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The Love of Things to Come: Rehearsing Blackness in the Theater of (Non) Being

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Zora Duncan

December 2024

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Prof. Donatella Galella, Co-Chairperson

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Prof. Jennifer Doyle

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2024

The Dissertation of Zora Duncan is approved:

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Love of Things to Come: Rehearsing Blackness in the Theater of (Non) Being

by

Zora Duncan

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English  
University of California, Riverside, December 2024  
Dr. Donatella Galella and Dr. Courtney R. Baker, Co-Chairpersons

*The Love of Things to Come: Rehearsing Blackness in the Theatre of (Non) Being*

is concerned with black artists and artists of color who engage with blackness and the racialized history of spectatorship in the United States. The primary aim of this project is to understand how, through this engagement, Lorraine Hansberry, Yiyun Li, Jackie Sibblies Drury, Young Jean Lee, and Adrian Piper deconstruct performances of race and gender, revise established theatrical tropes, and alter the viewing frameworks that ground our experiences of performance and the (racialized, gendered, and sexualized) self. To do so, I theorize rehearsal as a transitional space and time that hasn't settled into the finality of performance, following the incorporation of D.W. Winnicott's theory of "transitional phenomena" in the work of performance studies scholars studying the relation between psychoanalysis and performance. Attempting to forge a non-psychogistic approach to transitional phenomena grounded in Black Studies, rehearsal thus comes to name a methodological approach which asks scholars to reconsider the social dynamics of critique, reorient our relationship to art and performance as viewers, and initiate an ethical shift in our relationship to artists themselves as sites of creative activity.

I am interested, therefore, in cultural producers for whom performance functions as an invitation to collectively return to the “rehearsal space.” I argue that this invitation is borne out by practices of autobiographical (de)composition and para-performance: formal and modal interventions that foreground representational aporias in hopes of re-animating and redirecting the relation between race, gender, sexuality, and collective desires for social transformation. Over the course of this project, then, I perform readings of a variety of twentieth and twenty-first-century texts and performances that serve as exemplary instances of how these theories are practically engaged. I consider Lorraine Hansberry’s posthumously produced *Les Blancs* (1970) in order to rethink the relation between the discourse surrounding her archive and public acknowledgments of her sexuality; between a prefiguration of contemporary discourses regarding gender non-conformity in *Les Blancs* and Hansberry’s anti-colonial and feminist politics. I also read Yiyun Li’s memoir *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life* (2018) both with and against Frank Chin’s formative and controversial interventions in Asian American studies. I propose autobiographical (de)composition as a non-comparative method for reading the haunt of slavery and colonialism in colonial languages, following the work of Lisa Lowe and Sora Han. Finally, I consider Young Jean Lee’s experimental take on black identity in *The Shipment* (2009) alongside Jackie Sibblies Drury’s *Fairview* (2018), a play which refracts and intensifies the formal interventions Lee introduces through para-performative practices. A reflection on Adrian Piper’s *Funk Lessons* (1983) alongside her retrospective study of “unsynthesized intuitions” in her conceptual and performance art then serves as a coda to this dissertation.

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**This dissertation is dedicated to:**

Catherine Duncan

## Introduction

In a less quoted portion of her seminal essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers considers Patrick Moynihan’s infamous report on the black family, and the way in which the litany of “nicknames by which African-American women have been called, or regarded, or imagined on the New World scene” take their “narrative energies from the grid of associations, from the semantic and iconic folds buried deep in the collective past, that come to surround and signify the captive person” (69). According to her, those nicknames are representative of the “powers of distortion that the dominant community seizes as its unlawful prerogative.” Spillers goes on to narrate the disappointment that awaits any researcher attempting to locate black African women in the historical record, a pursuit which might offer resistance to those “powers of distortion” and provide a clearer understanding of the semantic forces black women are up against. This is because of the “mighty debris of the itemized account,” which presents black Africans as commercial inventory, obscuring any access to them as people.

She turns to Elizabeth Donnan’s four volume collection, *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America* (1932); and here, Spillers’ narrative voice makes a qualitative shift, as “turning to this source, we discover what we had not expected to find—that this aspect of the search has been rendered problematic, and that...the European males who laded and captained these galleys and who policed and corralled these human beings...were not curious about this ‘cargo’”(“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” 70). Through Donnan, Spillers encounters Gomes Eannes de Azurara’s

“Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea, 1441-1448,” and observes three genetic distinctions made by Azurara that function to “subjugate the ‘foreign code of conscience,’ whose most easily remarkable and irremediable difference is perceived in skin color” (“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” 70). She argues that in doing so, Azurara utilizes a specific narrative strategy of his own: “Typically, there is in this grammar of description the perspective of ‘declension,’ not of simultaneity, and its point of initiation is solipsistic” (70). She suggests that if we were to take Azurara at his word, we would observe only “males looking at other males,” going on to say:

It seems clear that the political program of European Christianity promotes this hierarchical view among *males*, although it remains puzzling to us exactly how this version of Christianity transforms the “pagan” also into the “ugly.” It appears that human beings came up with degrees of “fair” and then the “hideous,” in its overtones of bestiality, as the opposite of “fair,” all by themselves, without stage direction, even though there is the curious and blazing exception of Nietzsche’s Socrates, who was Athens’s ugliest and wisest and best citizen. The intimate choreography that the Portuguese narrator sets going between the ‘faithless’ and the ‘ugly’ transforms a partnership of dancers into a single figure. Once the ‘faithless,’ indiscriminate of the three stops of Portuguese skin color, are transported to Europe, they become an *altered* human factor...The altered human factor renders an alterity of European ego, an invention, or “discovery” as decisive in the full range of its social implications as the birth of a newborn. (70 – 1)

I am deeply interested in the rhetorical strategy Spillers employs here. Throughout the passage, her tone of voice sits somewhere between sarcasm and incredulity, embarking upon the navigation of these accounts in order to communicate how resounding the silence around black African women is in the historical record. When Spillers says, “it remains puzzling,” she articulates a suspicion that European perceptions of black women are in fact the piece of the puzzle missing from the association that Azurara makes

between the “faithless” and the “ugly.” Furthermore, while part of the problem is that Azurara’s narrative naturalizes the meaning it makes out of differences in skin color, Spillers suggests that Donnan’s overview of this history actually doubles down on this obfuscation through its suggestion that the lack of references to enslaved women is merely a lack of care on the part of male European slavers. Spillers implies that Donnan’s four volume documentation, published in 1932, is in fact in collusion with Azurara’s chronicle that is written almost 500 years prior insofar as “such silence is the nickname of distortion” (73). The particularities of my interest in this moment in Spillers’ text are grounded in a fascination with her use of the language of stage direction and choreography to tease out her meaning: the European ego is a production, in the theatrical sense, of an alterity based in the careful, intentional, directed, and choreographed erasure and disavowal of the presence of black African women. Through ironic narration, Spillers dramatizes what it might look like for a student to take the archive at its word on the subject of black African women and the inauguration of the transatlantic slave trade, highlighting the semantic moves through which the archive, as a residual expression of European ego, actively prevents the student from drawing definitive conclusions on this topic. Spillers performs a critique of the archive on slavery that arrives at an angle and requires careful reading. In this way, the nature of Spillers’ writing here is resonant with what Tavia Nyong’o has termed “critical shade.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nyong’o describes “Shade as a vernacular method of active and aggressive interpretation of an unfair and unequal social order is a frequent resource.” *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 34.

I start here, because my attempts to think through blackness and aesthetics have led me to the medium of theater via the rehearsal space, which I understand as the place where a theatrical world and its rules are negotiated for the purposes of putting on a performance. In *The Love of Things to Come: Rehearsing Blackness in the Theater of (Non) Being*, I theorize rehearsal as an improvisatory space and time that hasn't settled into the finality of performance, and a concept that can be mobilized when engaging with the performative and discursive conventions that overdetermine alternative possibilities in critical and creative work for black, queer, and gender-variant cultural producers.

Improvisation, then, is a crucial term for this project because of how it helps articulate what is significant about the space of rehearsal as well as connections between blackness and theatricality. In my estimation, the use of improvisation as a concept always seems tinged with a sense of the "new" that is implied in the spontaneity of creation. There is a part of me that wants to push against this, because in jazz, the cultural form most exemplary of this practice, *most* of what is produced in moments of improvisation is not new. Solos are not necessarily planned out note-for-note, but playing over chord changes requires an understanding of possible melodic and harmonic movements that can be made within the confines of a piece's basic structure. In that sense, improvisation is deeply related to preparation, practice, and the interplay between movement and constraint, where the presence of chord changes might be thought of as the imposition of structural constraints that force the ensemble to draw upon what they know and think of ways to navigate their way out of, or through, those conditions.

The verb “improvise” comes from the Italian word *improvvisare*, meaning “to sing or speak extempore,” and from the Latin *improvisio*, meaning “unforeseen; not studied or prepared beforehand.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, the verb is an ablative of *improvisus*, meaning “not foreseen, unexpected,” which comes from the assimilated form of *in* (‘not, opposite of’) + *provisus* (“foreseen,” also “provided,”) which is the past participle of *providere* (“foresee, provide”). In the course of its etymological development, the connotations of the not foreseen and the unexpected, in the move from *improvisus* to *improvisio*, seem to link the act of improvising to notions of unpreparedness. What is the relationship between the not foreseen or unexpected and study or preparedness? Do the former terms necessarily suggest a lack of the latter? In this project, I suggest that improvisation might be better understood as practice or preparation for new expression. As I understand it, the *possibility* of playing something new is the activity that improvisation is engaged in, a kind of fostering of the potential for expression that is unforeseen or unprepared. Perhaps improvisation could be thought of as the accumulation of potential energy; it is both more and less than extemporaneous expression, or the production of something from nothing, which is the sense of improvisation that I want to bring to my work.

Rehearsal can be thought of as a space or place where actions are solidified, when and where the details of an upcoming performance take shape and approach fixity through repetition. However, with this sense of improvisation as an organizing principle, (the space and time of) rehearsal can also be thought of as a place where repetition and practice are instead used to loosen restriction and foster unforeseen expression.

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<sup>2</sup> See “Improvise (v.)” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=improvise>

Rehearsal, then, provides a way of thinking through the open vulnerability of blackness. I intend for rehearsal to denote an improvisational devotion to exploring what blackness is and might be. This does not ignore experiences of precarity imposed on black people due to the (de)valuation of blackness; I mean for rehearsal to serve as a call to see and hold experiences of precarity differently. To that end, I want to posit an ethics or practice of invitation into the scene of (de)valuation, where it becomes possible to initiate a fugitive and non-proprietary improvisation of the given, in activation of the sense of “love” I mean to invoke with the title of this project.

### **Literature Review**

Central to my project is an understanding of Black Studies as an inherently interdisciplinary undertaking. As such, I draw from a range of scholars working in Black Studies across academic fields. I began this prospectus with Hortense Spillers because I see her work as foundational to my understanding of the relationship between language, the middle passage, and normative understandings and embodiments of race, gender, and sexuality. Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten are two scholars doing work in the wake of Spillers who both have immense influence on my thinking, especially in the critique they both level against a liberal notion of freedom understood as individuated self-possession. Hartman uses this critique to question and debunk the notion that formal emancipation meant the end of slavery, while Moten insists upon the improvisatory fugitivity of the

collective ensemble in light of that questioning.<sup>3</sup> My understanding of rehearsal is an attempt to give language to how these assertions are put into practice in black cultural production.

The study of performance is central to Moten and Hartman's interventions in black study, and it is therefore important to acknowledge the fact that I am approaching theater specifically from a Performance Studies perspective. My thinking along these lines is indebted to the intervention of queer of color critique in the field of performance studies and the work of José Esteban Muñoz in particular. While his work does not figure directly in the following chapters, his attention to the "burden of liveness" that minoritarian subjects have to negotiate in the public sphere is very relevant to the texts and performances I explore in this project.<sup>4</sup> In addition, his assertion of a "brown commons" that can be described as a "collectivity with and through the incommensurable" has been influential for thinking about how queers of color understand and negotiate difference in a way that survives and resists the disciplinary impositions of a heteronormative public sphere.<sup>5</sup> His influence is everywhere in how I consider negotiations of race, gender, and sexuality for figures not normally considered under the sign of queerness. Influential to my thinking as well are critical assertions naming the

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<sup>3</sup> See Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> See José Esteban Muñoz, "Latina Performance and Queer Worldmaking; Or, *Chusmería* at the End of the Twentieth Century" in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> See José Esteban Muñoz, "The Brown Commons" in *The Sense of Brown* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020) as well as "Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate: Gary Fisher and Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick," *Queer futures: reconsidering ethics, activism, and the political* (2013).

importance of aesthetic form in the work of queer artists of color made by Amber Musser, Kadji Amin, and Roy Pérez in their work on Queer Form, as well as feminist calls to denaturalize and re-politicize the defining practices and aesthetic terms of late capitalism, exemplified by theorists such as Kathi Weeks and Sianne Ngai.<sup>6</sup> In this way, I see my project as furthering a desire to articulate how minoritarian populations continue to develop forms of immanent critique, theorizing sustainability under duress. In thinking through critiques of Western theater practice, I take inspiration from Daphne Brooks and Elin Diamond, whose black and feminist critiques of realism offer a clearer understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and discursive formation;<sup>7</sup> in thinking through critiques of Western conceptions of history, I take inspiration from Cedric Robinson and his understanding of the black radical tradition as a critique of Western civilization that is not simply derivative or reactionary, as well as Brent Edwards argument that this critique is an internationalist affair.<sup>8</sup> Thus, I understand my theorization of rehearsal as contributing to a politically black, queer, and feminist critique of Western aesthetic practice.

My project is also heavily invested in the autobiographical. Historically, autobiography has been central to struggles against oppression for minoritarian

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<sup>6</sup> See Amber Musser, Kadji Amin, and Roy Pérez, “Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social,” *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017), Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005) and *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012)

<sup>7</sup> See Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on feminism and theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1997), and *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850 – 1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> See Cedric Robinson. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000[1983]) and Brent Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

populations globally. One foundational example of this is the history of slave narrative: a genealogy of literature that makes an explicit connection between restrictions upon education and enslavement, as well as between the acquisition of literacy and liberation.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the multiparous critiques of enlightenment subjectivity found in African American Autobiography are integral to my project. Valerie Smith sheds light on the way slave narratives fugitively perform liberation in their resistance to formal conventions, and Lindon Barrett, going further, suggests that African American autobiography calls for a “total rejection” of the notion of the enlightenment subject.<sup>10</sup> Because of this, I make recourse to my own experiences at various points, in addition to interviews with playwrights, directors, and actors involved in productions of the works that I analyze, in order to situate and understand the positionality of the claims I make in this dissertation. Autobiographical texts like these allow me to view and analyze how black selfhood is staged and performed in search of liberatory openings in the fabric(at)ions of subjection. In so doing, I am especially inspired by the folkloric writings of Zora Neale Hurston,<sup>11</sup> in addition to black feminist thinkers such as Toni Morrison and Barbara Christian,<sup>12</sup> who think through how black life theorizes in ways that deviate from normative forms of theoretical intervention.

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<sup>9</sup> The paradigmatic examples of this are Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) as well as Harriett Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).

<sup>10</sup> See Valerie Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), and Lindon Barrett, “Self-Knowledge, Law, and African American Autobiography: Lucy A. Delany’s ‘From the Darkness Cometh the Light’” in *The Culture of Autobiography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 106.

<sup>11</sup> See Zora Neale Hurston. *The Sanctified Church: The Folklore Writings of Zora Neale Hurston* (Berkeley: Turtle Island Foundation, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> See Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Cultural Critique* no. 6 (1987), and Morrison, Toni. “The Site of Memory” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995).

Lastly, my project implicitly explores African American and Asian American relationalities; in that vein, I take the lead of Asian American legal and cultural studies scholars such as Lisa Lowe and Sora Han, both of whom make efforts to propose modes of formal analysis that do not rely on the convention of cultural comparison to make claims about the violences of American chattel slavery and settler colonialism. I share Lowe's understanding of liberalism as "a formalism that translates the world through an economy of affirmation and forgetting within a regime of desiring freedom," as well as Han's contention that "(post)colonial cultural pluralisms today carry with them the legal and psychic violence of racial slavery wherever abolition remains uninitiated or unfinished."<sup>13</sup> Struggling under liberalism, according to Lowe, requires thinking differently about the simultaneity of colonial histories. For her, the convention of comparison reproduces erasures by presuming "equivalences between discrete analogous units" ("History Hesitant" 97). Han, in a different register, is interested in the question of diglossia, transliteration and utterance across Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's novel *Dictee*, Fred Moten's essay "Blackness and Nothingness," and Nathaniel Mackey's poetry collection *Splay Anthem*, mobilizing Edouard Glissant's concept of *terra incognita* as "another poetics" that "works through and beyond historical linguistics or comparative literature" ("Poetics of mu" 925). In order to bear this out, Han considers the way in which French colonialism has "touched all four corners of the modern world, either directly, as in the case of Martinique, or indirectly, as in the case of Korea," arguing that,

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<sup>13</sup> Lisa Lowe, "History Hesitant" *Social Text* 33, no.4 (2015): 97 – 8, and Sora Han, "Poetics of Mu" *Textual Practice* 34, no. 6 (2020): 927.

while Glissant's *terra incognita* is developed out of the local political and aesthetic cultures of the Caribbean, "all modern legal systems today can be understood together as forms of (post)colonial cultural pluralism" (925 – 6). For Han, Glissant's *terra incognita* provides a link between Cha, Moten, and Mackey, naming each writer as a producer of black writing insofar as they read and think diglossic division in language as the haunt of slavery and colonialism, a haunting that manifests itself as "*an inability to speak with just one voice*" (931, emphasis in original). These insights are especially relevant for the last two chapters of *The Love of Things to Come*, where I consider Asian American writers who similarly engage with the haunt of slavery and colonialism in language, either directly, as in the case of Korean American playwright, Young Jean Lee (Chapter 3), or indirectly, as in the case of Chinese American writer, Yiyun Li (Chapter 2).

## **Methodology**

*The Love of Things to Come: Rehearsing Blackness in the Theatre of (Non) Being* is concerned with black artists and artists of color who engage with blackness and the racialized history of spectatorship in the United States. The primary aim of this project is to understand how, through this engagement, Lorraine Hansberry, Yiyun Li, Jackie Sibblies Drury, Young Jean Lee, and Adrian Piper deconstruct performances of race and gender, revise established theatrical tropes, and alter the viewing frameworks that ground our experiences of performance and the (racialized, gendered, and sexualized) self. In this sense, rehearsal functions as a methodological approach, asking scholars to reconsider the social dynamics of critique, reorient our relationship to art and performance as viewers,

and initiate an ethical shift in our relationship to artists themselves as sites of creative activity.

### 1. Rehearsal as Transitional Phenomena

In their collaborative writing, Lisa Baraitser and Simon Bayly, co-directors of the live arts company PUR, consider resonances between rehearsal processes and the set of activities entailed by the practice of psychotherapy; for them, this is an intellectual pursuit spurred by the observation of an increased interest in privileging process and/or play over a purportedly finished product for both artists and therapeutic practitioners.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, the comparison is characterized as depressing, as if the associative pairing is tantamount to diluting the “radical cultural activity” of avant-garde and experimental live performance (“Now and Then” 60). On the other hand, throughout the essay, the analogy is made to suggest a latent voyeuristic desire, on the part of audiences and performers, to see what goes on behind “closed doors” made public, whether the doors are those of the rehearsal room or those of the therapist’s office. In order to better understand this parallel, Baraitser and Bayly turn to the work of the British developmental psychologist D.W. Winnicott and his influential theory of “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena” (1953).<sup>15</sup> Winnicott, writing in the middle of the twentieth century, acknowledges the import of theories of personhood that allow for the articulation of an “inner reality and external life,” articulations that emerge from topographical descriptions of the mind which articulate the function of fantasy in the

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<sup>14</sup> See Baraitser and Bayly, “Now and Then: Psychotherapy and the rehearsal process” in *Psychoanalysis and Performance*, edited by Patrick Campbell and Adrian Kear (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> See Winnicott, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena” collected in *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 2005 [1971]).

division of the mind between its conscious and unconscious regions (*Playing and Reality*

3). For Winnicott, this “double statement” would be benefitted by the articulation of a third space, giving necessary attention to

an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated. (*Playing and Reality* 3, emphasis in original)

Winnicott takes the development of infants as his primary example, and within this “intermediate area of *experiencing*,” gestures and actions made in relation to non-human things, such as dolls, blankets, or hard toys, come to exist apart from “more direct auto-erotic activities” (*Playing and Reality* 6). As such, these gestures and actions, or transitional phenomena, are developed and become the primary instances through which an infant learns to understand and relate to “*the original ‘not-me’ possession*,” or the transitional object (*Playing and Reality* 4 – 6, emphasis in original). For Baraitser and Bayly, one characteristic of Winnicott’s transitional object stands out in particular: namely, that “it comes from without from our point of view, but not so from the point of view of the baby. Neither does it come from within; it is not a hallucination” (*Playing and Reality* 7). In working to more precisely understand the intricacies and differences between their experiences with PUR, various modes of therapeutic treatment, as well as their experiences raising an infant son, Baraitser and Bayly suggest that this intermediate area—serving as an unchallenged “resting-place,” where the relationships between objects of fantasy, a notion of reality, and a subjective sense of the Real can be worked

out, as well as where the terms of that relationship can be negotiated<sup>16</sup>—is “the kind of space that rehearsal wants to occupy” (“Now and Then” 65). Furthermore, however, Baraitser and Bayly argue that Winnicott’s move to describe this intermediate area as “unchallenged” is actually an assertion and a demand: Winnicott attempts to describe transitional phenomena and transitional objects in order to *defend* the transitional space and make an argument for its importance to mental health. This assertion becomes crucial for theorizing the rehearsal space, then, because while the rehearsal space is often idealized as a space of play and freedom, it is always shadowed and burdened by the demands of an anticipated performance, which can be seen as a challenge to “do justice” to its material. Baraitser and Bayly suggest that this challenge is analogous to a human need to come to terms with the implacable materiality of the body; in this analogy, the material of rehearsal is nothing short of “the massive and equally implacable body of history, specifically the history of the twentieth – the psychoanalytic – century” (“Now and Then” 67). Like Baraitser and Bayly, I am interested in this sense of rehearsal as a space and time that allows for confrontations with, rather than a retreat from, the materiality of history. Thus, I seek to develop a method of reading and writing which consists in carving out and defending a transitional space in which the concepts and practices that facilitate aesthetic and political formations of identity are held in

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<sup>16</sup> At one point in the essay, the authors write: “Just as performance contains within it the real of rehearsal, so rehearsal contains within it the real of a once unchallenged area of experience, the birth-place, as Winnicott saw it, of self and other” (71). Without making direct references, comments like these carry overtones of the Lacanian Real. I won’t be engaging directly with Lacan in this project, but it is important to note the way in which these research questions flirt with discourses concerned with “the Real.”

abeyance.<sup>17</sup> This suspension is not initiated in the interest of a romanticized “free play” that takes place in flight from the labeling power of language; rather, following Lisa Lowe, I argue that rehearsal—defined as the sustained practice of generating a forceful and critical hesitance—might allow for engagements with the material of racial representation that are foreclosed by the demands of a system of meaning which privileges semantic content. Therefore, I mean for rehearsal to signal an engagement with the interinanimation<sup>18</sup> of reading and writing practices at work in cultural production that attempts to reckon with blackness in representations of race.

## 2. Prefatory Insistence in Black Cultural Production

Thus, *Rehearsing Blackness in the Theater of (Non) Being*, requires an oblique approach because the value of rehearsal as a critical term becomes discernable through careful, and sometimes counterintuitive, examinations of the circumstances that condition the emergence of black writing. W.E.B. DuBois, for instance, in his monumental text, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), attempts to “tell and interpret” the history of the period following the emancipation of slaves in America “with especial reference to the

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<sup>17</sup> Early on in the essay, the authors describe rehearsal as “a period of time in which everyday life is held in abeyance, identity is deferred, old knots, dissolved, and new ideas, emotions, behaviour can be played with” (“Now and Then” 62).

<sup>18</sup> See John Donne, “The Ecstasy”; for example, as collected in *Some Poems and a Devotion of John Donne* (Norfolk: New Directions in Prose and Poetry, 1941): i.e. “When love, with one another so / Interinanimates the soul, which thence doth flow, / Defects of loneliness controls.” See Michael Ursell, “Interinanimation and Lifelessness in John Donne’s Book Studies” *Studies in English literature, 1500 – 1900* 56, no.1 (2016). “Interinanimate” is a neologism suggesting both an infusion of life (“inter” and “animate”) and lifelessness (“inanimate”). Ursell notes that the term is usually read as “a mutually enlivening mixture of two lovers’ souls” or “spiritual quickening” (71). I am interested in how, sonically, the word covers over its “inanimate” register; I am suggesting that the relation between blackness and the practices of reading and writing functions much like the internal contradictions that inhere in this term.

efforts and experiences of the Negroes themselves” to counter incomplete and repressive accounts of that history. Towards the end of his note, “To the Reader,” DuBois writes:

the attitude of any person toward this story will be distinctly influenced by his theories of the Negro race. If he believes that the Negro in America and in general is an average and ordinary human being, who under given environment develops like other human beings, then he will read this story and judge it by the facts adduced. If, however, he regards the negro as a distinctly inferior creation, who can never successfully take art in modern civilization and whose emancipation and enfranchisement were gestures against nature then he will need something more than the sort of facts I have set down. But this latter person, I am not trying to convince.

The importance DuBois attributes to a notion of “attitude” is striking. For DuBois, the reception of a work will be shaped by previously held attitudes, because the quality of an attitude can either facilitate or encroach upon authenticity in the textual encounter. In naming the “Negro” as an object of study and in claiming to address the concerns of those who do not yet know the specific history of reconstruction, the audience for DuBois’ historical intervention implicitly announces itself: readers who are on the fence as it concerns the “Negro question,” a dynamic which, in many ways, is the classic paradigm of black writing since the publication of narratives by enslaved and formerly enslaved black individuals. This paradigm is a result of a mode of framing that is general to the conditions of publication and literacy in the western world; however, those conditions are transmuted by the material conditions of slavery, a transmutation felt and confronted in every era of black cultural production. In another moment of prefatory insistence, Toni Morrison, in her book of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), makes a point to state that, for her, “until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of

American fiction have been positioned as white” (xii). Morrison then goes on to lay out a couple of questions that, in her estimation, necessarily follow from such an observation, asking:

“What does positioning one’s writerly self, in the wholly racialized society that is the United States, as unraced and all others as raced entail? What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level *always* conscious of representing one’s own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be “universal or race-free?” (xii, emphasis in original).

Reading DuBois’s preface through Morrison’s, it becomes clear that imagining the intended audience to be made up of readers who see themselves as “universal or race-free” is shorthand for processes of racialization that bear, ontologically, upon the formulation of the creative and critical practices of reading and writing in general. In other words, that DuBois and Morrison are *black readers and writers of race* in American letters is, in a sense, anathema<sup>19</sup> to the history of reading and writing in the United States.

