University of Iowa
Iowa Research Online

Theses and Dissertations

2010

Poetry 'n acts: the cultural politics of twentieth-century American poets' theater

Heidi R. Bean
University of Iowa

Copyright 2010 Heidi R Bean

This dissertation is available at Iowa Research Online: http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/638

Recommended Citation
Bean, Heidi R.. "Poetry 'n acts: the cultural politics of twentieth-century American poets' theater." dissertation, University of Iowa, 2010.
http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/638.

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

POETRY 'N ACTS: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN POETS' THEATER

by

Heidi R. Bean

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of
Philosophy degree in English
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

July 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Adalaide Morris

ABSTRACT

"Poetry 'n Acts: The Cultural Politics of Twentieth-Century American Poets' Theater," focuses on the disciplinary blind spot that obscures the productive overlap between poetry and dramatic theater and prevents us from seeing the cultural work that this combination can perform. Why did 2100 people turn out in 1968 to see a play in which most of the characters speak only in such apparently nonsensical phrases as "Red hus the beat trim doing going" and "Achtung swachtung"? And why would an Obie award-winning playwright move to New Jersey to write such a play in the first place? What led to the founding in 1978 of the San Francisco Poets Theatre by L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers, and why have those plays and performers been virtually ignored by critics despite the admitted centrality of performance to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing's textual politics? Why would the renowned Yale Repertory Theatre produce in the 1990s the poetic, plotless plays of a theater newcomer twice in as many years—even when audiences walked out? What vision for the future of theater could possibly involve episodic drama with footnotes? In each example, part of the story is missing. This dissertation begins to fill in that gap.

Attending to often overlooked aspects of theater language, this dissertation examines theatrical performances that use poetic devices to intervene in narratives of cultural oppression, often by questioning the very suitability of narrative as a primary means of social exchange. While Gertrude Stein must be seen as a forerunner to contemporary poets' theater, chapter one argues that the Living Theatre's late 1950s and early 1960s anti-authoritarian theater demonstrates key alliances between poetry and theater at mid-century. The remaining chapters closely examine particular instances of poets' theater by Amiri Baraka (known equally as poet and playwright), Carla Harryman (associated with West Coast poetry), and Suzan-Lori Parks (a critically acclaimed playwright). These productions put poetic theater on the backs of tractors in Harlem

streets, in open gallery spaces, and in more conventional black box and proscenium architectures, and each case develops the importance of performance contexts and production histories in determining plays' cultural effects.

Abstract Approved: _____
Thesis Supervisor

_____
Title and Department

_____
Date

POETRY 'N ACTS: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN POETS' THEATER

by

Heidi R. Bean

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of
Philosophy degree in English
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

July 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Adalaide Morris

Copyright by

Heidi R. Bean

2010

All Rights Reserved

Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Heidi R. Bean

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy
degree in English at the July 2010 graduation.

Thesis Committee: _____
Adalaide Morris, Thesis Supervisor

_____
Kim Marra

_____
Harilaos Stecopoulos

_____
Garrett Stewart

_____
W. B. Worthen

To Robin and Max

Prose is our culture's language of sincerity, in which we expect to be most able to say what we mean and see what is meant, to be understood and to understand. The place of message. Poetry is our culture's language of complexity, idiosyncratic sensibility, the language of artifice.

Lisa Samuels
"Eight Justifications for Canonizing Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*"

There is a metaphysics in the preference for the eye or ear, and a politics as well.

Herbert Blau
The Audience

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a great deal to a wonderful community of friends, family, and colleagues, who have supported this project and me in ways too numerous to name. But my greatest gratitude goes to Dee Morris, in whose "Sound States" course during my very first semester of graduate school I learned to listen to the soundings of texts. Since then, Dee has been a mentor in the true sense of the word, moving easily from advisor to colleague and from sounding board to advocate, as each situation has required. For these things and many more, she has my utmost appreciation. I am also grateful to several faculty members here at the University of Iowa who have inspired me along the way: to Garrett Stewart for introducing me to the act of narrative, to Kim Marra for impressing upon me the ways of the theater and cultural historian, to Jane Desmond for opening my mind to the study of performance writ large, and to Art Borreca for showing me what the study of theater looks like from the other side of the river. I also wish to thank Bill Worthen for agreeing so quickly and kindly to work with a student whom he'd neither met nor even heard of, and for reading each of my drafts with true critical generosity. I have also benefited from the guidance of Harry Stecopoulos and Brooks Landon.

A number of friends and colleagues have read portions of this dissertation at different stages and/or have helped me work out my ideas in conversation. I'm grateful to Mike Chasar, Deb Manion, Vickie Larson, Jen Buckley, Lori Branch, Mary Lou Emery, Laura Hinton, Robin Tierney, J. P. Craig, Gunnar Benediktsson, Jailyn Moreland, and Michael Peter. Other artists and scholars shared their work with me, allowed me to sit in on rehearsals or to see their own drafts-in-progress, submitted to interviews, or were

otherwise generous with their time and ideas. For these kindnesses, I wish to thank Carla Harryman, Mark Bly, Sarah Bay-Cheng, Kevin Killian, Patrick Durgin, and John Beer.

Generous financial support from the University of Iowa's Graduate College, in the form of a Presidential Fellowship, allowed me the intellectual space and freedom to try out ideas, take risks, hit a few dead-ends, and not panic. The Frederick P. W. McDowell Dissertation Fellowship from Iowa's English department supported crucial research at the New York Public Library's Billy Rose Theatre Collection and Berg Collection, at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. I also benefited greatly from support to participate in the Committee for Institutional Cooperation (CIC) Summer Institute, "Textual States, Theatrical Stances, Performative Turns," which took place in the summer of 2008 and was led with true engagement and enthusiasm by Tracy Davis, Valerie Traub, and Will West. This institute pushed my inquiry into new arenas, and its influence on my thinking can be found throughout this dissertation. I also appreciated the opportunity to present selections from this work at several conferences, including the 2004 convention of the Modernist Studies Association, the 2006 annual Mid-America Theater Conference, the 2007 Performing Literatures Conference, the 2008 annual Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture since 1900, the 2008 annual Modern Language Association conference, and the 2009 Association for Theatre in Higher Education annual conference, and the 2009 American Society for Theatre Research annual conference.

This dissertation would never have been written if it weren't for the creative energy and risk-taking collaborators and institutions that support poets' theater by bringing it to audiences across the United States. These productions are not money-

makers and are largely labors of love, but without them American creative and intellectual life would surely be diminished. I therefore wish to thank the institutions that support poets' theater wherever it can be found. I have personally enjoyed and been challenged by productions that have included the involvement of, in no particular order, New York's Dixon Place, the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Chicago's Links Hall, Small Press Traffic, and California College of the Arts.

Finally, I would like to offer my most heartfelt appreciation to Robin Tierney, who has given me the gift of true intellectual and emotional partnership. While Robin and I have been at each other's sides as we've crossed and re-crossed oceans, it is a less heroic but equally nurturing act of kindness that finds her in the seat beside me at countless "experimental" performances of varying quality over the years with hardly a complaint and willing to discuss them for hours afterwards with completely convincing interest and enthusiasm. If our son learns from me a love of the theater, may he learn equally from Robin such everyday acts of love.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES viii

INTRODUCTION: WHERE IS POETS' THEATER? 1

Repeating Gertrude Stein: Toward a Joining of Texts and Bodies 14
The Chapters 24

CHAPTER ONE FROM VERSE DRAMA TO POETS' THEATER: AMERICAN POETRY AND PERFORMANCE AT MID-CENTURY 31

The Theater of Poetry 33
Poetry and Performance in Theory and Criticism 45
Poetry and Performance in Practice 52
The Living Theatre's Anti-Authoritarian Theater 60

CHAPTER TWO "UNINTELLIGIBLE GIBBERISH" AND THE JAZZ AESTHETIC: AMIRI BARAKA'S BLACK NATIONALIST POETS' THEATER 70

Prologue: Baraka's Art and Politics in the 1960s 73
White Voices, Black Voices 82
Performativity and the Jazz Aesthetic 93
Framing the Text 102
The Tone of America 106
The Demise of a Black Nationalist Poets' Theater 112

CHAPTER THREE CARLA HARRYMAN'S NON/REPRESENTATION AND THE ETHICS OF DISPERSIVE PERFORMANCE 119

Language Poetry, Poets' Theater, and the Body 125
Mimesis and Misrecognition in *Mirror Play* 139
Dispersive Performance and the Theater of Others 150

CHAPTER FOUR POETS' THEATER AS CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT: READING *THE AMERICA PLAY* DRAMATURGICALLY 157

Poets' Theater, Empathy, and Nervousness, or, How Do You Spell Relief? 161
Resisting Closure 165
Traversing the Page and Stage 177
The Footnote 186
Consuming Emotions: The Case for Nervousness 192

AFTER WORDS: PERCEIVING POETS' THEATER 195

BIBLIOGRAPHY 202

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Image from the Yale Repertory Theatre program for *The America Play*.....180

INTRODUCTION:
WHERE IS POETS' THEATER?

In May 2002 the Gertrude Stein Repertory Theatre, in conjunction with the University of Iowa Theatre Arts department, premiered *The Making of Americans, Part I: The Silent Scream of Martha Hersland*.[1] The play was the first of an intended four-part theatrical adaptation of Gertrude Stein's groundbreaking work *The Making of Americans*, originally published in 1925. The goal of GSRT's production was no less than an interrogation of how identity is constituted, with Stein's innovative novel as model. In adapting for theatrical production a novel that is itself an interrogation of narrative representation and of the conventions used to create identity, GSRT picked up Stein's exploration of identity and compositional self-reflexivity but shifted its mechanisms to the visual and embodied technologies of performance. Employing video and digital imagery, human screens, "nonmatrixed" performance[2], and the cyborg imaginary in addition to live actors, *Martha Hersland* interrogated the role of visual and embodied mediation—that is, the application of visual and bodily technologies of performance—in the creation of theatrical identity and subjectivity. But the production was beleaguered with problems from the start, most of which were related to the complex technical requirements of the digital media used to construct the character of Martha Hersland piece by piece on stage, as a performance of the processes by which identity is

---

[1] Unpublished manuscript by Leon Katz. Directed by Cheryl Faver.

[2] "Nonmatrixed performing" is Michael Kirby's term to refer to theatrical performance in which a performer "is not embedded, as it were, in matrices of pretended or represented character, situation, place, and time" (99).

constituted. More significantly, Stein's verbal experimentalism disappeared in the stage production; instead, the anti-realist theatrical performance was grounded by a very un-Steinian realist dialogue. In doing away with Stein's verbal/textual innovation and replacing it with visual experimentalism, GSRT essentially "translated" Stein's verbal strategies into visual ones, ultimately pitting image *against* word.

GSRT is hardly alone in its choice to replace verbal experimentalism with non-verbal theatrical experimentalism. In fact, pitting performance against text is something of a mainstay in twentieth-century American theater, especially since the "anti-textual" 1960s. From what Bonnie Marranca termed the "theater of images" in the 1970s to Suzan-Lori Parks's "spells" in the 1990s, non-verbal performance, and especially visual, strategies are often characterized as replacing dialogue. In Marranca's assessment of avant-garde theater in the 1970s, characters had been replaced by "demonstrators" of the play's processes, creating a dialectical relationship not "solely in the framework of the play on stage [as with Brecht] but…in the relationship of the audience to the production *in process*" (Marranca 5, 7). And yet the goal of such theater was, according to Marranca, to call "attention to itself—how it works—[and to] stimulate…the audience's powers of perception" (7). GSRT in some ways updates the theater of images for the new millennium, turning its powers of perception not just toward the processes of theater but toward the relationship between representation and experience that constitutes everyday life. And yet GSRT seems unable to shed the legacy of the 1960s reputed anti-textual bias.

I begin with this contemporary example of text-performance opposition in part because it raises important questions about the expectations and effects of different

representational media in the theater. GSRT's promotion of a performance strategy over a verbal one reveals a particularly contemporary anti-theatrical prejudice with roots in the 1960s. The opposition of word and bodily performance in contemporary American theater can be traced in part to the so-called "anti-textual" 1960s, a period in which theater companies are said to have abandoned the play script in favor of improvisatory collaboration, on one hand, and direct communion with the audience, on the other. Julia A. Walker has argued that the interest in performance that marks the last half of the twentieth century "signals an implicit dismantling of the anti-performative bias upon which a certain modernist understanding of textuality is based" (161), a dismantling that has come about largely because "textuality is felt to be inadequate to a full description of cultural experience" (162).

But as Stephen Bottoms has demonstrated, American theater of the 1960s was far less "anti-textual" than is commonly acknowledged. While theater companies certainly emphasized improvisation and spontaneity—playwright H. M. Koutoukas, for example, went so far as to destroy some of his scripts after opening night and the archives of La Mama and Judson Church, for example, are scant (Bottoms vi)—I want to argue that this stance toward the use of scripted drama as an integral, but not privileged, element of performance might be better characterized as anti-authoritarian. Such anti-authoritarian theater functions to challenge the ideological position of the playwright in the age of print and to reorient the notion of theatrical performance as a collaborative endeavor that relies as much on production elements as on textual scripting.[3]

In an enthusiastic forecast on the future of digital theater, GSRT's founder and

---

[3] For a superb discussion of drama and theater in the age of print, see Worthen *Print*.

artistic director Cheryl Faver implies that GSRT's visual strategies are aimed at countering the dehumanization of the contemporary era. "The drama of our own bodies," she writes, "has never been more vivid than it will be in the utopian theater of the future….There could be a new theatrical investigation of who we are, and of what makes us human, which would balance the danger of dehumanization so often a part of technological innovation" (142). Faver champions a virtual theater that would "create a pictorial medium to rival [Stein's] multiple linguistic realities" (149). In choosing translate Stein's verbal strategies into visual ones, GSRT seems to echo Sue-Ellen Case's call for the power of the visual to replace the verbal. Case argues specifically that the rhetoric of performativity (largely considered a verbal strategy) relies on an anti-essentialism that simply functions as a sort of last-gasp attempt to recuperate writing in the face of print culture's demise.[4] As a remedy to the dominance of writing created by the anti-essentialist critical popularity of performativity, Case, like GSRT, looks to digital media to reestablish the power of the visual. In this sense, then, we might see GSRT's implicit promotion of visual and embodied performance, and particularly their dismissal of verbally performative strategies, as an argument against the presumed antiessentialism of contemporary criticism, for in the realm of the visual, the body is often understood to have natural as well as discursive existence.

While GSRT's insight into Stein's reiterative strategies is astute and their technological strategies for the stage are compelling, their separation of verbal experimentalism from other forms of experimentalism relies on an implied critique of the

---

[4] For more on the print culture/visual culture divide and its relevance to the performance/performativity debates, see Case, especially Part II.

textualization of culture that misrepresents Stein's own ability to cross the text-performance divide. In MOA, Stein had discovered that it was impossible to portray the complete character of anyone because the manifestations of any given identity always depend on the conditions of the present moment. "We inside us do not change," she explained in a later lecture, "but our emphasis and the moment in which we live changes. That is it is never the same moment it is never the same emphasis at any successive moment of existing" ("Portraits" 305-306). Stein's assertion that "we inside us do not change" indicates her overriding belief in essential identity; her use of repetition with difference as a means of portraying existence-in-process reformulates identity as not only natural but also reiterative. This reiterativity is not the same as the reiterability at the center of Judith Butler's theory of performativity, for it ultimately grounds its reiteration in an identity that precedes reiteration. And yet in arguing that identity can never be completely captured in narrative—as she puts it in MOA, "Perhaps no one gets a complete history of any one….[H]ow important each repeating in each one is to make a completer realisation [sic] of that one" (454)—Stein implies that reiteration plays a role in identity formation. In acknowledging that one's "history" can never be complete, she refocuses attention on the issue of (re)iterability itself. MOA thus becomes a performative dismantling of language's transparency and self-sufficiency—a dismantling that, like the critical turn to performance a few decades later, trains attention on social and material contexts as necessary supplements to semiotic interpretation and embodied experience.

As a social tool whose normative power is continually reinforced through the repetition of recognized conventions, language is what Judith Butler refers to as

"performative" because of its ability to constitute, enable, and constrain the subject. Identity in this formulation is understood as an ongoing process that works via a collaboration of embodied experience and the discursive processes by which experience is understood. The result undermines not the body itself but rather the mutually exclusive paradigms that separate the "natural" body from the discursive body. And the body that emerges from this newly bridged gap is best understood as performative. The identity that is produced is both experienced as real and constituted by and through the reiteration of discursive conventions and, therefore, continually subject to revision. Thus, the language used by social subjects and the physical embodiment of those subjects are not separate issues but rather are intimately linked elements in the formation of identity. When Butler argues that matter is "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of a boundary, fixity, and surface" (*Bodies* 10), she is not claiming that bodies to do not exist but rather that our understandings and experiences of them are produced within a rearticulatory practice that creates both subjects and the power that constrains them. Moreover, she suggests that these rearticulatory practices have the power not only to form, but also to de-form and re-form identity.

Butler has come under attack both by critics who find her account of performativity too dependent on a notion of culture-as-text and by critics who find her theorization of agency insufficient. Walker argues that these shortcomings are in fact related to one another: Butler's inability to completely divest of a textual model of culture, she argues, creates special problems for Butler's account of agency. Walker criticizes Butler for locating resistance in discursive conventions rather than in performing subjects. "The problem," she asserts, "is that the theoretical strategy [Butler]

chooses locks her hopelessly into a nominalist position, preventing her from speaking to the ways in which these terms are lived within the material conditions of reality" (165-166). Walker's desire to draw attention to the lived conditions of performing subjects is crucial, but I think she misplaces the blame. Butler's theorizations are useful up to a point; in order to accomplish the necessary particularity that Walker rightly calls for, individual critics themselves need to figure out how these theorizations might work (or not) in specific situations.

This dissertation therefore focuses its individual chapters on specific plays in performance—including text, production, performance space, historical and social context, theoretical underpinnings, and more. In doing so, it explicitly draws connections between writing, theatrical performance, and social performativity, thus entering into the gap between textuality and live theater and between representation and embodiment. Peggy Phelan shines a spotlight on this gap in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) when she makes the provocative argument that writing itself must become more performative if it is to meet the challenge raised by performance's ontology, a call she formulates as an ethics. "The act of writing toward disappearance, rather than the act of writing toward preservation," she writes, "must remember that the after-effect of disappearance is the experience of subjectivity itself" (148). Perhaps the better homology for Phelan's ethics, however, is between not writing and performance but *reading* and performance, for reading, like performance, is an embodied act that exists only in the moment of its enactment. When reading is finished, the text as trace may remain, just as after a performance, visual documentation or conceptual scripting may remain; but in both cases, the event itself has "disappeared" in the sense that is both past and non-

reproducible. Phelan's call for greater textual performativity ultimately points her book in an intriguing, if unexpected, direction, for as Case has argued, Phelan seems to end by suggesting that performance is most useful in the service of making writing more performative.[5]

While a number of theater scholars have exhibited interest in language as much as (or almost as much as) other performance media, they have, like GSRT, tended to treat language as referential, with little regard for its materiality (by which I mean the visual and aural properties of language that play a crucial role in the meaning that is produced).[6] As a result, their work tends to treat language as a reliable index of the world, or at the very least as a Brechtian literalization meant to serve as critical counterpoint to the figurality of theater. Scholars coming out of literary backgrounds, on the other hand, tend to begin with the word as both discursive and material act, turning to theatrical performance largely as a "fuller" realization of the dramatic "script." Fred Moten and Kimberly Benston are important exceptions to this trend, but though both of these critics examine a wide array of performance practices, including poetry readings, plays, jazz music, speeches, and sermons, they also tend to constrain theatrical performance largely to an aesthetic or method that complements or corresponds to verbal performance. As a result, they risk overlooking the ways in which theatrical and textual strategies actively collaborate, creating new openings in what has been traditionally been considered a

---

[5] The next book Phelan published, *Mourning Sex*, is an example of performative writing that is both creative and critical.

[6] See, for example, the otherwise excellent theatrical studies by Muñoz, Puchner, and Román. For a rare and insightful example of theater scholarship that closely examines linguistic performativity, see chapter six of Shannon Jackson.

closed relationship in which one is presumed to be a "translation" of the other.

Recently, W. B. Worthen has called for a more complex understanding of the relationship between performative texts and dramatic performances. Worthen traces two important theoretical arguments that bear on the relationship between theatrical performance and textual performativity: speech act theory and ethnographic performance theory. He argues that "[i]t is not the text that prescribes the meanings of the performance: it is the construction of the text within the specific apparatus of the ceremony that creates performative force. The performance is not a citation of the text. The ceremony deploys the text—and much else—as part of an elaborate reiteration of a specific vision of social order" ("Drama" 1097). In other words, performance is less interested in citing texts than in "reiterating its own regimes" of social and behavioral practices (1098). In discussing ethnographic performance theory, Worthen argues that textual practices themselves are not simply by definition complicit with authority; rather, the authority of writing is embedded in "an elaborate, historically contingent, dynamic network of citational possibilities" (1099).

Indeed, the role—and disciplinary home—of drama in the academy is increasingly contentious. As textuality has given way to performance as an analytical paradigm, the dramatic text itself has become a fuddy-duddy. Literature departments continue to employ modern and contemporary drama specialists on the faculty at least as much out of habit as out of clear vision of the role of drama study in the twenty-first century, and the curriculum they appear to imagine foregrounds text-centered, "literary" plays by such canonical figures as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, Tom Stoppard, August

Wilson, and a smattering of others. But as James M. Harding has noted, a thorough history of modern and contemporary drama must include not only dramatic texts but also a range of avant-garde practices, and especially the avant-garde's anti-textual sentiments (1).

Literary scholarship in recent years has been increasingly marked by approaches that decenter the text "itself" in favor of its various uses. And yet, while scholars of other literary genres ask what texts are used to *do*, the same question asked of dramatic literature often takes a very literal form as the analysis of dramatic text as performance script. Dramatic *literature* has proven surprisingly resistant to performance analysis, perhaps because scholarship that decenters the dramatic text is no longer the domain of literature departments at all. Theater and Performance Studies departments are better positioned, it seems, to address the various performance and cultural practices that enter into this broadened approach, the object of which is called "theater," "performance," "events," or even "acts," rather than "drama."

This dissertation is not going to argue for or against recent trends in the disciplining of drama, theater, and performance.[7] But as someone trained in a literature department, I am certainly not inclined to give up texts altogether. Like scholars of other literary genres, I ask what texts are used to do, but perhaps paradoxically, I ask this question of some of the most "anti-textual" of dramatic texts—texts that eschew conventions of dramatic plot and narrative language and sometimes even of character and dialogue. In order to determine what such experimental, anti-authoritarian play texts are

[7] See Shannon Jackson for a very useful genealogy of drama, theater, and performance in the American academy.

used to do, I examine production and publication histories, cultural contexts, aesthetic ideologies, and artistic practices, but I also examine play texts themselves for what they can tell us about the rhetoric and practice of textuality and performance as it plays out on the page and on the stage. This dissertation, then, is a self-conscious examination of *dramatic literature* that makes recourse to these two terms not as a reactionary return to the dominance of the playwright but rather as an investigation, in part, of our assumptions about dramatic literature and its relationship to performance broadly conceived.

In his study of the rhetoric of modern drama, Worthen positions modernist poetic theater as a direct textual "intervention in the rhetorical ordering of realism, reclaiming the text's authority over the physical 'languages' that construct the drama as theater" (*Modern* 100). For Worthen, Yeats, Eliot, Auden, and Beckett all wrote not (or not only) "poetic drama"—which he distinguishes as the mere "rhythmic recitation" of poetry *in* the theater that frequently functioned as a "repudiation of the prosaic drama of daily life"—but poetic theater, which he characterizes as "strategic attempts to theorize the possible relation between the dramatic text and the discourses of its production onstage…[a theorization that] has implications for our understanding of modern theatricality" (100). If the rhetoric of realism is founded on a visual coherence of the theatrical scene, poetic theater structures its staging according to the (absent) verbal text. And indeed, "[o]nly when the verbal formalities of the text are deployed in such a way as to govern the productive discourses of the stage," Worthen argues, "does a poetic theater become possible, a theater in which the linguistic complexity of the text is visible throughout the spectacle" (101). The result of modernist poetic theater, then, is decidedly anti-theatrical, as both Worthen and Martin Puchner, among others, have characterized it.

In this formulation, anti-theatricalism is not the same as being anti-theater; rather, it is an artistic stance that rejects the value of mimesis and, along with it, mimetic elements of the theater, such as the impersonating actor. It is in this sense that many critics have also deemed Stein's plays anti-theatrical. Unfortunately, equating Stein's anti-narrativity with anti-theatricality (read as modernist anti-mimeticism) has resulted, at least in the case of GSRT, in overlooking Stein's reconceptualization of theatricality that locates the action of theater in the lively relations of bodies and multivocal, exuberant language itself. Equating anti-mimeticism with anti-impersonation can ignore the ways in which writing itself can re-present performance by employing aural, visual, and interactive patterns.

This dissertation is primarily concerned with American theater from the 1950s to the 1990s—a period in which text-oriented practice and criticism gave way to performance-oriented practice and criticism. So while I find Worthen's discussion of modernist poetic theater extremely helpful for thinking about the text's direct engagement with the theater and its effect on the actor, my focus here is not modernist poetic theater but the politically oriented text-body collaborations that emerge with the turn to performance in the mid-twentieth century—a practice I am calling "poets' theater" in allegiance to the multiple mid-century theater companies and venues that staged these early works. With its emphasis on poets rather than on the poetic, I also use "poets' theater" as a nominal attempt to bring attention back to bodies in their rich complexity as imitating an authorizing, object and subject, representational and phenomenological, artistic practice and social identity. Poets' theater shares with modernist poetic theater a spirit of experimentalism and a rejection of social realism. In particular, these plays eschew naturalism in favor of a theatrical anti-realism with a specific emphasis on

language and identity. But what is different about the poets' theater—and this difference is central to this dissertation project—is that poets' theater is self-consciously political, aimed at social critique precisely *through* an investigation of the relationship between language and performance.

Methodologically, this dissertation unites the ear of the poetry scholar with the eye of the theater critic, and in so doing, it reveals an important aspect of recent American theater history that disciplinary allegiances have obscured. But in focusing on audience reception (defining "audience" broadly as theater-goers, critics, and students), it also adds to our understandings of contemporary modes of audience participation. Most importantly, it argues that to take theater texts and embodied performances as mutually constitutive—that is, to be attentive to the ways in which texts come to inform embodied identities and embodied performances help to bring texts into being—opens up a key aspect of contemporary theater's cultural politics, allowing us to see the ways in which theater can intervene in normalizing cultural narratives.

Rather than proffer a theory, I offer a method. Employing the conventional tools of the theater scholar—including production and publication histories, reviews, scripts, performances, playbills, and cultural and historical contexts—I also take seriously the poetic language of plays in a way that perhaps only poetry scholars feel fully licensed to do. Such an approach can help us both better understand plays that use language in decidedly non-referential ways and place these approaches within a particular cultural history that explains the importance of these strategies to specific cultural communities at particular historical moments as well as the relation of those strategies to broader cultural understandings of performance that were developing in the second half of the twentieth

century. And, perhaps most importantly, this method engages a more complex understanding of the relationship between language and embodiment.

Repeating Gertrude Stein:
Toward a Joining of Texts and Bodies

The meanings of any play script are enacted both in the individual act of reading and in staged performance. But what is the relationship between these two enactments? As anyone who has ever attended a book group or a college literature class can attest, the meaning of written language is not always self-evident, and literary texts in particular don't just capitalize on the multivocality of language—they make it a virtue. Furthermore, the multivocality of a written text may actually occur both at the level of overt vocalization in performance and as a kind of subvocalization in the act of "silent" reading—as what Garrett Stewart has called an "evocalization" rather than vocalization of the text (3). "Evocalized" phonemic reading, Stewart argues, destabilizes a text by carrying sound across lexical gaps between words, momentarily multiplying meaning through a kind of sonic drift. The resulting "phonotext" exists in wavering tension with the inscribed text. Stewart is concerned primarily with conventionally written texts that are read with an expectation of stable meaning. Thus, "evocalization" can be said to destabilize a traditional text by crossing the lexical gaps, the blankness of the page, between words.

But what can be said to happen to a poetic, verbally creative, and decidedly multivocal text that is, to take Stewart's sounding a step further, fully vocalized, as in theatrical performance? If the scripted gaps between words become silence in

vocalization, in what ways does sound function to cross or to reinforce those gaps and how does this affect meaning? It may be useful to begin to answer that question first by acknowledging that evocalization itself may work in part by activating the body. In her analysis of sound in twentieth-century American poetry, Lesley Wheeler cites Åke W. Edfeldt's 1960 study *Silent Speech and Silent Reading* in which Edfeldt argues that "silent speech," which likely occurs in all acts of reading, mobilizes the speech musculature. In fact, Wheeler's examination of neuroscience research in relation to reading and performance poetry concludes that "even when we read silently, our bodies respond as if we are preparing to read aloud" (25). And while approaches across the sciences vary widely, Wheeler finds that the "seemingly mental activity [of silent reading] involves multiple regions of the body, and not only through the visual processing of written language: muscles in the tongue, lips, and larynx may move, sometimes almost imperceptibly" (24). Wheeler's discussion holds the greatest implications for poets' theater when she argues that the degree of muscular activity increases with the degree of difficulty or non-transparency of the text and that, although written language and spoken language activate different parts of the brain, the research suggests that readers translate graphemes into phonemes in the act of decoding (24, 25).

Wheeler's discussion is one important facet of understanding the relationship of the body to text, but attending only to the ways in which reading mobilizes the musculature runs the risk of placing bodily experience in the service of reading. It is just as important to recognize that such an understanding of bodily activation in the act of reading also changes our understanding of reading itself. Subvocalized reading is not a textualization of embodied experience but a performance of reading that works in part by

particularizing, through an individual's act of embodied reading, the generalized communicability of language itself. That is, signification in this formulation occurs not by a general, universally applicable structure of meaning but rather through the particular experience of embodied reading that must take into account not only the activation of the body in the act of reading but also particular personal associations, contexts, and histories that come to bear on the meaning-making process in that particular temporally and spatially located act of reading. Moreover, reading understood as embodied experience also reveals reading as an event that exceeds semantic meaning. In Walker's thought-provoking critique of Butler's theorization of performativity, for example, as much as Walker asserts that "language is *not* simply an ideational medium, but 'speaks' to the heart and the gut as well as the head" (167), she nevertheless remains closely linked to ideational understandings of language, such as vocal and gestural torquing of syntactic (or written) language. In contrast, Stewart and Wheeler demonstrate that written language itself is subject to, and activator of, non-syntactical experience, which may or may not result in ideational meaning.

In realist theater, stage performance tends to fix the polysemity of the script in place. If the script on the page is subject to multiple interpretations in the imagination of the individual reader, these interpretations can be trained into submission on the stage via a single dominant character portrayal, set design, voice direction, and/or scenic coherence. In poets' theater, by contrast, embodied—and especially vocalized—performance tends to work in the opposite direction, increasing polysemity by creating aural alternatives to scripted univocality. Operating from the belief that we are initiated into the/a world by language, poets' theater, like experimental poetic such as "Language"

writing, resists closure, conventional syntax, and sedimented meaning as a way of mobilizing against ideology as it resides in language and polices/constructs our subjectivities. But poets' theater extends this to bodies as well, balancing the ocularcentrism of theater and the "turn to the visual" with the text-in-the-body of aurality. I use the term aurality, following Charles Bernstein, "to emphasize the sounding of the *writing*, and to make a sharp contrast with *orality* and its emphasis on breath, voice, and speech—an emphasis that tends to valorize speech over writing, voice over sounds, listening over hearing, and indeed, orality over aurality" (13). Aurality might be thought of as a particular condition of literate society, which proliferates multiple versions of a text (manuscripts, printing, readings, performances) with no sole authority.[8] Though aurality is fundamentally linked to the body—"what the mouth and tongue and vocal chords enact" (ibid.)—the body does not control the performance. Rather, it is the body's engagement with the text that performs, enacts, and materializes the work. In referring to the bodily grounding of language as its "animalady" (22), however, Bernstein unfortunately removes it from the context of (human) social performance. Poets' theater

---

[8] While I appreciate Bernstein's notion of "aurality" here, the collection in which this quotation appears, *Close Listening*, relies on an overly flexible notion of "performance." When Bernstein describes poetry readings as "anti-performative"—meaning, he notes, "anti-expressivist"—he is pointing to the poet's rhetorical strategy rather than to the event's ontological status. Yet this equation of performativity with expressivity seems to reinforce the notion of performance as presence that Bernstein is attempting to counter with this anthology. Peter Middleton's use of performativity later in the anthology is much more in line with Judith Butler's notion of constitutive acts. Middleton argues that poetry readings perform "the affirmation or transgression of foundational social structures" in their formation of an audience into an intersubjective network (265). Nick Piombino's discussion of "aural ellipsis" seems to use "performance" in the sense of live oral delivery, although it also opens the door for consideration of the object/subject formation that might more strictly be considered "performative." Furthermore, while the anthology overall makes a good case for taking readings seriously in themselves rather than as mere supplements to texts, it tends to perpetuate the opposition of speech and writing. For challenges to that oppositionality, see the essays in Morris's *Sound States*.

restores this emphasis on language's social function, welding voice and speech together into a social weapon that cuts both ways.

Consider the "exact replica of the Great Hole of History" that is the setting of Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play* (1994), to take one familiar example. On the page "the Great Hole of History" is certainly creative, but it is not generative—each word in the phrase is seemingly clear. When the phrase is vocalized, however, the word "Hole" is ambiguous, at least in my Midwestern American pronunciation. Does it indicate a totality (whole) or an absence (hole)? In Parks's play script, the word is written as "hole." It is the body's engagement with this written text that materializes and enacts its semantic oscillation, which in turn informs its politics. In enacting the oscillation between the "hole" and the "whole" of History, embodied engagement with the text creates the conditions for disidentification with History's totalizing narrative.

In this example, vocalized performance reveals a condition of textuality that not only supports but enacts *The America Play*'s critique of historiography. So although Wheeler's study finds some compelling correspondences between vocal performance and silent reading, my interest, as this example should make clear, is not in the science of the poetic voicing but rather in the rhetoric of poetry and performance that inform the strategies used by poet-playwrights in different periods and communities, especially as it is related to the conjunction of representation and literality. Performance is not necessarily the replacement of representation with literality, although it is sometimes rhetorically presented as such. Just as often, performance is composed of the interplay of, and oscillation between, the two.

In discussing American poetry of the twentieth century, Wheeler argues that

"[p]oetic voice is, among other things, a metaphor: it refers to literary qualities that evoke physical qualities" (38). In poets' theater, however, physical qualities also evoke literary qualities—that is, it is the sounding of the text that produces the multiple meanings more conventionally associated with the page. It is also the sounding of the text that produces a kind of three-way encounter between author/text, performer/vocalizer, and audience/listener—and it is upon this encounter that, to return to my opening example, Stein's performative poetics relies.

Stein is cited by innovative poets and playwrights alike as a key influence, and she is a crucial forerunner to politically-oriented poets' theater.[9] Theater scholars tend to characterize Stein's drama as anti-theatrical, in the sense that it is anti-mimetic, but I want to argue that it's *differently* mimetic. Her "fine new kind of realism," as William James called it (Mellow 147), portrays not the representation of reality but the reality of representation. As Sarah Bay-Cheng has argued, it is important not to approach Stein's work monolithically, since her drama underwent a transformation in the 1920s as she experimented with film conventions. Significantly, the Stein that seems most influential on poets' theater is not the later Stein of *The Mother of Us All* but the earlier Stein of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, and—just as significantly—of non-dramatic works such as the novel *The Making of Americans* and the scores of "verbal portraits" she wrote in the 1910s.

Arguing that memory stymies creation because it emphasizes identity over being, Stein tried to employ language in these works in a way that would create a direct

---

[9] Marc Robinson constructs a similar argument of influence in *The Other American Drama*, but my focus is the relationship of representation and experience, rather than, as for Robinson, the emotional intensity of moments of dramatic language.

experience of a thing by capturing its movement in the present moment. Take, for example, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, written in the late 1920s and produced in 1934. Some of its best-known lines appear in the "Pigeons on the Grass Alas" section, which Stein has described as an evocation of her emotions in seeing pigeons on the yellow grass of late summer. The section ends with this litany of short, flapping "l" sounds: "Let Lucy Lily Lily Lucy Lucy let Lucy Lucy Lily Lily Lily Lily. Lily let Lily Lucy Lucy let Lily. Let Lucy Lily" (637). The opacity of this language clearly resists conventional interpretation. Even with careful enunciation, the phonemes merge across lexical gaps to evoke other words not actually printed on the page. The first two syllables in "Let Lucy" invite the reader to "let loose," which suggests freedom from constraint. The reader is urged to play with language, and to see the "silly" hidden within the phonemes of "Lucy Lily." And as we do so, our own tongue-flapping performance of these repeated "l" sounds comes to resemble perhaps the beating of wings. As this performance suggests, Stein does not simply subvert the relationship between referent and object; rather, her words oscillate between referentiality and material presence. In this way, Stein's play both exposes and explores the necessary but fraught relationship between experience and representation. This is the key to Stein's linguistic performativity, for it allows words to *generate* an experience, as well as to refer to one.

Stein's performativity works according to a strategy Fred Moten has characterized as "second iconicity," which builds off of Charles Sanders Peirce's notion of the icon as that which physically resembles what it stands for (which Moten refers to as "first iconicity"). Moten's work is concerned with how to convey the experience of musical performance in writing, but its applicability can be generalized to any performance that is

understood to exist somewhere between phenomenon and reference. The key for Moten is that second iconicity must move beyond language's referentiality to the sounded re-presentation of the experience of musical performance, based in attention to language's materiality. As an analog of musical conventions in the context of language, such re-presentation is both mimetic, in that it is imitative or citational, and performative, in that it creates anew the experience of music by reiterating musical conventions recontextualized in the sound-space of the page.

And yet: as musical and affective as Stein's language is here, it functions this way only within the closed system of the play itself. That is, the language does not refer to social life, and certainly not to the ways in which language helps to initiate bodies into lived experience. What's different about poets' theater in the latter part of the twentieth century, I want to argue, is that it picks up the combination of mimeticism and performativity modeled by Stein and brings it into the realm of the social.

Contemporary poets' theater employs an oscillation between mimesis and performativity that forms the basis of a strategy I am calling "generative mimesis," a term that takes its inspiration from Elin Diamond's notion of "feminist mimesis." Diamond notes that mimesis involves an act of patterning "difference into sameness," an act of taking something which *is* and turning it into something which *is like*. Feminism has challenged the motivations of this mimetic impulse: The same as what? For whom? And for what purpose? Sameness, of course, is not a neutral and unchanging characteristic. Feminist mimesis challenges the objective nature of mimicry and instead displays mimesis as a performative representation, a display which gestically reveals its normative modeling, making visible the social values inherent in such models. Yet while Diamond

is clearly interested in denaturalizing the theatrical relation between actor and character that works in concert with ideology, when it comes to language she assumes a transparently referential relationship. I am therefore proposing "generative mimesis" as an expansion of Diamond's "feminist mimesis" that can be found in *both* the textual and embodied performances of poets' theater. And typically, the politics of generative mimesis lies in the intersection between the two.

Despite conventional characterizations of poetic drama as anti-mimetic, poets' theater as I consider it here should not be understood as anti-mimetic. Rather, poets' theater reconceptualizes mimeticism through an understanding of social identity as a process of citation and identification. In this view, representation is not only unavoidable, but also necessary to the process of identification through which social identity is secured. At the same time, normative representation is critiqued as a form of social and political consolidation. In poets' theater, this manifests itself as an attack on literary and dramatic realism and as an attack on the ideology of narrative and language usage as representations of reality rather than as acts of production.

Worthen distinguishes poetic theater from poetic drama by the relation of language to scene. Whereas in poetic drama, poetic language frequently functions as a counter to scenic realism and its portrayal of everyday life, in poetic theater language takes up a more complex relation to the stage, not as a repudiation of theatrical portrayals but as an organizing structure of onstage production. Realism, Worthen argues, effaces its own means of production, achieving its sense of "reality" precisely by removing the traces of theatrical mediation. Poetic theater, in contrast, is decidedly anti-realist, in the sense that it foregrounds, even celebrates, the theatrical event. Worthen claims that the

"real innovations of poetic theater stem from its sustained investigation of how the text is rewritten by the stage" (*Modern* 103)—an especially apt description of, for examples, Stein's poetic theater. In its eschewal of realistic portrayals of character, setting, temporality, etc., poetic theater releases performance from regulation by the drama.

