendre de représentations queer, résistantes. Or comment les contester ? À travers des contre-représentations, des contre-modèles, des contre-performances. C'est ce que Muñoz appelle la désidentification. La théâtralité queer est politique dans la mesure où elle conduit à refuser des identifica-

tions majoritaires, en produisant des subjectivités autres – celle d'une lesbienne latina attirée par les butch.

À partir de Muñoz, il nous est possible de définir la performance queer désidentifiante comme une expérience permettant de tester les limites des normes identitaires hégémoniques. À travers la performance, qui est en ce sens autant politique qu'éthique, ces normes sont déplacées et revisitées : les normes majoritaires lesbophobes et racistes qui déterminent la lesbienne, qui plus est latina, comme repoussante sont renversées avec la performance de Gomez qui la montre comme attirante.

Expérimenter les normes identitaires : le drag radical

Afin d'aller plus loin dans cette conception de la performance queer comme expérience, référons-nous à l'ouvrage de Renate Lorenz, *Art queer*, qui définit l'art drag comme un art de l'expérimentation. Cette thèse repose sur une pensée du drag comme ensemble des "pratiques artistiques queer" qui "permettent de rompre ou de déplacer" les limites qui constituent les sujets (35), donc l'ensemble des performances expérimentales. Lorenz analyse à cet égard ce qu'elle nomme le "drag radical" (40).

Lorenz analyse une performance de Ron Vawter, intitulée *Ron Cohn/Jack Smith* (1993), qui met en confrontation la vie de deux hommes gay ayant vécu à la même époque : le conservateur homophobe Ron Cohn et l'illustre performeur queer Jack Smith, les deux étant morts du SIDA à la fin des années 1980 (69).

S'il s'agit d'une performance drag selon Lorenz, c'est parce que Ron Vawter, lui-même gay et atteint du SIDA, se travestit, joue à la fois ces deux autres rôles et le sien, "coprésence de Ron Vawter et en même temps de 'drag Ron Vawter'" (75). Cette ambiguïté d'un autoportrait qui passe par le portrait des autres, et de deux figures radicalement opposées, rend la performance drag radicale car elle est chargée d'interrogations concernant la vie gay, ou plutôt les vies gay possibles, celles vécues par Cohn et Smith, et celles à vivre. Vawter ne cherche pas vraiment à incarner ces deux figures, ni à s'en dissocier,

mais il “réinterprète sur scène” sa rencontre avec elles (77). Ainsi le spectacle présente ses souvenirs, son rapport affectif à eux, et cette mise en scène de sa propre subjectivité d’homme gay séropositif, en miroir de deux hommes opposés partageant pourtant cette condition, permet d’interroger l’identité gay à la racine. La performance produit un individu ambigu qui tantôt incarne le discours homophobe de Cohn, tantôt porte les tenues de Smith. À travers un travail archivistique poussé sur les vies de ces deux personnes, mettant en scène des détails de leur existence, l’artiste projette et commente des photos de Smith, l’enregistrement d’une de ses performances, et le discours politique réécrit de Cohn à la Société américaine pour la protection de la famille (79).[9]

Ce contact ambigu et ténu que la performance opère entre la vie de Vawter et celles de Cohn et Smith produit scéniquement “un être qui prend corps, qui se trouve relié à maintes reprises à une personne ou à une autre, ainsi qu’à des documents, des actions, des objets et des situations, et qui s’en voit ainsi transformé” (81). La coprésence scénique Vawter-Smith est radicale dans la mesure où elle produit quelque chose de nouveau, qui n’est ni Vawter ni Smith, une représentation scénique qui n’existe que dans la rencontre ponctuelle entre les deux. Et c’est cela qui rend le drag radical expérimental : il permet de produire de la nouveauté, il ne se contente pas de parodier des modèles, de subvertir des normes préexistantes. Il invente un monde autre par la performance, par la juxtaposition d’éléments et l’incarnation ambiguë.[10] L’expérimentation désigne le fait que la performance est productrice de nouveauté, et cette nouveauté réside dans la subjectivité élaborée, ce “corps collectif” Vawter-Smith nouveau “qui reste en mouvement” par et dans la performance seulement (82).

La performance queer crée un individu unique, un personnage qui n’existe pas en-dehors d’elle ; et cela devient subversif lorsque ce personnage nouveau témoigne par son existence scénique des limites de certaines normes. Ce que cherche à faire toute performance queer artistique, c’est de tester les limites des normes identitaires, à commencer par celles auxquelles l’artiste est lui-même soumis. La performance

de Vawter vise ainsi à problématiser les limites des normes de l'identité gay américaine, pour reprendre les termes de Baroque et Eanelli (25).

Nous avons défini la performance queer comme un mode d'expérimentation des normes identitaires. Toutefois il nous faut comprendre de manière plus précise ce qui se joue dans cette expérience : comment précisément les normes sont-elles transformées, comment agit la performance queer ?

Comment la performance queer expérimente les normes identitaires ?

Notre analyse esthétique a été jusqu'ici limitée à l'expérience faite par l'artiste même, alors que la performance implique un public qui vit également cette expérience. Nous allons donc tâcher de comprendre comment précisément cette expérience modifie les subjectivités réunies dans la performance.

La performance queer comme "travail du désir"

La performance, en tant qu'art théâtral, est relation de l'artiste à un public, en plus d'être relation intime de l'artiste à son œuvre. Sans pouvoir prendre en compte toute la complexité des théories de la réception (Bennett), notre propos exige d'interroger l'expérience occasionnée par la performance non pas seulement comme une expérience menée par et sur l'artiste, mais également sur le public. Ainsi Lorenz défend que la communication au public, que Vawter ne ménage pas mais trouble en ne rendant pas son œuvre accessible, peut être qualifiée de "drag comme travail de désir" (93). La relation que la performance établit avec le public fonctionne sur un plan pulsionnel comme attraction et répulsion, plaisir et inconfort. Le drag de Vawter travaille le désir en suscitant à la fois plaisir et colère, possibilité et difficulté "de rejoindre Ron Vawter, Roy Cohn, ou Jack Smith", c'est-à-dire de s'identifier (93). Les limites de l'identité sont testées à travers le désir travaillé chez le public et l'artiste lui-même : tantôt le public est amené à s'identifier à Vawter, à l'aimer, tantôt à être repoussé par lui.

Ainsi comment des normes peuvent-elle être déplacées à travers une simple performance ? Dans la mesure où cette performance agit au niveau des affects, au niveau du désir comme produit et producteur de ces normes – ce qui a du sens puisque la performance est entièrement une pratique sensible, qui s'adresse à nos sens, à nos affects nourris de normes. C'est aussi ce que l'on pouvait comprendre en lisant l'exemple de la performance de Marga Gomez : celle-ci est subversive dans la mesure où elle présente un désir autre, une attraction inattendue, et la performance sert à communiquer ce désir-autre à un public. Les normes majoritaires façonnent nos désirs : en les suivant le public straight est discipliné de manière à éprouver de la répulsion pour une lesbienne butch. Or la performance queer refaçonne ces désirs normatifs, en mettant en scène une attraction pulsionnelle pour cette lesbienne butch. Cela rejoint la conclusion de Ahmed (2006) : les désirs queer ont pour effet de désorienter les désirs *straight*, c'est-à-dire d'agir dessus de manière à tester les limites des normes qui les orientent. Notre thèse est que c'est par la performance que cette désorientation a lieu, en opérant une communication intense et unique entre désirs straights et désirs queer, désirs normés et désirs que l'on pourrait dire dénormés.

En relisant Muñoz et Lorenz, il est donc possible de formuler l'hypothèse suivante : les performances queer sont politiques dans la mesure où elles transgressent les normes qui structurent nos désirs, nos pulsions, nos affects – ce qu'on peut appeler les normes érotiques ou la normativité du désir. La performance queer cherche à tester les limites des corps et des identités certes, mais plus profondément surtout de ce qui constitue les corps dans leur rapport aux normes, ce que les normes construisent dans les corps pour les faire agir : les désirs, les pulsions, la sensibilité. La performance queer est une expérience érotique car elle cherche à transformer les désirs normatifs qu'elle réunit (Dolan 1993).

Pour comprendre cette thèse, je souhaite relater une expérience personnelle vécue face à une performance queer. La première fois que j'ai assisté à un *drag show*, c'était lors d'une soirée queer au Elsker

Club à Oslo, en octobre 2017. Je me souviens particulièrement d'une performance qui a eu lieu ce soir-là : celle d'une femme grosse qui, en s'effeuillant sur scène, à travers le dispositif scénographique (la musique, les lumières) et la danse saccadée et lascive, a rendu son corps profondément attractif et désirable. Pourtant les normes gay, profondément grossophobes, qui structurent mon désir non seulement excluent les corps féminins, mais également les corps gros, jugés non-désirables. Cette expérience érotique rendue possible par la performance a donc permis de me faire éprouver une attraction pour un corps qu'en-dehors de la performance je ne suis jamais amené à désirer, que les normes érotiques m'empêchent de désirer. La performance a été le moyen privilégié d'agir sur mon désir, en produisant de l'attraction, comme le faisait Marga Gomez.

De manière générale, quel est l'effet de cette pratique drag si répandue, l'effeuillage ? Il s'agit de travailler le désir du public, de le provoquer et jouer avec. Combien de straight se surprennent à éprouver du désir pour un homosexuel en queen, combien de gay pour une lesbienne en king ? Il m'est souvent arrivé, au cours d'une performance drag, d'éprouver du désir pour des seins par exemple, à rebours des normes gay *cisnormés* qui conditionnent mon désir.

La mise en scène de soi en tant que queer est une représentation de son désir-autre pour tenter de le communiquer à un public. Cette communication devient subversive lorsqu'elle parvient à modifier les affects *queerphobes* dudit public comme la haine, la peur ou le rejet au profit d'affects positifs à l'égard des subjectivités queer, comme la sympathie, l'amour ou la contemplation érotique. L'exemple très actuel des représentations positives des identités trans nous montre que l'intérêt des performances queer réside dans leur capacité à susciter autre chose que des affects négatifs.[11]

Tâchons, une fois cette idée bien comprise et posée, de la rendre intelligible sur un plan philosophique : comment entendre qu'en effet nos désirs, ciblés par les performances queer, sont profondément construits par des normes ?

La normativité du désir

Il faut ici préciser ce que nous entendons par désir ou éros. Éros désigne tout ce que nous éprouvons en nous du fait de notre situation d'êtres sensibles et corporels, l'ensemble des sentiments, pulsions, affects qui nous agitent, qui sont cachés en nous et nous déterminent à agir. Notre concept de subjectivité est lié aux concepts de norme et de sensibilité : il s'agit d'un ensemble de normes intériorisées qui produisent une sensibilité, de même qu'une sensibilité produite qui génère et reproduit des normes. C'est en ce sens qu'identité et subjectivité s'articulent comme nous l'avons évoqué dans un premier temps.

L'idée que nous défendons véhicule une conception originale du queer, et pas seulement des performances queer. Le queer aurait bien une définition, qui est le désir-autre, le fait de désirer autrement. Si "l'homoïté" est désir du même selon Bersani,[12] on peut dire que la *queerïté* est désir-autre. La différence entre la définition de Bersani et la nôtre, c'est la conception du désir : Bersani reprend une conception psychanalytique du désir sexuel, qui tend d'ailleurs à le naturaliser, à en faire l'élément essentiel d'une identité, alors que nous nous référons à une conception constructiviste du désir comme construction de normes, conception que nous explicitons ici. Désirer autrement signifie désirer autre chose que les normes hégémoniques. Précisons que le désir ne se limite pas aux désirs sexuels, mais renvoie à toute l'activité pulsionnelle qui vit en nous et nous pousse notamment, comme en témoigne la performance de Marga Gomez, à apprécier ou à rejeter une chose.

Ainsi genre et sexualité sont le produit de nos désirs. Les corps assignés homme à la naissance qui désirent que leur genre soit déterminé par d'autres normes que cette norme cisgenre hégémonique "pénis = homme" sont des corps queer. L'identité trans est le fait de désirer le genre autrement. Les hommes qui désirent *relationner* sexuellement et affectivement avec d'autres corps que ceux déterminés par cette norme hétérosexuelle hégémonique "homme = relation avec femme" sont des hommes queer. L'identité gay est le fait de

désirer la sexualité et l'amour autrement. Il y a bien un lien profond entre normes de genre et normes sexuelles, ces deux grands types de normes straight ciblées par le queer. Toutes sont produites par des désirs, et produisent des désirs en retour : identités trans et gay sont des désirs-autres. Notons que nous ne faisons qu'approfondir ce qui est déjà contenu dans l'ouvrage de Muñoz lorsqu'il remet en cause la distinction freudienne entre désir et identification, pour montrer que l'identification et le désir sont liés, et que la désidentification consiste précisément à jouer sur notre désir des normes qui est au cœur de l'identification. S'identifier à l'idéal (raciste) de la beauté blanche c'est désirer cet idéal (15). Si le queer désigne une position de résistance aux normes identitaires hégémoniques, cette résistance repose sur le désir-autre, le fait de désirer autrement les normes. Ainsi les désirs queer se désidentifient dans le sens où ils désirent cet idéal mais différemment (15) : dans la *ballroom culture* on peut chercher à imiter les normes de la bourgeoisie blanche, mais pour inventer un autre rapport identitaire à ces normes.[13]

Cela nous permet aussi d'affirmer que l'acte du spectacle, l'acte de se rassembler dans une même pièce pour assister à une performance, contribue à produire une communauté d'affects partagés (Dolan, 2005), à établir ces "groupes structurés par des relations érotiques" dont parlait déjà Brecht (30). Nos vies pulsionnelles sont limitées par les normes, principalement straight et racistes, mais aussi capitalistes (Bourcier), qui nous environnent et définissent les corps et les vies désirables, et la performance permet, par sa double dimension de présence physique et d'expérience collective, de transgresser ces limites normatives.

Cette idée suppose de comprendre les normes comme ce qui structure nos désirs, dans une perspective proche de celle de *L'Anti-Oedipe* : tout le chapitre 1 reconceptualise le désir, d'inspiration spinoziste, comme le principe de production de la réalité qui est lui-même produit par la réalité, par les normes. Il ne faut plus séparer, comme le fait la psychanalyse, le désir et son objet, le désir psychique et la réalité objective désirable : les deux doivent être pensés ensemble comme

“machine”. La production sociale, tout ce qui est objectivement produit, à savoir les normes, les représentations hégémoniques, les systèmes politiques disciplinaires, doit être comprise comme production désirante, production par des désirs humains (38). Les normes sont ce que les humains désirent, elles sont produites par nos désirs ; et, en retour, nos désirs sont constitués par les normes que nous désirons puisque précisément elles sont l’objet de nos désirs. Le désir est productif de réalité, en même temps qu’il est produit par cette réalité : c’est le principe de la production immanente des normes, nécessaire pour penser leur action, comme tâche de le faire Macherey avec cette même inspiration spinoziste (131).[14]

C’est au désir dans sa conception spinoziste que nous nous référons ici, et non freudienne, contrairement à Bersani ou même à Edelman (2004). Ce désir comme force de production, comme ce qui me pousse à agir, non pas comme produit du manque ou du fantasme mais comme produit des normes, est ce qui structure les subjectivités normées, et qu’expérimentent les performances queer. C’est cela que nous avons montré avec les performances drag qui érotisent les corps gros ou les seins, contre les normes grossophobes et cisgenres qui construisent les désirs gay par exemple. Si en tant qu’homme gay je peux être amené à désirer les seins d’un king, c’est dans la mesure où mon désir pour un torse plat est un désir construit par les normes cisgenres de la masculinité, qui peut être déconstruit grâce à la performance érotique.

Nous pouvons répondre à l’enjeu soulevé en introduction : si les performances queer dans ce qu’elles ont de minoritaire peuvent transformer les mécanismes normatifs majoritaires, c’est dans la mesure où elles peuvent altérer le désir qui est la cible privilégiée de ces mécanismes. On peut toutefois interroger la durabilité de cette transformation érotique : dans quelle mesure mon désir n’est-il pas seulement modifié le temps de la performance queer ? Cette question de la durabilité des effets esthétiques ne saurait être définitivement résolue, néanmoins il nous semble évident qu’à travers la répétition des performances le désir peut être modifié en profondeur. La fréquen-

tation soutenue et répétée des drag shows dans leur diversité depuis 2017 a totalement transformé mon désir pour des corps masculins : mon désir gay ne se porte plus sur des masculinités exclusivement cisnormées, et ce n'est qu'un exemple des capacités politiques de l'art queer à altérer nos normes érotiques.

Conclusion :

Nous nous demandions quelle est la spécificité de la performance queer qui lui donne son efficacité politique. Nous pouvons désormais répondre que ce qui fait la force politique des performances, c'est leur capacité à altérer les désirs réunis par elle. Tel est le premier résultat que nous avançons : les performances queer sont politiques dans la mesure où elles sont éthiques, agissent au niveau de la construction normative des identités, et il est impossible de séparer enjeux politiques et enjeux éthiques dans l'analyse esthétique de l'art queer. Notons que cela suppose de concevoir le désir de manière non-psychanalytique comme produit normatif, contrairement à ce que propose une partie de la théorie queer. Ainsi, deuxième résultat de recherche, nous avons établi une définition non seulement de la performance queer mais aussi du queer. Définir les performances queer permet de repenser le phénomène queer dans sa globalité : la performance queer est expérimentation érotique, et le queer est désir-autre. Or, évidemment, proposer de définir le queer et les performances queer pose problème.

Commençons par le problème qu'il y a à définir la performance queer. Sur un plan esthétique, le queer doit rester indéfinissable et critique, comme le souligne Flore Garcin-Marrou dans la lignée de Muriel Plana (2015). Il faut, nous dit-elle, refuser de fixer une identité esthétique du queer, ce qui est exactement ce que nous venons de faire. Si nous le faisons, nous justifions notre démarche d'au moins deux manières : d'abord le résultat que nous avons établi l'a été grâce à deux grandes théories esthétiques sur le queer, dans leur lignée et à l'aide de leur éclairage. Nous avons donc mis en lumière un aspect du queer déjà présent dans la théorie queer actuelle, qui s'avère dans cette mesure nécessaire pour comprendre et analyser ce phénomène.