This anathema shows itself in scholarship that seeks to incorporate the contributions of black writers into the tradition of American literary criticism. Betsy Erkkila, in an essay on race in the work of Edgar Allen Poe,<sup>20</sup> looks to Toni Morrison’s book as a work that complicates a previous body of scholarship on Poe that would ignore and elide the issue of race in his work. Given the sociopolitical climate of the antebellum United States, as well as Poe’s own southern roots, Erkkila suggests that Poe makes an

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<sup>19</sup> See “Anathema (n.)” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=anathema>: “from Latin *anathema* ‘an excommunicated person; the curse of excommunication.’”

<sup>20</sup> See Betsy Erkkila, “The Poetics of Whiteness: Poe and the Racial Imaginary” in *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

“effort to lay claim to a separate space of pure beauty, pure art, and pure pleasure beyond empirical knowledge and the passions of the body” (“The Poetics of Whiteness” 66).

However, following Morrison, she goes on to argue that “the subject he seeks to affirm and the pure space of beauty towards which he aspires continue to be shaped by the racial codes, hierarchies, and values of Western, and specifically Anglo-American, culture”

(66). To develop an understanding of the relation between Poe’s apparent aestheticism, his biographical background, and his American reception, Erkkila writes:

If Poe’s aesthetic theory was driven, as I have tried to suggest, by an imaginative flight away from the historical presence of blacks in the social landscape of America, it is ironic that following his death, he himself became the dark other, the demon, the ‘one black sheep in the American literary flock’ who needed to be expelled from the social body. (68)

This argument is incisive; and yet, she also adds that “while Morrison and others have offered a useful corrective to the erasure of race in past approaches to Poe, there is a tendency among recent critics to reduce Poe to his proslavery sentiments and American Literature to African Americanism” (44). For Erkkila, “this exclusive focus on the shaping presence of ‘American Africanism’ in the constitution of American national identity seems much too simple,” and concludes her engagement with Morrison’s reading of Poe by arguing that:

To reverse the hierarchical relation of white to black by claiming black precedence risks reinstating the exclusions of the white literary tradition; it also isolates blackness and Africanism from the complicated network of religious, cultural historical, economic, and ultimately transnational relations in which they were involved. (44)

In light of these observations, turning back to the question of authorship and the imagination is useful for thinking through its intersection with the question of how race is

represented in literature. In turning like this, I am not interested in developing a criticism of racial politics in literary criticism, per se. Rather, I want to articulate and foreground aspects of this critical discourse that are irreducible and go against the grain of how race is assumed to function in narrative, and in literary criticism by extension: in short, I want to work against the assumption that race can function as a direct object of study by foregrounding the aporia race represents in the practice of cultural interpretation. This aporia is gendered and sexualized as well; along those lines, Erkkila misinterprets key aspects of Morrison's argument, given in Morrison's prefatory comments, that detail and frame the "attitude" with which Morrison approaches writing. Morrison writes, "My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world" (*Playing in the Dark* 4), which is a direct answer to the question of "what happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level *always* conscious of representing one's own race" that she asks in her preface. More than a straightforward affirmation of racial liberation in writing, it is important to recognize the way this burden of representation is taken on "in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be "universal or race-free" (*Playing in the Dark* xii). In other words, Morrison's preface is a *refusal of critical distance* in relation to the topic at hand; at the same time, it is this critical distance that Erkkila charges Morrison with lacking. Erkkila attempts to offer a corrective to the "simplicity" of Morrison's argument by claiming to "examine the ways Orientalism intersects with Africanism and a whole series of social subordinations" ("The Poetics of Whiteness" 49). However, her argument is only made possible only through the numerous and varied

articulations of Orientalism and Africanism, made by scholars of color, that Erkkila proceeds to mobilize. Furthermore, characterizing Morrison's effort as "much too simple" is the specific pivot point or critical hinge through which her claim to further complexity gains its legitimacy. Implicit in Erkkila's essay is a kind of neutrality or colorlessness through which critical distance establishes the right to make a critique or judgement. Morrison indirectly addresses this kind of critical move by calling out the act of "positioning one's writerly self, in the wholly racialized society that is the United States, as unraced." For Morrison, this positioning is evidence of "how agendas in criticism have disguised themselves and, in doing so, impoverished the literature [criticism] studies," going on to suggest that "criticism as a form of knowledge is capable of robbing literature not only of its own implicit and explicit ideology but of its ideas as well" (*Playing in the Dark* 8 – 9). When this suggestion is applied to Erkkila's reading of Poe, the problem is not that she pairs Morrison's work with Orientalist critiques of Poe in the interest of drawing a fuller picture of the contexts surrounding his work. Rather, the problem is that such a pairing is made under the assumption that on their own, these lines of thought do not do *enough* critical work, and therefore *need* Erkkila's intervention. Ultimately Erkkila makes this pairing primarily in order to more adequately articulate the complexity of constructions of whiteness in Poe. In doing so, both by way of and against what is "much too simple" in Morrison's work, Erkkila does more work to reinstate "the exclusions of the white literary tradition" that she is attempting to work against.

### 3. Blackness and the Aesthetics of (Self) Possession

In claiming that Morrison's argument amounts to a reversal of "the hierarchical relation of white to black by claiming black precedence," I would argue that Erkkila conflates blackness with black people in a way that covers over an important aspect of the criticism Morrison and DuBois (as well as Poe) make regarding blackness, whiteness, the imagination, and the relation between these and a notion of world that constitutes the shared realities of the Western world. In the first sentence of the "Forethought" to *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), DuBois argues that "Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century" (xi). Perhaps part of what is both difficult and most exciting in the work of Morrison and DuBois (and Poe), is the way they implicitly and differentially attempt to get at what is "strange" about the "meaning of being black," which highlights the importance of taking into account the attitude a reader has going into a work of art or literature. Recently, some writers in black studies have begun to try and think through the implication of DuBois' remark concerning "the strange meaning of being black." Fred Moten, following Nahum Chandler, reads this moment in DuBois as prefiguring Martin Heidegger's ontological distinction between Being and beings, and reads it as a moment which allows for a "paraontological," understanding of blackness.<sup>21</sup> This alternative sheds light on what is problematic in Erkkila's reading of Morrison. As Moten suggests:

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<sup>21</sup> See Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013). See also Axelle Karera, "Paraontology: Interruption, Inheritance, or a Debt One Often Regrets" *Critical Philosophy of Race* 10, issue 2 (2022) for a discussion of Moten, Chandler, and intellectual debts surrounding the term "paraontology."

The paraontological distinction between blackness and blacks allows us no longer to be enthralled by the notion that blackness is a property that belongs to blacks (thereby placing certain formulations regarding non/relationality and non/communicability on a different footing and under a certain pressure) but also because ultimately it allows us to detach blackness from the question of (the meaning of) being. (“Blackness and Nothingness” 749-50)

Following Moten, it is important to note the distinction Morrison makes between herself as “an African-American woman writer” and her writerly aim to illuminate the presence of blackness or Africanism in the work of Poe and other white canonical writers.

Morrison writes that “it may be possible to discover, through a close look at literary ‘blackness,’ the nature—even the cause—of literary ‘whiteness’” (9); Moten, in a relay with Morrison, elaborates upon this by arguing that “blackness is ontologically prior to the logistic and regulative power that is supposed to have brought it into existence” (739).

While this may seem to confirm Erkkilä’s suspicions about racial inversion in literary criticism, Moten’s understanding of blackness, rather than hinging upon a notion of critical complexity, is grounded in an attempt to think through the aesthetics of (self) possession that found theories regarding the transcendental subject of Enlightenment. Riffing on the power dynamics implied in the relationality of language, Moten argues that “the givenness and substantiveness of transcendental subjectivity is assured by a relative nothingness,” which puts those who have no access to civil or political society in the impossible position of being and meaning nothing, relative to notions of whiteness and property (749). To support this claim, Moten makes recourse to Nishida Kitarō’s notion of “absolute nothingness,” a theoretical extension of the Buddhist teaching of nothingness, and calls for a “general dispossession” of the (proprietary) self. Moten reads

Nishida alongside Frantz Fanon, giving specific attention to what Fanon calls “a zone of nonbeing...from which a genuine new departure can be born.”<sup>22</sup> A couple of relevant quotes:

The desire to attain transcendental subjectivity’s self-regard is emphatic even if it is there primarily to mark an interdiction, and antagonism, a declivity, a fall into the deadly experiment that will have been productive of ‘a genuine new departure,’ the end of the world and the start of the general dispossession that will have been understood as cost and benefit. (777)

It is as if Fanon is there to remind us that the lunatic, the (revolutionary) lover, and the poet are of imagination all compact. They occupy and are preoccupied with a zone of the alternative, the zone of nonbeing (antic disposition’s tendency to cut and displace organic position) that asks and requires us to consider whether it is possible to differentiate a place in the sun, a promised land, a home—or merely a place and time—in this world, from the position of the settler. Is it possible to desire something other than transcendental subjectivity that is called nothing? (777-8)

Here Moten names settler logic as foundational, if not mutually constitutive with assumptions about spatiotemporal placement that are necessary for intersubjective communication. For Moten, Fanon’s work is important because of the way the emphatic “desire for transcendental subjectivity” names a (non)positionality that is essentially without ground and shored up only by the language of position and possession. Revealing that groundlessness for what it is might thus serve as an opening through which a “genuine new departure” can become possible. Regarding dispossession, Moten’s assertions feel resonant with Shona Jackson’s argument that a normative understanding of labor as constitutive of humanity is the basis for a settler-colonial relationship to land as property (*Creole Indigeneity* 47). For Jackson, if revolutionary consciousness and anti-

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<sup>22</sup> See Frantz Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008 [1967]), xii.

colonial resistance is predicated on a “right” to the land based on labor, the issue of indigenous dispossession gets overlooked and the violence of appropriation is reinforced. Moten’s intervention is to suggest the ways in which blackness bears a foundational critique of the very idea of property and ownership, and to ask how labor might be conducted in service of something other than the discrete and (self) possessive individual.

In closing (or opening) this thread, I also want to remark upon the fact that *Rehearsing Blackness in the Theater of (Non) Being* is an allusion to The Theatre of Being, an acting conservatory and theater company founded in 1964 by the actor Frank Silvera and set designer Vantile Whitfield.<sup>23</sup> Silvera, a Jamaican-born and mixed-race character actor, described by the *St. Joseph News-Press* as being “born of a white father and Negro mother,” rose to prominence in the 1930s and 1940s, playing an ethnically diverse range of stage and television roles due to his “lithe and swarthy” appearance (“Civil Rights’ Theater”). Politicized by the March on Washington, Silvera and Whitfield teamed up, raising \$5500 to begin the Los Angeles-based company, which sought to “lead people out of the quicksands of hate” and combat a theater ecosystem that “avoids reality and talks only in stereotypes of escape” (“Civil Rights’ Theater”). In his interview with *St Joseph*, Silvera laments the negative consequences, for black theater makers in particular, of a mainstream theater environment which “has denied [the Negro’s] ethos—his reality,” arguing that “the mass communication media have culturally exterminated him” (“Civil Rights’ Theater”). In response to this, The Theatre of Being would provide acting workshops intended to give black actors a chance to play non-stereotypical roles.

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<sup>23</sup> See “Civil Rights’ Theater Has New Show on Broadway” *St. Joseph News-Press* (1965).

In addition to providing workshops, they produced a version of James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner*, which went on to premier in New York on Broadway in 1965, a production for which its lead actor, Bea Richards, was nominated for a Tony Award. This interview contains an almost dizzying array of articulations that take on a variety of asymmetrical, if not contradictory, meanings. On the one hand, for Silvera and Whitfield, politicization entails taking up the affirmative project of recovering a lost authenticity for black actors. Silvera thus portrays The Theater of Being as an undertaking that "takes us back to B.C.—before the corruption of words, and gets at the meaning behind words" ("Civil Rights' Theater"). On the other hand, the pursuit of racial justice for the theater is a conservative project, and Silvera suggestively claims that in choosing to produce *The Amen Corner*, rather than the more recent and polemical *Blues for Mister Charlie*, "I'm trying to lead Baldwin back" ("Civil Rights' Theater"). *St Joseph* describes this tension as an attempt to strike a balance between "anger about racial cliches" and "civil rights extremism," and in reading I am most struck by Silvera's comments regarding Baldwin that function as both a possessive claim as well as a kind of call for respectability qua affective equilibrium over and against a critique that many black people "regard [The Theatre of Being's] dramatic objectives as too restrained." By communicating a tension inherent in Silvera's positionality as mixed-race and relatively successful actor and pedagogue, this article illustrates the importance of considering the circumstances which condition the emergence of black creative expression. Ultimately, Silvera makes a utopian case for The Theatre of Being as a radically participatory affair, establishing a theater company whose "whole purpose is to shake the audience from their seats so that

they join and become part of the experience.” What are the currents of desire that inform this venture, and how is that desire situated according to the coordinates of race, gender, and sexuality that are specific to Silvera? As an attempt at cultivating an anti-racist theater practice that mobilizes the onto-epistemological language of “being,” *The Theatre of Being* is a fascinating case study to me. And yet, by *Rehearsing Blackness in the Theater of (Non) Being* I mean to name a deeper interest in artists for whom the relay between affirmation and negation implied by an aesthetics of “being” is inadequate to the task of addressing the relation between blackness and the representation of race.

This is not to forward a kind of logic of (non) being that serves as a preferable aesthetic sensibility. Rather, in this project my critical eye is trained on works that invite readers and audiences into the scene of representation through what I will be referring to as autobiographical (de)composition and para-performance. The former phrase is derived from Spillers’ analysis of the transformation effected by the application of narrative convention to the New World situation, and the latter refers to practices that defer authorial claims and enable collective reckoning with the materiality of history. As a potential response to Moten’s question (“Is it possible to desire something other than transcendental subjectivity that is called nothing?”), Zora Neale Hurston’s essay, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934), has been immensely useful for understanding Silvera’s intervention and continues to be a touchstone for thinking about how to approach the study of representations of race in cultural production more broadly. Three moments, in particular, stand out:

the Negro's universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama.

His very words are action words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another. Hence the rich metaphor and simile (49)

Anyone watching Negro dancers will be struck by the same phenomenon. Every posture is another angle. Pleasing, yes. But an effect achieved by the very means which a European strives to avoid. (54)

The presence of rhythm and lack of symmetry are paradoxical, but there they are. Both are present to a marked degree. There is always rhythm, but it is the rhythm of segments. Each unit has a rhythm of its own, but when the whole is assembled it is lacking in symmetry. (55)

There is an irony in Hurston's ethnographic description of a drama that "pervades [the Negro's] entire self," and she pokes fun at the attempt to draw a "simple straight line" between the cultural productions of African American people and an essential Blackness that might ground and subsequently circumscribe our understanding of Black people as a whole; and yet, she doesn't seem to be joking. In some ways, this set of statements might be read as essentialist; as Nathaniel Mackey has written, Hurston employs tropes of black "primitivity" in this essay that align at times with negative portrayals of black people in popular entertainment ("Other: From Noun to Verb" 53). However, what might it mean for an activity, a mode of performance, to "permeate [one's] entire self"? Hurston, writing of "one act described in terms of another," initiates an exploration of the way an attention to movement and performance can undermine a settler-colonial imagination that moves by way of the categorization, separation, and hierarchization of the senses and their concomitant modes of perception. I am struck here by the double-sidedness of Hurston's use of metaphor and simile. In a normative sense, on the one hand, metaphor and simile allow comparisons to be made which fortify rational understanding, and

usually do so along racist lines. On the other hand, Hurston's privileging of these figurative devices in a conversation about *drama as black life* suggests the possibility of taking figurative language seriously as an alternative way of understanding difference in things. For me, reading Hurston's essay mobilizes an implicit argument against the essentialism of stereotypes without making recourse to liberal discourses of universal and unmarked freedom. As if proposing a distinction between permeation and emanation, Hurston's work allows for an alternative understanding of the problem of racial identification. It's important that this distinction is made through the study of movement, and that on the other side of this formulation is an attention to "the very means which a European strives to avoid." In Hurston's essay, the observations above are grouped under the section headings "Angularity" and "Asymmetry," which suggests the importance of placement, position, and disposition when engaging in this discourse. In *The Love of Things to Come*, I contribute to a tradition of black study that is invested in reconsidering placement, position, disposition, and how each can be thought more precisely in the practices and processes of cultural production.

### **Chapter Summaries**

The consistent through-line in each chapter of *The Love of Things to Come* is an attempt on the part of this group of writers, artists, scholars, and critics to address Spillers' intervention regarding the connection between language, the middle passage, and our current understandings of race, gender, and sexuality. In each chapter, the literary and theatrical representation of race and gender appears as a conceptual limit that is

paradoxically also central to all forms of representation and cut by the force of conflicting currents of desire. In response to this problematic, my deployment of the term rehearsal throughout is meant to signal an interest in cultural producers for whom performance functions as an invitation to collectively return to the “rehearsal space.” I argue that this invitation is borne out by formal and modal interventions that theatrically render narrative aporias, or moments of representational undecidability, in hopes of re-animating and redirecting the relation between race, gender, sexuality, and collective desires for social transformation. This dissertation seeks to understand how Lorraine Hansberry, Yiyun Li, Jackie Sibblies Drury, and Young Jean Lee deconstruct performances of race and gender, revise established theatrical tropes, and alter the viewing frameworks that ground our experiences of performance and the (racialized, gendered, and sexualized) self.

The first chapter of my dissertation, on Lorraine Hansberry’s posthumously produced play, *Les Blancs* (1970), foregrounds a character from the play whose deviations from gender and sexual norms are paralleled by textual disruptions in syntax that circumscribe this character’s appearance in the play. I suggest that this character can be seen as a prefiguration of contemporary discourse on gender non-conformity and argue that understanding Hansberry’s deployment of that character requires us to acknowledge her lesbianism as a fundamental aspect of the diasporic and decolonial desire expressed in *Les Blancs*. By actively confronting the mutual imbrication of sexuality and gender identity in the racial and ethnic politics of colonialism, Hansberry’s play might serve as a proposal for the decolonization of race, gender, and sexuality. In another register, however, I argue that a more thorough understanding of the relationship

between her lesbianism and her political rhetoric offers insight into how we might more ethically contemplate and discuss Hansberry's posthumous work, considering the discourses that structure our access to and engagement with her archive. In that sense, I hope to constructively intervene in a body of scholarship on Hansberry that has emerged since the publication of critical autobiographies by Imani Perry (2018) and Soyica Diggs Colbert (2021).<sup>24</sup>

In the second chapter of my dissertation, my central focus is Yiyun Li's memoir, *Dear Friend, From My Life I Write to You in Your Life* (2018), in which the experience of migration and the difficulty of living with suicidal depression form a contextual background out of which Li initiates an interrogation of the relation between language, mental life, and the genre of autobiography. I argue that her consideration of religion and the pressures of individualism that constitute Western conceptions of social life put her in conversation with Frank Chin's oft cited essay, "This is Not an Autobiography," a harsh critique of the imposition of Western Christianity as a value system that is operative in early examples of Asian American autobiography. Both authors ask similar questions about the existential assumptions that ground the genre of autobiography, and I begin with an attempt to chart the convergences and divergences that obtain in their different articulations of the problems those assumptions raise for any attempt to assume a unified and coherent subject position. Li diverges from Chin's perspective in that she finds the assertion of an "I" immensely problematic, and she critiques the way that such assertions

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<sup>24</sup> Perry, *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018) and Colbert, *Radical Vision: A Biography of Lorraine Hansberry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

are foundational to the English language; however, her recognition and questioning of this foundation reveals a set of emotional and psychological burdens and pressures that seem to structure a form of social life that is untenable. I argue that Li deploys a practice of autobiographical (de)composition in her writing, and I turn to the work of Lisa Lowe and Sora Han to understand how Asian American cultural production is engaged with blackness insofar as the English language is haunted by the history of slavery and settler-colonialism. Finally, by way of their mutual exploration of Buddhist understandings of nothingness, I bring the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro's theory of religious consciousness into conversation with Li's reflections on what it might mean to abolish the self. Each of these connections are ways of engaging with what Li articulates as a "gap between clarity and confusion...where a mind, with the instinct of self-preservation, battles against itself" (Li 200). My contention is that Li's meditation constitutes a mode of writing from that gap, which I am calling autobiographical (de)composition. This mode of writing concretizes the brutality of these impositions and offers generative resources for survival. In that way, Li's memoir forges a connection between mental health and the philosophical critique of subjectivity that is underthought in engagements with race, colonialism, migration, and diaspora in academic writing. I argue that a more developed articulation of this connection would strengthen and enrich our desires and attempts to formulate alternative and decolonial modes of social life.

In my final chapter, I consider the ways in which Young Jean Lee's *The Shipment* (2009) and Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview* (2018) theatrically render cognitive dissonances and asymmetries that result from the psychological and affective topography

of normative viewing frameworks. While these plays are most often read through the lens of racial stereotype and the white gaze, I claim that, by reading these plays together, it is possible to distill a set of theatrical practices, employed by Lee and Drury, that urge audiences to engage with this topography in ways that elucidate and combat the disabling effects of neoliberal identity politics. Moreover, I demonstrate how, by addressing the ideological assumptions of realism, these innovations in form and practice put the plays and their playwrights directly in conversation with theorists of the relation between race, gender and the emergence of realism, such as Daphne Brooks (2006) and Elin Diamond (1997). I argue that this practical and theoretical resonance is evidenced in the mainstream and scholarly theater criticism generated by each play.

In the coda that concludes this dissertation, I put Adrian Piper's *Funk Lessons* (1983), an attempt to foster a collective engagement with black music in predominantly non-black settings, in conversation with her essay, "The Real Thing Strange" (2013), a lecture which Piper delivered at Cambridge University. I carefully read her analysis of "unsynthesized intuitions," a term derived from her extensive study of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), and consider what the term allows for thinking the forms of music and dance associated with funk in a way that acknowledges the rigor and depth of thought in black embodiment. I examine the formal and affective structure of her presentation of funk in the context of the performance, her notes on white reactions to the music, alongside her claim that "To be at home in this place means to be comfortable with unsynthesized intuitions: with unfamiliar things and happenings and states and presences that confound and silence the mind and decompose the ego" ("The Real Thing

Strange” 91). My argument is not that funk and, by extension, black cultural expression can be analogously understood as instances of “unsynthesized intuitions.” Rather, I suggest that what we call synthesis might be viewed as an active possibility naming a psychical and affective phenomenon that does not move *wholly* in service of establishing understanding, a perspective that constitutes an intellectual disposition for which the materiality of existence is not a source of anxiety or despair. Activating a performative dimension of W.E.B. DuBois’s definition of “double consciousness,” a dimension that is similarly underthought, I argue that Piper’s performance is an example of “second sight” that demonstrates how that phenomenon functions in practice.

On the one hand, this project is primarily informed by the intellectual contributions of Black feminism and seeks to make legible a set of creative practices that elucidate the complex inter-articulation of social, discursive, and aesthetic norms, challenging the representational capacity of given social formations. On the other hand, this project is also concerned with a resonance between examinations of the productive relation between performer and spectator, given in critical accounts of theatricality, and interrogations of the social role of affect, given in queer-of-color critique and feminist critiques of post-Fordist modes of production and consumption. I argue that recognition of the gendered relations informing this resonance necessitates a transformation of the social position and function of the performance event. This is a transformation which would have profound implications for how non-normative modes of embodiment are understood and felt, as well as for how resistance to the disabling effects of neoliberalism is conceived and organized in the context of a global society governed through the violent

regulation of race, gender, sexual, and class difference. Rehearsal, then, names an ethical orientation and methodology that structures my work and acts as an invitation to continually envision and rehearse alternative social relationships.

# 1

## A Play of (Re)visions

Commenting on Lorraine Hansberry's legacy in the essay, "The Sighted Eyes and Feeling Heart of Lorraine Hansberry" (1983), Margaret B. Wilkerson begins by remarking upon The Black Arts Movement and the supposed spontaneity of its emergence. She says that this movement "of the 1960s seemed to burst on the American theatrical scene with no warning. The plays of LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka), Ed Bullins, and others appeared, it seemed, from nowhere, called forth from hidden reserves of anger deep within the black community" (8). Her point in recognizing this is to draw our attention to the unrecognized "strains of militance in the earlier voice of Lorraine Hansberry" that, in her estimation, "heralded the new movement and, in fact, became one of its major literary catalysts." Finally, she writes "Only now, in retrospect, do we begin to comprehend her significance as an American and a black writer."

Wilkerson argues that "the commercial success and popularity of her first play blinded some to her vision of light; suppression of her other works robbed the public of her insights and her warnings of the cataclysmic civic revolts to come" (8). Wilkerson's essay was published in 1983; however, her observations have been deepened and extended with the arrival of the similarly titled documentary "Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart" (2017), as well as Imani Perry's *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry* (2018) and Soyica Colbert's *Radical Vision: A Biography of Lorraine Hansberry* (2021), critical biographies which plumb the playwright's

underexplored history for insight into her sense of the relationship between art and politics<sup>1</sup>. Interestingly, each of the aforementioned titles features an attention to vision and the act of seeing, naming what might be called an anticipatory radicality as a fundamental quality of Hansberry's artistic output; Wilkerson goes so far as to suggest that hindsight is the primary temporal perspective through which Hansberry's ability to diagnose root causes and make projections about their broader societal effects persists, becoming increasingly legible with each passing year. It strikes me that characterizations of Lorraine Hansberry as a figure are temporally marked, emerging from a sense that she has yet to be fully understood from any present vantage point. In an immensely mournful sense, the act of "looking for Lorraine" permeates literature on the playwright because at every turn there seems to be some aspect of Hansberry that is inaccessible or unrevealed. The timing of her massive success, her untimely death, and the historical significance of the events that occurred between 1954 and 1968 under the name of the civil rights movement produce layers upon layers of almost mythic significance that surround the writer of *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Since the publication of "Lorraine Hansberry: Art of Thunder, Vision of Light," a 1979 special issue of the journal *Freedomways* dedicated to remembering and celebrating Hansberry's life and legacy, the archival presence of her ex-husband and literary executor, Robert Nemiroff, has consistently raised concerns around the degree of mediation Hansberry's words have been subjected to. How do we know that what we read in works like *To Be Young Gifted and Black* is presented as Hansberry would have

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<sup>1</sup> Perry (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018) and Colbert (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

wanted under different circumstances? These questions are perhaps most poignantly articulated by the poet and writer Adrienne Rich in her essay “The Problem with Lorraine Hansberry,” where she famously argues that “Lorraine Hansberry is a problem to me because she is black, female and dead” (Rich 247). Rich laments the myriad challenges which overdetermined the boundaries and pathways for social mobility available to black woman writers; Rich, approaching this problem as a “white, lesbian, feminist writer,” names the posthumous status of Hansberry’s published and unpublished work as an explicitly political concern for the way writing under the influence of a “culture and judgment of white males” pushes readers to ponder the “interior and exterior censors” Hansberry may have encountered as a result of that enculturation (Rich 249). Hansberry’s play *Les Blancs* gets to the heart of this concern due to the context of its emergence, and the play serves as a critical opening and crucial case study for Rich’s reflections on the discursive politics surrounding the playwright’s posthumous work. *Les Blancs* was adapted by Nemiroff from unfinished drafts, and the play was subsequently produced in December of 1970, almost six years after Hansberry’s death in January of 1965.