Whereas the modernist poetic theater that Worthen discusses goes a long way toward rethinking the relationship of the dramatic text, onstage performance, and the audience, it is a theater that focuses its attention on the processes of theater itself. In contrast, the poets' theater of the latter part of the twentieth century that is the subject of this dissertation continues modernist poetic theater's repudiation of naturalized meaning rhetorically constructed by realism's prioritization of everyday behavior, but its theatricality creates an awareness not of the processes of stage production but of the production of meaning in everyday life. If everyday life might be said to operate via a rhetoric of reality that effaces the means by which the meaning of everyday experience is produced and maintained rather than simply latent, then poets' theater's theatricalization of everyday processes of meaning production becomes a political act that exposes the rhetoric of "reality" itself.

As a way of better accounting for the critical and creative work inspired by the joining of theater and experimental poetics, the term poets' theater therefore functions as a critical category that indicates not a self-consciously shared lineage but rather a set of characteristic strategies: attention to the conventions of theatrical characterization and scripted plotting, language thickened by a poet's sense of sound, rhythm, and layers of meaning, and resistance to the cultural coercion of conventional social and narrative forms. My emphasis on the activity of audiences places poets' theater in direct contrast

to the usual understanding of "verse drama" as an anti-theatrical, "high" art form aimed at private contemplation away from the harmful influence of collective reception.

Both poetry and theater since the 1960s have been engaged in countering the conventions what Dwight Conquergood has called "textocentrism"—that is, the sense of the text as authorized and authoritative, as an enduring document that always gets the last word. Realizing this changes the way we understand mid-century American theater, which is often portrayed not only as anti-textual but as openly hostile toward writing of any sort. But merely mapping the relationship between poetry and theater is not enough to understand the cultural interventions of these plays—especially plays since the 1960s. Each of these plays also needs to be placed within its own specific cultural context, against a background of the ideas about language and cultural identity that were circulating at the time, and also within a framework of arguments about the ideological constraints of narrative itself. This approach is related to what Diamond has called "gestic criticism," which derives from Bertolt Brecht's theory of the moment when a play's social attitudes become visible. To read gestically is, in Diamond's words, "to draw into analysis the author's history, the play's production conditions, and the historical class and gender contradictions through which stage action might be read" (xiv).

The Chapters

Why did 2600 people turn out in 1968 to see a play in which most of the characters speak only in such apparently nonsensical phrases as "Red hus the beat trim doing going" and "Achtung Swachtung"? And why would an Obie award-winning

playwright move to New Jersey to write such a play in the first place? What led to the founding in 1978 of the San Francisco Poets Theatre by so-called L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers, and why have those plays and performers been virtually ignored by critics despite the admitted centrality of performance to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing's textual politics? Why would the renowned Yale Repertory Theatre produce in the 1990s the poetic, plotless plays of a theater newcomer twice in as many years—even when audiences walked out? What vision for the future of theater could possibly involve episodic drama with footnotes?

In each of these examples, part of the story is missing, and this dissertation is, in its broadest sense, an attempt to fill in that gap. The discussions and analyses that follow begin with a rather simple inquiry: Why have poets of the twentieth-century turned, time and time again, to the stage, and why have playwrights of the last fifty years increasingly drawn on experimental poetics? What's the relationship between page and stage in these works that makes writers on both sides of the divide seek out the devices and possibilities of a different genre? Which is really to ask two interrelated questions: In what ways does the stage further the aims of twentieth-century poetry, and in what ways does experimental poetry further the aims of twentieth-century theater? My search for answers to these questions has revealed a disciplinary blind spot that prevents both theater and poetry critics from fully accounting for this work. This dissertation therefore works in part as a critical mapping to address the interrelations of theatrical performance and experimental poetics.

The question in my introduction title, "Where Is Poets' Theater?," must certainly be understood as an acknowledgement of this absence in the critical record. (At the

moment, the answer is, largely, nowhere.) But it also points to several overlapping questions of location. Where precisely are critical practices of poets' theater itself inscribed? (On the page, on the stage, between the two, or perhaps somewhere else?) In what ways is poets' theater a site-specific practice (where the "site" may be impaginated or embodied, but also architectural, geographical, and historical)? And finally, where does poets' theater belong as an object of disciplinary study?

As a cultural political practice, poets' theater must be understood as emerging from the same fertile poetry reading and avant-garde theater scene that also gave rise to communal, improvisatory theater. At the same time that a number of American theater groups were tossing away scripts and reconfiguring the theater company as a collaborative community, a number of companies and even playwrights were rethinking the dramatic text itself. Meanwhile, poets, too, were re-envisioning poetry as an enactment, not only as a live reading event but also as a scripted performance on the page. Attending to overlapping interests in performance, I find correspondences in a range of post-1960s practices that use both poetic and theatrical devices to intervene in narratives of cultural oppression, in part by questioning the very suitability of narrative as a primary means of social exchange. The paradigm that links these creative and critical approaches is the notion of performativity, which focuses on a system of production rather than on the "play itself."

The relationship of the body to performance and poetry changes over time—not wholesale but locally, in relation to specific communities in specific moments—and part of what this dissertation does is examine local understandings of these relationships and trace the changes. While my focus is the cultural politics of poets' theater beginning in

the 1960s, the first chapter sets the scene for this analysis by examining the intersections of poetics and performance rhetoric in the earlier part of the century. Self-proclaimed "poets' theaters" proliferated in the 1950s amidst the surge in performance theories that characterized a range of practices, including poetry readings, anti-textual performance, and off-off-Broadway theater. The most famous of these was The Living Theatre, whose shift from verse drama in the 1950s to avant-garde performance in the 1960s reveals the continuity between notions of poetic and theatrical performance. Using The Living Theatre as a key case study, this chapter demonstrates linkages between the "New American Poetry," and particularly Charles Olson's notion of "projective verse," and Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. The chapter both looks back to modernist poetic drama, prominent amongst The Living Theatre's early productions, and moves forward briefly into the 1970s to discuss some of the ways in which post-1960s poetry and theater have incorporated *both* representation and presentation as two poles of the same continuum.

Poets' theater is therefore a hybrid creative practice calls for a correspondingly hybrid critical approach, and in chapter two I contend that the poetry scholar's sustained attention to pressurized language can be a useful additional tool for the historical theater scholar. By way of demonstration, I examine Amiri Baraka's 1968 Black Nationalist play entitled *Home on the Range*, a play which seemed destined for an auspicious career in its own era but which baffles critics in ours. My focus on performance scripts, reviews, production and publication histories, and Baraka's own development as a poet-playwright reveals Baraka's musical deployment of poetic language as cultural strategy aimed at undermining white cultural systems of oppression that exist in the very form of

the expressions we use. This strategy works by upending textual authority via aural performativity, making us not only witness to our own complicity in the enforcement of social narratives, but more importantly, making us aware of our complicity in accepting narrative as a primary form of social exchange. I offer the term "textual theatricality" to describe the resulting critical activity that both recognizes and tries to get some distance from textuality as the dominant receptive paradigm for dramatic texts.

If theatrical naturalism construes audiences (albeit mistakenly) as uniform, knowable, authorizing, and organized around notions of belonging, as Una Chaudhuri has suggested, then contemporary poets' theater audiences might best be characterized by community rupture, with each member experiencing an individual identification in the collective space of the theater. In chapter three, I take a closer look at this audience formation through the work of Carla Harryman, a poet-playwright associated with the San Francisco branch of what has become known as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing. Harryman's 2008 work *Mirror Play* weaves together poetic experimentalism with references to the U.S.'s role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to the Gulf War, and to the 1968 campy intergalactic anti-war movie *Barbarella*. She employs poets' theater conceptually as a means of rethinking our engagement with political narratives. The result is, I argue, an interpretive "community" marked, paradoxically, by discontinuity and dispersion. Portraying an America defined not by physical borders but by complex military, economic, cultural, and political relationships, *Mirror Play* plays through the ways in which these relationships are constructed and maintained. What emerges is not an interpretive free-for-all but rather an embodiment of the ethical dilemma in the postmodern era—the contradiction, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham puts it, between "How

ought one to live?" and "What ought I to do?", between generalizable norms and individual acts in actual (and unique) situations. Uniting radical textuality, embodied performance, and political action, Harryman's poets' theater attends to the very condition of choice. If realist narrative theater's appeal to public morals has become suspect in a post-9/11 world, then contemporary poets' theater, I argue, may perhaps provide a paradigm more suitable to the present world's complex interconnectivities.

The receptive orientation required by poets' theater is the active, committed involvement of the audience-participant. In chapter four I term this orientation "dramaturgical arousal," uniting Geoffrey S. Proehl's notion of the dramaturgical sensibility, which merges the pursuit of knowledge with emotional and even physical sensation, and Megan S. Boler's call for an arts and humanities curriculum steered not by empathetic identification but by the critical actions of self-reflection and responsibility-taking. Most importantly, I argue, dramaturgical arousal is, like all acts of critical engagement, a learned strategy. Poets' theater can teach the art of dramaturgical arousal, first by resisting the closure of meaning, and secondly by preempting empathetic identification. My test case is the 1994 Yale Repertory Theatre premiere of Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play*, a production which mobilizes testimonial, poetic performance as an antidote to the oppression of the so-called "historical" record. A key aspect of the production's effect came from the dramaturgical notes written by Parks and production dramaturg Mark Bly and published in the theater program handed out before each performance, and this chapter uses the production dramaturg as a pedagogical model for the cultural interventions of poets' theater.

This pedagogical role of poets' theater is perhaps its greatest contribution to

drama and theater broadly conceived. In teaching us how to engage with drama dramaturgically, poets' theater opens the way for a more active engagement with all forms of theater and drama. When we stop thinking of theatrical texts only for their "use value" as scripts for stage production—a value which privileges transparent meaning—and leave ourselves open to their non-use (that is non-utilizable) value as well (excess, waste, non-exchange), then something new emerges in the space between text and performance.

A skeptic might ask: why attend to dramatic/theatrical texts this way? But given the creative collaboration between poetry, theater, and performance in the twentieth century, the more relevant question is why *don't* we attend to theatrical texts this way? And what are the attendant assumptions in the ways we *do* attend to them? Part of what we learn from engaging with poets' theater as a hybrid genre is what we value about theater, what we think theater should and shouldn't do, and the ways in which we think theater does and doesn't produce both knowledge and experience. Poets' theater's revaluation of theatrical texts may offer different answers to these questions—answers than emphasize not only *what* but also *how* and *where*. And, in doing so, it may change our thinking about the differences between poetry and theater as well as our understanding of the interactions of knowledge and embodiment. In this sense, poets' theater can never solely reside in a dramatic text nor in a theatrical production but always in some site-specific collaboration between the two.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM VERSE DRAMA TO POETS' THEATER: AMERICAN POETRY AND PERFORMANCE AT MID-CENTURY

> [I]t could be argued that it is because Eliot has stayed inside the non-projective that he fails as a dramatist—that his root is the mind alone…and that, in his listenings he has stayed there where the ear and the mind are, has only gone from his fine ear outward rather than, as I say a projective poet will, down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs.
>
> Charles Olson
> "Projective Verse" (1950)

> Breakdown of language equals breakdown of values, of modes of insight, of the sick rationale. Breakdown of language means invention of fresh forms of communication. Breakdown of language means breakdown of computers. Breakdown the language of the controlling forces and you breakdown their weary logic, you breakdown their tight structure. Shake things up, change, give ourselves over to what we do not comprehend, what we think we comprehend we don't comprehend anyway, our logic is false, is rigid and systematic, open it up. Breathe.
>
> Julian Beck
> "Three Meditations on Strategies" (1970)

Before moving into discussions of specific instances of poets' theater in the latter half of the twentieth century—instances that emerged in response to particular political and aesthetic contexts and engaged with audiences in particular ways—it is first necessary to consider the theoretical, artistic, and practical collaborations out of which these instances, in a general sense, developed. Indeed, a consideration of the political implications of generative mimesis only makes sense in the aftermath of the 1950s, following the several borrowings that occurred between the fields of sociology,

linguistics, anthropology, and theater that opened the way for a broad-based theory of performativity. But also necessary to the analyses that follow is a new mapping of the relationship between poetry and performance in the middle of the century, a mapping which acknowledges their mergings, alliances, and collaborations as much as their differences and oppositions.

This chapter therefore begins with a survey of the overlaps in the rhetoric and practice of poetry and performance in the middle of the century. In it, I demonstrate the ways in which rhetoric about the functions and effects of poetry moved from a metaphorical usage of the "theater" of poetry to a notion of embodied performance as fundamental to poetry's communicative power—in writing, in poetry readings, and in the frequent stagings by mid-century poets' theaters. The second half of the chapter then focuses on the way these overlaps played out in the work of The Living Theatre, the New York theater company that has become an emblem of 1960s anti-textual theater. While it is commonplace to interpret the Living Theatre's own creative development as evidence of the incommensurability of dramatic texts and performance theater,[10] closer examination of the Living's "transitional" plays *The Connection* (1959) and *The Brig* (1963) suggests a more complicated relationship between poetic drama and so-called anti-textual theater. Perhaps more significantly, the Living's co-founders Julian Beck and Judith Malina reveal in their own writings the connections between poetry, dramatic

---

[10] The term "performance theater" has been used by both Michael Vanden Heuvel and Christopher Bigsby to refer to theater structured not by the dramatic text but a wide range of performance strategies. Vanden Heuvel uses the term to indicate a hybrid form of theater, arising in the 1970s, that brings radicalized performance art strategies into contact with mainstream drama and its audiences and creates new, complex, non-linear relationships between drama and performance (6). For Bigsby "performance theater" indicates the use of improvisation and resistance to language, among other strategies (65).

plays, acting, and "real life" that they were working out in their theatrical productions. While several scholars have similarly located the Living Theatre's shift to strategies of improvisation and enactment specifically in their productions of *The Connection* and *The Brig*,[11] the ways in which these concerns also occupied poetry performance have been largely overlooked. This chapter therefore uses the example of The Living Theatre in order to demonstrate that poets' theater is not a minor theatrical practice that occurred simultaneously with but separate from anti-textual theater but is, rather, another important, if frequently overlooked, American theater practice that grew directly out of the same collaborative inter-art scene of the 1950s and 60s that gave rise to anti-textual theater. My goal is to show how poets' theater and anti-textual theater can be understood as two different manifestations of surprisingly similar ideas.

The Theater of Poetry

The beginnings of poets' theater, as distinct from verse drama, might be traced back to the period immediately following WWII, when rich, performance-oriented poetry and theater scenes came together on the makeshift stages of urban coffee houses, shared apartments, and underground theaters. The 1940s were dominated by a New Critical rhetoric emphasizing the self-sufficiency of the art object—as in John Crowe Ransom's assertion that "emotions themselves are fictions, and critical theory could not with a straight face have recourse to them"—that many later saw as a deadly academicism (72). But by the 1950s the critical discourses of poetry, theater, and social life were increasingly marked by interests in enactment, in the relation of language to social

[11] See, for example, Bigsby 63-65, Martin, and Sell.

experience, and in the presence of the performing body itself and its relation to the audience. And in the midst of these interests, poetic theater proliferated.

And yet this surge in poetic theater occurred, paradoxically, at precisely the same moment that the most famous mid-century champions of poetic theater in the U.S.—the Living Theatre—had, according to most accounts, decided to abandon poetic theater in favor of theatrical investigations of the actor's "presence" and toward what was seen as a more unmediated involvement of the audience. As Stephen Bottoms recounts:

> [T]he Living's productions of poetic dramas had often baffled audiences, and the company itself had never felt happy with much of the work. Loathe as [Living Theatre co-founder Julian] Beck might have been to admit it, even the best poets did not necessarily make good writers for a visual and physical medium like the stage, and indeed many of those who did experiment with dramatic form were really writing "closet dramas"—literary exercises not seriously intended for staging. As some of the Living's would-be successors quickly discovered, theaters dedicated to mounting verse plays ran the risk of seeming esoteric, overly wordy, or simply impenetrable to audiences. The question was how best to find a balance between poetic aspiration and theatrical viability. (61)

The Living Theatre was, of course, primarily a theater company. Despite its interest in poetic theater, its primary approach to the work was through conventions of the theater. But poets, too, found themselves drawn to questions of performance and to the increasingly imprecise border between poetry performance and theater. And in this context, the Living's shifts might be understood not as an abandonment of poetic theater but as a reworking of poetic strategies for the stage.

In 1942, Wallace Stevens was already imagining a different future for American poetry, in the merging of the imaginative and material worlds, and casting it in theatrical terms. In the poem "Of Modern Poetry," Stevens asserts that "the scene [of poetry in the early twentieth century] was set; it repeated what was in the script"; but "the theatre [of

contemporary poetry] has changed" and the charge is now "to construct a new stage."[12] In order to meet the challenge of this new stage, the language of poetry had to be "living" and had to "learn the speech of the place." Thus, for Stevens the future of modern poetry lay not in the repetition of tradition or in the forms of the masters but in words seen not just as representations but as acts. In this theater of poetry,

> …an invisible audience listens,
> Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
> In an emotion as of two people, as of two
> Emotions becoming one.

As the actor speaks words, the external expression and the internal reality become one. In this sense, then, poetry is not merely a recollection or an artifact but an event. The poet is at once actor and metaphysician. Stevens's poem summarizes many of the developing values in American poetry at mid-century, including the use of concrete language, an interest in experimentation, and enactment rather than ideas. Most importantly, the emphasis here is not on what is said but rather on the process of saying.

While Stevens has often been remembered for his philosophical poetry, his early interest in concrete language and in the relationship between reality and the literary imagination appealed to the later modernist avant-garde. Alan Golding notes, for example, that Louis Zukofsky was attracted by the simple, concrete diction and balance of the imaginative and literal worlds in Stevens's 1916 play *Three Travellers Watch a Sunrise*. In this play, three Chinese travelers and their attendants journey to a densely wooded forest to watch a sunrise. The three travelers offer different ways of viewing

---

[12] Wallace Stevens, "Of Modern Poetry," in *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play by Wallace Stevens,* ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 175.

reality: One looks at the thing, one at representation, and one at context. But at the end, the play seems to concede, albeit reluctantly, that no assessment exists "[e]xcept with reference to ourselves" (133). Even colors, in the end, are shown to be a matter of individual perception. This joining of the philosophical and the concrete, or of the imaginative and literal worlds, also marked his first collection of poetry, *Harmonium* (1923).

Stevens's dictum "not the idea of the thing but the thing itself" echoed a number of iconic modernist poets, including Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Williams, in particular, turned his attention to language itself as a material object—art not as a representation or copy of nature but as a thing in itself—and this anti-mimeticism characterized both his poetry and drama. Like Stevens, Williams was a playwright, but he also participated in stage productions. His acting debut occurred in 1916, at the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village, in Alfred Kreymbourg's Dadaist drama *Lima Beans* opposite Mina Loy.[13] He also wrote his first drama, a verse play, at this time. Williams continued to write verse and non-verse drama in the following years, but his most renowned play is *Trial Horse No. 1*, or *Many Loves* (as it is now most commonly known), written around 1940 and first performed in 1959 by the Living

[13] The Provincetown Playhouse was an early twentieth-century site of both innovative and political theater and can be seen as a direct antecedent to The Living Theatre. Bradford D. Martin suggests, for example, that "[t]he Provincetown Players even practiced a form of what the Living Theatre (and Students for a Democratic Society) later called 'collective creation. Many of the players participated in the 1913 Paterson Strike Pageant at the old Madison Square Garden. The Paterson Strike Pageant blurred the lines between art and everyday life, creating a spectacle in a venue not usually used for theater, staging the performance to maximize audience participation, and anticipating sixties participatory events such as Happenings, the Diggers' Invisible Circus, and the Living Theatre's *Paradise Now*" (8). See also Chansky.

Theatre.[14]

What is striking about *Many Loves* in this discussion of the relationship between modernist plays and poetry is its similarity to two key poetic works by Williams, *Spring and All* and *Kora in Hell*. *Kora*, published in 1920, was one of Williams' own favorite books, composed in a collage form that he turned to again and again throughout his career, and *Spring and All* (1923) has become a key poetic text in the modernist canon. What all three works share is a disavowal of representation in favor of direct experience. In *Spring and All* Williams argues that art should be, not a representation or a copy of nature, but rather a thing in itself, self-conscious, self-actualizing, and unique, and the collection of poems goes some distance toward realizing this goal. *Kora* is even more anti-mimetic: the entire work is a collage consisting of "improvisations" focused sharply on language and the effects it can produce, and the subject is the compositional process itself. In contrast, *Many Loves* self-consciously draws attention to the theatrical frame by fictionalizing the staging of three one-act plays: a playwright is in final rehearsals of his production and tries to keep his romantic involvement with the leading lady a secret from his financial backer. Notably, *Many Loves* actually began as a group of one-act plays for a local theater in Rutherford, New Jersey, but Williams eventually combined the three "playlets" under one title by linking them together through the Pirandello-like story frame, written in unrhymed modern verse, about a playwright preparing to put on a series of three one-act plays.

While the collage techniques of *Kora* and *Spring and All* force readers to consider

---

[14] *Many Loves* subsequently toured Europe, where it was awarded the Grand Prix de Nations as well as the Paris Theatre Critics Circle Award. For more on the Living Theatre's production of *Many Loves*, see Tytell 150-154.

the compositional process itself, the fictional frame of *Many Loves* safely cordons off the question of process as a thematic rather than as a constitutive element of the work. The difference lies in the critical effects of anti-mimeticism in each genre. That is, unlike anti-mimeticism in poetry, which manifests in part as a direct experience of the materiality of language itself, sometimes as an end in itself but also, as the century progressed as a means of directly accessing the poet's physicality, anti-mimeticism in drama challenges the work's very status as a play by focusing audience attention directly on its compositional (and production) processes. Such drama tends to be categorized nowadays as "performance art," ultimately designating the work as postmodernist or avant-garde rather than modernist.[15] Williams's *Many Loves* remains a "play" precisely because it *fictionalizes* its self-consciousness through the character of the playwright. From this perspective, *Many Loves* only pretends to be literal—it may be a play about making a play, but it is still fully mimetic.

Many Loves was hardly the first play of this sort to be produced by the Living Theatre. In March 1955, for example, the Living produced Luigi Pirandello's *Tonight We Improvise*, which begins with actors planted in the audience disrupting the performance—and which, like *Many Loves*, draws awareness to the theatrical frame via a fictionalization of everyday life. The actors complain that they want greater freedom to improvise their lines and during the intermission they mingle the audience members to express their disdain for predetermined structure. "This attempt to suggest the autonomy of the actors as creative principals," Living Theatre biographer John Tytell asserts,

---

[15] It is indeed this purported distinction between mimetic "drama" and anti-mimetic "performance" that has led such theater critics as Michael Vanden Heuvel and Christopher Bigsby to employ the neologism "performance theater" (see footnote 1).

"would become a central feature of the work of The Living Theatre in the 1960s, and what seemed a revolutionary departure to many in their audiences was actually a notion that began with Pirandello" (111).

But of course it didn't begin with Pirandello. In fact, one of the Living's ongoing "tactics for freeing audience members' perceptions," argues Leslie Atkins Durham, was the actor's realignment of "his/her relationship to other audience members and to the actors on stage" (78). Indeed, as Jack Wright observed of the 1951-52 season, "[i]n each of the five productions, an attempt was made to involve the audience in the action of the play and to seek greater participation. Actors approached audience members…in an effort to force members into some kind of activity" (qtd in Durham 79). The shift that came with the Living's productions of *The Connection* in 1959 and, especially, *The Brig* in 1963 was not a metatheatrical focus, which had long been a tactic of the Living, but a focus on social life itself. A similar redirection occurs in poetry at this same time, when poets begin to consider not the ways in which performative language points back to the compositional process itself but rather the ways in which language—and its performativity—are aspects of social life.

The performativity of social life had by the end of the 1950s become a topic of interest across the social sciences as well. Erving Goffman's foundational text in the field of performance studies, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), put forth what was at the time a new method of social analysis from the point of view of impression management, the techniques by which individuals attempt to control how others perceive them. Using the theater as metaphor, Goffman's dramaturgical method analyzed the individual as a "performer" within a closed system, "surrounded by fixed

barriers to perception in which a particular kind of activity regularly takes place" (238). The individual as performer, Goffman argued, is distinct from the individual as character, the former implying the active process of self-presentation and the latter signifying the often idealized product of that process. But perhaps most interesting was Goffman's conclusion that the self is not a natural and inherent part of an individual but rather a dramatic *effect* generated by the performer and interpreted by the audience. Modifying his general definition of performance ("all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" [15]), Goffman emphasized its communicative goal. Because the purpose of performance is to influence others, he argued, it is not an activity in and for itself but rather a representation of an activity that serves to communicate something to an audience, thereby transforming the activity from doing to performing, but perhaps paradoxically by casting it as mimetic. Walking across a room to reach a glass of lemonade may, for example, be a merely practical activity when it is enacted alone, but the presence of others—an audience—can transform the act from simply a means of acquiring a glass of lemonade to a representation of walking-across-the-room-to-get-a-glass-of-lemonade as a means of creating a specific impression. The distinction of course lies in the presence of an audience, who interprets the performance. The production of a specific impression takes place in the interaction between the audience's interpretation of the act and the performer's (self-conscious or not) enactment of an idealized representation. And as later theorists such as Butler argued, idealized representation can, with repetition, become inseparable from one's bodily movements and experiences.

At roughly the same time Goffman was disseminating his theories of performance

and impression management, British linguist J. L. August was employing the notion of performance as a means theorizing the ability of language to create reality rather than merely refer to it. In 1955, Austin delivered the Harvard lectures that were subsequently collected and published as *How to Do Things with Words*. In an attempt to work out a schema for understanding what we use language to *do*, Austin designated "performative" to indicate an utterance in which the saying of words constitutes the performance of an act—in other words, language is not just the representation of an act but the act itself. While Austin explicitly excluded drama and poetry from the category of performatives because, he argued, they are fictive and not accompanied by sincere intentions, his lectures added a material layer to the act of signification itself. Performed with sincere intentions in appropriate circumstances, language has the power, Austin argued, not only refer to an act but to be an act in itself. What is ultimately most instructive in these lectures is the eventual failure of the categories put forth: that is, although Austin sets out to distinguish between constatives and performatives, he eventually finds this distinction to be false to the degree that there is no such thing as a "pure" performative. Initially basing his definition of the performative on a specific grammatical structure, he eventually finds that it is not the form but rather the context of the utterance that determines whether or not it performs an act; moreover, given the right conditions, even statements may perform acts.

Part of what is at issue in these various interdisciplinary uses of the concept of performance is the very notion of performance as a constitutive or a mimetic act. And this interest extended across the arts to include, for example, Action Painting, Happenings, and aleatory musical composition, all focusing on the performance and

recording of a process/event. Jackson Pollack's work, for example, refocused attention from mimetic artistic representation to the act/action of painting itself, as recorded in the drips, splashes, and footprints left on the canvas. In doing so, it broke down the art/life distinction that characterized the rhetoric of art-as-representation and replaced it with a rhetoric of performance and participation (that, notably, renders critical judgment irrelevant). Rather than abandoning mimesis, then, Pollack changed its focus to the act of painting itself.

To be clear, as records of past events, Pollack's canvases do not exhibit generative mimesis as I discuss it in my introduction. They are, however, representative of a more general shift in mimetic strategies that was taking place in a range of artistic practices in the middle of the century. In a similar spirit, Allan Kaprow's Happenings abolished the text as well as conventions of plot, action, character, and structured form in favor of improvisation and chance events, reducing speech, as Susan Sontag writes, "to a stutter" (266)—and indeed Kaprow notes that Happenings developed not out of drama and theater but out of art practices such as Action Painting. Poetry and theater's identification with jazz informs a similar emphasis on presentation over representation through an improvisatory aesthetic. And yet, like Stein's verbal portraits, each of these events, objects, and performers is unavoidably perceived within a system of references and relations whose meanings inevitably carry over to the performance, not in a predetermined or preconditioned way but as part of the experience of the performative event itself. To characterize this mid-century emphasis on performance as the abandonment of representation or as strictly anti-mimetic is therefore misleading. Regardless of the rhetoric of performance employed by the artists themselves, the impact

of performance relied on reference to, as well as critique of, a system of representation with far-reaching political effects, as Mike Sell acknowledges when he insists that "performance [in the 1960s] was a method that enabled radicals to devise actions that could address simultaneously the structures of language, economics, politics, social institutions, cultural history, and the body" (16).

As much as they shared a performance orientation, however, these different creative practices were not necessarily involved in the same political, artistic, or countercultural project. An emphasis on performance can, after all, be employed for a startling range of effects. In fact, Sell notes that despite their apparent similarities, many countercultural communities employed performance for rather different reasons:

> For Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theatre, for example, the moment of performance cleared a conceptual and affective space in the claustrophobic market halls of imperialist capitalism…..Happenings and Fluxus events also privileged performance as the grounds for a global community, but unlike the Living Theatre, the artists and audiences of early performance art utilized performance not so much to destroy capitalism and capitalist bureaucracy as to divert, exploit, and ironize it. In events such as Allan Kaprow's *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* (1959), performance enabled a radical individualization of art by empowering the spectator as an active maker of the art event and by calling into question the ability of any one spectator to create sensible, coherent accounts of it. (17)

Most importantly, as Sell argues well and at length, there is nothing inherently progressive about the self-conscious attention to the relationship between form and content, just as there is nothing necessarily political about formal innovation.

Such cross-pollination of artistic media and political ideologies was enabled by the conditions of New York in the 1950s. As Bottoms explains in his wonderful study of the scene, Greenwich Village, and especially the East Village, allowed bohemian artists of all stripes to mingle in the smoky haze of its lively bar, coffee house, and jazz club culture. These provisional spaces hosted poetry readings and theatrical performances

outside of the institutionalized structures that, in the economic pinch of the post-War period, hesitated to support anything not guaranteed to be a financial success. Small casts, spare sets, and simple plots made these productions amenable to slim budgets, and they could easily be performed in modest bar and coffee house spaces. Such aesthetic choices may have been driven by economic necessity, but, as Bottoms notes, they had the additional effect of focusing the audience's attention on the bodies and speech of the performers themselves, since there was little else to distract from these. Similar low-budget, performer-centered aesthetics characterized Action Painting, jazz jams, and poetry readings, and indeed artists, musicians, and poets frequently constituted each other's audiences.

It was out of this scene that politically oriented poets' theater emerged—not as a definitive practice but in the sharing of ideas and practices across media and ideologies. Following World War II, the politics of Senator Joe McCarthy, the founding of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947, and the attack on artists in particular led to a separation of art and politics (modeled, for example, in the apoliticality of Abstract Expressionism that influenced the 1950s). But in the 1960s, artists repoliticized aesthetics as they turned to the models, routines, and practices of everyday life. Poets' theater as a politically-oriented practice arises in this transition. If, as Mike Sell writes, "the body often served as the vehicle for communicating or mediating the peculiar time signatures of politically attuned art" (81), then it is no coincidence that the politicization of art emerged amidst a turn to performance that was, as can be seen in the epigraphs to this chapter, characterized as both an expression of the body itself and as a critical rethinking of social life. At the center of this rethinking of the relation of art to social life

was the emphasis on physically establishing community through performance. This communitarian drive was enacted by theater companies and artist communities through creative collaboration and even communal living arrangements but it was also foregrounded in the rhetoric and formal strategies of performance that sought to bring audiences into the work.

Poetry and Performance in Theory and Criticism

Nearly twenty years after Stevens's call for a modern poetry in terms taken from the theater, Donald Allen's groundbreaking anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960) introduced an emerging counter-tradition in post-WW II poetry marked by a performance aesthetic. Much of the poetry showcased in Allen's anthology had up to then reached its audiences primarily through live poetry readings, a format that was in itself considered countercultural. Emerging from Berkeley, San Francisco, Boston, New York, and Black Mountain, the "New American Poetry" challenged academic verse with a living practice that reached audiences directly through performance. In fact, the idea for the anthology came to Allen not long after he'd finished work on landmark issue No. 2 of *Evergreen Review*, featuring San Francisco Bay Area writing including Allen Ginsberg's iconic performance poem "Howl."

Although Allen's anthology links together a range of poetic practices under the general umbrella of anti-establishment performance poetics, there is a need for more nuanced distinctions, and especially a need to distinguish between the Beats and the New York School poets. As David Lehman has breezily characterized it, the Beats, who sported whiskers, berets, and sunglasses and introduced pot, Zen Buddhism, and bongos

to the poetry reading, championed colloquial language and countercultural protest, while, in contrast, the New York poets, who dressed and acted conservatively, located their rebellion "not in social attitude but in artistic innovation" (341). Yet both groups were interested in the cadences of everyday life as well as in poetry *as* experience (rather than as simply a record of experience). "Like the Beats, who were intent on bringing Hebraic chants, Eastern mysticism, and 'bop prosody' into their writing," Lehman writes, "[New York poets] Ashbery, O'Hara, and company tapped sources beyond the strictly literary: movies, comic books, music, avant-garde drama, and, above all, modern art. Like the Beats, too, they were determined to be poetically incorrect; their work is full of provocative gestures and violations of decorum. Unlike the Beats, however, the poets of the New York School pursued an aesthetic agenda that was deliberately apolitical, even antipolitical" (9). There were of course figures who bridged both communities, including Frank O'Hara and V. R. "Bunny" Lang, whose Cambridge Poets Theater, founded with Beat poet Richard Eberhart, produced plays by New York poets as well as by O'Hara. Most importantly, poets and readers of poetry in the 1960s saw more similarities than differences between the groups, influenced in part by Allen's anthology.

Ginsberg's iconic performance poem "Howl" was influenced by another text included in Allen's anthology—Charles Olson's 1950 essay "Projective Verse," which opened the "Statements on Poetics" section of Allen's book. Working against New Criticism's separation of the poet from the poem, "Projective Verse" became a key text for mid-century American poets rebelling against New Criticism's codification of poetry according to a critical approach modeled on scientific rationalism. Olson's manifesto-like treatise sets down a vision of a new, "open" poetry, calling for verse that is both

prospective and percussive and based on Robert Creeley's assertion that "form is never more than an extension of content" (240). Characterized equally by its relation to sound as by its relation to breath—what Olson calls the "speech-force of language" that gives the objects in the poem solidity (392)—projective verse is defined as a transfer of energy, via the poet, from its original source to the reader (and, presumably, to the listener). In this formulation, several things happen simultaneously: while the mind engages with sound, thus producing the syllable, the emotions use the breath to create lines; and in the union of these elements, energy is shaped into form. Olson's emphasis on the syllable as fundamental, as the place where speech "is least careless—and least logical" (241), echoes Futurism and Dada with one key difference: where Futurist and Dadaist poetry was concerned with non-sensical, purely expressive sound, Olson wants to use sound in combination with meaning without subordinating meaning to sound. Noting that "[o]bservation of any kind…is previous to the act of the poem," Olson seems to suggest that narrative meaning (or "observation") is secondary and must be used sparingly. In order to retain the poem's fundamental energy, the poet uses typographical symbols, spaces, etc., to indicate how the poem should be voiced.

"Projective Verse" had a significant impact on 1950s and 60s American avant-garde poets. But the essay is not an argument in favor of the poet's own expressivist ego, as it is sometimes taken to be, but rather a rejection of ego-centric poetry.[16] Olson argues that the form of the poem should be a projection of the content, shaped by the poet who is *listening* and by the poet's own breath. "Breath" does not, however, relate to ego but is instead an emphasis on natural physicality that puts the poem in touch with the

---

[16] A point that Worthen also makes in *Print*.

nature of man, through the poet who creates the poem—rather like the physicality of the performer's presence being explored in mid-century "anti-textual" theater. In this sense, the exploration of the relationship between performance and poetry also becomes the exploration of processes of perception.

Like John Cage, Olson felt that the author's intention should not be imposed on/as form, but whereas Olson believed that form would arise organically from the content as it was physically channeled through the performer's body, Cage worked to impose a structure that was procedural and non-intentional and that originated externally. Olson's sense of "breath" as the expression of some natural physicality assumed a correspondence between language and reality, but it was a correspondence that lay in language's rhythms rather than in its referentiality. In tracing emotion directly from the heart through the breath, Olson locates emotion not in the mind but in the body and finds its expression in the poem's lineation. Meanwhile, the mind uses sound to construct syllables. In this merging of mind and body, form emerges.

Both Stevens and Olson argue in their own ways that poems should not be based on ideas or preconceptions but should be treated as performances that hold tensions. Whether conceived of as a physical performance or as an imaginative act, the emphasis is on the presentational aspects of language—an emphasis which finds important echoes in the work of the French director, poet, and theorist Antonin Artaud. As Artaud's *The Theater and Its Double* announces in its English translation, published in 1958 (the original French came out in 1938) and key reading for a generation of theater artists, "the stage is a concrete physical place which asks to be filled, and to be given its own concrete language to speak" (37).

Criticizing traditional Western theater's emphasis on psychological or emotional conflict created via a privileging of language and dialogue, Artaud instead advocates a theater that provokes spiritual conflict via the concrete language of the mise en scène, beyond the reach of speech, that would use all elements of the stage, including sound, gestures, lights, and physical objects, to produce in the audience both physical response and revelation. While Artaud's denouncement of "speech" and "language" is sometimes taken as a disavowal of all language, Artaud argues that "there is a poetry of the sense as there is a poetry of language, and…this concrete physical language to which I refer is truly theatrical only to the degree that the thoughts it expresses are beyond the reach of spoken language [i.e. speech]" (37).

Artaud's use of the term "theatrical" here is significant. While he located the value of theater in its presentationality, that value necessarily relied on linguistic meaning as contradistinction. Indeed, although Artaud suggests that "[t]o change the role of speech in theater is to make use of it in a concrete and spatial sense" (72), he also asserts in his preface that the theater "rediscovers itself precisely at the point where the mind requires a language to express its manifestations" (12). As Artaud further clarifies in his essay "Oriental and Occidental Theater," speech may be conceived of on a "universal level" as "an active force springing out of the destruction of appearances in order to reach the mind itself," but the West tends to treat speech as completed thought "which is lost at the moment of its own exteriorization" (Innes 70). In this formulation, speech functions non-symbolically to inspire creativity. The thought that is produced by such speech is emergent rather than completed.

The political force of this shift from speech-as-completed-thought to speech-as-

destruction-of-appearances lay in its potential to reconfigure modes of perception via theatricality. As a phenomenon of perception, theatricality depends, according to theater theorist Josette Féral, "on the overlap of representation (ostension, fiction) and presentation (reality, the real)" ("Foreword" 11). Certainly Olson's notion of projective verse as indication of physicality separate from semantic reference satisfies Artaud's notion of the "truly theatrical." As "visual and plastic materialization of speech," Artaud's language of the stage addresses itself "first of all to the senses instead of being addressed primarily to the mind as is the language of words" (69, 38).

In "An Affective Athleticism" Artaud talks about the importance of breath in supporting the actor's body, arguing that the tempo of the breath corresponds to a particular emotion: "It is certain that for every feeling, every mental action, every leap of human emotion there is a corresponding breath which is appropriate to it. The tempos of the breath have a name taught us by the Cabala; it is these tempos which give the human heart its shape, and the movements of the passions their sex" (134). Like Artaud, Olson too suggests that emotion comes more from the body than from the mind, for he traces emotion directly from the heart through the breath, as opposed to form which comes from the mind through sound (which is itself a kind of merging of mind and body).[17] Olson's emphasis seems to be on the breath of the *writer* but is also intended as instruction for reading, which works more actively than theater to put the audience's (reader's) breathing patterns into harmony with the rhythms of the work. In seeking to create emotional response via breathing rhythms, Olson's emphasis on performance resembles

[17] In his essay on Artaud, David Graver notes that it has been shown that spectators' heartbeats and breathing patterns adjust in order to be in harmony with stage rhythms (54).

Artaud's affective athleticism, but it lacks the spiritual goals of Artaud.

Most critics have located Artaud's legacy in an explosion of "anti-textual" theater in the 1960s.[18] Associated with "Happenings," unscripted "spontaneity," and emphasis on the event "itself," anti-textual theater is frequently characterized as openly hostile toward the traditional textuality of the commercial theater.[19] But, as discussed in this dissertation's introduction, "anti-authoritarian" theater might be better descriptor than "anti-textual" for a practice that was largely aimed not at eradicating texts but at destabilizing their authority. But the characterization of the 1960s theater as "anti-textual" also obscures the ways in which the language of a theatrical text may oscillate between presentational and representational aspects. If poetry is, as Worthen asserts, "a field in which performance—particularly performance by *actors*—is regarded with an irritable skepticism," much of poets' theater nevertheless self-consciously plays with the "modern, print-derived understanding of theatre" that assigns the identity of the play to its textual form (*Print* 105, 103). Rather than resist this notion of theater, poets' theater explores the relationship between text and performance as complexly bound up with one another, and often mutually constitutive. What does it mean to write and perform drama

---

[18] Graver, for example, places Artaud in the context of other twentieth-century theater theorists and practitioners, such as German expressionist Oskar Kokoschka, Russian artist and theorist Wassily Kandisky, Russian director and producer Vsevolod Meyerhold, and English director Edward Gordon Craig, who revolted against the subjugation of performance to dramatic literature by emphasizing the primacy of theatrical performance over the text.