Ensuite, le fait de refuser un contenu identitaire au queer ne signifie pas que le queer ne soit rien, qu'il doive être pensé comme un pur néant négatif – à rebours des conceptions de Halberstam[15] et Edelman notamment. Il y a de la positivité dans la résistance, et c'est précisément ce que nous enseignent les performances queer : en résistant aux normes on en produit de nouvelles, moins hégémoniques et plus inclusives, on apprend à désirer autrement. Nous soutenons donc qu'il est possible de donner un contenu aux performances queer, sans pour autant les essentialiser : il ne s'agit pas de délivrer la nature des performances queer, mais de comprendre que leur force réside dans leur capacité à transformer les désirs réunis, à agir dessus. Notre démarche consiste à comprendre la force des performances queer, et non à les enfermer dans un cadre rigide.

Enfin, le problème qu'il y a à définir le queer, nous y avons déjà en partie répondu : Halperin dit que le queer est certes non-identifiable, au sens où il échappe aux normes identitaires, pourtant il est bien quelque chose : il est ce qui problématise les normes érotiques qui structurent les identités. Le dernier problème tient cependant à l'emploi du terme de désir : en définissant le queer par un rapport au désir, nous sommes en train d'enfreindre l'interdit foucaldien qui mettait en garde face à l'aspect psychologisant et normatif du désir, ce pour quoi Foucault préférait le terme de plaisir, plus neutre selon lui (Le Bitoux 2015 : 50). Ainsi ne sommes-nous pas en train de substantialiser le queer en terme de désir, en le concevant comme une expérimentation érotique ?

Au contraire, tout l'enjeu de notre conceptualisation tient au terme d'expérimentation : le queer n'est pas le désir, il est l'expérimentation sur son propre désir. Le sujet queer n'est pas défini par son désir, mais par le fait qu'il expérimente sur son désir, expérimentation qui passe par la performance – le désir gay est queer dans la mesure où il n'est pas d'abord désir du même genre, contrairement à ce que pense Bersani, mais désir d'autre chose, d'un autre monde, d'autres normes sexuelles et relationnelles. Au fond nous sommes en train d'envisager que la solution face au problème de la subjectivité rendue normative par son

identification psychanalytique en terme de désir n'est pas l'usage d'un autre terme, celui de "plaisir", mais le fait de se déprendre de ce désir normatif, de désirer d'autres normes non-hégémoniques. Et n'est-ce pas déjà ce que Foucault suggérait lorsqu'il appelait, pour résister aux normes sexuelles, à inventer de nouveaux plaisirs "en érotisant ce corps" (Defert et Ewald 2005 : 1557), ou encore le collectif *Bash Back !* lorsqu'il appelait à "ré-érotiser l'espace public" (2016:48) ?

SOURCES CITÉES

AHMED, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology.* Duke UP, 2006.

AILLAGON, Jean-Jacques, directeur. *Les études gay et lesbiennes.* Supplémentaires, 1998.

ANZALDÚA, Gloria et Cherríe MORAGA. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color.* Persephone P, 1981.

BAROQUE, Fray et Tegan EANELLI. *Vers la plus queer des insurrections.* Traduit par Diabolo Nigmon et Decibel Espanto, Libertalia, 2016.

BATAILLE, Georges. *L'expérience intérieure.* 1943. Gallimard, 2020.

BENNETT, Susan. *Theater Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*. Routledge, 1990.

BOURCIER, Sam. *Homo Inc.orporated*. Cambourakis, 2019.

BRECHT, Stefan. *Queer Theatre.* 1978. Methuen, 1986.

BUTLER, Judith. *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "sex".* Routledge, 1993.

—. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 1990. Routledge classics, 2006.

DELEUZE, Gilles et Félix GUATTARI. *L'Anti-Œdipe.* 1972. Minuit, 2012.

DOLAN, Jill. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. U of Michigan P, 2005.

—. *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance.* U of Michigan P, 1993.

EDELMAN, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Duke UP, 2004.

FOUCAULT, Michel. *Histoire de la sexualité 1, La Volonté de savoir*. *Œuvres*, sous la direction de Frédéric Gros, Gallimard, 2015, pp. 617-36.
—. "Michel Foucault, une interview : sexe, pouvoir et la politique de l'identité". *Dits et écrits II. 1976 - 1988*, sous la direction de Daniel Defert et François Ewald, Quarto Gallimard, pp. 1554-65.
GARCIN-MARROU, Flore. "Le 'performatif' de Judith Butler à l'épreuve de la scène". *Esthétique(s)* queer *dans la littérature et les arts : sexualités et politiques du trouble,* sous la direction de Muriel Plana et Frédéric Sounac, éditions U de Dijon, 2015.
HALBERSTAM, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke UP, 2011.
HALPERIN, David. *Saint Foucault*. 1995. Traduit par Didier Eribon, EPEL, 2000.
JONES, Amelia. *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance.* Routledge, 2021.
LE BITOUX, Jean, directeur. "Le gay savoir - Michel Foucault". *Entretiens sur la question gay.* H&O, 2005, pp. 45-72.
LEMOINE, Xavier. "Naissance des comiques gays et lesbiens américains: le rire queer comme performance esthético-politique". *Miranda*, 2019. doi.org/10.4000/miranda.20106. Consulté le 28 juin 2023.
LORENZ, Renate. *Art queer: une théorie freak.* Traduit par Marie-Mathilde Bortolotti, B42, 2018.
MACHEREY, Pierre. *De Canguilhem à Foucault, la force des normes.* La Fabrique éditions, 2009.
MUÑOZ, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics.* U of Minnesota P, 1999.
ROMÁN, David. *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS.* Indiana UP, 1998.
SCHECHNER, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction.* Routledge, 2013.
SUSMAN, Tara. "The Vogue of Life: Fashion Culture, Identity, and the Dance of Survival in the Gay Balls". *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 9, art. 15, 2000, pp. 117-141.

WIEGMAN, Robyn et Elizabeth A.WILSON. “Introduction: Antinormativity’s Queer Conventions”. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist and Cultural Studies*, Duke UP, 2015, pp. 2-24.
WITTIG, Monique. *La Pensée straight*. Balland, 2001.

---

1 Nous empruntons le concept de straight (“droit” en anglais, par opposition au queer comme tordu, en biais) à Monique Wittig avec son célèbre *La Pensée straight*, pour désigner l’hétérosexualité comme système de normes hégémoniques et obligatoires, ainsi que l’ensemble des individus, dits hétérosexuels ou straight, qui les reproduisent.

2 Rappelons qu’étymologiquement queer vient de l’indo-européen twerk, qui a donné le latin torquere (tordre), l’anglais athwart (à travers) et l’allemand quer (transversal). Le queer est étymologiquement ce qui traverse, est tordu, et non ce qui s’oppose. Cela rejoint d’ailleurs la position de Sedgwick dans “Construire des significations *Queer*” (*Les études gays et lesbiennes*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1998).

3 Cette conception est largement inspirée par les travaux de Butler (1993 : 14), mais également par ceux de Foucault sur la distinction qu’il fait entre dispositif et résistance : on ne peut analyser les stratégies d’un pouvoir, les mécanismes d’un dispositif sans prendre en compte les points de résistance nécessaires qui s’y logent (2016 : 695).

4 Cette articulation entre identification et subjectivation est notamment explorée par Sara Ahmed au chapitre 2 de son ouvrage *Queer phenomenology*.

5 On trouve dans les performance studies une définition de la performance artistique solo comme un spectacle dans lequel l’artiste est l’objet artistique, autrement dit son corps est l’œuvre qui n’est plus séparée de l’artiste. C’est Rebecca Schneider, citée par Schechner, qui nous explique que “The Solo Artist *making* art became, then, the auratic object himself” (“L’Artiste Solo *créant* l’art devint alors lui-même l’objet de l’aura artistique”, notre traduction) à une époque où, comme le diagnostique Walter Benjamin, l’œuvre d’art avait précisément perdu son aura (Schechner 159).

6 La logique intersectionnelle est au cœur du travail de Muñoz, comme il le déclare en se référant à la grande anthologie de féminisme intersectionnel publiée par Gloria Anzaldúa et Cherríe Moraga en 1981, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. D’après Muñoz, cet ouvrage critique envers le féminisme blanc défend une politique de désidentification similaire à la sienne (21-23).

7 La fiction ne renvoie donc pas au contraire de la réalité, mais à ce qui est humainement construit, dans un sens similaire à celui qu’entend Foucault

lorsqu'il dit qu'il n'a "jamais écrit que des fictions" ("Les rapports de pouvoir passent à l'intérieur des corps", dans *Dits et écrits II*, source citée). Les fictions sont des produits humains, et le concept permet donc d'insister sur la dimension constructiviste des réalités humaines, contre l'illusion d'un donné sans histoire.

8 C'est ce qu'on peut appeler l'assimilationnisme, très présent et critiqué aujourd'hui dans le milieu gay par exemple. Voir par exemple la première partie de l'ouvrage de Sam Bourcier, *Homo Inc.orporated*, dans laquelle l'auteur critique l'assimilationnisme des "bons homos" qui se fondent dans les normes néolibérales.

9 Il existe une version filmée de cette performance, réalisée par Jill Godmilow en 1994, intitulée *Roy Cohn / Sam Smith*.

10 Ce pouvoir singulier de la performance dans sa capacité à produire un monde et des subjectivités autres a notamment été étudié par Jill Dolan dans son ouvrage *Utopia in Performance*.

11 Le documentaire Netflix de 2020, *Identités trans : au-delà de l'image* nous montre ainsi l'importance vitale de représentations positives des identités trans, qui s'opposent à des représentations mainstream et souvent transphobes, en produisant de la sympathie pour ces identités.

12 Bersani développe l'idée qu'être homosexuel signifie désirer le même, comme le veut l'étymologie. Or ce désir est précieux selon lui, car il conduit à aimer dans le monde ce qu'il y a en nous, à aimer ce qu'il y a de commun entre moi, les autres et le monde (Aillagon 71).

13 C'est une idée que l'on peut trouver dans l'article de Tara Susman sur les milieux du ballroom, "The Vogue of Life: Fashion Culture, Identity, and the Dance of Survival in the Gay Balls". Même lorsqu'il s'agit d'imiter des normes mainstream dans une catégorie 'realness', c'est la créativité qui est au cœur d'un ball, et non la soumission à un modèle préexistant (120-122). Susman montre notamment que le voguing, danse inventée par ces milieux, est profondément critique envers l'idéal de la féminité blanche (126).

14 Macherey montre en effet que la force des normes, c'est l'action qui est immanente aux forces, l'action qui répète la norme pour la signifier autant que l'action qui institue la norme, l'action singulière du médecin qui déclare "c'est une fille" autant que les actions collectives, historiques, scientifiques qui ont contribué à produire cette norme dyadique (un homme a un pénis, une femme a un vagin). Toute action de désirer est en ce sens normée et normative.

15 Dans son grand ouvrage de 2011, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam pense le rôle du queer et de son esthétique de façon strictement négative, comme pouvoir de dire non aux systèmes hégémoniques, d'échouer (voir notamment les chapitres 3 et 4).

"I really prize rage": 50 years of Queer American Theater with David Savran, Distinguished Professor of Theatre and Performance, Very Mowry Roberts Chair in American Theatre, Graduate Center, City University of New York.

Interview by Xavier Lemoine, New York City, CUNY, Theater Department, November 20, 2019.

Xavier Lemoine: Could you give your perspective on queer theater, looking back at theater productions, what important dates and productions in the development of queer theater and performance would you like to underline as significant moments?

David Savran: I need to preface my answer by talking about the fact that I came out in the early 1970s. In my early 20s, actually, after college. So it was a little late in a way. In any case, the summer of 1973 I spent in New York. I worked as a stage manager for Ronald Tavel who was one of the Theater of the Ridiculous people. And that summer, I got the chance to meet, besides Tavel and his brother Harvey who was directing, Harvey Fierstein who was in one of the productions. There was this theater festival taking place in New York, it wasn't specifically queer but many of the people were. That summer I got to meet Maria Irene Fornes and I also went to see Charles Ludlam's *Camille*,[1] which of course is one of the most historic productions. Beginning at that time, I realized that there were really interesting things happening in what I would *now* describe as queer theater but at the time I'm not even sure we had a way of talking about it, except these were gay people or lesbians making theater. Well, Theater of the Ridiculous had a…

XL Not even Gay theater would have come to mind?

DS: Not, really… not as category, back then. I remember, at that time, when I was coming out, I was somewhat phobic about a play like *Boys in the Band*[2] because *that* to me epitomized all of the things that I was afraid of being. That's why I'm not sure I would have used that category. Tennessee Williams it was different. Anyways, it did not seem to really exist for me as a category. And, then, in the mid-1970s when I was in graduate school, I was aware that stuff was happening… I was not in New York City. It just seemed extraneous; I would never *dream* of studying it. It just seemed to me like interesting entertainment.

XL: Not serious? Ridiculous?

DS: That's around the time that I also got to know the work of John Waters, *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*,[3] that I completely fell in love with. I *knew* that those were in their own way serious movies but, at the same time, I did not have the language to talk about them or any of this work for that matter. When I was in graduate school, you just didn't talk about sexual orientation of theater people for the most part, unless it was Oscar Wilde! But he was really the main example. I don't ever remember studying Tennessee Williams in graduate school.

Then from 1977 until 1988, I was teaching in Canada in a drama department. I would spend a lot of time in New York, I would come and spend most of my summers here. I saw things like *Cloud 9*, for example, which was mind-blowing. Actually, *Cloud 9* was one of the very first plays that struck me as serious enough to be taken as a kind of…, again I'm not even gonna say gay play, but that really made sexuality, what I call now queer sexuality, or let's say gay sexuality an issue. *Cloud 9* made a huge impression on me.

XL Do you remember the date of this production?

DS: This was right when it opened.[4] It was playing in Christopher Street in what was then called Theater de Lys, now the Lucille Lortell. I would guess this was about 1980. Also, Paula Vogel was a good friend of mine. I knew that Paula was writing plays and she was very out, but even Paula's plays at that time were not primarily about sexuality. I did see some interesting stuff, I remember going to see Spider woman Theater[5] in the early 1980s. I started becoming aware of interesting alternatives, what we'd now call queer theater. And I indeed was taking it very seriously. It was at the same time that I discovered the Wooster Group.[6] They're not queer but it was part of that circle. Just the fact that Ron Vawter, who was one of the members of the Wooster Group, was gay, that was really important because he always really put his sexuality out there.

In the 1980s, I really began to see a certain legitimation for what I call queer theater. Of course, this was also the time of AIDS, the height of the AIDS crisis. I remember the first AIDS plays were *The Normal Heart* and *As Is*.[7] I went to see *As Is*, actually I didn't see *Normal Heart* at that time. It was very tough for a million reasons that I'd rather not go into. There's no question that this really raised people's consciousness.

Also, through Paula [Vogel],[8] I became much more aware of what was going in terms of lesbian writing and performance. Although I don't think I saw Split Britches until after I'd left Canada it was probably late 1980s or like around 1990. I didn't go to WOW Café but I *did* know of it. I went to see some Ludlam work then. I really loved the work of Ethyl Eichelberger. And all of this I thought was really serious stuff, maybe serious isn't the right word, but legitimate and important theater activity. I didn't really have anything to do with it. I was teaching and I wasn't anticipating writing about it.

XL: When did you start writing about it?

DS: Everything changed in 1988 when I moved to Brown. I was very lucky. I got to Brown just at the moment when queer theory was starting to explode. I remember reading Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men*,[9] it was about 1988, which I really liked, and having interesting discussions about that. And then, a year or two later, both *Gender Trouble* and *Epistemology of the Closet*,[10] which of course are the two books that put queer theory on the map. I was lucky to be at Brown, a place where this was really happening, not only among faculty but among students and various other networks. Also I think a really important part of this was *Angels in America* because it was the first *great* play. A play that won the Pulitzer Prize, that was explicitly out. And *everybody* agreed that it was a great play and a really serious play. He used Walter Benjamin so it was a really theoretical intervention. For me, it's this coincidence of *Angels in America* and queer theory in the early 1990s that suddenly made a place for all of this. For *me*, and I'm sure for others besides me. It was really around that time, probably 1991 that I started teaching gay and lesbian theater as a discipline.

XL: How did that come about?

SD: The first time I did it Paula was teaching at Brown then and we co-taught. I don't remember exactly what the syllabus was. We probably went back to Oscar Wilde and Radclyffe Hall. We were both in the English Department, so fiction was not out of bounds. So yes, *The Well of Loneliness* which Paula knew really well. I don't remember exactly where the course started and we tried to split it pretty equally between men and women. That was when I had gotten the manuscript copy of Part I of *Angels in America*. This was a probably good year before it was produced on Broadway. I gave it to my class. As I said, that play more than anything else really legitimized that as a field—as a field of practice and as a field of study. With *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Gender Trouble* and all this other stuff there was a lot of happening then a lot of really ex-

citing stuff, and in cinema as well. In an English Department, I was somewhat more open, I was thinking more across forms. Starting around 1994, pretty much every year I taught a class that I called "Unnatural Acts." Part of this is because some students did not want courses on their transcript with the words lesbian and gay in the title. The subtitle was something like "lesbian and gay theater" but that didn't appear on the transcript. In this way there was a certain deniability.

XL: Almost like a coded language that you found in the plays…

DS: Yes. Also, I had finished *Communist, Cowboys and Queers* around 1991.[11] That was very much informed by this nascent queer theory. So for me the 1990s was very much a gay decade, a queer decade. It was *the* queer decade, actually, the decade of Queer Nation, queer nationalism, then queer this and queer that, in theater and cinema and everything. So it was very exciting. I had a lot of support at Brown and a lot of student interest. So it was a very exciting enterprise. I was coming into New York quite a bit and seeing a lot. There was nothing that I saw, of course, that had the impact of *Angels*. I remember *Love, Valour and Compassion*,[12] thinking "okay, that's all right." I'm not a huge Terrence McNally fan. Or Lanford Wilson, but I was also getting really interested in Holly Hughes and Split Britches.[13]

XL: Among all those artists you mentioned do you see any major esthetic lines or moments that could cohere into this idea of a queer theater?

DS: The thing about queer theory is that it happened to hit when deconstruction became the way to go. What was exciting was that queer, unlike gay or lesbian, could be understood as a deconstructionist

trope. So there were theoretical possibilities there and real ones. This gave work, I'm thinking of some of Holly Hughes's early work, which on the one hand was straightforward, sort of first person narrative but *not*. I just felt that there was a lot of things happening, queer performance was some of the most innovative work in US theater.