Nemiroff, in a critical introduction to the play text,<sup>2</sup> writes:

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<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I will be drawing from *Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), a collection edited by Robert Nemiroff including the edited text of *Les Blancs* and two previously unpublished scripts written by Hansberry for television: *The Drinking Gourd* and *What Use are Flowers?*. The collection was originally published in 1972, and Wilkerson’s essay was added to the collection as an introduction in 1994. Jewell Handy Gresham provides a foreword that is added to the volume in the same year. For each play in the collection, Nemiroff includes a “Critical Background,” detailing the events (historical and personal) surrounding each play’s conception and development. The “Critical Background” for *Les Blancs*, in particular, focuses on his involvement in its completion. In addition, Nemiroff includes a “Postscript” for *Les Blancs* that describes critical reception of the play’s Broadway debut at the Longacre Theatre in 1970. I won’t be focusing on Nemiroff’s writing in this essay; however, it is important to note how thoroughly this collection is framed and contextualized by Nemiroff, as well as how that framing has been revised over the years. In my discussion of Hansberry as a playwright,

In her last working months she cracked the problem to her own satisfaction and outlined in our discussions (during these sessions, I acted as soundingboard-advocate-critic) the major structural and character developments she envisioned. After her death, as literary executor, I continued the work: synthesizing the scenes already completed throughout the play with those in progress, drawing upon relevant fragments from earlier drafts and creating, as needed, dialogue of my own to bridge gaps, deepen relationships or tighten the drama along the lines we had explored together. (*Les Blancs* 34)

For Rich, the process of composition that produced *Les Blancs*, and Hansberry's larger body of posthumous work by extension, exacerbates a desire to find or uncover what seems to have been lost or obscured. Rich writes: "I do not know when I am reading dialogue written by Hansberry, and when I am reading of the process Nemiroff describes" (247). What could *Les Blancs* have been if Hansberry herself were the one to bridge the gaps that Nemiroff notes? What are the specifics of the "problem" that Nemiroff says that she cracked "to her own satisfaction?" Hortense Spillers, in a review of this memorial issue of *Freedomways*, further articulates the political stakes involved in pursuing this line of questioning. Spillers argues that Adrienne Rich's contribution is the only article of interest for her because Rich "reaches beyond the generally hagiographic aims of this edition to touch the intrigue and the burden that Hansberry engenders now that she has become a celebrated and protected public property" (Spillers, "Review" 527). Spillers' harsh review is telling, and she continues with the assertion that "the rest of this issue of *Freedomways* is not stimulating because it appears intent on rehearsing the

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I will be primarily focusing on that phenomenon as a quality of the discourse surrounding the posthumous reproduction of Hansberry's work.

woman's heroic transcendence; Hansberry is transformed into a monolith, and we lose the life and the struggle to a unanimity of good opinion" (527). On the one hand, the use of the phrase "public property" in reference to Hansberry names the (de)valuation of black people, black labor, and black art in the United States as well as forcefully evoking the history of slavery and its afterlife. On the other hand, the invocation of the "public" allows us to think beyond Nemiroff's individual role and consider the gravity of *our* investment in Hansberry as a black public figure. Rather than simply reframing the collective understanding of *Les Blancs* in a way that is skeptical of Nemiroff, but nothing more, is it possible to use *Les Blancs* as an opportunity to reorganize our ways of looking at/for Lorraine in general?

The problem is that Nemiroff's involvement in the publication and production of Hansberry's posthumous work, to the detriment of the discourse surrounding that work, carries a weighty and almost unavoidable resonance with the conditions surrounding the publication of narratives by enslaved and formerly enslaved people in the early-American period. Rich's suspicion around Nemiroff's literary executorship thus implies something similar to Valerie Smith's observation, in *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (1987), that "in each stage of their history, the presence of an intermediary renders the majority of the narratives not artistic constructions of personal experience but illustrations of someone else's view of slavery" (9). Hansberry's autobiography *To Be Young Gifted and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words* (1969) was adapted from her writings and published by Nemiroff, and the subtitle, "in her own words," is reminiscent of the titular addendums that accompanied narratives by formerly enslaved

individuals. An example of this would be *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* (1831), where the need to put “related by herself” in the title simultaneously affirms and denies the power of authorship. Obviously, there is a large difference between Hansberry’s posthumous works, such as *Les Blancs*, and the narratives of formerly enslaved individuals, but it is important to acknowledge this resonance as indicative of slavery’s afterlife.<sup>3</sup> While Nemiroff is primarily attempting to extend Hansberry’s legacy beyond her physical presence, the result is an archive that, following her passing, we have come to access almost entirely through his editing and executorship, a fact that complicates the status of Hansberry’s posthumous work as a “subject of critical inquiry.”<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Nemiroff appears as both a contributor to and assistant in the preparation of the aforementioned special issue of *Freedomways*, suggesting an awareness of these dynamics, and perhaps even a willingness to be subjected to the kind of inquiry that writers like Rich and Spillers call for. Following their insights, my intention here is not to cast doubt upon the authenticity of Hansberry’s posthumous work, or even mainly to criticize Nemiroff; I don’t believe that either of these possible conclusions speaks to the larger aims Rich and Spillers have in mind with their questions.

Nemiroff himself passed away in 1991; since then, the work of his executorship was extended and transformed through the Lorraine Hansberry Literary Trust. Led by Jewell Handy Gresham, a professor of English literature who married Nemiroff in 1967,

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<sup>3</sup> See Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> This is a phrase used by Valerie Smith in her analyses of early Afro-American narratives: “the way in which the narratives of freed and fugitive slaves were produced has been largely responsible for their uncertain status as subjects of critical inquiry” (9).

until her passing in 2005, and succeeded by their daughter, Joi Gresham, the Lorraine Hansberry Literary Trust has served as the primary organization through which Hansberry's work has continued to garner public interest.<sup>5</sup> In a more recent essay, Alec Pollack observes that "today, we are in the midst of a Hansberry renaissance that one hopes will be her last," ascribing to the playwright an "afterlife [that] has been full of false starts" due to a tension between the ongoing efforts of Hansberry's literary trust to maintain her relevance and a tendency in criticism to write off Hansberry's work, after *A Raisin in the Sun*, as a tragically unfinished oeuvre<sup>6</sup>. Representing one of the most significant developments in her posthumous history, Pollack argues that the burst of contemporary publications about Hansberry can be traced to 2014, when "the Lorraine Hansberry Literary Trust avowed publicly that Hansberry was a lesbian and greenlit an unprecedented number of projects" ("Lorraine Hansberry's Queer Archive"). Indeed, Pollack notes, "for the first time, Hansberry's sexuality has emerged as a meaningful component of her identity, one that demands consideration in any account of her life and work" ("Lorraine Hansberry's Queer Archive"). Pollack traces a line of development threaded through a series of unpublished plays and short stories featuring lesbian characters facing the "question" of homosexuality from a variety of positions and approaches that, Pollack argues, parallel Hansberry's own struggles with the relation between identity and politics. On multiple levels, the stated hope that this renaissance will be Hansberry's last, combined with the claim that Hansberry's sexuality is emerging

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<sup>5</sup> See Joi Gresham's profile on the Lorraine Hansberry Literary Trust website: <https://www.lhlt.org/joi-gresham>

<sup>6</sup> See Alec Pollack, "Lorraine Hansberry's Queer Archive" (2023), <https://yalereview.org/article/alec-pollak-lorraine-hansberry-queer-archive>

as a site of inquiry for the first time, resonates both with Rich's description of Hansberry as a "problem" and Wilkerson's declaration of the value of hindsight in our understanding of Hansberry's body of work. What interests me here is the way in which, due to the layered circumstances surrounding *Les Blancs* and Hansberry's posthumous work more broadly, a polarity between the potential for and undermining of political and creative possibility is generated by Hansberry's archive, producing an impossible tension that becomes retroactively embodied in the figure of Hansberry herself. This tension pushes Pollack to ask: "Would she force a reconciliation between her feminism, her race pride, and her lesbianism by publicly claiming them all?" However, what is striking for me about the relation between Hansberry's unpublished lesbian fiction and the life conditions against which she struggled is that the necessity to "claim" in the manner Pollack describes can be read as a direct result of this nexus of pressures.

I argue that the force of this nexus is important to recognize because of what it opens when considering *Les Blancs* as a purportedly (un)finished play. For the purposes of this essay, I am interested in what putting the content of *Les Blancs* in conversation with the fact of its (in)completion can teach us. Along those lines, Valerie Smith's insights into the power dynamics involved in early African American narratives are instructive. She argues that "the narrators who transform the conventions into an image of what they believe their lives mean most closely resemble autobiographers; they leave the impress of their personal experience on the structure in which they tell their story" (12). For Smith, these narratives are interesting because their variations in form serve as figures for their routes to freedom. The narratives themselves fugitively perform

liberation in their resistance to formal conventions. Smith writes, “in these places of difference, the narrators of these stories of freedom reveal their resistance even to the domination of their white allies” (12). This isn’t to suggest that *Les Blancs* bears autobiographical secrets about Hansberry; however, I do want to locate those places of difference in *Les Blancs* where the play itself resists the conventions that have framed its critical reception.

### **The Improvisation of (In)sight**

My attempts to think through blackness and aesthetics have led me to the medium of theater by way of the rehearsal space, which I understand as the place where a theatrical world and its rules are negotiated for the purposes of putting on a performance. In this essay, I theorize rehearsal as an improvisatory space and time that hasn’t settled into the finality of performance, and a concept that can be mobilized when engaging with the performative and discursive conventions that overdetermine alternative possibilities in critical and creative work for queer Afro-diasporic cultural producers. Improvisation, then, is a crucial term which helps articulate what is significant about the space of rehearsal as well as connections between blackness and theatricality. In my estimation, the use of improvisation as a concept always seems tinged with a sense of the “new” that is implied in the spontaneity of creation. There is a part of me that wants to push against this, because in jazz, the cultural form most exemplary of this practice, *most* of what is produced in moments of improvisation is not new. Solos are not necessarily planned out note-for-note, but playing over chord changes requires an understanding of possible

melodic and harmonic movements that can be made within the confines of a piece's basic structure. In that sense, improvisation is deeply related to preparation, practice, and the interplay between movement and constraint, where the presence of chord changes might be thought of as an imposition of structural constraints that force the ensemble to draw upon what they know and think of ways to navigate their way out of, or through, those conditions.

At the same time, I do not mean to suggest that improvisation has no relationship to the new. Improvisation might be better understood as practice or preparation for new expression. As I understand it, the *possibility* of playing something new is the activity that improvisation is engaged in, a kind of fostering of the potential for expression that is unforeseen or unprepared. Perhaps improvisation could be thought of as the accumulation of potential energy; it is both more and less than extemporaneous expression, or the production of something from nothing, which is the sense of improvisation that I want to bring to my work.

Rehearsal can be thought of as a space or place where actions are solidified, when and where the details of an upcoming performance take shape and approach fixity through repetition. However, with this sense of improvisation as an organizing principle, (the space and time of) rehearsal can also be thought of as a place where repetition and practice are instead used to loosen restriction and foster unforeseen expression.

Rehearsal, then, provides a way of thinking through the open vulnerability of blackness. I intend for rehearsal to denote an improvisational devotion to exploring what blackness is and might be.

Soyica Colbert is already attuned to the relation between rehearsal and Hansberry's artistic and political motivations and intentions. Colbert's *Radical Vision* is described as a critical biography of Hansberry which argues that the theater was in fact "a rehearsal room for [her] political and intellectual work."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, her article "Practices of Freedom: Lorraine Hansberry, Freedom Writer," focuses on Hansberry's work as a journalist, describing "Hansberry's short-form writing from 1950 – 1958 as a practice of freedom rather than a performance because its temporality was anticipatory rather than accumulative; driven by ideas, it sought to disrupt not synthesize" (158 – 9). I want to consider this provocation alongside the work of Stephen Best, who makes a strong case for "thinking like a work of art"<sup>8</sup> in critical inquiries, a phrase which suggests

that artworks perform, in one way or another, an intellectual or philosophical project. The artwork, in this theory of form, points reflexively to its own internal complexity. It can be considered a reflection, not in the passive sense of a mirror image, but in the active sense of an act of thought.  
(34)

On the face of things, the application of these interventions, in combination with Smith's work on early African American narrative, might seem to position Nemiroff as merely an agent of closure and Hansberry as resistant to Nemiroff in particular. In order to bring her works to publication and production, his editing decisions, in effect, close and finalize those of Hansberry, and the result has been the solidification of her legacy as an integral black artist and political figure. While this has led to widespread recognition, her status as, in Spillers' terms, "public property" is concerning. Through Stephen Best's

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<sup>7</sup> See description of the book: <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300264784/radical-vision/>

<sup>8</sup> See Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018)

explanation of the reflexive artwork, we might begin to view a kind of life lived *in the artwork* that exists somewhere (some time) between Hansberry's status as a monumental or mythic political figure, Nemiroff's hand in our ability to access her archive, and the idea or image of a "true" Lorraine that drives contemporary literature on her life and work. That life, given the questions Hansberry was attempting to address and her ideas for what the world could be, can be said to move and think in evasion of capture. It is important to point out that this movement and thought is not *independent of* these surrounding circumstances. To suggest that Hansberry's voice, vision, presence, or spirit shines through or perseveres in spite of these circumstances would simply set up a binary opposition that is not reflective of the argument I want to make. Rather than setting up a moral paradigm that pits Hansberry against an understanding of her surround as purely restrictive, I want to understand her *position* in the dynamic between these forces as something generative, and explore the way in which *Les Blancs*, as an artwork, can be seen as actively thinking through, and not simply in spite of, the fact of Nemiroff's completion of this particular work. *Les Blancs* is a site of a black improvisational resistance to closure. This movement and life, in constant non-oppositional evasion of capture, is one way to describe what blackness is.

**"You're not ready to be—"**

My interest in *Les Blancs* begins with a relatively minor character, Eric, who, at various points in the play, is described as transgressing racial, sexual, and gender norms, especially relative to his brothers, Thesmbé and Abioseh. The play is set in the fictional

African country of Zatembe and follows the inhabitants of a colonial mission compound led by Reverend Torvald Nielsen, a Catholic priest, and Major George Rice, a white colonial reserve officer. Thesambe and Abioseh are the sons of Aquah and Old Abioseh, members of the fictional Kwi community who act as a bridge between Zatembe and the compound. In the time and space of the play, the three brothers are reuniting in the wake of their father's death. Abioseh has recently returned from a Catholic educational institution where he has worked to become a priest. In returning to Zatembe, Abioseh expresses hopes of furthering evangelistic projects in Africa, and takes the tack of the colonial reserve in denouncing the brewing anticolonial sentiments arising in the area surrounding Zatembe. Tshembe, on the other hand, is returning from Europe where he has become a cosmopolitan intellectual and started a family. Tshembe is represented as intellectually aware of what is violent and problematic about the various colonial presences imposing themselves in Zatembe and, throughout the play, forwards a developed critique of colonialism and its effects on colonized populations. However, as a result of his travels and the life he's built in Europe, Tshembe ultimately distances himself from Zatembe. While he is sympathetic to the anti-colonial struggle, this sympathy is expressed through a detached intellectualism. At times Tshembe even mocks his own ethnic identification while simultaneously expressing pity over what seems to him like an intractable situation. Eric, on the other hand, is the son of Aquah, their shared mother, and Major Rice. Thus, Eric is relatively neglected and perceived as a scandalous reminder that the Christian mission is also a site of racial and sexual transgression. When Eric is born, Aquah passes away during labor, and the brothers are raised on the mission

by Madame Nielsen, the elderly Norwegian wife of Reverend Nielsen who subsequently becomes a mother figure for the three brothers.

Madame Nielsen's way of talking around the issue (or problem) of Eric is most provocative to me, especially in the opening scene of the play. Earlier on, Charlie Morris, an American reporter who has just arrived, is startled by Congo drums that begin beating with intensity, seemingly out of nowhere. Madame apologizes to Charlie for the timing of his arrival, because, according to the drums, "someone important has died" (51). When Charlie inquires further about her ability to understand the meaning of the drums, Madame reminisces about Aquah, who she considered to be her dearest friend. Aquah would teach her the language of the Kwi, and Madame would teach her English and French in return, suggesting a level of reciprocity. She laments what she calls "The change," in which "Some cold wind blew in over our people here and chilled their hearts to us," and she tells Charlie that the change began with Aquah's husband, Old Abioseh, and subsequently spread to the "the village—then the tribe" (51) In the present, "they still come to the clinic, some of them. But to this day, virtually no Kwi attend Reverend Nielsen's services. In almost seven years I have not set foot in a hut in this village" (51). While she expresses sadness over the current state of affairs, Nielsen intentionally omits Eric in this lament, and at this point in the play, it is not yet clear that Eric is Aquah's third child. This is followed by Eric's physical entrance into the scene, which is described as follows:

*(A young boy appears behind the Mission and looks quickly about to make certain he is unobserved: a sodden, fairskinned youth in the late teens, in shorts, filthy undershirt and sneakers, and—incongruously—a clean white pith helmet. MADAME stiffens and stares straight ahead)* Now, sir, “Caliban” is almost upon us. He has turned on the generator and now the river breeze tells me—*(he crosses swiftly to a tree stump)*—he is crossing the compound to make certain—*(he looks from right to left, stoops and reaches into the tree stump)*—that Dr. DeKoven has left him a bottle. *(He comes up with the bottle, drinks, recaps and replaces it, and heads for the mission)* This, sir, is Eric. (52).

Madame’s allusion to Caliban, in addition to the descriptor “fairskinned,” marks Eric as racially mixed. In addition, Eric’s appearance is described as incongruous in the stage directions due to the contrast between his clean headwear and filthy clothes, adding symbolic representation of his mixed heritage. More striking, however, is the fact that his arrival in the text is also marked by syntactical interruptions in Madame’s speech.

Madame’s sentence (“He has turned on the generator and now the river breeze tells me he is crossing the compound to make certain that Dr. DeKoven has left him a bottle”) is repeatedly cut with stage directions detailing Eric’s blocking in the scene. While there isn’t anything remarkable about his movements, the nature of those movements’ inscription in the text of the play deviates from stage directions modifying the other characters. The text formally positions Eric as a character who is carefully observed by Madame Nielsen. It is almost as if Madame herself is directing, or attempting to direct, Eric’s movement, given the fact that each phrase predicts the movements described in the stage directions. This movement is contrasted with Madame, who, upon seeing him, “stiffens and stares straight ahead” (52). When Eric fully enters the scene, Madame asks him to show Charlie to his room. Before Charlie is able to follow Eric, Madame takes his arm, and they share a final exchange in this opening scene:

I shall think you an exceedingly poor journalist, Mr. Morris, if you allow me to believe that you are in the least confounded by either the name or the complexion of our Eric. (*Settling back with finality*) Now I have said enough. Now I shall sit on the veranda and merely be quiet and invalid, and leave the world to its deceptions. (*CHARLIE looks at her, hesitates—and about to speak, when:*) I'm sure your room is ready, Mr. Morris. (*CHARLIE exits. The old lady sits staring dead ahead*). (52)

In word, Madame shrinks herself, “merely” emphasizing her weaker physical stature and satisfaction with being quiet from then on. In feeling, however, her comments on Eric ring with an air of final judgement as she settles back and stares “dead ahead.” However, this description of herself, which downplays her significance, is not merely misdirection. The association with death and finality, as well as stiffness, staring, settling suggests that the fragility which is expressed in Madame’s description of herself as “quiet and invalid” is not opposed to but, in fact, part and parcel of the strength of her judgement. Formally, her sentence describing Eric’s movements frame his blocking, but his movements also disrupt, interrupt, and resist her attempt to frame him. This dynamic is reminiscent of Fred Moten’s complication of the terms of subjectivity. For him, “While subjectivity is defined by the subject’s possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed—infused, deformed—by the object it possesses” (*In the Break* 1). It’s important to recognize that an application of this quote does not suggest a resistance to being possessed on the part of Eric that moves by way of an opposition to Madame. Rather, an application of Moten’s use of the m-dash and his modification of the word “possessed” is reflective of what is happening during this moment in the play via its stage directions. Madame’s attempt to frame Eric’s movement across the compound in her description of it is actually “infused”

and “deformed” by that movement in the play. When Madame says that she would think Charlie “an exceedingly poor journalist” if he doesn’t understand what is going on, she indirectly acknowledges the open secret that is Eric’s existence as a product of sexual transgression under conditions of colonization. This open secret similarly infuses and deforms Madame’s understanding of herself and by extension the mission. In the play, she “stiffens and stares straight [or dead] ahead” when she sees Eric, as if making an attempt to maintain a sense of security in her world that Eric’s presence throws into crisis.

This movement is also expressed through the language of crossing that is used to describe Eric’s movement. “Crosses” in the stage direction and “crossing” in Madame’s articulation of his movement seem to mark Eric as a figure on the border between worlds. Eric exists between the colonizing mission and the colonized Zatembe, as well as racially between black and white. However, the importance of describing the first scene of *Les Blancs* in detail is in suggesting that Eric is actually the nexus or focal point of the multitude of perspectives and positions that exist in relation to the colonial situation. When considering his movement alongside Madame’s stillness, I would argue that his crossing is not so much a crossing between worlds as it is a description of his orientation towards the totality of that situation, an orientation that I associate with an improvisational resistance to closure that I have used to describe Hansberry, or *Les Blancs* as an artwork or literary artifact. Eric’s position in relation to the field of characters is elusive; and it might be more accurate to say, at this point in the play, that Eric occupies no position. Elsewhere, Moten elucidates the significance of this non-

positionality, in an elaboration upon his critique of subjectivity while discussing the theoretical interventions of Afro-Pessimism. Moten critiques Afro-Pessimism's move to associate blackness with wretchedness via Frantz Fanon, because for him, "wretchedness emerges from a standpoint that is not only not ours, that is not only one we cannot have and ought not want, but that is, in general, held within the logic of im/possibility that delineates what subjects and citizens call the real world" ("Blackness and Nothingness" 738). In the play, Eric's existence must be either passed over in silence or acknowledged indirectly, as is the case in Madame's aside to Charlie. If we follow Moten's logic, this is because, within the official and authorized world of the mission, Eric is an im/possibility.

The nature of this orientation is fleshed out through Eric's familial relationships and is most clearly articulated in the relationship between Eric and his two older brothers. This is first, and perhaps most most strikingly, exhibited in Eric's alternative embodiment of gender and sexuality. Early in the second act of the play, Tshembe finds out that Eric possesses makeup and is sexually involved with Dr. Willy DeKoven, a doctor working at the mission. Tshembe ridicules Eric for this, saying "if you cannot quite be a white man you have decided to become a white woman?" (88). Assuming Eric's helplessness in the face of his circumstances, the elder brothers struggle with one another over who will control Eric's destiny, and their conflict comes to a head when Eric reveals that he wants to join the Kwi resistance. Eric is unsurprisingly met with derision; Tshembe mocks him after he picks up a spear on his way to meet with the resistance, retorting "you are half European. Which part of yourself will you drive into the sea!" (107). These moments in the play read as extremely ambivalent. On the one hand, through Eric, Hansberry

incorporates a character who might be retroactively read as queer and gender non-conforming in a play explicitly concerned with some of the more difficult questions regarding anti-colonialism and revolutionary possibility. Furthermore, this non-normative character is positioned on the side of anti-colonial resistance. On the other hand, Eric's deviance is not presented as an example of pure self-determination; from the perspective of the brothers, Eric's queering of boundaries (between race, nationality, gender, and sexuality) marks him as a product of communal neglect, at best, and of colonial violence, at worst.

When Eric says that he is "African enough not to mock when my people call!" Tshembe again ridicules him for his relationship with DeKoven and proclaims that "it takes more than a spear to make a man" (108). Eric fires back, asking "what does it take, Tshembe? You teach me! What does it take to be a man? A white wife and son?" (108). When Eric launches this critique, the confrontation becomes physical, and Tshembe attempts to block Eric's movement. He says "Put down the things, boy. You're not ready to be—(ERIC *crashes the length of the spear against TSHEMBE's chest. He takes it from him in a show of strength*)—a warrior yet...I...promise you" (108). Here, again, I am interested in the syntax used in the script, and the way the m-dash isolates the phrase "you're not ready to be." This highlights the existential stakes of the perspectives adopted by Tshembe and Abioseh. While they are opposed politically, they converge on their insistence that Eric and, by extension, Zatembe are not fit for "being," according to their worldview(s). In pleading his case, Eric argues on a personal level that Zatembe is where he belongs because the members of the resistance "call me by the name my mother gave

me—.” Tshembe finishes his sentence “(*Derisively*) –Ngedi!” (109). Before rushing off, Eric accidentally reveals that Peter, the porter of the mission, is actually a leader of the resistance, which surprises Abioseh. Tshembe and Eric look at one another, and Abioseh tells Tshembe “It is creatures like that who make it impossible for us.” Tshembe is struck by Abioseh’s use of “us,” and expresses confusion, which Eric takes as his opportunity to take off. After Eric exits, Abioseh elaborates: “For responsible men... Practical men who know how to bide their time—who understand that there is only one way to power here” (110). Moten’s meditation on blackness and nothingness proves useful here as well, and he provides a way to think about the point of view that joins Tshembe and Abioseh in this moment of the play:

This mass is understood to be undifferentiated precisely because from the imaginary perspective of the political subject—who is also the transcendental subject of knowledge, grasp, ownership, and self-possession—difference can only be manifest as the discrete individuality that holds or occupies a standpoint. From that standpoint, from the artificial officially assumed position, blackness is nothing, that is, the relative nothingness of the impossible, pathological subject and his fellows. (“Blackness and Nothingness” 741)

Tshembe is derisive in his enunciation of the name “Ngedi,” and his derision cannot be separated from Abioseh’s categorization of Peter as a “creature.” Both exhibit a desire for an unrealizable subjecthood that can only be achieved by marking themselves as individually distinct from the larger colonized population in Zatembe. It is this assertion of difference from the undifferentiated mass that gives them authority to stake claims on Eric’s life. Eric, however, refuses these claims, slipping away when the brothers are distracted by their argument. Moten makes it clear that he is not seeking to construct a new “necessarily fictive standpoint;” rather, the aim of his critique is the reorganization

of the entanglement of thought and desire: “what would it be, deeper still, what is it, to think from no standpoint; to think outside the desire for a standpoint?” (738). It is my contention that Eric’s character is an example of this reorganization on the part of *Les Blancs*.