[19] Indeed, it is likely for this reason that the recent *Kenning Anthology of Poets Theatre, 1945-1985*, while breathtaking in its historical scope and in the sheer number of plays it brings to new audiences from faraway locations inaccessible to the general public, nevertheless suggests that the lack of documentation of poets' theater scripts suggests that the poet-playwrights "treated their poets theater work as though they were ashamed of having done it" (ii). While there may be something to this, assuming that lack of documentation reveals a lack of interest must also be taken as the particular perspective of the poetry scholar editors, who may perhaps be more at home in a genre that, for all its interest in performance, still measures in textual terms such as publication, documentation, and vast library archives.

while simultaneously attempting to resist the conventions of language that exert a powerful force on our sense of individual and collective identity, worldview, social relations, and the possibilities of all of these? This is the question that might be said to broadly guide poets' theater in the middle of the twentieth century.

Poetry and Performance in Practice

A number of theaters since 1950 have adopted some version of the name "Poets' Theater" (typically without punctuation) as their official moniker: The Cambridge Poets Theatre, founded in 1951 by V. R. "Bunny" Lang; the New York Poets Theatre, a.k.a. the American Theater for Poets, founded in 1961 by Diane diPrima, LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka), Alan S. Marlowe, John Herbert McDowell, and James Waring; the Judson Poet's Theater, founded in the 1960s by Al Carmines; the Nuyorican Poets Theater (now "Café"), founded in the mid-1970s by Miguel Algarín; and the San Francisco Poets Theater, 1978-1984,[20] founded by Nick Robinson and Eileen Corder and associated with the Bay Area L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E (or "Language") writers. In virtually every case, poets' theater seems overall to have been a creative outlet and countercultural community more than an artistic movement.

Existing in various forms from 1951 until its Palmer Street building burned down in 1968,[21] the Cambridge Poets Theatre (CPT) included such participants as Richard

---

[20] A related but discontinuous San Francisco Poets Theater was founded in 2000 by poet and playwright Kevin Killian and continues to the present.

[21] Nora Sayre ends the CBT in 1964, while Andreas Teuber extends it to 1968. A 1986 revival of the Cambridge Poets Theatre continued until 1994, but though it took its predecessor's name, the latter incarnation was a markedly more professional theater that bore little resemblance to the original.

Eberhart, John Ciardi, and Richard Wilbur as "senior" members and Lyon Phelps (credited with initiating the concept of the theater), and recent Harvard graduates Alison Lurie, Edward Gorey, Donald Hall, John Ashbery, and Frank O'Hara. Thorton Wilder and William Carlos Williams were among the first members of its board. One of the CPT's central participants, Nora Sayre, writes in her memoir that the goal of the group was no less than the development of a wholly American verse theater. But nobody who actually participated was able to specify what that meant, and members spent little time worrying about it. Many participants had little previous interest in drama but had joined the group as a countercultural gesture, in an era when there was little counterculture to be found. Influenced by surrealism, Ionesco, the verse drama of T. S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, and W. H. Auden, and plays by William Carlos Williams and Dylan Thomas, participants nevertheless felt that verse drama had not gone far enough. In fact, Sayre insists that American audiences were drawn to traditional verse drama simply for its ability "to fulfill a public need in a philistine era—to assuage the audience's feelings of guilt for not reading poetry: a guilt that [audiences wrongly felt] could be dissolved by the penance of seeing Fry's *The Dark Is Light Enough*" (96). Eschewing professionalism, the CPT strived for a people's theater of common expression and everyday life, trying to avoid the authoritarianism of "meaningful statements" and "saying something" (97).[22] Performances were staged in churches, living rooms, and on

[22] Alison Lurie, an early member, suggests that the theater's initial lack of professionalism was, rather than an explicit goal, simply a condition of its circumstances and even an occasional source of irritation to founder Bunny Lang. Due to this lack professionalism, local Harvard faculty and students wanted nothing to do with the theater in its early years. But as the theater became more successful, those same communities began to flock to it. Along with respectability, however, came constraints that the theater members, and Lang especially, resented. Lurie also asserts that no one in the theater "was single-mindedly anxious to 'revive poetic drama'" (19).

front porches. On its opening night, the theater presented a series of four one-acts, free of charge, including Frank O'Hara's most famous play *Try! Try!*

While Sayre asserts that the most lasting influence of the CPT is its contributions to the development of a "natural speaking voice" for poetry, she also argues that the CPT can be seen as a spiritual predecessor to the later OOB movement and mid-century American avant-garde theater companies and experimental clubs, such as La Mama. Bottoms echoes this claim when he writes that 1960s New York poets' theaters, such as the New York Poets Theatre, the Judson Poets' Theater, and the Hardware Poets' Playhouse, "marked themselves out as more consciously avant-garde than other early off-off concerns, such as the Caffe Cino" (*Playing* 61). Such experimental theater groups and venues ignored the genre distinctions of more respectable theater, and the rise of poets' theater is linked as much to the "burgeoning Village coffeehouse scene, and the popularity of its performance-poetry events" (ibid) as it is to theatrical stagings. This is not, however, to suggest that poets' theater was anti-commercial. Alan Marlowe, one of the founders of the New York Poets Theatre, for example, convinced his co-founders to incorporate the theater as a non-profit organization because, as Diane di Prima recollects, "he thought we could all cash in on it" (255).

These "performance-poetry events" included, as I've already discussed, not only theatrical productions but also, and far more frequently, poetry readings. Readings by Beat poets in particular aimed at countering traditional recitations of poetic works by established authors. While the traditional author's reading of his/her own text served to reassure audiences through its "authoritative rendition of words and ideas already known to [the audience]," countercultural performances functioned "not to reassure but to defy

and undermine the public's assumptions" (Selenick 19). Beat readings were infamously participatory, with poets heckling one another or simply drowning each other out.[23] And di Prima recounts a poetry reading at Rutgers in 1962 that included herself, LeRoi Jones, Frank O'Hara, and others, recalling that "[n]one of us wanted to read last, and so we agreed on the train that at the very end we'd each read a poem aloud simultaneously. It seemed like a very natural solution, immersed as we were in the world of cut-ups and chance composition, but it did make the Rutgers audience rather upset. Folks came storming up afterwards to ask us what we were trying to 'prove.' It was the only time I have ever read at Rutgers" (287). Clearly, in this instance a reassuring, authoritative reading was not the poets' desired effect.

Perhaps the most famous company producing both poetry readings and poets' theater in the mid-century was the Living Theatre, whose transformation from a company devoted to the staging of poetic drama in the 1950s to icons of the presentational theater in the late 1960s is well known. Yet while this narrative of transformation is commonly understood as evidence of the incompatibility of poetic drama and presentational theater, a closer examination of the Living Theatre's goals reveals an affinity between their poetic and performance ideals. The poetic theater favored by the Living Theatre in the 1950s followed the practices and precepts of Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams, both of whom developed new conceptions of poetry that emphasized, in different ways, the materiality of the word and its relationship to performing bodies. And in many ways the

---

[23] See, for example, Tytell's account of a reading by Frank O'Hara and Gregory Corso hosted by the Living Theatre, where the atmosphere of drinking and jeering displayed "a kind of raw, disreputable energy," an energy that Tytell observes became a hallmark of The Living Theatre (153).

Living Theatre's development throughout the 1960s toward increasingly more direct engagement with its audiences—culminating in its most famous production, *Paradise Now*, at the end of the decade—proceeds logically from this early interest in poetic theater.

In most narratives, the Living Theatre's shift from poetic theater to performance that emphasized the "presence" of the actor, allowing for what was seen as a less mediated relationship between performers and audience, was prompted in part by the American translation of Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double* in 1958, and indeed the influence of Artaud's writings on the Living cannot be underestimated. But as Worthen has pointed out, poets at this time were also skeptical of the impersonating actor, and poetry was involved in a similar move toward performance at just the same time, inspired in part by Charles Olson's "Projective Verse." In poetry, the emphasis on the performer's presence was aimed, as has been discussed above, at producing a kind of unmediated connection between poet and audience in which the textual scripting of the language offered some kind of connection with the natural physicality of the poet through the notion of "breath."[24] The Living was well steeped in this rhetoric before discovering Artaud in 1958. Involved as they were in New York's lively performance poetry community, the frequent poetry readings they held throughout the fifties contributed directly, in Donald Allen's estimation, to the development of New York's "extraordinary

---

[24] As Worthen remarks, "Olson's attention to the objective nature of the drama [through discussions of Pound's translation of *The Trojan Women* and of T. S. Eliot's plays] amplifies and specifies the work of projective poetry as a theory of writing and performance" (*Print* 118). Olson's yoking of poetry and performance enter into practice most seamlessly not in the theater but in the contemporary poetry reading, and indeed Worthen limits his own chapter-long study of the relationship of theater to poetry to this "principal form of performed poetry," sidestepping the matter of poets' theater that is the subject of this dissertation (101).

poetry scene" (448). It also availed them of poetry's more developed distribution networks, including mailing lists, small presses, and reading series. What Artaud offered, then, was not a new vision but a way of bringing the Living's interest in non-authoritarian performance into dramatic theater.

The career of the Living Theatre in the 1950s and 60s captures the complicated relationship between poetry, theater, and performance at mid-century. Their first night of plays (performed in the Becks' living room in New York) included Paul Goodman's *Childish Jokes*, Gertrude Stein's *Ladies' Voices*, Bertolt Brecht's *He Who Says Yes and He Who Says No*, and Federico García Lorca's *The Dialogue of the Mannequin and the Young Man*. Their first theatrical production was Stein's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* in 1951, which was followed over the next two years by productions of plays by Kenneth Rexroth, Pablo Picasso, T. S. Eliot, John Ashbery, W. H. Auden, Jean Cocteau, Luigi Pirandello, and William Carlos Williams. This interest in poetic theater was likely the result of a number of influences and goals.

A number of critics have tried to locate a politics in the Living's choice to produce poetic drama. Christopher Bigsby, for example, places the Living's early productions within a wider practice of performance theater that, he argues, "chose to de-emphasize language, partly because of its emphasis on rationalism and partly because, as Pinter, Handke and Albee, among others, have indicated, it is a means for structuring and hence controlling experience" (65)—and indeed Beck makes a similar assertion in the quotation that serves as one of the epigraphs to this chapter. Other critics have interpreted the Living's choice to produce poetic drama in the 1950s as a means of avoiding the reproduction of Cold War ideology by producing plays whose language did

not participate in narrative consolidation.[25] Leslie Atkins Durham, in contrast, finds clear thematic resonances between the Living's 1951 inaugural production of Stein's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, in which a thirst for technological knowledge leads an inventor to sell his soul, and the Cold War nuclear climate.

In a later interview, Living Theatre co-founder Judith Malina critiqued political theater as "something which could be oversimplified as cheap propaganda…it was the sort of thing that had no subtlety[,] that tried to tell you what to think" even while she emphasized that "there was really no question about our commitment and that our commitment was political" (qtd in Durham 78). The trick was producing political theater that was not propagandistic but rather focused on what Durham refers to as "perceptual freedoms," the kind of freedom produced, notably, by a non-authoritarian theater that required an active audience (78). And this is precisely where the Living's early poetic theater productions can be seen as part of a continuum with their later overtly political work.

Beck returns again and again to the importance of poetry in "Storming the Barricades," his introduction to the Kenneth H. Brown's acting script used for the Living Theatre's 1963 production of *The Brig*. In this essay, Beck repeatedly reworks the term "poetry," revealing in the process his own contradictory ideas about the power of poetic theater. In the beginning of the essay, Beck assesses the Living Theatre's early productions as "failures" in aesthetic terms. They simply didn't "work," he laments, and the fault lay both in the difficulty that poets have with writing for the theater and in the difficulty that actors have with delivering poetry (13). Musing that the productions were

---

[25] See, for example, Sell (26 and, more broadly, introduction and chapter 1).

"perhaps too much Schumann and not enough Cage" (13), Beck implies there was too much emphasis on intellectual and emotional appeal and not enough on listening to the sounds of the everyday. But as the company matured, their goal became the creative collaboration between poetry and theater, conceived of as a process rather than as a product, and as an ethics—"[j]oining," as Beck put it, "as opposed to separation" (22). Reading Richards's translation of Artaud had inspired the company "to create that spectacle, that Aztec, convulsive, plague-ridden panorama that would so shake people up" by putting them back in touch with real feeling (24). And it was the separation from "real feeling," Beck reasoned following Artaud, that had led to wars and atrocities. Reconnecting with our feelings would make such suffering intolerable, so that "we might put an end to it, and then, being able to feel, we might truly feel the job, the joy of everything else, of loving, of creating, of being at peace, of being ourselves" (25).

Perhaps paradoxically, Beck implies that both real feeling and social critique were to be achieved by "a strict formalism in the very nature of action," a formalism created by attending to improvisation and pursuing the effects of chance events as an alternative to authorized, predetermined relations. "In the reverence for truly spoken speech, the reverence made clear by the absence of just such speech and the few phrases of friendly conversation," Beck writes, "[are] thick hints of the new poetry we are seeking" (33). Beck's return to the term "poetry" here is informed by contemporaneous poetic practices that sought out the rhythms of "real speech." Unlike Artaud, whose "mistake," Beck argued, "was that he imagined you could create a horror out of the fantastic," the power of *The Brig* was the insight "that horror is not in what we imagine but is in what is real" (35). Communicating this reality relied on the exposure of the controlling power of a

range of institutional and social conventions, including those of language—conventions that created the reality of everyday life. The solution to social ills lay not so much in abandoning language and other conventions of authority and control but rather in reorganizing them so that the relations they produce were not predetermined.

The Living Theatre's Anti-Authoritarian Theater

In 1959, the same year that the Living Theatre produced William Carlos Williams's most famous play *Many Loves*, they also performed their breakthrough production of Jack Gelber's *The Connection*, a play about heroin addicts in pursuit of their next fix. The play compares drug addiction to bourgeois consumerism and wage labor, but it offers no easy answers. Like many of the Living's previous plays, *The Connection* is framed as the fictionalized staging of a play (in this case, a play about addicts), but it also breaks through this frame, both in the actual use of drugs by actors on stage and, more importantly, in the music of actual jazz musicians improvising together on stage.

As a way of orienting audiences to the production's political aims, the program/playbill for *The Connection* included Artaud's essay "The Theater and Culture," which was the introductory essay in *The Theater and Its Double* (Sell 71). In this essay, Artaud writes that art should be useful, for "[i]f confusion is the sign of the times, I see at the root of this confusion a rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas and signs that are their representation" (7). Here Artaud seems to be arguing in part against the *art pour l'art* movement. But, notably, he does not suggest that representation should be banished but that representation should be used like a totem—

that is, as something that has a shadow or "double" and that can also, like magic, bring something new into being. If Artaud is ambivalent toward theater's use of representation, it is an ambivalence borne out of his specific critique of an inwardly oriented theater, a theater separated from everyday life.

The anti-textuality with which Artaud is so commonly associated must be understood in these terms—as a break not from language, or even representation, itself but rather from language cut off from life. *The Connection* particularly appealed to the Becks in this sense because it challenged the division between theater and everyday life. And it did so, furthermore, by focusing attention not on the theater itself but on the cruelty (and painful monotony) of everyday lives of social outcasts such as drug addicts.

The production's depiction of the suffering of addicts was inspired by Malina's recent experience with addicts during her imprisonment in the New York Women's House of Detention.[26] According to Malina's own account, both Beck and Malina were detained in 1957 for refusing to report to a fallout shelter during an air-raid drill. During their thirty days of incarceration, they got to know many of their fellow inmates, many of whom were prostitutes and drug addicts. "This crucial moment in the Becks' political education," Sell notes, "ratified for them a lesson first taught to them by Allen Ginsberg: artistic revolution was inseparable from bodily revolution" (71). The goal was to confront audiences with real suffering in order to inspire them to act toward social change.

Bradford Martin considers *The Connection* a turning point in the Living's

---

[26] For Malina's account of the arrest and detention, see *Diaries* entry for August 1957 (441-462). See also Tytell 133-137 and Martin 59-60.

merging of art and politics. Whereas in previous productions, Martin asserts, the company relied heavily on aesthetic innovation that referenced very little outside of itself, *The Connection* drew, like Beat poetics, on the cultural influence of jazz improvisation.[27] In fact, many of the performers in *The Connection* were actual jazz musicians whose improvisatory musical interludes were incorporated directly into the stage performance.[28] Sell concurs when he writes that while Pirandello's *Tonight We Improvise* and Williams's *Many Loves* both displayed an ambivalence toward the written text that he characterizes as antitextuality, it wasn't until *The Connection*'s discovery of jazz as a structural component—what Sell refers to as a "jazz epistemology"—that antitextuality become more than a thematic in the work of the Living (78). In fact, Sell suggests that the "jazz jam" as social form was part of the political strategy enacted by the Living (94). Existing outside of typical market structures allowed for an individual to do and say what she pleased. Jazz jams were not, however, intended to be public spectacles. Instead, they were lessons in listening that brought the performers themselves together into an interactive community.

When stoned, the characters of *The Connection* put language together in ways that don't always proceed rationally—in ways, in fact, that might be considered poetic, such as in the character Solly's address to the audience:

> As you have gathered, we are, as they say in the tabloids, dope fiends. We are waiting. We have waited before. The connection is coming. He is always coming. But so is education, for example.

---

[27] According to Sell, the audience at *The Connection*, at least before word started filtering out, was largely working-class blacks and middle-class white and black jazz fans (75).

[28] Some of the actors were also real heroine junkies, who admitted to actually shooting up in front of the audience.

> The man who will whisper the truth in your ear. Or the one who will shout it out among the people. I can't generalize and believe it. I'm not made that way. Perhaps Jaybird [the producer of the play] has chosen this petty and miserable microcosm because of its self-annihilating aspects. This tells us something about Jaybird, but nothing about me. Hurry, hurry, hurry. The circus is here. Suicide is not uncommon among us. The seeking of death is at once fascinating and repellent. The overdose of heroin is where that frail line of life and death swings in silent breeze of ecstatic summer. The concept of this limbo you can hold in your palsied hand. Who else can make so much out of passing out? (40)

Sell refers to the play's druggy speech, which wanders at times into the sounds of agony, as "a kind of sound poem…what we would now call a deconstructive performance that troubles the distinction between text and performance" (120). That is, the Living dramatized the rejection of the text by making the script itself an object of struggle between the junkies and the "producer" of the play, rather like Pirandello's *Tonight We Improvise*. While I concede that *The Connection* might be characterized as a "deconstructive" performance, its use of live jazz improvisation begins to make the transition toward the use of non-mimetic performance itself that was to become a central concern of the Living Theatre in the later part of the decade and which has become the Living Theatre's greatest legacy.[29]

Like Pirandello's *Tonight We Improvise* and Williams's *Many Loves*, *The Connection* is structured as a play within a play: a producer has brought together a group of addicts to improvise his theater script about junkies. But, as Martin points out, unlike the two earlier productions, which consisted entirely of pre-scripted action and dialogue, *The Connection* combined pre-written dialogue with improvised action to create a version

---

[29] To call something "deconstructive" implies, as Sell suggests, that its purpose is to "trouble" distinctions. Later poets' theater, as examined in this dissertation, is less interested in troubling distinctions—although this is certainly part of what it does—than in promoting a performative epistemology and a generative mimesis as an alternative to a text-centered ideology.

of realism as the performance of actual events unfolding in the present moment (58)—a version of Stein's recalibrated realism that sought to create experience in the present moment through verbal performance that drew on both the semantic and material aspects of language. If, as Martin asserts, *The Connection* was "a theatrical event that depicted more than two hours of 'real time' in the lives of junkies waiting for a fix" (58), such monotony must be understood as an attempt to achieve the temporal conditions of real life. Demanding real silences, real dirt, real jazz, and real speech, Beck aimed for a "resurgence of realism" because "what had been passing for realism was not real" ("Storming" 26).

In their 1963 production of *The Brig*, the Living took this reformulation of realism one step further. The play depicts the terrifying discipline and order of an actual Marine Corps brig in Japan in 1957—a horror, the play's notes explain, that was "feared and ignored by members of the unit not directly connected with it" (43). The Living's production sought to involve audience members not by placing them in the midst of the action—as productions of *Tonight We Improvise*, *Many Loves*, and even *The Connection* tried to do—but rather by enforcing a separation between audience and performers. Concretized in the barbed wire fence at the edge of the stage, this barrier was intended to submit the audience to the pain of coerced divisions and ultimately lead to them to action, the storming of the wire barricades, borne of a desire for union. The villain of *The Brig* is therefore not a character but rather, as Judith Malina puts it in her essay "Directing *The Brig*," the "Immovable Structure" itself, embodied in the prison as well as in the separation of performers from the audience that reinforces the social structure of bourgeois society.

What the Living tried to do with *The Brig* was more than mimic the confinement, monotony, and cruelty of a military prison. All of their rehearsals were aimed at creating similarly cruel conditions, conditions that were as genuinely constricting to them as prison life was for the characters of *The Brig*. The pain created by the performance is therefore not a strictly mimetic representation but a re-presentation, an enactment inspired by actual experiences but relocated into a new context. If it's not possible to take audiences to an actual military brig, the production implies, it *is* possible to give audiences a similar emotional experience through the re-presentation of the pain of the confinement, control, and routinization of all human activity in the space of the theater.

In order to accomplish this, Malina prepared a set of "Rehearsal Regulations" that she modeled on the play's "Brig Regulations," which were themselves modeled on a U. S. Marine Corps manual. The rehearsal regulations included strict adherence to a rigid schedule, to be determined by the stage manager; the prohibition of eating, joking, or conversation unrelated to rehearsal; a dress code; and substantial penalties for misconduct, tardiness, or absence. The rules were so unlike the usual operation of the company that members had to take frequent "breaks" to relieve tension. More importantly, the strict rules about formal address, respectful silence, and the prohibition of joking left the normally intimate company with a distinct feeling of separation from one another. The rehearsals therefore paved the way for a strangely naturalistic performance, in the sense that the emotions and conditions that the actors portrayed on stage were in fact the actual emotions and conditions effected by the rehearsal regulations.

The published text of *The Brig* includes an introductory essay by Beck entitled

"Storming the Barricades" and a concluding essay by Malina entitled "Directing *The Brig*," and it is in the divergences of these two essays that we can see the separation of poetry from physical theater begin to take place in the rhetoric of the Living's co-founders. Beck's essay makes a case for the honesty of emotion in plain speech that is not just a matter of speaking plainly but of scripting language accordingly. Arguing that "[l]anguage is the key. It opens the doors that keep us locked in confining chambers," Beck derides the publisher's decision to make more than 600 revisions to his original text without his approval, a decision that erased Beck's use of typography and punctuation intended, in the spirit of Olson's "Projective Verse," to distinguish "passion from affectation and me speaking to you from me writing an essay" ("Storming" 3, "Mister Beck" v). "Honest" language, for Beck here, resides in what he termed "speech" but might be better described as oral performance: in "the poet reading aloud, the actor speaking the word, not on the page, but in the ear" (4).

Beck's own characterization of his writing as a form of resistance to the "ancien regime of grammar" suggests that he locates in nonconformist uses of language a means of liberating not only literature but also the world.[30] And in fact, Beck makes the connection between writing and theater explicit when he says of the publisher's revisions that he has "the feeling I might have if the barbed wire that separates the audience from the action in The Brig had been removed, because somebody thought the spectators could see better that way" ("Mister Beck" v). To Beck, then, *The Brig* does not serve as a

---

[30] Beck's remarks resemble John Cage's claims that "[d]ue to Norman O. Brown's remark that syntax is the arrangement of the army, and Thoreau's that when he heard a sentence he heard feet marching, I became devoted to nonsyntactical 'demilitarized' language" ("Writing for the Second Time through *Finnegan's Wake*" 133).

departure from the company's earlier devotion to poetic theater. In fact Beck claims that the Living Theatre's first major production—of Stein's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* at the Cherry Lane theater in 1951—and the 1963 production of *The Brig* "are like mirrors locked face to face….Both are concerned with examining minutely a moral sensibility and both are concerned with identity. Both are deeply formed by the rhythms they create" ("Storming" 8). The history of the Living Theatre's growth from *Doctor Faustus* to *The Brig*, Beck seems to suggest, might best be understood in terms of "development" rather than "change" (9)—a development that led the company from its earlier "revulsion…against sham" to its current interest in "poetic action" (6). "Nothing can get closer to life than verse," Beck insists, "and nothing further away, nothing further away as when the verse strays into representing that kind of life which never ought to be" (11).

But Beck's emphasis on plain speech supports an ego-centric understanding of language, in which writing is used to create the best approximation to the natural oral expression of the speaker/writer. This is a rather different understanding from Malina's theatrical description of the actors, who, she observes, "play[ed] themselves" (qtd in Innes 63). In Malina's essay, the framing of the theater transforms the assumption of identity as "natural" manifestation to a performative enactment. As Pierre Biner describes it in his history of the Living Theatre: "Instead of saying, as a traditional actor, 'I am the embodiment of Richard III,' or as a Brechtian actor, 'I am Mother Courage, but I am also Helen Weigel playing Courage,' the actor in the Living Theatre says, 'I am Julian Beck and I play Julian Beck'" (170). The intent, I want to argue, is not to suggest that all identity is mere "play" but rather that the relationship between identity and

performance is complex—in fact, it may not always be clear whether one is watching a representation or an enactment or that there is necessarily a clean distinction between the two.

Increasingly what it meant to "play" one's "self" was open to debate. Within the frame of the play, the "self" takes on the contours of character, even if the goal of the acting is to communicate a lack of pretense. And as experiments in presentationalism reached their investigative limits, both poetry and theater began to shift in the 1970s away from a contrapuntal relationship between representation and presentation and toward the idea of a continuum between the two, with each pole—"pure" representation and "pure" presentation—as philosophical, rather than actual, possibilities.

In 1972, *The Drama Review* published an important essay by Michael Kirby entitled "On Acting and Not-Acting" in which Kirby abandons the opposition of representation and presentation and instead portrays acting as a continuum that held the two in productive relationship to one another. At one end of Kirby's continuum is "nonmatrixed performing," in which a performer "is not embedded, as it were, in matrices of pretended or represented character, situation, place, and time"; at the other is "complex acting," in which multiple elements of pretense are employed by the actor (4). The complex combinations of the elements of impersonation increase the degree to which actors are seen to represent specific character identities. Thus, as the complexity of acting increases, so too does the degree of representation attached to their bodily presence on the stage.[31]

---

[31] Interestingly, Annabelle Henkin Melzer echoes Kirby's analytical continuum in her analysis of the connections between Artaud and the early period of Dada performance in Zurich, 1916-1917. In an attempt to differentiate Dada actors from other actors, Melzer identifies three

Part of what Kirby emphasizes here is the status of actors not as objects but in their relations to each other, rather like what was described in poetry as the verbal "field" of relations. As performers embedded within a matrix of impersonation who are simultaneously involved in non-illusionist performance, the actors in *The Connection* raise questions about the boundaries between art and everyday life—questions aimed not only at exploring the reach of artistic practices themselves but also at questioning the very boundaries subscribed to by many academics and practitioners alike.

In describing the actors as "play[ing] themselves," Malina implies, intentionally or not, that such representations are generative, that they have the potential to create new understandings and relations by allowing us to perceive the articulatory practices that go into their construction. They are also political in the sense that they make audience members aware, sometimes uncomfortably, of their complicity in accepting such representations and situations. Artaud's lasting contribution to poets' theater, then, might be best understood as a cruelty that forces us into awareness not only of the world as it is but also into an awareness of our own roles in constructing it that way, via all the structures and strategies of representation and creation we have available to us. And it is this understanding that marks the start of a politically oriented poets' theater.

---

analytical categories—the skilled actor, the masked actor, and the personal actor—and places the Dada performer in the last group (49). That is, the Dada actor appears on the stage as himself, even though he may be wearing costumes and performing unusual actions. Unfortunately, after spending a few pages to set up these distinctions, Melzer doesn't make much of them.

CHAPTER TWO

"UNINTELLIGIBLE GIBBERISH" AND THE JAZZ AESTHETIC: AMIRI BARAKA'S BLACK NATIONALIST POETS' THEATER

Amiri Baraka's 1967 play *Home on the Range* opens with a typical domestic scene: a white middle-class American family—Father, Mother, Daughter, and Son—are seated in their living room watching television, eating popcorn, and talking. This domestic ritual is observed by a black Criminal, who appears at the window looking in on the scene as an outsider, marked both by his location outside the home and by his skin color. This clichéd presentation of the cultural marginalization of racial minorities, who are relegated to peering in on "America" (coded white) from the other side of the window, is complicated by the play's challenge to corresponding norms of language usage. While the black Criminal speaks in clear English, the white family's chatter is incomprehensible, a nonsensical string of repetitive expressions such as "Gollygolly" and "Mamarama," sounding vaguely like the soundtrack of a wholesome 1950s family sitcom twisted into unintelligibility. Although the black Criminal is racially, spatially, and even linguistically marginalized from the white family's performance of domesticity, it is the Criminal outside the home, rather than the white family inside, with whom the audience is encouraged to identify through a shared language.

Largely due to what Werner Sollors has deemed the white family's "unintelligible gibberish," composed of "meaningless word fragments reminiscent of Ionesco dialogues" (208), this Black Nationalist one-act has been consigned to the critical waste bin. And if critics don't dismiss the play for its unusual language, they bypass it as an anomaly in Baraka's general development as a playwright. Kimberly Benston, for example, has

called it "a baffling piece," a "collage of absurdity, farce, social satire, mythology, and apocalyptic vision…designed to make a series of quick, catching, and only loosely related impressions on a large audience," and "probably the least powerful of Baraka's agit-prop pieces" (*Baraka* 219-220). More recently, Sandra G. Shannon has flatly summed it up as essentially "based upon tongue-in-cheek inversions of the usual negative principles of black behavior assumed by whites" ("Evolution" 277).

But in 1967-1968 the play seemed destined for a more auspicious career. First read publicly in San Francisco in Spring of 1967 as part of the Black Communications Project,[32] the play was given a full production in 1968 at Newark's Spirit House and taken on tour to Boston and Chicago courtesy of the Spirit House Movers and Players.[33] And in March of 1968 it was published in the celebrated Black Theatre issue of *The Drama Review* (*TDR*), the foremost American journal on avant-garde theater. Two months later its New York tour opened before an audience of 2600[34] at the Fillmore East Theater in New York's East Village as part of a Black Panther benefit to raise bail money for Eldridge Cleaver and six other Panthers in California jails. The play shared a bill with theater pieces by Ed Bullins and Robert MacBeth, among others, and with speeches

---

[32] Werner Sollors explains that Baraka's "Black Communications Projects" "were all-Black affairs, attempts to reach Black audiences in order to make them more Black-conscious. These activities, although cultural in origin and scope, moved Baraka into more visibly political arenas, from Black Power conferences to Pan-African conferences" (179).

[33] *Range* was also the first of two one-act plays by Baraka (the second was *A Black Mass*) comprising *Roi*, produced in July 1970 in Los Angeles by the Performing Arts Society of Los Angeles (PASLA) and directed by Van Whitfield. The PASLA Players were non-professional actors from the local black community. See Jones for a review of that production.

[34] To put this figure into perspective, Off-Broadway theater houses were limited by the Actors' Equity Association in 1949 to no more than 300 seats, while Broadway theaters might have as many as 1000 or 1500 (Aronson 107-109). Spirit House had only 30-40 seats (Baraka "Amiri Baraka, March 30, 1984": 20).

by H. Rap Brown, Marlon Brando, Mrs. Eldridge Cleaver, and Bobby Seals, as well as by LeRoi Jones himself. The high-profile event was covered by *The New York Times* and *Commonweal* and taped by the National Broadcasting Company, the British Broadcasting Corporation, The National Educational Television Network, and the radical film group Newsreel. And yet the play soon fell into obscurity, with no productions on record after 1970 and no reprint for thirty years.[35]

The fact that a play would disappear is not in itself remarkable, of course. The economics of theatrical production and dramatic publishing, to say nothing of changing audience interests and critical tastes, ensures that most plays are lost to history. But more than most plays, perhaps, *Range* is both product and victim of its particular historical, social, and aesthetic moment—a clash of pro-textual experimental theater, 1960s anti-textual ritualism, and agit-prop political realism, a language-oriented Beat-inspired aesthetic, Black Nationalist ideology, and the emerging sense of cultural performativity championed by the "new social movements," all coming together at a particularly activist moment in African American cultural history. And while the strategy of placing a conventionally marginalized character at the center of the performance may sound to contemporary critics like a simple inversion of normative representations, *Range* attempted to move beyond mere representation by staging what was a revolutionary blend of "total" theater—here, a constellation, I want to argue, not only of dramatic performance, dance, and music but also of *textual* theatricality. Merging poets' theater with social performativity and political agit-prop, the play explores the politics of aurality as counter to visuality and as antidote to the double-consciousness of blacks in white

---

[35] The play was reprinted for the first time in 1999. See Annemarie Bean.

society.

Prologue: Baraka's Art and Politics in the 1960s

1967-1968 was a pivotal period in the development of Baraka's Black Nationalist consciousness. The second National Black Power Conference, with more than 1000 people in attendance, had been held in Newark in 1967, on the heels of the Newark Rebellion in which Baraka had been arrested and, eventually, sentenced for inciting violence. A few months later, Baraka and Harold Wilson founded the United Brothers (later The Committee for a Unified NewArk and, still later, the Congress of African People) to promote cultural nationalism and black political unity (Woodard 89). In 1968 Baraka also founded the Black Community Development and Defense Organization, whose members wore African dress, conversed in Swahili, and professed a version of Islam. As a way of both claiming and performing his Africanist identity, he thereafter abandoned the "slave" name LeRoi Jones in favor of the African-identified Imamu Amiri Baraka, a change that Jerry Gafio Watts characterizes as "Baraka's dramaturgic approach to politics" (310).[36] For Baraka the Black Nationalist, culture was political and "[a]ll activities were cultural" (Van Deburg 177), and he famously advocated the performance of black culture and the expression of black life through politically-committed artistic practice as elements in bringing about a Black Nationalist revolution.

But Baraka's appeal to performativity can be traced even further back, before his black cultural politicization, to his participation in the fertile avant-garde artists' scene of

[36] Baraka later dropping "Imamu," after his conversion to Third-World Marxism, as a "bourgeois" affectation.

New York's Lower East Side in the early 1960s, where ritual performance groups, underground dramatic theater, and text-based, performance-oriented avant-garde poetry all flourished side-by-side. Baraka himself was both actively involved with the widely canonized Beat poets of the late 1950s and early 1960s and also associated as a sort of mentor figure and political colleague with the black writers of the Umbra Poets' Workshop group. Many of the poets in both groups employed a textual aesthetics influenced by elements of live performance, but the Umbra poets, unlike the Beats, grounded their performance aesthetics in an orality and musicality associated with African and African American cultural traditions.[37]

Baraka's transformation from Greenwich Village avant-gardist to Black Nationalist in the mid-1960s is often succinctly (if simplistically) characterized as a shift from an identification with white America to the championing of blackness. It is marked most explicitly by Baraka's abandonment of the downtown avant-garde scene for Harlem to found the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BART/S) in 1965, shortly after the February 21 assassination of Malcolm X. From the start, the Black Arts Movement (BAM) and its offshoots strived to wed art and politics through the power of performance and the action of the live event. Early BART/S members brought drama into the streets, performing on improvised stages in different Harlem locations night after night.[38] Yet

---

[37] Although there is a cultural politics inherent in Umbra's emphasis on African American traditions, James Edward Smethurst notes that the first issue of Umbra's eponymous journal championed aesthetics over politics. Nevertheless, he argues, "radical politics…was central to the lives of many of the members" (148). In fact, the demise of Umbra is generally attributed to "ideological conflict [especially conflict between Marxism and Black Nationalism] and the relation of ideology to group action" (149).

[38] For an account of these early days of the BART/S, see Baraka's *Autobiography*, especially the section entitled "Black Arts (Harlem, Politics, Search for a New Life)," 202-229.

the inaugural performance of BART/S was not a play but a poetry reading, a performance format that Lorenzo Thomas has argued was essential to the artistic and political visions of the BAM.[39] From the beginning, the BAM, and Baraka in particular, saw power in the intersection of poetry and ritualized cultural performance. But by 1966, BART/S had been undermined and eventually destroyed by internal disagreements, and Baraka left Harlem for his hometown of Newark, New Jersey, where he established a new black cultural center, Spirit House, dedicated to both political and cultural action. Like BART/S, Spirit House provided training and performance space for black drama, poetry, art, and music and served as an educational and spiritual center. And it established Newark, with an estimated black population of 220,000 in 1967,[40] as the center of Black Arts and Black Nationalism on the east coast.

Significantly, this move from Greenwich Village to Newark is also reflected in the theaters in which Baraka's plays premiered in the 1960s. Prior to 1965, virtually all of Baraka's plays debuted within what might be thought of, loosely, as New York's off-off-Broadway theater scene (OOB), situated downtown and populated largely by liberal white artists.[41] *The Eighth Ditch* (1961) was part of the New York Poets Theatre's

---

[39] For a discussion of poetry readings in the BAM, see Thomas.

[40] In fact, Newark's transformation from a majority white to a majority black city in the 1960s was astonishing. According to a recent Rutgers University publication, "[i]n Newark, as a result of post-war suburban migration, the white population plummeted to approximately 158,000 in 1967 from 363,000 in 1950 and 266,000 in 1960. Correspondingly, the black population of Newark rose from 70,000 in 1950 to 125,000 in 1960 and an estimated 220,000 in 1967. By 1967, a majority of Newark residents (55%) were African-American," (Herman: 11).

[41] I am indebted to Bottoms for my discussion of 1960s OOB theaters.

inaugural program (along with plays by Diane di Prima and Michael McClure)[42], while *The Toilet* (1962) was first presented by the Playwright's Unit (founded by Edward Albee and Richard Barr), which also premiered *Dutchman* in 1964. *The Baptism* (1964) was performed by the Present Stages company in the East Village in double bill with Frank O'Hara's "most accessible and stageable play" *The General Returns from One Place to Another* (Bottoms 80). Even the first of Baraka's overtly Black Revolutionary dramas, *Experimental Death Unit #1*, was staged at an East Village venue—St. Mark's Playhouse, home to Theatre Genesis, where Sam Shepard began his playwriting career in 1964. But as Baraka explains, this was largely an arrangement of convenience: "We charged $20 a ticket, the audience was mostly white, and we used the money to pay down on the brownstone and help put the building [for the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School] in some shape" (Reader, 370). Notably, Baraka abandoned the OOB "circuit" with his next play, *A Black Mass* (1966), which was first performed at the Proctor's Theatre in Newark. *Great Goodness of Life* (1967) and *Home on the Range* (1968) both premiered at Newark's Spirit House, while *Madheart* was first staged at San Francisco State College in 1967 with a Black Arts alliance cast. Such a migration not only of Baraka's creative home but also of his collaborative and audience networks, and their attendant aesthetic and political expectations, changes the potential impact of these performances.[43] Baraka notes, for example, that although *Dutchman* received an Obie

---

[42] The New York Poets Theatre was founded in 1961 by Diane diPrima (who had previously worked with the Living Theatre), LeRoi Jones, James Waring, Alan S. Marlowe, and Fred Herko. Also known as "The American Theater for Poets," it was "a nonprofit organization to encourage painters and poets to work in the theater" ("Theater").