XL: Can you detail those innovations?

DS: As I said, the deconstructionist angle. This is very much what was described as post-gay and lesbian. It's very much about unsettling and problematizing sexual and gender identity and the relationship between the two of them. At the time, that struck me as really radical stuff to be doing.

XL. Do you see some kind of esthetic innovations along the lines of Butch/fem esthetics?

DS: It was interesting because Judith Butler, as I recall, did not cite Sue Ellen Case in *Gender Trouble* when she was talking about Butch/femme.[14] But that re-legitimation at the same time with the deconstruction of Butch/femme was very important. It was taking on butch/femme very explicitly as gender performance. This is also the time when Performance Studies is beginning to explode. There was an amazing synergy in the 1990s that made queer theater, which again became more and more identifiable as a class of work… there were gay plays but there was also gay performance. So much queer performance! And it wasn't all white, that's the other thing. There were a lot of important voices, if you think of Cherríe Moraga. The collection *This Bridge Call My Back*[15] from the 1980s, Gloria Anzaldúa and a lot of African American activists and just countless great figures. So it was *not* just a middle-class white thing.

XL: Would you say, by then, that there was a queer canon forming?

Yes, at that time, then in the mid-1990s, I could go back to *The Boys in the Band* and fall in love with it and realize actually what a fine play it is. Then that became part of the canon and I could put some Tennessee Williams in there as well and obviously Oscar Wilde. It was a little bit more complicated to put together a lesbian canon at that time. Radclyffe Hall did not write plays, there were a few plays here and there, but there wasn't much pre-1970s and 1980s. In my class most of the lesbian stuff I taught was not theater.

In terms of gay male stuff you could always go back to Mae West. To some extent that settlement has not significantly changed. If I were to put together a queer theater and performance class now obviously, I would add a lot more recent stuff but I think in terms of the basic genealogy it would be pretty much the same.

XL: Do you believe the term queer canon is the most appropriate? There's been a lot of debates around the limits of the canon and of queer? Do you think canon is still a useful term? Does it signal the death of queer theater (as De Certeau claims for folklore in *La culture au pluriel*)?

DS: Well, the fact is we have canons. As an educator, I have to put together a syllabus and that's very much related to canon making. Yes, there are canons and people look back to what came before. The way for example, even something like *The Inheritance*[16] is obviously looking back both to *Howard's Ends* and to *Angels in American* and to *Love, Valour, and Compassion*. Like it or not, there are canons. Canons are always up for debate and they are always changing. There's a lot at stake in putting together a canon because inevitably things are excluded. It's vexed, I would almost describe it as neces-

sary evil, but I don't feel apologetic about the fact of the canon. I'm very willing to debate the questions of canonicity with anyone.

XL: Do you think it's a relevant way to deal with issues like memory and history?

DS: I do, very much so. I mean we're talking about the memories of a lot of people being involved here. It's the memories of the people who put these things together, the writers, the performers, the audience members. I feel that a lot of queer theater has been, I was going to say from the beginning, but let's say from *Angels in America*, has been very intent on questions of memorialization and of remembering the past.

XL: Actually, you're right from the beginning! William M. Hoffman in *Gay Plays: The First Collection*,[17] goes all the way back to Marlowe's *Edward II* and the list of male-male passions through history to the point that history is used as validation of queer love and almost a trope not unlike the "coming out" in gay and lesbian plays.

DS: Yes, it's also very important to think about playwrights who for various reasons have not made it into the canon. Playwrights, for example, like Robert Patrick. He is not really remembered.

XL: Why not?

DS: I don't know his work well enough. I think I have a book or two of his on my bookshelf. I knew his work slightly, but I was not really that well acquainted with it. I think we were really fortunate that TCG[18] published that collection of Ludlam plays, otherwise they

would have been lost. There have been some happy accidents. I could go back and think about a lot of work that has been forgotten in the process of making the canon. And it's important to go back and realize what has not been canonized.

XL: Is there a specificity of the theater canon? Is there a difference with a literary canon?

DS: The thing about a literary canon is that we're talking about works that are read. The difference with theater is that, yes, we generally talk about plays that can be read, but there's also the question of performance. There is a lot of work that is still read but that people would never perform. And, then, in some cases, it's the opposite, plays that keep being performed but they are not going to be studied in universities.

XL: This makes me think about the debate initiated by Richard Schechner and, then, famously discussed by Conquergood on the prevalence of print over performance?[19]

DS: To some extent, yes because we're still talking about plays. Another thing that is enormously important is that these be able to circulate. Historically, performance has circulated as text, it's only within the past… really since the 1990s that there's been a lot of video documentation of performance, and video documentation has its own limitations as well, because video is a different art it has different rules, even documentation of a live performance.

XL: Is the canon an archival gesture as well?

DS: Absolutely! Canons and archives are very closely related. It's a selective process, these are things we remember to remember, and we choose to remember. There are a lot of things that sort of disappear, with actually very little trace. This is more likely to happen with live performance. You take Ethyl Eichelberger for example; I don't think any of his work was ever published. I have no idea where his archives are and what happened to his estate. I thought he was an amazing person in his own way, rather different, but almost as fabulous as Ludlam but he doesn't have plays, not much has been published or not much has been published about him. As far as I know. And there are a number of other figures who are…, think of David Greenspan, who is an important writer, it took a long time but a lot of his plays have been published. So publication is very important. It's a question of how things circulate.

XL: Would you include Jack Smith in this canon (in connection with Eichelberger, Ludlam)?

DS: Yes, the important early work on the theater of the ridiculous included Jack Smith. I never saw Jack Smith's work, I didn't really know that much about him to be honest until I saw Ron Vawter's piece the *Jack Smith/Roy Cohn*.[20] So, it was that piece that really made me aware of what Jack Smith had done. He is another figure that did not leave behind primarily a body of texts. So he is much more difficult to deal with. That doesn't excuse us, but it does challenge us.

XL: I'm really interested in what you've just said about seeing *Jack Smith/Roy Cohn* and that it connected you to a previous performer and made that performance exist…

DS: I think that Ron's work on that piece was very much an archival project. That's something that he first learned from Liz LeCompte and

the Wooster Group. Actually, even now, still now, *Pink Chair*,[21] this is archival performance or performance based on archives. So it's very lucky that Ron Vawter happened to do that piece.

XL: The Wooster Group is not queer, as you said, but their work, by being postmodern, is part of something queer…

DS: They are *deconstructionist*! It's the logic of their work, which is something I think of as distinctively queer. Whether there was homoeroticism or not was in a way irrelevant.

XL: What about their use of gay references and lesbian themes, as in *Vieux Carré* and *Town Hall Affair*?[22] Is there's an elemental connection to queerness in their dramaturgy?

DS: I would agree. I think that there was an element of that in a lot of the really interesting experimental work at that period. Even with Mabou Mimes, Ruth Maleczech was not lesbian but there were various people who were involved in Mabou Mime who were queer. But again there was something about the work itself and its deconstructionist strategies and its way of unsettling boundaries and norms that I think was identified, then, and still is, as queer. This is one of the reasons why the work of the late 1980s and 1990s is so valuable to us. I'm not convinced that we've advanced a lot since then.

XL: I was going to ask you about now, the 2000s. You mentioned a little bit the 1960s, and then the 1990s mostly?

DS: I don't see a huge amount of work that I would identify as queer performance, when I do, it very often involves older stuff or older people, like Charles Busch, Split Britches. Let's see, I think some of

the most innovative work now is around trans stuff, which in some respects is even more difficult to classify, because it's not just gender, it's a lot more complicated than that. Trans is a deconstructive trope as queer is. It's not something in which I'm personally fascinated for the most part. I don't feel I have a personal stake the way I very much do with queer stuff.

XL: So you would make a distinction between queer and trans?

DS: I would tend to think of them separately. Part of it is because it seems to me that this development of trans performance is… I don't think that we can talk about what Charles Ludlam was doing was trans, drag is not trans. Drag was a different kind of practice, a different vocabulary and a different way of thinking. I think that trans is very much its own thing. It has a name. I very much respect how people label themselves. It's important to do so. So that someone like Becca Blackwell who is very involved in trans performance, it may be queer*ish*, but it's trans performance.

XL: What about the blurring of the lines between trans and queer, as in balls?

DS: Yes, but again I tend to honor people's chosen self-definition and the terms people use to describe themselves. *Paris Is Burning*[23] was about drag, *well* a few people considered themselves trans in the documentary. I think it's important to honor what people choose rather than just going back and applying labels retrospectively. So, yes there was that trans element in *Paris Is Burning*, in the early 1990s, right?

XL: Yes, and the fact that Butler addressed this in *Bodies that Matter*,[24] leading to questions framed as intersectional…

DS: Yes, the thing is, intersectionality has been going on for decades. In the 1970s, we called it… it's changed designations but the kind of analysis that was going on for example, especially putting together questions of sexuality and race that goes back to the seminal text *This Bridge Called My Back*, it was about 1980. So I don't think that intersectionality is at *all* a new idea. I actually don't like that word because I think it's trying to put old wine in a new bottle, as they say, and I see no reason why we need a new bottle for that.

XL: Following up on these tensions between past and present representations, I'd like to turn to Stonewall 50, but first, do you personally remember Stonewall?

DS: I do not remember Stonewall. I was in college then. I was much more interested in smoking marijuana and hanging out with my friends than in having sex. Gay stuff just seemed… at that time my *not* coming out was because I did *not* want to be gay so I did not notice Stonewall. Because queers were queer!

XL So when did you become aware of the existence of Stonewall?

DS: When I got to Cornell in 1974. Ithaca was a very lively lesbian and gay community. Both Paula and I became very much part of that. That's when I became aware of Gay Liberation. People talked about Stonewall, but it was not discussed the way it is now. I remember even in the 1990s when I was teaching "Unnatural Acts" and doing John D'Emilio[25] and one of the reasons I was teaching that is to tell students that, yes, Stonewall was important but there was stuff that was happening before Stonewall that was also really, really, really important. Yes, Stonewall mattered but it was one of many things.

XL: Do you think it's still pertinent to commemorate Stonewall?

DS: Sure, it's an opportunity to party. I'm serious when I say that, it's always useful to have these occasions and these days we need to remember to celebrate. Yesterday in class I was talking about 1989, but that's different because when the wall came down that really did change the world whereas Stonewall, *sorry*, did not.

XL: Do you think Stonewall's significance is overemphasized?

DS: I'm getting a lot of this information from some of my students although this is something I've also been aware of. In the 1990s, when the gay marriage debates were raging, I found myself very much on Michael Warner's side, in other words, the question was: why are we interested in this oppressive bourgeois institution? I don't particularly want to be part of it. I felt very strongly about that. At the same time, I recognized that there were certain legal and economic benefits for people who are not middle-class white men like me. Gay marriage, it's great that that possibility exists but it's not something that I ever want for myself. Part of this was also because of my coming of age, in terms of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s and it was drummed into me that marriage was really a bourgeois oppressive institution. Part of me still sees it that way. As I said, but at the same time I understand the importance of it. For me, one very important term that I guess has been around for 15 years or so is homonormativity and the way certain kinds of queer people and queer sexualities are normalized and others are not. This is very much like making canons, there are things that are accepted and things that remain outside. I have a lot of issues with homonormativity.

XL: Would you go so far as to say that gay marriage ended queerness?

DS: (*laughter*) One can certainly make that argument, I'm not sure that I would. Another thing that I've become more and more con-

scious of is that when we're talking about homonormativity or gay marriage we're basically talking about Western Europe and the United States or North America. Once you get to Eastern Europe or even parts of Southern Europe it's a completely different scene. When you go a little bit further into the Middle East, or into Africa, or in South America, these questions of gender and sexuality work very different. It's a lot more dangerous in most of those places. I find that there's something a little too cozy and comfortable about white or European or Western homonormativy. It's very distinctive to Western Europe and North America.

XL: This brings us back to Stonewall and its international influence, as something that is important in queer history.

DS: Yes, in Germany it's very big, they call it Christopher Street. But Germany for a long time has been at the forefront of sexual liberation, dare I say. Certainly, if you're talking about Weimar Germany but also in the late 19th century with Magnus Hirschfeld and sexology, for all its problems, still.

XL: What do you think about the celebration of Stonewall 50 this year?

DS: I wasn't in New York, I was in Berlin while that was happening. I was following what was happening and I was glad that I wasn't here to be honest. It just struck me as being very selective in who and what was being celebrated. A student was telling me that she'd seen an exhibit I think at the New York Public Library about Stonewall 50 and basically the narrative this exhibit constructed was from Stonewall to Gay marriage. End of story! That narrative is not *my* story; it's not the story of *most* queer people, actually. Most people did not enjoy those kinds of privileges. I think that's a really problematic genealogy.

XL: There were also a number of counter Stonewall events, with slogans like the first Gay Pride was a riot.

DS: What I remember the first time as an out gay man when I got to know New York was that summer of 1973. I got to know the gay scene through Ronald Tavel, Harvey Fierstein, Irene Fornes, and Ludlam… homonormativity was *unthinkable* at that time, absolutely unthinkable. I didn't think that all of this was always great, but still I thought there were incredibly exciting things happening and I felt personally excited by all the possibilities and the opportunities.

XL: You mentioned Fierstein, his play *Bella Bella* is showing now,[26] did it take you back to the 1970s, did it make you feel that queer theater gained historical depth?

DS: Interestingly, I remember teaching *Torch Song* back in the 1990s and teaching it as this very conservative piece. *Bella Bella* is more old-fashioned liberationist in its politics. I really appreciated Harvey's memorialization of Bella Abzug and of that time. That was the 1970s after all. I do not wanna say that was the golden age because it was not the case, but still there were a lot of possibilities and a lot of things happening and there was a lot of hope.

XL Do you think that there's no hope now?

DS: I think that hope comes in short supply.

XL: Does the queer canon, looking back to the past, prevent a utopian perspective?

DS: I used to be very much a believer in the utopian stuff, utopian figurations, utopian tropes, utopian! I find it much more difficult these days. It's very much the result of the concrete political changes not only in the United States, but in many other parts of the world as well. And these changes make me very nervous about the future. It's not that I think utopia is no longer a possibility, but there are more pressing issues right now than utopia. Back in the 1990s, I was: "No! Revolution not Reform". I'm a child of the 1960s! Now I don't really believe in revolution and I only believe in reform.

XL: Do you see change happening on the stage?

DS: *The Inheritance* struck me as pretty homonormativizing and reformist kind of work.

XL What about *Booty Candy* or *Strange Loop*?[27]

DS: Yes, although *Strange Loop* is also a very dark piece (*laughter*). I do think that right now it's a golden age of African American theater and performance. Generally, what's happening there is a lot more interesting. Even something like *Fairview*,[28] I mean "even" (*laughter*), which is a Pulitzer Prize winning play, offers possibilities that I otherwise don't find in bourgeois white theater.

XL: I was thinking that Abdoh[29] was against bourgeois convention as well…

DS: I never saw his work. When Charles Busch started, I remember seeing him in the 1980s in the East Village and it was anything but Bourgeois.

XL: What about Taylor Mac's 24-hour music performance[30] and the way it addresses the past?

DS: Taylor Mac is very consciously keeping alive the Ludlam tradition; he is the keeper of the flame actually, which I admire. I like Taylor Mac a lot but he's not the second coming of Jesus Christ, I don't think he is a savior. Last December Taylor Mac and Justin Bond did a joint concert at the Town Hall that I went to as a sort of Christmas thing. I think Justin Bond is a much more interesting performer, a better singer. Justin doesn't have all the costumes and that's a very clear difference to me. Taylor Mac is basically doing sort of old fashion drag show, new fashioned old fashion. What Justin does is very differently trans. To be honest, these days, I find Justin more interesting than Taylor because I always know what Taylor is going to do, and I don't with Justin. The last show I saw was Justin's Karen Carpenter evening that I thought was fabulous.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, I went wild for *Kiki and Herb*.[31] I think they were absolute genius. One of the reasons is that they have something that Taylor Mac doesn't have, *rage*. When Justin is really cooking there is a *rage* behind her work that for me is just overwhelming. I felt that in *A Strange Loop*. There was a lot of rage in that piece (laughter). That to me is what makes really exciting theater. I didn't see any rage in *The Inheritance* or it's not that palpable. I think there is some in *Angels in America* if we want to go back. And this is something I really prize, rage.

---

1 Ludlam, Charles. *Camille*. 1973. In *The Complete Plays by Charles Ludlam*. Steven Samuels and Everett Quinton, eds. Harper and Row, 1989, pp. 221-51.

2 Crowley, Mart. *The Boys in the Band*. 1968. Samuel French, 2018.

3 Waters, John. *Female Trouble*. Dreamland Productions, 1974. Waters, John. *Pink Flamingos.* Dreamland Productions, 1972.

[4] Opening date: May 18, 1981. Closing date: September 4, 1983. Source: http://www.iobdb.com/production/614. Accessed August 4, 2023. It premiered at Dartington College of Arts, Devon, UK on February 14, 1979.

[5] This feminist theater group was founded in 1976 by Muriel Miguel and a diverse group of women.

[6] The Wooster Group is one of the longest-running experimental theater groups in New York City founded in 1975 by Elizabeth LeCompte. Savran's first important book was about their early work. See, *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group*. Theatre Communications Group, 1986.

[7] Kramer, Larry. *The Normal Heart*. Plume, 1985. Hoffman, William M. *As Is*. 1985. In Don Shewey, ed. *Out Front: Contemporary Gay and Lesbian Plays*. Grove P, 1988, pp. 493-551.

[8] Paula Vogel is Pulitzer Prize winning playwright and University Professor.

[9] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Columbia UP, 1985.

[10] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990. Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. U of California P, 1990.

[11] Savran, David. *Communists, Cowboys and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*. University of Minnesota P, 1992.

[12] McNally, Terrence. *Love! Valour! Compassion!*, *A Perfect Ganesh*. Plume, 1995.

[13] Split Britches is a highly influential lesbian/feminist theater group formed by Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw and Deborah Margolin. Many of their early work was produced at the WOW Café, a small collectively-run women's theater. See the collection of their work: Case, Sue-Ellen, ed. *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/ Feminist Performance*. Routledge, 1996. Holly Hughes also performed her early work at the WOW Café and became a highly featured lesbian performer as she was part of the NEA 4 who went all the way to the Supreme Court to fight for their right to public funding despite their radical and often queer art.