In saying this, it is important to make a distinction between Tshembe’s detached intellectualism and the idea of thinking “outside the desire for a standpoint.” When Tshembe questions Abioseh’s use of the word “us,” he claims that Abioseh is “altogether committed to them,” comparing him to Judas of the Bible. Abioseh responds by calling out Tshembe’s lack of action, arguing “it is *you* who have sold yourself to Europe...you believe in nothing! You act on nothing! You have put man on God’s throne—but you serve neither God nor man!” (110). Ultimately, this exchange is what drives Tshembe to change and join the independence movement by the end of the play; however, I am interested in the question of commitment and belief in this moment, and the difference between Tshembe’s and Eric’s mode of detachment. While Tshembe’s detachment from the situation allows him to have a solid critique of the colonial situation and sympathy for the insurrection, he is unable to actively engage with the situation because of his inability to justify such action based on his existentialist and individuated conception of freedom. Any intention (commitment/belief) based in his history or identity as a person of African descent cannot be entertained, because for him, Africa has no history or identity. As a result, his sympathy is condescending, and he is critiqued by Abioseh for mocking Zatembe through his self-righteous intellectualism.

Eric's detachment, on the other hand, is a detachment from the need to individuate. Eric's open retreat from subjectivity is a disposition that leaves him open to violence, mistreatment, and exploitation at the hands of the mission as well as his own brothers; but it is also a disposition that, through the same openness and vulnerability, allows Eric to carry the intentions of his mother and the Kwi who are struggling for their independence in Zatembe. During these moments of crossing and slipping away that describe Eric's character in the play, he might be said to tap into what Hortense Spillers calls the "wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility*," that describes fleshly existence prior to the differentiation-as-separation associated with subjectivity and normative Western society ("Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" 72, emphasis in original). Moten's call to "think outside the desire for a standpoint" is indebted to Spillers' observation about the beginnings of modernity, and her distinction between the "body" and the "flesh" is the theoretical ground for Moten's call to "remain in the hold of the ship" ("Blackness and Nothingness" 738). Eric's improvisational resistance to closure and capture comes from this (non)place.

### **The (Non)place of Difference**

Spillers' investigation into the location of black women in the historical record on the slave trade is a powerfully cogent articulation of what this (non)place opens for thinking beyond the given conditions of our modernity. Spillers' use of "wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility*" in reference to captive Africans in the middle passage is part of her speculation about what it meant to be "literally suspended in the 'oceanic,'"

moving across the Atlantic, but “also *nowhere* at all” (72, emphasis in original). Spillers suggests that relegation to this “*nowhere*” space was part of the process through which captive Africans were “culturally unmade.” She emphasizes the way this unmaking happens in language along the axis of gender insofar as any access to a patriarchal lineage was severed *and* the recording of slavery features a systematic and intentional erasure of enslaved women *as* women (72). In that sense, one of the effects of slavery was simultaneously the imposition of Western understandings of gender and the restriction of access to a place in society that would be afforded by those roles. Spillers suggests that in undertaking the project of understanding and “undressing the confluences of meaning” that result from this history, “we would gain, in short, the *potential* for gender differentiation as it might express itself along a range of stress points, including human biology in its intersection with the project of culture” (66).

In an extension of this project, Christina Sharpe proposes “the wake” as a way of thinking through the problematic of black death and loss, as well as slavery’s legacy in the present.<sup>9</sup> She argues that “To be in the wake is also to recognize the ways that we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to overwhelming force though not *only* known to ourselves and to each other by that force” (Sharpe 16). Following this, “wake work” becomes a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives (Sharpe 17). My reasoning for foregrounding the resonance between the issues surrounding our engagement with Hansberry’s archive and histories of the middle passage and American chattel slavery is that, in *Les Blancs*, Hansberry’s

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<sup>9</sup> See Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

mobilization of the character Eric rehearses the possibility of arriving at an alternative and black embodiment of gender through an “undressing” akin to Spillers’ theorization, revealing a “stress point,” the articulation of which can be seen as a generative opening, revealing a range of alternative paths. Again, Eric’s wayward presentation of self and deviation from gender and sexual norms is not a pure expression of self-determination, and his presence in *Les Blancs* is everywhere an active critique of the forces that encumber him, but it is important to notice the ways in which the activity registered here is not reducible to that critique. I want to imagine *Les Blancs* as an artwork that thinks, initiating a kind of wake work that, on the one hand, poses questions regarding the connections between gender, sexuality, and colonialism; and a work that, on the other hand, takes seriously the problem of pondering what a change in our relation to those forces would look like.

Cheryl Higashida, draws attention to the fact that *Les Blancs* and the last play by Hansberry to be produced during her lifetime, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* (1964), were both originally conceived of as plays featuring women as the main characters.<sup>10</sup> She performs a study of Hansberry’s relationship to Simone de Beauvoir’s work, attempting to clarify what can be ascertained about Hansberry’s relationship to feminism and homosexuality based on the kinds of characters she created in her plays. She concedes that “these changes in Hansberry’s work can be seen as forms of silencing and self-censorship, as Adrienne Rich has argued,” acknowledging the way in which

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<sup>10</sup> See Cheryl Higashida, “To Be(come) Young, Gay), and Black: Lorraine Hansberry’s Existentialist Routes to Anticolonialism,” *American Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (2003): 905 – 906.

widespread sexism and homophobia may have been motivating factors in such revisions. However, Higashida goes on to argue that “we can also read Hansberry’s ‘replacement’ of women with men, including lesbians with gay males, as a strategy or opening through which she continued to develop an emancipatory political aesthetics committed to critiquing heteropatriarchy in conjunction with racialized imperialism and capitalism” (906). From this, Higashida asserts that *Les Blancs* exhibits an “anticolonial diasporic vision,” and I am interested in understanding more clearly the relation between this vision and the processes of revision at play in her writing. What might a clearer understanding of that relation allow in terms of engagement with the play, as well as with Hansberry herself, given her status, in Spillers’ words, as “a celebrated and protected public property?” As a result of an executorship that has, in many ways, functioned as a determining factor in how Hansberry’s archive can be read, there is no way to come to a definitive conclusion regarding the editing decisions that Higashida takes up in her essay; even so, *Les Blancs* can be seen as very actively working through the question of gender and sexuality through revisions and reworkings of her plays. I would argue that, in Valerie Smith’s terms, Eric might be a “place of difference” wherein a resistance to conventional discursive framings might be revealed.

What would it mean for our understanding of the play to read Eric’s character as a black and queer (if not gender non-conforming) rehearsal; a form of care that exceeds the terms of recognition that condition the normative operation of political and civic society? Is it possible to claim that reading as on the run from a conventional narrative understanding of *Les Blancs*? One of the results of Robert Nemiroff’s literary

executorship was that Hansberry's own lesbianism was obscured; at the same time, his adaptation of her notes on *Les Blancs* preserves its queerness. Rather than simply ignoring or shifting attention away from suspicions around Robert Nemiroff's close and controlled handling of Hansberry's work and archive, how might we imagine that archive as doing its own work in and through the fact of those conditions? What would it mean to read and discuss Hansberry's work with respect for Hansberry's own openness and vulnerability as a black lesbian writer, artist, and activist? How do these considerations actually extend and deepen the critique of colonialism that *Les Blancs* is known for? In both its content as well as in the contextual web that is its adaptation, publication, and production, *Les Blancs* actively poses these questions. In that sense, despite the fact that it was completed and finalized in publication and production, *Les Blancs* often feels more like a rehearsal for something else.

## 2

### The Grammar of Autobiographical (De)composition

Life produces a peculiar set of questions for Yiyun Li, the writer of *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life* (2018). While the book is categorized as a memoir, Li is adamant in claiming “I am not an autobiographical writer—one cannot be without a solid and explicable self—and read all autobiographical writers with the same curiosity. What kind of life permits a person the right to become his own subject?” (26). In the absence of “a solid and explicable self,” and against the grain of autobiography as a genre, how might the kind of life Li does manage to find and narrate be described? Following Li’s lead, we might ponder the conditions under which “life permits a person the right to become his own subject,” a pondering which is, ostensibly, the basis of autobiographical writing in general. On the other hand, Li implicitly suggests that there is a relation between the language of rights, ownership (“his own”), and personal writing that life itself refuses to abide by, calling the representative ethos of autobiography into question.

Yiyun Li, born in Beijing during the latter years of Mao Zedong’s leadership of the People’s Republic of China, spent a year in compulsory service to the People’s Liberation Army before earning a Bachelor of Science at the University of Peking. Following this, Li migrated to Iowa to pursue graduate work in immunology and went on to obtain an MFA from the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, fulfilling a desire write that was

spawned by a love of books developed early on in childhood.<sup>1</sup> In her career as a writer, Li has become known for writing fiction exclusively in English, having published five novels and three short story collections to date,<sup>2</sup> and contributing regularly to publications such as *Harper's Magazine* and *The New Yorker*. Published in 2018, *Dear Friend* is thus an anomaly in Li's oeuvre, narrating two years of Li's life spent dealing with suicidal depression. This culminates in two instances of hospitalization following attempts at ending her life, which are only obliquely remarked upon in the text itself. While the memoir is, in a sense, organized around these devastating occurrences, Li utilizes a variety of descriptive approaches that privilege the portrayal of a layered and distressed mental landscape, rather than producing a recounting of traumatic events. Throughout the memoir, her depressed mental state exerts a permeating influence, such that routine, even mundane, activities and interactions seem burdened by the presence of an inarticulate sadness; daily and fairly innocuous happenings are punctuated by self-critical questions that take on essential or constitutive significance, and the lack of "a solid and explicable self" renders these questions impossible to answer. One early instance of this involves a mental health worker who asks after the source of her sadness, flatly remarking "we know you're sad. What I want to know is, what makes you sad?" Li initially provides a contrarian response: "Can't I just be left alone in my sadness?" (16).

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<sup>1</sup> See Jennifer Altmann's profile of Li, published the same year. Altmann, "Creative Writing: Life By the Book," *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, (2018): <https://paw.princeton.edu/article/creative-writing-life-book>.

<sup>2</sup> Her novels include *The Vagrants* (2009), *Kinder Than Solitude* (2014), *Where Reasons End* (2019), *Must I Go* (2020), *The Book of Goose* (2022); and her short story collections include *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2005), *Gold boy, emerald girl* (2010), and *Wednesday's Child* (2023).

Her assessment of the situation is that “one hides from people who ask these unanswerable questions only to ask them oneself again and again” (17).

In this chapter, following this tendency towards the recursive, I linger with Li’s interrogation of the relation between language, mental life, and the genre of autobiography. I explore the ways in which Li performs a decomposition of the autobiographical “I”—in particular, “I” as an English-language linguistic or literary figure—and suggest that this writing practice puts her in conversation with the Chinese American author and playwright Frank Chin, who is exemplary of a post-civil rights era Third World nationalism in the wake of the Black Power movement. While this pairing is unusual, the conversation between them is heard most clearly in how both writers converge and diverge in their questionings of the relation between religion and settler-colonial conceptions of temporal progress. In a related vein, I suggest that, insofar as Li approaches the autobiographical “I” as a question of grammar, *Dear Friend* can read through the work of Hortense Spillers on the structuring role of slavery in the development of a national discourse that administers untenable forms of life through its disavowal of that role. Lisa Lowe, Sora Han, and Nishida Kitarō help to flesh out this connection between Li and Spillers: Lowe on translations of liberalism, Nishida on Buddhist conceptions of “absolute nothingness,” and Han on transliteration, diglossia, and the haunt of slavery in colonial language. I argue that Li’s memoir forges a connection between discourses on mental health and the philosophical critique of subjectivity that is underthought in engagements with race, colonialism, migration, and diaspora in academic writing. I argue that a more developed articulation of this

connection would strengthen and enrich our desires and attempts to formulate alternative and decolonial modes of social life.

As I've articulated at other moments in this project, I theorize rehearsal as a space and time that allows for confrontations with, rather than a retreat from, the materiality of history. While rehearsal can be thought of as a space or place where actions are solidified, when and where the details of an upcoming performance take shape and approach fixity through repetition, rehearsal can also, with improvisation as an organizing principle, be thought of as a place where repetition and practice are instead used to loosen restriction and foster unforeseen expression. In *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life*, Li develops a method of reading and writing which consists in carving out and defending a transitional space in which the concepts and practices that facilitate aesthetic and political formations of identity are suspended in "the gap between clarity and confusion." Utilizing a theory of rehearsal to consider this suspension is not equivalent to claiming a romanticized "free play" that takes place in shelter from the labeling power of language; rather, following Lisa Lowe, I argue that rehearsal—defined as the sustained practice of generating a forceful and critical hesitance<sup>3</sup>—might allow for engagements with the material of racial representation that are foreclosed by the demands of a system of meaning which privileges semantic content. This is an intervention Yiyun Li makes in contradistinction to Frank Chin, even as both actively and thoroughly contest and decompose the foundations of autobiography as a genre.

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<sup>3</sup> See Lisa Lowe, "History Hesitant" *Social Text* 33, no.4 (2015)

### **“This is Not An Autobiography”**

Frank Chin is a highly influential, and often critiqued, figure in the development of Asian American literature, authoring plays such as *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974), in addition to collaborating with Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Inada, and Shawn Wong to publish *The Big Aiiieeeee!: an Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* in 1974. In his essay, “This is Not An Autobiography” (1985), Chin traces the genre of autobiography to its roots in Western forms of Christianity, arguing that the genre functions as “a literary weapon” that exerts its power through the tropes of conversion and confession (109-10). According to Chin, the former trope establishes a teleological paradigm for Chinese American writers, a trope that rhetorically positions China and the United States as opposing spaces of damnation and salvation, respectively. The latter functions therefore as a mode of narration that drives and directs the writing subject in its cultural transition through a unidirectional value system favoring the west. At the same time, in studies of Asian American literature, Chin is infamous for his scathing reviews of a series of autobiographies published in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s by second-generation Chinese American writers.<sup>4</sup> Taking issue with what he reads as an assimilationist perspective that perpetuates stereotypes and favors a white readership, Chin has been rightly and thoroughly taken to task for the way he takes particular aim at women writers in the Asian American literary tradition, exhibiting a virulent misogyny that is resistant to and

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<sup>4</sup> In particular, Chin takes aim at authors such as Pardew Lowe, Jade Snow Wong, Virginia Lee, and Betty Sung. See Laura Chow Reeve, “Between Assimilation and Authenticity: On Navigating Discourses Around Asian American Literary Identity” *Literary Hub* (2024) <https://lithub.com/between-assimilation-and-authenticity-on-navigating-discourses-around-asian-american-literary-identity/>.

contemptuous of femininity in particular, foreclosing feminist and queer forms of Asian American identity formation in his own analyses (Chow Reeve). At the same time, Chin's critique has been useful for its attention to the the commodification of Asian cultures and the strain that stereotypes impose on life for Asian Americans and Asian migrants in America. Taking note of this tension, Traise Yamamoto argues that "reading the body of Asian American autobiography in agonistic relationship to Chin's statement productively highlights the many ways in which these texts self-consciously resist and radically destabilize the notion of a discrete self whose singular 'life' is commodifiable or reducible to dominant stereotypes of Asian Americans as exotic foreigners" (Yamamoto 379). Her analysis allows us to pause and reflect upon the position from which these narratives are produced, and I suggest that an attention to positionality enables resistant readings that might uncover what Yamamoto calls the "muted" or "coded" critique of dominant narratives present in Asian American life writing.

Through radically different approaches, Li and Chin similarly challenge the teleological logic of cultural migration as a form of narration, a system of value, and a framework for the evaluation of Asian American autobiography and memoir. In "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," Frank Chin writes that "the conflict between the heathen and Christian, the Chinaman and the honorary white, the despicable pariah and the acceptable pariah, the either/or dual personality and identity crisis feeds and flashes on the self-hatred of the mutually repugnant halves of the self in a kind of perpetual motion" ("Come All Ye" 25). For Chin, "the despicable pariah and the acceptable pariah" are two sides of the same coin. Even so, there is a gap between a self

that is perpetually excluded and degraded in relation to whiteness and a self that knows this is the case, and Chin's argument is that the degradation he observes is facilitated by the intimate relationship between whiteness and Western adoptions and conceptions of Christianity as a moral system of value. In that sense, Chin wants to foreground and affirm the portion of the self that, through knowledge of its degradation, exists and desires in excess of that "either/or dual personality."

This gap between what one is, what one wants, and how one is perceived is present but differently inflected and coded by Li in *Dear Friend*. In the afterword to her book, Li tells readers that the "gap between clarity and confusion is where a mind, with the instinct of self-preservation, battles against itself. That gap is my privacy. Writing fiction has been my way to protect it, though not always effectively. Writing from the gap—this book—is an experiment in establishing a truce with what cannot be changed" (200). The trace of the gap that Li articulates is also palpable for me in Chin's oscillation between "the mutually repugnant halves of the self" and the perpetual motion of that conflict. What happens to the energy that can't be entirely contained within the closed kinetic system Chin describes? Where is that excess held and preserved? As the essential elements of Christian autobiography, conversion and confession figure as narrative tools that produce a specific set of racial meanings that are morally inflected; Li and Chin write to demonstrate and show a gap between that (racial and moral) meaning and the *feeling* of being Chinese American. I argue that Chin and Li ask a similar set of questions by interrogating the form of narration that autobiography requires, a form disclosed by the grammatical subject. For Chin, the relations implied by this form of narration produce

sites of tension that require linguistic combat. However, Li's willingness to bear (and bare) the content of that "gap between clarity and confusion" in *Dear Friend*—is an opening through which Chin's grievance might even be read as an extension of the texts he is engaged in a critique of.

It is in this sense that we might take a closer look at the differences in how Li and Chin attempt to question the coherence of identity and identification in language as members of a Chinese diaspora. Chin registers a self that is split into two "mutually repugnant halves," which suggests a lack of coherence. Yet, by approaching the activity of writing from an explicitly voiced Chinese American nationalism, there is a lingering sense that the nature and form of that incoherence is explicable and clearly defined. Thus, the aspect of Chin's self that exists in excess of that "either/or dual personality" is mobilized in service of a war for the maintenance of "personal integrity against historical extinction." Chin elaborates:

You, dear reader of English, aren't used to a Chinaman act in "your" language. You have rules of style and decorum about raging personal in intellectual exercise. Forget it. Your language is mine. I speak in the Chinaman "I" here, and write a Chinaman act. I don't mean to be impolite in my taking your language and dashing the moral universals you've built into it. But betrayal is at the heart of your English. You speak the "I" of "Revenge is mine sayeth the Lord." Mine is the Chinaman "I." Whatever language a Chinaman speaks, it is always Chinaman, and the first person pronoun I, in any language, means "I am the law." (110-111)

I am most interested in the use of "I" here, and its relation to "raging personal" for Chin. Even in using a block quote to present this section of Chin's essay, the affective intensity of his prose threatens to take over *this* essay. When Chin says "forget it. Your language is mine...Whatever language a Chinaman speaks, it is always Chinaman" he claims an

ownership over language, authorized by the use of “the first person pronoun I”—“I” is therefore law, no matter the language. Through short, declarative uses of “I,” Chin establishes a “Chinaman” identity that resists “the church of white supremacy” by subsuming and redirecting its language. Chin’s “I” is also collective, and there is no tension between the individual “I” and the “Chinaman ‘I,’” barring betrayal, a breach of authenticity, what Chin calls “the writing of an individual without a people” (130). Chin explicates this knowledge with a (self-)confidence that Li is unable to assume. In *Dear Friend*, however, this challenge emerges from a conception of the self that is anything but “solid and explicable,” as well as a serious and literal consideration of what the destabilization of discrete selfhood implies.

In contrast, Li writes: “A word I hate to use in English is *I*. It is a melodramatic word. In Chinese, a language less grammatically strict, one can construct a sentence with an implied subject pronoun and skip that embarrassing I, or else replace it with *we*. Living is not an original business” (27). Melodrama will return later in this chapter; for now, suffice it to say that for Li, *I* is an embarrassment that generates a desire for (what is called) the individual to be passed over in silence, or else subsumed by a *we* that Li does not specify in terms of a racial or national identity. In one sense, I want to suggest that this embarrassment is at the heart of Li’s assertion that “one hides from people who ask these unanswerable questions only to ask them oneself again and again” (16-17). I also want to suggest that it is precisely Chin’s belief and confidence in the integrity of his own “I” that grounds his ability to explain what it means to be authentic, what it means to be real or fake, to name and identify traitors and betrayal, and therefore to enact revenge on

behalf of an authentic “Chinaman ‘I.’” I want to write towards an understanding of the slippage between *I* and *we*, and how that slippage signifies differently for Chin and for Li. I want to argue that the question of what is and is not the self is the hinge upon which the slippage between *I* and *we* turns. In the interest of teasing out how those subject positions are oriented in relation to the problem of slippage, I want to follow an association the juxtaposition of Li and Chin has recalled regarding the history of that question and its relation to narratives of the self: it is significant that one of the ways Li engages the question of *I* and *we* is through the grammatical differences between English and Chinese.

### **The Grammar of Autobiographical (De)composition**

In order to rehearse the question of grammatical difference, then, I want to consider, for a moment, a less quoted portion of Hortense Spillers’ seminal essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987). While most cited for her mobilization of the distinction between “the body” and “the flesh,” Spillers dedicates a section of her essay to reading Olaudah Equiano’s 1789 narrative alongside Elizabeth Donnan’s *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America* (1932). In addressing Donnan’s massive text, the first volume of which “covers three centuries of European ‘discovery’ and ‘conquest,’” Spillers focuses in particular on Gomes Eannes de Azurara, a 15<sup>th</sup> Century Portuguese Chronicler, and his narration of encounters between the Portuguese and black Africans, which she compares to Equiano’s famous description of his experience on the Middle Passage. She suggests a link between

Azurara's narration and the formation of a value system in which "human beings came up with degrees of 'fair' and then the "hideous," in its overtones of bestiality, as the opposite of "fair," all by themselves, without stage direction" (70). Spillers writes:

Typically, there is in this grammar of description the perspective of "declension," not of simultaneity, and its point of initiation is solipsistic—it begins with a narrative self, in an apparent unity of feeling, and unlike Equiano, who also saw "ugly" when he looked out, this collective self uncovers the means by which to subjugate the "foreign code of conscience," whose most easily remarkable and irremediable difference is perceived in skin color. (Spillers 70)

In this passage, the slippage from *I* to *we* runs parallel to the slippage from "the narrative self—in an apparent unity of feeling"—to a "foreign code of conscience." Spillers focuses on how, for the Portuguese, encounter with the foreign shows up as a visual problematic that is narrated from "the perspective of 'declension.'" However, it is equally as important to recognize that the encounter is articulated as a problem of stage direction and of grammar. The use of this example has an effect that is extreme in its implications, so much so that much of this section is mediated by an ironic tone of voice on the part of Spillers, as if to bear the telling of the story it is necessary to cut the facts with sarcasm. Although, for Spillers, "there is no absolute point of chronological initiation," she quips that "the Portuguese probably gain the dubious distinction of having introduced black Africans to the European market of servitude," (69 – 70). Ultimately, her writing in this essay suggests the importance of keeping in mind the various and disparate forms the encounter between a narrative self and a "foreign code of conscience" takes and has taken. In that sense, Spillers' passage pushes black scholars and writers to consider the grammatical positions taken and imposed in the act of narration, as well as the conditions

under which those positions are constituted and administered. To be more specific, Spillers foregrounds the way in which “the narrative self,” presenting itself as subject, subjugates the “foreign code of conscience” out of the desire to maintain “an apparent unity of feeling.” This desire is then transferred to the other or object through the grammar of self-narration, constituting the other as an entity lacking in unity and operating in an apparent state of disarray. Returning to Equiano, Spillers forwards another important argument: namely, that “the visual shock waves touched off when African and European ‘met’ reverberated on both sides of the encounter” (69). Thus, for Spillers, “we are justified in regarding the outcome of Equiano’s experience in the same light as he himself might have—as a ‘fall,’ as a veritable descent into the loss of communicative force.” In her estimation, the “apparent unity,” implied in the “perspective of ‘declension’” and assumed by the Portuguese, is actually a narrative assertion that, in turn, imposes a unity of direction and chronology (“the perspective of ‘declension,’ not of simultaneity”).

In order to unpack how the colonial implications of grammatical encounter, as Spillers outlines them, are operative in the life writing of Li and Chin, I turn to the work of Lisa Lowe and Sora Han, both of whom make efforts to propose modes of formal analysis that do not rely on the convention of cultural comparison to make claims about the violences of American chattel slavery and settler colonialism.<sup>5</sup> In recent writings, Lowe forwards an understanding of liberalism as “a formalism that translates the world

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<sup>5</sup> See Lisa Lowe, “History Hesitant” *Social Text* 33, no.4 (2015) and Sora Han, “Poetics of mu” *Textual Practice* 34, no. 6 (2020).

through an economy of affirmation and forgetting within a regime of desiring freedom” (Lowe 97 – 8). Jumping off of the observation that liberal notions of freedom served to rationalize and implement, rather than contradict, the practice of slavery, Lowe argues that struggling against oppression under liberalism requires thinking differently about the simultaneity of colonial histories. This is because “many of the liberal concepts that were used to justify slavery were also employed differently at other times to justify settler occupation, theft of land, imperial war, and overseas empire” (Lowe 90). In order to account for the simultaneity of histories, Lowe argues that it is necessary to “retire the convention of comparison” because this methodology risks reproducing erasures by presuming “equivalences between discrete analogous units” (Lowe 90). My aim in invoking Spillers’ analysis of Equiano, Azurara, and Donnan is not to draw an analogy between the history of slavery and the confrontations with the Western genre of autobiography, staged by Li with Chin. While it is important to be careful in parsing each text, the purpose of this practice is also not merely to arrive at a measured account of the related but discrete differences we might register between each of the writers invoked thus far. Rather, invoking Spillers recalls Sora Han’s contention that “(post)colonial cultural pluralisms today carry with them the legal and psychic violence of racial slavery wherever abolition remains uninitiated or unfinished” (“Poetics of mu” 927). The translation of liberalism and presumptions of equivalence as colonial practices are directly relevant to Li and Chin’s different engagements with the autobiographical “I,” especially in light of Li’s question: “What kind of life permits a person the right to become his own subject?”