[43] It is worth noting that BART/S and Spirit House represent perhaps the most revolutionary wing of the Black Theatre Movement (BTM) but by no means the only ones. Other

for Best American Play when it was produced at the Cherry Lane theater in 1964, its subsequent production by BART/S on Harlem street corners "was deemed 'racist' by the authorities and ultimately contributed to the reappropriation of the school's funding and, as a consequence, the school's demise. At the same time, the production enabled the self-identification of a community of African Americans who at one and the same time were appropriating the legacies of the Western Enlightenment and recapturing the history of the African diaspora" (Sell 33).[44]

Baraka's migration from Greenwich Village to Harlem to Newark reflects not so much a break with his past as a change in direction toward an increasing allegiance to black culture. White language and artistic strategies seemed incapable of expressing

---

BTM theaters include Harlem's New Lafayette Theatre, founded in 1967 and led by Robert Macbeth, the Negro Ensemble Company, founded in 1967, The National Black Theatre, founded by Barbara Ann Teer in 1968, and Woodie King, Jr.'s New Federal Theatre, founded in 1970. The New Lafayette, which survived for six years, had the highest profile of any BTM theater and it played a role in bringing Ed Bullins to national prominence when it hired him as its artist-in-residence, subsequently producing several of his plays. The Negro Ensemble Company (NEC) was the most adversarial to Black Arts and Black Nationalism, a position revealed by its location downtown at St. Mark's Playhouse as well as by its use of the word "Negro" in its title. Tension between the NEC and the Black Arts Movement (BAM) eventually led Barbara Ann Teer to split from the NEC to form The National Black Theatre (NBT). Like BART/S and Spirit House, the NBT was a school and workshop as well as a performance group. It was also the longest-surviving New York company that had its foundations in the BAM and was a "pioneer of ritual black theater [and] became an integral part of the Harlem Black Arts loft scene that also included the Black Mind, the Last Poets' East Wind, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and, for a time, the New Lafayette Theatre" (Smethurst 104). Although, as Smethurst notes, the fact that the NBT produced no public performances before 1970 (indeed, its heyday was the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s) makes its impact difficult to judge, many Black artists cite the NBT as an important training ground (105). Woodie King, Jr.'s New Federal Theatre had a close relationship with Black Arts but was itself a multiethnic, multiracial arts program that originally grew out of the publicly funded, anti-poverty Mobilization for Youth and was more professionally oriented than most BAM institutions.

[44] Of course, the fact that BART/S played the white characters in whiteface likely contributed to the play's denunciation as racist. In the BART/S productions, Baraka's sister Kimako played the role of Lulu in face paint that made her "look like some kind of monster. She painted her face so that it looked like a mask--like some kind of monstrous projection, like a symbolic character" (Baraka, "Amiri Baraka, March 30, 1984": 12).

black cultural experiences. The question was how—and increasingly if—avant-gardist strategies could be put to Black Nationalist use. Like many people active in 1960s avant-garde theater, Baraka acknowledges the influence of Artaud. By placing the audience in the midst of the spectacle, Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty attempted to complicate the role of the spectator and to preclude the pure pleasure of passive entertainment—notably, the kind of entertainment being enjoyed by the white family at the beginning of *Range*. As a dramatist and Black Nationalist, Baraka's use of ritualized performance and his emphasis on the total mise-en-scène was therefore not unique. But whereas most ritual theater groups of the period foregrounded the relationship between the performer and spectator as a model for, and opening into, more egalitarian social relationships, Baraka took this relationship in a new direction. Spectatorship for Baraka was not only a sign of political passivity, but it was also an ideological trap largely associated with white middle-class rituals, such as the "American" family ritual of watching television together as in the opening scene of *Range*. In seeking to transform Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty into concentrated social action, Baraka enacted rituals associated with African American culture as a way of intervening in the dominant ideology. Notably, the rituals that Baraka chose to emphasize—dance and musical expression in general and jazz improvisation in particular—shifted the performance from an emphasis on the liberatory power of personal interactions to the enactment of community and cultural traditions. And it was in this way that Baraka saw his theater as social action.

In a 1980 interview with William J. Harris, Baraka explains: "[Artaud] seemed to want to commit violence on certain bourgeois intellectualism in a sense, and I wanted to transform that into actual violence on society itself, a society that I thought of as

oppressive and racist…Artaud was to me the blind thrust against bourgeois sensibility and bourgeois consciousness. I wanted to make it much more overtly political and much more focused" (Harris 141). Like Artaud, Baraka was interested in "total" theater, or theater in which music, poetry, dance, and drama all worked together to create a transformative experience, but Baraka aimed at no less than cultural transformation that would bring about, as he put it, "the destruction of Western imperialism" (Duval 253).

Just as Baraka did not simply break from the 1960s theatrical avant-garde, neither did he break from his training as an avant-garde poet, and the total theater performed by *Range* extends beyond its staging to include a poetics on the page that constitutes a kind of "textual theatricality." Textual theatricality, as I am conceiving of it, stages language in what W. B. Worthen has called the "mise-en-page" (11). Such a layering of representation and presentation can have political impact, as perhaps Brecht best theorized, for as we simultaneously recognize both the representational frame and the reality of, for example, the acting bodies on stage, we are faced with a duality that "obliges us to see differently" (Féral 11). Textual theatricality obliges us, along similar lines, to *read* differently. Kept within the frame of the page, with its attendant meaning-making conventions, scripted language is understood as discursive representation. But the visual and aural elements of a text are also experienced as material realities that exist in various and unstable relationships to the discursive text. "Textual theatricality" therefore denotes the overlap of the material and discursive texts, creating a link between production and reception. And in this conjunction of production and reception, and of discursivity and materiality, textual theatricality is also performative.

While *Range* is the most extreme example of Baraka's marriage of poetry and

dramatic theater, it is not the only one. Several of Baraka's plays were simultaneously ritualist, anti-authoritarian, and pro-textual, staging a confrontation between linguistic convention and embodied expression that in some ways re-presented the conflict of African Americans in European American society. The pre-Black Nationalist *The Toilet* (1962), for example, follows the style of much 1950s and early 1960s New York poets' theater—written by poets such as Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Diane di Prima, and performed by groups such as the Artists' Theatre (1953-1956) and the New York Poets Theatre (1961-?)—that sought to revitalize theater by bringing to it a heightened awareness of language. These works rejected the social realism of popular theater (exemplified in the works of Lillian Hellman and Arthur Miller, among others) and instead focused on, in the words of The Artists' Theatre founder Herbert Machiz, "the private landscape of tormented souls living in an environment they never made" (9). Machiz's other characterizations of these works—that they desired to "bypass an exhausted naturalism in favor of a fresh approach to the individual in the coils of modern society" and to depict "the irony with which contemporary man must view a world where everything has become incredibly difficult to understand" (9)—make it clear that the purpose of these plays was not social activism but rather a depiction of the painful isolation of the individual, and Sollors argues likewise that Baraka's *The Toilet* "never completely transcends the individualistic 'love story' reading. It is an unresolved fusion of aesthetic protest (as the abstract sentimentalized affirmation of individual beauty against the brutal social order) and emerging ethnic protest" (116). But as Baraka honed his poetic-dramatic style, the aesthetics and politics of his plays began to cooperate. The punning, indeterminate, "perverse" language of *The Baptism* (1964) linguistically

performs the play's themes of hypocrisy and perversity, and notably *The Baptism* can be read not only as an indictment of religious perversion but also in part as a critique of apolitical bohemianism. And yet neither *The Toilet* nor *The Baptism* performs anything that can be called black culturalism.

This changed, however, with 1964's *Dutchman*, a play explicitly concerned with U.S. race relations and devoted to the communicative limitations of language and to the political limitations of art. The protagonist Clay is a pre-Revolutionary poet, afflicted with DuBoisian double-consciousness, who chooses speech over action. But although Clay's murder at the end of the play can be read as a call to action for African Americans, *Dutchman* does not exhibit the racial separatism of Baraka's next play, the overtly Black Nationalist *A Black Mass* (1965). *A Black Mass* relates a Black Muslim mythical story critiquing the individualist values of European America (while the music of Sun-Ra plays in the background). When the black scientist Jacoub creates a creature that is half (white) beast and half (black) humanity, another character accuses him: "You made them. Human. You made them. And now they roost in the human mind" (26). As the word "Human" slides here from its reference to Jacoub into the suggestion that Jacoub made the beasts themselves human, the boundaries of humanity slip. And in this single poetic ambiguity, the text encapsulates the play's fear of racial mixing and of the threat, once again, of double consciousness. A similar, more cutting, poetic slippage occurs in *Madheart* (1966) when the white Devil Lady, depicted as a "free enterprise" prostitute who has been killed, in part, by a spear thrust into her "hole," comes back to life and speaks: "Enter the prize. And I am the prize. And I am dead. And all my life is me. Flowing from my vast whole, entire civilizations" (6). The aural slippage from "hole" to

"whole" implies the cultural emptiness at the core of white civilization. The Devil Lady's w/hole is not the "whole" of the cultural accord but rather a "hole" that prevents black unity. As the white-identified black Sister and Mother mourn the Devil Lady's loss, they also mourn an America divided and unwhole without recognizing, the play makes clear, that the wholeness they seek comes only at a price devastating to black America. With the accumulation of such suggestive slippages, we can begin to identify a poetic strategy increasingly at work in the aural excess of Baraka's plays of the 1960s.

White Voices, Black Voices

While the examples above demonstrate the ways in which play texts can actually perform, rather than merely capitulate to, meaning, *Range* represents Baraka's first full-fledged attempt to employ textual performativity to cultural nationalist ends. Notably, the culturally-oriented textual performativity at the heart of *Range* arises simultaneously with the emergence in the 1960s of the "new social movements," of which the "black" movement is considered the vanguard (Omi and Winant 4). Unlike the economically-oriented Marxist social movements of the previous era, "new" social movements emphasize processes of social learning and are marked by what Ronald Inglehart has termed "postmaterial values" to indicate that as humans are liberated by societal advances from their material needs, they shift their attention to nonmaterial goals such as freedom of expression, environmental conservation, and cultural liberation.[45] As a movement located at the transition from "old" to "new," the U.S. civil rights movement "reflected the shifting focus of consciousness from the material to the cultural as the driving force in

[45] See especially chapter 2.

the cognitive praxis of social movements" (Eyerman and Jamison 145). Black Nationalism has its roots in the civil rights movement but represents a more radical politicization of black identity aimed at cultural separatism. And the revolutionary cultural activism of Baraka's Black Nationalist poets' theater, which came to a boil in the racially performative *Range*, epitomizes this transformation from "old" to "new" and from protest to separatism.

Range is, above all, a play that must be *heard*, a fact that becomes apparent as soon as the characters, watching television in the living room, speak their opening lines:

> FATHER: Red hus beat the trim, doing going.
>
> MOTHER: Yah, de 89 red garter shooting.
>
> FATHER: Siboom, das blows.
>
> MOTHER: Coil. (107)

Because most of the words in these opening lines are recognizable as words, one's first inclination is to assume a mimetic representation and, therefore, to try to make sense of the language.[46] The syntax, too, mimes familiar structures, further supporting the feeling that the language can be decoded, perhaps as a kind of "urban" ethnic vernacular.

Given Baraka's explicit emphasis on the ideological processes at work in all dimensions of expression, it should come as no surprise that the language of the white characters is, in fact, a carefully crafted nonsensicality rather than mere "unintelligible gibberish." Attention to the rhythm of the words reveals the hint of a possible language

---

[46] This inclination would likely be heightened in viewing the performance, where the possibility of not having one's ear readily attuned to the particular sound of a character's language can render the first few lines meaningless until the viewer has hit upon the right "code" through which to understand the rest of the performance.

structure, which structuration is further emphasized by the phonic echoes present in the Criminal's own intelligible speech. Phonemes such as "hus," "yah," and "das" suggest a German influence. The assumption underlying the text seems to be that attention to the language will eventually unlock its meaning. Perhaps, for example, "de 89 red garter shooting" refers to a significant local event, like "the blizzard of '78." The Father then responds to his wife with a general expression of discontent or critique, to which she rejoins in agreement. While we remain unable to translate the specific meaning of individual words, we can locate in the rhythm of the language the miming of a general pattern of conversation, suggesting that the voicings of the Mother and Father can create the *experience* of language despite the fact that they are semantically undecipherable.

In a 2003 interview with Kalamu ya Salaam, Baraka describes this experience of language rhythms as "onomatopoetic":

> SALAAM: …[I]n *Home on the Range* and *Experimental Death Unit*, you have people talking all kinds of stuff. How did you write that? I'm asking a technical question. Did you put words in a hat and just pull them out?
>
> BARAKA: No, I got the rhythms of what I thought they might be saying.
>
> SALAAM: What do you mean by rhythms?
>
> BARAKA: Well, the kind of people I was creating, their personalities would make them go (does a chipper sing-song rhythm).
>
> SALAAM: So you heard the sound of what they would sound like, but how did you get the words?
>
> BARAKA: That's what I heard. You just try to make an onomatopoetic representation.
>
> SALAAM: Onomatopoetic? Is that a technique you use often?
>
> BARAKA: Yeah, always. That's what bebop is. You take the rhythm and make it into a vocal sound.

> SALAAM: So the rhythm becomes the melody and the harmony?
>
> BARAKA: Yeah, which it is anyway, to me, always, but that's another thing. (225)

For Baraka rhythm thus functions as a kind of ideological contouring of language. Speech rhythms reflect not just physiological differences but also "personalities" and cultural identities. But note as well the final turn of this discussion from onomatopoetic rhythms of speech associated with particular people to music and then, more specifically, to the notions of melody and harmony. Whereas early jazz and blues performers such as Louis Armstrong used instruments to imitate the sounds of the human voice, Baraka, paradoxically, uses scat-like language to imitate the sounds of the human speech, thereby insinuating absence precisely through the medium traditionally associated with notions of presence. One way to understand this implied distance is as an argument that, to borrow a phrase from Ajay Heble, "language can only 'stand in the way of' rather than 'stand for' presence" (61).[47] Because the white characters produce sounds that only *mimic* language, a system of meaning that is in itself arbitrary, they are, the play suggests, more removed from the world's realities than the black characters. In emphasizing absence, such mimesis creates not identification but rather the marked failure of identification.

This is not meant to suggest that *Range* is an overt critique of the notion of naturalized meanings. Baraka was, after all, famous for championing black music as the natural expression of black culture. But the absence implied by the musical mimesis of

---

[47] Heble's argument is that literary postmodernism and atonal "free jazz" are analogous in that they both emphasize form over content and assert that meaning can be found in the relations between signs rather than in any external referentiality. This argument tries to counter Baraka's claim that jazz arises out of a specific culture, for Heble asserts that Armstrong's use of the horn to imitate voice (and thereby emphasize absence) "works to conceal the cultural or social attitude that it wishes rather to reveal" (54). He reads Baraka's *Dutchman* as a play about the failure of naturalism, an inability to access human essence or reality through representation. Although I find Heble's argument intriguing, my reading of *Range* finds reference in the structure of the sounds. Thus, the "absence" indicated by the white characters should be read as a cultural critique rather than as an argument about the nature of language.

the white characters' speech functions as both deconstructive and cultural critique that might best be likened to contemporary notions of racial performativity. While the imitative, echoic voices of the white characters signal a lack of natural expressiveness, the black characters and, perhaps more importantly, the music associated with them (discussed in more detail below) can communicate their most fundamental experiences through *active* expression. Language is presented as a tool of ideological control, and music is both circumvention and alternative production. This is not to say that music is free from convention, but it is not constrained by the same burden of meaning. As Fred Moten has asked, "[H]ow is it that a work can bear content, have something to say, while not being wholly bound to the constraints and requirements of making meaning?" (Rowell 962). This is the realm and challenge of poets' theater.

Aurality emerges as Baraka's culturalist weapon, setting the play apart both from mainstream theater and from most other OOB theater of the period. While *Range* shares with much OOB theater, often performed in cafés and makeshift venues, an emphasis on a particular moment instead of the development of themes and a linear narrative, OOB playwrights "tended to stay in one place—literally, the small space of the stage—and to view that place prismatically, creating a variety of perspectives on the central dramatic circumstance by 'riffing' improvisationally around it. They keenly felt the need for a central, theatrical image around which a play could cohere," focusing on what they found most visually exciting (Bottoms 125). Baraka employs a similar singular emphasis in *Range*, but in his use of a central musical element and aural slippages, transforms the visual "riffing" of OOB into a verbal multiplicity that creates competing ideological perspectives. And while the Beat poets are known for a similar emphasis on aural performance, and even a use of jazz as a central motif, Baraka's use of aurality is aimed at the performance of blackness as a means of cultural transformation. As a *theatrical* strategy, this shift is key, for it marks a break from, and even antidote to, American culture's, and especially American theater's, increasing ocularcentrism. By uniting

aurality with the visual realm of theater, *Range* explores the collaboration between the ocular and aural registers, complicating the conventional argument that aurality simply opposes visuality.[48] How one (as both subject and object) looks is inseparable from how one sounds.

Although audiences are distanced from the white characters via their initial use of language, the space that opens up in this mimesis of absence creates the possibility for an ironic reversal of values in a moment that occurs just before the black Criminal enters the home: as the Daughter is preparing to the open the door of the family's house in response to the Criminal's knocking, the Mother says (warns? exclaims?) "Achtung Swachtung" (33). Whether one is reading the play text or one is seated in the audience watching a performance of the play, the effect of this language is the same: the reader/spectator tries to translate it. This impulse to translate comes from a desire to make sense of language already mobilized as musical and overdetermined within a context of conventional assumptions about the realist referentiality of language in agit-prop political theater. Significantly, the original typescript draft of *Range* reveals that "Achtung" does not function here simply as a nonsensical word important only at the level of sound, for Baraka has corrected the apparent typographical error "actung" in the original draft to conform to the German spelling "Achtung," indicating that for Baraka the German spelling is important.[49] Echoing the Germanic overtones of the play's opening lines, "Achtung" means, of course, "attention." The Germanic influence is significant, for by drawing on images of the Third Reich, this instance of attention is imbued with the terror of fascism and even of cultural or actual genocide (a variation, perhaps, on the cultural

---

[48] Garrett Stewart's *Reading Voices* and Adalaide Morris's *Sound States* are notable exceptions to this tendency. For a brief introduction to the literary analysis of sound in writing, see Morris's introduction (1-14).

[49] The original typescript for *Range*, with Baraka's holographic emendations, is held at the Schomburg Library.

erasure of the Plains Indians implicit in the play's title motif). Attention, it seems, may not always be a good thing, and indeed, *Range* may be seen in part as an argument against the kind of faith in the transparency of language that assumes that attention or logic will render everything clear. This belief in the universality of logic and meaning manifests itself in a kind of linguistic fascism that finds certain structures comprehensible and others "baffling" or mere "gibberish."

Like "Achtung," "Swachtung" is also overdetermined, but, in addition, it resists easy translation, although its sound and appearance suggest not only that it is meant to mimic German but also that it is closely, even metonymically, related to "Achtung." Both visually and aurally, it is possible to read in the first syllable of "Swachtung" the suggestion of *schwarz*, or "black," indicating perhaps a warning of the Criminal who is about to appear at the front door or, more broadly, an echo of the overall racial theme of the play.[50] Phonemically and visually, "tung" echoes *zunge*, meaning "tongue" and suggesting perhaps language, sound, or voice, but it also resembles *tunen*, "to tune." Together in the same word, this cacophony suggests black music or black voices, crookedly foreshadowing the moment a few lines later when the Criminal speaks his first words.

It is surely no coincidence that the Criminal is not engaged in the theft of material possessions. Despite the Criminal's declaration in the opening scene that he has come "to commit a crime," Baraka has edited out of the original typescript the more specific "I just want your valuables." The removal of this line from the final text renders the crime more ambiguous. The criminality exhibited here is perhaps best imagined as the "fugitive spirit" discussed by Nathaniel Mackey in "Other: From Noun to Verb," an essay

---

[50] It is worth noting that the German *schwarz* also translingually echoes the vocal component of the musical accompaniment (probably not Ayler's) described by *Commonweal* reviewer Paul Velde as assuming "a chanting quality: 'black, blackness, blackness, black'" (441).

whose title was inspired by Baraka's writings on black music. Allied with the history of fugitive slaves, the fugitive spirit refers to the "flatted or bent notes of the African American's altered scale" that, perhaps like the blackness in "Achtung Swachtung," evades detection by white ears (55). Or as Fred Moten describes it, it "is the sound of the resistance to slavery; the critique of (private) property and of the proper, and it is, in the radical transformationality of all of its reproduction and recording, its commodified dissemination and circulation, irreducible and ongoing" (Rowell 963). The "criminality" of fugitivity appears only in reference to white laws and notions of propriety, just as here the Criminal is marked as such not because he steals (which he does not) but rather in his position outside of "American" family institutions. He is an American fugitive whose survival, the play suggests, depends on the aurality lurking just outside (the window of) the prisonhouse of meaning.

Given *Range*'s foregrounding of black cultural forms of performance, it is of particular significance that the power of attention expressed by the word "Achtung" is eroded not by singsong play but rather by the black voices of "Swachtung." Like the expression "fancy schmancy," that works recursively to trivialize the first term in the pair by phonemically parodying it so that "fancy" is no longer fancy at all but rather, mockingly, fancy *schmancy*, "Achtung Swachtung" ridicules the idea that compelled attention will reveal univocal meaning by subjecting it not merely to singsong deconstruction but rather to the specific parodic power of black voices. The phrase's resistance to translation and ridicule of the assumption that attention simply to words and grammar will unlock meaning, spits readers back out into the realm of aural experience, particularly the experience of black language and black music as performative antidotes to European American cultural ideologies.

Such parodic performances may have appealed to Black Nationalist audience members, but they appear to have only offended white audience members, who found neither their lives nor their values expressed in the play. *New York Times* reviewer Dan

Sullivan—who alludes to his own whiteness when he condescendingly notes that "I must stop saying 'Negro': if the evening taught me anything, it is that the word is 'black'"—clearly feels that the play is not speaking to him. But he concedes that "to criticize this poem, or incantation, or harangue, or whatever it might be called, as if it were a piece of literature is to miss the point. Jones uses words as weapons; he is a propagandist. If he stirs up an audience, he had done [sic] what he is trying to do, and he did exactly that last night." The play stirs up audiences, Sullivan grudgingly admits, but not white audiences, who, like Sullivan, presumably feel that "it is a profoundly boring thing to hear the word 'black' repeated what sounds like 25 times." In a similar fashion *Commonweal* critic Paul Velde comments that the title "Home on the Range" "apparently drops with sarcasm on the right ears," making it clear that his are not the "right" ears (440).

Velde would not have been the only one offended by the play's relentless critique of "whiteness." While many of the new social movements, particularly the student free speech movement, disparage the modern scientific-technological state and champion alternative forms of knowledge and education, *Range* turns this into a racial censure. Associated with middle-class capitalist consumption and media indoctrination, the language of the white characters demonstrates at best that they have been brainwashed and at worst that it exists only within a system of exchange, an empty signifier devoid of any power for critique or cultural change. This influence of the media is first demonstrated through laughter:

> (Laughter is coming from the television set. A cold hideous sustaining laughter: That backs the CRIMINAL unintentionally into the wallpaper.)
>
> CRIMINAL: Goddam. (he waves gun at television)
>
> (Laughter goes on, rising. Then broken by explosions, of great dimension. Screams. People in violent turmoil. The laughter rises again above it. Now the FAMILY, the MOTHER starting it, passing it to the SON, to the DAUGHTER, then the FATHER. They all begin to imitate the laughter on the television screen. They are wiggling and shaking, slapping each other and grabbing themselves in a frenzy of wicked merriment.)

FATHER: HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! (107-8)

Despite the obvious devastation of the explosions, screams, and images presented in the television scenes—experienced by the audience aurally, the textual directions indicate, rather than visually—the family responds not with concern or with action but rather, led by the television voiceover itself, with laughter. And this laughter is, notably, textually rendered as simple repetition without variation, creativity, or change (ha ha ha), rather than as reiteration and difference. "Jones had made the same points in a talk earlier in the evening," Velde notes of the Black Panther Benefit performance, "that blacks are more natural, more creative than whites, who are imitative and who basically want to be like blacks" (441). Baraka reveals America's idealized "home on the range" as an ideological trap, an embodiment not of the individual freedom associated (by some) with the frontier spirit but rather an empty imitation, effected through the static repetitions of propaganda piped in through the mass media, that nevertheless has the power to constitute and control our very identities (there)by creating distance from ourselves.

In layering black voices and values into the white characters' discursive absence, as he does with "Achtung Swachtung," Baraka creates in his white characters a kind of dual subjectivity that recalls, but does not quite invert, the "double consciousness" of African Americans described by W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Significantly, the sing-song expression of this dual subjectivity functions to break down white normative codes and infiltrate them with blackness, creating a projection of "black" values onto the representations of "white" bodies. The result is not that Black Nationalist audience members' identify with the white characters but rather that they identify simultaneously with the blackness that has infiltrated those characters and with the power

connoted by blackness's defeat of whiteness. The effect is Brechtian in the sense that it "makes palpable the theatre's ability to (de)construct the spectator's apparently individual, transcendent 'subjectivity' by implicating individual desire in the externalized process of the stage[….It]teaches us that desire, the desiring subject, is what the theatrical mode of production *produces*" (Worthen *Print* 129). And as it does so, performance aesthetics become a tool for cultural change.

Rather than think of this in terms of alienation, however, I'd like to consider it in terms of defamiliarized identification. That is, identification is not prevented, or even resisted, but its mechanisms are exposed. Desire and identification are not devalued but denormalized, channeled through aesthetic processes that allow for disidentification with European American rhetorical structures and aesthetic conventions. Such rewired identification would certainly have been aided in performance by the fact that the role of the white father was performed not by a white actor but by a black and Latino member of the Spirit House Movers and Players, Marvin Pancho Camillo. "His portrayal of a 'Dad' of one of the average American families in *Home on the Range*," Baraka recalls, "convinced me he knew madness! He could imagine himself to be the thing he hated!" ("Marvin" 106). In playing "the thing he hated," and playing it straight rather than as caricature (the strange language notwithstanding), Camillo performed whiteness and blackness simultaneously. Certainly his skin color would have prevented audiences from simply identifying the actor with the character he portrayed, thereby bringing theatricality (as the overlap between representation and the real) into view. The whiteness that Camillo performed stands out as a racial enactment that relies on characteristics other than skin color—that is, Camillo's character is recognized as white even though the

actor's skin color is not white. Such racial cross-dressing parodically disrupts the conventional invisibility of whiteness. Ironically, Camillo's brownness renders his character's skin color "invisible," just as whiteness is considered to be invisible in broader American society. But what makes whiteness invisible in Camillo's portrayal is not its normativity but its absence. Moreover, although whiteness is not visually represented here, it is nonetheless clearly marked—a fact which subjects it, at least symbolically, to (black) surveillance and scrutiny.

African American audience members, whose skin color has conventionally subjected them to political surveillance, would surely have appreciated this turning of tables. But the political strategy of *Range* relies not just on marking what has typically remained unmarked but furthermore on reversing the power structure encoded into visibility and invisibility. The play suggests that black voices and black music can offer a means of slipping past European American culture's surveillance structures, infiltrating white spaces and white normative conventions with an uncontrollable blackness.

Performativity and the Jazz Aesthetic

Cultural nationalist aesthetics were for Baraka just one element of a broad revolutionary program of "nation-becoming" that included participation in black political conference, voter drives, community education, and agitations of all sorts.[51] Working on

---

[51] Smethurst defines "cultural nationalism" as "an insider ideological stance (or a grouping of related stances) that casts a specific 'minority' group as a nation with a particular, if often disputed, national culture. Generally speaking, the cultural nationalist stance involves a concept of liberation and self-determination, whether in a separate republic, some sort of federated state, or some smaller community unit (say, Harlem, East Los Angeles, or the Central Ward of Newark). It also often entails some notion of the development or recovery of a true 'national' culture that is linked to an already existing folk or popular culture. In the case of African Americans, cultural nationalism also usually posited that the bedrock of black national

multiple fronts simultaneously, the goal was to instill pride in African American traditions while at the same time critiquing European American culture and to provide an alternative that both celebrated and enacted self-actualizing identities—relying not on mere performance (the realm of representation) but on performativity, which for Baraka constituted an ethics. In a manifesto entitled "The Revolutionary Theatre," published in *Liberator* in 1965, the year after *Dutchman* was first produced, Baraka calls for a theater that communicates revolutionary spirit though the playwright's use of ordinary language "tightened by the poet's backbone," suggesting the poet's ability to transform ordinary language into a cultural weapon (4). In this formulation, the political nature of the revolutionary theater does not lie merely in its depiction of black heroes or in its thematic exposure of black oppression but also, and, Baraka suggests, more importantly, in the "aesthetic" of the plays: "Wittgenstein said ethics and aesthetics are one. I believe this" (4). In arguing for the unity of ethics and aesthetics, Baraka is, in part, pointing to the ideological processes by which art is created and critiquing the European tradition of separating art from lived experience, which tradition Larry Neal has critiqued as "symptomatic of a dying culture" (31). The Black aesthetic, both Baraka and Neal argue, weds aesthetics and ethics as a means of intervening in the cultural ideologies that lead to oppression. In Baraka's 1966 play *A Black Mass*, for example, the black scientist Jacoub performs increasingly dangerous experiments despite the protests of his fellow scientists. He eventually creates a white Devil, the embodiment of evil, who represents, Neal

---

culture was an African essence that needed to be rejoined, revitalized, or reconstructed" (17). Revolutionary Nationalism, on the other hand, is defined by "an open engagement with Marxism (and generally Leninism), particularly with respect to political economy, Leninist notions of imperialism, and often Communist formulations of the 'national question'" (16). The difference between the two represents, once again, the difference between the "new" and "old" social movements.

suggests, “the aesthetic impulse gone astray” (36). Taken as a parable for artistic creation, the play argues that acts of creation must have a function, must not be meaninglessly separated from the world into which they are created. Art becomes both action and moral value and, importantly, can be seen as an alternative to the idiotic passivity of the white Family in *Range*.

Baraka has written extensively on the ethics of music as cultural expression and as ideological intervention. In *Blues People*, he argues that music is a way of emphasizing the “swing,” or verb force, of the artistic process, a process to which he refers elsewhere as “art-ing”: “Art is like speech…in that it is at the end, and a shadowy replica, of another operation, thought…Art-ing is what makes art, and is thereby more valuable” (“Hunting” 175). Western culture, Baraka asserts, is too focused on nouns, or objects, instead of on the processes that create objects. If we are to have actual social change, we must, he insists, intervene in the ideological processes of meaning-making itself. Thus, Baraka’s theories of music may be seen as having a dual emphasis on music as cultural expression and on music as a more widely targeted cultural critique. In this way, musical performance becomes a form of social action, a means of expressing cultural allegiances as well as a model for intervention into oppressive social ideologies.

It is therefore significant that the play script of *Range* opens with the explicit direction, set off from the rest of the text by larger typeface, that this is “a play to be performed with the music of Albert Ayler improvised in the background” (106). Ayler was not only a political colleague of Baraka but also provided him with a musical model for his own cultural aesthetic. Ayler’s signature song “Ghosts” begins with a jazz transformation of popular white folk songs, such as “Oh Susanna,” which, like the song

"Home on the Range," celebrated American Westward expansion. Yet for Baraka cultural ideology lay not just in the lyrics but in the musical form as well. Western musical traditions esteem the regularity of pitch, tempo, etc., and seek clarity and cultivation, he argues in *Blues People*, while African American traditions value imagination and circumlocution (29-30). "Clean" Western melodies emphasize the artifact whereas African American jazz improvisations emphasize the playing itself, with the music as an expression of the self that cannot be separated from the final product. Just as Ayler's "Ghosts" moves from simple, "regular" melodies grounded in Western traditions to a free jazz improvisation that transforms but never entirely abandons those melodies, Baraka's *Range* attempts to voice its resistance to white ideological systems of meaning by transforming but never entirely abandoning the language of white cultural oppression in the U.S. This transformation occurs in the "total" work that goes beyond the structures of meaning—what Baraka refers to as Ayler's "total articulation" of "sound" that goes beyond "notes" ("The Changing Same" 200)—much as Baraka's own total theater goes beyond lexical meaning and staged representations. And as an element in Baraka's total theater, Ayler's musical accompaniment serves not just as background but as "an added dramatic dimension—as narrator, as actor" (Shannon "Amiri" 427). "Music, to me," Baraka asserts, "is as much alive as the actors" (ibid.).

Much has been written about Baraka's use of "jazzification,"[52] but as Kalamu ya

---

[52] Shannon's recent article on Baraka's Black Nationalist theater includes an excellent discussion of the jazzification process at work in the title of *Range*. She argues that Baraka's titular appropriation transforms the rural idyll of white America that is the subject of the song "Home on the Range" into a parody that ends up "giving blacks the moral and philosophical advantage over whites" (283). In fact, Shannon's article is the first serious attention any critic has paid to the play.

Salaam points out in his recent interview with Baraka "[m]any critics and cultural observers have said that Baraka is very much influenced by black music, and they start looking at the obvious things like [he uses] music when [he] performs the poetry, but they don't look at what it means temperamentally and structurally to be influenced by the music" (233). In order to examine what it means that Baraka is "temperamentally and structurally" influenced by music, it is necessary to go beyond the simple recognition of music as a performance element and instead to see it, as Baraka suggests, as an *actor* in the play.

Both Harris and Sollors have, in fact, noted the "murderous" character of Baraka's Black Nationalist aesethetics and portrayed these plays not as mere texts to be read but as weapons to be wielded. Based on the deconstructionism of prominent jazz musicians such as Charlie Parker and John Coltrane, the idea was to take a familiar, often sugary song like "My Favorite Things" and tear it apart through increasingly discordant repetitions.[53] "Baraka also wants to take weak Western forms," Harris has argued, "rip them asunder, and create something new out of the rubble. He transposes Coltrane's musical ideas to poetry, using them to turn white poetic forms backwards and upside down. This murderous impulse is behind all the forms of Baraka's aesthetic and art" (15). But to characterize Baraka's jazz aesthetic as "murderous" obfuscates its performative goal (which Harris himself hints at when he argues Baraka wants to "create something new")—after all, Baraka's weapon of choice is not a gun but jazz.

As black audience members identify with the blackness now embodied in the

---

[53] Coltrane himself said he played "My Favorite Things" for its chord changes, but what matters most here is not the reason for the choice but rather what he did with it.

white characters (though not, notably, with the white characters themselves) and as they feel "stirred up" by the music that (at least according to the reviewers) leaves white audience members feeling only alienated, the ethics of Baraka's aesthetic begins to take hold. In parodying European American language and rituals, Baraka repeats them with a difference—a "black" difference based on a jazz model that both critiques the original (in the empty onomatopoeia of the white characters "sounds") and infiltrates it with an alternative (in the blackness hidden in the white characters' "language"). Significantly, blackness is presented as performative while whiteness is presented as unproductive, unethical, and alienated reiteration. Abjected blackness upon which white identity is based is now apparent in aural performance, as the "other" that lurks, like the criminal just outside the window, in the "in-between" of presence and absence. Baraka employs avant-garde strategies in order to undermine white ideologies. And, ironically, audience members are likely to identify not only with the blackness of the black characters but also with the blackness in the white characters, for although the relative normativity of the black characters is attractive, it is the projection of black values onto the white characters that is most striking, most notable, and most gleefully amusing.

In describing John Coltrane's jazz aesthetic as simultaneously deconstructive and self-presentational, as both "structural critique" and "phenomenological inflection," Kimberly Benston provides a description that might be applied just as aptly to Baraka's performative jazz aesthetic (*Performing* 132). Coltrane's deconstructive method points up the limitations in, and the ideology of, the use of harmonious melodies. As the performance grows increasingly discordant and as the gaps between notes seem to disappear, something new emerges—something that is no longer deconstruction but has

morphed into the constitutive reiterations of performativity. How might we "measure the authority of 'rendition' as against 'original,' and by way of that question, how to construe the relation of interpretation to invention," Benston asks (*Performing* 131). Indeed, Baraka's performances are not merely inversions of originals. Via their repetition with a difference, or what Baraka calls the "changing same," they also create new relations.

Range's portrayal of whiteness is similarly deconstructive and self-presentational, in that it creates the potential for new identifications. The white characters in *Range* are victims of their own culture of alienation. As self-absent voids, they do not inspire identification but rather create the possibility for *dis*identification, an important, if symbolic, break in the historical chain of identifications on which double consciousness is based. As the white characters' "presence" recedes, we are faced with the "absences" which constitute white identity—the blackness in whiteness. Of course, this is still a parodic mimesis, presented from the antinormative position of black power in American society. But it creates a new relationship to whiteness that is less oppositional than mere resistance, more powerful than ridicule and denunciation, and potentially more transformative than speech-making. Like Stein's "insistence," here re-tuned as the enactment of a community ethics, Baraka's "changing same" is a *generative* reiteration. In re-presenting, rather than reproducing, whiteness, Baraka addresses the politics and power of representation. His characterizations are not mimetic in the traditional sense of reinforcing normative themes, concepts, etc.—the "performance" (musical, staged, written, or otherwise) is not secondary, does not simply reflect "the real" or refer to "the world," but rather generates new identifications.

Harris has labeled Baraka's performative transformations the "jazz aesthetic"

because they employ "jazz variations as paradigms for the conversion of white poetic and social ideas into black ones" (13). Baraka turned to jazz aesthetics from (white) avant-garde techniques, Harris argues, because he found that the revolt against the bourgeoisie did not go far enough, did not take into account the racial violence that was bigger than the individual. As Harris puts it in a comparison between Baraka and Allen Ginsberg: "Baraka's commitments are collective; Ginsberg's are to the unfettered soul. Thus, while Ginsberg's politics spring from Emersonian individualism, Baraka's spring from ethnic collectivism" (26). Along similar lines, Larry Neal calls (in the same Black Theatre issue in which *Range* was published) for "the destruction of the white thing" which he formulates, in part, as a rejection of the notion of individualism and the championing of a communal ethics. In transforming white "language" with the performativity of black music, language, oral histories, and rituals, Baraka offers a collective alternative to the individualist ideology of European American histories and rituals.

"[T]heatre is potentially the most social of all the arts," Neal argues, and he sees the sociality of theater not just as a condition but as a duty, for theater "exists in direct relationship to the audience it claims to serve" (33). In other words, theater does not merely reflect society, it actively *socializes* its audience. Benston (a former student of Larry Neal) has more recently asserted that the Black Arts aesthetic promoted a group participation (which he terms "methexis") that relied on a kind of "expressive realism," in which language does not simply observe or confirm experience but, instead, becomes a way of grasping and affecting the world" (*Performing* 201). *Range* can be characterized in similar terms. In particular, the language of the white characters might be understood as the warped realism of a generative mimesis, relying in this case both on the hyper-

realism of onomatopoeia and on the generativity created by attending largely to the aurality, rather than the referentiality, of language. The ethics of this aesthetic lie in its system-immanent critique and in its ability to create multiple identifications where previously only one had been allowed to exist.

Notably, the embodied performance witnessed by audience members of the stage production of *Range* emphasizes the interaction of the visual and the aural. As noted above, instead of marking the white characters visually, as in conventional realist theater, Baraka marks them aurally—they sound "white"—though just what makes their sounds white is alienation and a *lack* of cultural expressiveness rather than any clear rootedness in European American tradition. The generativity of this aural-visual interaction arises in the fusion of temporally-based language (in both its oral and textual forms) with the totality of the visual, a fusion that does not so much dismiss ocularcentric knowledge as subvert its primacy. What matters here is less what you look like than how you sound. And, for Baraka, how one sounds is always culturally based.[54] The use of cultural sounds is Baraka's weapon. In using sound, both on the page and on the stage, to take theater past its usual limits, Baraka creates new possibilities for identification in the interactions between the visual and the aural—in identifying with the blackness that has infiltrated the white characters, black audience members can sit back and laugh *at* and *with* the ridiculously singsong "Achtung Swachtung." The ideology of white language has been emptied out and rendered innocuous, defeated by black performativity.

---

[54] "How You Sound??," taken from "Louis Armstrong's ad-libbed line on a 1949 recording with Billie Holiday," was the title of Baraka's essay in *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* (Mackey 60).

Framing the Text

Given the complexity of *Range*'s strategies, it is perhaps not surprising that Baraka directed the play himself, as he did with many of his own plays during the 1960s, arguing that he could "give the work an added kind of accuracy in terms of the interpretation" (Shannon, "Amiri" 425). Certainly the extensive narrative direction provided in the play text of *Range* reveals a desire to control the performance—in effect, to direct it—from the page, suggesting that in Baraka's ideal vision (which, of course, may never have been realized in actual performance) the play's textual and staged elements share similar performative strategies and identificatory goals.

In fact, Baraka's attention to dramatic textual direction borders, quite literally, on the poetic. A classic example is the opening to *Dutchman*, which begins "In the flying underbelly of the city. Steaming hot, and summer on top, outside. Underground. The subway heaped in modern myth" (1). What exactly does a "subway heaped in modern myth" look like? What is a "flying underbelly"? Clearly these are directions meant to be read rather than to be used for practical staging design. As the introduction continues, it refers not to a specific character but to a "man" and a "face" which smiles, rather than Lula's face or Clay's face. These descriptions suggest that the protagonists are types whose encounter takes place in the mythical and vague setting of the city's "underbelly," rather than the fully individualized characters of realism. And indeed the circularity of the play's ending (in which Lula will apparently go on to victimize yet another black male) makes it clear that Clay is not an individual object of love but a categorical object of racism. *Dutchman* presents not a unique occurrence but a rule, and this meaning is indicated initially in the play's literally unstageable "paratext." In employing to

performative ends textual conventions generally considered insignificant to theatrical production, Baraka challenges text/paratext distinctions and, in doing so, once again underscores the need to rethink the exclusions upon which all performances are based.