[14] Sue-Ellen Case worked on this issue and had published an important article on it: Case, Sue-Ellen. "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic". In *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*. Lynda Hart, ed. U of Michigan P, 1989, pp. 282-99. An earlier version was published in *Discourse* 11:1, 1988-89.

[15] Anzaldúa, Gloria and Cherríe Moraga, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Fourth Edition. 2015. State U of New York P, 1981.

[16] Lopez, Matthew. *The Inheritance*. Faber & Faber, 2018.

[17] Hoffman, William M., ed. *Gay Plays: The First Collection*. Avon, 1979.

[18] Theater Communications Group. Actually, it is Harper and Row that published the Complete Plays.

[19] The texts alluded to here are: Conquergood, Dwight. "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research." *The Drama Review*, vol. 46, n° 2, 2002, pp. 145-56. Schechner, Richard. Performance: *Between Theater and Anthropology*. U of Pennsylvania P, 1985. Schechner, Richard. *Public Domain: Essays on Theatre*. Avon Books, 1969.

[20] Vawter, Ron. *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith*. In Holly Hughes and David Roman, eds. *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance*. Grove P, 1998, pp. 441-76.

[21] Premiered in July 2017 at Bard SummerScape, LUMA Theater, the Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. Rehearsed and performed then in Los Angeles (2018), New York (2019), Paris (2019), Berlin (2023). All new performances often entail substantial changes, hence the necessity to mention all performances as they can amount to rather different experiences.

[22] *Vieux Carré* premiered at Théâtre National in Strasbourg, France (2009) and then performed at Centre Pompidou (2019), Royal Lyceum Theater in Edinburgh, Scotland (2010), REDCAT in Los Angeles, CA (2010), the Baryshnikov Arts Center, NYC (2010), deSingel International Arts Campus in Antwerp, Belgium (2011), National Théâtre Bourgogne in Dijon, France (2011), Holland Festival in Amsterdam, The Netherlands (2011), Nationaltheatret Hovedscenen in Oslo, Norway (2011), Théâtre National de Toulouse-Midi-Pyrénées in Toulouse, France (2011), World Stage Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, Canada (2012) and at SESC Pompeia, São Paulo, Brazil (2013). *Town Hall Affair* received advance showing at The Performing Garage, New York City in May 2016 and then was performed at deSingel, Antwerp, Belgium (2016), Centre Pompidou, Paris, France (2016), The Performing Garage (2017), REDCAT in Los Angeles, California (2017), Z Space in San Francisco, California (2017), Sydney Opera House, Sydney, Australia (2018), Barbican, London, United Kingdom (2018), KAAT (Kanagawa Arts Theatre), Yokohama, Japan (2018), Kyoto Art Theater Shunjuza as part of Kyoto Experiment 2018, Kyoto, Japan, and at the Schaubühne, Berlin, Germany (2019).

[23] Livingston, Jenny. *Paris Is Burning*. Moskwood Video, 1990.

[24] Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Routledge, 1993.

[25] D'Emilio, John. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Community: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

[26] Fierstein, Harvey. *Bella, Bella*. Premiered October 22, 2019 at MTC at New York City Center – Stage I.

[27] O'Hara, Robert. *Booty Candy*. Samuel French, 2014. Jackson, Michael, R. *A Strange Loop: A Musical*. Theatre Communications Group, 2020.

[28] Drury, Jackie Sibblies. *Fairview*. Theatre Communications Group, 2019.

[29] See Mufson, Daniel, ed. *Reza Abdoh*. Baltimore & London: PAJ Book and John Hopkins UP, 1999. And the voluminous catalogue of the 2019 exhibition "Reza Abdoh" held at MoMA PS1 and KW Institute for Contemporary Art: Azimi, Negar, Malakooti, Tiffany, Vazquez Michael C, eds, *Reza Abdoh*. Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2021.

[30] "*A 24-Decade History of Popular Music* is a 24-hour long performance art concert. Its creation began in 2010 and the entirety of it was performed from beginning to end in 2016, at St. Ann's Warehouse, Brooklyn and subsequently in four 6-hour chapters at The Curran Theater, Theater at the Ace Hotel (CAP UCLA), The Melbourne Festival, Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts (The Kimmel Center), and the Berliner Festpiele's Immersion program series. It won The Kennedy Prize, an Obie, two Bessies, two Australian Helpmann Awards, a Drama Critics Circle Award, and was a Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize." Source: https://taylormac.org/. Accessed October 10, 2023.

[31] *Kiki and Herb* is a cabaret style queer performance created and performed by Mx (Justin) Vivian Bond and Herman Mellman. It started in the 1990s in small venues and, then, went all the way to Broadway at the Helen Hayes Theater (August 2006). The characters reappear here and there for limited runs.

"Arts *for* the queer community": Creating Queer Theater for a New Generation with Adam Odsess-Rubin,
Artistic Director of the National Queer Theater

Interview by Xavier Lemoine in New York City, November 29, 2019, Cafe Amrita, Harlem.

Xavier LEMOINE: Can you tell me about your background?

Adam ODSESS-RUBIN: I grew up in Berkeley, California. I'm 27 so I grew up there in the early mid-1990s. Even though Berkeley is a very progressive area, I went to a very conservative high school. I was bullied a lot and called "faggot" and beat up and all this shit. It was called Athenian [Danvin, California], it was a private school outside of the Bay Area. When I was in high school was also when California was debating same-sex marriage and Proposition 8 so LGBT issues were in the news a lot. So you would hear these political commentators debating whether queer people should have the right to get married. And it has a psychological effect on you as a kid: do people even recognize your basic worth? Especially when I was 14, 15 years old and reckoning with my own identity and my own self-worth, and feeling really isolated and I didn't know any other gay people, it really took a toll on me. When I was 16 my high school drama teacher decided to do a production of *The Laramie Project* [by Moisés Kaufman and the Members of the Tectonic Theater Project], which was pretty daring for my high school. I was cast in it and doing that play really changed my life in a lot of ways. I realized I was part of a bigger community, that my community had a history and a culture that was distinct. It wasn't just this weird thing about me that it wasn't a sin or a disease or anything like this but that it was an identity that I could hold on to and that I could be proud of.

XL: Did you fully realize you were queer thanks to the play?

AOR: I knew I liked boys before doing the play but I saw that as a sexual desire and not as an identity. I grew up Jewish that was my identity. I saw my attraction to other guys as a fetish, another thing about me but not as a part of who I am in a deep way or in a historical way. So the play really blew my mind and really changed the environment of my high school to be much more accepting. The bullying stopped after we did this production because the Westville Baptist Church, the people with "God hates fags" signs came to our opening night to protest. So I think that the homophobic students in my school they really saw "oh when I say faggot or that's so gay," it's actually part of this larger homophobic structure that they did not recognize and, then, they were like, "Oh this is not cool, I can't say this shit."

So after that I came out of the closet. I came out to my dad. And he told me he was bisexual when I told him I was gay. And that really was pretty mind-exploding. I thought he would maybe kick me out of the house and instead he told me he was bisexual. He told me that if he hadn't met my mother in the late 1970s he would have been dead from AIDS. And so, it got me thinking about my place in the queer community and in the historical context. When I, later, got more involved with queer theater, thinking about the place of my generation in relation to those who came before me. I think part of growing up as a queer person is you're robbed of your history. You're not taught your history in school. My family taught me Jewish history. I went to a Jewish school as a kid. I learned Jewish history. Nobody ever taught me gay history, right? So I had to teach myself about Stonewall, about Harvey Milk, about the AIDS epidemic, the memorial quilt.

XL: How did you teach yourself queer history?

AOR: I used to go to Barnes and Noble bookstore and I'd just sit in the gay and lesbian section and I would sometimes open a gay book inside of a larger other book so that people didn't see what I was reading. I really had a lot of shame. I was very secretive. My high school had a really small gay and straight alliance club during lunches. Before I was out of the closet, I would sneak around the cafeteria to go to this club in secret. But coming out just opened the whole world before me and I felt like I was, "Oh I can explore this part of myself." I had something to be proud of. I used to volunteer at the Pride Parade in San Francisco. It was super exciting and, then, Prop 8 passed banning gay marriage in California. The same day that Obama became the first Black president. And everyone was so happy and I was so happy for Obama's presidency but I was really pissed off about Pride err… about Prop 8. I think it only fueled my activism.

XL: You slipped by saying you were angry about Prop 8 do you think that you also felt or feel there were limitations to Pride marches?

AOR: No, I mean… as a teenager Pride felt a little distant from me because it was so much about sexy guys drinking alcohol and festive and about a lot of straight people (straight teenage girls). I was trying to figure out what Pride meant to me in terms of the activity that happens in June. I was more interested in the political activism rather than the celebration. After gay marriage was denied I was wondering what's there to celebrate, we have a lot of fighting to do.

XL: Is that why you started the National Queer Theater?

AOR: I think it was the seed of it. Doing the *Laramie Project* as a high school student and seeing the change it had on myself and on my school, I recognized the power of this kind of theater to create political change. Growing up in Berkley my parents were hippies and

activists from the 1970s so I grew up with this political mindset. I didn't necessarily connect the political counterculture movement to my queer identity until doing this play. Then, I felt like theater could be my vehicle for creating political change. Maybe it's not leading a protest maybe it's doing a play and that could be just as powerful.

XL: How did you end up coming to New York and getting involved in creating theater programs?

AOR: After college in San Francisco, I worked for two years as the personal assistant for Cleve Jones, who'd started the AIDS memorial quilt and had been the assistant for Harvey Milk in City Hall. So I was very involved in political activism in the queer community in San Francisco in demonstrations. During the night, I would be directing mostly queer plays in the basement of bars and in weird theaters around the city, working with young queer playwrights. I worked a few jobs doing educational work in different non-profit theaters but I was reaching a ceiling when it came to my career. I decided to apply to grad school at NYU. I went to NYU for applied theater practice, studying the Theater of the Oppressed. So I came to New York for school. When I got here I got a part-time job working with a friend at this HIV-AIDS non-profit that was using storytelling as a form of creative therapy. And for me storytelling and theater are very connected. I started developing this play called *Speechless* based on interviews with HIV+ people in New York and Jackson, Mississippi, which has the highest infection rate in the country mostly affecting young queer black gay and bisexual men. Through developing that play, I started thinking about opening my own theater company. I went to a lecture about the National Black Theater which is here in Harlem. The speaker was talking about how the National Black Theater was this hub for Black thought and Black culture and his community and his family. So I wondered if there is a National Gay Theater, a National Queer Theater, that I could be part of. I was part of the queer theater in San Francisco, the New Conservatory Theater. I miss that community. So

I was sitting and googling on my phone during this lecture and I was like, "Oh there's no Queer National Theater", that's just such a good name. So I went online that night and I registered the website for $20. I was like I guess this is a thing now, you register the website and now it's an organization. We registered as a non-profit in the next few months. I had worked in a lot of bigger theaters and did a lot of education work and activist work, so I felt I had a vision for what I wanted this theater to be and how we could be involved in supporting the community while also producing new queer plays.

XL: So how did you go from the website registration to actual productions? Did you meet people or groups who helped you? So far you seemed to have been alone.

AOR: We had a lot of enthusiasm from artists, especially younger artists. The thing I heard over and over again from young artists and especially young artists of color was: that there isn't a big queer theater in New York. The queer plays that are happening in New York are like *Boys in the Band*, *Angels in America*, they are very white and old, a few decades old. Not old, old, but where is the new queer theater and why is queer theater not showing the full diversity of our community? So, can National Queer Theater be a platform for queer artists of color, for queer immigrants, for HIV+ people, for trans people, the parts of our community that have been largely ignored by queer art? Where I met the opposition was usually from people of an older generation who said, "Oh you're never gonna get the funding! It's hard starting a non-profit!" Now I would say "ok boomer!" -- a response to condescension for the millennials and for generation Z from the baby boomers. I was just constantly met with older queer people telling me, "Oh you're never gonna do it, you'll never make it. It's too hard to start a new organization."

XL. No one from the older generation felt excited by the project?

AOR: They liked the idea and they offered their advice, but they were very dismissive.

XL: How did you meet the older and younger queer groups?

AOR: Graduate school is a great network. I met a lot of people at NYU.

XL: Could you name a few that were important people and who contributed to the National Queer Theater?

AOR: My friend Abe Johnson was an early supporter and he was our music director. Charlie Gershman was our first board member. Andrea Prestinario joined our board and she is the leader of this group called Ring of Keys, which is a network for queer women and trans women in musical theater. We realized early it could very easily be a gay theater, but we wanted to make sure to be equally responsive to queer women and trans artists and *not* just be another gay theater.

XL: Did you reach out to artists involved in previous queer theaters like the WOW Cafe?

AOR: Someone I talked with early on was Jason Jacobs. He was the founder of Theater Askew, which was the previous "large" queer theater in New York City. I got dinner with him and he talked me through the history of Theater Askew and why they fall apart. I think one reason they disbanded after a while was that the founders fought with each other. It has been difficult at times feeling it's on my shoulders, alone, but I get to have my own vision for the company and make decisions based on that with a lot of people's advice and input.

XL: What is this vision?

AOR: The vision is to be the cultural hub for the queer community and for queer artists to feel like they have a space to express their stories so that there is an outlet and a place where they can have a family and support for telling stories. Hence, theater can be seen as an intrinsically important part of the movement for greater human rights for queer people. I think that certainly has been true for the past fifty years in terms of plays, TV, movies that have pushed forward queer rights in general from *Angels in America* to what we're seeing now, *Pose* for the trans community. The real world on TV.

XL: Are there specific productions that were especially important for you in relation to NQT?

AOR: Yeah, *The Normal Heart* was a really big influence. The fact that Larry Kramer was a political activist who came to theater to get people to understand this important message about people dying of AIDS and how this was a political issue for the community. He was using theater for a political purpose rather than art for art's sake but did it in a way that was very artistic and powerful. I think that was very moving to me. It showed me what political activism through theater could look like. It charted a path for that. I directed a production [of this play] for my college thesis and people were sitting there crying, both older generations, who lived through the 80s, and my college students, some of whom were HIV+, and they felt seen maybe for the first time on stage. They felt represented. More recently, I've been thinking a lot about *Slave Play* and what it means to have a play like that on Broadway by a young queer playwright like Jeremy O. Harris, producing really radical work and the fact that it's so mainstream to be on Broadway. It's kind of amazing! It's displaying nuanced difficult conversations about queer about interracial politics. I saw *The Inheritance*, for me that's so surface level, there's nothing new that

contributed, but you see *Slave Play*, it's really pushing forward the conversation about what it means to be a queer person. Certainly, *Fun Home* for representation for queer women. I wish I could say that there's more transgender theater that's really pushing things forward but it's been so marginalized. There's Taylor Mac and a handful of other downtown artists but nothing really getting major significance. There's *Hedwig*, which was a big influence for me, but that's just the seeds of transgender theater, which I think is just emerging as its own movement.

XL: Did you get in touch with other LGBTQ theaters like The Other Side of Silence?

AOR: Yes, I reached out to them early on but I don't think I ever heard back from them. The impression I got was they were mostly in their 50s and 60s mostly white, mostly male and that's what I came from, from the queer theater in San Francisco and I really wanted to do something different and I thought: we're the next generation? I wanted to start something fresh and new.

XL: Did you experience the same thing with your collaboration with Stonewall 50.

AOR: I would go to the Stonewall 50 meetings at the NYPL that Eric Marcus was leading and they were wonderful meetings but I was always the youngest person there. There are plenty of other young queer people involved in the queer movement and in queer arts. I would say the majority are my age or a little bit older and yet everyone at these meetings was over 50. Clearly, there's a problem with the outreach that's happening, it's stuck in these old power structures. The meetings were very male and very white. That's not the community

I'm a part of or that I see in my friends and my networks when I go to events. There's a disconnect.

XL: However you tried to get involved, did you manage to bridge that disconnect?

AOR: Yes, kind of. I was part of it. We got funding from New York City Pride, which was amazing for us as a small organization and to have Pride's logo and Pride's name on our Criminal Queerness festival, which was an event that we did for Pride. It showed support from the older power structure of LGBT organizations in New York. But I think the older generation still looks down on us and don't take us seriously. Yet they complain: where are the young people who are the activists? We're right here, we're in front of you, but you refuse to see us and recognize us because you think you're better than us or smarter. That young people don't understand the culture of the history, where we come from. People don't give my generation enough credit. We do have a very strong sense of our history and are very involved politically and culturally and we are bigger and more out of the closet than any previous generation.

XL: Stonewall 50 was criticized by many queer groups and there were more radical organizations like *Reclaim Pride*, so do you think you could you have turned to other groups?

AOR: It's a tricky question because we needed funding for our projects and we were sponsored by Pride. So it was in our best interest as an organization to align ourselves with New York City Pride and Stonewall 50. We still were able to push back from the inside and push Pride to be more accountable to the community. I think for them to give us funding was part of their commitment to be more accountable and to support smaller projects, more grassroots, more activist projects

coming from the community rather than the traditional institutions. But certainly a lot of our artists were involved with Reclaim Pride.

XL: How did Stonewall and Stonewall 50 change your perspective on theater and queer activism? More generally what does Stonewall represent for you, does it still matter?

AOR: I think for me it is not that Stonewall doesn't matter. The Stonewall uprising is a central turning point in our history as queer people. Where I find a problem with Stonewall 50 is that out of the maybe 50 or 60 organizations that were part of the Stonewall 50 group, 90% of the activities were historical and focused on 1969 and the Stonewall uprisings in New York City. And for me it's not like gay rights is in the past. We're just at the beginning, there are still so many issues that we need to focus on, like the murder of trans people of color, the detention of queer migrants at the southern border with the Trump administration. This is a very critical time for queer rights with the current administration. So to use all these resources to only focus on photography exhibits, and historical statues and plaques and art exhibits, it was frustrating for me. Maybe for the people in their 60s it's really time for them to reflect on their history. There's still so much to be done. Let's use the resources to talk about what's happening now. In terms of our movements and how the arts and the cultural sector play a role in this?

XL: What about the Brooklyn exhibit that could be considered as political and included trans perspectives for instance?

AOR: I didn't see the Brooklyn exhibit, the hard thing was that all of us were so busy doing our own events that it was hard to see the others. The general sense I got was that the bigger institutions were putting out historical content. They did an opera about Stonewall,

they did a photography exhibit about Stonewall. Ok, Stonewall is important, but what's the next Stonewall? Why are we not putting our resources into that question?