Han, writing in a different register, is interested in the question of diglossia, transliteration and utterance across Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's novel *Dictee*, Fred Moten's essay "Blackness and Nothingness," and Nathaniel Mackey's poetry collection *Splay Anthem*, mobilizing Edouard Glissant's concept of *terra incognita* as "another poetics" that "works through and beyond historical linguistics or comparative literature" (Han 925). In order to bear this out, Han considers the way in which French colonialism has "touched all four corners of the modern world, either directly, as in the case of Martinique, or indirectly, as in the case of Korea,"<sup>6</sup> arguing that, while Glissant's *terra incognita* is developed out of the local political and aesthetic cultures of the Caribbean, "all modern legal systems today can be understood together as forms of (post)colonial cultural pluralism" (Han 925 – 6). For Han, Glissant's *terra incognita* provides a link between Cha, Moten, and Mackey, and she identifies each writer as a producer of black writing insofar as they read and think diglossic division in language as the haunt of slavery and colonialism, a haunting that manifests itself as "*an inability to speak with just one voice*" (Han 931, emphasis in original). This is a multivocality internal to language that plays itself out as a questioning of law's reference. Insofar as Li and Chin bring together a combative "I" that threatens destruction and an unruly "I" that risks dissolution, how might the movement generated when reading their writing together be described? What are the grammatical conditions under which it becomes possible to clearly articulate what it is "I" feels? Grammatically correct usage requires the unified

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<sup>6</sup> See Han, "Poetics of mu": 926 and 944 n24. Han cites Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013) as an account of French excursions in Korea during the first half of the nineteenth century. Martinique remains to this day a colonial Department of France.

subject to carry out the functions of comparison, measurement, parsing, and accounting in order to make meaning. And yet, the “apparent unity of feeling” I might claim as a reader/writer is always already disrupted by the slippage between a narrative and a collective self; by the way *I* slips down into *we*; by the way *we* spills into *I*. What is to be done when the words needed for articulation fail to show up or don’t exist? Even if the words are there, is there something about narration itself that cannot be articulated, existing in excess of the possessive logics of English grammar? Is it possible to maintain a unity of feeling when speaking for a collective? Even if there is a shared feeling about a certain aim or goal, can a narrative self ever account for the multitude of feelings each supposedly individual member of a collective might carry or be carried by?

Is it truly  
possible  
to speak  
for or as  
one-  
self  
or an-  
other?

At issue is the perspectives from which Li and Chin articulate their selves in relation to what is assumed to be nonself. At issue is the way nonself endlessly infringes upon what is, or is understood as proper to, a “solid and explicable self.” In addition, both writers articulate a fraught relationship to the place, position, or (non) utility of feelings, and their effect on the solidity of the self. For Chin, following Ishmael Reed, “writing is fighting,” and as previously stated, his project is conceived of as war, carried out under the banner of the “Chinaman ‘I’”; at the same time, what it means to be authentic to Asian American history, and therefore to oneself, in Chin’s estimation, has everything to

do with exorcising all that is nonself through writing: “as a rule of style and literary activity, it means the fighter writer uses literary forms as weapons of war, not the expression of ego alone, and does not fuck around wasting time with dandyish expressions of feeling and psychological attitudinizing. The individual is found in the act of war, of not selling out, not in feelings” (“This is Not An Autobiography” 112). In the form of Chin’s argument, we find that it is always and everywhere important in writing to name, repeatedly and with further elaboration, all that is not authentic to the individual in the attempt to find it. From this standpoint, the language of Chin’s misogyny and homophobia is deployed in the service of establishing the primacy of an authentically individual “I,” whose authenticity is founded on a “solid and explicable” understanding of Chinese and Chinese American history. Thus, Chin hurls a homophobic slur to describe the racist representations of East Asian monks on ABC’s “Kung Fu,” asserts the falsity of taking on the role of “the warm and friendly teacher,” even for a “real and worthy” young student, and immediately follows with “you write alone, kid. That’s the only lesson. Code of the West. Writing is fighting. Life is war” (129). In Chin’s estimation, embracing feeling means giving up the individual, and finding the individual means engaging in war. In the interest of finding that “I,” his dense, combative prose is specifically opposed to the “‘I’ of ‘Revenge is mine sayeth the Lord’”—against submission to Western Christianity as a mode of religious engagement that requires the subjugation of Chinese American history.

In *Dear Friend*, the relation between self and nonself is rendered as an antagonism through the metaphor of a malfunctioning immune system. Thinking about

her adjacent interests in immunology and literature, Li explores the possibility and danger given in the co-mingling, in the self, of desire, affirmation, and negation:

I came to this country as an aspiring immunologist. I had chosen the field— if one does not count the practical motives of wanting a reason to leave China and of having a skill to make a living—because I had liked the working concept of the immune system. Its job is to detect and attack nonself; it has memories, some as long lasting as life; its memories can go awry selectively, or, worse, indiscriminately, leading the system to mistake self as foreign, as something to eliminate. (Li 14).

When the distinction between self and nonself blurs, the mechanism designed to protect the self can turn against the self; with this description, Li positions *Dear Friend* as an exploration of how this malfunction of the immune system can at times play out mentally. For her, “Everything I say is scrutinized by myself, not only the words and their logic but also my motives. As a body suffers from an autoimmune disease, my mind targets every feeling and thought it creates; a self-dissecting itself finds little repose” (52). The “autoimmune condition of the mind” shows up throughout the memoir as a form of self-negation, which, when taken to its limit, threatens life itself for Li in the absence of an internal affirmative force, yielding only mental self-destruction and highlighting the stakes of this problem for depressed subjects. In this sense it is key that, for Li, the memories of the immune system can go awry *indiscriminately*; it is of utmost importance that the possibility of turning against the self, and even more so the inability to recognize and separate self and nonself, is not always a question of choice.

This internal antagonism is also rendered through encounters with religion that differ in style and tone from instances of religious encounter in Chin’s writing, but there is a resonance on the level of how religion works as a call to a “proper” personhood that

cannot be sustained. This can be observed in the following interaction with “a majestic mental health worker,” taking place during one of Li’s hospital stays. She describes the mental health worker as adorned

with perfect lipstick, shining curly hair, and bright blouses and flats of matching colors.

Young lady, she said every time she saw me; don’t lose that smile of yours.

I had liked her, and liked her still after she questioned my spiritual life. I could see that the godless state of my mind concerned her, and that my compliance made me a good project. Don’t mind her, my roommate, a black Buddhist, said; she has an evangelical background. I don’t, I assured my roommate; being preached to did not bother me. (16)

The mental health worker’s concern for “the godless state” of Li’s mind, in conjunction with her perfectly composed outward appearance, suggests a relation between religion and a sense of self-worth. In Li’s recounting, there is a connection between the mental health worker’s evangelism and her perfect personal presentation that might be aligned with Chin’s portrayal of Christianity as a racialized ideology that engages in an explicit attribution of value based on proximity to whiteness. It is not immediately evident that the mental health worker is white, but contrasted with Li’s roommate, who is explicitly described as “a black Buddhist,” the mental health worker’s colorlessness stands out as having a regulatory force that, arguably, can be associated with whiteness. Li is direct in articulating a fondness for the mental health worker and doesn’t mind the evangelism; at the same time, this section of *Dear Friend* is punctuated by a hollow feeling, culminating in this expression: “There is this emptiness in me. All the things in the world are not enough to drown out the voice of this emptiness that says: you are nothing” (18). For Li, this sense of emptiness restricts (temporal) movement in that it is always present, making

no claim on the past and blocking out the future. Li's perpetually questioning mind pushes her to ask "what if I become less than nothing when I get rid of this emptiness? What if this emptiness is what keeps me going?" The stream of thoughts generated by the presence of the mental health worker is offset by her "black Buddhist" roommate. While conversations with her roommate are more familiar as fellow patients, their relationship reaches its limit in conversations about religion:

One day my roommate said she noticed I became quiet if she talked about Buddhism with me. I don't mean it as a religion, she said; for instance, you can try to meditate.

I did not explain that I had read Buddhist scriptures from the ages of twelve to twenty-three. For the longest time they offered the most comforting words. The teaching of nothingness diluted the intensity of that emptiness. (18)

Her roommate's focus on the utility of various religious practices serves as a counterpoint to the mental health worker's self-composed concern. Li "likes" both of them, but her interactions with her interlocutors around the question of religion are anything but clear and transparent. This section of *Dear Friend* involves a gradual unraveling of intertwined, never entirely separate, associative anecdotes and interactions that function like counterpoint in a musical composition. At the same time, these intertwined melodies never quite settle or resolve into what might be called a story. In that sense, it is difficult to do more than summarize in dealing with certain moments in this opening section of *Dear Friend*. If we take the musical metaphors even further, "the voice of this emptiness" suffuses the text, serving as a kind of pedal point. With that voice working as a steady and constant note that shifts in meaning and tone in relation to her changing articulations, the content of Li's text is delivered as a kind of melancholic non-arrival at narrative; the

feeling of emptiness is ever present, yet never quite concretely attached to anything in particular.

Throughout *Dear Friend*, the ownership of feeling is disrupted by this internal antagonism between self and nonself, an antagonism animated by the presence of human others; for Li, however, the problem of articulating how that phenomenon feels is described as a melodramatic affair. Here, we might return to her assertion that “A word I hate to use in English is *I*. It is a melodramatic word” (26). At the beginning of the third chapter, “Memory Is a Melodrama. From Which No One Is Exempt,” Li offers a hypothesis that “memory is melodrama; melodrama preserves memory” (58). Elaborating upon this formulation, Li writes:

Memory is a collection of moments rearranged—recollected—to create a narrative. Moments, defined by a tangible space, are like sculptures and paintings. But moments are also individual notes of music; none will hold still forever. In the instant they are swept up in time—in that shift from space to time, memory is melodrama.

Yet melodrama has not much chance to survive. Not brave enough in that instant, we miss the music and are left to replace it with interpretation. (58)

Melodrama comes from the Greek, *melos* (music or song), and the French, *drame* (drama)<sup>7</sup>, and historically refers to a form of drama that is sensational and exaggerated, an effect in large part achieved through the use of music. Li tells us that “in its original meaning, melodrama was the music that accompanied speech or pantomime on stage” (54). Peter Brooks, in an attempt to clarify uses of the term “melodramatic” by gaining a deeper understanding of the substantive practice of melodrama in popular culture, focuses

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<sup>7</sup> “Melodrama (n.)” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=melodrama>

on a French tradition of melodrama, a genre which reached its popular height in early-nineteenth century France following the French Revolution.<sup>8</sup> While there were British and American traditions of melodrama, Brooks' choice to locate France as a primary point of reference, beyond the fact that the word and genre are of French origin, is due to the fact that "the classic examples of French melodrama were written for a public that extended from the lower classes, especially artisans and shopkeepers, through all sectors of the middle class, and even embraced members of the aristocracy" (Brooks xiii). For Brooks, then, French melodrama can be considered a radically egalitarian art form that transcends class boundaries, serving as an originary example of popular culture. Brooks observes that melodrama tends "toward intense, excessive representations of life which strip the façade of manners to reveal the essential conflicts at work—moments of symbolic confrontation which fully articulate the terms of the drama" (Brooks 3). While this tendency towards the excessive is a clarifying force, according to Brooks, the transcendence of class boundaries associated with the genre is registered by Li as a transgression of internal boundaries. Distinguishing melodrama from comedy or tragedy, Li attempts to assert the generic difference as an issue of audience and the presence of others. For her, melodrama is associated with pure feeling and is therefore next to impossible to articulate in language. She writes, "tragedy and comedy involve an audience, so they must give—sharing themselves to elicit tears and laughter. Melodrama is not such a strategist. It meets no one's expectation but its internal need to feel" (Li 52).

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<sup>8</sup> See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).

This “internal need to feel” is construed as reckless, and thus becomes the content of her most explicit ruminations on the issue of suicide. She writes: “a suicide can be dismissed as a drama gone awry and entering the realm of melodrama. If a tragedy makes us weep out of compassion and a comedy makes us laugh out of appreciation, a melodrama alienates and discomfits” (Li 51-2). In melodrama, Li registers an essential connection between memory and a communication of feeling that is taken beyond its internal limit by a “shift from space to time.” On either side of that shift, melodrama’s appearance is transgressive of boundaries between self and nonself. In his analysis of the genre, Brooks even admits: “The only way in which I find myself able to make sense of melodrama as a sense-making system is through the act of interpretation itself, through the discovery of meaning and its particular coordinates, which means that melodrama is recaptured and understood only insofar as it can be touched by my own critical gesture” (Brooks xiii). By characterizing interpretation as a protective function that attempts to still the movement of memory, Li actively questions the possessive desires of the critical self. However, Li also suggests that this line of questioning runs the risk of becoming suicidal when the self becomes the object of that interpretive gesture. Read within the context of the colonial situation that Lisa Lowe and Sora Han describe, however, Li’s questioning can be understood as a rehearsal of autobiographical (de)composition, cultivating a form of reading and writing that serves as a mode of survival, implicitly rejecting and rewriting the colonial grammars of narration construed as endemic to the English language.

## **Absolute, Not Relative, Nothingness**

In order to think further about autobiographical (de)composition, I stage an encounter in the following section between *Dear Friend* and another text that engages with the Buddhist teaching of nothingness as a chance for rethinking questions of the self, (dis)possession, sociality, and the stakes of life and death. In Nishida Kitarō's essay, "The Logic of the Place of Nothingness and the Religious Worldview" (1945),<sup>9</sup> the theory of nothingness becomes an alternative to the normative metaphysical presuppositions of Western philosophy. I came into contact with this essay through Fred Moten's reflections on blackness and the difference between relative and absolute nothingness;<sup>10</sup> as with my invocation of Spillers, I am not interested in how this text might be unilaterally applied to *Dear Friend*, or even in how Li's skepticism around the teaching of nothingness might be productively countered by Nishida's (or Moten's) optimistic orientations towards the teaching of nothingness as an alternative perspective. On the contrary, I am curious about the way Li's text serves to deepen and complicate the theoretical interventions being made by Nishida regarding the relation between nothingness and the self. In this pursuit, I am following Sora Han, who provides readings of the translation and transliteration of the letter *mu* across Chinese, Korean, and Japanese languages and its use in Moten's theoretical engagement with Nishida, as well

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<sup>9</sup> See *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, translated by David A. Dilworth (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> See "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013). There, Moten writes: "from the imaginary perspective of the political subject—who is also the transcendental subject of knowledge, grasp, ownership, and selfpossession—difference can only be manifest as the discrete individuality that holds or occupies a standpoint. From that standpoint, from the artificial, officially assumed position, blackness is nothing, that is, the relative nothingness of the impossible, pathological subject and his fellows" 741.

as Nathaniel Mackey’s poetry.<sup>11</sup> Across these texts, *mu* signifies as “not have, without,” “shaman or spirit medium,” as well as a denoting a dance or ritual of the body (“Poetics of mu” 930 – 1). I am not concerned with readings of this letter here; however, it is important to understand that Han’s aim is to provide a reading that enables “a proliferation through and as *mu* that differentially deconstructs the oppositions that ground this intellectual scene of exchange—Occident/Orient, Chinese/Japanese, philosophy/politics, black/non-black—to give us something like a blackened critical theory of law and language” (Han 937). Through an exploration of *mu* Han uncovers the “perverse logics of law” that inhere in “slave law, Oedipus, kinship, and language,” attempting to articulate the loss of protection that results whether one submits to or refuses that logic (Han 937). I argue that, in dealing with suicidal depression, Li offers an engagement with the relation between the abstract individual, the embodied self, and death that foregrounds the very real danger that accompanies a genuine questioning of the carceral logics of settler-colonialism and slavery that structure colonial language. In addition, Nishida’s notion of religious consciousness renders Li’s non-religious standpoint in a different light, a rendering that is useful for thinking through the function of religion in her interactions with her roommate and the mental health worker. This is because Nishida’s project involves making a distinction between religion as a moral system of value and what he calls “true religious experience,” defined as “an event of the soul” (Nishida 47). For Li, along with Nishida, the issue at hand is: how does an *I* or *we*

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<sup>11</sup> See Han, “Poetics of mu” *Textual Practice* 34, no. 6 (2018) and *Mu, 49 marks of abolition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024).

deal with the fact that *I* or *we* exist? This definitional distinction suggests an account of religion that goes beyond the issue of proper personhood in terms of behavior, presentation, and status and reveals a more thorough consideration of these questions. Furthermore, Li writes towards the possibility of sustaining a critique of colonial law in language by demonstrating the negative effects of this questioning on mental health.

Nishida Kitarō offers his theory of religious consciousness through an engagement with Buddhism and Christianity, as well as with Western and Eastern philosophical traditions. I am particularly interested in the second part of “The Logic of the Place of Nothingness,” in which he discusses the moral standpoint from which some might choose to ground their understanding of religion. Nishida argues that “The question of religion lies not in what the self *should be* as a consciously active being, but in the question of what the self *is*: not in how the self should *act*, but the self’s very *is and is not*” (Nishida 76). Throughout the essay, Nishida outlines the contours of what he calls “contradictory identity.” He does this to think through the relation between Buddha/God, conceived of as infinite or absolute, and the self, conceived of as finite or limited. He is interested in contesting a dialectical understanding of this opposition that resolves in synthesis, opting to hold these oppositions in a tension that blurs the distinction between the two. Instead of aiming for a transcendental and Hegelian realization of the self, Nishida argues that “in authentically religious remorse...the self itself must be thrown out, abandoned altogether” (77). He goes further in saying that religious consciousness must involve “an abandoning of the self in its existential depths—a feeling of shame concerning the very existence of the self,” which he refers to as “eternal” or “absolute

nothingness” (Nishida 77). Here, Nishida repurposes the language of morality (“a feeling of shame”) to sidestep a teleological, purposive understanding of becoming. In his words: “true religious experience does not consist, as many people think, in an ethical progression from the finite to the infinite, from the relative to the absolute. It is first consciously realized when the self’s very existence becomes problematic—when existence itself becomes problematic” (Nishida 65). For Nishida, morality serves as a value system, which is related but not essential to religion: if religion involves calling existence itself into question, “religion is the absolute overturning of values in this sense” (Nishida 79).

This set of formulations is useful for thinking through the disconnect between Li and her religious interlocutors, as well as the problem Frank Chin registers in the connection between Christianity and the form of narration endemic to the genre of autobiography. If the experience of religion does not involve a morally progressive notion of personal development, then perhaps Li is involved in what Nishida would consider a genuinely religious inquiry. At the same time, this is not to position her as being in possession of some knowledge that her interlocutors fail to grasp. At issue is the lack of language to contend with the presence of feeling, as well as an inability to communicate how an engagement with inarticulate feeling can generate a sense of (and sometimes even a desire for) isolation. In the face of this dynamic, Li retrospectively recognizes a kind of fatalism imparted by her father in his practice of Buddhism. In the first chapter, Li explains: “the truth is, he tried to instill this fatalism in us because it was our only protection. For years I have been hiding behind that: being addicted to fatalism

can make one look calm, capable, even happy” (Li 19). The protection that fatalism provides converges with the issue of (not) having “a solid and explicable self” in the second chapter, “Amongst People,” when she says “I had often glided through life with deceiving tranquility; I had the confidence to put up a seeming as my being. That confidence, however, is the void replacing *I*. The moment that *I* enters my narrative my confidence crumbles. Can one live without what one cannot have—the absence of *I*, and the closeness to people that makes that absence impossible?” (48, emphasis in original). Here, Li draws attention to the unavoidable presence of others and the burden of having to stand, confident and alone, as an “*I*” when confronted with that presence. This issue is not limited to human others—in a reflection on a moment of violence towards an inanimate object that appears earlier in this chapter, Li takes note of an immediate sense of regret that arises because “I had never in my life harmed or destroyed an object out of uncontrollable emotions” (32-3). She goes on to say:

I must have inherited this respect for things from my father, who is a hoarder, though I have resisted forming an attachment to any object, or any place. I wished then and I wish now that I had never formed an attachment to anyone in the world either. I would be all kindness. I would not have done anything ruinous. I would never have to ask that question—when will I ever be good enough for you?—because by abolishing *you*, the opposite of *I*, I could erase that troublesome *I* from my narrative, too. (33)

“abolish” comes from the Latin *abolere*, meaning to “destroy, efface, annihilate; cause to die out, retard the growth of;” however, in the etymology of the word, “there has been a confusion of forms in Latin,” because of the term’s shared roots with the Latin *adolere*, meaning “to grow, nourish.”<sup>12</sup> Li pushes readers to consider the word *you* and its

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<sup>12</sup> “Abolish (v.)” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=abolish>

differentially slippery relation to *I* as a question of abolition, an inquiry which is animated by the uncertain relation between growth and destruction that exists at the root of “abolish.” This moment is where Li’s language rubs closest with Frank Chin’s, and we might recall his statement: “You, dear reader of English, aren’t used to a Chinaman act in “your” language. You have rules of style and decorum about raging personal in intellectual exercise. Forget it. Your language is mine. I speak in the Chinaman ‘I’ here, and write a Chinaman act.” In both of these instances *you* is directly opposed to *I*, but there is still a slippage. For Li, the presence of *you* is marked by the chance/risk of attachment; at the same time, the presumably separate *you* creates the necessity of *I* to communicate and understand that tenuous separation. In both cases, *I* and *you* can be understood as different articulations of *we*.

The tension between growth and destruction in “abolish” is relevant to Chin’s argument in that one possible outcome of his resistant declaration is the destruction of the *you* he is addressing, and that destructive impulse is productive of a new and different *I*: the “Chinaman ‘I.’” Li’s case is striking, then, because the abolition of *you* is in service of finally abolishing the *I* that causes her so much difficulty. Following this difference, Nishida’s contention that the self should be “abandoned altogether” becomes relevant because, in his estimation, the religiously conscious self “contains its own self-negation and self-affirmation within itself,” which culminates in the “absolutely contradictory identity of the many and the one” (Nishida 50-1). In both cases, Li and Chin write in ways that suggest the impossibly ideal nature of the equivalence that Nishida sets up between affirmation and negation. Considering his argument regarding “the mutually

repugnant halves of the self' in the opening chapter of *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, Chin's desire to usurp English itself for the "Chinaman 'I'" might be read by Nishida as a form of Hegelian synthesis, undercut by the slippage I've noted. However, for Li, despite her inhabitation of the contradiction presented by the presence of *you* and *I*, the option to "abandon the self altogether" shows up as suicide, which would only be further negation. In this sense, while Nishida would rhetorically like to present an answer to the problem of the many and the one, Li responds by revealing an asymmetry in the slide from *I* to *we*. I want to give attention to the asymmetry that inheres even in a desire for the simultaneous affirmation and negation of the self. Nishida, despite his call to "abandon the self," is primarily concerned with what it means to be truly individual. Nishida writes that, "to a being that has no self, death has no meaning. We can even say that there is no death for a merely biological being. For death entails that a self enters into eternal nothingness. It is because a self enters into eternal nothingness that it is historically irrepeatable, unique, and individual" (Nishida 77). The distinction that Kitarō makes between religion as a moral system of value and religious experience or consciousness as an event of the soul, runs parallel to a distinction he makes between an idea of the self as affirmed and sure of itself in subjectivity, and the self as truly, historically individual. What can be done about the desire for individuation when the form that desire takes is manifold and might be said to permeate our forms of articulation, no matter how nuanced?

## The Limitations of “My Private Lanugage”

In the afterword, Li tells her readers that “writing this book has taken about two years now, as long as the period that led to it, a year of descending into the darkest despair and a year of being confined to that despair. The bleakness, which can be summarized with a few generic words—suicide attempts and hospitalizations—was so absolute that it sheds little light on things. A sensible goal is to avoid it” (200). In returning to Spillers, the first of this pair of sentences is interesting for the way its language is similar to Azurara’s language of visual encounter, as outlined by Spillers. She utilizes a language of declension to describe her narrative movement, light and dark take on a system of value that slides from good to bad, and there is even a kind of chronological symmetry that might hold some narrative weight or significance as a formal unity. At the same time, bracketing the initiating events in question, Li, echoing Equiano, might describe that period of two years “as a ‘fall,’ as a veritable descent into the loss of communicative force” (Spillers 69). Both describe a loss of bearings that abolishes any “apparent unity of feeling,” and these sentences are followed by a paragraph that contains Li’s evocative formulation of “the gap between clarity and confusion,” mentioned at the opening of this essay, from which *Dear Friend* is written. I am interested in what is given in Li’s avoidance, through simple summary, of the event(s) that describe her descent. I am interested in what might be gleaned from lingering with Li in “the gap between clarity and confusion,” interested in what forms of activity might be generated from that (non) position. The jazz pianist Cecil Taylor offers some potential insight:

After my father died, I went into analysis. It was Sullivan analysis, a kind of analysis that built on the theory of interpersonal relationships. The analyst would help steer your course. There is a relationship between the analysis and my music, even though it's hard to define. The fact is that, being a musician, I had to put a lot of things into the music that music itself was not able to resolve. That is, music is the creation of a language out of symbols, of sounds, sounds that cannot be spoken and therefore create a kind of personal isolation. If there are problems that music cannot answer wholly, you either have to have friends whom you can trust not to destroy you with whatever you give them of yourself, or you have to go to a neutral source, and that is what analysis was for me. (Spellman 74-5)

This quote appears in *Four Lives and the Bebop Business*, a collection of four short, biographical portrayals of jazz musicians, constructed by the poet and critic A.B. Spellman through interviews with the musicians themselves (Spellman xiv). In this moment, Taylor, through his use of the second person, provides access to another version of the slippage between *you* and *I*, a perspective Li only uses to ventriloquize or quote others. In an embrace of the *you* that is Spellman, who turns that *you* into *us* through *Four Lives*, Taylor offers a narration of self that is an explicitly non-exclusionary understanding of the limits of music, and perhaps of artistic production in general. The second person form of narration has an instructional valence, but through its colloquial rendering, it is as if we come into an understanding of the advantages and limits of music *with* Taylor. At the same time, Taylor makes a point to say that he “*had* to put a lot of things into the music that the music was unable to resolve” (emphasis mine): Taylor’s art is articulated as a necessity.

In the sixth chapter of *Dear Friend*, “To Speak is to Blunder but I Venture,” Li tells readers that “my husband asked if I understood the implication of my decision” to become an artist. She goes on to say that “my husband’s question was about language.