It should not seem farfetched, then, to look for layers of meaning in what is perhaps the most textually unremarkable of dramatic conventions—the character list. On first glance *Range*'s character list may appear blandly ordinary: "The Father, The Mother, The Son, The Daughter, Black Criminal, A Crowd of Black People, Black Man 1" etc. But for those familiar with Baraka's dramatic texts, the racial designation of these characters is striking, for in all of Baraka's previous plays, blackness is presented in the character list as normative: he racially marks all characters or marks none, or marks whiteness but not blackness, thereby turning something as seemingly innocuous as a character list into a political statement on racial normativity and the invisibility of whiteness. Against this background, *Range*'s list of characters at the beginning of the play sets up expectations of European American cultural codes by marking black characters while leaving white characters racially unmarked. By setting up the play within European American cultural codes, in which whiteness is un(re)marked and blackness is marked and therefore surveillable, Baraka creates the conditions for the play's aural, and even fugitive, infiltration of ocularcentric cultural norms. When the play ends with "The End" rather than with Baraka's more usual, and racially suggestive, "Black," it is perhaps because blackness has infiltrated whiteness so thoroughly that the assertion of "Black" is no longer necessary in the play's post-apocalyptic, post-white world.

But the most significant "paratext" to consider here is *Range*'s publication in the

special Black Theatre issue of *TDR*, which, like the opening list of characters, puts the play in critical dialogue with European American codes and traditions. As the foremost American journal on avant-garde theater, *TDR* had a regular readership of avant-gardists (understood to be largely white) and intellectuals, and Schechner's theories of avant-garde performance continue to influence new generations of performers today. For the special Black Theatre issue, however, Schechner turned editorial authority entirely over to the African American playwright Ed Bullins.[55] "In this issue we sought a precise measurement of a certain aspect of black awareness," Schechner wrote in an introductory comment. "To achieve that, we removed the white hands from the blue pencils…[I]f this issue was to be unavoidably subjective, whose subjectivity should it reflect? I chose Bullins' over my own" (25-26). Yet as Harry J. Elam, Jr. notes, Schechner's reflections are not entirely ingenuous, for he asserts his own editorial control via a brief comment (entitled, pointedly, "White on Black") in which he suggests that the Black Theatre issue is "long on plays and short on articles" and that "he didn't like some of the plays" (qtd in Elam 47).

Bullins's editorial title "The King is Dead" may therefore be understood, as Elam notes, in part as a proclamation of the overthrow of the king of the avant-garde himself.[56] Certainly, Bullins's role as editor not only of *TDR*'s Black Theatre issue, but also of the

---

[55] The layout of the Black Theatre issue of *TDR* was a kind of argument in itself about the politics of theater. The issue was divided into two sections: "Black Revolutionary Theatre" and "Theatre of Black Experience." Larry Neal's "The Black Arts Movement" manifesto led off the issue; Baraka's *Range* and *Police* were the final plays in the Black Revolutionary Theater section. Bullins's own play *Clara's Ole Man* was included as Theatre of Black Experience, although his "Short Statement on Street Theatre" was included under Black Revolutionary Theatre.

[56] However, the title refers more explicitly to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination and to the policy of non-violence that died along with him, as Elam notes.

later journal (supported by the New Lafayette Theatre) simply entitled *Black Theatre* and of several drama anthologies, and as the artist-in-residence at the New Lafayette rendered him an extremely influential figure in the Black Theater Movement. And although Bullins was, perhaps, not as wildly outspoken as Baraka, he was no assimilationist. Six months earlier in *Liberator* magazine, Bullins had pulled no punches in disparaging Western avant-garde theater:

> Avant-garde theater is difficult to recognize, for it may not be truly indicative of the future and may have little other effect upon the current drama other than to be pretentious. Its characteristics may only be bizarre, e.g., penis worship, masturbation, incestuous narcissism and ego projection. And often avant-garde mannerisms are a collection of rediscovered conventions of a forgotten era, newly foisted upon the new generation to become clichés in themselves. (16)

Criticizing contemporary European American avant-garde theater for recycling past conventions and thereby remaining within a particularly Western tradition, Bullins argued that such theater offered nothing new and was therefore only "so-called" avant-garde. More to the point, Bullins argued that "it is the white man's vision of reality that is most identifiable in his drama, and Black dramatists are not heir to that type of madness" (17).

Given the anti-avant-gardism of *TDR*'s guest editor, the decision to publish Baraka's play in this issue may be understood as a claim for the play as an alternative to, and an implicit critique of, (white) avant-gardism. This in spite of the fact that Schechner's introductory comments identify Baraka's work firmly within the avant-garde tradition: "Surprisingly, among the writers who have maintained a steady relationship with the avant-garde is LeRoi Jones. His militancy has not militated against his powerful use of new forms. As he has used them, these forms are also traditional. Tom Dent of

the Free Southern Theatre pointed out to me how dear black culture holds participation, song, tragic and triumphant celebration" (27). Although Schechner chooses to emphasize the ways in which Baraka's work can be categorized as avant-garde, his own comments also suggest why that label may not fit. As Baraka puts it in his poem "Western Front," "Poems are made / by fools like Allen Ginsberg, who loves God, and went to India / only to see God, finding him walking barefoot in the street, / blood sickness and hysteria, yet only God touched this poet, / who has no use for the world" (*Black Magic* 81).

The Tone of America

Contextualized within the cultural politics embedded in Baraka's textual theatricality and denial of paratextuality, the larger message of the play begins to take shape. Consider, for example, the final two scenes, beginning with the play's most Artaudian moment—the party of black people who mistakenly look to conformist music and dance as antidotes to the passivity of the white family's media consumption. By this point in the play, the Criminal has destroyed the loudspeaker that externally controls, Big Brother-like, the voices and lives of the white family, yet the effects of internal colonization continue. And significantly, this internal colonization is revealed, just prior to the party scene, to be at work not only in the white family but in the black Criminal as well:

> CRIMINAL comes over. Then he, as if from a pre-signal, jams his gun into his breast pocket, and takes a collapsible baton out of the other pocket. He begins, with great fanfare (tapping on a chair as if it is a music stand, calling for attention with his head and now very haughty demeanor, turning to acknowledge an invisible audience) to conduct the FAMILY singing: first a version of "America the Beautiful," then a soupy stupid version of the Negro

> national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which comes to a super-dramatic climax, with the CRIMINAL having been moved to tears, finally giving a super-military salute. As they reach the highest point of the song, suddenly a whole CROWD OF BLACK PEOPLE pushes through the door. The CRIMINAL wheels around, at first, startled, then he lets out a yell of recognition, and there is a general yowl from all the BLACK PEOPLE, and they proceed to run around and once they all take in the FAMILY, with second takes, over the shoulder jibes, and stage-whispered insult-inquiries, they race around and begin getting ready for a party. (110)

This scene swings on the moment in which the black Criminal appears, if only briefly, brainwashed or controlled by a "different set of vibrations." He suddenly puts his gun into his pocket, takes out a baton and, in what might be seen as a critique of assimilationism, begins directing the family first in a version of "America the Beautiful" and then in a "soupy stupid version of the Negro national anthem." Although both are musical, neither "America the Beautiful" nor "Lift Every Voice and Sing" offers a way out of dominant American cultural ideology, for while one celebrates the victory of European America over indigenous populations via an ideology of manifest destiny, the other offers hope for African Americans through long-suffering assimilationist strategies that uphold the basic tenets of American nationalist ideology.[57]

Meanwhile, although Ayler's free jazz plays in the background, the black Criminal seems unable to understand the improvisatory process that will free him from the binds of (white) American nationalist ideology, now seen as internally imperialist. Transformation comes, if at all, in the form not of individual resistance but of the controlled chaos of the ensemble, whose "dancing, singing, cursing, and fighting" is "the cool takeover in the midst of strong rhythms, and grace" (110). We might understand the

---

[57] "Lift Every Voice and Sing," popularly known as the Negro National Anthem, was written by James Weldon Johnson in 1900, for presentation at a celebration in honor of Abraham Lincoln. It served as the official song of the NAACP from the 1920s through the 1960s.

"wild nigger party" as an attempt to get beyond the ideology of language altogether, replacing it instead with more fundamental cultural expressions that are communal in nature—lyric-less music and dance. And yet, the play suggests, when musical expression takes the form of cultural anthems and popularized dance moves, when it exists within a system of representation rather than as the "total" articulation of pure sound and movement, it too stands in the way of presence. As the play cycles through various modes of representation—"ethnic" language, dramatic impersonation, cultural anthem, and even dance—it dismisses each in turn, suggesting that cultural revolution cannot be effected by performing self-identity through rituals that are externally imposed or through representations that create the double-con(sciousness) of always looking at oneself from the outside.

As a means of exorcizing double-consciousness, generative mimesis is marked by a fundamental tension between the collective and the individual, or what Fred Moten designates "totality" and "singularity," and, following Moten, this tension in *Range* might best be characterized as an "ensemble" ethics (89). Despite his emphasis on the "collective," Baraka eschewed mere adherence to prescribed conventions, white or black, and he parodies not only the white family's mindless repetition of television propaganda but also the black Criminal's display of American patriotism in the mechanical reiteration of the American national anthem and "Lift Every Voice and Sing." As an ethical alternative to (white) American individualism, Baraka's emphasis on the collective is mindful, informed by a knowledge of African American cultural history and with a renewed pride in African American cultural traditions. But it is always, ultimately, the individual who must act, who must make choices not simply for his own good but for the

betterment of the African American community as a whole, which is achieved, *Range* argues, by unchaining oneself from convention, by breaking out of representation and entering into *experience*. In this mixing (rather than opposition) of the individual and collective, Moten explains, "you linger in the cut between them, a generative space that fills and erases itself. That space is, is the site of, *ensemble*: the improvisation *of* singularity and totality and *through* their opposition" (89 italics original). It is in this way that Baraka's performative cultural nationalism might best be thought of as an ethics of the ensemble.

As he turns his back on the dance party scene, the Criminal interpellates the audience into the performance by declaring derisively that "[t]his is the tone of America" and shooting his gun out over the audience several times before the scene goes, pointedly, "Black." When the lights come up again the stage is riddled with bodies in a slumber that appears to be not merely post-party but post-apocalyptic. The Criminal and Father are the only figures fully awake and they are engaged in a kind of language lesson. The Criminal is instructing the Father how to speak in normal English, essentially reprogramming him by teaching him how to narrate his personal history, his memory: "I was born in Kansas City in 1920. My father was the vice-president of a fertilizer company. Before that we were phantoms…*Waving at his FAMILY*. Evil ghosts without substance" (111). In this new world of Black Revolutionary America, whiteness is still "evil," but it is no longer the norm. With the post-party fallout, the play has shifted from one black voice among several white voices to one white voice amid several black ones, and the white voice is, notably, being taught to mimic the now normative language of the Criminal. Although black audience members would certainly most identify with the

Criminal in this scene, they would once again also identify with the black values to which the white Father gives voice. Indeed, the father's reference to himself and his family as "ghosts" may be understood here not only as a derisive term for whiteness and but also as (white) self-absence. And yet the final argument here, despite the generative mimesis that has preceded this moment, is that language is power. While jazz improvisation may serve as a model for evading European American surveillance, he who controls representation—linguistic or otherwise—ultimately has the power.[58]

It is for this reason that the infiltration of black values into representations of whiteness is so key. And this infiltration is apparent not only in the staged performance but also in the textual direction, in which the family is referred to as "grays," notably the only such reference in the play. Infiltrated, indeed stained, by blackness, the family is no longer white but gray. Recalling Baraka's description of black America as a "no-man's land, a black country, completely invisible to white America, but so essentially part of it as to stain its whole being an ominous gray" ("Myth" 114), *Range*'s previously white family and its culture has been fundamentally altered by the performativity of blackness. When Baraka argues that "[w]hat a culture produces, is, and refers to, is an image—a picture of a process, since it is a form of a process: movement seen….[and that t]he Black artist, in this context, is desperately needed to change the images his people identify with, by asserting Black feeling, Black mind, Black judgment" ("Legacy" 166-167), he indicates that representation is a weapon to be wielded. In order to understand *Range*'s final image, this quotation suggests, we must look at the *process* of cultural

---

[58] There is no doubt that Baraka's post-apocalyptic black world is still highly patriarchal. Note, for example, that it is the male characters whose language usage matters most at the end of the play.

transformation depicted in the play, for the final image neither inspires nor even makes sense without understanding how we got there. The play's vision of America is no longer a "home on the range" but a "no-man's land"—a place ironically constituted by absence. It is the location of the abject that blacks have come to inhabit and improvise—creatively, generatively—into a cultural home. Ultimately, it is this generative process that determines the ethics of the play's final image.

When *Range* ends with a Black Girl announcing "Hey look, the sun's coming up. *Turns around, greeting the three brothers*. Good Morning, Men. Good Morning" (111), what emerges is a new, post-apocalyptic Black America that indeed appears to be an inversion of white-dominated society. But when Sandra G. Shannon writes that Baraka's "strategy for developing an effective cultural nationalist message in [*Range*] is based upon the repeated practices of inverting an original stereotype and thus giving blacks the moral and philosophical advantage over whites" ("Evolution" 283), she misses the seismographic shift in the processes that have led to this depiction of the American landscape. The cultural structure has not been merely inverted; it has been turned inside out to redirect identifications and renegotiate desires. It is now the white characters who exhibit a kind of double-consciousness by giving voice to the black values that have been not merely projected onto them but that have penetrated their very means of making sense of—and thereby controlling—the world. Black audience members (or, again, at least Black Nationalist audience members) are not offered merely entertaining caricatures (though at times the white characters are no more than this) but are, more importantly, presented with opportunities for identification outside of the ruling surveillance structures. When the white Father recites his history in the final scene, we begin to

realize (presumably along with the Father) that history is not fact but construction, produced and controlled by whomever has enough power to direct the narrative. And this realization is capable of "stirring up" black audiences, not merely because it depends on the all-too-familiar strategy of inverting common stereotypes but, more powerfully, because it holds the potential for cultural change.

The Demise of a Black Nationalist Poets' Theater

Without a consideration of *Range*'s textual theatricality—through which double-consciousness is dismantled by the voicing of black cultural values—it is certainly possible to see the end of *Range* as a simple inversion of racist stereotypes. Moreover, the play's final abandonment of textual theatricality and generative mimesis in favor of fairly straightforward agit-prop realism seems to produce a photographic negative of the white-dominated American landscape. This signals one of the difficulties of trying to create politically activist work with avant-garde techniques and suggests why critics consider *Range* a failed agit-prop play. The play works on one level to critique the very structure of representation, making it impossible to take up a cogent, defensible, practical political position. And yet, in the end, *Range* does attempt to establish a recognizably *black* identity, as precursor to political action, in a cultural aesthetic based in part on the improvisatory model of jazz.

But 1968 also happened to be a pivotal year in American theater history, the year that the Living Theatre returned from Europe with four ensemble pieces (including the critically acclaimed *Paradise Now*) that, according to Arnold Aronson, "served as the final catalyst for the destruction of conventional performer-spectator relationships and of

traditional literary texts" (137). Although, as I have already argued, this characterization of American theater as anti-textual is exaggerated, there is no doubt that ritualist theater appealed not only to European American practitioners but to Baraka's sense of Black Nationalist theater as well. And indeed Baraka's own most anti-textual play appeared around the same time—the ritualist *Slave Ship*, penned the same year as *Range* and described by Neal as "a play which almost totally eliminates the need for a text. It functions on the basis of movement and energy—the dramatic equivalent of the New Music" (37).

Like *Range*, *Slave Ship* critiques the conditions of white-dominated society and seeks to create a political and aesthetic alternative, relying heavily on sounds and music to create what Baraka here calls "atmos-feeling." Employing music, dance, nonverbal expression, and even odors, the play moves metonymically between the Middle Passage, a slave uprising, and the contemporary civil rights movement, uniting myth, history, spiritualism, and critique toward Black Nationalist goals. Engulfed in darkness for long periods to experience a "total" sense-assaulting theater, including the sounds of crying and screaming, the smells of urine, excrement, and death, and the feeling of a rough wooden bench beneath them, audience members are immersed in *Slave Ship*'s performance. In the end they are invited to dance with the actors, until the event turns into an "actual party," taking it past the wild stage party of *Range* into the realm of active audience participation. Only after the dancing "starts for real"—in other words, only once audience members feel fully integrated into the performance—does the play actually end, with the severed head of the play's assimilationist preacher thrown into the middle of the dance floor, "then black."

Given their similar starts, the differing production and publication histories of *Range* and *Slave Ship* are remarkable. Both were written in 1967 and both had their initial productions at Spirit House.[59] But after production in March 1967 and publication in *Negro Digest* the following month, *Slave Ship* seemed to founder. While *Range* was promoted in 1968 at the high-profile Black Panther fundraiser, taken on nationwide tour, and selected for publication in the celebrated Black Theatre issue of *TDR*, *Slave Ship* lay dormant until 1969—notably, *after* the return of the Living Theatre—when it became Baraka's most successful crossover play since *Dutchman*, with a six-week run produced by the Chelsea Theater Center at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.[60] Occupying a space somewhere between the experimentalism of OOB and the commercialism of off-Broadway, the Chelsea was known for producing "realized radical scripts, off-beat revivals, or the plays of Europe's avant-garde" (Gottfried) and the $50,000 NEA grant it received in 1971 testifies to its mainstream acceptance (see "Papp").[61] Given Baraka's separatist politics at this point in his career, it is not entirely clear why he gave the play to the "white" Chelsea, but it may have been, as theater critic Martin Gottfried has asserted, because "[h]e simply hadn't forgotten that the Chelsea had done 'Black Quartet,' which

---

[59] The only other dramatic play to be produced at Spirit House was Baraka's *Great Goodness of Life* in November, 1967.

[60] According to Sell, *Slave Ship* was also produced by Concept East in Detroit (*Avant-Garde Performance* 248).

[61] Bottoms describes the Chelsea as "always more self-consciously industry-oriented than its Village counterparts" and points out that founder Robert Kalfin actively sought financial backing and paid Equity wages. Noting that the Chelsea was given a $15,000 NEA grant in 1967 (before it took up residence at the Brooklyn Academy of Music)—"three times what [the NEA] gave either [established and influential OOB theaters] La Mama or the Open Theatre in the same funding round"—he concludes: "Clearly, the available grant money was heading in the direction of those whose aspirations were toward assimilation into the professional theater world" (271), of which the Chelsea was one.

included one of his plays[62] and that [Chelsea founder Robert] Kalfin had done black plays and used black directors long before it was fashionable." Perhaps because of the theater's location on the border between Brooklyn and Bedford-Stuyvesant, the show managed to pull in 60-70% black audiences on most nights (Gottfried). After the Chelsea moved the production to the Theater in the Church on Washington Square, it was twice shut down by cast members, who were unhappy with the conditions of their new venue, demanding among other things "to move the play to a black community" ("'Slave Ship' Closed"). Baraka backed the actors' demands.

Certainly, the disappearance of *Range* and simultaneous revival of *Slave Ship* reflect in part the post-1968 trend in American theater (especially in New York), toward a more ritualist, participatory, environmental style, and Baraka states in a 1970 interview that this is where his own theater aesthetic was headed (Baraka "Conversation" 76). It is not that Baraka's aesthetic becomes more conservative—indeed, *Slave Ship* was considered by many his most challenging and innovative play to date—but, as argued above in my discussion of Baraka's use of Artaud, ritualism in particular appealed to the BAM's community ethic. And *Range* was critiqued for not being ritualist enough. *Commonweal* reviewer Velde, for example, suggests that *Range* is at its best when it produces not a clear message so much as an *experience* of racial history, and he considers the play is too caught up in African American racial conflict to function as a celebration

---

[62] The play was *Great Goodness of Life*. *A Black Quartet*, which also included Ben Caldwell's *Prayer Meeting*, Ron Milner's *The Warning—A Theme for Linda*, and Ed Bullins's *The Gentleman Caller*, was first produced at the Chelsea April 25-26, 1969. As with most Chelsea productions, admission was free. The quartet was subsequently produced at Tambellini's Gate Theater on the Lower East Side and had a highly successful run of 111 performances, from July 30 to Nov. 2, 1969.

of the essence of blackness (revealing that his critique is not entirely aesthetic). Complaining that Baraka is "trapped by his reliance on English," he asserts that "if national and cultural histories have to do with exploits, defeats and accomplishments, racial histories with their primordial expansions and contractions carry the weight of the sheer misery of existence (441). Velde's critique reveals the essential conflict faced by Black Nationalist drama—whether to dramatize American racial conflict or to work to transcend geographical boundaries—and, as with so many white reviewers, Velde's liberalism is offended by a play that angrily and aggressively condemns white people. Still, his assertion that the production is too confined by the American idiom is telling, since the play's condemnation of specifically American racial conditions, and even antagonism toward white people themselves, is most often located in the play's use and critique of language. After 1968, amidst the changing political and aesthetic climate that Velde's critique highlights, Baraka's aesthetics splintered into an all-too-familiar separation between poetry and theater.

In the end, the disappearance of *Range* should probably be blamed on a number of factors, not all of them related to the play's particular cultural aesthetic strategy. Despite Sullivan's testimony that black audiences responded excitedly to the play, there is evidence that some black leaders had a different response. The play's Chicago production was a highly anticipated event in the city's black newspaper the *Daily Defender*, for example, but on the day following the production, the paper published not a theater review but instead a heated reproach of Baraka's prefatory anti-Christian and anti-black middle class vitriol (see Calloway). The play itself was ignored entirely, leaving not only no account of how Chicago audience members responded but in fact no

descriptive evidence of the production at all. Whatever the politics of the play, it was deemed less noteworthy than Baraka's introductory remarks. Around this same time, Marxist Black Panther Party leaders were expressing their own doubts about the political value of radical aesthetics, a critique that was also leveled by some prominent cultural nationalists themselves, including Sonia Sanchez, Haku Madhubuti, and John Oliver Killens (Murray 300-301). And as Baraka's own personal activities became more political, he increasingly turned from dramatic theater to staged agitations, such as "Board of Education" (1968), protesting the poor conditions of black education in the U.S., or agit-prop revues, such as the "Black Power Chant" (1968) dance and stomp performance designed to accompany political protests and fundraisers.[63] Meanwhile, Ayler, whose music was so central to *Range*'s musical aesthetic, had begun to transform his style, so much so that by 1969 Baraka considered it to be a reflection of the "corny self-consciousness" of white life and, ultimately, "bullshit" ("Fire" 120), which may have contributed to Baraka's own decreasing interest in the play. After 1968, Baraka mentions the play just once in publication, in Camillo's eulogy.

As only one element in a much larger black culturalist campaign to alter the consciousness of African Americans through performative strategies, *Range*'s individual impact is difficult to assess. But as Michael Omi and Howard Winant have argued in their influential study of new social movements and racial formation in the United States, "the persistence of the new racial identities developed during this period stands out as the single truly formidable obstacle to the consolidation of a newly repressive social order"

---

[63] Both of these works are unpublished in book form but full-text electronic editions are available from Alexander Street Press, L.L.C.

(91). African American racial consciousness and identity—developed, performed, advocated, and indeed constituted via a variety of performative means during the 1960s—can be seen not just as an accomplishment of black culturalism of the 1960s but also as a resource for contemporary African Americans continuing to agitate for social change (Buechler 132). And while Baraka's Black Nationalist poets' theater may not have moved audiences toward organized action, its combination of (European American) cultural critique and (African American) cultural advocacy managed to stir its audiences up. The larger program of cultural nationalism of which it was a part offered African Americans new ways of conceiving their place in a the world, a goal that could only be achieved by first dismantling the European American ruling structure from within. With its complex marriage of performative language and embodied theater, and of simultaneous deconstructive critique and generative possibility, *Range* worked to renegotiate and re-present "Black" identity and represents a telling moment in the interrelated histories of African American cultural ideology, the new social movements, and the aesthetic politics of American poetry and theater.

CHAPTER THREE

CARLA HARRYMAN'S NON/REPRESENTATION AND THE ETHICS OF DISPERSIVE PERFORMANCE

I live in a fabrication near something I have never said before.

Carla Harryman
"Property"

In "The Ear of the Poet in the Mouth of the Performer," an essay-play that works through the politics of poetry-performance in the post-9/11 U.S., Carla Harryman recalls a performance in which she participated in the early 1990s: the wearing of a pin designed by artist Daniel Davidson that bore the deceptively simple message "Iraqi." Responses to Harryman's wearing of the pin oscillated between "largely friendly looks and pleasantly unanticipated conversations from mostly Arab immigrant and Arab American shopkeepers of various religions and nationalities" and the confusion of "literal minded American types," who took the pin as a confession, as a "coming-out as Iraqi" ("The Ear of the Poet" n.p.). As a performance, wearing the pin was not simply a personal expression of solidarity. It was also a demonstration of the ways in which meaning can mutate in different contexts and for different audience members. And significantly, the power of the performance came just as often in the moments of confusion and misrecognition it created.

While the Arabs and Arab-Americans in Harryman's account may have gotten it "right," the more "literal minded" observers too found ways of identifying with the performance, though not perhaps in expected or intended ways. Harryman recalls, for example, that one woman took the pin as "an invitation to exchange confidences, hers

being that she had an excess of facial hair and that she was terrified that her husband would find out about it" (n.p.). While the woman was mistaken in her assumption, the identification makes some sense to Harryman, who points out that in this interpretation both women "had something to hide until this private moment of mutual outing, even if I hadn't been deliberately hiding something like she had" (n.p.). Although the woman was interpellated by the performance, the performer was not in control of that interpellation.

As wearer of the pin, Harryman felt a political responsibility to the responses it provoked. The purpose of the performance, she explains, was

> to diffuse the theater of war and to dramatize the real life conflations that lead to the targeting of Iraqi subjects as enemies. As a performer of the pin, one becomes responsible in a local context to major world events. The performer citizen engages in a dialogic meditation that exceeds the limits of conventional narrative and argumentation as she becomes aware of her personhood stripped of reductive theatrics and narratives of identity. As with much performance art of the 70's, Davidson's work is partly about the performer's experience itself; and like the performance values of the modernist avant-garde, it assertively provokes a response to emerging states of affairs. (n.p.)

The performer of the pin circulates, but is not in control of, the meanings of language already embedded in social and political narratives. In this sense, I would argue not that the performer's "personhood [is] stripped of…narratives of identity," as Harryman puts it, but rather that the pin clasps the performer to already-circulating narratives, which may then be embraced, rejected, identified with, or disidentified with. Harryman is wearing not a pin that states "I claim solidarity with Iraqi victims of war," which would be a speech-like assertion of her political beliefs and identity—a self-narration—but rather a pin that appears to declare an identity that is not self-evident. In order to make sense of the pin, observers must interpret it within the range of their own experiences and

understandings. And in subsequently interacting with the performer, they project those identifications onto her body in social exchange, thereby enacting new narratives.

The performance event therefore takes place in the interaction between the performer and the audience, or, perhaps more accurately, in what the audience does with the performance. The wearing of the Iraqi pin is a speech act with unpredictable effects, and in this sense both Harryman and her observers become performers of its meaning. Harryman's role in the performance is one of responsibility to her interlocutors, but it is, in some respects, a non-normative responsibility carried out as generously listening to and considering a range of possible identifications. While she mobilizes the structures, Harryman does not lead the interpretations. And although she hints that the Arab and Arab-American observers got it right, she does not accuse others of getting it "wrong" but rather of getting it different. In wearing the pin, the performer becomes responsible to this difference.

Significantly, the performance must remain peripatetic in order to succeed, since success relies on individual responses not subject to the social pressure of the collective space of the theater. One of the ways Harryman tries to retain this peripatetic quality in the space of the theater is to construct a dispersive theater in which meaning is allowed to oscillate rather than being tied to a single correct interpretation. The oscillation of meaning, Una Chaudhuri reminds us, is "an open space or aporia in the political 'known'"—the space of revolution (163). Harryman suggests that the ear of the poet is tuned to the oscillation, and in her poets' theater, it is the job of the performer to keep this oscillation alive. In "The Ear of the Poet," for example, Harryman juxtaposes the discussion of the Iraqi pin performance with an excerpt from a Gertrude Stein play,

leaving the audience to interpret for themselves the relationship between the pieces. While Harryman acknowledges that "the discussion [of the Iraqi pin performance] preceding the extract from [Stein's] play would infect the semantic meaning of [Stein's] work—an inference would be brought forth that at this present moment a poet behind a locked door, a no longer living poet, Iraqi, and people are connected and that there is a simultaneity made between the word 'Iraqi' in my exposition and the word 'people' in Stein's play" (n.p.), this is not the "right" or even intended interpretation but rather the result of habituated interpretive practices themselves. Dispersive theater places under scrutiny not only the structure of interpretive practices but also the very impulse to interpret. The space of dispersive theater is therefore an ethical space, in the sense that it is a space "where thought itself experiences an obligation to form a relation with its other—not only other thoughts, but other-*than*-thought" (Harpham 404).

I discuss this example here at length because it offers a relatively self-contained way into thinking about some of the strategies and preoccupations of Harryman's poets' theater, which is both like and unlike Davidson's performance art piece. Harryman's use of Davidson as an element in her own essay-play demonstrates her ongoing engagement with intertextuality, hybrid genre, and art and/as analytic discourse, but she also uses Davidson to think through her own artistic practice. Davidson represents here a use of performance not merely as a provisional testing ground in moments of impasse[64] but as a kind of permanently provisional space, "one that in part fulfills an open-ended, non-

[64]Harryman finds in RoseLee Goldberg's *Performance Art*, for example, the implication that once performance has served its function as a testing ground that can release the art object from categorical or conventional constraints, the art object is reinstated and performance is retired.

objective mobile role that is exploratory, improvisatory, and that takes language as a medium as seriously as it does the other mediums of innovative theater that have superseded language" (n.p.). Like Davidson, Harryman is interested in the relationship of narrative to non-narrative and in the way this relationship figures and is figured by physical bodies. Also like Davidson, much of Harryman's performance is conceptual, though it is usually written as scripted dramatic theater. And as Harryman's own commentary above makes clear, in recent years she has become, like Davidson, interested in the social and political consequences of her artistic experiments. For Harryman, this shift in interest from her own "art activity and its genre excesses" to something else not clearly identified but characterized by "a sense of a loss of form-desire" is precipitated by U.S. militarization against Iraq as a response to 9/11. Viewed through this prism of art-activism, Harryman's poets' theater becomes, like the wearing of the Iraqi pin, a kind of "homework assignment" that allows both artist and audience to think through their relationships to form, media, discourse, embodiment, and identity.

Julia Walker's criticism of Butler's notion of performativity, which I discussed in my introductory chapter, is particularly relevant here. Harryman's discussion of the Iraqi pin project reveals the ways in which discursive conventions and performing subjects sometimes collide and sometimes collaborate. What Harryman demonstrates is that the real and the symbolic are not locked in a unidirectional relationship of mediation but rather that they influence each other and that this influence is site-specific. The Iraqi pin performance, Harryman's plays, and indeed poets' theater in general investigates not meaning but the uses to which meanings are put. While such an investigation assumes that language is neither stable nor univocal, this recognition is not its conclusion but

rather its jumping-off point. Poets' theater is not therefore deconstructive, as much as it relies on a deconstructive understanding of language.

Asking what comes first, the poetry or the theater, narrative or non-narrative, subject or object, muscle or skeleton, Harryman muses, "I would prefer to emphasize the skeleton. I would prefer the movement to be the movement of the muscles lifted by the skeleton. When the muscles are not lifted by the skeleton they become athletic. One becomes aggressive and competitive. The theater becomes a theater of conflict. And somebody has to win" (n.p.). While I want to be careful not to tie Harryman's ideas down to a simple metaphor, part of what she is suggesting here is that bodies are inseparable from the social forces that animate them. While both muscles and skeleton are components of bodies, they serve different but overlapping purposes, one mainly structure, the other mainly force. An illustration accompanying the essay depicts a knife held between teeth and lips, a cooperation of skeleton and muscle that can be read, simultaneously, as both defensive and aggressive. This is a depiction not of an oral weapon but of an aural weapon, both spoken and heard, suggested by the ear-in-the-mouth of the work's title. In the historical moment of the post-9/11 U.S. "War on Terror," Harryman implies, muscle-force has been recruited into insidious service, sculpting language and narrative into weapons of social conflict. Yet just as both muscles and skeleton are necessary to movement, so narrative is necessary to communication. The solution, Harryman writes, is "to distribute narrative rather than deny it" ("Toy Boats" 107).

Language Poetry, Poets' Theater, and the Body

Harryman's theater practice grows in part out of her participation in the Bay Area poetry community commonly known as "Language" writers, many of whom rework narrative as a political principle. One of the tactics of Language writing is to foreground the conventionalized function of the "I" and of other narrative tools. Such tools mark relationships of location, antagonism, causality, intention, and emphasis and "provide the illusion of movement, direction and location for the reader," Michael Davidson points out, "but when they lose their indexical function, they point at the conventionalized nature of writing itself" (79). When "I" tell a story from memory, who is the "I" that speaks, and who is the "I" that is spoken of? What is the overlap between the two and in what way does each help to constitute the other? Bringing these questions into the space of embodied performance, Harryman puts further pressure on the conventionalized function of linguistic markers as indicators of identity presumed to be natural.

Harryman's *Memory Play* (1994) explores the narrative and performative construction of the "I" via memory, played out differently by the play's three main characters, Pelican, Fish, and Reptile:

> REPTILE: If I tell you one thing that I remember, you will think I'm an idiot for remembering only one thing. This is one thing that makes theater different from real conversation. If I provide you with several of my most esteemed memories, you will probably believe there are more where those came from, and I will have earned your respect. This will make theater a little more like real conversation.
>
> PELICAN: I have a job and it is virtually all I can think about; however, I think this: memory is nothing but words stored up in an inefficient computer. What you will remember of this conversation will be nothing like what went into its construction. Such understanding promotes success in business.
>
> FISH: I had suffered for a long time from the illusion that remembering inhibited one's experience. Now the illusion is

> almost my only memory….[Later,] I will remember something else and not this. I will have forgotten the story to which I currently refer. Each person has his or her own theater. I propose this as an exhibit or a symptom of my personal stage. (9-10)

Reptile is a chameleon, disguising himself in the camouflage of social discourse. And yet his disguise is not aimed at deception. Although Reptile suggests that whether or not we are respected or maligned depends on the strength of our (storytelling/conversational) performance, he seems to move beyond Erving Goffman's notion of impression management to suggest that social discourse is all the truth there is.[65] Pelican on the other hand focuses on the "misinformation" that occurs between what one says and what another hears, and he promotes a notion of performance as information processing, mechanical and morally indifferent. Meanwhile, Fish appears to recognize the necessary relationship between discourse (remembering) and experience while at the same time acknowledging that the "back story" of identity is often forgotten, that identity is assumed without realizing what that identity is built upon. Fish might be taken as an example of contemporary performance studies notions of identity and performance: while we may understand that identity is performative, we experience it as natural. Despite their differences, what Reptile, Pelican, and Fish share is a notion of memory as performative, produced by and in narrative.

Memory relies, then, on the doubling of creative narrative and social discourse, a doppelgänger which first appears in the "stage directions" with which the prologue

---

[65] For a discussion of the dramaturgical method for analyzing impression management, see Goffman's *Presentation* 238. Notably, Goffman focuses entirely on the performer without any attention to the audience's active role in the meaning-making process.

opens: “A bedtime story/conversation in a little tent town out in the salt flats” (9). What one first notices about this direction is its generic ambivalence. While there would be little difficulty producing the visual elements of such a scenic design in performance (a small tent town, salt flats, bedtime), how would the difference-and-sameness indicated by the phrase “story/conversation” be performed? The slash is itself a radically textual performance that suggests the imbrication of social discourse with storytelling, with narrative, and indeed this relationship is the play’s central investigation. W. B. Worthen has argued that “modern drama in print typically frames a dialectical tension between the proprieties of the page and the identities of drama” (62). Harryman’s slash turns this page-stage tension outward, toward social life. Art (story) is different from, but inextricably bound to, social discourse (conversation). Storytelling is both oral and literary art. Harryman’s printed play alludes to the chiasmus of literary textuality and social discourse by putting the play’s status—as literary artifact, as embodied performance—into question.

While Harryman makes use of what Worthen has called the “accessories” of modernist dramatic publication—“page design, typography, act and scene numbering, speech prefixes, and stage directions” (13)—she does not do so in order to control the stage performance from the page. Despite Chris Stroffolino’s assertion that *Memory Play* “works at least as well as a closet drama as it does in theater performance,” the page and stage versions of the play are not correspondent but collaborative, together investigating the performativity of memory (177). This is to say not that each version cannot stand on its own but rather that the play’s textual-theatrical ambivalence proliferates its identity across genres and across forms of reproduction, undermining the final authority of any

single version.

In bringing the language of the text out into the space of performance—performing "as language event the fluidity between public and psychological space," as Harryman puts it ("Site" 158)— Harryman's plays investigate the social activities of language within a context of actual human relations, of the audience members and performers within a specific social space (that of the performance at a particular moment in time) and in relation to specific objects. Language writing on the page explores language in individual interaction with readers, while the performance of Language writing in poetry readings is bounded by the conventions of a touring authorial performance that rhetorically position the event (albeit falsely) as site- and audience-nonspecific, if not actually transcendent. In contrast to this, Harryman's poets' theater emphasizes embodied identities at the same time it deconstructs them. These identities are not incidental, and they are not nonspecific; rather, they are fluid. The character list of Harryman's play *Performing Objects Stationed in The Sub World*, for example, specifies a "White woman," "Child," and "Black man," but the author's notes for performance explain that "[t]he categories of gender and ethnicity are mutable in this play, based on whatever circumstance of the performance" (Harryman "Site Sampling" 158). This is accomplished in part by having multiple actors play each character but also by leaving the gap between character and actor visible: "For instance C3, the Black Man, reads the newspaper but that doesn't mean that C3 becomes a Black Man who reads the newspaper, but rather C3 performs a reading of the newspaper: his identity or identities such that it is or they are, migrates through activities" (162). In this way, the objects with which the actors interact "do not serve as extensions or illustrations of subjectivity nor do

they appear with autonomous luminosity […but they are instead] constitutive of an instability of social encounters and uncertain boundaries between interior fantasy and exterior fact, whether they are sentient or inert" (162). This does not, however, preclude psychological depth. Rather, characters are defined not by the moral challenges they face but rather by the communication they perform and are performed by.

In *Memory Play*, the playing through of multiple discursive and gestural registers in the formation of identity drives the action. As bodies and spoken language self-consciously jostle one another in performance, the relationship between discourse, identity, and embodiment takes center stage. Reptile's lines quoted above appear to interpellate audience members into a self-conscious suspension of disbelief: he explicitly acknowledges our tacit agreement to let one memory in "art" stand in for the multiple memories of "real" conversation.[66] In art, he suggests, a single story or image (memory) can take on a variety of symbolisms and resonances; in conversation, however, we may question such overdetermination of a single moment in one's life. But the "I" who speaks this line is shifty, posing as a social interlocutor and literary-dramatic character simultaneously. On the page, Reptile's "I" seems to remain consistent, a distant observer of the relationship between theater and conversation. Spoken by an actor onstage, however, the "I" oscillates between actor and dramatic character. Is this line a rehearsed but direct address to the audience by an actor who will soon become a character in the play, or is the actor already in character? And how does this ambiguity position audience members in relation to the play?

---

[66] Reptile seems to be recognizing here what Erving Goffman has termed "disclosive compensation"—the theatrical convention of giving the audience what it needs, and *only* what it needs, in order to construct and maintain the dramatic fiction. See Goffman *Frame* 142.

This last question raises the issue of what poet Joan Retallack has called "reciprocal alterity," which she conceptualizes as an equilibrium between, on the one hand, the "ethical and epistemological destabilizing principle" that we are never fully knowable to one another or to ourselves and, on the other, community, receptivity, and intention. Is the "I" who, according to Reptile, can earn "your" respect a "fictional" character or a "real" actor? Either way, of course, the "I" is a construction based in part on the speaker's performance and in part on the audience's conclusions in relation to that performance—making both intention and reception important matters to consider. The construction is simultaneously grammatical and epistemological, since pronouns are a necessary part of communication despite their radical insufficiency and contingency. Pronouns suggest independent subjectivity, and in doing so contribute to a model of individualism. In order to "move away from models of cultural and political agency lodged in isolated heroic acts and simplistic notions of cause and effect," as Retallack urges, we must therefore think through our tools of communication at their most basic level (3).