XL: There seems to be a tension between theater and activism, is it irreconcilable for you?

AOR: I don't see it as a tension; I see it as a synergy. Theater is the tool that fuels the activism. When we produced a play for National Queer Theater, the hope is that the audience leaves feeling inspired, empowered, that they wanna contribute more to the movement and they wanna get more involved. That we are able to connect them with resources so that they can donate and volunteer or march. Not that every play has to be didactic and beat you on the head with a message, like it should be artistic and creative. I meet so many young queer artists who wanna do more, they wanna be more involved in the community and they don't know how. So we're building community partnerships with LGBT organizations, using theater as a tool to get more people involved in the movement. Our formal mission statement is: "To foster and support LGBT communities through social justice in the performing arts". The key word is "through," so the arts *for* the queer community and not queer community for the arts. If we get a great review in the *New York Times*, that's wonderful but that's not the goal. The goal is that we're building the movement.

XL: Can you share a little bit about your own work. For instance, how did you work on the play *DREAMers: An (Un)Documentary Play*? How did it happen?

AOR: So *DREAMers* was a project that I helped create in 2012. It's an older project. I was an artistic intern for a theater company called The Civilians, which used interviews and journalistic method to cre-

ate new plays for social consciousness. At the time my boyfriend was a DREAMer. The DACA program (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) had just been announced by the Obama Administration. I witnessed him coming out of the closet twice: coming out as an undocumented immigrant to his gay friends and coming out as gay to his conservative family—that were immigrants. Supporting him through this struggle and watching him reconcile this, I found it really inspiring and heartbreaking. I felt that people who were not part of the immigrant community and certainly not the queer community were not focused on this issue of immigration in a way that was really important. So, I got together with a group of NYU acting students. We partnered with Make the Road New York, which is an immigrant justice organization in Queens. We interviewed a group of DREAMers, of young undocumented immigrants. Then, I put together the transcripts from the interviews and created a play out of it. It turned out a lot of them were LGBT. It wasn't necessarily the intention going in, but a lot of them were queer and talked about that in the interviews. We did a reading at Theater for the New City back in 2012. I produced the play a few times in California. We did a production last year [2018] at NYU. The play ended on a very hopeful note because we wrote it in 2012 and things were getting better for undocumented immigrants. Now obviously the things are the opposite with Trump. So it was interesting to view this play in 2018 through the lens of these interviews of 2012. So that's the story of that play.

XL: Was your use of "interviewing technique" connected to this genre made famous here by Anna Deavere Smith?

AOR: Yes, Anna Deavere Smith and *The Laramie Project* were definitely influences as well as the work of The Civilians where I was doing my internship. But yes it was in the style of Anna Deavere Smith and *Laramie*. The choice of basing the play on interviews was partly because of the style of The Civilians Company. The original

intention was that the people we were interviewing would also be the actors. They would tell their own story and tell each other's stories but they were too afraid to get on stage. They didn't have any acting training and they were afraid of being deported. So they said, "I'll tell you my story but I want you to change my name and someone else can play my role." So, the interviewers also were the actors playing them. Part of the goal was that their stories were important and people needed to hear stories of these DREAMers and they weren't being told. Maybe they'd been interviewed a little bit on the news but only in a very narrow context in a way that wasn't personal or intimate at all, it was just commenting on the politics. I felt with my boyfriend at the time that once I knew his story and knew him in a very personal way my political opinion on migration changed a lot. I became more sympathetic. If hearing his story made *me* more empathetic so that can be true for other people as well through theater.

XL. So for you the heart of theater is to achieve transformation?

AOR: Yes, I really want people to have the experience that I had when I was 16 doing the Laramie Project and it was this turning point, like this light bulb went on. It changed my life and it saved me in so many ways. If I can give that to other people, that's a wonderful purpose in life.

XL: How do you factor esthetic questions in your work?

AOR: A lot of my work comes out of the San Francisco style of political theater, which has roots in the late 1960s and the movement against the War in Vietnam. Specifically with the San Francisco Mime Troupe and also El Teatro Campesino, the Farmworkers Theater, with Luis Valdez. Their work is very *agit prop*, hitting you over the head with a message but it's really meant to galvanize people towards polit-

ical action. The work of El Teatro in the grape fields with the Delano grape strike in the 1960s with Cesar Chaves was to get the workers to organize against the oppressive bosses and they did their plays in the back of their trucks with signs around their neck that said: "union worker" or "boss" with a pig mask. It was very obvious but it was working with non-actors, the audience was not the traditional theater audience, it was workers. So I think these tools, these ideas of how to create social change through theater came from studying that kind of work and also Anna Deavere Smith and Tectonic Theater. Then, moving past that, I'm thinking about a play like *Angels in America*, helping me wondering how do we take these political tools, this *agit prop* style, and create more nuance and build character development, and how do we support playwrights to create this change through more artistic storytelling—what more people would call *real* theater— that is beautiful, that is nuanced, that is complex and not so black and white because I think it's more digestible, people listen a bit more.

XL: You talked about the history but did you see their work in SF? Were you also interested in the work of ACT UP or Queer Nation?

AOR: I was really too young but certainly when I was working for Cleve Jones I was in the middle of a lot of AIDS activism history. So I was very aware of ACT UP and Queer Nation. My work is about finding queer activism in theater versus the theater in queer activism. ACT UP was theatrical; they used theatrical means for political protests, so kind of the flip side of what we're doing but connected. Queer activism has been theatrical; you have the die-ins in front of St. Patrick's Church is a piece of guerrilla theater. I think the connector has been the Theater of the Oppressed and August Boal's work that used both theater in political protest, but also political protest in theater and creating theater with communities. I've been participating in and leading Theater of the Oppressed in different settings for the past five or six years, working in Juvenile Hall in San Francisco, working with refugee youth here in New York, working with Israeli

and Palestinian teenagers. That's been hugely informative in the kind of work I've done.

XL: What about the future perspective for you and the National Queer Theater?

AOR: The most gratifying work that we've done has been *not* the plays that we've produced but that's the work we've done in communities. Every month we do workshops with SAGE, which is Services and Advocacy for LGBT Elders, working with queer people over the age of 60 doing acting and improvisation classes, with the aim of hoping to build community and eliminate some of the isolation that older queer people are experiencing and also working with Homeless Queer Youth with Ali Forney Center and with New Alternatives and doing improvisation classes with them. And also helping young people write their own stories, because they can go watch *Boys in the Band* or *Angels in America* on Broadway and they don't see themselves reflected even though we are all queer, they have totally different experiences. When I go to these homeless shelters for queer youth, almost all of them are black, a lot of them are transgender and a lot of them are dealing with substance abuse, prostitution. You know issues that, even as bad as gay people have had it in the past, that a lot of people didn't have to deal with because of economic privilege.

Looking forward I want to expand these community programs, involve more artists as teachers and facilitators for these classes. Maybe start a queer youth theater troupe. And really champion young queer playwrights who maybe don't have another platform because their work is too queer for the mainstream theater. How can we really bring trans playwrights in the mainstream and have their work produced at the Public Theater and on Broadway because that will create wider acceptance in the larger community.

XL: What about working with the ball scene that deals with queer trans issues? Would you work with them?

AOR: As a white gay guy myself that's not for me to go into that community, that's for another group of people but we certainly welcome artists from that community to come work with us. In terms of working with nightlife, because it's such a big part of queer culture, we did a show last month at the Eagle, which is the leather bar in New York City. They invited us to do a performance there. We did seven short plays that took place in a leather bar. We had 200 people in the Eagle for these plays and worked with 40 artists. It was really fun working in that queer space that normally doesn't have traditional theater there and to give artists an opportunity to create work for queer spaces like that. So we definitely would love to do more work in queer nightlife.

XL: That's such a great connection with Doric Wilson's *Street Theater*, which was also produced at the Eagle.

AOR: Yes, absolutely. We're all in conservation with each other. The New York theater community is big but it's small, especially when you're looking at New York City downtown queer theater. So we're always borrowing and stealing from each other and inspiring each other. That's good for everybody.

Créée au Contemporary Arts Center de New Orleans en 2019 par Lyam B. Gabel, *the dance floor, the hospital room, and the kitchen table* est une performance pour 3 comédien.nes enquêtant sur l'histoire de la solidarité queer, depuis l'épidémie du SIDA et le mouvement de libération queer jusqu'au COVID-19 et les identités trans et non binaires. Vingt-deux témoignages enregistrés par des patients atteints du SIDA, des survivant.e.s, des militant.e.s, des personnels soignants, nous sont donnés à entendre : on se souvient alors comment des patients gays servirent de cobayes à des dosages d'AZT mortifères, de la peur de la contamination, de la solidarité des lesbiennes avec les gays atteints du SIDA ; on apprend que 25 % de femmes de couleur étaient atteintes du SIDA et que les anti-avortement n'avaient pas droit aux soins. OWEN, gay de 35 ans environ, HANNAH, vingt ans environ, bisexuelle noire, et FRANKIE, la trentaine, queer non-binaire trans masculin, dialoguent avec ces voix chorales, fantômes du passé : iels reviennent sur leur expérience de souffrance et de solitude et questionnent ce qui unit et divise les membres de la communauté LGBTQIA+. Les personnages évoluent entre le passé et le présent dans un espace scénique qui devient tour à tour piste de danse disco, chambre d'hôpital, table de cuisine. Le spectateur est invité à traverser les nuits blanches en boîte de nuit ou à l'hôpital, à partager les conversations dans la cuisine où cette communauté queer s'indigne contre l'indifférence criminelle de l'État à l'égard des homosexuels atteints du SIDA dans les années quatre-vingt, et revient sur l'organisation de la solidarité transgénérationnelle aujourd'hui. Loin de tout pathos, grâce au prisme de l'archive, cette pièce documentaire, festive sur la piste de danse, questionne les fantômes queer du passé, voire du futur, pour tenter d'affirmer les identités plurielles, et en appelle à la survivance de mémoires intimes comme porte d'accès à la résilience, à la survie, et la vie à venir.

the dance floor, the hospital room, and the kitchen table

Research and Writing by Lyam B. Gabel[1]

Featuring the voices and stories of Anne-Christine d'Adesky, Cass Brayton, Cindra Fauer, Donna Persona, Ganymede Cupbearer, Gabriel Stelian Shanks, Harry Breaux, Hank Trout, John, Maxx Sizeler, Matt Stanley, Paul Aguilar, Rick, Richard, Suzie Silver, Susan Haugh, Timothy Haggerty and more



[Photo by Beth Barbis. Courtesy of Lyam B. Gabel]

"Eratohistography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding. It sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations."

-Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*

"How can we take care of the ghosts who take such care of us?"

-Hil Malatino, *Trans Care*

CONTENT NOTE:

This script includes references to sex and sexuality, depression and suicide, drinking and drug use, illness, death and dying, racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia.

LANGUAGE NOTE:

The language that the LGBTQIA+ community has used to describe itself has changed over the years. Some words which were/are considered offensive by some members of the community are used in a way that feels self-empowering by others. This is complicated by the race, class, gender, and geographical location of the speaker.

This is a play about haunting
About possession
About who possesses history
How history possesses us

This is a play about a history that is also a present
and a present that is also a history.

This play is a kinesthetic ritual for remembering. It moves. It should move and the performers should move and the people watching it should also move.

Who:

Three queer researchers.

For the sake of this text, the researchers are named OWEN (he/him), FRANKIE (they/them), and HANNAH (she/her), after the performers who are originating these roles.

OWEN is a white gay man in his mid-30s

FRANKIE is a queer non-binary transmasculine person in their early-30s

HANNAH is a Black bisexual woman in her early-20s

Where: a queer archive of care

Track 1

The archive is talking to itself.

ANNE-CHRISTINE VO. One: Listen. Like just that…

RICK VO. It seems like another lifetime, another age, you know, literally another century...it seems far away but it doesn't take much for it all to come back. Every room in this house, if I put my mind to it, reminds me of him.

DONNA VO. As hard as I try as diligently as I try. I cannot really like transport you to that time.

SUSAN VO. Yeah, because I think—I guess the main overarching thing is a lot of loneliness. And a lot of yeah, just loneliness. Yeah, and I shared that, like a lot of people share that. That loneliness.

WARREN VO. Everybody else was saying this was a death sentence, you know, you're not going to make it, you got six months to live. Of course. I had never been sick. I'd never had an opportunistic infection. I'd never had anything and I never have I've always been asymptomatic. And it was really you know for a long time there was a whole lot of survivor's guilt. You know, it's like why me, you know, why am I alive when everybody else around me is not.

VINCE VO. We were all still paranoid about getting sick, it was weird because you wanted to love your friends but you were afraid of them at the same time and not understanding what was going on but you always wanted to show up and do the right thing.

GABRIEL VO. I think the saddest thing for me was I got used to it. It became something I was good at I hated being good at it. I still hate that I could do that. I still feel like when my father died, I was able. To use the skills. I learned in the AIDS epidemic, too. To be there for my mother and channel, my own grief, for a time. When I could do it, you know, like, all of those sort of practical skills. I learned in AIDS epidemic. I still have and I hate having those skills.

Those aren't that isn't healthy but it is the only way your psychic can protect you.

HANK VO. When you're up to your ass in bedpans it's hard to find time to write about being up to your ass in bedpans.

BILL VO. Just little things make a big difference.

CRAIG VO. I'm still grieving. I'm still grieving. That's why I'm still grieving, I'm still grieving. It's not over.

GABRIEL VO. I think it is an unresolved grief.

JOANI VO. We were there. We remember

GABRIEL VO. There's no way to talk about this as a survivor that centers my pain. I want to say the people who had HIV is where this needs to stay and live. There is a, as a survivor, there's a separate set of sort of psychic and emotional damage. It's weird to talk about because I don't want to put myself at the center of the narrative. They need to be at the center of the mirror. But I am broken by it. That's the truth. I miss them. I miss them very much.

REBECCA VO. And then people kept dying we change things I was able, you know, I'd be there in the hospital watching someone get a medication which we'd fought for access to and there they were getting that medication, but the fact is people kept dying.

DORIAN VO. If you look at a lot of the print ads pretty much white faces young bodies. That's not the face of HIV. 25 percent are women, most of them are women of color. It's like really racism in the gay community seems pretty damn high.

TIM VO. I used to call Paul, you know once a month. I mean it's always nice to have friends on the west coast right? Because you can call late. And we talked once a month or so, you know one of those relationships, and then one time I called and his number had been disconnected and forwarded to a number in Minnesota. And I

thought he maybe had gotten sick and gone home. His sister picked up and we chatted and he had passed away. He was a terrific guy. He was always positive. At one point he had like 4 T cells and he said, "We're going to live through this and we're going to be...You know, there's gonna be something that will come down the pike." There was *nothing* coming down the pike at that point, but I thought "he really believes that." I was always like "I'm going to be one of those very nice young gay men who is very dead."

Sometime during the next voiceover Owen walks in. He's alone, and removes his mask.

The room feels…full.

HARRY BREAUX VO. When all those people died of AIDS, it created a break for the first time ever in history from one older homosexual being able to mentor a younger homosexual. Being able to express what goes on—show them how to eat, show them how to decorate, show him how to do hair or whatever you want, you know, whatever it was that gay people did before AIDS. We used to pass it along gingerly and nicely in a lot of ways to the younger people so that they have an idea what it was to be gay. But when AIDS came along you– meaning, in general, you but you specifically because your age– you lost an entire probably two generations, technically, of people that had any experience that you could benefit from having it passed along.

He sees the microphone and whispers into it.



[Photo by Beth Barbis. Courtesy of Lyam B. Gabel]

OWEN. Hello?

Suddenly it's just an archive, but the room is still alive– aware of him. He tries not to overwhelm the space. He settles at the archive table and

in that moment Frankie enters. They are wearing a mask. Owen goes for his mask.

FRANKIE. It's okay.

OWEN. Are you sure? I can…

FRANKIE. No it's okay, do you mind if I?

OWEN. Oh yeah, sure! Of course. I'm vaxxed.

FRANKIE. Yeah me too.

OWEN. Ok.

FRANKIE. Ok.

HANNAH walks in, hangs up her bag, takes off her mask and goes directly to a box. OWEN stands up, "is this the archivist?" HANNAH looks at him.

HANNAH. Hello.

What are they doing here?

OWEN. Hi.

FRANKIE. Hey.

HANNAH puts the box down on the table and starts riffling through it. FRANKIE doesn't budge and is looking over her shoulder.

HANNAH. I'm Hannah.

FRANKIE. Oh. yeah. Sorry. Frankie.

OWEN. Owen.

HANNAH. What are you looking for?

FRANKIE. I'm not sure.

OWEN. I just like being around old things.

HANNAH. I'm a researcher.

FRANKIE. Oh?

OWEN. Yeah? That's cool.

FRANKIE. I've always wanted to be a person who knows/ what they are looking for.

HANNAH. /You can

FRANKIE. I don't know. I'm kind of a "know it when I see it" type of person.

Some more looking

HANNAH. Do you think that queer ghosts are different than regular ghosts?

FRANKIE. I'm not sure that I believe in ghosts/ what do you mean queer?

OWEN. /what do you mean regular?

HANNAH. Like, are they angrier?

OWEN. Maybe they're less angry.

FRANKIE. I think that queerness is kind of about the future so I mostly think that if there is such a thing as ghosts they wouldn't be queer. Like they could be gay but they wouldn't be queer.

HANNAH. I just keep getting the sense that if you scratch the surface of all this talk about queer futures and our endless prismatic selves there's a lot of death underneath that.

Track 2

HANNAH. I struggle with representations of queerness that center trauma, but I also struggle with this kind of triumphalist and ultimately assimilationist idea that being queer is just like…totally ok now. Like we have PrEP and so we are moving on. Like we're not still living with HIV in all the ways. And so I wonder about how we have survived because I wonder about how we can continue to survive. Because I guess maybe I think that's what queerness is about. Survival.

And I need to learn how to honor people that we've lost, that's so important, but I also need to figure out how to care for the folks that are still here. Because we didn't lose a whole generation actually, I've talked to some of them. And it's messy, and it's euphoric, and it's terrifying, and it's tragic.

Because memory is messy.

But also… memory is like a portal. Archives are like portals.

FRANKIE. To where?

HANNAH. Excuse me?

FRANKIE. A portal to where?

HANNAH. Oh. Umm. I'm not sure.

Hannah finds a tape in a box

Maybe that's what I'm researching?