Did I understand what it meant to renounce my mother tongue?" (Li 138). For Li, the difference between her native Chinese and adopted English is articulated as a distinction between public and private, and the chapter serves as a meditation on the limits of language understood through that dichotomy. Two relevant instances:

Chinese immigrants of my generation in America criticize my English for not being native enough. A compatriot emailed, pointing out how my language is neither lavish nor lyrical, as a real writer's language should be; you only write simple things in simple English, you should be ashamed of yourself, he wrote in a fury. A professor in graduate school told me I should stop writing, as English would remain a foreign language to me. Their concerns about ownership of a language, rather than making me impatient like Nabokov, allow me a secret laughter. English is to me as random a choice as any other language. What one goes toward is less definitive than that from which one turns away. (142)

That I write in English—does it make me part of something else? The verdict of my professor in graduate school was that I was writing in a language that did not belong to me, hence I would not, and should not, belong. But his protest was irrelevant. I have not been using the language to be a part of something. (146)

On the one hand, there is a resonance between these instances and Chin's observation that "You, dear reader of English, aren't used to a Chinaman act in 'your' language" ("This is Not An Autobiography" 110), especially in the way the sarcasm of "dear reader of English" might also elicit a "secret laughter." On the other hand, Chin might respond to Li's assertion that "I have not been using the language to be a part of something" by calling her work "the writing of an individual without a people" ("This is Not An Autobiography" 130). In addition, it is important to take into consideration the way Li is thinking about her adoption of English, as well as her immigration to America, as a choice, which is not the case for Chin. However, Li's declarative statements are often undercut by a voiced awareness of their agential limitations. Towards the end of this

chapter, she says “perhaps the line between the two languages—the public and the private—is, and should be, fluid; it is never so for me. I often forget, when I write that English is also used by others. English is my private language” (146). English is figured as a “private,” in an almost salvific sense; and yet, she goes on to assert that “to write one has to give up protection fundamentally” (190). In that sense, she raises the question of whether or not protection can be conflated with salvation. Her admission of the possibility that the distinction between the public and the private is fluid theoretically blurs the distinction, even as she claims that the blurring doesn’t quite apply to her. Li’s claim that “English is *my* private language” is preceded by the observation that “to own—a house, a life on a quiet street, a language, a dream—is to allow oneself to be owned too. The moment the present slips into the past owning starts to be replaced by disowning. Why wait for the inevitable” (140)?

How might we understand Chin’s logical progression from the claim that “your language is mine” to “I speak in the Chinaman ‘I’” with and against Li’s asymmetrical collage of statements? Moten, in his essay “Amuse-Bouche,”<sup>13</sup> argues that for Taylor, “the music becomes self-analysis, improvisation taking over the function of a certain distance, where private language and personal gesture move from solipsism to the social” (Moten 180). If we return to Spillers’ speculation on the implications of Azurara and “the Portuguese eye,” we learn that “human beings came up with degrees of ‘fair’ and then the ‘hideous’ all by themselves, without stage direction...the intimate choreography that the Portuguese narrator sets going between the ‘faithless’ and the ‘ugly’ transforms a

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<sup>13</sup> See Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

partnership of dancers into a single figure” (Spillers 70). Perhaps these are two formulations that might help establish an understanding of what is at stake in the antagonism between self and nonself. It is important that Spillers uses the language of stage direction and choreography to describe the conceptual movement being made in Azurara’s narration. As a counterpoint to that, it is important that Frank Chin begins “This is Not An Autobiography” with the desire to “make art of my yellow self” (109). What would it take to resist the impulse to “transform a partnership of dancers into a single figure,” and resist reenacting the violence birthed by that conceptual movement? The word “analysis” comes from the greek prefix, *ana*, meaning “up,” and *luain*, meaning “loosen.”<sup>14</sup> How might we conceptually loosen up the (possessive, possessed) self in scholarly analyses? How can the resistance *we* are, simply by virtue of *our* existence be accounted for? I don’t mean to revel in a *we* that is a simple collection of individuals; as I’ve previously stated, what is most relevant in Spillers’ essay to this discussion is the way “an apparent unity of feeling” is always already disrupted by the slippage between a narrative and collective self; by the way *I* slips down into *we*; by the way *we* spills into *I*. What can we make of ourselves in light of that slippage?

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<sup>14</sup> “Analysis (n.)” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=analysis>.

### 3

#### Para-Performance and The (Im)Possibility of Looking Anew

##### Theatricality as production

A 2002 special issue of *SubStance*, entitled “Theatricality,” features a variety of interdisciplinary approaches to the term that seek to articulate its relevance for theater studies, as well as its intersections with the fields of philosophy, cultural studies, gender and sexuality studies, and cognitive science. Josette Feral, in her foreword to the issue, argues that each essay is connected by “the shared conviction that the beholder is fundamental to the definition of theatricality, since the theatrical phenomenon is acknowledged and rendered operational by the spectator’s presence alone” (3). For her, the procedures or inscriptions established or enacted by a performer are activated only by a “process of perception” on the part of a beholder that confers recognition; theatricality is a quality inferred, producing “a series of cleavages (inscribed by the artist and recognized by the spectator) aimed at making a disjunction in systems of signification, in order to substitute other, more fluid ones” (10). What emerges from Feral’s analysis is a process of inference initiated by a spectator, a relation between cleavage, disjunction, and substitution as operations of an activity of beholding. It is in this sense that theatricality can be understood as a production. Operating in a manner that recalls the structure of linguistic metaphor—a structure in which “the relationships between elements of a source domain are viewed as similar to those prevailing in the target domain, which enables the speaker to use words from the source domain to describe relationships in the target

domain”<sup>1</sup>—parsing the domains (source and target) that underpin the concept of theatricality, on the one hand, is an opportunity to ponder the conditions that render movement possible. This operation offers, on the other, a chance to consider the character of theatricality’s product.

Much has been made of theatricality’s slippery and elusive qualities, as well as the implications of its simultaneous ubiquity and opacity. While, as an imposition of rules or codes that condition the participation in and reception of performance, theatricality registers a sense of structural integrity, in some instances the term can connote a degree of constructed-ness bordering on falsity; due to this ambiguity, in the most pejorative terms, a perceived proximity to its domain of influence has at times been considered equivalent to the degeneration of art itself.<sup>2</sup> At issue in discourse on the term in theater and performance studies is how to satisfy our desire to more clearly describe the dynamics that constitute the performative event both in and beyond the stage, as well as the terms of our engagement with this desire insofar as it is reflective of a larger desire for social transformation.

Young Jean Lee’s *The Shipment* (2009) and Jackie Sibblies Drury’s Pulitzer Prize winning *Fairview* (2018) are two plays which take on the problem of spectatorship and

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<sup>1</sup> See Olivier Fraysse, ““Work and Labour as Metonymy and Metaphor” *Triple C* 12, no.2 (2014): 472.

<sup>2</sup> See Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Diamond traces the ambiguity of theatricality’s pejorative connotation to its connection with philosophical debates about the value of mimesis; in particular, the contrast between Plato’s disdain for “image-makers” and Aristotle’s use of the term to establish a normative telos where mimesis can locate and identify purposeful action (i – ii). For a polemic against the influence of theatricality on the development of modern art, see Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood” (1967) in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), an essay that has become notorious for the influence it has exerted on contemporary art criticism since its publication.

the terms of cultural investments in and engagement with race as a subject of theatrical production. The language of cleavage, disjunction and substitution might extend and enrich how each play's interrogation of these problems is understood, and I argue that the interventions in form and content made by Lee's play necessitate a consideration of her approach to writing and producing the show, as well as of how the show is framed in the script and in interviews with the playwright. This shift in attention might effect a cleavage in critical discourse on Lee's work, which sees the details about her approach to writing as merely a description of her personal creative process. Keeping this in mind, I also want to riff on the methodological question of approach as it concerns the stakes of initiating a critical engagement with *The Shipment* and *Fairview* together, subsequently making the argument that in the latter play, Drury brings Lee's intervention to bear on the racialization of performance in general through a theatrical articulation of how the relation between spectator, performer, and event is constituted and contextualized. In what follows, alongside a consideration of the scripts themselves, I analyze the claims each play makes about itself, existing mainstream and scholarly criticism on each play's engagement with stereotype and spectatorship, as well as how the plays are framed by the playwrights' deployment of their own theater making philosophies.

### **'Gestic Feminist Criticism,' 'Afro-Alienation Acts,' and Para-Performative Rehearsal**

One of my aims in this chapter is to suggest a strong resonance in the theater making practices employed by Young Jean Lee and Jackie Sibblies Drury. However, in

bringing the work of these playwrights into conversation with one another, I also hope to distill a set of elements in *The Shipment* and *Fairview* that enable an understanding of how these plays speak to, but also *see* one another. In this chapter, then, I tease out the implications of that speaking and seeing for how the aims of critique are conceptualized and enacted. I argue that this critical pursuit would benefit scholarly considerations of performative possibility in and beyond performance as an event. Admittedly, from a literary studies perspective it might sound more appropriate to say that each play can serve as a “lens” through which the other can be read; however, I prefer the active sense of the verb “to see,” which might more accurately communicate a sense of what their relationality can activate in thought and practice.

1. Realism as “the right class of referents”

The first of these elements concerns a notion of theatricality as production that emerges from a particular overlap in the theoretical contributions of two landmark texts in theater studies: Elin Diamond’s *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* and Daphne Brooks’ *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850 – 1910*. These projects converge in addressing their interventions to the historical development of realism as a salient and pervasive cultural form that conditions the legibility of identity in performance as well as its legibility in critical practice. I highlight this convergence to foreground the question of methodological approach and argue that this question is central to both *The Shipment* and *Fairview* insofar as both plays, as texts, performances, and discursive events, pay careful attention to the productive capacities of realism (and naturalism) in their attempts to engage with the aesthetics of identity. If, as

Feral notes, the inference of theatricality emerges out of a tension between inscription and recognition on the part of the performer and spectator, respectively, for the purposes of substituting more fluid systems of signification, then Diamond's "gestic feminist criticism" and Brooks' "Afro-alienation act" make use of theatricality and its rudimentary elements to ask: what assumptions condition the possibility of inscription and recognition? Each activates a process of questioning that troubles the ideologies which underpin the desire for fluidity in theatrical and theoretical production, as well as how that fluidity is put to use in determining the direction of signification's flow in the development of discourse.

In this sense, Diamond's gloss on the foundational characteristics of realism is helpful. Realism is a theatrical form which purports to present audiences with a representation of life "as it really is." However, this theatrical form, according to Diamond, establishes its authenticity against the rules of neoclassicism, on the one hand, and against the excessive histrionics of melodrama, on the other, by mobilizing "the new science of psychoanalysis and the new 'sex-problem play,'" leading to a situation in which realist drama, while enabling the debunking of cultural mythologies, ultimately retains oedipal family relations (4). For Diamond, the establishment of this form leads to the emergence of a discursive formation which takes advantage of the symptomatology of hysteria, embodied in the figure of the "fallen woman" or "woman with a past." Hysteria itself is a particularly enigmatic signifier: denoting a "nervous disease" ostensibly based

in the womb,<sup>3</sup> the charge of hysteria is based in a desire to decipher and expose the truth of its symptoms. In the nineteenth century, then, hysteria served as a kind of engine powering the cultural legitimacy of positivist inquiry. As a discursive formation, however, Diamond argues that “realism is more than an interpretation of reality passing as reality; it *produces* reality by positioning its spectator to recognize and verify its truths.” The recognizable elements of the family living room create a link between late Victorian bourgeoisie social reality and the mechanics of stage design, constituting a field of signification in which, “the actor/signifier, laminated to her character/signified, strenuously seeks admission to the right class of referents” (4). Diamond suggests that a recognition of how this system of relations operates becomes productive for feminist theater scholars when it is understood that in Ibsenism, identification with women characters is empowering insofar as “the truth of referentiality passes through the signifier of hysteria” (7). For Diamond, the question is thus: “can feminist theory make use of the observation that realism, at its inception, can be construed as a form of hysteria?” (7). Highlighting its grounding assumptions, Diamond and Brooks pick and pull at the loose threads that realist drama either ignores or actively works to conceal, making use of this observation and its multiparous implications in different and generative ways.

Two quotes in particular shed light on a qualitative difference in the methodological approaches of both theorists that, in turn, becomes the subject of the

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<sup>3</sup> “Hysteria (n.)” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=hysteria>.

contemporary and experimental plays that are this chapter's focus. The first comes from Diamond and involves the commingling of the "historical subject" and the spectator in the "single stage figure":

This historical subject disappears neither into a representation of the character nor into a representation of the actor; each remains processural, historical, incomplete. And the spectator? Aware of three temporalities within a single stage figure the spectator cannot read one without the other, her/his gaze is constantly split; her/his 'vouloir-voir'--the desire, as in realism, to see and know all without any obstacle--is deflected into the dialectic of which the divided performer is only a part. Moreover, in reading a complex ever-changing text, spectators are 'pulled out of [their] fixity;' they become part of--indeed they produce--the dialectical comparisons and contradictions that the text enacts. (Diamond 51)

Diamond answers her question about the hysteria of realism by articulating a "gestic feminist criticism" which would read Brechtian theory and feminist theory intertextually, thereby activating the possibility of re-radicalizing the former. This practice combines the Brechtian *gestus*—dialectical images denoting "a synthesis of alienation, historicization, and the 'not...but'" (a sense of "difference within" a single figure)—with a feminist concern with the body and its historicity—given in the cultural inscription of gender and sexuality—to "recover (specifically gestic) moments in which the historical actor, the character, the spectator, *and* the author enter and disrupt the scopic regime of realist representation" (54). For Diamond, mobilizing this critical possibility involves understanding historicization in theater as "*a way of seeing*," that "refers both to the spectator's detachment, her 'critical' position, *and* to the fact that she is writing her own history even as she absorbs messages from the stage" (49, emphasis in original). Casting sight as an activity which might, in combination with a kind of Brechtian critical distance, disclose the historicity of the gendered body establishes "gestic feminist

criticism” as an emergent possibility in the practice of theater criticism more broadly. Diamond attempts to qualitatively capture this activity in the phrase “looking-at-being-looked-at-ness,” a reappropriation of Laura Mulvey’s name for the passive connotations that constitute the female filmic figure and haunt the female spectator in mainstream cinema.<sup>4</sup> In the second quote, Brooks describes the radical (un)doing of black cultural producers in nineteenth century performance:

Rather than depending on conventional realist methods to convey the humanity and value of black subjectivity, Afro-alienation opens up a field where black cultural producers might perform narratives of black culture that resist the narrow constraints of realist representation. In short, these singular figures questioned (or perhaps eschewed) the high (and unrealistic) bar of credibility set for them by dominant culture in representing and (un)doing themselves, favoring instead dissenting methods of narration and aesthetic articulation. (Brooks 6)

Diamond’s reappropriation of Mulvey and Brecht is recast in the “Afro-alienation act,” the primary methodological intervention of *Bodies in Dissent*, Brooks’ study of “spectacular performances of race and freedom,v” expressing the cultural production of a period extending from the second half of the nineteenth century through the turn of the twentieth. A particularly black feminist line of inquiry, Brooks’ alternative historicization is not simply a new conceptualization, or a reorientation of our sense of the gendered body in its intersection with processes of racialization. Rather, Brooks traces a series of interventions in transatlantic culture, locating and making an argument for the presence of a critical consciousness already at work in the lives, activism, and performance of African American performers and ambiguously racialized public figures working under

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<sup>4</sup> See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 11.

the “representational timelessness projected onto blackness.” Her primary reference for this methodological approach is Hortense Spillers’ analysis of the archival erasure of enslaved women and her argument that this erasure initiates an historical process through which the black body is “mythically rendered” as a “signifier that has ‘no movement in a field of signification’” (5). For Brooks, the work of this consciousness is to produce a critical defamiliarization of the body which is then deployed to “yield alternative racial and gender epistemologies,” suggesting that these alternatives constitute a field of insurgent activity out of which the seeds of liberatory practice can be identified and articulated (5).

Gestic feminist criticism opens a field of vision capable of reading the complex of relationships that situate actor, spectator, and the “historical subject” in the realist text through a collective sense of historicity, thereby enabling a productive relation to the event of performance which might reveal, unsettle, and perhaps shift the dependence of realism on the figure of the hysteric. Afro-alienation acts, by contrast, construe blackness and the imposition of a lack of “movement in the field of signification” as a point of departure, foundationally questioning the cultural legitimacy of realism (and giving the parenthetical “eschew” suggestive and oppositional force) in its call to pursue alternatives to engagements with normative systems of representation. I would argue, however, that both interventions provide considerations of the relation between theatricality and discursive formation that, while primarily concerned with nineteenth century culture, serve my effort to contextualize the theatrical practices exemplified by Lee and Drury. I am not invoking these scholars here to posit the work of Young Jean Lee and Jackie

Sibblies Drury as analogous to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century performers and productions analyzed in *Unmaking Mimesis* and *Bodies in Dissent*. Rather, just as Diamond identifies a historical connection between the rise of psychoanalysis and the “sex-problem play,” I argue that it is possible to identify a connection between the work of theorists and artists working contemporaneously at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to address the lasting social and cultural consequences of realism (and its implicit naturalism). In other words, this chapter asks: what might be gained when the overlaps between the work of these cultural producers is construed as a convergence of aims?

## 2. Performance, Performative, Performativity

Contextualizing these practices also, however, requires giving some attention to the second element I want to distill, which is relation between the “theatrical” and the “performative” as critical indices and how this relation has often come to be understood as a site of contestation. A large part of the issue of *SubStance* mentioned at the beginning of this chapter is dedicated to forging a clearer understanding of this relation in an attempt to reconsider the pertinence of “theatricality” for contemporary theater criticism. In “The Politics of Discourse: Performativity Meets Theatricality,” for example, Janelle Reinelt mounts an investigation of the dissonance and volatility that attends the terms theatricality and performativity as signifiers of discourses in flux (201). Performativity, especially, is subject to a particular lability resulting from an ever-present tension produced by the slippage from performance to performative to performativity. Respectively, between an effort to distinguish events and processes understood as “performance art” from theatrical performance; anthropological theorizations of the term

which highlight the significance of cultural rituals and challenge established hierarchies of high and low art; as well as philosophical reworkings of J.L. Austin's theory of performative utterances, usages of each term reveal a series of political contestations over the social meaning of performance that revolve around the capacity of performance, in the face of ongoing structures of domination as they intersect with transformations in global processes of communication, to generate and herald new possibilities for agency after the critique of the subject. Reinelt thus sketches a discursive scene in which authority and legitimation are thrown into crisis for institutional representatives of power; but, importantly, those forces are also thrown into crisis for individuals and communities looking for performance and performativity to alter their material conditions. In other words, the use of each term carries consequences that, for Reinelt, should encourage scholars to rethink the relation between performance theory and "our contemporary transnational situation." Following especially Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, Reinelt's article imagines a "future space," between structures of linguistic meaning and material systems of power, "to project performance as a model for the emergence of novelty and the theatrical as the space of its emergence" (213). With this, Reinelt schematizes the difference between theatricality and performativity in order to offer scholars a clearer framework for contextualizing the social and cultural interventions of performance in relation to a larger field of study mobilized to understand and articulate the implications of those interventions.

While this schematic seems fairly clear, returning to these efforts at clarification is helpful for the way the terminological dissonance around performance, performative,

and performativity persists. At the same time, the volatility Reinelt identifies with this group of terms can appear muted at times, if not somewhat flattened, in a historical moment marked by communication processes which radically undermine the distinction between the “local” and the “global” aspects of the “contemporary transnational situation” Reinelt identifies. Aaron C. Thomas, in an updated meditation on the use of “performativity” by scholars of performance, argues that the “there has been an extraordinary and puzzling laxity around uses of this word by editors and journals in the field so that performative has become not only hard to pin down...but...consistently and reliably infelicitous (14). In what he calls a “nod to Austin’s own classificatory tendencies,” Thomas isolates five distinct uses of the term in its adjectival form tracing its various misfires and revisions, which range from descriptions of objects, practices, rituals that either resemble theater or are significantly distinct from theater, to descriptions of processes of social and cultural becoming and interventions in those processes, meant to resist and disrupt the sedimentation of norms or master scripts, if not alter their operation. He also notes the term’s inheritance of an anti-theatrical prejudice in everyday language where “performative,” especially in social media, is often used to denote falsity or excessive, conspicuous, or insincere acting. Thomas ultimately takes issue both with simple adjectival uses of the word—indexing objects that have “performance-like” qualities and flattening the history of theater and performance studies—and uses that mean “interventional performance,” which “obscure performances (including theater performances) whose aims are more modest” (22). He questions the desire for “felicitous performances,” and takes a middle ground in the debate, suggesting

the presence of a positive value that exists when we notice that the term raises more questions than it answers, an act of noticing which might allow scholars to more faithfully follow the lines of flight opened by performances seeking to effect change.

### 3. The Para-Performative

Admittedly, these meditations on the usefulness of the “performative” in theater and performance theory can feel confusing and distracting. For my purposes here, however, it is useful to note this quality for how it enables a questioning of the relation between criticism and theater practice, and how the question of that relation opens a further questioning of the cultural significance and function of aesthetic production more broadly. In other words, it seems to me less important to land on a solid definition of the “performative,” or even an exhaustive understanding of its various uses, than it is important to initiate and sustain a para-performative practice of noticing how writing on performance *moves* in relation to preceding bodies of writing and alongside instances of performance that criticism seeks to describe, document, understand, and articulate. I mean, on the one hand, for the term “para-performative” to recall Eve Sedgwick’s *periperformative*, a spatializing extension of J.L. Austin’s linguistic theory, positing a class of utterances “whose complex efficacy depends on their tangency to, as well as their difference from, the explicit performatives” (*Touching Feeling* 5). On the other hand, I mean also to invoke what Matthew Jesse Jackson calls “the para-performative practices of the artist-historian,” a phrase he arrives at to conclude an article examining the late modernist practices of contemporary artists and the contemporary art museum (“Para-performative Practices and Late Modernism” 48). Jackson considers a performance by

Jackson Pollock Bar, entitled *Theses on Feuerbach* and described as a “theory instillation,” meant to dramatize Karl Marx’s lament about the persistence of an “idealism that does not know real, sensuous activity as such. . . but regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude,” published posthumously as part of a series of preparatory notes for *The German Ideology* (42). The performance consists of what appears to be a panel discussion involving the conceptual art collective, Art & Language.

Jackson explains:

However, instead of Art & Language, the Bar’s members sit down at the table and begin lip-synching to a track of voices and sound effects that the audience eventually assumes to be a recording of Art & Language discussing the conditions of production in the contemporary art world. (It is, in fact, a recording of hired actors reading a script produced by Art & Language.) What is more, the Bar performs the ‘theory installation’ while members of Art & Language look on from the audience. Afterwards, the Jackson Pollock Bar and Art & Language participate in another panel discussion that fields questions from the audience about the just ‘performed’ panel discussion. At the conclusion of the event, the viewer is left with the uncanny (and immensely satisfying) feeling of having watched the art world performed, rather than having watched yet another performance in the art world. The event was artful, but difficult to describe in the terms of art. (42)

For Jackson, this recursive performance exemplifies a critical self-reflection on the part of institutions and artists that is evidence of a larger shift in the conditions under which art is produced, displayed, and distributed. In other words, an acute awareness of the contexts and situations in which work will be shown (and, perhaps more importantly, discussed) serves to mediate the production of art; in some cases, that awareness itself becomes both artistic and curatorial material. Para-performance indexes what is difficult about describing the artful presentation of art’s presentation. Recursive and self-referential, the para-performative veers dangerously close to becoming another name for

fragmentary and postmodern meta-artistic practice, a kind of conceptual acrobatics meant to put various abstractions of experience on display. However, it is important to note how Jackson Pollock Bar's performance blurs the distinction between audience and participants through a kind of collaborative displacement of authorship in its citation of Art & Language, which might productively bridge para- and peri- performative theorizations. Sedgwick says that it is difficult "to say why these periperformatives would here be *more* potent than performatives proper," but she suggests that "one reason might be that they dramatize (what Neil Hertz refers to as) the pathos of uncertain agency, rather than occluding it as the explicit performative almost must" (*Touching Feeling* 76). I would argue that the displacement of authorship in Jackson Pollock Bar's *Theses on Feuerbach* puts the artistic content of both groups into appositional play; rather than undermining authorship, the deferral of the claim fosters para-performative engagement. The para-performative, then, can be described as an active element that is constitutive of both a critical (dis)position and a mode of arrangement, which, within the space of this chapter, might assist in foregrounding the rehearsal of gestic feminist criticism and afro-alienation acts taking place in the way Young Jean Lee and Jackie Sibblies Drury work. Furthermore, the para-performative might enable an understanding of how that work exists as part of a larger effort and collective labor.

### **Explorations of Modal Difference**

Young Jean Lee's emergence in the theater world came by way of a series of plays which resist attempts to situate Lee's body of work, as a whole, within a singular

tradition. After abandoning a dissertation on King Lear at the University of California, Berkeley to become a playwright, Lee became immersed in the world of New York City experimental and avant-garde theater, entering an MFA program directed by Mac Wellman where she would study the work of playwrights such as Richard Foreman and Richard Maxwell while interning at off-Broadway theaters such as Soho Rep. In an interview with the former Artistic Director of Soho Rep, Sarah Benson, Lee recalls a period of writer's block that resulted from this career transition. To overcome what she felt as a gulf between her ability to actualize the desire to be a playwright and the work being made by the experimental theater artists she admired, Lee wrote "The Appeal," a parody of the English romantic poets, in response to Wellman's advice to "write the worst play you can think of" ("Young Jean Lee in conversation with Sarah Benson"). Over the course of her career, however, Lee has transformed this advice into a creative maxim, with her conception of "the worst" effectively denoting a desire to mine and face varying levels of discomfort with the connection between unexamined personal feelings and larger trends in cultural discourse. Following this maxim, *The Shipment* is one of four "identity-politics plays," written and directed by Lee, which attempt to shed light on (un)intentional blindnesses and insights otherwise excluded from conscious articulation by an inadequate or unacknowledged understanding of the operation of race, gender, and class in contemporary society.<sup>5</sup> Premiering at New York's The Kitchen in 2009, against the backdrop of Obama's first presidential election, *The Shipment* challenges notions of a

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<sup>5</sup> The others are: "Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven" (2007), "Untitled Feminist Show" (2011), and "Straight White Men" (2014). See Young Jean Lee's Theatre Company Archive: <https://youngjeanlee.org/>.

“post-racial” society and serves as an aesthetic provocation intended to, in Lee’s words, “trap the audience so they can’t escape through ways of their dismissive loopholes” (Maxwell). For this provocation, *The Shipment* is included in *The Menthuen Drama Book of Post-Black Plays*, under a section titled “(Post-) Blackness by Non-Black Playwrights,” for how it fulfills the post-black imperative to “incorporate but also diverge from normative dramaturgical formations of black drama,” and “interrogate traditional renderings of race.” In that sense, the play is resonant with work by black artists, as well as work by artists of color that confronts the persistence and intractability of racial stereotype in contemporary media and entertainment.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, her approach to the topic of racial performance, in its brashness, at times appears to take cues from explorations of the “subversive” associated with the experimental interventions of the Wooster Group and Richard Foreman’s Ontological-Hysteric Theatre. Importantly, the interrogation that *The Shipment* enacts involves a dramatic citation of the nineteenth century practice of blackface minstrelsy, a citation not unfamiliar to late twentieth century white avant-gardism.<sup>7</sup> Secondary literature on Lee’s “identity-politics plays,” particularly her plays concerning racial identity, focuses primarily on how this citation allows Lee to perform a critical subversion of stereotype, examining the ways in which

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<sup>6</sup> The plays of Adrienne Kennedy and George C. Wolfe come to mind; especially *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) and *The Colored Museum* (1986), respectively.

<sup>7</sup> See David Savran, *Breaking the Rules: the Wooster Group* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988). This book includes mentions (with pictures) of performances by the Wooster Group that incorporated the use of blackface techniques.