Both Retallack and Harryman, in an echo of Stein, propose a new kind of realism. Retallack approaches this version of realism by appealing to the essay form, because, she argues, the essay writes from the position of an "I" understood as selfsame, whereas the lyric "I" of poetry is already understood to be a persona. The theater, however, presents an unusually apt arena for an investigation of representation, for the presence of bodies on stage always simultaneously evokes both the characters being portrayed and the actors "themselves."

If the Humanities have emerged from the "turn to language" only to enter into the "turn to the visual,"[67] then Harryman's work provides an apt vehicle for exploring our negotiations of these turns. Language writing arose simultaneously with the rise of linguistic theory in the 1970s, and the relationship between the two has always been seen as collaborative—Language writing *as* theory. Some saw Language writing as the perfect object of the new theory and saw developments in theory as supporting the sense that Language writing had a cognitive and social use. But not everyone agreed on the role of theory in Language writing.[68] In *There Is Nothing Better Than a Theory* (given its first full performance in 1989), Harryman satirizes what she sees as a tendency toward theory fetishism. In *Memory Play* she similarly pokes fun at theory's drive to dominate, this time in the figure of a child's toy, humorously named the Miltonic Humiliator. Meanwhile, recent productions of *Mirror Play* seem to indict theory as the production of knowledge removed from lived experience. In debates about representation and gender, the body has become the vanishing point of theory.

Although poets' theater emerged along with what has become known as "Language" writing, it has not figured into those historical accounts until recently.[69]

---

[67] For a discussion of the "turn to the visual," see Jay.

[68] See Vickery chapter 7 for an excellent discussion of, especially, the genderedness of theory in Language writing.

[69] Bob Perelman's *The Marginalization of Poetry* was the first book-length historical account of Language writing and remains a key text in understanding this history, but the SFPT receives no critical attention there (despite the fact that Perelman himself wrote for the SFPT). Megan Simpson's *Poetic Epistemologies* and Ann Vickery's *Leaving Lines of Gender* offer alternative, feminist-inflected histories of Language writing, but both attend to "performance" only in a sense of the performance of social identities. Vickery acknowledges the divisions between visual artists and writers that characterized the Bay Area in the 1970s (33), but despite her interest in documenting the broader range of activities carried out by women in the Language community than has been commonly acknowledged, she too leaves out critical discussion of

Nick Robinson and Eileen Corder founded the San Francisco Poets Theater (SFPT) in 1978, and by the time the final SFPT play was produced in 1984, nearly a dozen plays had been produced, involving a wide range of "Language" and associated poets in a variety of roles (from playwright, actor, set designer, and director to publicist and poster/program designer), including Harryman, Corder, Nick Robinson, Kit Robinson, Steve Benson, Alan Bernheimer, Johanna Drucker, Lyn Hejinian, Tom Mandel, and Bob Perelman, among others.[70] While some of these play texts have been published (almost exclusively in small journals), there are virtually no sustained examinations, let alone theorizations, of this performance work.[71]

One of the reasons for this neglect has to do with Language writing's almost exclusive focus, in the 1970s and 80s, on material textuality. In a 1986 review of Harryman's *Percentage* and *Property*, for example, Jean Day explains the dramatic form of these hybrid works metaphorically, as a *theatrum mundi* in which "'We' are acting out aspects of a common drama through language, not just in the sense that we're using the same tools, but in the sense that it is language which makes the private public, makes the passion of the revolutionary *charge*" (120-121, emphasis original). Steve Benson—Harryman's close friend, fellow performer, and frequent theater collaborator—refers to

---

Harryman's (or anyone else's) theater work, choosing instead to focus on Harryman's and Hejinian's important collaborative novel "The Wide Road" (see Vickery final chapter). Recently, *The Grand Piano* series has started to address some of this history (see in particular vol. 6).

[70] See the *Grand Piano* website page on the SFPT for a partial list of plays as well as for links to some program, poster, and production images: < http://www.thegrandpiano.org/poetstheater.html>.

[71] For play texts, see *Hills* 9 (1983). For criticism and commentary on the SFPT and related theater, see Kennedy and Tuma, *Mantis* 3 (2002), and *Poetics Journal* 5 (May 1985): 122-138.

the published text of Harryman's play *La Quotidienne* as "the play itself," folding the entire work under an umbrella of textual interpretation when he argues that "[t]he lack of any stable context or prescribed behavior indicates no means or property other than discourse by which the figures can gain leverage in the struggles for authority and autonomy" (24, 23). Focusing exclusively on discourse, such an interpretation ignores the ways in which the actor-characters give the play's figures an authority and autonomy outside of discourse, in the presence of live bodies on stage.

Poets and Language writers were not the only ones to downplay key aspects of poets' theater, however. The disciplinary divide rendering the SFPT invisible was, if anything, worse on the side of visual artists. As Ann Vickery writes, "the arts were strongly differentiated in the Bay Area during the seventies. Although performance-based poets like Carla Harryman encouraged visual artists to attend readings and talks, poetry was still presumed to be too tied to the page and thus limiting. Harryman recalls a young and prominent artist dismissing Language writings as 'just a version of surrealism'" (qtd in Vickery 33). Harryman's work was thus trapped in both a practical and a critical disciplinary blind spot.

In an essay published in *Poetics Journal*, Alan Bernheimer suggests that poets' theater consists of works "written towards production…work[s] with then two lives to lead, one self-evident and the other potential" (70). But what is "self-evident" about a poets' theater text like *Memory Play*? Bernheimer sees words as agents, which "[l]eft to their own devices…tell stories by themselves, resolute (resonant in the evolving history of their use)" (*ibid.*), but of course it is this latter assertion—that words are "resonant in the evolving history of their use"—that points out the falsehood of the former suggestion

that words have their own agency, for the "stories" of words are constituted in their social use. Certainly, unintended meanings and histories can (and often do) arise when we use language, but to characterize this as an act of words "by themselves" obscures the ways in which meaning both constitutes and is constituted by bodies and embodied identities both on the stage and in social exchange.

Acknowledging the work of Language poets such as Ron Silliman, Charles Altieri, Bob Perelman, and Charles Bernstein, who engage the performativity of material language, Worthen too considers this work as a textual phenomenon, interesting for its similarities to printed drama (which the title of his last chapter suggests is "something like poetry") but not engaged *as* drama or theater. But Worthen's discussion of anti-theatricality in both poetry and theater is an important step in opening the relationship between two fields normally considered to have very little overlap. Most significantly for my purposes here, Worthen observes that

> the materiality of the mise-en-page, the precise construction of printed words in space, does not operated as a kind of stage direction, an authorized and authoritarian effort to govern subsequent performance (though some authors may intend it that way), nor is it complete in itself, a container or "can" of perfected meanings waiting to be emptied by performance. Instead, Language poetics implies the incommensurability of these two modes of writing's "thickness." The poem's physical design on the page, and its physicalized performance cannot be collapsed into one another so that the script grounds the performance or the performance realizes the script….Language poetics reframes the page as a distinctive field of play, insisting that words can and must be joined in ways beyond the habits of conventional speech. (138)

Indeed, in "Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto," a collaborative essay on the political and aesthetic practices of Language writing, Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman, and Barrett Watten critique the

expressivist lyric, institutionalized in literary and creative writing programs in the U.S., as responsible for "the scenario of disinterested critical evaluation reinforcing the alleged moral autonomy of the poem" (269).[72]

Recently, however, the infiltration of performance studies into literature departments has sparked a more performance-oriented interest in hybrid works such as Harryman's. In the first five months of 2008, Harryman's play *Third Man* was staged in San Francisco as part of a SFPT retrospective,[73] *Memory Play* was produced in Chicago with the support of the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, and a weekend of poets' theater plays directed by Harryman, including Harryman's own *Mirror Play*, Frank O'Hara's *Try! Try!* and an adaptation from Barrett Watten's *Bad History*, was presented in Chicago as part of a festival of poets' theater.[74] During this same period, *The Grand Piano* series, an "experiment in collective autobiography" documenting the rise of Language writing in San Francisco, has begun to present Harryman's work in particular and poets' theater in general as a fundamental part of the history of Language writing.[75]

What Harryman's theater adds to Language writing is a consideration of the ways

---

[72] It is remarkable how much this critique of poetry scholarship and the expressivist lyric sounds like the critique by contemporary Performance Studies scholars of traditional object-oriented scholarship, in which the objective, disinterested scholar remains separate from the object of study that he (and in this critique, the scholar is usually a he) describes and interprets in terms that place the object easily within the dominant worldview.

[73] Performed as part of the annual Poets Theatre festival, which is produced by Small Press Traffic each January and/or February.

[74] The showcase, entitled "Returning from One Place to Another," was produced by Links Hall and curated by John Beer.

[75] See especially volume 6 of that series.

in which the presence of bodies affects our understanding of language politics, particularly in the different ways language and bodies mark a threshold in interrelated processes of speaking, enacting, and knowing. It may be helpful here to recall Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of the body as a kind of "living memory pad" onto and via which not only behaviors but also beliefs and values are inscribed (68). Childhood learning leads to a kind of automatically enacted belief that is not a state of mind but rather "a state of the body" (ibid.). As practical sense becomes naturalized, the source of the practices becomes obscured. "It is because agents never know completely what they are doing," Bourdieu argues, "that what they do has more sense than they know" (69). But whereas for Bourdieu acting and theater become ways of recalling these automated, naturalized thoughts and feelings,[76] Harryman sees theater as a means of defamiliarizing the social ideologies inscribed onto bodies—ideologies that are, for Bourdieu, obscured by time and naturalization and that are, for Judith Butler, denied in the necessary construction of subjective autonomy.

Poets' theater is a collaborative performance between generative language and physical gesturality that can help us understand the complex linguistic and embodied performativities that constitute and materialize identity. Gesture is a bodily act that, in the realm of the social, becomes a sign of communication. Martin Puchner, who has written thoughtfully on arrested movement in modernist drama, describes gesture as "the praxis and labor that go into the production of language and linguistic communication,

---

[76] Bourdieu argues that "depositories of deferred thoughts…can be triggered off at a distance in space and time by the simple effect of re-placing the body in an overall posture which *recalls* the associated thoughts and feelings, in one of the inductive states of the body which, as actors know, give rise to states of mind" (69).

the labor that is more or less erased in the finished, linguistic product" (28). Isolated and disjointed, individual gestures can only be amassed into an aggregate rather than organically connected into a whole.[77]

Puchner notes that both Nietzche and Adorno maligned gesturality as that which prevents actors on stage from presenting organic wholes.[78] Postmodernism's valorization of the aggregate, however, offers a new kind of pro-theatricalism that celebrates precisely the gesturality disavowed by these theorists of modernism. Harryman's theater embraces the aggregative quality of gesture by using denaturalized acting to create paratactic (rather than syntactic or hypotactic) structures. In rehearsal for a 2008 production of *Memory Play*,[79] for example, the actor playing Fish needed help slowing down her speech, so she was given an activity to perform: writing a note on a piece of paper. This practical solution to an acting problem soon became an interpretive issue, however. What should the actors then *do* with the note? Director Catharine Sullivan wanted Fish to hand the note to Child, but Harryman (who was present at rehearsals) was adamant that this was not possible, presumably because it transformed the activity of note-writing into the narrative gesture of passing on instructions. In the

---

[77] This is because the syntax of gesture and speech are different. Speech builds up its meaning out of independently meaningful parts. Gesture on the other hand becomes meaningful only in the aggregate. Speech is spread out, and each part can be analyzed separately, but a gesture is "synthetic," compressing its semantic components (actor, action, path) into one symbol: "Thus, when gesture and speech combine, they bring into one meaning system two distinct semiotic architectures. Each modality, because of its unique semiotic properties, can go beyond the meaning possibilities of the other" (McNeill and Duncan 144).

[78] For more on modernist anti-theatricality and its relationship to gesture, see Puchner chapter 1.

[79] Dir. Catharine Sullivan. Produced by the Renaissance Society and performed at Experimental Station, Chicago, March 7, 2008.

end, it was agreed that Pelican would intercept the note without (oral or gestural) comment. In preventing the note-writing gesture from cohering into narrative meaning, Harryman and Sullivan created a paratactic structure—one gesture and another gesture and another gesture that do not bear any clear narrative relationship to one another. At the same time, Sullivan and Harryman's disagreement over what to do next demonstrates the tendency of gesture to aggregate into character identity and narrative meaning.

As an embodied act with the potential for social meaning, gesture both is and isn't language.[80] Gesture reaches simultaneously inward toward the construction of subjectivity and outward toward the construction of social identity, but it also relies on bodily impulse, understood within a system of discourse but not reducible to it. As both being and representation, gesture reveals what Peggy Phelan has called the body's metonymic relationship to the subject. While the real exceeds representation, representation also exceeds the real. The identity produced in and through this reciprocal excess is not only a marker, Phelan argues, but an ethics:

---

[80] Cognitive psychology, incidentally, supports this view. Cognitive psychologists David McNeill and Susan D. Duncan have developed the concept of the "growth point" (GP), originated by McNeill, as an analytical framework for the combination of "imagery and linguistic categorical content" that insists on an understanding of both gesture and speech as "material carriers of thinking" (144, 155). In this view, speech and gesture are not "the packaged communicative outputs of a separate internal production process but rather…the joint embodiments of that process itself" (155). Speech-gesture combinations do not simply reflect already formed similarities, then, but contribute to the establishment a correspondence between the two and are therefore productive of thought. Furthermore, McNeill and Duncan argue, GPs "are a way of cognitively existing, of cognitively being, at the moment of speaking. By performing the gesture, the core idea is brought into concrete existence and becomes part of the speaker's own existence at that moment" (156). In this view, gesture is not an expression of being but rather constitutive of being, and in this sense, we can consider gesture performative. It is also significant that although a GP is highly synchronous, "strongly resist[ing] forces trying to divide it" (145), this synchrony "is disrupted…if speech and gesture are drained of meaning through repetition; i.e., such that GPs may be circumvented in their production" (145). See McNeill and Duncan, and McNeill.

> Identity emerges in the failure of the body to express being fully and the failure of the signifier to convey meaning exactly. Identity is perceptible only through a relation to an other—which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other. In that declaration of identity and identification, there is always loss, the loss of not-being the other and yet remaining dependent on that other for self-seeing, self-being. (13)

In denying narrative coherence to Fish's note-writing gesture, the production of *Memory Play* discussed above places the burden of meaning on audience members themselves. What the body does and what it means do not perfectly correspond. Making meaning out of a gesture necessarily involves a merging of interpreter and interpreted, of self and other. Harryman, like Phelan, is interested in the relationship of representation to being, a relationship she investigates via a strategy she characterizes as "non/narrative" when performed in prose, and which we might modify as "non/representation" in theater. As in *Memory Play*'s play of "story/conversation," the slash here indicates not an opposition but an imbrication of two modes.

Mimesis and Misrecognition in *Mirror Play*

Harryman's latest performance work, *Mirror Play*, revolves around violence perpetrated by nations against other nations or against (its own or other) individuals. Divided into four Acts, a prologue, and an epilogue (all appearing in reverse order) but without stage directions or speech prefixes, the stage performance differs widely from production to production. What remains consistent, however, is a web of political and social references—for example, media portrayals of Rachel Corrie, the American peace activist killed defending a Palestinian house against U.S.-built bulldozers operated by the Israeli Defense Forces; images from the second Gulf War of U.S. soldiers raiding Iraqi

tombs and Iraqis' own destruction of Iraqi cultural artifacts; and the 1968 campy intergalactic anti-war movie *Barbarella*, whose star Jane Fonda was transformed in the 1970s from GI pinup girl to despised anti-war activist and then again in the 1980s to aerobic video icon. *Mirror Play* portrays an America defined not by physical borders but by complex military, economic, cultural, and political relationships, playing through the ways in which these relationships are constructed and maintained.

The play is both radically textual and radically gestural, using paratactic gesture and language as well as architectural space not to reflect the interiority of the subject but rather to help constitute and figure it. In this sense, *Mirror Play* represents a broad shift in thinking from the concept of an individual subject, seen as a self-sufficient and independent whole, to the concept of the social subject, in which the social (exterior) is a necessary and mutable circumstance of subject constitution (interior). Throughout the play, "wholes"—words, characters, clothes, rooms—are revealed as mere resting points in the ongoing process of meaning-making. What is simultaneously difficult and hopeful about this piece is that it dares to imagine a politics (or ethics) for those who are produced in and by narrative. *Mirror Play* does not simply reveal or reflect this condition of narrativity; it tries to think a way that we might be active within this condition rather than merely subject to it.

The play opens, in one version,[81] with a simple image of homey domesticity—

---

[81] The play, which has been performed in San Francisco, Chicago, Detroit, and Tubingen, Germany, has never been published. Each production uses a different version of the script (in some cases bilingual). Some performances have used a full cast (Detroit, Chicago), while others have consisted only of Harryman herself reading the text to live musical accompaniment by John Raskin (San Francisco). All of these versions, however, are formed out of the full-length English text entitled "Mirror Play" included in Harryman's "Poets Theater Plays" manuscript 178-215).

clothes hanging on a line, blowing in the wind—portrayed entirely in language: "Flying. Clothes flying. Sleeves wrapping / around clouds, cinching them in, dragging / them" (178).[82] The empty clothes are both human products and human forms, registering simultaneously the presence and absence of human beings themselves. As the sleeves first "wrap" around clouds, then "cinch," and finally "drag" them, the clothes imply a kind of "domestic" violence, most clearly perhaps a reference to the Clothesline Project—protesting against, and memorializing the victims of, a private kind of "domestic" violence against women. But it is also perhaps a reference to that which inspired the Clothesline Project—the AIDS Quilt, originally created to memorialize the victims of AIDS and to protest against their neglect by American society and history. As theater and performance critic Elinor Fuchs has pointed out, participant-created AIDS quilts, in their jumbling of Jews, Catholics, Muslims, and New Age Buddhists with sequins, flags, prayers, a measuring spoon, and much more, perform a postmodern breakdown of master narratives—in direct contrast to the hero memorials of "modern imperial politics" (195-196).[83]

Significantly, in the Detroit production directed by Jim Cave,[84] no flying shirts are visually present on stage; rather, they're represented as artifacts of language, drawing attention to the ways in which narrative has been inscribed on bodies even to the point of

---

[82] *Mirror Play* page references are from Harryman's unpublished manuscript entitled "Poets Theater Plays."

[83] Notably, the AIDS quilt grew out of a simple, non-narrative performance as San Francisco marchers carried placards with the names of men lost to AIDS. It was only with the durable AIDS Memorial Quilt that individual micro-narratives began to be incorporated in the form of images, quotations, and other forms of characterization.

[84] Performed at the Susanne Hilberry Gallery in the Detroit suburb of Ferndale, Michigan, on August 14, 2007.

replacing them altogether (as one speaker says in *Mirror Play*, "Images are crowding. Crowding us out" [207]). If the shirts had been physically represented—staged—they might simply have performed an iconic function; but because they are described in language—a reference to a reference—the very textuality of the representation creates not a destruction of visual representation but a recognition of the very condition of representation.

Despite the lack of narrative through-line, the play achieves continuity both by returning again and again to key words and images and by taking as its central focus the investigation of the conditions of representation. Cycling back to the image of clothing after several pages, for example, the text meditates on the perspective created by choosing some descriptors over others:

> …This scheme
> Imagines clothing in terms of whole or
> complete entities: a shirt, a hat, a shoe, etc.
> So there is still much that it cannot describe.
> For instance, in the great outdoors, the
> clothes rot and decompose. Birds pull at
> their threads. The threads mingle with other
> things. The thread is no longer a discrete
> thing but part of a unit for which there is no
> name until the nest is complete. Then the
> unit is a nest. I wear a sleeve on my heart.
> Note this also. And other harmless events.
> (note)
> (note)
> *echo makes a note*. (192)

To imagine clothing as a finished object rather than as a composite of that which went into its making or as a decomposite used, part by part, in the making of other objects is, the text asserts, a "scheme" rather than an inevitability. If the object that is no-longer-a-shirt-and-not-yet-a-nest has no name, it becomes subjugated, merely a stage in the creation of an "actual" object and meaningless except in relation to the end product

(recalling Puchner's definition of gesture above).

From this cluster of lines, organized thematically around the impact of language usage on conceptual thinking (which is hardly "harmless"), the text suddenly shifts paratactically to a reordered cliché—"I wear a sleeve on my heart"—with no apparent relation to the previous lines. One way a reader might approach this shift is simply to give in to the experience of abrupt change, with no attempt to impose meaning. Habituated reading practices are more likely, however, to coerce a meaningful connection. Is this sentence perhaps another example of language that privileges object over process? What is the relationship of the "I" to the objects (clothing, nest) that came before? And what do we make of the shift in tone from material objects such as shirts, hats, threads, and nests, to symbolic objects, such a heart and, now, sleeve (which can be worn on a heart only metaphorically)? A nest made out of threads is a home (a physical place) and home is where the heart is (a symbolic place). Emotional vulnerability (wearing one's heart on one's sleeve) is replaced with emotional self-preservation (wearing a sleeve on one's heart). What was formerly outside (clothing) moves inward (to "I"). Here the text mimes its meaning through the generation of interpretive possibilities: Any single understanding represents a "scheme," useful perhaps but certainly not inevitable.

But the text quoted above also moves beyond semantic frontiers toward the semiotic border between language and music inhabited by the word "note." This single word suggests simultaneously a musical sound, different speech modes (command—"note this"—or description), and textual objects (a hierarchical category designator [i.e., footnote] or a casual piece of writing). The use parentheses on the page—an instantiation

which cannot be precisely performed on stage—is a textual convention indicating that the word "note" might be read as a placeholder (as in "I intend to insert a note here") or as a stage direction (as in "Play a musical note here"). In either case, the note functions as an (explanatory or musical) "echo."

The play's textual performance on the page, then, is not identical with its performance on stage. The relationship of the text to stage is neither directive nor documentary, neither script nor recording. Reading the text and attending the performance produce experientially distinct plays that nevertheless constitute linked "work" exploring the relationship of textual language to embodied performance. The semantic overdetermination of "note" in the text, for example, is linked but not identical to the overdetermination of the voice, as speech and as instrument, in performance: Both the Detroit and San Francisco productions featured a jaw harp, which produces sound uncannily in between language and music.[85] Working with sound and music at the limits of language, these performances in part explored the ways in which sounds morph into and out of meaning.

What is at stake here is an awareness of the multiple processes by which we make experience meaningful. When a speaker asserts at the beginning of Harryman's play that "the composition of the sky is a matter of knowledge," for example, she suggests both that the sky's physical make-up (one sense of "composition") can be scientifically

---

[85] In both productions, the jaw harp was played by John Raskin, who also composed all of the music. Harryman comments: "Initially, I had conceived of *Mirror Play* as a poly-vocal piece for one performer: I liked the idea of one performer working with multiple voices within the conceptual antechamber space. However, that one immediately turned into two as I felt that an instrumental voice needed to be an aspect of the speaking voice. I started working with Jon Raskin, developing the piece for spoken voice (mine) and jaw harps. Now the poly-vocality is being extended to many voices and more instruments" (Hinton n.p.).

known, but also that this knowledge is itself a matter of narrative construction (a second sense of "composition"). The goal is not to question the makeup of the sky, but rather to suggest that what is known must also take into account *how* it is known. A few lines later the play suggests that, quote, "addicts" to knowledge "suffer atmosphere," a line which is vocally elongated in performance—"atmosssphhhere"—to suggest both the vaporous air that surrounds a planet and, simultaneously, a fear of the *atmos*, or vaporosity, perhaps the vaporosity or lack of solidity of knowledge itself. Here, vocalized performance vaporizes our certainty about the meaning of the line, and in doing so, it both mimes and produces its meaning. Here Harryman's play employs not a poetics of memory as witness but rather a poetics of memory as performative, as *productive* of the relationships it purports to describe and attend, a strategy that echoes Elin Diamond's notion of mimesis as the *production* of truth through a manipulation of the mirroring process.

In the psychological space of *Mirror Play*'s collectivity, all aspects of discourse are both positive and negative. The play alludes to the imbricated discourses of health, war, beauty, and pornography, for example, in its repeated references to "Barbarella," the title role from the soft-porn sci-fi film that made the actress Jane Fonda famous. In the film, Barbarella is a representative of the Federation of Earth who is sent on a peace-seeking mission to rid the world of a weapon that could mean the end of humanity. Making love not war across the galaxy, Barbarella made Fonda a favorite pinup among GIs.

Mirror Play's reference to "fa(r)ce and pornography" (198) certainly alludes to *Barbarella*, but it might just as aptly describe Fonda's 1980s reincarnation as the aerobic ideal of her wildly popular workout video series. Dressed in form-hugging fitness

fashion, Fonda bent over and spread her legs in a model of arrested movement. But in the period between *Barbarella* and the height of her workout popularity, Fonda also became an anti-war activist, speaking out against the Vietnam War starting in 1970. Though she remained a sexual icon, Fonda's perceived betrayal[86] of American troops transformed her into a target of overt, if symbolic, sexual violence. "At places where soldiers or former soldiers congregate," Rick Perlstein reports, "there'll be stickers of her likeness on the urinals; one is an invitation to symbolic rape: Fonda in her 1980s 'work-out' costume, her legs splayed, pudenda at the bulls-eye. Every night at lights-out midshipmen at the US Naval Academy cry out 'Goodnight, bitch!' in her honour" (3).

Disturbing though this report is, it is the discourse behind the violence that interests me here. Ironically, this "symbolic rape" is in part encouraged by the false mirror—the farce/face—of aerobicism misrecognized as athleticism. Johannes Birringer has argued that the image of the aerobic body is structured around a

> scene of instruction/mimicry that promotes an exercise of subjective and corporeal transformation while masking the ritualized submission of the body to serial, monotonous, and stationary motion. In her willful self-production of an actively new feminine body, the woman participant misrecognizes the mirror structure in this performative exchange, aligned as it is around persistent cultural/hierarchical oppositions between mobility/immobility, seeing/being seen, and so forth. She is drawn into a phantom interaction with the two-dimensional, depthless and absent body of the video image that simulates an actual relation between body model and "real" performance in "real" time. (215)

The aerobic body, always a feminized body, is immobilized and put on display. In contrast, the military body might be thought of as an athleticized body, masculinized, mobile, and—recalling Harryman's discussion of the athleticism of muscles acting

---

[86] Perlstein discusses some of the myths surrounding Fonda's position on the war.

without the assistance of the skeleton—competitive and aggressive. The discursive oppositions promulgated by the aerobic-atheletic dichotomy contribute to, among other things, both kinds of "domestic" violence suggested in the play's opening verbal image of flying clothes (violence against women and against discursively feminized homosexual men). Although *Mirror Play* alludes to physical acts of violence (as in the Hilberry performance when a hooded male figure claiming "Nobody wanted war" conjures images of torture associated both with American Vietnam POWs and with Iraqi prisoners at the American military prison Abu Ghraib), these are not the focus of *Mirror Play*. Rather, Harryman's attends, as I have done in this example of the soldiers' violence against Fonda, to the discourses that both materialize the body and enable violence—discourses that rely on a range of mis/recognitions. Employing not a poetics of memory as witness but rather a poetics of memory as performative, as productive of the relationships it purports to describe and attend, *Mirror Play* plays through and with the notion of national(ist) memory.

Exploring the psychological space of collectivity, *Mirror Play* offers a counter to mass culture reliance on what Retallack deems "naïve realism" and its attendant call "for intellectual and imaginative resignation, a naturalization of normapathic desire" (5). Such realism is "normapathic" because it works by irresponsibly burying difference, contradiction, irrationality—an irresponsibility that, Retallack notes, "is never benign" (19). Harryman's work, in contrast, remains open to radical difference. It engages with processes of social learning by rethinking the production and dissemination of knowledge. The realism of Harryman's work lies not in a normative reenactment of past events but rather in its existence as a thought experiment through which the past and its

connection to the present moment are reconfigured. It is characterized by the ability to hold contradictions in interplay and by a willingness to see the overlay of conflicting realities.

In *Mirror Play* Harryman turns this exploration toward social-spatial constructions with material consequences in the perpetuation of national violence. Architecture, like language, always has both a form and a social use.[87] Postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon recalls that Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the architect of the classically modernist Seagram Building in Manhattan, "allowed only white blinds on the plate glass windows and demanded that these be left in only one of three positions, open, shut, or half-way" (28)—the building's design quite literally controlling the personal lives that inhabited its space. Viewing tenants either as children to be guided or as subjects on whom to experiment, modernist architects, Hutcheon argues, positioned themselves apart from the buildings' interior communities. Postmodernist architecture returns to the idea of community, but now as a *de*centralized entity with practical needs. And memory is, Hutcheon argues, "central to this linking of the *past* with the *lived*" (29).

Mirror Play's mise-en-scène is conceptual: as a foyer that has been cut-away from the house, it represents the threshold between public and private, into and out of which "any body" may pass. The "antechamber" is both room and passageway that comes "before" the house, in between the inside and outside. It is a room defined only in relation to other rooms, not as a place in itself (and in vocalized performance the word slides between antechamber and anti-chamber). But in *Mirror Play* the antechamber has

---

[87] See Hutcheon 27-36 for a brief but helpful discussion of postmodernism's foundations in architecture.

been torn away from the house, destroying the relation that constitutes its identity. Here, then, the antechamber is not a room but a moment in the midst of transition from one object (foyer) to another, as yet unknown, resting point.

Harryman's approach to architecture is influenced in part by Denis Hollier's notion of "anti-architecture" as a means of getting out from under the authoritarian hierarchies with which architecture is complicit, a condition which led Georges Bataille to deem architecture "society's authorized superego" (Hollier ix). Hollier conceptualizes "an architecture that would not inspire, as in Bataille, social good behavior, or would not produce, as in Foucault's disciplinary factory, madness or criminality in individuals" (x). Anti-architecture is therefore an alternative that leads

> against the grain to some space before the constitution of the subject, before the institutionalization of subjectivity…[or that would] open up a space anterior to the division between madness and reason; rather than performing the subject it would perform spacing: a space from before the subject, from before meaning; the asubjective, asemantic space of unedifying architecture, and architecture that would not allow space for the time needed to become a subject. (x-xi)

Such anti-architecture works as loss or dismantling of the meaning that is assumed to inhere in architectural structures—such as houses, prisons, and tombs, all of which are implicitly or explicitly referenced in *Mirror Play*.[88]

Mirror Play's foyer investigates, in part, the penetration of exterior social space into a subject's interiority. But as a space that has been torn away from the house, presumably in an act of violence, the foyer is also what Hollier labels above an

---

[88] Hollier notes that there have been "endless arguments over whether the origin of architecture was the house, the temple, or the tomb, etc. For Bataille it was the prison" (ix).

"asubjective" space—a space which defies interpretive coherence. In this way, *Mirror Play* enters into the discourse of space and place as they figure interiority/exteriority (from the position of the subject) and insiderness/outsiderness (as the position *of* the subject)—this is in part a difference between being from/in a place and belonging to a place. In contrast to what Una Chaudhuri has described as modernist drama's recourse to "a vague, culturally determined symbology of the home, replete with all those powerful and empowering associations of space that are organized by the notion of belonging" (xii), *Mirror Play* is organized around a violated home that is also an opening—a condition that acknowledges both the very human desire to belong and the simultaneous violence and promise of belonging. Whereas modernism's drama of the home is built around what Chaudhuri has labeled "a *victimage of location* and a *heroism of departure*," which "structure the plot as well as the plays' accounts of subjectivity and identity" (xii emphasis original), *Mirror Play* articulates the question its unattached foyer invites: "Can the antechamber lose its meaning, its substance, or is it always the same, even if every aspect of it contradicts its defining characteristics?" (191).

Dispersive Performance and the Theater of Others

According to Jerzy Grotowski, whose efforts to rethink actors' training have influenced Harryman's own approach to performance, the defining feature of theater is the performer-audience relationship (15). But in the postmodern era, the audience is notoriously difficult to characterize. In *The Audience*, theater theorist Herbert Blau discusses the peculiar notion of the postmodern audience, both collective and disparate, joined to one another through a shared experience interpreted in highly individualized

ways. Like Harryman, Blau locates the efficacy of postmodernist theater in its challenge to the primacy of ocularcentric knowledge. To position understanding as seeing is, he argues, an ideology that ignores the audience's original auditory role.

Postmodern theater audiences are a product of "the vast seduction of the dispersive media" (14) and marked by division, or what Blau describes as "an 'original splitting'" that is "not the image of an original unity but the mysterious rupture of social identity in the moment of its emergence" (10). The postmodern audience is therefore not a certainty—not a community to be joined or a position to be occupied—but rather an effect of performance itself: "The audience…is not so much a mere congregation of people as a body of thought and desire. It does not exist before the play but is *initiated* or *precipitated* by it; it is not an entity to begin with but a consciousness constructed. The audience is what *happens* when, performing the signs and passwords of a play, something postulates itself and unfolds in response" (25, italics original). Blau historicizes the concept of a "public" as a modernist notion that conceptualizes the audience as uniform, understandable, and authorizing—that is, as something that can be figured out and won over. In contrast, postmodernist audiences are indeterminate, with each member experiencing an individual response, an individual identification.

Blau dubs this theater the "theater of otherness" as an alternative to the more traditional notion of a theater of essence (94). This "otherness" does not constitute a counterpublic—it is not the disidentificatory community that, for example, José Muñoz discusses in his study of contemporary minoritarian performance. Rather, it is an interpretive "community" marked, paradoxically, by discontinuity and dispersion. It is a community formed in spite of (or perhaps because of, or prior to) the foreclosure of

normative identification. But while Blau argues that such theater is marked by an oscillation between eye and ear that creates distance *rather than* identification, I want to propose that in Harryman's theater this oscillation forms the basis for an ethics of responsibility *toward* the identifications we form. In this sense, we might think of Harryman's theater not as a theater of otherness but as a theater of others, others to whom we are, for better or worse, ethically bound—a theater in which, to borrow Harryman's language, "[m]e talking fuses to you" ("Property" AI 16).

If the space of performance is, as Harryman argues in "The Ear of the Poet," a provisional space in which ideas, narratives, and social constructions may be tested, then what's being tested in *Mirror Play* is perhaps not only our methods for making sense of a post-9/11 world but also the very idea that making "sense"—a particular cognitive ordering of experience—is the correct goal. If "making sense" is a narrative proposition, then poetry might provide a different paradigm more suitable to the present world's complex interconnectivities. Poetry might offer, as Retallack asserts, a cognitive alternative to imagining borders and the crossing of lines, allowing us instead to think in terms of fractal geometries and the "swerve," an unpredictable (form of) change that can defamiliarize, disorient, and even estrange by "radically altering geometries of attention," resulting in "an unsettling transfiguration of once-familiar terrain" (1). As interruption, digression, and the unexpected, the swerve is produced in and by hybridity, the vitality of which lies in its inventiveness, in its generativity. The swerve is not an abdication of responsibility but rather the recognition that all events are overdetermined, unpredictable, subject to chance. Swerves "dislodge

us," Retallack argues, "from reactionary allegiances and nostalgias" (3). Openness to the unexpected, to generativity, thus becomes a kind of ethics: generosity toward generativity.

Placing such generativity at the heart of an ethics of non-normative obligation takes seriously Geoffrey Galt Harpham's assertion that "ethics does not solve problems, it structures them" (404). The modernist hero narrative, related to the sense of a universal ethical imperative on which ethical discourse has traditionally been founded, has been denounced in the postmodern era as an "ideological vehicle and the legitimation of concrete structures of power and domination" (Jameson 114; qtd in Harpham 387). The paradox of a postmodernist ethics of non-normative obligation, then, is that while it does not posit a hierarchy of interpretive values, it does rely on the categorical imperative of obligation itself. This imperative may, Harpham suggests, be at the center of Derrida's notion of deconstructionism itself, seeping into it in the form of the subject who is allowed to "'return' on the condition that it be transformed and modernized—no longer the self-identical, self-regulating subject of humanism, but rather a subject inmixed with otherness. This otherness, Derrida said, would consist not only of the obligation that all other people owe to other people, but also of the iron laws, the internal othernesses, which we, as speaking animals, harbor within our living consciousnesses" (Harpham 392).

The paradox of dispersive theater's non-normative obligation embodies the contradiction Harpham locates in ethics itself—the contradiction between "How ought one to live?" and "What ought I to do?", the contradiction between the distanced laws of generalizable norms and an individual in an actual (and unique) situation (395). For

Harpham the key to ethics is not only the obligation but the *choice* between different ethics (for example, between mercy and retribution). Dispersive theater makes us attentive to these choices, makes us aware that there *are* choices. This is not to say that all choices are equal, but rather that each choice "violates some law or other, and violates it precisely because it is 'ethical'" (396). Dispersive theater is ethical, then, not because it offers a moral order but because it reveals the conditions of choice. *Mirror Play* presents a very postmodern problematic: while the body is materialized through the very act of narrative (including discourse, gesture, and image), narrative is always an imperfect mirror—a necessary framing that inevitably obfuscates, a "view [that] blocks what's behind it" (Harryman "Animal" 33). This presents a particular obstacle to audience members, who are presented with a range of possibilities for mis/recognition, but it also presents a threat to bodies, for violence—in the form of war, rape, social neglect, and government policy—is justified through such mis/recognitions.

And yet, it is the very vulnerability of bodies that leads to claims of "bodily integrity and self-determinism" that are, as Judith Butler has pointed out, "essential to so many political movements" (*Precarious Life* 25). "The body," Butler continues,

> implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprints, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do. Indeed, if I deny that prior to the formation of my 'will,' my body related me to others whom I did not choose to have in proximity to myself, if I build a notion of 'autonomy' on the basis of the denial of this sphere of a primary and unwilled physical proximity with others, then am I

> denying the social conditions of my embodiment in the name of autonomy? (26)

Here, Butler helps us understand the vulnerability of the body in the public realm, a vulnerability of both its physicality and its identity. This mentally and physically projected "external" body inevitably figures one's internal subjectivity as well. And yet in figuring this subjectivity as autonomous, Butler argues, we do violence to those others on whose denial that autonomy is based. "I" is not the measure, Harryman argues, but the "interference" ("Acker" 36). But it is necessary interference.

Dispersive theater may, in fact, represent a new chapter in the history of anti-theatricality. Anti-theatricality in the twentieth century has frequently indicated, at least in part, a desire to distance ourselves from the influence of the mass audience, who may make us respond differently than we might otherwise do. Mimetic acts are, moreover, repugnant because they allow us to enjoy the suffering of others. But dispersive theater employs what might be called a flexible theatricality, whereby the value of the theater collectivity fluctuates between coercion and responsibility, between the awareness that narrative is, at best, imperfect and that meaning must nevertheless be made. Dispersive theater thus embraces the stage, but in a different way, avoiding spectacle and emphasizing the poetic, not as a direct route to the emotions but as a social tool.

The woman who, in Harryman's account of the Iraqi pin performance, interpreted the wearing of the pin as an admission of a secret understood, at least subconsciously, that she was both actor and acted upon. Taking Harryman's pin as the revelation of a guilty secret was perhaps a conditioned response—the only way she could make sense of the performance within a political context characterized by a nationalist narrative drive toward "mission accomplished."

And yet in responding with a secret of her own, she demonstrated a deeply felt, if unexpected, empathy that operated according to a set of interpretive conditions not determined by borders or even by autonomy: She too felt the vulnerability of her body in public, she too suffered a social policing that ultimately figured her subjectivity.

Avoiding narratives of witness, of moral imperative, of political identity, the Iraqi pin performance was certainly not a call to action. But for the woman who revealed her own secret, and certainly for Harryman as well, it was a moment of unexpected connection. It is probably too much to imagine this moment as a swerve away from terror, as a swerve toward hope, but it may perhaps remind us that there is far more to every event than any story can express. Generosity toward the generativity of imperfect mirrorings and unexpected identifications becomes a way of opening ourselves up to other possibilities of connection beyond explanation, justification, and non-contradiction. Poets' theater may not result in the dissolution of atmosphere or of *atmos*-fear, but as it swerves between them, it has the potential to encourage critical discussion and collective interpretation in which no one is "right" but in which difference proliferates.