She puts it in the tape player, puts on headphones, and listens. The space kind of pulses a little with the memory.

FRANKIE and OWEN inch closer, she takes off her headphones so they can listen.

It's still too quiet, she amplifies it with a microphone.

As they listen to the voice something shifts, a touch, a closeness, a feeling.



[Photo by Beth Barbis. Courtesy of Lyam B. Gabel]

PAUL VO. People became afraid to touch each other, to hug each other, to... because we didn't really know then what caused it. We had no idea. We had no test. We didn't know what was causing it. Most of us were pretty sure it wasn't airborne, because there would've been a lot more people dead. I remember when my first friend that I knew had died. This was even before Ward 5B had started. And we had gone to visit him, he and his partner had owned a frame store on Haight Street. And when we heard he was in the hospital, my little sister, well, my best friend, but my little sister decided we'd go visit him. And so, you know, we got a bunch of stuff together in a gift basket because you do that for people when they're in the hospital. We didn't know what to expect. And when we got there he was in isolation. He was under a big oxygen tent mask covering his face and everybody going in out of the room was covered head

to toe in, in surgical gear hat, booties, masks the whole nine yards, gloves... and that was the only way that anybody went in and out of that room and I just remember him the look... Just the fear in his eyes. Normally, this really upbeat, lively, funny guy just sitting there, so afraid because, you know, everybody was like, in these masks and stuff. And I remember, something... I don't know what it was natural caregiver in me, defiant teenager, take your pick but before I left that room, I took my rubber glove off and I grabbed his hand and I told him, you know, stay strong or something like that because it just felt like the right thing to do.

With Owen's help Hannah presses stop on the tape player but doesn't quite pull herself out of whatever is happening.

HANNAH. Should we be doing this?

FRANKIE. LOL Which part?

HANNAH. I'm not…totally sure.

OWEN. Is there… is there someone that we should ask?

FRANKIE. I think I need a drink.

HANNAH. I guess we're doing it.

OWEN. (*to the space*) Is that ok?

FRANKIE. I don't know.

HANNAH. It's just…. it's just the stakes seem pretty high.

FRANKIE. How high are they?

OWEN. (*to the space again*) What are the stakes?

They wait for an answer

HANNAH. I'm not sure about that either.

FRANKIE. Now what?

OWEN. Now we wait?

FRANKIE. For what?

OWEN. For something else to happen.

…

Isn't something supposed to happen?

They do, wait, for a while

*They look at all the *stuff**

And it starts to like… call them.

*Owen starts rustling around in boxes and *surprise* hits a tape player. Frankie finds a box of tapes and starts to put one on the player that Hannah was working with.*

GANYMEDE/OWEN. I mean the city blew up and we instead of becoming a party-loving sexually promiscuous crowd. Suddenly we were an angry force of nature to be contended with.

SUZIE VO/FRANKIE. It just felt like the end of the world and there are so many things that felt like the end of the world in the 80s

CINDRA VO/HANNAH. And I mean those were the days that we would just go into a meeting with, I don't know, the Department of Health of New York City and we didn't like what they were saying, so we would just blow whistles really really loud and people would just want us to get the fuck out.

Owen finds a whistle. Looks at it, maybe cleans it off, and makes the decision to blow it.

MAXX VO/FRANKIE. I had no idea. Being that naive kid that I was, I had no idea what to expect. So I mostly just watched and listened and took a seat and there weren't that many women.

ANNE-CHRISTINE VO/HANNAH. I mean a lot of the women were very close to the guys.

MAXX VO/FRANKIE. I didn't know them but Courtney ~~Sharp,~~ and there was one other trans woman... The two of them were the only ones I ever really I think... or maybe there was three but there was a few and boy these people were gutsy because the gay community did not accept them and they were like fighting tooth and nail the whole way. I think, you know, back then, I was afraid of the feelings I was having and I was scared of that life. I want to say, almost, I was scared of the trans people of the trans women, maybe just because I was like, you know, I knew how I felt but it was terrifying.

ANNE-CHRISTINE VO/HANNAH. I had really close male friends and I also had close women friends. I had some affairs with people in Act Up. So, you know, that was the scene. We were all together and very close to each other.

CINDRA VO/FRANKIE. What's that expression? You don't don't eat where you... Don't shit where you eat. We worked where we fucked and we fucked where we worked and there was no, there didn't seem like there was ever a need to be professional.

Owen finds a boom box

INGRID VO/OWEN. We always had a strong women's caucus in our chapter of act up and we were very involved in clinic defense. We had a banner that said: ActUp Women: pro-sex and pro-choice. We were trying to make it clear to the men in ActUp that abortion was something they should be concerned about. It was also about sexuality-related Healthcare and victim-blaming and basically this idea that you don't deserve health care because you had this kind of sex that we don't approve of.

OWEN stops the tape for a moment, they share a look. OWEN starts the tape again.

INGRID VO/OWEN. They're all you know in their leather jackets, they used fashion and art as part of their activism and, it just was like this is the kind of activism I want to be doing.

Owen rewinds and replays to underline this, until they can all repeat it

INGRID VO/OWEN. this is the kind of activism I want to be doing.

INGRID VO/OWEN/HANNAH. this is the kind of activism I want to be doing.

INGRID VO/OWEN/FRANKIE/HANNAH. this is the kind of activism I want to be doing.

MAXX VO/FRANKIE. So basically the meetings were run by two co-chairs and the meetings I went to had a man and a woman co-chairing. The first thing they would say in the meeting was they would address the FBI "we know you're here"

OWEN. we know you're here

MAXX VO/FRANKIE. and I can't remember exactly what they would say, but they would basically say "we know you're here recording us"

HANNAH. we know you're here recording us

MAXX VO/FRANKIE. I mean back in those days the federal government still saw gay community as a threat. But anyway, so they would start off the meeting like that which was a little bit scary in a way to someone like me. I'm like "Woooaaa Am I gonna get arrested?" so then they would just start talking about the things they had on the agenda. I think you know, the meeting was pretty raucous, you know, it was not quiet. I mean, there are a lot of people milling around talking there were lots and lots of chairs set up. I would usually sit in the front so I could hear. Afterwards there was a lot of, yeah, people getting up and socializing and talking and stuff and I

didn't have anybody to talk to so I guess I would sort of try to look like I was doing something and then when I got too uncomfortable I probably would leave.

A voice comes from the room

SUSAN VO/HANNAH. Because I think I guess the main overarching thing is a lot of loneliness. And a lot of yeah, just loneliness. Yeah, and I shared that like a lot of people share that, that loneliness.

HANNAH. I mean, I guess that I think the main overarching thing is a sense of loneliness. And a lot of yeah, just loneliness. Yeah, and I share, that like a lot of people share that, that loneliness.

Like I can be in a big vault of all of these papers and all these voices and know that these are me

and not me.

I first got interested in the early years of the HIV epidemic when I heard stories of lesbians who cared for gay men when they were dying. And how—in the words of some of the older folks that I talked to—and let's be clear these folks are like 50s-70s, but I'm in my 20s and queer time is sometimes…accelerated—some of the older lesbians that I talked to said that it's the first time that they felt connected to gay men. And the alphabet is aspirational right? LGBTQ is aspirational. We are an imperfect collection of different identities with different needs. But I got so fascinated with, and fixated on, the role of lesbians who took care during that time.

And then I was in the library, at school, and I found *Women, AIDS, and Activism* and seriously, read this book, so much of it sounds like it was written today and not 32 years ago at this point. And the first thing that was in the book, the very first thing, was a rejection of this caretaker narrative. They were like look HIV affects us too! It affects women! And it's understudied. And we were—are—leaders in the movement.

And you see it now—like HIV is a present presence for so many of us but especially for women of color and yet we still can only take 1 out of two of the PrEP options and it took until [[DATE]] for that to happen.

So I started thinking about how we all are still living with

by which I mean living in a world with

HIV

and I started thinking about care more broadly–

thinking about activism as care

and intimacy as care

and drug trial participation as care–

and how like when we think about healthcare

it's all connected

it's our bodies

it's in us.

So when I talk about ghosts

what I mean is the way that the past haunts how I think about myself

and all of my interactions

and how I make family

and how I organize.

I mean the parts of my older kin that are in me

even if we're not blood,

even if we don't know each other.

I mean the me but not me.

That's in me.

Owen puts in another tape. Hannah runs over the amplify it.

GANYMEDE VO/OWEN. My partner was one of the ones who suffered with very high doses of AZT that poisoned his bone marrow and made his his pancreas not operate and you know because he was that guinea pig and many others like him. They figured out the right dosages for AZT. At first when prep came about and Gilead was granted the only license for PrEP with their drug Truvada. I was thinking like why would healthy people want to take this noxious drug that has so many side effects. And then I realized my brothers died so you could have this medicine.

They all listen for more

It doesn't come

FRANKIE. Should we keep going?

HANNAH. Owen?

OWEN. I'm fine.

FRANKIE. Do you want to stop?

OWEN. I don't think so.

HANNAH. ????

OWEN. No.

FRANKIE. ??????

OWEN. No, I don't want to stop.

HANNAH. Ok.

FRANKIE. Ok.

OWEN. Ok.

FRANKIE. Do you think it gets easier?

HANNAH. In the queer future?

FRANKIE. Ok, ok, ok,

maybe so–

maybe

I think in reality I don't think queerness is about the future.

I think it's about being late

and stuck

and about loss

about missing out on things.

HANNAH. And not being able to sit in chairs correctly

OWEN. Wait, did you say you think queerness is about lattes?

HANNAH. Why is iced coffee gay?/ I still feel like I don't fully understand…

FRANKIE. NO.

I think it's feeling like we've lost time—like I lost time—like I have FOMO for this whole childhood I could have had. But I don't want that. To be stuck, and feeling the weight of that grief.

Track 3

OWEN. How do you think we get unstuck?

FRANKIE. I don't know.

OWEN. I think maybe that's what I'm researching?

HANNAH. I feel like I'm just understanding this… what this is… my relationship to it.

FRANKIE. This history

OWEN. It's not just a history friend.

HANNAH. Yes. Yes. I know. I guess all of it. I go looking for the queer ghosts in my own family tree and they're not there. It's hard for me to find myself.

FRANKIE. Do you feel like you need to find them in your own family tree?

HANNAH. Maybe… maybe not. But I want them to be there.

I'm like.

I just came out.

FRANKIE. Wait what?!

HANNAH. Yes.

OWEN. Stop.

FRANKIE. How just is just?

HANNAH. Like…a year? Or something? It's a process. It hasn't been so easy to define.

OWEN. Welcome.

HANNAH. Yes. thank you.

FRANKIE. LOL why are you welcoming her? Are you the person at the gate of gay letting folks in? Are you the host at the gay house party?

OWEN. Yes. yes, I am.

HANNAH. It's just…

I'm **researching.**

I'm trying to find my models.

I'm looking for me.

But I keep flipping through files and finding not me. But also…me? It's hard to explain.

OWEN. I would like to welcome the ghosts of prior you but not you to the gay house party.

(an incantation)

The question is not if we are haunted but how we are haunted

The question is not if the past is present but how it is present

And what it does to our bodies

In our bodies

The box of tapes glistens. They seem queer (whatever that means). FRANKIE finds a tape, and puts it in the tape player.

HANK VO. In the 80s and 90s we danced to forget. We danced to forget all the crap that was going on around us. Nowadays it's more like we dance to remember. Yeah, we dance to remember those people that aren't here to dance with us anymore.

The voice is like a portal. Hannah, Owen, and Frankie are on the dancefloor, but still in the archive, and time and space are slippery again. They latch onto some of the words, move it through their bodies.

OWEN finds a dusty boom box and presses play. Music moves through the space, gently at first and then with more force. The researchers let it infect them.



[Photo by Beth Barbis. Courtesy of Lyam B. Gabel]

TIM VO. (*music starts here*) The entire gay city went crazy, you know, we all went sort of insane.

It's like all I do is drink.

It was just like being caught under a bell jar, and it felt that way because you couldn't fight an enemy you didn't know. And if there was an enemy, it was internalized. I mean literally internalized. I mean the enemy was in you

It's like all I do is drink.

You know, there was a joke that the cause of AIDS was track lighting and industrial carpeting...or you know poppers. Poppers were immediate. They were easy cause you could just throw the poppers away. I remember I was on the dance floor once and some older guy pulled out a bottle of poppers and I was dancing with my friend. I said in my best Dorothy Parker. "Oh, there's a Dying Breed" You know, but that's how you dealt with it.

It's like all I do is drink

He came into the White Horse and he said, Did you hear the bad news about AIDS? "Oh, no bad news about AIDS really?" what the fuck there is no good news about AIDS, and that was a very surreal part of it. It just kept getting worse. It kept getting worse for 15 years. That's a really long time.

It's like all I do is drink

Sometimes you would suddenly realize you hadn't seen somebody in a while and you tended not to ask about them because you knew. My friend Dan's lover died and he didn't show up very often and but at one point I said "where's Steve?" and he was like, Steve died five months ago.

He wrote Steve's mother. And asked—there was a picture of them together—he asked for a copy of it. Steve's mother cut it up into 45 pieces and mailed it back to Dan.

OWEN stops dancing, finds the fragments inside of an envelope and lets them fall.

TIM VO. (*coming from the tape deck. the sound echoes, skips, distorts*) we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to

live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be…we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...

TIM VO (*music ends*) You know, that all seems like history now.

The room shrinks, returns to normal but Frankie and Hannah are still dancing

Owen presses stop on the boom box

Hannah stops first, out of breath.

OWEN. Do you think that queer ghosts are different than regular ghosts?

HANNAH. What do you mean different?

OWEN. Like, are they angrier?

FRANKIE. Maybe they're less angry.

OWEN. Maybe the question isn't are they angrier, but am I angrier when I think about them?

Am I angrier when I can't find them or know their names?

FRANKIE. Would they want me to know their names?

How would they even want to be known?

Track 4

OWEN. Is this our inheritance? Scribbles on bar napkins and anonymous photographs and half-used notebooks full of half-lived lives?

I don't know what to do with that.

I don't know how to hold it

How I am supposed to mourn people I never meet?

I dance and I fuck and I….

I mostly don't think about it.

But sometimes it climbs out of my stomach and into my throat

unexpectedly

when I'm like

dancing

or running

or kissing.

And it feels like ghosts–

or ghosts are the only things that can help me deal with it?

how it feels in my body…

It's like…

I don't know what to do with like the

gravity of the

entire fucking state of the world.

And I need help.

And then I remember.

There are people who lived through that

there are versions of me

like people like me

but not me

and some of them I can pick up the phone and call

but a lot of them

like a whole lot of them

I maybe need to call a different way

but like I need them to understand what it is to be a person like me living in a time like this.



[Photo by Beth Barbis. Courtesy of Lyam B. Gabel]

A phone has been knocked off the hook in one of the boxes.

Owen takes it out

Tries to answer it

He puts it on the table

Still off the hook

RICHARD VO. I was alone with this doctor in the room who says "well, it wasn't an abscess." and I didn't hear—I don't remember anything after that except a few things about treatment, and statistics, and "goodbye," and then he walked out and left me alone.

FRANKIE presses play on a tape, rewinds it and goes back to the same piece of audio over and over.

GAYNEMEDE VO. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. He left the room and I was in complete shock—like I couldn't move and the door opened and one of the nurses turned and just came running in. She opened the door ran in and held me and I just cried and sobbed.

GAYNEMEDE VO. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. (*music starts here*) First person I called was my friend Phyllis who is my bestie from the women's clinic and still one of my best friends. And I cried on the phone with her, sobbed on the phone. And I think she came and brought me home.

GAYNEMEDE VO. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. I was so scared. It was horrible. So my friends, umm, rallied.

GAYNEMEDE VO. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. They did, like, everything I couldn't do—cook, clean, at that point I could still bathe myself, but I couldn't make food or do anything like housework-wise or drive.

GAYNEMEDE VO. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. I was really freaked out. I couldn't... I didn't want to be alone. So people stayed with me.

GAYNEMEDE VO. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. We had a potluck at my apartment to sort of figure out what I needed, who could do what, and to create a calendar, you know, stay organized. All with the background music playing of you know, I'm going to die. I'm not going to get through this.

GAYNEMEDE VO. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. It was a nightmare. My friends were great, but it was hard to like scream and cry with them and tell them how frightened I was because they wanted me to get through it. They wanted to make me better—which, I wanted to get better, but I was just like beside myself with Terror and Fear and I was afraid to freak them out, and they were doing so much. And so at that point I called Shanti and I talked to somebody on the phone I vividly remember having somebody hear me for the first time and say

OWEN. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO/OWEN. I understand and that must be terribly scary. Just listening without trying to change my feelings, you know or anything. It was exactly what I needed. And he supported me on the phone for two weeks. I could say anything and you know, there was no judgment, there was no wall of "you can't feel this" or "you can't say that". And at that point I was really really really really sick and homebound except for going to the radiation treatments which were daily and chemo was like once a week and I started having bad side effects from the chemo and from the radiation, the burns, and I had this giant wound and diarrhea and I couldn't control my bowels and it hurt like the, you know, like you're shitting razor blades and you know, it was just like the worst darkest time.

GAYNEMEDE VO/OWEN/FRANKIE. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. So Simon was there through all that, you know, he was always the person I could call and talk to and I only saw him once a week, but that was so important because my friends they did all the practical stuff.

GAYNEMEDE VO/OWEN/HANNAH/FRANKIE. I'm here doing it. I'm taking care of you. I love you. I can't bear to see you die.

RICHARD VO. I'm still best friends with Simon 30 years later. We stopped being volunteer/client about a year into it but we had grown close at that point—like to the point of we wanted to stay in each other's lives, even though he no longer could be my volunteer. I wanted to be—I *want to be* friends with him. We did this ritual. We did a very conscious ritual of turning a hundred and eighty degrees and letting go of that relationship and then returning another hundred eighty to a friendship. You know sharing about each other's lives and actually, you know, being part of each other's families and I think that happened a lot. People just become so close. They become part of your family. (*music ends*)

Owen is left holding the phone

He looks at Frankie and Hannah

Frankie takes his hand and puts it to their ear

FRANKIE. Hey Richard.

They open it up so that Owen can share

FRANKIE. Thanks for talking

OWEN. I just…

Thanks.

RICHARD VO. Yeah

OWEN. I needed that.

I'll call you again tomorrow.

RICHARD VO. Great, see you in a bit. Ok. Bye.