Lee deploys a “dramaturgy of race” to unsettle audience identification with contemporary notions of social progress.<sup>8</sup>

As a potential site of disruption, the relationship between representational norms and the ideologies underpinning American culture and the United States’ sense of its present position in history is of particular concern for Lee. This is certainly because of the material this relationship affords for social critique, but also because of how “weird” the relationship is. In the author’s note that introduces the script, Lee describes a play composed of a single act “divided into two parts”:

The first half is structured like a minstrel show—dance, stand-up routine, sketches, and a song—and I wrote it to address the stereotypes my cast members felt they had to deal with as black performers. Our goal was to walk the line between stock forms of black entertainment and some unidentifiable weirdness to the point where the audience wasn’t sure what they were watching or how they were supposed to respond. The performers wore stereotypes like ill-fitting paper-doll outfits held on by two tabs, which denied the audience easy responses (illicit pleasure or self-righteous indignation) to racial clichés and created a kind of uncomfortable paranoid watchfulness in everyone. The second half of the show is a relatively straight naturalistic comedy. I asked the actors to come up with roles they’d always wanted to play and wrote the second half of the show in response to their requests. (5)

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<sup>8</sup> See Ryan Anthony Hatch, “First as Minstrelsy, Then as Farce: On the Spectacle of Race in the Theater of Young Jean Lee,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 13, no. 3 (2013). For more on how Lee approaches race as a subject of drama, see Tina Post, “Excess and Absence (Or, The Negro Believes \_\_\_\_\_),” in *Deadpan: The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression* (New York: New York University Press, 2022); Ilka Saal, “On the Portability of Blackness in Young Jean Lee’s *The Shipment*” *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 5, no.1 (2017); Saal, “Performing Slavery at the Turn of the Millenium: Stereotypes, Affect, and Theatricality in Branden Jacobs-Jenkin’s *Neighbors* and Young Jean Lee’s *The Shipment*,” in *Slavery and the Post-Black Imagination* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019); Karen Shimakawa, “Young Jean Lee’s Ugly Feelings about Race and Gender: Stuplime animation in Young Jean Lee’s Songs of the dragons flying to heaven,” *Women and Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 17, no.1 (2007); and Patricia Ybarra, “Young Jean Lee’s Cruel Dramaturgy,” *Modern Drama* 57, no. 4 (2014).

On the one hand, insofar as Lee expresses a desire to resist both “illicit pleasure” and “self-righteous indignation,” paranoia appears as an affective goal intended to produce a relation to the representation of race on stage on the part of spectators that addresses assumptions about the nature of stereotype. That is, Lee seems to suggest that paranoia is the affective engine driving the construction of stereotype as a form of knowledge production, and that the centrality of this relation is obscured by the conditions and exigencies of performance as a form of cultural production. In other words, *The Shipment* purports to confront the predictability of audience responses to a show about race, refusing the possibility of identification, with either the actors on stage or with the progressive/enlightened self-image of the “theater-going audience” as a social form. On the other hand, the show is presented as an address of conditions her black cast members have had to deal with in their careers as actors. It is accurate to suggest that the technique of applying stereotypes “like ill-fitting paper-doll outfits” defamiliarizes them, creating room to alter their operation in the formation of knowledge about race. However, I argue that the interplay between “unidentifiable weirdness” and “stock forms” which Lee engages in the composition of *The Shipment* should be understood less as a categorical opposition foregrounding the “inaccuracy” of stereotype and more as a qualitative argument about the formal role of affect in the act of representation more broadly. This distinction is akin to Sianne Ngai’s suggestion in *Ugly Feelings* that the distinction between emotion and affect is a question of modal rather than formal difference (27). She suggests the importance of recognizing that the difference between emotion and affect was coined to solve the problem of distinguishing between feelings experienced first-

hand and those whose source is not easily identifiable, which is ultimately another way of attempting to address the problematics of subjectivity and the subject/object divide. In her estimation, the difference between affect and emotion is one of “intensity or degree rather than a formal difference of quality or kind” and the switch from formal to modal enables “an analysis of the transitions from one pole to the other: the passages whereby affects acquire the semantic density and narrative complexity of emotions, and emotions conversely denature into affects” (Ngai 27). This shift in emphasis is useful here for thinking through the specificity of how Lee engages stereotype; in that sense, I follow Karen Shimakawa’s suggestion that Lee’s work indicates and responds to the value of Ngai’s conception of ugly feelings as diagnostic tools for thinking about contemporary configurations of racial difference in the context of late capitalism.<sup>9</sup> Following this, a few preliminary observations on Drury’s approach to modal difference in theatrical performance are necessary.

...

Drury’s work pursues a similar exploration of the weirdness which obtains in the relation between the affective dimensions and structural characteristics of representation in the performance of race. For Drury, the aesthetic and political terms through which identity is articulated are thoroughly dissected in productions that parse their contents and position the audience to affectively experience those terms as conceptual limit cases. In many ways, *Fairview* might be considered a refinement or extension of her first full-

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<sup>9</sup> See Karen Shimakawa, “Young Jean Lee’s Ugly Feelings about Race and Gender: Stuplime animation in Young Jean Lee’s *Songs of the dragons flying to heaven*” (2007).

length play, *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About The Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, From the German Sudwestafrika, Between the Years 1884 – 1915*. The play-text is introduced by a note entitled, “Empathy by Another Name,” in which Drury ponders a theory, encountered secondhand, explaining the popularity of investigative television crime dramas. At their core, Drury writes, “*Cop shows are so popular because everyone wants to believe that someone is going to care about them after they’re gone,*” a theory uttered by someone she can’t quite remember, but which is “so essentially true it must have been thought up by a comedian” (emphasis in original). In lieu of direct credit, she attributes this theory to a human desire to both be remembered (“to make a mark”) and to remember (“to be affected”), arguing that “the artistic expression of these reciprocal impulses is theatre, and the elemental expression of these impulses is human-ness—empathy, by another name.” Drury makes a connection between this conceptual origin story and her own attraction to and conception of history, which she describes as a practice of contemplating the variety of shapes a relationship to remembrance might take. Her conclusion is that:

To study history is also, of course, to study death. While death is often considered a tragedy instead of an inevitability, when I am in the midst of feeling my most human, when I am remembering and wondering and imagining, I sometimes think that the most tragic death is the death that is elided over as history is canonized. That elided death doesn’t participate in the process of metaphysical care that creates culture. It is not remembered, studied, imagined. That death is stripped of its humanity, which seems to be, if not a fate worse than death, perhaps a death worse than death. And perhaps, in turn, allowing that elided death to remain unimagined makes us a bit less human.

The play itself involves a cast of actors attempting to stage a performance detailing the colonization of the Herero of Namibia, a period historically underrecognized as leading

to the genocide of the Herero people, and the first genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Comprised of scenes that shift in and out and between lecture, presentation, and process, six actors struggle through the muddling task of determining what can (or should) and can't (or shouldn't) be said, depicted, or remembered about a forgotten genocide.<sup>10</sup> It is helpful to mark Drury's concern with theater, defined as a space that allows collective exploration of the imaginative limits of culture, an exploration construed as "a process of metaphysical care." Drury is adept at contextually and conceptually thinking the there-and-back-again of art's intersection with history as it is lived in the performing body. As an introduction to a play about race and the history of genocide, what it means to feel "my most human," or not, in the act of remembering is, if nothing else, a question that transfers an immense amount of ideological freight. The conceptual content of "Empathy by Another Name" is metaphorized in the conceit of a play about actors trying to make a play; in this manner, the project of *We are Proud to Present* is to communicate the immensity of what it means to collectively assume responsibility for redressing gaps in the historical record that are (implicitly and explicitly) racialized. Specifically addressing the logic of racial difference as hierarchy, it does so by attempting to make the distance between concept and material *felt* by the audience in confrontational moments where the actors collectively experience the collapse of that distance. The frame of this project is altered in a significant way by the text that serves as an introduction to *Fairview*:

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<sup>10</sup> the characters are listed as: "black woman," "white man," "black man," "another white man," "another black man," and "Sarah" (or "white woman" in the cast listing which accompanies the plays production at Bush Theatre in London).

### **A NOTE**

Text in [brackets] is optional.

### **A QUOTE**

“Dirty Nigger!” or simply “Look! A Negro!”

This, reversed, is the play, in a way.

The “Note” and “Quote” which open the text of *Fairview* present, without credit, the succinct portrayal of a racializing encounter coming from Frantz Fanon’s theory of epidermalization, which might be the most cited example of what moments of conceptual collapse imply for analyses of race as a psychosocial reality.<sup>11</sup> Through affective exchange, *Fairview* transfers the ideological freight of the questions posed by *We are Proud to Present* directly to the audience in extension of the latter’s meta-theatrical exploration of the performance space and its boundaries. Claiming to reverse the dynamics of Fanon’s encounter, *Fairview* stages an event in which white audience members are asked to come on stage at the conclusion of the show, a theatrical feat which operates as a kind of ethical crux, questioning the line between witness and spectator and generating an interrogative nucleus around which mainstream and scholarly analyses of the play revolve.

*Fairview* premiered at Soho Rep in June of 2018, and the play was developed by Drury in collaboration with its director, Sarah Benson, and set designer, Mimi Lien, at a Summer Residency Lab held a few years earlier by Berkeley Repertory Theatre, the California regional theater where it would have its second opening in October of 2018

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<sup>11</sup> See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952); in particular, chapter 5, the title of which is translated as either “The Fact of Blackness” or “The Lived Experience of the Black.” The tension between ontological and phenomenological understandings of blackness is very resonant with the theatrical interventions I discuss in this chapter, as well as the interventions described throughout this dissertation.

(“How We Watch”). The play was initially conceived from research on the role of implicit bias in practices of surveillance, and an exploration of how the experience of being surveilled qualitatively impacts inhabitation of and movement through the world. The trio were inspired by Simone Browne’s book, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, which they read together as their conversations turned more incisively towards considering the adverse effects of surveillance practices for black people and people of color. Browne defines “racializing surveillance” as “those moments when enactments of surveillance reify boundaries, borders, and bodies along racial lines, and where the outcome is often discriminatory treatment of those who are negatively racialized by such surveillance” (“Introduction and Other Dark Matters” 16). Following Browne, their thinking began to shift beyond the strictly technological valences of the term to consider the palpable effects of “how we watch and how we change the person we’re watching by how we watch them” (“How We Watch”).

The play is a significant departure from the kind of work theatergoers have come to expect from the Brooklyn based playwright, in that the play begins as a straightforward naturalistic drama about an exemplary black middle-class household. According to Drury, this choice emerged out of a desire to produce a shift for the audience that resembled the shift experienced in her study of surveillance with Benson and Lien. As artists for whom avant-garde theater serves as an artistic starting point, the process of finding ways to enact this shift meant “Figuring out [that] what felt normal in a theater was something naturalistic/sitcom-ish” which came about in “a completely random way, after all of this other weird theoretical architecture was put up” (“RE: Jackie Sibblies

Drury). *Fairview*, therefore, works backwards to present surveillance less as a practice and more as an ambient or atmospheric condition that produces a sense of what can subsequently be recognized the “normal” through a highly specific set of constraints. Benson, known for her tenure as the Artistic Director for Soho Rep from 2007 until 2023, and Lien, trained as an architect and known for her structural experimentations with spatial possibility as a set designer, make the sense of constraint in Drury’s text palpable through a citational practice that exploits the recognizability of both mainstream forms of entertainment and avant-garde or experimental theater and performance. Benson lists the sitcom *Family Matters*, for example, as a direct reference point for developing a sense of behavioral norms and patterns (“How We Watch”). Charles McNulty, commenting on Lien’s set design in his review of *Fairview*’s opening at Berkeley, observes that “the decor, which might as well have quotation marks around it, is drained of individual character. The layout suggests an anonymous model home in a housing development aimed at the upwardly mobile.” Middle class respectability and its requisite aesthetic sensibilities are theatrically quoted and reflected in the architectural design of *Fairview*, exerting a normative force that is highlighted, and perhaps even heightened, by the experimental performance context in which the play appears.

It might seem fair from the outset to suggest that Lee and Drury possess a shared interest in troubling a boundary dividing notions of the conventional and the avant-garde. However, it is important to notice the way both artists pursue that interest through differing approaches to realism as a kind of theatrical shibboleth; and here, we might recall Elin Diamond’s question: “can feminist theory make use of the observation that

realism, at its inception, can be construed as a form of hysteria?" (*Unmaking Mimesis* 7). Following Ngai's characterization of the distinction between affect and emotion as a "modal rather than formal difference," I would argue that for both playwrights the difference between realism (or naturalism) and the avant-garde can be read, through hysteria, as a question of the "intensity or degree" to which the affective dimensions of representation and identification—and the histories those formal structures carry—are practically engaged in performance. In the following sections of this chapter, I consider how Lee and Drury explore this question.

## **Racialized Hysteria and the Para-Performance of the Look**

### 1. *The Shipment*

*They stand in a line looking around at the audience in silence. They look at the audience for an uncomfortably long time.*

*As they sing an a cappella rendition of the indie-rock song "Dark Center of the Universe" by Modest Mouse, they continue to look around at the audience. They don't move or change expression, but they sing with feeling.*

—Young Jean Lee, *The Shipment*

In an article entitled, "First as Minstrelsy, Then as Farce: On the Spectacle of Race in the Theater of Young Jean Lee," Hatch characterizes Young Jean Lee's work as an exploration of the phantasmatic underpinning of race as a specular form of "meaning," in addition to an exploration of the way fantasy feeds "the widespread expectation that such meaning can and ought to be communicated in and as narrative—as one's story, or as the larger cultural story to which one is said to belong" (90). Hatch pursues an

obliquely psychoanalytic reading of two of Lee's "identity-politics plays" (*The Shipment* and *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*), in hopes of gaining a clearer understanding Lee's aesthetic method, which, Hatch argues, constitutes "an attack on the ethics of identity politics *in the name of the Freudian subject*," without being "about psychoanalysis," per se (91). This distinction is subtle, but crucial. Reminding his readers that psychoanalysis, as a clinical practice rather than a theory, "exists only to the extent that it takes place," Hatch asserts an understanding of Lee's intervention as a formal method that "attests to the insistence of a subject much like the one articulated in psychoanalytic experience," a subject "neither fully determined by, nor finally detachable from, the symbolic and historical coordinates of race" (91). For Hatch, the subject of the unconscious cannot be given full presence as a direct object of experience, and therefore "always figures as anamorphic with respect to the plane of representation" (91). Ultimately, then, rather than understanding racial stereotype as a kind of expression of unconscious content, Lee's work, according to Hatch, seems to suggest that it might be more useful to interrogate the "unconscious" endurance of blackface minstrelsy in the politics of identity formation and racial performance as representational *practices*.

Hatch's invocation of anamorphosis, the name for a projection which appears distorted unless viewed from a particular vantage point or viewed with the aid of a particular device, such as a mirror or lens, is of particular interest to me here. *The Shipment*, in title, is immediately evocative of the legacy of slavery and the middle passage, as well as of the economic (de)valuation of cultural representations of racial identity, and of black labor and performance in particular. Leaning into an intellectual

thread, not fully borne out by, but hinted at in Hatch's titular revision of Karl Marx's famous allusion to Hegel,<sup>12</sup> I would argue that theatricality—that is, theatricality as production—is a kind of aperture through which a clearer account of this entanglement, between the question of aim and that of value in Lee's aesthetic method, might emerge. Cheekily recalling Young Jean Lee's creative maxim, Hatch remarks that, "On the face of things, one can scarcely think of a worse idea than for a nonblack playwright, someone possessing no lived, practical knowledge of the black experience, to write a black identity play" (Hatch 104). I am interested in the creative processes which enable the composition of Lee's Obama-era offering despite the limiting factor Hatch observes, and I hope to emphasize aspects that run alongside, rather than beyond, its critique of "the ethics of identity politics." Doing so requires a para-performative critical practice that, I argue, can provide a more robust impression of what *The Shipment* accomplishes.

While in its nebulous form as the idea to do a black identity politics show, Lee set about recruiting a cast prior to writing any of its script and facilitating two workshops with the actors in order to develop ideas for the show's content. In interviews, Lee describes her role at this stage as that of a "personal chef," allowing the actors to determine the content of the show, while she provides writing that must be reviewed and approved by the actors in rehearsals ("Young Jean Lee – Artist Talk Part 2). Originally, dancers were cast for the roles and the play first took shape as a hip-hop dance party.

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<sup>12</sup> See *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963[1852]), 15. In the first sentence of the first chapter, Marx writes: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce," a source of the truism "history repeats itself." Hatch alludes to this in the title of his article but doesn't directly pursue a Marxist analysis.

According to Lee, it involved the dancers performing overly exaggerated stereotypes of black entertainment that were intended to make the audience uncomfortable; this was to culminate in the dancers ironically inviting the audience to join them in cathartically dancing on stage. To her team's dismay, the audience fully enjoyed the opening displays and "all the white people joyously joined the black actors on stage, fulfilling the horrified expectations that accompany the idea of a black identity politics show written by a non-black playwright ("Young Jean Lee – Artist Talk Part 2"). In response to this outcome Lee and her cast removed the invitational section of the show for its second workshop. While this improved the reception of the show, the fact that the actors were untrained became an issue that couldn't be overcome; black audience members felt it was problematic to have black people on stage who could dance but couldn't act, because it highlighted the performance of stereotypes without any sense of critical mediation.

As a result, Lee recast the show, except for one of the dancers, who was also a trained actor, and collaborated with the new set of actors to come up with a more fully developed play.<sup>13</sup> In producing the first half of *The Shipment*, the section modeled after a minstrel show, the first workshops of the show served as evidence that minstrel performance was not necessarily shocking or out of place for contemporary viewers. To counteract this observation, the play, in costuming and lighting, gets as close as possible to the nineteenth century aesthetics of minstrel shows, while the content has roots in more contemporary tropes of black entertainment. One of the sketches that is performed

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<sup>13</sup> The cast with which *The Shipment* had its debut includes Mikéah Ernest Jennings, Prentice Onayemi, Okieriete Onaodowan, Douglas Scott Streater, and Amelia Workman. Jennings is the only holdover from previous iterations of the show.

involves Rapper Omar, a teenaged aspiring rapper who gets lured into the world of drug dealing and prostitution on the way to becoming politicized and obtaining a record deal (*The Shipment and LEAR* 16-26). However, moving through what is essentially a variety show, the actors are costumed in formal wear more evocative of a Vaudevillian act, and the actors are brightly lit against a completely black background (“THE SHIPMENT”). In addition, the actors perform each sketch in a disembodied and flat manner that reads as if the actors are making a conscious effort to empty the performance of the aural and gestural signifiers of racial authenticity.

Lee developed the second half of the play by asking “the actors to come up with roles they’d always wanted to play” and fashioning a “straight naturalistic comedy” out of their responses. In the transition between halves, the lights remain bright, and this section of the play is set up by the stage crew in full view of the audience. The actors retain their formal wear, and this section of the play appears to involve a group of upper-middle class friends getting together for drinks after work. However, this link to the events witnessed in the first half is emphasized by the fact that the actors also retain the names of the characters that populated the disembodied rehearsals of black entertainment tropes. In a gloss, the dinner party is maliciously plunged into chaos by its host, Thomas, who, after serving drinks, reveals that he has surreptitiously poisoned his guests. Things predictably escalate, as his guests panic, call an ambulance, and comically proceed to move through the classic stages of grief in response to the news. Thomas eventually admits that he has lied about the poison, suggesting that he made this claim as a joke, a displaced expression of the feelings of isolation, loneliness, and depression he has been

experiencing in response to his job. As if the episode was a mere faux pas, the play ends with the party guests drunkenly agreeing to play “library,” a guessing game of fill-in-the-blank involving a random sentence from a random book from Thomas’s library. He chooses a book entitled, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*, by Yvonne Patricia Chireau, and tells his guests “There’s a chapter in this book called ‘Negro Superstitions’ which is made up of a list of black superstitions. You guys have to come up with the first superstition in the list. Your sentence should begin, ‘The Negro believes’” (*The Shipment and LEAR* 52). After everyone ponders and crafts a response, Thomas proceeds to collect and read through them. Each response progressively incites more laughter, and after reading the last response (“The Negro believes that a Negro’s hands and feet are white because the moon done touched ‘em in Africa!”) the party bursts into laughter (*The Shipment and LEAR* 53). The play ends with this exchange between two of Thomas’s guests:

Omar: I’m sorry. I’m sorry, but I have to say that I’m really uncomfortable with all of this.  
I just don’t think we’d be doing this if there were a black person in the room.  
(Pause.)

Desmond: I guess that would depend on what kind of black person it was.  
(Blackout) (53)

According to Lee, the final lines were initially proposed as a joke in one of their rehearsals; however, the actors were enthusiastically receptive to the idea, and in this moment, the visual spectacle of black performers on stage is suddenly disrupted by the revelation that the characters (as distinct from the actors) are not black. In an interview at

the University of California, Berkeley, conducted as part of an event series highlighting distinguished alumni of their department of English, Catherine Gallagher describes this scene as a moment when Lee is “trying to empty things of racial content...move out of the register of racial performance into something unmarked in racial terms.” Later, in a moment of overlapping and interruptive dialogue, Gallagher observes:

CG:           You’re watching this as a scene in a black bourgeoisie life, and then all of a sudden, it’s just a bourgeoisie life, and you’re so surprised that there’s a difference in your mind—

YJL:          But also, just because they say that none of them are black...what does that even mean? It’s a play, you just saw them, they are black, and they were playing those characters, you know—

CG:           Yeah, but they’re *actors*!

Lee goes on to say that she did not originally want to end the play in this way because she felt as though it would rob the cast of their chance to genuinely inhabit the characters the cast members themselves had come up with in their conversations with her; however, the actors themselves insisted retaining this closing moment. What are the politics of this exchange between Gallagher and Lee? How do the interpretive terms of this exchange relate differently to the play’s content as well as its composition? Hatch suggests that *The Shipment* reminds “its audience that ideas about race have always been forged in theatricality’s foundry,” and that the practices associated with the theater have historically served as the testing ground on which “the stereotypical ‘meaning’ of black subjectivity has been consolidated and addressed to the American spectator—a spectator who, it would be foolish to forget, has nearly always been construed as white” (104). Given the social and historical function of theater, then, how do the actors figure in this

scene of theater criticism? Scholars have attempted to unpack the visual power dynamics implied by *The Shipment*'s exploration of theater's investment in racial stereotype approaching the issue as a question of affect, on the one hand, and as a question of formal experimentation, on the other.

Ilka Saal applies three interrelated uses of the term “theatricality” in her approach to analyzing *The Shipment*:<sup>14</sup> “a) theatricality as the foregrounding of a communicative situation between performer and spectator; b) theatricality as referring to the self-reflective, meta-quality of a particular performance that foregrounds its own presentational qualities; and c) theatricality as the resistance of the performing object” (145). In this way, Saal revises Josette Feral’s definition of theatricality by shifting the accent to the performer’s role in the inference of theatricality. Saal suggests that *The Shipment* stages a confrontation between spectator and stereotype and argues that the performance foregrounds the “various affective layers and intricacies of the encounter.” The first sense of her understanding of theatricality thus brings into view an “affective dimension,” which charges this encounter and yields a wide range of responses from the audience, demonstrating the “complex interplay of anxiety and desire, fear and fetish of and for the imagined Other” (144 – 5). Saal thus notes a “special complicity” in spectatorship that is “extorted” by the work and serves as “a crucial part—if not the very

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<sup>14</sup> Saal takes Michael Fried and Fred Moten as her models for thinking through theatricality. See “On the Portability of Blackness in Young Jean Lee’s *The Shipment*” *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 5, no.1 (2017) and her expanded reading of the play in “Performing Slavery at the Turn of the Millenium: Stereotypes, Affect, and Theatricality in Branden Jacobs-Jenkin’s *Neighbors* and Young Jean Lee’s *The Shipment*” in *Slavery and the Post-Black Imagination* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019). I am primarily concerned with her reading in the latter offering here.

focus—of the artwork/performance itself,” even beyond its epistemological critique of minstrelsy (144). In conferring articulation to this affective dimension, Saal situates *The Shipment*, alongside Branden Jacobs-Jenkins *Neighbors*, within a larger context of discourse on contemporary visual art, a discourse which is marked by a “heightened emotive register.” She views both plays’ engagement with her multilayered conception of theatricality as exemplary case studies for thinking about “the various performative dynamics and scopic mechanisms at work in reiterative enactments of racial identities” (155). Saal teases out the ways in which *The Shipment* launches an attack on our epistemological and affective investment in stereotype, which serves to mediate and circumscribe performances of racial identity.

While Saal’s reading usefully schematizes theatricality as a critical term, it neither explores the specific contents of the “affective dimension” nor the formal interventions of Lee and Jacobs-Jenkins in depth, preferring instead to keep her critical eye trained on affective investments in stereotype on the part of theater-going audiences. Tina Post’s recent work on the aesthetics of deadpan includes a book chapter that similarly reads Lee’s play alongside Jacobs-Jenkins’s *Neighbors*, analyzing each through the aesthetics of late nineteenth century European monochrome painting.<sup>15</sup> Observing a particular aesthetic tension within modernism, Post singles out two late nineteenth century paintings by Paul Billhaud and Alphonse Allais, entitled *Combat de nègres pendant la nuit* (1883) and *Combat de nègres dans une cave pendant la nuit* (1897), for her investigation into the

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<sup>15</sup> See Post, *Deadpan: The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression* (New York: New York University Press, 2022); in particular, the chapter “Excess and Absence (or, the Negro Believes \_\_\_\_\_)”

origins of the genre of monochrome. Each is a painting featuring a canvas saturated with black color that, by way of a racist joke, “[states] an absurdity with seriousness,” leading Post to the suggestion that each is an example of what would come to be recognized as deadpan humor in the early twentieth century. Insofar as monochrome, and the aesthetics of modernism more broadly, are “informed from the beginning by the intersection of European imagination with African bodies,” Post argues that the racist jokes given in the titles of these paintings demonstrate, via the co-presence of a racialized notion of blackness and deracinated methods of abstraction, “a keen appreciation for the play of absence and excess” (141 – 2). Glossing similar preoccupations with abstract or graphical representations of the moving body in Suprematist and Symbolist painting and performance, as well as confluences of the visual and cultural tropes of the “black field,” Post goes on to foreground a link between theatricality, performativity, and the “racial tones” of a “conceptual blackness” that is expressive of the perceptual crisis central to the aesthetic modernism that emerges at the turn of the twentieth century (142 – 6). Relying on the insights of Angeline Dawn Morrison,<sup>16</sup> what is most interesting for Post is the way in which the various “meanings” of monochrome painting are generated by attempts to make sense of an irreducible illegibility in the genre. What becomes most palpable in this critical situation is the “affective indeterminacy” of attempts to “read” monochrome (145), a quality she similarly ascribes to Young Jean Lee theatrical experiment with black identity. For Post, *The Shipment* is representative of a strain of theater that “inspires the

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<sup>16</sup> See Morrison, “Autobiography of an (Ex)Coloured Surface: Monochrome and Liminality,” in *Discrepant Abstraction*, edited by Kobena Mercer (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

desire to decode blackness even as it perpetually frustrates that desire,” and she sees this tendency as the core of the play’s deadpan aesthetic, in both its first and second halves (155). Rather than, like Saal, taking *The Shipment*’s confrontation with the spectator as a given orientation, then, Post explores the “affective dimension” through a consideration of the show’s resistance to interpretation. *The Shipment* and *Neighbors* are both difficult reconsiderations of the contemporary function of stereotype in representations of blackness. Post takes issue with a tendency to suspend analysis of these plays at that observation, demonstrating how that tendency resonates with the sense of irreducible illegibility that emerges in studies of monochrome. For Post, this begs an alternative reading of contemporary experiments with blackness in the theater. Post writes: “Rather, these plays’ formal innovations—the ways they exceed genre, how their proliferations and contestations of speech and skin both invoke and undermine authenticities—render their affective register incoherent, inscrutable, or highly individualistic: as subject to blackness’s reinscription as its abandonment” (161). I want to think further about the simultaneous invocation and disavowal of authenticities, as well as the supposedly individuated “affective dimension,” in order to get back to the question of interpretive politics and of the social function of theater and performance.