CHAPTER FOUR

POETS' THEATER AS CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT: READING *THE AMERICA PLAY* DRAMATURGICALLY

> [T]he training of an audience is inseparable from the training of ourselves as poet-playwrights.
>
> Lyon Phelps
> "The Objectives of the [Cambridge] Poets' Theatre"

In his keynote address to the 2009 American Alliance for Theatre and Education/Association for Theatre in Higher Education (AATE/ATHE) conference, Howard Gardner discussed his by now quite well-known theory of multiple intelligences. It was clear from Gardner's remarks that he had been asked to speak to this audience of theater artists and educators in particular about what his work might suggest for the value of arts education, so organizers and audience members were likely disappointed to hear Gardner assert unequivocally that the theory of multiple intelligences cannot be adapted into any specific educational program. The relationships between different intelligences aren't always clear, he emphasized, and besides, the theory is descriptive, not prescriptive. Gardner did, however, briefly refer to studies indicating that acting classes may produce more empathetic individuals, and he suggested that the arts might best apply themselves not to developing any particular intelligence but rather to fostering moral character.

This idea is not new of course. Progressive educational philosophers such as John Dewey and Martha Nussbaum have long argued that literature and the arts facilitate democracy by helping us to imaginatively identify with the "other"—a function Nussbaum labels "poetic justice" (120-1). And in the last few decades of

multiculturalism and globalization, understanding the "other" seems not only increasingly relevant but imperative. But educational theorist Megan M. Boler has taken issue with this notion of poetic justice steered by empathetic identification as misguided because it bypasses the necessary critical actions of self-reflection and responsibility-taking and results, instead, merely in one's using the other to think about one's own vulnerabilities and fears. Boler, who studies the relationship between media and democracy, wants to replace a consumerist approach to texts with what she terms "testimonial reading," centered around acts of "listening" that defamiliarize and historicize our emotional responses to the stories we hear. As that which "responds to the crisis of truth by exceeding the facts," testimony is a discursive practice and an act of production that refutes the transparency of language and knowledge (166).

Boler's strategy of testimonial reading is not limited to specific texts or genres. All texts can be read testimonially, including both dramatic and performance texts, since all are "historically situated in power relationships" (170), and indeed her critique of empathy largely echoes Brecht's dramaturgical critique of "culinary" theater. Boler does not advocate the avoidance of emotional connection. Quite to the contrary, she argues that the discounting of emotion is one of the ways in which our rationalist, masculinist culture has effected control over certain populations and over certain bodies. In response, she asks how and why emotions "have been systematically discounted" (xviii) and how we might develop new roles for emotion in educational practice.

To read testimonially, Boler suggests, we must ask "what crisis of truth does this text speak to, and what mass of contradictions and struggles do I become as a result?" (170-1). To read testimonially therefore means to contextualize and historicize but also

to “meet the text with [one’s] own testimony, rather than using the other as a catalyst or a substitute for oneself” (172)—in other words, to meet the text co-performatively. Or, to put it another way, to read dramaturgically.

Boler’s notion of “testimonial reading” finds its theatrical ally in what Geoffrey S. Proehl has called the “dramaturgical sensibility,” which merges the pursuit of knowledge with emotional and even physical sensation. Committed “to the slow, ambiguous emergence of meaning, particularly those meanings (discursive and aesthetic) we seek with and from our collaborators,” the dramaturgical sensibility, Proehl argues, takes the form of questions about what we know but also about what it is possible to know, about the possibilities of knowledge and the ways in which it is produced, experienced, and understood (28). Dramaturgy is an act of generous engagement that “comes directly from a desire to do more than respond at a distance” (22). Elinor Fuchs aptly describes it as being “aroused to meaning” (qtd in Proehl 91). The production dramaturg, who takes her title from this act, is therefore engaged not just in research as contextualization, though this is part of her work, but always also in the art of bringing a play to production. The dramaturg employs critical thinking but she is not a critic. Rather, she is a co-collaborator with the text, an explorer of the play’s world, a respondent to its questions and a questioner of its responses. And both the responses and the questions are, Proehl reminds us, “a function of who we are and how we attend to what we experience” (182).

Combining Boler’s strategy of testimonial reading with Proehl’s dramaturgical sensibility, I want to argue that the reception demanded by poets’ theater might best be conceptualized as dramaturgical arousal. I borrow Fuchs’s highly apt descriptor “arousal” here to indicate an act of awakening, a feeling of excitement, and a stirring to

action. I also use it for its merging of mental, emotional, and physical responses. What receptive orientation is required by—to take two emblematic moments from previous chapters—"Achtung Swachtung" and "atmossphhhere"? Not the passive reception of the absorbed audience member enjoying an entertainment but the active, committed involvement of the audience-participant, employing a dramaturgical sensibility—the simultaneously critical and generous, listening and responding, feeling and thinking, questioning and collaborating, reading and enacting engagement of dramaturgical arousal.

But neither testimonial reading nor a dramaturgical arousal can be assumed; they, like all acts of critical engagement, are learned strategies. Indeed, Boler implies that the teaching of testimonial reading should be at the center of an arts and humanities curriculum. Poets' theater, I'd like to suggest, can actually both assist in and teach the art of dramaturgical arousal, first by preventing, or at least resisting, the closure of meaning and, secondly, by preempting empathetic identification, thereby leaving audiences with excess, unrelieved energy that can then be channeled into other kinds of engagement.

My analysis will focus on the Yale Repertory Theatre premiere of Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play*. I have chosen that production in particular because it combines several interests: (1) explicit interrogation of the relationship between testimony and text, (2) a production dramaturg whose co-performative role can be traced, in part, through the production's program notes, (3) the combination of dramatic theater with anti-theatrical (or anti-dramatic) performance that foregrounds the relationship between textuality and performativity, and (4) a concern with language as an embodied practice. My argument is that Parks's play channels dramaturgical arousal into

awakening audiences to their collaborative responsibility in bringing "truth" into being. What is at stake is not simply an understanding of texts as performances but, more importantly, the ways in which text and performance can collaboratively work to unsettle one another, defamiliarizing our emotional responses and making us aware of the social forces we embody and enact.

In demanding that audience members engage beyond the duration of the stage performance, that they ponder possible meanings and even research unfamiliar references, and that they talk with fellow audience members and even with those who haven't seen the play, poets' theater is not different from any other engaging work of theater. But in preventing us relief in other ways, poets' theater may arouse us into developing our dramaturgical sensibilities further than we might otherwise do.

Poets' Theater, Empathy, and Nervousness, or, How Do You Spell Relief?

> When one reads a play and very often one does read a play… it [is] always necessary to keep one's finger in the list of characters for at least the whole first act, and in a way it is necessary to do the same when the play is played. One has one's programme for that and beside one has to become or has become acquainted with the actors as an actor and one has one's programme too for that. And so the introduction to the characters on the stage has a great many different sides to it. And this has again a great deal to do with the nervousness of the theatre excitement.
>
> Gertrude Stein
> "Plays"

According to Gertrude Stein, the difference between plays and "real life" is in the temporal experience of one's emotions. While in real life emotions occur in conjunction with the events that are taking place, one's emotions in watching a play, Stein famously

protested, “is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening” (“Plays” 244). Stein theorized that the problem with plays was that audiences had no time to become “acquainted,” and so they were forced, as described in the epigraph above, to shift their attention back and forth between the theater program and the events on stage. Having both one’s finger on the program and one’s eyes on the stage created a feeling of nervousness that Stein disliked intensely. Her most influential theater innovation, the “landscape” play, was an attempt to do away with this nervousness, based on her assertion that a landscape “does not have to make acquaintance” (263).

While there could be no better expression of anti-theatricality than Stein’s sentiments above, it is important, as I argue in chapter one, to differentiate her rather idiosyncratic anti-theatricality from the more conventional notion of anti-theatricality as fear of the public sphere. Stein’s landscape theater, informed by her experimentations in verbal portraiture, was indeed aimed at creating a feeling of immediacy, but it was an immediacy founded in the “real-life” experiences of representation itself. Stein’s anti-theatricality therefore centers, paradoxically, on a “(pro)theatricalism,” as Martin Puchner has termed it (2), that replaces the representation of reality with the reality of representation. The terms of this exchange are key, for the goal is not to bypass representation but rather to focus on it. Stein’s insights were prescient, and seventy-five years later, much contemporary theater is preoccupied with the relationship between representation and experience, between theater and reality, and between theatricality and performativity.

Having one’s finger on the program and one’s eyes on the stage is a surprisingly

appropriate characterization of the audience activity demanded by Parks's 1994 breakthrough work *The America Play*: the theater program contains, after all, footnotes that comment on the dialogue and unfolding dramatic action, forcing audience members who want to stay "acquainted" with the play to shift back and forth between program and stage. But Parks's footnotes are deceptive. While on the surface they appear to help explain the events unfolding on the stage, it soon becomes clear that they are actually part of the performance, cycling performatively back into the play itself. As the semiotic distinction between text and paratext breaks down (in a strategy common to all of the plays examined in this dissertation), representation as an act of framing takes center stage.

Whereas Stein attempted to avoid nervousness by reworking many dramatic conventions almost to the point of unrecognizability, Parks embraces these conventions even as she destabilizes them. *The America Play* is unabashedly a work of dramatic theater, however anti-realist in design [Steven Drukman has wryly remarked that "It's like Gertrude Stein if Gertrude Stein liked to dangle carrots" (57)]: Actors dress in costume; the scene of the stage is imaginatively separate from the audience seating area; act, scene, and character prefixes mark the play text as a performance script; and language offers characterization if not fully fledged characters. And yet *The America Play* does not center on something that might be called a "plot," even if there is a kind of "story" to it. Instead, Parks demonstrates, like Stein, an interest in bringing the audience's experience of the play to more closely resemble the experience of "real life" by emphasizing the sound of language and the materiality of the text—by emphasizing, in other words, the liveliness of language.

For Stein, the use of such lively language created a feeling of excitement in perfect correspondence to the action of the language itself rather than to any narrative plot. Because the audience's emotional experience corresponds to what they are seeing and hearing, she argued, there is no by-product of nervousness. Whereas narrative plays require climax as a way of providing relief from the nervousness of always needing to get acquainted, Stein asserted, landscape plays, like real life itself, end simply in completion.

But what exactly does this distinction between "relief" and "completion" and between "nervousness" and "excitement" mean for a work of theater like *The America Play*, a work that combines dramatic theater with Steinian anti-theatrical performance? *The America Play* joins lively language to drama, but it is does not employ a fully scripted plot with psychologically complex characters. The characters are instead what Fuchs describes as "pre-psychological," as "impression or inscription" (74). Fuchs argues that postmodern theater is frequently marked by a loss of dramatic character that assists the audience's full immersion in the performance. She terms one extreme of this immersion "shopping" entertainment—the opposite of Brechtian culinary theater—in which the spectator is plunged so deeply into the action that it is "embraced without suspicion" (139). "[E]mpathy," in the shopping play, "is not required or even possible…[because] the spectator's spatial saturation essentially takes the place of his experience of characters in a drama" (139-140). Fuchs's notion of the shopping play is useful for comparison's sake, but, to be clear, *The America Play* it is not shopping entertainment. By immersing audiences in the materiality of the language and the production of the text, *The America Play* makes identification and empathy difficult, but at the same time its retention of the spatial divide between character and spectator keeps

audiences at a certain distance and manages, in Stein's terms, to simultaneously produce nervousness and prevent relief. Which begs the question: If the audience experiences neither empathy nor relief, what is the goal of the play? What happens to the tension between structural frames? Or to put it in Stein's terms, where does the audience's nervousness ultimately go?

Resisting Closure

One of the ways in which *The America Play* resists closure and maintains emotional tension is through its use of poetic overdeterminacy. The play's reference to "the Great Hole of History" can serve as a quick example. When the phrase "the Great Hole of History" is vocalized, the word "Hole" is, at least in my Midwestern pronunciation, ambiguous. Does it indicate a totality ("whole") or an absence ("hole")? In the published text, the word is determinate. It is the body's engagement with this written text that materializes and enacts the phrase's semantic oscillation, which in turn informs its politics. In *The America Play* History with a big H—the kind that's written down, documented, and presumed to endure—is founded on erasure, on the loss of voices that don't make it into the historical record. The aurality of the phrase "the Great Hole of History," then, does not merely refer to an idea, it *enacts* it. The politics of this aurality lies in the critical stance that accompanies this enactment. That is, in enacting oscillation between the "hole" and "whole" of History, embodied engagement with the text creates the conditions for disidentification with History's totalizing narrative.

It may therefore come as no surprise that in a 1994 interview—the year *The America Play* was published—Parks counts William Faulkner as her favorite writer,

above Samuel Beckett and Adrienne Kennedy (Drukman 72). In interviews that recount her own development as a playwright, Parks stresses that she initially wrote fiction but was urged toward playwrighting by James Baldwin because of the dramatic way she read her stories aloud in his creative writing class at Mount Holyoke (Jiggetts 309). And when she first arrived in New York, she attended poetry readings rather than theater productions (Savran 146). Indeed, each of Parks's plays written and produced prior to 1997, including *Betting on the Dust Commander* (1987), *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989), *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1992), *The America Play* (1994), and *Venus* (1996), exhibit a writerly attention to language more commonly associated with poetry and experimental fiction, leading theater critic Edwin Wilson to label Parks "a poet and word-musician."

Wilson is not alone in his characterization. Liz Diamond, who has directed multiple productions of *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, *The Last Black Man*, and *The America Play*, has called Parks a "truly brilliant poet" (Backalenick 34). This is not casual praise. At the Yale School of Drama, Diamond regularly taught MFA classes that included plays by such writers as Tristan Tzara, Adrienne Kennedy, and Mac Wellman, and yet it is Parks whom Diamond credits with teaching her about "the nature of poetry and poetic meaning" (Drukman 59).

Some critics have read the unusual, poetic page layout of Parks's early plays via the textual conventions of dramatic scripts and stage directions. In her insightful analysis of *Venus*, Elizabeth Lyman, for example, argues that "[t]he arrangement of elements on each page is carefully crafted for effect. In a scene from 'The Whirlwind Tour,' for instance…Parks's simulation of stage space with the positioning of the Negro

Resurrectionist on one side and the Mother-Showman and Venus on the other, sets up a temporal as well as a spatial separation" (92). Such a reading certainly makes sense from the perspective of the stage, but I wonder about the characterization of Parks's page as a "simulation of stage space." After all, as Parks herself acknowledges, she was more interested in poetry and radical modernism than in theater and plays, and she wrote plays even before she was fully familiar with the conventions of writing for the stage. In fact, the spatial arrangement that Lyman describes seems more descriptive of a textual design, with the "primary" text on one side and "marginalia" on the other—an arrangement that recalls, for example, James Joyce's experimental novel *Finnegans Wake* and Langston Hughes's collection of performance poetry *Ask Your Mama*.

The printed program that accompanied the 1994 Yale Repertory premiere of *The America Play* places the play within a context of poetry, including quotations by Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, Charles Olson, and Robert Creeley. It also contains multiple historical images and program notes, as well as Parks's fifteen footnotes, a text mixing historical, grammatical, fictional, conjectural, and skeptical references that performatively cycle back into the play. This joining of printed images, poetry, and textual conventions to embodied performance in the space of live theater suggests an interpretive approach to the play that figures page and stage as collaborative rather than determinant. Encouraging an understanding of history as performative, *The America Play* stages texts and bodies as co-conspirators in the construction of meaning and the formation of identity. Assembled by Bly, a renowned dramaturg who has built a reputation for helping playwrights and directors develop innovative works and who worked closely with Parks and Diamond on the Yale Rep production, the program

content taken all together suggests that the play benefits from poetic reading that turns the audience's role in the construction of meaning back on itself.[89]

In helping orient audiences for a particular theater production, Bly characterizes the job of the production dramaturg as "docking," rather like "bringing together a space shuttle and it port with as little bumping and scraping as possible."[90] Some plays, of course, require more docking than others. While theater scholars have come to love *The America Play*, and it is considered the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright's breakthrough work, its initial reception was cool. Despite the talented production team of Diamond and Bly, reviewers were torn. Wilson of the *Wall Street Journal* warmly declared the play "a ground-zero 1990s work," "arresting and provocative" if also "not an easy play to realize on stage," and "precisely the kind of work a theater like the Yale Rep should be presenting." Markland Taylor of *Variety* dismissed it as evidence of "the emperor's-new-clothes syndrome." When the production transferred virtually wholesale to the Public Theatre in New York in March, the reviews were largely negative, with one reviewer complaining, for example, that "none of it makes any dramatic or coherent sense" (Lepidus) and another lamenting that audiences "will never known what Suzan-Lori

---

[89] *The America Play* also represents an important moment in the history of production dramaturgy. As Mark Bly explains, "Before I insisted on my name being on the Title page at the Public [Theatre] with the other collaborators…the Public had never allowed the credit for a Dramaturg on the title page. It was a little known but huge moment in Dramaturgy History at the Public. But I made it clear I would resign from the project and the director Liz Diamond and Suzan-Lori Parks backed me on it" (email to the author, April 8, 2009). Bly was also the first dramaturg to receive production credit on Broadway, recognized for his work on the 1986 production of *Execution of Justice*, written and directed by Emily Mann, at the Virginia Theatre.

[90] I'd like to express my gratitude to Mark Bly for making time in his schedule to speak with me about the production and his work at Yale Rep. This anecdote and others related to Bly's recollection of events come from a telephone interview between Bly and the author that took place on May 1, 2009.

Parks's play was all about" (Mode). Audience members walked out on at least two performances (see Mode, Green).

Bly recalls the hostile mood that preceded a post-performance talkback shortly after the production premiered. Wanting to protect his actors from the disparaging remarks he heard arising from the audience, he sent the actors away and faced on his own a group of about 100 people seeking an explanation of the play and of Yale Rep's choice to produce it. So Bly took the uncharacteristic step of talking the audience through the play, scene by scene, for forty-five minutes. Although a few left early, the majority were, as Bly puts it, "converted." Bly's explanation of this change of heart is that the remaining audience members felt they'd learned something, that trained on conventional dramatic structures and realist plots, they simply had not known how to engage with Parks's play, and he was able to offer them some ideas for a new approach. The response to the talkback was so enthusiastic, in fact, that Bly received three dinner invitations afterwards, including one from an elderly couple asking Bly to join them for a fried chicken dinner after Sunday church.

Helping audiences learn to engage with unfamiliar forms of theater is an important aspect of the production dramaturg's job, and it was especially so in this case. While *The America Play* had already been produced in workshop at the Dallas Theatre Center and Arena Stage in Washington D.C. in 1993,[91] the influential Yale Repertory in the early 1990s was a different sort of proving ground. Distinguished director Stan Wojewodski, Jr. had taken over as artistic director in 1991 and was leading the theater it

---

[91] It had been commissioned by Theatre for a New Audience, whose main mission is the development, performance, and study of Shakespeare and classical drama for contemporary audiences.

in a new direction. Whereas Lloyd Richards, Yale Repertory's artistic director from 1979 to 1991, had nurtured artistically precise, well-made plays by such playwrights as August Wilson and Athol Fugard, Wojewodski championed the linguistically innovative theater of Eric Overmyer, Len Jenkin, Mac Wellman, and Maria Irene Fornes. Parks's own *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* had been produced at the Yale Repertory in 1992,[92] and producing another play by the relative newcomer to theater was a significant statement on her work's relationship to the direction of American theater in the late twentieth century.

But only the most committed (or sometimes irritated) audience members attend a talkback. The dramaturg's chief tool for engaging and orienting audiences—and certainly the most ubiquitous—is the theater program, handed out to audience members only minutes before the curtains rise. Theater programs traditionally serve a wide range of practical functions. Contractually required by the Actors Equity Association, they create publicity for actors and stage managers and indicate actor substitutions or other changes to a publicized performance. For theaters and producers, programs create revenue by providing advertising space. And audience members often save them as souvenirs of an evening spent at the theater—a function most clearly evidenced in the abundant archives of souvenir theater programs across the country.[93]

Most histories of the contemporary theater program format trace it back to Frank

---

[92] Liz Diamond had become a close collaborator of Parks, directing both *Death of the Last Black Man* and *The America Play* at Yale Rep and directing Parks's *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* in Seattle in 1991.

[93] In fact, AEA contracts make distinct mention of cast lists, programs, and souvenir programs, indicating the particular significance of the theater program's souvenir function.

Strauss, the Ohio ad man who first came up with the idea of transforming the handbill or theater poster into a multi-page space for advertising—the now familiar *Playbill*.[94] The magazine format allowed for more pages devoted to production photographs and supplementary materials. But the theater program's explanatory function likely also developed out of an earlier use of expanded, supplementary titles and promotional descriptions designed to lure broader audiences into attendance. Mid-nineteenth-century theater posters, for example, included not only title and location but also illustrations, brief characterizations, and, often, the promise of engrossing spectacle (and Parks's frequent allusion to circuses, amusements, and sideshows link her plays explicitly to this particular style of theatrical spectacle).[95]

Meanwhile, programs not constrained by the copyrighted *Playbill* format often include a greater range of notes and images that not only give specific information about the current production but that also serve interpretive, interrogative, and even co-performative roles, a function that dramaturg D. J. Hopkins has described as a Barthesian "counter-text" that "presents an alternative site of authority in performance, an alternative center of gravity that exerts influence over the trajectory of a production process" (2). The aim of the co-performative theater program, Hopkins suggests, is "to invite the audience to participate in the counter-textual practice at work in the production" (15), a goal that extends Hopkins's own notion of "hybrid authorship" even beyond the co-creative work of dramaturg with "playwright, director, designers, actors" to a

---

[94] See, for example, Mandell.

[95] Enrica Jemma Glickman's discussion of Celestina Paladini's successful use of expanded titles to reach a broader cross-section of the public offers an even earlier, related example of theater posters' emerging explanatory function. See Glickman 71.

collaboration with audience members as well. As a methodological field positioned within a range of cultural discourses, the counter-text is independent, productive, collaborative, audacious, excessive, and performative.

In his book-length meditation on the work of the dramaturg as model for an expansive dramaturgical sensibility, Proehl worries that Hopkins's "anxiety of authorship" may obscure or diminish a dramaturg's more subtle forms of authorship. Proehl tempers the idea of the dramaturgical counter-text by noting that it does not actually function "counter to the work," though it is "an act of creation" (69), and his sense of dramaturgical productivity also allows that audiences may engage in co-creative acts with the play text. In addition, he notes, production dramaturgs produce a range of published and written works more conventionally defined as texts, or what Proehl describes as "projects sprung from the seedbed of production research and a dramaturgical sensibility," including "program essays (such as those recently published by Felicia Loundré), production case studies, Bly's *Production Notebooks*, [German director Peter] Stein and [German dramaturg Dieter] Stürm's *Shakespeare's Memory*" and his own book (69). Proehl argues for a notion of the dramaturg not as researcher but, following Bly, as questioner. Coming across an interview in which the German dramaturg Dieter Stürm argues that production dramaturgy involves "the destruction of illusionary knowledge (*Scheinwissen*) and the questioning of precipitous analyses—which involves the discovery of what one cannot at the moment know and basically can never know and the recognition of this," Proehl discovers for the first time "what a dramaturgical sensibility might be" (74).

Despite their differences, both Hopkins and Proehl portray dramaturgical work as

a creative activity that embraces a position of unknowingness, that treats the unanswerable question as a productive act that directly collaborates with the play text. As David Savran has suggested, Parks's play "[l]ike the plays of Kennedy or Stein,…demand that directors and readers conspire with the playwright as active producers of meaning. For they construct stable and fixed meanings but set the self in dialogue with itself, offering contradictory possibilities for meaning. They, in short, stage (double) consciousness" (140). Parks concurs that others must take an active role in relation to her texts: "I'll put in something like, 'He's in the big hole which is an exact replica of the Great Hole of History.' I want to see what the director says. And the director's going to say, 'It's a museum, it's a black hole, it's a fishbowl.' That is magical to me, when people think for themselves. It's not when I have to write down every single little thing" (147). What Parks seems to be aiming for here is a kind of generative mimesis, as it has been discussed throughout this dissertation as a tension between the collective and the individual produced in extra-lexical effects that create the possibility of multiple identifications. Such generative mimesis can be understood, according to Savran, as "(double) consciousness," but I want to add that this double consciousness is available largely in the oscillation between textual and embodied performance.

Dramaturgical arousal involves being aware of multiple interpretive choices. This multiplicity is produced largely through the play's resistance to closure via a rejection of narrative plot and the use of overdetermined language. But dramaturgical arousal is also, within the collective space of the theater, a community response, and in this sense it becomes, like Boler's testimonial reading, a "collective educational responsibility" (164). Indeed, Boler characterizes testimonial reading as (1) that which responds to our

contemporary era by requiring "new representations of 'truth' which are not static and fixed, but allows us to communicate trauma's 'excess'" and as (2) the reader's acceptance of "responsibility as a co-producer of 'truth'" (166). One of the shifts of what I'm referring to as dramaturgical arousal is an awakening to the acts of framing that socially condition emotional and critical response.

Consider, then, the two-page image at the center of the Yale Rep program for *The America Play*: a derringer pistol aimed at the back of Abraham Lincoln's head, shown in profile. The image is reproduced from the book *Twenty Days*, "a narrative in text and pictures" of Lincoln's assassination and the following twenty days that led up to his burial in Springfield, Illinois. Published in 1965, the book is described in its foreword as both an "arrangement" and a "record" compiled by the daughter and grandson of a collector of Lincoln memorabilia "who devoted a lifetime to amassing the greatest collection in existence of photographs of Lincoln, his times, and his contemporaries" (Catton n.p.). The book works in part as an attempt to uncover the facts in a morass of competing witness accounts. But it also acknowledges the practical and even philosophical challenges in constructing a single historical narrative, an acknowledgment that *The America Play* takes as its starting point.

The caption that accompanies the Lincoln-and-derringer image in *Twenty Days* informs us that "[t]he actual derringer pistol that killed Lincoln is used here with this tilted profile of the President to show the exact angle and the extremely close range at which he was hit" (39). In Bly's program for the Yale Rep production, the same image is entitled "Lincoln Assassination" and accompanied by a caption, attributed to John Wilkes Booth, that reads: "What a glorious opportunity there is for a man to immortalize himself

by killing Lincoln" (n.p). The relationship of, and differences between, these two presentations of the image are revealing. First, the caption in *Twenty Days* positions the image, spread across two oversized pages, as an authoritative depiction. But what is meant to be ascertained from the flat, two-dimensional recreation of the angle of the gun, which necessarily misses a whole other dimension of the gun's angle? What "truth" can we learn from this "recreation," especially when the book's foreword argues that

> [o]f necessity, history is selective. When it deals with an event like this it assembles the pertinent accounts and discards the irrelevant, carefully separates the probably true from the obviously false, pieces stray bits of testimony together, and presents us at last with a coherent story. This is the way history has to be, and if it were not told that way it would be unendurably confusing. Yet we may miss something when we read it that way, and what we miss can be important—the dreadful incoherence which the affair had at the time for the people who were involved in it. History's most compelling moments are not always as orderly as the books make them seem; sometimes they are in the highest degree disorderly, so bewildering that even people who lived through them may have only a shadowy idea of what they themselves saw. There is a confusion of tongues, which may indeed be a deep problem for the historian but which was after all part of the reality at the time. It is no wonder that history's tragedies give birth to myths and legends. Sometimes it seems marvelous that the real truth ever does take shape. (n.p.)

The argument with which *Twenty Days* opens, then, is that in the formation of a coherent historical narrative something is always left out—and what is left out is the "confusion of tongues," the multiplicity, contradiction, and indeterminacy, that direct experience of an event and the resulting testimony produce.

"Testimony," Boler reminds us again, "responds to the crisis of truth by exceeding the facts" (166). The crisis to which Boler refers is both material and representational—that is, it is a crisis both in the experience of our everyday lives and in the ways these traumas get represented. At the same time that *Twenty Days* mourns the

necessary elisions of historical narrative, it presents images as essentially unmediated and therefore as closer to truth. Not only is the Lincoln-and-derringer image offered as visual evidence that can at least partially reenact the truth of the event, but throughout *Twenty Days* images are used to clarify facts muddled in eyewitness accounts—one photo verifies the existence of a flag decorating Lincoln's theater box on the night he was assassinated, for example, while another attests to the location of the apartment where he died; a third documents the blood left on the bedclothes by a dying president, and another reveals the assassins' attendance at a public address by Lincoln earlier that same month.

While *Twenty Days* uses the "truth" of Lincoln's assassination to frame the witness testimonies, *The America Play* uses witness testimony to frame the "truth" of the event. "Testimony," Boler asserts, "contains the energy and life force that cannot be captured as content or conclusions. Testimony's own medium 'is in process,' and has no self-transparency" (167). The Yale Rep program recycles the Lincoln-and-derringer image performatively, removing the claim to precision, transparency, and factuality and replacing it with a performative speech-act whose force lies in the identity it proleptically creates for its speaker via its physical engagement with the body of Lincoln. In linking Lincoln's assassination not to presumably objective "facts" but rather to the speech acts of John Wilkes Booth, who was both a theater actor in his own right and the brother of the acclaimed Shakespearian actor Edwin Booth, Bly's program frames this moment in our nation's history as a performative, even theatrical, event. Meanwhile, in the play's onstage performance, the multiple recreations of the moment of Lincoln's assassination belie the historical value of a single, flat pictorial layout. The image of Lincoln's assassination, the play suggests, is always already mediated—in part by the very

expectation that there is a single, unmotivated "truth" to any event. The tension between the images leads audiences not toward relief but rather toward expectation, possibility, arousal, and generativity.

Traversing the Page and Stage

In the first Act, or the "Lincoln Act," of *The America Play*—which Parks has described as a play about "greatness and costume" (Pearce)—a black man whose physical resemblance to Abraham Lincoln has been remarked on by others all his life has built a theme park (an "exact replica," the text explains, of an amusement park back East known as "the Great Hole of History"). This man, known throughout the play only as "the Foundling Father" (in the stage directions) or "the Lesser Known" (in the play's dialogue), earns his living by playing victim for paying customers who wish to reenact Lincoln's murder at a theatrical production of *Our American Cousin*, a role he repeats again and again and yet always slightly differently to meet the desires of the various "Booths" who have come to assassinate him. As a play that stages a historical moment that occurred during a theatrical performance of a play that was in part about the specific cultural identity of America, *The America Play* layers competing references together as elements in a complex performance and interrogation of "America." The central character, for example, is a "reiteration" of Lincoln with a difference, just as the continual reenactment of Lincoln's assassination is reiteration of American history with a difference—a process Parks refers to as "rep and rev," or repetition and revision, which creates a structure out of accumulation. Parks's reference to Robert Creeley's famous dictum that "form is never more than an expression of content" offers an interpretive

approach to her portrayal of the Foundling Father as a reiteration of Lincoln.[96] As one who both is and is not Lincoln, the Foundling Father repeats Lincoln's form with some notable differences. In fact, *The America Play* is filled with reiterations, or "echoes" as Parks refers to them: "the bust, the cut-out, the Foundling Father, the memory, the son who comes and follows in his father's footsteps" (Savran148).

The use of "rep and rev" continues in the second act, entitled "The Hall of Wonders," which takes place at the now-abandoned site, apparently several years later, after the Foundling Father has died. Lucy and Brazil, wife and son of the Foundling Father, have come seeking his remains. (In this way, too, the play echoes *Twenty Days*, described in its own foreword as an "arrangement" and "record" compiled by the wife and son of a collector of Lincoln memorabilia.) They are employed in the funeral business, as diggers and paid mourners, just as the Foundling Father was himself a digger who dug the exact replica of the Great Hole of History when he came out west (think frontier). At the play's end, Lucy and Brazil have unburied the Lesser Known's personal effects and decide to use them to stage their own historical attraction, the House of Wonders. As a site that is both a "hole" and a replica of a replica, the "exact replica of the Great Hole of History" is a rearticulation in a chain of absences. Built on loss, its identity is explicitly constituted by abjection. If the Great Hole of History is, as theater scholar Jeanette Malkin has claimed, the "absence from which power emerges" (4), then the exact replica of the Great Hole is a mimetic rearticulation of that absence and that power, a performative reenactment, constituted by abjection, that produces the effect of

---

[96] See "A Talk with Liz Diamond on Suzan-Lori Parks" and also Parks's "From Elements of Style" 7.

material reality in the form of History. Or perhaps more accurately, *a* history, for as Worthen has argued, "In the Great Hole of History, or its replica, words and things aspire to the condition of history, a history that—as citation—can only be rhetorical, devised in and by its performance" ("Citing" 7).

Against this background, it is easy to read *The America Play*'s use of Lincoln as a kind of deconstructive signifying on the cultural myths upon which American History is founded, an interpretation recommended in Bly's program notes by an excerpt from John Wideman's essay "The Black Writer and the Magic of the Word." Wideman's essay, which addresses the use of language in African American literature, promotes the use of signifying as a means both of deconstructing the pretensions of "proper" English and of creating a black speech community. Within this context, Parks's use of the "Foundling Father" and the "w/hole" of history become playful oral deconstructions of the absence of African American history upon which (white) American (textual) history is founded. The Black writer must become "bilingual," Wideman argues, able to move easily between the textual language of the professional American writer and the oral language of African American culture.

At issue in this notion of a deconstructive signifying is the discrepancy between codes of literacy and codes of orality, but Parks transforms this from an either-or to a both-and proposition, suggesting that African American writing must reincorporate the testimonial "confusion of tongues" intentionally selected out of historical narratives such as *Twenty Days*. In doing so, it does not move back and forth between languages so much as speak multiple languages simultaneously—an assertion explicitly performed in the program notes by the image-sound-text:

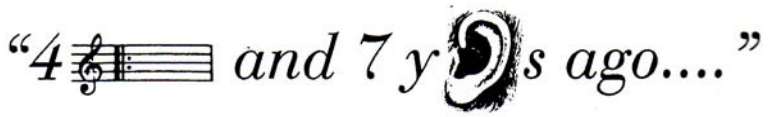

Figure 1. Image from the Yale Repertory Theatre program for *The America Play*

The images in this formulation do double representational duty, conceptually suggesting both the production and reception of sound and textually conjuring the words "score" and "ear" that complete the famous opening of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. But in the absence of the actual words themselves, the Gettysburg quotation is available only aurally, as a subvocalization or imagined vocalization that occurs in the act of "reading" the images that works by substituting them. It is only in mobilizing eyes, voice, images, and text collaboratively that meaning can emerge, but this meaning is founded on absence as it oscillates between Lincoln's historical text and Parks's performative citation and between images that suggest sounds, sounds that suggest words, and words that suggest absent texts.

One of the ways this image-sound-text works is by conjuring—but not precisely reproducing—the opening line to the Gettysburg Address and, simultaneously, defamiliarizing that text and our emotional responses to it. Such defamiliarization creates the conditions under which we can, as Boler puts it, "excavate [our] structures of feeling" (172) rather than merely respond emotionally. This reworking of the Address produces not patriotism and/or racial pride but amusement, and perhaps, depending on one's attitudes about such things, irritation at having such an important and meaningful text in our nation's history toyed with as though it were merely like any other text. Whatever

one's emotional response, dramaturgical arousal awakens us to those responses, as a precondition to subjecting them to analysis.

In juxtaposing Wideman's excerpt with such an image-sound-text, the program notes produce a counter-text that pushes *The America Play* past mere signifying to a more collaborative, chiastic relationship between literacy and orality. Consider *The America Play*'s opening lines, for example, spoken by The Foundling Father As Abraham Lincoln:

> "To stop too fearful and too faint to go."
>
> (*Rest*)
>
> "He digged the hole and the whole held him."
>
> (*Rest*)
>
> "I cannot dig, to beg I am ashamed."
>
> (*Rest*)
>
> "He went to the theatre but home went she." (159)

In performance, the first line causes aural disorientation—is it "two," "to," or "too"?—that creates a desire for textual confirmation, immediately mobilizing the oscillation between text and performance that persists throughout the play. This disorientation continues into the second line, creating the possibility for "misunderstanding" as audience members may hear "hole" twice. As discussed above, the aural oscillation of whole/hole here generatively mimes the plenitude (whole) that creates an absence (hole) of clear interpretation, playfully producing and enacting its meaning as it refers to it.

Against this background, we might expand on our initial deconstructive interpretation of "Foundling Father," a designation that is, as mentioned above, available only textually. While it might be possible to read "Foundling Father" as a creative kind of stage direction (though it's unclear how such a direction would be performed), this

understanding relies on a conventional notion of a script for the stage, putting the play text in the service of performance and the theatrical image. From the vantage point of poetry, we might view Parks's imagistic "Foundling Father, As Abraham Lincoln" differently, as the deconstruction of the transparency of the Image, demonstrating the ways in which the page refigures both the historical image of Lincoln as revered American forefather (or "faux-father" elsewhere in the play) and the stage image of the "Lesser Known," an African American man dressed up to look like Lincoln whose cultural history is both indebted to and eclipsed by Lincoln's historical legacy. Such a reading is in fact suggested in Bly's program notes, which cinch together Charles Olson's "abt the dead he sd…," Robert Creeley's "A Variation," and Wallace Stevens's "The Irish Cliffs of Moher," along with Stein. Each of the selections explicitly thematizes and interrogates the notion of inheritance, cultural or familial, extending it beyond a simple unidirectional passing on of histories and characteristics to consider the ways in which later generations refigure the previous ones (Creeley), the struggle to come to terms with one's inheritance (Olson), and the impossibility of identifying origins (Stevens). In addition to these thematic connections, the excerpts function hermeneutically, tuning audience members' ears for the playful, poetic language of the play.

Dramaturgically, the phrase "Foundling Father, As Abraham Lincoln" functions not as a stage direction but as a counter-textual act or a performative event that calls a partially eclipsed identity into (tentative, unstable) being through a self-conscious act of mis-citation. As both orphan and antecedent, the Foundling Father's historical grounding is shaky. He is an unmoored referent, an "echo" of an American historical icon built on myth, assumption, hearsay, and invention. In contrast, "the Lesser Known" is a relational

identity, a reiteration of Lincoln, with a key difference: he is African American.[97]

The defamiliarization that occurs through this casting decision is pointed. We might say in Boler's terms that it reveals the "semiotics" of our emotional response to Lincoln as a white national hero brutally gunned down for opposing Confederate independence and for emancipating African American slaves (157). In testimonial reading, Boler theorizes, the reader

> must attend to herself as much as to the other—not in terms of 'fears for one's own vulnerabilities,' but rather in terms of the affective obstacles that prevent the reader's acute attention to the power relations guiding her response and judgments. For example, to experience a surge of irritation at the text allows the reader to examine potential analyses: does she dismiss the text out of irritation? Might irritation, for example, indicate the reader's desire to avoid confronting the articulated pain? (169)

To replace Lincoln with a black "reiteration" undermines the racial relations upon which the narrative of the white national hero is founded. It may even lead readers and audience members to consider the histories that get silenced by this white hero narrative at the center of African American history.

Textually, the quotation marks that surround the opening lines of the play also point to the act of citation. On stage, these are incorporated as an implied rehearsal—the Lesser Known, dressed as Lincoln, appears to be practicing for a show. But the marks are literal as well: the first, third, and fourth lines of the play have each been footnoted as dictionary examples of chiasmus, a grammatical form in which the sequencing of the first phrase is reversed in the second. Grammatical forms are usually better identified in

---

[97] In the Yale Rep production, both the Lesser Known and the customer-assassins are played by African American actors, though this is not explicitly indicated in Parks's notes. Such casting is, however, widely assumed. Casting a white actor would, of course, produce a very different dramaturgical engagement.

reading, which may explain why Parks begins her play with not one but five examples of chiasmus, cycling back to the most symbolically important—"He digged the hole and the whole held him"—before moving on. While a single example of chiasmus may not register to theater audiences, repetition of the structure creates a pattern that begins to be audible. Meanwhile, the opening lines also create thematic movement, joining digging, w/hole, not digging, theater, and Lincoln chiastically, not as a progression through history or narrative but as a performative linkage by which subject and object trade positions.

Chiasmus therefore serves a hermeneutic function, calling for a particular kind of interpretive approach especially suited to revision, multiplicity, and "the struggle of the emergence of something new"[98] out of already-circulating discourses, histories, and identities. It also creates a chiastic approach to interpreting the stage actions, creating a shifty I/eye. Is the Lesser Known manipulating or manipulated by already-circulating discourses and images? When, for example, he dons beards as part of his Lincoln costume—beards that "were his although he himself had not grown them on his face," beards whose procurement, arrangement, and care "took so much work he figured that the beards were completely his," beards that were "as authentic as he was, so to speak" (159-160)—to what degree is he creating the performance and to what degree is the performance creating him?