Owen hangs up the telephone.

He picks it up. It floats.

So when I talk about ghosts,

I mean the parts of our past that stay present with us.

The ways that we *are* together.

because of the ways that we *were* together.

Track 5

OWEN. I guess my question is, how do I hold it in both hands? How do I care for the ghosts, and also care for the living?

HANNAH. When I'm just starting to figure this out, what do I do with my own grief?

I want to learn how to find joy when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to have hot sex when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to hold community when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to make dinner when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to get sober when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to go to bed on time when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to laugh when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to write when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to dance when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to fall in love when the world is ending.

I want to learn how to love well when the world is ending.

FRANKIE and OWEN head back into the archive. They dive in deep. FRANKIE opens a box and a voice emerges.

CASS/FRANKIE. I lived with somebody for a while who I moved in with when he got diagnosed. He was somebody I was I had a crush on, I was kind of in love and it was not reciprocated but I felt okay, he needs me and I just want to be near him. I want to care for him. I was always wanting some sort of more physical connection just you know, touch, and he was more and more suspicious of it. And so it was not a good situation. It got more dysfunctional and we'd fight

and withdraw to our own corners of the house and I felt like well, he's not getting what he needs from me, I'm not getting what I want from him, and maybe if I, you know, move out he'll have more room in his life for somebody. He didn't really want me to move but I felt I was doing the right thing. Maybe I was running away, and maybe I was abandoning him. That's not what I felt at the time. We were in a downward spiral and for whatever personal failings I couldn't put my own agenda on the back burner and just sort of let it be and be in the situation as it was. Several months after I moved out he ended up in the hospital at General. I went to visit him in the hospital and we hadn't seen each other for a while, but it was kind of—it felt nice being there with him... and he asked me to wash his back and that was... like it was an invitation to touch him and to care for him in a way that he let go of all of his kind of suspicions and weariness and just and it's kind of ...The most tender thing I think I've ever done in my life was to wash his back.

A moment of touch

A moment of song

FRANKIE hands the tapedeck to OWEN, and helps him to get started. He holds the tape player to his body, and holds every word in his mouth.



[Photo by Beth Barbis. Courtesy of Lyam B. Gabel]

JOHN/OWEN. I kind of fell in love with J Paul as soon as I saw him. He was a bright fish, you know in a rather dull pool. Our home was like living in an art piece. He painted and he made all his own clothes. He was an amazingly creative soul. I mean, this was really what drove his life. He had huge dreams about what he was going to do. The world was going to be different because J Paul is in it, you know, and so when he realized that none of that was going to take place it was a roller coaster ride. We had seen all of our friends end up with AIDS. I'm the only Survivor of all of them.

J Paul always kind of laughed at my worldview. He said

"John you want life to be like a Doris Day and Rock Hudson Musical and everyone's going to drive off in the end in a convertible and live happily ever after. You know, it's not that way."

And he proved it. So that was an interesting lesson to learn—a kind of a slap to the face, but you know.

He was in and out of the hospital—mostly in the hospital and the very last few days that he was there they knew that he was going to be passing probably within a day or so and so he asked me to take him home because he wanted to die at home. And so I told the doctor J wants to die at home and they didn't want to let him go. The doctors had never seen those kinds of cancers reacting to a body in that particular way and so they wanted to keep him there till the very end watch the entire process and then do an autopsy. The whole idea of an autopsy for J Paul was like the antithesis of everything. I mean, he was an aesthete, he was just not interested in having his beautiful body cut open. So he said no to all of that and the doctors actually walked away and would not sign him out of the hospital. He was hooked up to machines and stuff. I got a nurse and I said if you will help me there'll be less blood, but he's coming home with me. And so she helped me, and I got him home. But um, the last 24 hours he entered into a kind of painless state. So he was not on drugs and he was without pain and so so we just sat and talked for a long time. And that's kind of how we ended our relationship with the long conversation about our life together and it was an important conversation. But as he started drifting, you know, I said

Jay I think you're you're ready. And he said there's one more thing he wanted me to help him with, and that was to get dressed because he was a fashion major. So... sorry...so he had his clothes chosen and I helped him get in his clothes and you know laid him down and put on his favorite music and his favorite incense and held his hand.

A moment of touch

A moment of song

OWEN hands the tapedeck to HANNAH and gets her started.

REBECCA VO/HANNAH. Dog was just this extraordinary human being. I always struggled to figure out what pronouns to use because because they were using "him" when I met Dog and were using "her" later. But in retrospect, given, you know, what Dog

always said to me about not feeling like they were any gender at all and the way Dog was in their body and in the world. You know, I am certain, as certain as anyone can be, that Dog would really have found a home in, you know, in the non-binary identity and community. And- And had that community existed when Dog was alive, they might be alive now.

So Dog and I became partners following a demonstration in DC. We were protesting for single-payer, universal healthcare. And we went into the capital on a tour like, you know, got in line and everything and then just lay down on the floor of the Rotunda and did a die-in and started screaming until they dragged us all out. But after this, when we finally got released from custody, we spent that night together. And that- That was pretty, kind of, representative something that would happen within that movement, it was just all very intense all the time. And, you know, intimacy was a way that people took care of each other. You know, you can't talk about the movement without seeing even, you know- I think it's lying to talk about the movement and not say, you know, "that sex was something that brought joy to the movement and made it fun and wild and people came to meetings to meet other cute people." And there was a lot of that, there was a lot of like, "ACT UP is where all the cute guys are at so all the cute, guys go there." and things like that. But there was also this, you know, sometimes we, you know, we were really emotional and, you know, came together as a response to that. And so that's how things started between me and Dog. And then, we were just a pair, you know, and I was, I mean, we weren't exclusive and we- there are lots of other activists and a lot going on, I'm not gonna lie about that. But Rebecca and her Dog were kind of a thing.

And we were very close friends with another activist named Collin ~~Blakeney,~~ who was in and out of the hospital all through like, 1992-1993. And so we were part of Collin's care team. and, you know- And so, a lot of my life during those years was like, work, ACT UP meetings, demonstrations, the hospital with Collin.

And when Collin died, Dog went into a really bad depression. And then Dog also started transitioning at that time, and so was going by the name Kaci and identifying as female and was, you know, on hormone therapy. And, you know and- But- But Kaci's mental health was really bad and Kaci was- started dealing with her grief by using heroin. And alternating between heroin and

HANNAH. Xanax, Kaci overdosed three years to the day after Colin died. So it was very clear that it was just like she was basically saying, "I'm never going to recover from this, I'm never going to be okay."

FRANKIE. Hannah?

HANNAH. Yeah?

FRANKIE. Do you think that queer ghosts are different than regular ghosts?

HANNAH. What do you mean?



[Photo by Beth Barbis. Courtesy of Lyam B. Gabel]

FRANKIE. Like, how would they even want to be known?

How do we know what to call them?

…

I mean, ok, there is an agreed-upon right way to talk about trans ghosts and tbh trans people, live people, in the past and that's to al-

ways use the name and pronouns that they were using most recently to talk about them the whole time.

And that is MOST people's preference

Because trans people don't become trans when they tell you that they are

It's been inside them for their whole life.

It's been inside me for my whole life.

Whether they knew it or not

or i knew it or not

but for me

it's slipperier

it's becoming

My name is Frankie

But I used to be called something else

And this name has opened up a portal

To let out so many things that have always been inside

So sometimes the old name feels like it belongs to another person

Me but not me

And they're not dead

The name isn't dead

But they can feel like a ghost

And I have so much love for them

And everything they went through

I would never deny them

But I can't carry their anxiety and trauma anmore

Naming is a portal to a lighter place

It's a way for me to have some agency over my body and my story

And when I talk to older people, a lot of folks do this thing, they like-backwards identify their friends as non-binary "You know he was very fey, very non-binary"

trying to wrestle with how to talk about people in the past

people who might have moved into this linguistic space that we opened recently to describe something that has always been here and has been forcibly erased through linguistic and other violence.

And I really wish,

Kaci,

that you were here to tell me how you want to be talked about.

I think you'd be like 50?

And it is fucked that you are not someone that I can just call.

Especially because Rebecca thinks

that if the doors that have been opened for me were open to you

that you might still be around.

So when I talk about ghosts

I'm talking about stolen time

and wisps of knowing

and spirits that can't be contained with language.

And I want a queer past that I can use to chart a queer future

But fuck it's hard to talk about.

Hannah presses rewind and play on a deck that is already there. She goes back to a piece that she remembers.

HANK VO/ HANNAH. In the 80s and 90s we danced to forget. We danced to forget all the crap that was going on around us. Nowadays it's more like we dance to remember. Yeah, we dance to remember those people that aren't here to dance with us anymore.

A dance to remember, and a dance to forget



[Photo by Beth Barbis. Courtesy of Lyam B. Gabel]

HANNAH. What do we do now when the world is ending?

Fever in a parking lot, gonna dance away this grief

Heart in a chamber, beating for your love

Hot sex on a burning beach, and a party just for me

ALL. When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is ending

FRANKIE AND OWEN. I can feel you, reaching across time

Your fingers brush my spirit as I groove into this dream

Learning to remember how you feel

Kiss me till I can't forget that the love we share is real

ALL. When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is ending

(Music break)

ALL. I want to learn how to love you when the world is ending

HANNAH. I want to find joy when the world is ending/

FRANKIE AND OWEN. I want to learn how to love you when the world is ending/

ALL. When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is ending

(freely) When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is, when the world is, when the world is ending

When the world is ending

FRANKIE. I had a dream last night that Lou Sullivan taught me how to shave.

OWEN. Do you want Lou Sullivan to be your daddy?

FRANKIE. /STOP

HANNAH. Isn't that a little irreverent?

FRANKIE. Maybe. Maybe I do want that.

OWEN. What was he wearing?

FRANKIE. I don't remember.

HANNAH. /How did you know it was him?

FRANKIE. We could just…recognize each other.

Sometimes I think that I read Lou Sullivan's journals and they like… magically made me trans.

HANNAH. Whoa.

FRANKIE. I know that it didn't happen like that. I know that's like… reductive and maybe deeply problematic to even be hinting at, but…I was sitting in a reading room at an archive, with fluores-

cent tube lighting, and some other artists looking at old porn, and a researcher reading something else—I'm not sure what—and an archivist that I know that I was annoying because I asked for way too many boxes because I wasn't sure what I was looking for. But he gave me the journals at the last minute. And they felt important. Maybe because they felt old and old things feel important. And I didn't want to ruin them but I wanted to touch them, to run my hands up and down them. And I read a passage he wrote about his lover, Johnny. About lying with him, and running his fingers over his skin like I was running my fingers over the pages of this tiny notebook. Something about yearning. And the way that he talked about clothes! And boys. I think…I think I didn't know that boys could do that actually...or that I could?

And then I read through, into the years when he was sick, and his last journal entry and I was terrified and my face was flushed with rage. He wasn't 40 yet when he died. He would be 70 now. Or I guess maybe he is 70 now. Just like…not on this plane. Does time work the same way for ghosts?

…

I think a lot of other trans people find what I found in an archive on youtube or tumblr or tiktok.

OWEN. It's very on-brand of you to find it in an archive.

FRANKIE. Thank you?

HANNAH. OMG how are we going to archive that.

How are we going to archive all of our fucking recorded zoom calls and sourdough starters/ and wordle.

OWEN. And fucking grindr

FRANKIE. How will we explain grindr to people in the future?

OWEN. How will we explain grindr to the ghosts?

FRANKIE. Ok hi! Hello! Ghosts?

I heard that you actually had something analogous to this–

that there were boys standing in windows along [[STREET]]

and that just meant you know,

“come upstairs”

so it’s like that

but on a phone?!

that also has a screen?!

HANNAH. like star trek!

FRANKIE. but not just video

like

you can know where the boys are

OWEN. (well kind of like how far they are from you)

FRANKIE. without needing to walk down the street

HANNAH. or stand in your window.

FRANKIE. AND

And and and

You can just disclose your last test!

And people are fucking jerks about stuff BUT

you can disclose your status and

DID YOU KNOW THAT YOU CAN BE UNDETECTABLE NOW?!?!?!?!?!?!

OWEN. U=U!

FRANKIE. It's like

really great

and really thank you

SO

Yes

That.

It's a weird world in a computer in the back pocket of my 501s and I think you would have been very happy there.

Track 6

HANNAH. I think about that all the time. What's missing. We don't put bedpans in the archive because they're gross,

OWEN. we don't put dirty rags and scrub daddies in the archive because they're gross.

HANNAH. We put posters and pretty things

FRANKIE. and stories with heroes.

OWEN. But it's important that we have bedpans in the archive.

FRANKIE. And other weird things.

HANNAH. Because those are actually the things that queer life circles around.

OWEN. It's so mundane.

HANNAH. The Queer Mundane.

They all look at the tapes, and decide to play one more.

TIM VO/FRANKIE. There are two kinds of support people: there were emotional support people and there were what were called practical support people. I was a practical support person. I couldn't deal with my own emotions about AIDS. You know, let alone deal with somebody else's, but I can scrub the toilet and I can vacuum and I can, you know, go to the market and I mean I like those kind of things. They're very concrete.

They're very I know this is helping somebody. So I did that for two or three years and it was funny because you had to do this completely over-the-top training. It was like an entire weekend, you know, and I was really I know how to clean a toilet already, I don't need training!

But it was about dealing with all the issues about AIDS and I still remember it was at the Shanti headquarters. It was all very new agey. People talking about healing and support. I still remember you had to go Friday night and it went to like 11:00 at night. And then you were supposed to be back there at 9:00 in the morning on Saturday and there was a potluck for lunch. Well, I still remember everybody did exactly the same thing. They went home and they made pasta salad because pasta salad is quick. So at the lunch at The Shanti on Saturday there were like 43 pasta salads and I said "Good thing I like pasta."

Track 7

OWEN. Did you find what you were looking for?

HANNAH. What?

OWEN. For your research. Did you find what you needed for your research?

HANNAH. No.

I'm not sure that what I'm looking for is in here.

FRANKIE. I'm still not sure what I was looking for.

OWEN. Do you feel better or worse

FRANKIE. I feel a pull

OWEN. A pull?

FRANKIE. Yeah

Like a solar plexus feeling

OWEN. Yearning is the inheritance of queer people and ghosts

HANNAH. And regular queer ghosts

The researchers arrange the tape decks and boom boxes and tapes and phones into a shrine and stand by it.

RICK VO. And that night I had a dream. And the dream was I was standing there and Jason was there. And I knew in my dream he was dead. It was like a visitation. He didn't say anything but he smiled and he was now my height rather than taller than me and we hugged and I said to myself I want to hold onto this moment. Don't let this dream end. Of course it did. It did.

The tape continues to run

Fragments of photographs fall from the sky

TIM VO. (*coming from the tape deck. the sound echoes, skips, distorts*) we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be…we're going to live through this and we're going to be… we're going to live through this and we're going to be… we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be… we're going to live through this and we're going to be...we're going to live through this and we're going to be…

The researchers leave

and the archive keeps talking

PAUL. (*sound effects fade through the monologue*) We don't have a vaccine or cure for HIV. And yes, I know. They're two totally different viruses. Don't get me started on that, but it's 40 years. I mean, death has been a part of my life every day. Since June 5th, 1981, my entire adult life. Whether it was watching a friend, wither away and die or whether it was waiting for that other shoe to drop and it was going to be my turn. Death has always been there. It's like the specter hanging over my whole adult life, you know, and so when covid hit, it's like, oh my God, here we go again. I stood up and applauded with dr. Burke's said that first press conference, that I watched the week that San Francisco sheltered in place and she said we need to look to the long-term survivors of HIV because they've been through this. And they know what to do. And it was like, wow, maybe it was all for a reason. Maybe I survived for a reason. Maybe this was the reason maybe I'm here to show your generation. What you do in the face of pandemic, it kind of felt that way, you know, there was a moment. I'll never forget it. I was sitting here watching TV and it was David Mirror because he's so cute. We love David Mirror and he started talking about the deaths in New York. And on the TV, they

were showing the mass graves that they had been digging and the refrigeration trucks and I I couldn't function. It was, it was like this bizarre fugue state. It was like this wave of grief and fear and anxiety was coming over, and going to pull me out like a riptide. And I was just like, like the anxiety was over... I've never experienced that kind of anxiety in my life. And all of a sudden that that wave became the arms of everyone ever lost to AIDS. And it'd- they just enveloped me. And and the voices were in my head saying it's okay. We got you. You know what this is. You've been here before, you know what to do. This is why you're still here. You're here because you're them when you need to show them.

Lights on the stage go dark

the click of a tape player

---

[1] All rights reserved by Lyam B Gabel. Please contact: lyambgabel@gmail.com

Itinéraire d'un auteur vers une dramaturgie de circonstance : le théâtre politique pour jeune public d'Edward Bond

Gaïa Richard

Abstract: What does it take for a canonic dramatist known for his plays for adults to suddenly decide to write for a small theatre company touring in British schools? Borrowing tools from the Cultural Studies as well as sociology of literature, this master's thesis depicts what took place for Edward Bond politically and dramatically between 1985 and 1995. It is argued the historical situation has encouraged him to change his career path working for children's theatre, even though this genre is often categorised as subliterature by literary critics. This work addresses various elements of the political, philosophical and dramaturgical theory that Edward Bond has developed throughout the years to severely criticise and categorically reject modern British adults' theatre. Margaret Thatcher's public policies regarding arts and education are largely described and analysed, since this political context favoured both the dramatist ceasing his collaboration with national theatres and the apparition of the Theatre in Education movement in 1965, in the wake of the New Education theories of the interwar period. This historiographical master's thesis tries to describe Edward Bond's shiftings across the British theatre field, which underwent deep and lasting mutations at the end of the last century. It appears that the collaborations between Edward Bond and Theatre in Education companies are the result of a common theatrical struggle against the ideology that produces liberalism, and in favour of the emancipation of children.

Résumé : Que s'est-il passé pour qu'un dramaturge phare du théâtre britannique à destination des adultes ait soudainement décidé d'écrire pour une petite compagnie de théâtre en milieu scolaire ? Empruntant aux *Cultural Studies* et à la sociologie de la littérature, ce mémoire de recherches rend compte de ce qui s'est joué politiquement et dramaturgiquement pour Edward Bond entre 1985 et 1995 pour le conduire à se reconvertir dans le théâtre jeunesse, alors que cette

forme d'écriture est souvent envisagée par la critique comme une sous-littérature dramatique. Ce mémoire aborde les points de théorie politique, philosophique et dramaturgique sur lesquels Edward Bond fonde un réquisitoire sans concession et un rejet catégorique du théâtre britannique contemporain destiné aux adultes. On cherche également à y décrire les politiques publiques thatchériennes en matière d'arts et d'éducation, dans la mesure où ce contexte politique a favorisé à la fois la rupture du dramaturge avec les grands théâtres nationaux et l'apparition du mouvement du *Theatre in Education,* né en 1965 dans le sillage des théories de "l'éducation nouvelle" (*New Education*) de l'entre-deux-guerres. Ce travail historiographique cherche à décrire les déplacements qu'Edward Bond effectue dans le champ du théâtre britannique, qui connait des mutations profondes à la fin du XX^{e} siècle. Il apparaît que les collaborations d'Edward Bond et des agents du *Theatre in Education* sont le produit d'une lutte théâtrale commune contre l'idéologie du libéralisme et en faveur de l'émancipation des enfants.

Keywords: Edward Bond, Theatre in Education, Young People's Theatre, Children's Theatre, dramaturgy, British theatre, political theatre, theatre and education, ideology, liberalism, Margaret Thatcher

Mots-clés : Edward Bond, Theatre in Education, théâtre jeune public, dramaturgie, théâtre britannique, théâtre politique, théâtre et éducation, idéologie, libéralisme, Margaret Thatcher

Ce mémoire de recherche est consacré à la dramaturgie et à la théorie de l'auteur britannique Edward Bond. Il vise à comprendre pour quelles raisons le parcours théâtral du dramaturge s'est défini comme l'exact opposé de celui des autres *Angry Young Men*, dont John Bull[1] a remarqué qu'ils étaient passés du camp du théâtre contestataire dans les années 1960 à celui du théâtre "mainstream" au tournant des années 1990. Tout à l'inverse, Edward Bond a suivi un itinéraire singu-

lier, qui l'a mené des scènes prestigieuses du théâtre public londonien dans les années 1980 vers les établissements scolaires des alentours de Birmingham dans les années 1990, c'est-à-dire d'espaces couverts par la critique théâtrale aux enceintes fermées de salles de classe. Ce travail a cherché comment s'est fabriqué ce débord dramatique, qui a pris la forme d'une reconversion dans le théâtre jeunesse, bien que ce genre soit souvent envisagé par la critique comme une sous-littérature dramatique. Ce mémoire aborde les points de théorie politique, philosophique et dramaturgique sur lesquels Edward Bond fonde une critique et un rejet sans concession du théâtre britannique contemporain destiné aux publics d'adultes. On cherche également à y décrire les politiques thatchériennes en matière d'art et d'éducation, dans la mesure où ce contexte politique a favorisé la rupture du dramaturge avec les grands théâtres nationaux et encouragé sa collaboration avec des agents du mouvement pédagogique du *Theatre in Education,* né en 1965 dans le sillage des théories de "l'éducation nouvelle" (*New Education*) de l'entre-deux-guerres.

Ce travail de mémoire a servi à rendre compte de ce qui s'est joué politiquement et dramaturgiquement pour Edward Bond lors de la décennie courant de 1980 à 1990. Les études bondiennes britanniques et internationales s'intéressant plus volontiers à ses pièces de jeunesse canonisées par l'histoire de la censure anglaise, cette période était restée relativement peu traitée par des travaux historiographiques. En outre, même lorsqu'elle a été étudiée, cette période de l'œuvre du dramaturge a souvent fait l'objet d'analyses partielles à portée polémique, polarisées autour du conflit médiatique qui a opposé les équipes de la Royal Shakespeare Company et Edward Bond, lorsqu'il a désavoué la mise en scène des *War Plays* présentée sur la scène de l'institution en 1984-1985.

Par ailleurs, ce travail a permis de retracer une partie de l'histoire du mouvement théâtral et pédagogique du *Theatre in Education* britannique, qui avait pour ambition d'aiguiser l'esprit critique des jeunes élèves en mettant en place des représentations théâtrales en milieu scolaire. Même si l'histoire du mouvement a donné lieu à un

très grand nombre de sommes historiques ou de monographies au Royaume-Uni, il est apparu que ce phénomène est resté dans l'ombre outre-Manche, puisque le fait qu'il n'ait pas existé de modèle équivalent dans l'école publique française n'a pas favorisé la rédaction de publications scientifiques à ce sujet.

Enfin, ce travail s'est élaboré à partir du constat que la recherche universitaire française a encore peu traité de la dimension politique du théâtre destiné au jeune public. En la matière, les travaux scientifiques français consistent majoritairement en la recension et en la description de l'offre dramatique francophone, ainsi qu'en l'évaluation des vertus pédagogiques, motrices et psychopathologiques de l'enseignement du théâtre dans le cadre scolaire.

En utilisant les outils de la sociologie de la littérature et en s'inscrivant dans le cadre méthodologique des *Cultural Studies*, il a été question d'étudier la reconversion dramaturgique d'Edward Bond et sa littérature dramatique pour la jeunesse du point de vue des concepts de légitimité et de prestige littéraires. Étant donnés les préjugés généralement négatifs associés à cette littérature, considérée comme naïve et simpliste, comment comprendre qu'Edward Bond se soit acquitté du coût symbolique demandé aux auteurs en voie de canonisation lorsqu'ils viennent inscrire leur pratique en dehors du pré carré de la culture légitime ? Ce mémoire de recherche se présente comme une somme d'analyses historiographiques concernant les raisons, les événements et les urgences politiques qui ont pu présider au choix de l'auteur d'hypothéquer son capital symbolique, lorsqu'il s'est consacré à l'écriture de pièces pour les jeunes publics scolaires à partir de 1995.

Ce travail d'historiographie théâtrale opère à la fois sur le plan de la macro-histoire britannique d'après-guerre et sur le plan de la micro-histoire théâtrale d'Edward Bond, pour la période allant des années 1980 au début des années 1990. Les analyses des politiques publiques des gouvernements de Margaret Thatcher en matière d'arts et d'instruction publique, ainsi que l'histoire du *Theatre in Education* forment une toile de fond historique sur laquelle se détachent, d'une part, des études de fragments de la théorie esthétique et politique de

Bond et, d'autre part, une analyse dramaturgique de sa première pièce pour la jeunesse, *Derek* (1982).

Dans un premier temps, ce mémoire s'attache à décrire les modalités des collaborations qu'Edward Bond mène avec trois grandes institutions du théâtre public britannique entre 1962 et 1985 (le Royal Court Theatre, le Royal National Theatre et la Royal Shakespeare Company, des entités qui ont eu partie liée avec les artistes contestataires de la gauche d'après-guerre). Il s'agit de vérifier si ces compagnonnages malheureux l'ont "préparé à écrire" pour des compagnies de théâtre de jeunesse, comme le suggère le dramaturge. À partir de l'étude de correspondances et d'essais du dramaturge, il est fait état des analyses désabusées et virulentes qu'il formule à l'égard du style de jeu des interprètes et de la programmation des grands théâtres londoniens dans les années 1980. Il est montré qu'Edward Bond juge que les directions de ces institutions ont échoué à mener une révolution culturelle et à élargir leurs publics. Pour le dramaturge, ces institutions auraient préféré élaborer une "esthétique libérale" qu'il réprouve, parce qu'elle serait destinée à générer le plus de profit possible en faisant la part belle aux scénographies colossales et aux comédies musicales, au détriment d'esthétiques minimalistes, critiques et politiques, comme celle qu'il cherche à définir.

Pour contrevenir à l'idée diffusée à coup de polémiques médiatiques qu'Edward Bond fait cesser ces collaborations dans un accès de colère injustifié, une étude de ses correspondances permet de remarquer qu'au tournant des années 1980, Bond entame à la fois un nouveau cycle dramatique (les "pièces-réponses") visant à questionner le bien-fondé du libéralisme, et un nouveau cycle de réflexions anthropologiques et politiques, consacrées aux notions "d'idéologie" et "d'institution". L'analyse du cas de la restructuration productiviste de la Royal Shakespeare Company à partir de 1980 permet de mettre en lumière les tactiques mises en place par les théâtres publics pour se réinventer en tant que nouveaux centres du "mainstream" libéral, alors même que ces lieux s'étaient définis comme des centres de propulsion des écritures dramatiques de gauche vingt ans auparavant. En recen-

sant les conséquences de ce processus dans le cadre de la collaboration de la troupe et d'Edward Bond, il est question de montrer comment les accents populistes de la politique de financement des arts sous Margaret Thatcher ont poussé les directions des théâtres publics à dépolitiser, à privatiser et à industrialiser une partie de leur activité, afin de correspondre au cahier des charges libéral qui conditionnait leurs subventions.

Après cette mise au jour des causes structurelles qui poussent le dramaturge à s'orienter vers les marges du champ théâtral britannique contemporain, le travail se poursuit en examinant les fondements esthétiques, métaphysiques et anthropologiques qui motivent théoriquement la redirection du travail d'Edward Bond vers le théâtre pour jeune public. Il est alors question de comprendre si Bond en vient à se consacrer au théâtre jeune public par pragmatisme, puisqu'il n'a plus accès aux grandes institutions théâtrales londoniennes à partir de 1985, ou si cette bifurcation dramaturgique est motivée par des réflexions théoriques antérieures. En étudiant de manière thématique, comparative et diachronique des fragments de traités dramatiques publiés par Bond, il s'agit de mieux cerner les fondements théoriques qui motivent les analyses désabusées que le dramaturge formule à l'égard du processus de "corruption" du théâtre londonien à destination des adultes. Ce moment de la démonstration permet de passer au-travers des textes théoriques foisonnants de l'auteur, en se focalisant tout particulièrement sur les missions et sur les critiques qu'il adresse à différents corps de métier du théâtre (dramaturges, interprètes, responsables de la mise en scène). Plus concrètement, il est question de dessiner les contours des quatre concepts syncrétiques qu'Edward Bond mobilise lorsqu'il explique les raisons pour lesquelles il rejette le théâtre britannique pour adultes—le Néant (*Nothingness*), l'Idéologie (*Ideology*), les histoires (*stories*) et la culture (*culture*). Ce moment s'élabore également à partir d'analyses comparatives des positions théoriques revendiquées par Edward Bond avec celles d'autres penseurs du XX^{e} siècle. Pour évaluer plus précisément les apports du dramaturge vis-à-vis de la notion "d'idéologie", au cœur de son réquisitoire contre le théâtre libéral, ses textes théoriques sont mis en regard

des travaux de Karl Marx et de Friedrich Engels, de Thomas Khun, d'Antonio Gramsci, de Günter Anders et de Walter Benjamin. Grâce à la définition de trois nouveaux concepts d'analyse dramaturgique mis en avant par Edward Bond à partir de 1985, il est montré qu'il propose une solution à sa critique sévère du théâtre moderne. Pour que l'art théâtral ne soit plus au service de l'industrie culturelle, il plaide pour la création d'une nouvelle grammaire dramaturgique, qui ferait la part belle à l'analyse des rôles par leurs interprètes. Dans un écho lointain aussi bien à Constantin Stanislavski qu'à Bertolt Brecht, cette méthode d'analyse du texte de théâtre s'élabore au détriment des responsables de la mise en scène, que Bond accuse d'avoir acquis un pouvoir monopolistique et d'être complaisants vis-à-vis du capitalisme. Il est ainsi suggéré que le réquisitoire que Bond dresse à l'égard des institutions de théâtre public du Royaume-Uni ne peut pas se concevoir comme la conséquence de ses compagnonnages malheureux avec les grands théâtres londoniens : il s'agit de la partie émergée de la théorie philosophique plus vaste qu'il élabore dans les années 1980 concernant la fabrique, la diffusion et la lutte contre l'idéologie libérale et ses institutions culturelles.

Le travail se poursuit avec une présentation historiographique des réformes éducatives du Royaume-Uni d'après-guerre, qui ont permis au mouvement du *Theatre in Education* de voir le jour au milieu des années 1960. Ce courant prend la forme d'un nouveau modèle pédagogique émancipateur et critique, élaboré par des compagnies pionnières aux confluents des arts dramatiques et de l'éducation publique. Il est suggéré que le *Theatre in Education* s'institue comme un contre-modèle à celui de l'instruction publique à visée économique et industrielle, favorisée par l'État britannique à partir de 1944 pour restructurer l'industrie du pays et le marché de l'emploi et s'assurer d'obtenir de bons indicateurs de performance économique dans le sillage du plan Marshall. Cet argument s'appuie sur une description du modèle tripartite de l'enseignement (1944-1965) et une analyse des critiques formulées par les différents partis nationaux, qui dénoncent sa dimension sélective, ses effets déterministes et son aspect inégalitaire. Il est également fait mention du fait que l'enseignement

théâtral est introduit dans les écoles britanniques par les travaillistes au tournant des années 1970, ce qui témoigne du fait que le théâtre n'est plus envisagé seulement dans une perspective instrumentale (en tant que levier favorisant l'acquisition de compétences linguistiques et motrices), mais également comme un vecteur de morale.

Ces développements d'histoire politique laissent place à l'étude du cas de la genèse de la compagnie *Theatre in Education* Belgrade, qui est fondée dans le théâtre municipal de Coventry en 1964. Cette troupe a conceptualisé et mis en œuvre la pratique dramatique qui a donné son nom au mouvement éponyme : on décrit comment s'inventent le mode de subvention municipale direct, le modèle d'organisation des séances participatives, les fables politiques mises en scène, et les brochures pédagogiques qui accompagnent la représentation. Il est indiqué que la diffusion rapide et spontanée de ce modèle pousse les acteurs du *Theatre in Education* à configurer leur champ disciplinaire autour de structures associatives, qui visent à unifier les pratiques et à mutualiser les techniques d'enseignement par le théâtre (la *Standing Conference for Young People's Theatre* (SCYPT) et la *National Association for the Teaching of Drama (NATD)*). Avant d'expliciter dans quelle mesure ces associations ont permis à Edward Bond de s'intégrer au mouvement du *Theatre in Education* au tournant des années 1990, il est suggéré qu'il existe des points de convergence entre la théorie dramatique que l'auteur élabore dans les années 1980 et les préoccupations esthétiques des agents de ce courant à la même période. Le cycle dramaturgique des "pièces-réponses" que l'auteur développe alors autour du principe esthétique de la "dramatisation de l'analyse", fait écho au fait que les compagnies de *Theatre in Education* alternent les saynètes jouées, les exercices de participation distanciée et les débats critiques lors de leurs séances d'intervention en milieu scolaire, dans le but d'aiguiser l'esprit critique et le sens de la responsabilité des élèves. Il est ainsi suggéré que Bond et les compagnies de *Theatre in Education* sont engagés synchroniquement dans la quête esthétique d'une forme théâtrale anti-naturaliste, qui puisse forcer "dramatiquement" le public à passer de l'observation à l'analyse, puis à la formulation de solutions pour résoudre activement les problèmes politiques traités sur

scène. L'analyse dramaturgique thématique et non linéaire de *Derek,* la première pièce que Bond écrit en 1982 à destination du public jeunesse du *Royal Shakespeare Company Youth Festival*, permet de montrer qu'Edward Bond compose une pièce de circonstance dans le même esprit que les compagnies de *Theatre in Education*, sans qu'ils ne soient engagés dans un compagnonnage. L'analyse de la pièce cherche à mettre en regard des éléments formels et thématiques de la pièce de Bond avec les anathèmes de la gouvernance thatchérienne. Bond étant visiblement animé par l'idée que le jeune public est à même de comprendre les implications politiques d'une fiction théâtrale, il est suggéré que des thèmes du dialogue de *Derek*, des situations dramatiques, ou des dispositifs dialogiques (comme des monologues dissociatifs et des intermèdes chantés) servent à dénoncer le caractère inégalitaire de la politique scolaire thatchérienne et à battre en brèche l'idée que la délinquance juvénile doit être matée par la violence disciplinaire. En outre, il apparaît que l'auteur signale que le discours classiste et la rhétorique foucaldienne de la société disciplinaire sont ingérés par les classes populaires sous Margaret Thatcher. Pour nuancer l'analyse rétrospective de certains chercheurs bondiens, ce mémoire se clôt avec l'argument que la collaboration de Bond avec le milieu du *Theatre in Education* n'a rien "d'inévitable". Tout au contraire, il est question de montrer que le fait que le dramaturge rejoigne ce mouvement pédagogique est lié à la brèche historique ouverte par la grève des mineurs britanniques de 1984-1985 et par la lutte contre les réformes éducatives thatchériennes de 1988. L'analyse des correspondances du dramaturge révèle qu'il a cherché à utiliser ce qu'il restait de son magistère théâtral pour alerter l'opinion et les pouvoirs publics sur les effets de l'*Education Reform Act* de 1988 sur l'activité des compagnies de *Theatre in Education* (raréfaction des subventions, censure thématique, disparition des troupes). En outre, cette étude montre que Bond cherche à transférer sa légitimité et sa propre notoriété dramatique aux agents du *Theatre in Education*, notamment lorsqu'il formule des doléances à l'adresse des directions des théâtres qui cessent de soutenir le mouvement. C'est seulement au terme de cette période de lutte politique et théâtrale longue de cinq ans qu'il débute un compagnonnage avec

la compagnie du Big Brum *Theatre in Education* de Birmingham. À partir de 1995, dans le cadre de cette collaboration, Edward Bond en est venu à mettre au jour une théorie de l'enfance, une philosophie de l'imagination et une théorie dramaturgique pour les pièces jeunesse.

En somme, ce mémoire de recherche rend compte de la manière dont Edward Bond s'est repositionné dans le champ du théâtre moderne britannique au tournant du siècle, en tant qu'ancien représentant de la Nouvelle Gauche artistique des années 1960. Il est montré qu'il s'est déporté progressivement des centres dramatiques du *mainstream* vers les marges du *fringe theatre,* qui s'est notamment réinventé dans l'enceinte des écoles publiques sous les mandats de Margaret Thatcher. Ce travail a ainsi cherché à couvrir un nouvel empan de l'œuvre dramaturgique et théorique d'Edward Bond, à dresser un tableau historiographique de l'état du théâtre sous Margaret Thatcher, ainsi qu'à aborder la question des enjeux politiques du répertoire théâtral pour les jeunes personnes.

---

1 John Bull, *Stage Right. Crisis and recovery in British contemporary mainstream theatre*, Londres, Macmillan, 1994.