When in Act II Lucy admonishes Brazil to keep his stories "tuh scale," then, she is expressing her desire "tuh know the real thing from thuh echo. Thuh truth from thuh hearsay," a desire which, she notes, distinguishes her from the Lesser Known (185, 175). As a combination of both of his parents, Brazil struggles to express the significance of his

---

[98] Linda Hutcheon's characterization of the poetics of postmodernism, 6.

inheritance in the terms that have been handed down to him. When Brazil discovers a medal for "fakin'," he cries "This is his! This is his!!," correcting to "This could be his!" only after Lucy reminds him to "Keep it tuh scale" (186). While there's no way of knowing whether or not the medal really was the Lesser Known's (a hole in history), the point also seems to be that it doesn't matter if it was really his as long as we believe it was his (the imaginative production of history that transforms a hole into a whole). Authenticity, in this formulation, is not inherent but performative. Thus, "fakin'" becomes a kind of key word for theater, for acting, but also for a wide range of performative re-creation—including the production of History.

Nevertheless, Lucy continually tries to shut down Brazil's imaginative engagement with material objects. Unearthing "Mr. Washingtons" wooden teeth, Brazil imagines them biting: "[N]ibblers, lookin for uh meal. Nibblin. I iduhnt your lunch….Quit that nibbling you nibblers you nibbling nibblers you" (185), and Lucy once again urges him to "Keep it tuh scale." When Brazil retells the story of his parents honeymooning at the Great Hole of History, he claims that "Mr. George Washington, for example, thuh Fathuh of our Country hisself, would rise up from thuh dead and walk uhround and cross thuh Delaware and say stuff!! Right before their very eyes!!!!," Lucy again corrects him: "That Hole back East was uh theme park son. Keep your story to scale" (179-180). The stories that Brazil speaks are what he's heard from his own mother, but they come out of his mouth in altered form. Lucy's repeated reminders to stay "to scale" suggests that the past cannot come back to life but can only be imitated or reconstructed via narrative that must adhere to a standard of truthfulness, measured, significantly, by what is already known and has already been said.

The Footnote

Footnotes enact a social pressure to keep things "to scale," verifying a text's truth value by recirculating what has already been written. But in *The America Play*, Parks puts her thumb on the scale, so to speak, by playing with the footnote, undermining its use as a textual convention that secures a narrative's authenticity. In fact, the footnote is a device that Parks returns to again and again, in different ways, in several of her plays, including not only *The America Play* but also *The Death of the Last Black Man*, *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, and *Venus*. Footnoting a play raises a number of practical and interpretive questions[99]: Are the notes intended to help actors better understand their characters and thus enacting a directorial function? Or are they perhaps intended for audience members to better understand the play's references, in which case one wonders why the notes are not in some way incorporated into the play's story,dialogue, or mise-en-scène? If we assume that the notes are not directorial but rather integral to the play's performance, how should they be presented (as Brechtian titles or placards or as printed additions to the playbill, for example)? What is the difference between notes that are orally presented and notes that are textually presented? And what are the theatrical and textual conventions and assumptions that must be taken into account when deciding how to *read* the notes?

As a literary form that "invade[s its] host text" by "activat[ing] that tension between part and whole" (McFarland 78, 77), the footnote conceptually undermines

---

[99] Critical editions of plays are often accompanied by footnotes, of course, but those notes are editorial additions intended to help contextualize and explicate the playwright's text rather than integral to the play itself.

theater's conventional page-stage relationship. Consider, for example, *The America Play*'s most heavily footnoted passage, delivered in the Lesser Known's opening monologue (Parks's footnotes follow the passage):

> It would be helpful to our story if when the Great Man died in death he were to meet the Lesser Known. It would be helpful to our story if, say, the Lesser Known were summoned to Big Town by the Great Mans wife: "*Emergency* oh, *Emergency*, please put the Great Man in the ground"[1] (they say the great Mans wife was given to hysterics: one young son dead other sickly: even the Great Man couldnt save them: a war on then off and surrendered to: "Play Dixie I always like that song"[2]: the brother against the brother: a new nation all conceived and ready to be hatched: the Great Man takes to guffawing guffawing at thin jokes in bad plays: "You sockdologizing old man-trap!"[3] haw haw haw because he wants so very badly to laugh at something and one moment guffawing and the next moment the Great Man is gunned down. In his rocker. "Useless Useless."[4] And there were bills to play.) "*Emergency* oh, *Emergency*, please put the Great Man in the ground."
>
> [1] Possibly the words of Mary Todd Lincoln after the death of her husband.
>
> [2] At the end of the Civil War, President Lincoln told his troops to play "Dixie," the song of the South, in tribute to the Confederacy.
>
> [3] A very funny line from the play *Our American Cousin*. As the audience roared with laughter, Booth entered Lincoln's box and shot him dead.
>
> [4] The last words of President Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth.
>
> (160)

In the Lesser Known's version, History is a collection of testimony, misrepresentations, conjecture, hearsay, sympathy, critique, and trivial observations—all sewn together, paratactically, with gaps. Testimony attests here to its own excess as discursive practice and functions as a refutation of the transparency of language and "truth." The Lesser Known is a collector, an accumulator of information and bits of hearsay, rather than a historian, who orders the collection and smoothes over the gaps with narrative. The

heavy use of footnotes—all of which can be traced back to *Twenty Days*, though Parks herself does not cite this source—becomes itself an exaggerated historiographical performance, an increasingly anxious attempt to authenticate the narrative even as the gaps render it incomplete, suspect, "holey." As the language and voices of others invades the account via quotations attributed to Mary Todd Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln, *Our American Cousin*, and John Wilkes Booth, the passage reverts to a "confusion of tongues." The footnotes register as a textual-historiographical attempt to order the testimonial confusion into a coherent narrative with truth value—an attempt, that is, to tie testimony's excess back to some sort of "scale."

Interestingly, the anxiety that pervades this passage is a textual anxiety, identified not with the dialogue of the Lesser Known but rather with the footnotes that seek to authenticate (and to thereby control) these testimonies from the margins. Indeed, the text is defensive even as the performance is not. But if the Lesser Known is not anxious, it is at least in part because he has no authority to lose—he can speak only from the sideshow and the archaeological site, reciting only the stories that have been handed down to him and that others are willing to accept (some paying clients reject the yellow beard, for example, because it "deviate[s] too much" [163], even though they don't seem bothered by the fact that this Lincoln is African American). To the degree that Parks is engaged in an act of historical recovery, it is a recovery entirely of gaps and holes—the contradictions, hesitations, uncertainties, exaggerations, and silences that can never be retold, that can never conform to the same scale as historical narrative itself.

Both the use of footnotes and Lucy's insistence on keeping things to scale reflect an obsessive interest in facts that can act as one of the "listening defenses" that prevents

bearing witness (Dori Laub qtd in Boler 169). Indeed, the conflict of the second act of *The America Play* is built largely around the struggle between these two notions of "truth." Bly's program notes do not merely gloss this idea but take it one step further, reworking "factual" presentation as speech acts and placing the entire play within a context of material and poetic language that contests truth's self-transparency. Meanwhile, the play's use of footnotes call the conventions of historiography and textual authority specifically into question, while at the same time the lack of full dramatic characterization prevents the audience's emotional identification and empathy. Cathexis is stymied, and audiences are left, if not with irritation, at least with a lack of closure. The program notes may then serve as a way to help "figure out" the play, but of course what is encountered there is not explanation but engagement. And in this moment, I want to suggest, dramaturgical arousal is not merely activated but taught.

As a social practice, textual annotation signifies both exclusion and inclusion. While annotation testifies to one's alienation from a text, and in this sense is "always…a response to a prior culture from which one believes oneself (and consequently, nearly everyone else) distanced," as Ralph Hanna asserts, it also signifies the text's importance to a critical community "of which the annotator is the designated representative" (178). Annotation therefore always points back to issues of community and institutional power. Within the reception community created by the play, power oscillates between two nodes—the narrative community of the theater audience and the critical community of the printed text. This reception is figured always by the play's production strategies.

As the "I" of the Foundling Father speaks directly to the audience about himself in the third person as the "Lesser Known," he places himself as both inside and outside of

"our story" and of the narrative community of the theater audience. The paired "I" of the Foundling Father and "he" of the Lesser Known indicate the doubling of subject and object that constitute the DuBoisian double consciousness, a double consciousness performatively experienced by audience members as they follow the play through its oscillating constructions of narrative subject and object. The Foundling Father's reference to himself as "I" only when talking about costuming suggests an alienated subjectivity, constituted by the act of impersonation. And when the Foundling Father dressed in a yellow beard remarks that "[t]he sun on his fair hair looked like the sun itself," the aural generativity that joins illumination (sun) with reiteration (son) is attributed, via footnote, to "'The Sun,' a composition by the Foundling Father, unpublished" (168).

As the only instance in the play, outside of the character list, in which the Foundling Father is named for the theater audience, this reference to textual authorship momentarily transforms the Foundling Father into an object of the play text, and of the audience's act of looking/reading, before cycling him back into the play text as an authorizing figure, and therefore shaper of audience perspective. And it is in this same moment that the performance of the Foundling Father on stage, now wearing the yellow beard, merges with the narrative of a historical past as we "pretend for a moment that our beloved Mr. Lincoln was a blonde….the Great *Blonde* Man" (168). No moment in the play better demonstrates the page-stage chiasmus than this one. Just as *The America Play*'s stage performance evokes strangeness—a black Lincoln? A blonde beard? –so do its program notes—a footnoted reference to a fictional work written by one of the play's characters? These defamiliarizing techniques work directly to prevent "insight" that

could lead to catharsis and what Boler calls a “voyeuristic sense of closure” (169).

And yet while textual conventions are often aimed at the individual—and their variations, pluralities, etc., are often legible only in the solitary act of reading—theatrical performance is a public form, coercively aural and visible. So what does it mean to combine these two elements? Parks has stated that her play is about the act of writing (Savran 161), but, as these examples demonstrate, she means specifically the writing of History. If History is public, but writing is private, what’s the relation between the public and private here? On the page, footnotes are an invitation to digression and detour, but they are not a command, and readers approach footnotes idiosyncratically. The footnotes may be read individually where inserted, they may be read in a group once the reader has reached the bottom of the page, they may be briefly skimmed, or they may be ignored altogether. In the theater, footnotes embedded in the program notes are unlikely to be read during the performance. Instead, they may be read briefly before the performance along with the other notes, but they are most likely to be considered after the performance, when an audience member looks back at the theater program as a way of processing what s/he has experienced. But of course this, too, is a conditioned response to theater, a product of the historical development of the divided theater space in which the hushed audience watches attentively and passively from darkened seats, waiting for emotional release and escape. Poets’ theater invites an interruption of this passivity in individual acts of critical engagement conditioned by reactions initiated within the collective theater space.

Consuming Emotions: The Case for Nervousness

If, as Boler asserts in *Feeling Power*, "emotions are a site of social control" (xvii), then poets' theater's challenge to the model of empathetic identification can serve as a critique from within the institutional structures of theater and education. In coercing not consent but awareness and in arousing audiences to action, poets' theater has as its primary goal the creation of active learning invested in the development of critical engagement and independent thought. Dramaturgical arousal assists this function by drawing our attention to acts of framing that influence our beliefs, values, and priorities. Poets' theater turns our attention on art's production as a form of knowledge production and as moral/ethical evaluation in the service of cultural norms, not as a way of tearing art down but as a way of considering what art does, as well as what it can do. "[E]motions"—including, I want to stress, trust in the authority and knowability of the historical record—"shape the selectivity of our cognitive and ethical attention and vision," Boler asserts (xviii). But how?

In *The America Play*, Brazil and Lucy act as paid mourners, a job marked by the publicization and consumption of private expression. Lucy and Brazil get paid to perform what we normally think of as the expression of deeply personal feelings. Their job descriptions reveal, however, the cultural tracking of emotions into acceptable contexts. Crying and other expressions of emotion, including "wild" or briefly uncontrolled emotions, are acceptable and even desirable within the context of a funeral. Releasing and relieving these emotions allows us to go on with our lives rationally. Containing these emotions to specific contexts prevents them from infecting our everyday lives. The Lesser Known's reenactments of Lincoln's assassination similarly

drain that event of emotional trauma. His paying customers (consumers, again) are interested in the "factuality" of historical details or in the reenactment's entertainment value, not in the emotional horror of the traumatic event in its original context.

Such careful selection of which emotions to express, notice, and attend to, in which contexts, and for which purposes is what Boler describes as "inscribed habits of inattention" (16). Such inattention, she ventures, is socially determined via processes of "becoming civilized" and "obtaining language" (17)—both of which processes, I want to stress, involve habits of reading. Indeed, an important though all-too-brief component of Boler's theorization of testimonial reading addresses the shift from testimony as a face-to-face relation to understanding testimonial *reading* as a relation between the reader and the text. *The America Play*, like other works of poets' theater discussed in this dissertation, pushes us toward dramaturgical arousal by defamiliarizing the conventions of reading and of theater. As we become critically aware of the codes, we are also able to engage actively with them ourselves in sustained acts of excavation and performative re-production.

Lincoln's place in history is secured by his assassination, by his giving his life for an end to African American slavery. Like Lucy and Brazil's paid mourning, our nationalist mourning of Lincoln controls the emotional impact of a traumatic event by channeling emotional expression into a specific, contained context that gives meaning to the emotion. It is not, notably, the confusion of emotions of witness testimony or the jumble of images, artifacts, and emotions that constitutes the collector's cache or Brazil's out-of-"scale" attachments, but the considered, ordered, and proper emotional expression sanctioned both by cultural norms and by History.

History has made “sense” out of Lincoln’s assassination, in part by making a hero out of Lincoln and a villain out of Booth, but the actual historical events involve many more than two actors—they also involve, in some sense, the complicity of a vast majority of the nation. And this history didn’t end (in more subtle ways, it has not ended) with the freeing of the slaves. Testimony avoids the passive empathy produced by the excision of emotional expression and obsessive attention to facts through a historicization of events and the emotions they produce. The page-stage collaborations of the Yale Rep’s production of *The America Play* both point the way toward the history of Lincoln’s assassination—while at the same time pointing out that this history is itself a representation of truth—and historicize our contemporary emotional response to the assassination by cycling our attention back to the acts of framing that cultivate cultural norms of expression. And in doing so, it just may arouse the dramaturg in each of us.

AFTER WORDS:
PERCEIVING POETS' THEATER

Arousing the dramaturg in each of us, poets' theater blurs the boundaries between performer and audience, writer and reader, practitioner and collaborator. And that is, of course, the point. Indeed, the rise of performance as an epistemological paradigm—in anthropology, linguistics, sociology, and theater, to name only the most avid advocates—fundamentally changes our understanding of how "experience" and "meaning" get produced and transforms virtually everyone connected with an event into a co-performer. These changes are not merely the result of increasing academic interdisciplinarity, though that is certainly a contributing factor. They are also the result of a challenge to the effects of disciplining more generally, a challenge that troubles the boundaries between subject and object, between being and doing, and between knowledge and event.

But five decades after the critical shifts that gave rise to the interdisciplinary collaborations known as performance studies, poets' theater seems just as subject to disciplinary effects as ever, relegated to a critical no man's land that proscribes it as too much poetry for theater scholars and as too much theater for poetry scholars. While theater scholars have occasionally addressed the poetic language of dramatic plays, they most frequently characterize it in such overarching terms as spatiality (Chaudhuri) or heteroglossia (Carlson). And poets' theater fares even worse in poetry scholarship, where it is virtually ignored except as a strictly textual phenomenon.

Heiner Müller, observes Hans-Thies Lehmann, once declared that "a theatre text was only good if it was unstageable for the theatre as it is" (Lehmann 50). Poets' theater might be said to offer the disciplines of literature and theater a version of this benefit, in

its imperceptibility to these disciplines as they are currently practiced. That is, in helping literature and theater to begin to perceive what has previously existed outside of their outermost limits, poets' theater raises important and beneficial questions about how what we ask determines what we can see and what we can hear.

In order to perceive poets' theater as a critical activity, generic and disciplinary boundaries themselves need to shift. One of the methods of perception opened up by the critical usage of poets' theater is the sound of dramatic writing, a phenomenon not currently discussed by theater critics. By "the sound of dramatic writing" I don't mean the actor's vocalization of written lines for which the text is understood merely as a script for performance. Rather, I mean how performing bodies—both acting bodies and reading bodies—sound the writing, how this sounding relates to the play's textuality, and how this relationship produces certain critical effects. The examples of politically-oriented poets' theater discussed in the preceding chapters are frequently marked by textual stagings that create moments of disidentification, moments of critical distance from the ideological encoding inherent in a range of narrative and other realist conventions. Such disidentification is often a way of critiquing social and embodied identities constituted and policed through narratives of all sorts—historical narratives, literary narratives, legal and dramatic narratives—that determine what is meaningful and *who* is meaningful. And yet because the page-stage divide is so entrenched in theater studies, the sound of writing on the page is something that theater scholars rarely pay attention to. We of course read plays and imagine how they would sound in performance, how they might be delivered by an actor in character, even how the way they're written on the page implies a certain

authorial stage direction. But, though there are some notable exceptions,[100] it is much rarer to imagine the page itself as a stage, as a space in which our engagement with the text is not directorial but performative.

Part of what I'm advocating here is that theater scholars allow themselves to listen to the pressurized language of poetically oriented plays with a poet's ear. In opening up to the aurality of writing, theater scholars gain a better ability to understand, evaluate, and critique plays that can be accessed only textually. We might then be better able to assess, and possibly even to recuperate, plays that were obviously influential in their own time, though that value seems lost to us now.

But attention to the aurality of dramatic plays also allows for a unique approach to their political engagements. Baraka's "Achtung Swachtung," Harryman's "atmosssphere," and Parks's "Great Hole of History," to take specific examples from the preceding chapters, mobilize critical stances that depend unique moments of theatricality. These moments of theatricality are fully available only in the *collaboration* of textuality and embodied performance. Parks's "w/hole" wouldn't be nearly so interesting if her play weren't also functioning as a critique of History as written artifact, as a critique of historiography. And the multiple possibilities of "Achtung Swachtung" depend on the upending of textual authority via aural performativity. The resulting critical activity allows for an ethical distance from the normative codes of language usage, codes which are often, though not always, narrative.

In characterizing this critical activity as a type of "theatricality," I wish to draw

---

[100] See Worthen, for example, and also discussions of the work of Parks and Anna Deveare Smith in Jackson.

poetry scholars' attention to poets' theater as an intersubjective event (rather than merely a text) that results not in social sanction but rather in critical thought. Tracing the coinage of the term "theatricality" to the beginning of the Victorian era, performance scholar Tracy Davis finds that whereas the word "theatrical" had already long been in usage to indicate a relationship to dramatic performance, "theatricality" emerged in democratic theory to indicate a process of spectatorship in which fascination with a public display or spectacle is combined with an absence of sympathy with that spectacle. Davis argues that in being aware of one's role as spectator—in being engaged but not absorbed—the spectator becomes the actor (154). But Davis's discussion of theatricality also opens it up, albeit unintentionally, to non-spectatorial events, such as the act of performing a text in which what's on public display is the convention of narrative reading itself. Davis claims "a person must decide to be a spectator, not merely a witness, engaged and conscious of the transaction of display and reception" (ibid). Like Davis, I want to emphasize a notion of theatricality as critical awareness, rather than as a degree of spectacle or as a condition of a heightened aesthetic or even as a particular cultural practice. Such theatricality makes us witness to our own complicity in the enforcement of social narratives. Indeed, such theatricality may even make us aware of our complicity in accepting narrative as the primary form of social exchange.

The theatricality at the heart of poets' theater is not, as I discussed in chapter one, an inwardly focused metatheatricality, not a particular awareness of the processes of theater itself. Rather, it is, as Malgorzata Sugiera has argued of postdramatic theater[101]

---

[101] "Postdramatic theater" is Hans-Thies Lehmann's term for the self-reflexive use of a range of theatrical signs, including the visual, audible, gestural, and textual, that is characteristic of a particular strain of contemporary theater.

more generally, “a means of inducing the audience to watch themselves as subjects which perceive, acquire knowledge and partly create the objects of their own cognition” (26). Part of what poets’ theater allows us to perceive are the different ways in which we are initiated into subjecthood, a perception that can encourage an act of critical recognition of that initiation into subjectivity.

The particular theatricality of poets’ theater relies on the gap between immersion in the narrative and awareness of the act of reception and one’s complicity in accepting these representations as “truthful,” or at any rate “believable.” The goal is not to realize the difference between the fictional frame of the onstage drama and the reality of the onstage acting bodies with real experiences. Instead, theatricality is both a creation and experience of audience members, as we check ourselves for sympathetic understanding or identification. This theatricality operates, on one hand, as a particular embodied experience of texts, an aural experience that materializes the text in such a way that we become not merely witness to the meanings that unfold there but critically aware of the narratives we materialize.

In this sense, poets’ theater as a critical activity goes beyond the mere problem of representation. It also becomes an investigation of the relationship between representation and experience. Kept within the frame of the page, with its attendant textocentric meaning-making conventions, scripted language is understood as discursive representation. But the visual and aural elements of a text are also experienced as material realities that exist in various and unstable relationships to the discursive text. The overlap of the material and discursive texts creates a link between production and

reception that might offer us another way of thinking about our critical role as engaged but not absorbed audience members.

As a result, poets' theater allows scholars on both sides of the generic divide to perceive how performance broadly conceived can produce a critical community. But the formation of a critical community is not an inevitability. That formation requires effort, engagement, openness, and even generosity. One of the functions of poetic language within the practice of poets' theater is to engage audiences in the *work* of critical awareness. After all, poetry is commonly taken to be "difficult"—which is to say, we perceive poetry as taking more effort than prose. With prose we often allow ourselves the laziness of not paying attention to form, of letting form work on us unconsciously, whereas with poetry we have been trained to look at form as a question and as an activity. The belief that prose is easy and poetry is hard is just another way of saying, within our contemporary context, that absorption is the *natural* way of experiencing written language, that the relief of dramatic realism is the natural way of experiencing a play. And the point at which such reception has become naturalized is precisely the point at which it begins controlling our experiences.

Theater offers that strange doubling that is at once a real space with real objects, real coughs, and real bodies performing actions and, at the same time, a fiction that requires props, representations, façades, and, most importantly, a willing suspension of disbelief. In a way, the competency of theater-goers is to embodiment as the competency of poetry audiences is to language: both see and delight in the artifice of their respective forms. When poetry and theater are brought together via poets' theater, a number of things can happen depending on one's competencies, but certainly one of the possibilities

is that the artifice of language and the artifice of theater begin to play off of one another. Sometimes they work together, sometimes they work against each other, and sometimes they work across each other. The relationship is not stable and often is not even predictable. But as audiences actively perceive what is being performed as well as how it is being performed, they may also become aware of how they are making sense of the performance, not as an inevitability but as a choice and an engagement. When we acknowledge that we have a role in that sense-making, then we become more responsible to those meanings, more open to the possibility of our own error and to the possibility of other meanings as equally valid. We become aware of our own co-performative role. And poets' theater becomes an agent in this broadened field of perception.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allen, Donald. *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960.

Aronson, Arnold. "American Theatre in Context: 1945-Present." *The Cambridge History of American Theatre,*Vol. III. Ed. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 87-162.

Artaud, Antonin. *The Theater and Its Double*. Trans. Mary Caroline Richards. New York: Grove Press, 1958.

"A Talk with Liz Diamond on Suzan-Lori Parks." *Yale News* 2:3 (Jan. 1994): 1.

Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975 (1962).

Backalenick, Irene. "A Director's Journey," *TheaterWeek* March 15-21, 1993: 32, 33-35.

Baraka, Amiri. "Amiri Baraka, March 30, 1984," Interview with Jim Hatch. *Artist and Influence*. Eds. Leo Hamalian and Judith Wilson. New York: Hatch Billops Collection, 1985. 1-23.

-----. *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*. New York: Freundlich, 1984.

-----. *A Black Mass*. *Four Black Revolutionary Plays: All Praises to the Black Man*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969.

-----. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. New York: Morrow, 1963.

-----. "The Changing Same." Baraka, *Reader*. 186-209.

-----. "A Conversation between Imamu Amiri Baraka and Theodore R. Hudson," *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1994. 71-76.

-----. "The Fire Must be Permitted to Burn Full Up Black Aesthetic," *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze: Essays since 1965*. New York: Random House, 1971. 117-123.

-----. *Home on the Range*, *The Drama Review* 12.4 (Summer 1968): 106-11.

-----. "Hunting Is Not Those Heads on the Wall." Baraka, *Home*. 173-78.

------. "The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation." Baraka, *Reader*. 161-168.

-----. *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*. Ed. William J. Harris. New York: Thunder Mouth, 1991.

-----. *Madheart*. *Four Black Revolutionary Plays: All Praises to the Black Man*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969.

-----. "Marvin Pancho Camillo (1937-1988)." *Eulogies*. New York: Marsilio, 1996. 103-07.

-----. "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature.'" Baraka, *Home*. 105-15.

-----. "The Revolutionary Theatre," *Liberator*, July 1965: 4-6.

-----. *Slave Ship*. *Crosswinds: An Anthology of Black Dramatists in the Diaspora*. Ed. William B. Branch. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993.

Bay-Cheng, Sarah. *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein's Avant-Garde Theater*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Bean, Annemarie. *A Sourcebook of African-American Performance: Plays, People, Movements*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.

Beck, Julian. "Three Meditations on Strategies." In *The Life of the Theatre: The Relation of the Artist to the Struggle of the People*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1972. n.p.

-----. "Mister Beck without Reefer." In *The Brig* by Kenneth H. Brown. New York: Hill and Wang, 1965. v-vi.

-----. "Storming the Barricades." In *The Brig* by Kenneth H. Brown. New York: Hill and Wang, 1965. 3-35.

Benson, Steve. "Hooks and Conceit in *La Quotidienne*," *Jimmy & Lucy's House of "K"* 2 (Aug 1984): 21-24.

Benston, Kimberly W. *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

-----. *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Bernheimer, Alan. "The Simulacrum of Narrative," *Poetics Journal* 5 (May 1985): 69-71.

Bernstein, Charles, ed. *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Bigsby, C. W. E. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama, Vol. 3: Beyond Broadway*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Biner, Pierre. *The Living Theatre*. New York: Horizons, 1972.

Birringer, Johannes. *Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Blau, Herbert. *The Audience*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.

Boler, Megan M. *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Bottoms, Stephen J. *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Brown, Kenneth H. *The Brig*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1965.

Buechler, Steven M. *Social Movements in Advanced Capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Bullins, Ed. "The So-called Western Avant-Garde Drama." *Liberator* 7.12 (December 1967): 16-17.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

-----. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London and New York: Verso, 2004.

Cage, John. "Writing for the Second Time through *Finnegans Wake*." *Empty Words: Writings '73-'78*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981. 133-176.

Calloway, Earl. "Theatre Wing," *Daily Defender*, May 2, 1968: 17.

Carlson, Marvin. *Speaking in Tongues: Language at Play in the Theatre*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006.

Case, Sue-Ellen. "Performing Lesbian in the Space of Technology, Part I" *Theatre Journal* 47:1 (March 1995): 1-18.

-----. "Performing Lesbian in the Space of Technology, Part II," *Theatre Journal* 47.3 (October 1995): 329-343.

Catton, Bruce. Foreword. *Twenty Days*. By Dorothy Meserve Kunhardt and Philip B. Kunhardt. n.p.

Chansky, Dorothy. *Composing Ourselves: The Little Theatre Movement and the American Audience*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.

Chaudhuri, Una. *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Conquergood, Dwight. "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research." *TDR* 46.2 (Summer 2002): 145-156.

Davidson, Michael. "Framed by the Story," *Poetics Journal* 5 (May 1985): 76-80.

Day, Jean. "Two Books by Carla Harryman," *Jimmy & Lucy's House of "K"* 6 (May 1986): 118-122.

Diamond, Elin. *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

Di Prima, Diane. *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*. New York: Viking, 2001.

Drukman, Steven. Suzan-Lori Parks and Liz Diamond: Doo-a-Diddly-Dit-Dit." *TDR: The Drama Review* 39.3 (1995): 56-75.

DuBois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk.* New York: Penguin, 1996 [1903].

Durham, Leslie Atkins. *Staging Gertrude Stein: Absence, Culture, and the Landscape of American Alternative Theatre*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Duval, Elaine Isolyn. "Theatre and the Double: Revolutionary Consciousness in Baraka and Artaud." Diss. U of Tennessee, Knoxville, 1988.

Elam, Harry, Jr. "The *TDR* Black Theatre Issue: Refiguring the Avant-Garde." *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*. Ed. James M. Harding and John Rouse. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006. 41-66.

Eyerman, Ron and Andrew Jamison. *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach*. Cambridge (UK): Polity Press, 1991.

Faver, Cheryl. "Refracted, Distracted, and Hopeful." *Theater* 26.1-2 (1995): 138-150.

Féral, Josette. "Foreword," *SubStance* 31:2-3 (2002): 3-13.

Fuchs, Elinor. *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996.

Gardner, Howard. "Multiple Intelligences and the Arts: Past, Present, and Future Perspectives," Keynote Address, AATE/ATHE conference, New York, New York, Aug. 8, 2009.

Gelber, Jack. *The Connection*. New York: Grove, 1960.

Glickman, Enrica Jemma. "Italian Dramatic Companies and the Peruvian Stage in the 1870s," *Latin American Theatre Review* 7.2 (Spring 1974): 69-80.

Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974.

-----. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor, 1959.

Goldberg, RoseLee. *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*. New York: H. N. Abrams, 1988.

Golding, Alan. "The 'Community of Elements' in Wallace Stevens and Louis Zukofsky." In *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*. Ed. Albert Gelpi, 1985. (page numbers?)

Gottfried, Martin. "America's Most Exciting New Theater?" *New York Times*, Feb 21, 1971: D3.

Graver, David. "Antonin Artaud and the Authority of Text, Spectacle, and Performance." In *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality*. Ed. James M. Harding. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000. 43-57.

Greene, Alexis. "Theater Review: *The America Play* and *Freefall*." *Theater Week* Mar. 21-27, 1994: 33.

Grotowski, Jerzy. *Towards a Poor Theatre*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968.

Hanna, Ralph, III. "Annotation as Social Practice." *Annotation and Its Texts*. Ed. Stephen A. Barney. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. 178-184.

Harding, James M. "Introduction," *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000: 1-11.

Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. "Ethics," *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995: 387-405.

Harris, William J. *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic*. Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1985.

Harryman, Carla. "Acker Un-formed." *Lust for Life: On the Writing of Kathy Acker*. Ed. Amy Scholder, Carla Harryman, and Avital Ronell. London: Verso, 2006. 35-44.

-----. *Animal Instincts: Prose, Plays, Essays*. Berkeley: This, 1989.

-----. "Animal Instincts." *Animal Instincts*. 33-43.

-----. "The Ear of the Poet in the Mouth of the Performer." *How2* 2.1 (Spring 2003). <http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v2_1_2003/current/index.htm>.

-----. "La Quotidienne: An Atmospheric Play." *Animal Instincts*. 81-89.

-----. *Memory Play*. Oakland, CA: O Books, 1994.

-----. *Mirror Play*. Unpublished manuscript.

-----. "Property." *Animal Instincts*. 15-26.

-----. "Site Sampling in 'Performing Objects Stationed in the Sub World." *Additional Apparitions*. Eds. David Kennedy and Keith Tuma. Sheffield UK: The Cherry on the Top P, 2002: 157-171.

-----. "There Is Nothing Better Than a Theory." *Animal Instincts*. 90-105.

-----. "Toy Boats." *Animal Instincts.* 107-110.

Heble, Ajay. "The Poetics of Jazz: From Symbolic to Semiotic." *Textual Practice* 2.1 (Spring 1988): 51-68.

Herman, Max. "Ethnic Succession and Urban Unrest in Newark and Detroit during the Summer of 1967." Newark, NJ: Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies, Rutgers University, July 2002. <http://www.cornwall.rutgers.edu/pdf/Herman-July%202002-Report.pdf>.

Hollier, Denis. *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1989.

Hopkins, D. J. "Research, Counter-text, Performance: Reconsidering the (Textual) Authority of the Dramaturg." *Theatre Topics* 13.1 (March 2003): 1-17.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Inglehart, Ronald. *Cultural Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Innes, Christopher. "Text/Pre-Text/Pretext: The Language of Avant-Garde Experiment." In *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality*. Ed. James M. Harding. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000. 58-78.

Jackson, Shannonn. *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Jameson, Frederic. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.

Jay, Martin. "Cultural Relativism and the Visual Turn," *journal of visual culture* 1.3 (2002): 267-278.

Jiggetts, Shelby. "Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks." *Callaloo* 19.2 (1996): 309-17.

Jones, Charles E. "Roi." *Soul Illustrated* July 1970: 17-18.

Killian, Kevin and David Brazil, eds. *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater, 1945-1985*. Chicago: Kenning Editions, 2010.

Kirby, Michael. "On Acting and Not-Acting." In *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984. Originally published in *The Drama Review* 16:1 (March 1972): 3-15.

Kunhardt, Dorothy Meserve and Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr. *Twenty Days: A Narrative in Text and Pictures of the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln and the Twenty Days and Nights that Followed--the Nation in Mourning, the Long Trip Home to Springfield*. New York: Castle Books, 1965.

Lehman, David. *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*. New York: Doubleday, 1998.

Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Trans. Karen Jürs-Munby. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Lepidus, Lawrence. "Nothing Great about 'The America Play.'" *The Westsider*, Mar. 17, 1994: 15.

Lurie, Alison. "V. R. Lang: A Memoir," in *V. R. Lang: Poems and Plays* (New York: Random House, 1975): 3-71.

Lyman, Elizabeth Dyrud. “The Page Refigured: The Verbal and Visual Language of Suzan-Lori Parks's Venus.” *Performance Research* 7.1 (2002): 90-100.

Machiz, Herbert. “Introduction.” *Artists’ Theatre: Four Plays*. Ed. Herbert Machiz. New York: Grove, 1960.

Mackey, Nathaniel. “Other: From Noun to Verb.” *Representations* 39 (Summer 1992): 51-70.

Malina, Judith. *The Diaries of Judith Malina, 1947-1957*. New York: Grove, 1984.

-----. “Directing *The Brig*.” In *The Brig* by Kenneth H. Brown. New York: Hill and Wang, 1965. (pages???)

Malkin, Jeanette R. *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Mandell, Jonathan. “Theater: Theater’s Memory Bank Expands.” *New York Times*, Aug. 25, 2002: A5.

Marranca, Bonnie. *The Theatre of Images*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Martin, Bradford D. *The Theater Is in the Streets: Politics and Performance in Sixties America*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004.

McFarland, Thomas. “Synecdochic Structure in Blake’s Marginalia.” *European Romantic Review* 1.1 (1990): 75-90.

McNeill, David. *Hand and Mind : What Gestures Reveal about Thought*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.

----- and Susan D. Duncan. “Growth Points in Thinking-for-Speaking.” *Language and Gesture*. Ed. David McNeill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 141-161.

Mellow, James R. *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein & Company*. New York: Praeger, 1974.

Melzer, Annabelle Henkin. “The Dada Actor and Performance Theory.” In *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984. 37-55.

Mode, Becky. “America, The Hideous.” *Our Town*, Mar. 24, 1994: 18.

Morris, Adalaide, ed. *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Muñoz, José. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Neal, Larry. "The Black Arts Movement." *The Drama Review* 12.4 (Summer 1968): 29-39.

Nussbaum, Martha. *Poetic Justice*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.Olson, Charles. "Projective Verse." In *Collected Prose*. Ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997. 239-249.

Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1980s*. New York: Routledge, 1986.

"Papp Grant Tops U.S. Arts Awards," *New York Times*, Sep 15, 1971: 38.

Parks, Suzan-Lori. "From Elements of Style." *The America Play and Other Works*. New York: Theatre Communications Groups, 1994. 6-18.

-----. *The America Play*. In *The America Play and Other Works*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994. 157-199.

Pearce, Michele. "Alien Nation: An Interview with the Playwright." *American Theatre* 11.3 (March 1994): 26.

Perelman, Bob. *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Perlstein, Rick. "Operation Barbarella," *London Review of Books* 27.22 (2005): 3.

Phelan, Peggy. *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

-----. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. New York: Routledge, 1996 [1993].

Proehl, Geoffrey S. *Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility*. Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008.

Puchner, Martin. *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.

Ransom, John Crowe. *The New Criticism*. Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1941.

Retallack, Joan. *The Poethical Wager*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2003.

Robinson, Marc. *The Other American Drama*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Román, David. *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998.

Rowell, Charles Henry. "'Words Don't Go There': An Interview with Fred Moten." *Callaloo* 27.4 (2004): 954-966.

Salaam, Kalamu ya. "Amiri Baraka Analyzes How He Writes (Interview)." *African American Review* 37.2-3 (Summer/Fall 2003): 211-36.

Samuels, Lisa. "Eight Justifications for Canonizing Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*." *Modern Language Studies* 27.2 (Spring 1997): 103-119.

Savran, David. "Suzan-Lori Parks." Interview. *The Playwright's Voice: American Dramatists on Memory, Writing and the Politics of Culture*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999. 139-164.

Sayre, Nora. "The Poets' Theatre: A Memoir of the Fifties," *Grand Street* 3:3 (Spring 1984): 92-105.

Schechner, Richard. "White on Black." *The Drama Review* 12.4 (Summer 1968): 25-27.

Selenick, Laurence. "Text and Violence: Performance Practices of the Modernist Avant-Garde." In *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality*. Ed. James M. Harding. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000. 15-42.

Sell, Mike. *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005.

Shannon, Sandra G. "Amiri Baraka on Directing," *Black American Literature Forum* 21.4 (Winter 1987): 425-33.

-----. "Evolution or Revolution in Black Theater: A Look at the Cultural Nationalist Agenda in Select Plays by Amiri Baraka." *African American Review* 37.2-3 (Summer/Fall 2003): 281-98.

Silliman, Ron, et. al. *The Grand Piano: An Experimental in Collective Autobiography*. Part 1- 6. Detroit: Mode A, 2008.

Simpson, Megan. *Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women's Language-*

Oriented Writing. Albany New York: SUNY Press, 2000.

"'Slave Ship' Closed Again by 14 Actors," *New York Times*, Jan 25, 1970: 70.

Smethurst, James Edward. *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

Sollors, Werner. *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism"*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.

Sontag, Susan. "Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition," *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1966. 263-274.

Stein, Gertrude. *Four Saints in Three Acts*. *Writings 1903-1932*. Ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman. New York: The Library of America, 1998. 608-650.

-----. *The Making of Americans*. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1995.

Stein, Gertrude. "Plays." *Writings 1932-1946*. Ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman. New York: The Library of America, 1998. 244-269.

-----. "Portraits and Repetition," *Writings 1932-1946*. Ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman. New York: The Library of America, 1998. 287-312.

Stevens, Wallace. *Three Travellers Watch a Sunrise*. In *Opus Posthumous: Poems, Plays, Prose*. New York: Knopf, 1957. (pages?)

Stewart, Garrett. *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext*. Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1990.

Stroffolino, Chris. "Carla Harryman." *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 193: American Poets Since World War II, Sixth Series. Ed. Joseph Conte. Buffalo, New York: SUNY Press, 1998. 171-179.

Sugiera, Malgorzata. "Beyond Drama: Writing for Postdramatic Theatre." *Theatre Research International* 29:1 (March 2004): 16-28.

Sullivan, Dan. "Black Panther Benefit Is Held in East Village: 3 Theater Troupes Perform—LeRoi Jones Speaks." *The New York Times* 21 May 1968: 42.

Taylor, Markland. "The America Play." Review. *Variety* Jan. 31, 1994: 70.

"Theater for Poets Will Use East End." *New York Times*, Jan. 9, 1965: 15.

Thomas, Lorenzo. "The Shadow World: New York's Umbra Workshop and Origins of the Black Arts Movement." *Callaloo* 1.4 (1978): 53-72.

Tytell, John. *The Living Theatre: Art, Exile, and Outrage*. New York: Grove, 1995.

Van Deburg, William L. *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Velde, Paul. "Pursued by the Furies." *Commonweal* 88.15 (June 28, 1968): 440-41.

Vickery, Ann. *Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000.

Walker, Julia A. "Why Performance? Why Now? Textuality and the Rearticulation of Human Presence," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 16.1 (2003): 149–175.

Watts, Jerry Gafio. *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

Wheeler, Lesley. *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.

Wideman, John. "The Black Writer and the Magic of the Word. " *New York Times* Jan. 24, 1988: BR1, 28-29.

Williams, William Carlos. *Many Loves*. In *Many Loves and Other Plays: The Collected Plays of William Carlos Williams*. (Pages???)

Wilson, Edwin. Review of *The America Play*. *Wall Street Journal* Jan 26, 1994: A12.

Woodard, Komozi. *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1999.

Worthen, W. B. "Drama, Performativity, and Performance." *PMLA* 113:5 (1998): 1093-1107.

-----. *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*. Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1992.

-----. *Print and the Poetics of Modern Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.