To do this, I will briefly consider a section of Hatch’s article on Lee where he reflects on the Korean American playwright’s relationship with Bertolt Brecht and his concept of epic theater. For Hatch, what emerges as paramount in Brechtian dramaturgy is the way in which dramatic form suppresses the composite nature of theater. Theater is political to Brecht because if, in the production of theater, the “radical separation of its

elements” was made clear, the social function of the form could move away from a mimetic relationship with the audience (100). For Hatch, following Brecht:

Aesthetic separation implies an analogous political separation: the epic work makes its existence as theatrical construction conspicuous, so that the spectator can take a distance from it and think critically about the manner of its construction and about how it might have been constructed otherwise. Separation foregrounds the contingency of the laws by which bodies and languages are organized, introducing a gap that is itself the site of the subject. (100)

For Brecht, this kind of theater would produce a critical spectator, the source of theater’s political potential. Reading *The Shipment*, and Lee’s oeuvre more broadly, through this lens, Hatch argues that Lee takes Brecht even further than he was willing to go by pushing dramatic form to its breaking point. First, in the sense that her plays evoke a sense of radical separation within the concept of character itself, a strategy that leads to the performance of “*micro-epic operations*” (101, emphasis in original). Secondly, *The Shipment*’s treatment of minstrelsy, which, in its nineteenth century manifestations, already contains a radical separation of its elements, reveals a “proto-Brechtian theatrical operation already present in a politically conservative and anti-dialectical practice” (106). Thus, Hatch concludes that “Brecht is in a sense not yet Brechtian enough—he still retains an unavowed faith in the mimetic relation with which his theater is meant to break” (107). Through micro-epic intervention and an engagement with disavowed racial histories of theatrical representation, Lee’s plays inhabit the broken mimetic relationship between the stage and the audience. Rather than signifying “blackness’s reinscription as its abandonment,” as Post suggests, I would argue that *The Shipment* asks audiences to

risk the critical and affective indeterminacy of this brokenness for long enough to see what is there.

Lingering with these Brechtian resonances a little longer, it is important to note how this problematic is also expressed in the work of a thinker heavily influenced by Brecht: Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," is concerned with the effect mass production has on works of art. For him, mass production signals a decay in the "aura" of the artwork, which is ambiguously defined as "a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be" (23). This strange tissue is tied to what he calls the "here and now of the work of art," the core of which is its authenticity (21-22). Its decay is then tied to a change in perception towards art on the part of the masses. In that way, this formulation resonates with Brecht. The core of Benjamin's argument is highly debatable; however, I want to think about the way distance, authenticity, and a change in perception function and show up in the space between Benjamin and Brecht. There is a resonance between the two because both are interested in the political potential made possible by a change in both the production and perception of art, and both are interested in uncovering an authenticity on the part of the masses and their desires. For Brecht, the Aristotelian prescription of dramatic form is, over time, conflated with theatricality and, against that conflation, it is imperative that the spectator be made to *see* theater, and therefore society, as it truly is. Benjamin is not concerned with recovering the true authenticity of the work of art; instead, in studying the decay of the aura, he is interested in the potential that decay generates, a potential for the masses of people to

view *themselves* as they “authentically” are: capable of *changing* the property relations that oppress them rather than simply *expressing*.<sup>17</sup>

There is a relay here through which one authenticity is substituted for another, and the substance of that substitution is the individual unit. I would argue that the constitution of the individual unit is resisted in Young Jean Lee’s work, and what is important to recognize is that this resistance is not necessarily an intentional subjective intervention on the part of Lee. Returning to Gallagher’s exclamation (“Yeah, but they’re *actors!*”), I take issue with scholarly analyses of *The Shipment* primarily to the degree that they ignore the conditions under which Lee’s plays are written and attribute her critique of the Freudian subject’s embeddedness in the symbology and history of race to Lee herself as an *individual artist*.

Introducing her study of race and ethnicity on the contemporary stage, Josephine Lee writes that “the playwrights whose works I discuss...are well aware that they and their characters are seen as representatives of a group; at the same time, their plays problematize the categories of race and ethnicity.”<sup>18</sup> In addition, Josephine Lee argues that “to place these playwrights and their works into a grouping designated by national origin, ethnicity, or race is to imply that they participate in a common project: the reconsideration of identity as it is linked both to social representation and to artistic

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<sup>17</sup> Benjamin writes: “Fascism attempts to organize the newly proletarianized masses while leaving intact the property relations which they strive to abolish. It sees its salvation in granting expression to the masses-but on no account granting them rights. The masses have a *right* to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them *expression* in keeping these relations unchanged” (41).

<sup>18</sup> See Josephine Lee, “Introduction,” in *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 4.

presentation” (4). Studying race and ethnicity on the contemporary stage gives us a way of understanding the dynamic of representation and the immanent critique of that dynamic enacted by racialized subjects; in that sense, the fact that the enigmatic ending of *The Shipment* came at the insistence of the actors is crucial. Young Jean Lee’s method of writing—casting first and then proceeding to collaboratively create a script with the cast—is an improvisational experiment in solidarity that operates by seeking to inhabit the realization that individuation, and the relations it makes possible (possession, property, subjectivity, preparedness, indivisibility), is impossible. This is not to say that *The Shipment* achieves a large-scale transformation of social relations, and this is also not to romanticize the ephemerality of the transformation it does achieve. Still, I believe it is important to recognize the invitation contained and concealed in what Post reads as blackness’s abandonment or abandonment in blackness: the recognition that the relations constituting scenes of racial performance can be different.

## 2. *Fairview*

**ACT ONE** appears to be a comedic family drama.

**ACT TWO** watches Act One.

**ACT TWO** pushes further into Act One and tries to drive it forward to make Act Three.

— Jackie Sibblies Drury, *Fairview*

Both *The Shipment* and *Fairview* address the question of the modal difference between realism (or naturalism) and the avant-garde by dramatizing Courtney R. Baker’s claim that “looking can be understood structurally and, consequently, as substantially

disconnected from the racial identification of the onlooker.”<sup>19</sup> Preferring a phenomenological, rather than materialist, approach, Baker offers an account of how normative relations of looking are underpinned by a notion of humanity that functions ideologically, a construct that, as such, cannot be confirmed absolutely. As an idea or concept that denotes how “those identified as human beings ought to be treated,” rather than a substance or condition, humanity denotes a zone of contestation for black people; however, for Baker it becomes important to recognize that “the terrain of contestation is not reality but rather the image” (9). Ideologically underwritten by a notion of humanity, movements for civil rights, national recognition, and political representation become situations that, on a sociopolitical level, function much like a realist play in which “the actor/signifier, laminated to her character/signified, strenuously seeks admission to the right class of referents,” in Elin Diamond’s words (*Unmaking Mimesis* 4). *Fairview* approaches this discursive situation theatrically, and in a way that foregrounds the “hysteric” racialization of performance in general, carrying specific implications for criticism as it intersects with art as practice. From the beginning of its first act, *Fairview* depicts the African American Frasier family in a frantic state, hurriedly making preparations for the birthday celebration of “Mama,” their beloved matriarch; in this way, the play’s initial act proceeds along understated comedic lines that are instantly recognizable for any fan of mainstream family friendly film and television. Immediately, however, a feeling of constraint is registered in the relation between lighting and gesture,

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<sup>19</sup> See Courtney R. Baker, “Introduction” in *Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 9.

and with “*Lights up on a Negro*,” the setting description introduces us to Beverly who “*steels herself*” to peel carrots while attempting to telepathically fix a glitching speaker with a glare. From the beginning of the first act, looking is presented as a problematic that suffuses the action that occurs between characters. Indeed, before uttering a word:

*...Beverly does that thing:  
She looks at herself in a pretend mirror hung on the fourth wall.  
It's a very normal thing to have happen in a play. (8)*

The tenor of this opening scene is made ambiguous through its presentation in the text. In two adjacent lines, the text draws attention to the fourth wall as a “pretend mirror” and comments, “It’s a very normal thing to have happen in a play,” which colors the lines preceding and following them with a careful but anxious sense of watchfulness. This is reflected in the set design such that “the entire play seems to be viewed from a downstage corner of the stage,” and the “pretend mirror “seems to be of the kind used for security purposes,” according to McNulty. While the action that begins the play is in fact “normal,” it is rendered suspicious by the design choices made in the text, in its production, and in body language and gestural expressions of anxiety. Through these decisions, looking becomes something other than a purely subjective act, and the status and substance of the look becomes a central subject of the show and subsequent reviews. In this scene, the look almost appears to be its own entity. As time passes, “*Eventually she feels herself being looked at,*” and Beverly turns to discover Dayton, her husband, who has entered with silverware, taking a moment to stare and admire her with a look that verges on an ogle. However, from the vantage point established by the stage

directions, by the time we get to Beverly's exclamation, "What are you looking at?!" it is not 100 percent clear who she is talking to.

This ambiguity and the resulting anxiety are perhaps most strikingly addressed by the character Keisha, Beverly's teenaged daughter, who, throughout the play, gradually generates a para-performative relationship with the event of performance through her oblique engagement with the audience. Throughout the first act, the Frasier's frenzy of preparation for Mama's birthday is punctuated by Keisha's brief asides, which complement the self-referentiality of the stage direction. At times, Keisha's presence serves to diffuse the buildup of tension between adults, and moments of diffusion are accompanied by an engagement with the "look." One such instance comes halfway through the first act, when Keisha, freshly bathed, descends from upstairs, dancing and interrupting a moment of frustrated confrontation between Jasmine and Bev. The adults, now distracted, observe, asking what she's doing. Keisha declares, "It's my I'm clean and I'm starving dance," and her audience's confusion is transmuted into comedy as Jasmine and Bev take turns singing/speaking: "Oooooo, all the boys / Oooooo, let them see me," engaging in a playful imitation and recounting of their mother's preferred adornments and mannerisms. Dayton renames the proceedings "Mama Frasier Birthday Dance!" and the scene affectively situates itself somewhere between sendup and homage. At this moment, Keisha takes on the role of observer:

*(Keisha looks out toward us and has a soliloquy, which is a theatrical device where a character talks aloud and no one onstage can hear them.)*

**KEISHA:** It's all just...so beautiful!  
I love these women.  
Joy. And Dancing and Singing!  
My future just looks so big and bright,  
I can't wait for it to hurry up and Get Here.  
I want to know all there is to know and be all there is to be.  
But.  
But I feel like something is keeping me from all that.  
Something...  
Yes, something is keeping me from what I could be.  
And that something.  
It thinks that it has made me who I am.  
It's...It's just so confusing. (26 – 7)

This invocation of future possibility impeded is enfolded in a dance of reminiscence which emerges from a declarative inhabitation of the present. Keisha is very specifically characterized by this mode of engagement with scene. Bits of her time on stage are spent out of the space and time of the play itself, and she is the character who most directly confronts the “look” as a force of mediation; in this moment, the encounter is indexed by a turn toward the audience and an ambiguous contemplation of what “could be.” Following the dance, the Frasier's are returned to the anxious space of preparation, and the airing of family laundry assumes a more serious tenor. Indeed, with Keisha's discovery that the cake has been burnt, Act One ends as a fainting Beverly and her freshly peeled carrots are strewn across the floor.

These dramatic fragments in the first third of the play presage developments to come: the second act “watches Act One,” and what results is an uncanny recursion, yielding an iteration of the first act overdubbed with an alternative set of dialogic exchanges. A character named Suze says, “No no no no no,” to which a character named Jimbo replies, “No, but if you could choose to be a different race, what race would you

be?” Through eerie re-presentation we are led back to the moment of Beverly’s fainting by way of a conversation between disembodied voices, replacing direct dialogic exchange between actors on stage. It becomes immediately clear that the voices are racially white, despite the fact that the audience is unable to verify this through sight—In a production of the play at Woolly Mammoth, a theater company in Washington D.C., the presence of these voices is registered visually only as a series of silhouettes which grace (or haunt) a window upstairs. The text of *Fairview*’s second act reads like a roundtable on the (un)consciousness of race, and Suze and Jimbo, later joined by the characters Mack and Bets, take part in an evaluation of racial types, developing criteria to determine their own fitness for non-white racial membership in response to Jimbo’s question. As Keisha performs her “I’m clean and I’m starving dance” for the second time, the voices of Suze, Jimbo, Mack, and Bets become individually “tethered” to the Frasier family—Keisha and Suze; Jasmine and Jimbo; Beverly and Mack; Dayton and Bets.

With Beverly’s tumble, Act One is superseded, and a series of stage directions describes the subsequent course of events: Beverly is tended to by her family, the burnt cake is removed from the oven, Dayton leaves and returns with a store-bought replacement, while the ghostly interlocutors comment on the unfolding of events on stage. Sans disembodied voices speaking from the ether, the project of making final preparations for dinner would seem to be back on track. However, as we near the opening of the third act, the absurdity of the commentary seems to leak into the details of the world depicted on stage. The family breaks out into dance while setting the table for dinner, putting out multiple plates and bowls of artificial food, which “get stranger and

stranger / in different ways, some of it is faker and some of it is less food-like” (78).

Thus, in the second act, our sense of the black middle-class family as a recognizable signifier is increasingly unsettled; as pieces of fake food accrue in heaps, the clarity of what is being depicted also begins to muddle.

The gradual process of defamiliarization that has been unfolding over the course of the play reaches a fever pitch with Act Three, where the disembodied voices of Jimbo, Suze, Mack, and Bets materialize in the flesh. That is, when the preparations are complete and Beverly calls up the stairs, “Mama? Can you come down here please” “We’re ready for you,” Suze, adorned in an ivory gown and gold turban, is the figure who emerges from the upper room, soon followed by Jimbo as Tyrone (Jasmine and Beverly’s brother), Mack as Erika, (Keisha’s friend from school), and Bets as a kind of jazz-era drag alternative to Suze’s more matronly version of “Mama.” Their entrances are accompanied by music which seems to reflect each character’s embodiment of the prompt issued by Jimbo. With this, the voices belonging to previously disembodied onlookers usurp the action on stage. This display sets up what is seen as *Fairview*’s most incisive theatrical intervention. As the scene progresses, confusions abound as Jimbo, Mack, Suze, and Bets perform their “versions” of the heretofore absent members of the Frasier family. Tyrone, for instance, is a lawyer, while Jimbo’s portrayal fashions him into a rapper. Another example of this occurs in Mack’s portrayal of Keisha’s friend, Erika. Earlier in the play it is suggested that Keisha’s friend Erika might come over to deliver a letter, and the exchange is implicitly framed as romantic. However, when Mack-as-Erika arrives, Jimbo intercepts her delivery of the letter, claiming that it is a positive

pregnancy test, while proceeding to accuse Dayton of cheating on Beverly. These moments exacerbate the already chaotic energy overtaking the show, and the play subsequently devolves into chaos. Interestingly, the Fraiser family is confused and disturbed not by characters as such, but by their performances. The confusion comes to a head when Jimbo throws food at Dayton, starting a food fight in which:

*Jimbo, Mack, Bets, and Suze are the aggressors,  
for the most part.  
Surprising things happen.  
Some of it is silly, but eventually the silly gives way to violence  
that feels more consequential.  
Something is actually broken.  
The set feels destroyed. (98)*

Following the destruction of the set, Keisha turns to Suze-as-Grandma and, in a series of asides, struggles to articulate a question, a struggle repeatedly interrupted by Suze's attempts to reassure her that "I have known you since the moment you were born," an affirmation that becomes increasingly difficult to categorize as either comforting or coercive. This uneven exchange continues for a number of lines until Keisha (to the room and not as an aside) asks Suze to:

**KEISHA:** Stop.  
Please, stop.  
*(Everything stops, or gets let go.  
All listen to Keisha.)*  
I know what you're going to say because...  
Because you have told me every story I have ever heard.  
And I...I need you to listen.  
Because I need to ask you something.

**SUZE:** Alright, Keisha. What do you want to ask me.

**KEISHA:** I...  
I don't know.  
I can't hear myself think.  
I can't hear anything but you staring at me. (99 – 100)

In her analysis of the look, Baker observes a tendency on the part of Enlightenment philosophers to construe society as “a secondary and even an artificial state that deforms and obscures the essential qualities of the human, preferring instead to contemplate *human nature*,” and preferring not to view interactions between humans as a defining condition (Baker 11, emphasis in original). This tendency constitutes a philosophical assertion of “nature as a priori,” which, Baker argues, “has permitted minority and oppressed groups to be continually confronted with a hierarchy of being” (11). Keisha, as if directly addressing this foundational assertion:

*(...Steps through the fourth wall  
It's as simple as that) (Fairview 100)*

Keisha thus begins the closing monologue of the play, addressing “folks who identify as white” and soliciting audience participation by asking white audience members in particular to “come up here / to where my family has always been...and let my family go out /to where you've always been” (*Fairview* 102). In one sense, the para-performative relationship that Keisha has been fostering throughout the play reaches a state of development that allows direct engagement and intervention in the performance itself as a social event. In so doing, Keisha redirects the hierarchy associated with conceptions of humanity attempting to induce a direct engagement with that ideological construct on the part of the audience, a social form that, in this context, is racialized as white. Importantly, this interruption is not a reversal of power: Keisha's monologue lasts for a few pages in

the play text, and throughout there is a slippage between “white people” and “folks who call themselves white,” as Keisha reflects on the “broken” set, speculating about what it might be like to tell “a story about us, by us, for us, only us” (*Fairview* 105). Ultimately, however, there is no resolution, and each iteration of the show presumably produces a different outcome based on how the audience reacts to Keisha’s invitation. Lindsay Goss argues that the call for white audience members to assume the stage is less about white self-reflection and transformation, and more so an effort, on the part of *Fairview*, to “make use of—which is to say, expend—all available theatrical resources in its effort to represent the intractability of white supremacy, as well as the radical collapse of existing structures that dismantling it will require” (Goss 65). Mobilizing Lauren Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism” to reflect on affective investments in given structures, Goss stresses the importance of recognizing that *Fairview* upends expectations “not so much on the level of plot but on the level of theatrical possibility” (Goss 65):

When this reality finally collapses, under the spectacular weight of the racist surveillance and white narrative entitlement that it has generated, the characters, critically, do not become not-characters. When Keisha speaks to the audience at the end, she has not ceased to be Keisha. She does not now speak to us as an actor, but rather as a character confronted with the problems of theatricality, which include the problem of being also an actor...she responds to a seemingly external force, one usually unseen but that has been permitted, by the vagaries of playwriting, to break through. The fourth wall breaks but it breaks within the world of the play. (Goss 65)

In that regard, there is a sense in which, like *The Shipment*, the end of Drury’s play can be read as an invitation to the audience, rather than merely a show. The ending calls the audience to inhabit and linger in the brokenness of performance in order to begin thinking the fullness of that break.

## The Critical Difference between Dissonance and Distortion

According to Sianne Ngai, New Critical definitions of tone might characterize the term as a “dramatic ‘attitude,’” or a “literary text’s affective bearing, orientation, or ‘set toward’ its audience and world.” Ngai rejects this premise and proffers instead a theory of tone as a “formal aspect” that enables ideology critique: diagnostic readings of works that are, in some sense, representative of a totality of social relations (*Ugly Feelings* 43). While tone is thus immensely useful for literary theory, Ngai suggests that, as a “formal aspect,” tone “poses the additional difficulty of aesthetic immanence, of being something that seems ‘attached’ to an artwork” (43). She performs a thorough reading Herman Melville’s last novel, *The Confidence Man*, drawing on the principle of “analog amplification,” a theory developed by Silvan Tompkins to explain the physiological function of affect. Ngai emphasizes the fact that the distinction between emotion and affect was originally introduced to explain the difference between subjective and objective feeling; Tompkins’s theory of affect as an “analog amplification” system in the body becomes particularly useful for thinking about antebellum economies of sympathy and trust, a period of United States history in which money took “excessively numerous forms” before the establishment of the American dollar (59). The main character of Melville’s novel, an anonymous “transfer-agent,” leads the reader through a series of recursive financial exchanges in which it becomes unclear whether the object being exchanged is money or affect; in particular, a sense of “confidence” or “trust.” Ngai focuses on moments where attempts to verify fiduciary transactions, due to a lack of confidence, produce a dissonant excess of sound. She argues that Melville represents this

excess through “a positional parallelism in which sound is foregrounded as an independent feature at the exact moment the subjective proprietorship of a feeling, ostensibly secured by analogical equivalences between affect, money, and language, is rendered questionable and unstable simply by the *amplification* of these equivalences” (65). In different ways, *The Shipment* and *Fairview* approach the problem of stereotype in racial representation in a way that feels resonant with Tompkins’ understanding of affect as a physiological system based in a principle of analog amplification. In the plays this resonance is represented by scenes of communicative breakdown that resemble those highlighted in Ngai’s reading of *The Confidence Man*. The implications of this resemblance are most readily observable in scholarly and mainstream theater criticism of *Fairview*, and in the final section of this chapter I want to consider the way *Fairview* disrupts the “subjective proprietorship” of feeling in critics who, in the abbreviated form of reviews, respond to the ending of the play in ways that highlight the qualitative difference between *The Shipment* and *Fairview*.

It should be stated that the “heightened emotive register” that Saal mentions in her assessment of Young Jean Lee’s work can be viewed in reviews of *The Shipment*. A review of the play’s 2018 restaging at Red Tape Theatre in Chicago suggests that “Young Jean Lee’s play about racism has only gotten stronger and more uncomfortable,” following the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and increased media coverage of police killings of unarmed black individuals (Reid). In this sense, *The Shipment* appears to “take the temperature of audiences on the question of identity politics,” where comedic critique serves as a measure of mental and emotional capacity

for facing the persistence of racial caricature (Healy). However, in asking white audience members to give up their seats and take the stage, *Fairview* raises the stakes of mainstream critical engagement with works by black playwrights. Where reviews of *The Shipment* are primarily concerned with the relation between audience reactions and historical context, *Fairview* extends this concern by generating a parallel discourse that hinges on the implications of white spectatorship and the ethics of criticism. The secondary literature on *Fairview* is decidedly more self-reflective in that sense, but the discursive context that frames *The Shipment*'s reception is refracted through a layer of critical irony in writing on Drury's play. Sara Holdren, in a review titled "Reviewing *Fairview*, a Play That Almost Demands That I Not Do So," remarks that *Fairview* evokes "an ongoing debate in the theater world about who should be reviewing what plays," and the terms of this debate are circular, bound to the "eternally returning question of who has a right to tell which stories." Jesse Green, in a conversation with Salamishah Tillet, asks "Can a white critic even "see" these plays properly?" a question which exemplifies the circular insolubility Holdren notes. As a rejoinder, Tillet suggests that the lack of influential black theater critics amounts to "cultural malpractice," to which Green responds: "What I'm really learning most from our conversation is the way in which thinking a lot about the white gaze can also be a distorting element *within* the plays. Which raises a more fundamental question: In making a play whose subject is the white gaze, are you turning the power of the play back to the very people you're trying to get it away from?"

Scholarly reviews of the play are less cheeky, attempting to more soberly respond to *Fairview*'s indictment of the white gaze and conceptually engage with questions of spectatorship and affect. Shane Breaux situates *Fairview* within a larger history of black performance by drawing a comparison between the play and the theatrical and oratorical work of the abolitionist William Wells Brown. Breaux suggests that the play "does not necessarily represent white supremacy, but hails it," through the deployment of a character who, like Wells Brown, shifts roles in ways that highlight the systematicity of white supremacy and collapse the space between theatricality and reality by drawing attention to the stage as a structure. According to Breaux, this helps "(white) people see representations of black people rather than helping black people see or realize themselves" (85 – 6). Michael Pearce argues that *Fairview* stages a confrontation with the white gaze, deconstructing its operation in the field of visual representation and theatrical technique to "make white audience members feel white" (1). For Pearce, *Fairview* is an instance of "affective antiracist activism," staging a "tentative rehearsal" where asking white audience members to take the stage provides them "with an opportunity to demonstrate their support for values of racial equality by giving up their seats for the cast" (1). In each case, the analysis of affect includes a consideration of the writer's positionality as a white scholar, a consideration which is construed as confrontational and meant to elicit commitment and accountability in the project of antiracism.

I argue that the tonal difference between reviews and scholarly writing is important to notice for the way the contestations of position and power play out in between the lines, so to speak. At a glance, the praise afforded *Fairview* in reviews seems

curtailed by the concession or accusation that *Fairview* recenters white audience members even though it incites reflection on racial power dynamics in a daring and insightful way. Responding to the moment when Keisha breaks the fourth wall, Tillet admits to being moved by the play's representation of "the violent schizophrenia of American racism. If the play ended with that lack of closure, it would have been jarring but it offered no absolution, no purging of white guilt." Tillet's use of the word "absolution" is significant and illustrates the affective stakes of critical engagement with the play. Green's question about power is pointedly echoed in reviews by black critics, who at times take issue with *Fairview*'s engagement (or lack thereof) with audience members of color. Faedra Chatard Carpenter laments that, on a dramaturgical level, the play is effective but not meant for black viewers who "live its commentary."<sup>20</sup> Paul J. Edwards takes issue with the fact that *Fairview* invites participation from white audience members alone," creating "a work that enacts the problem without a way forward."<sup>21</sup> This critique is often leveled at art that attempts to bring attention to structural harm, but in the case of *Fairview*, the attempt is egregious enough for Edwards to go as far as saying that the play is "meant for a white audience to be lulled into the comfort of an observer beholding a slice of life that was not their own" ("Catering to White Audiences" 177). In less pointed language, Hilton Als suggests that the questions posed by Drury's dramatic choices confound rather than illuminate "as if, in the fashion of other downtown theater artists, she was embarrassed by the idea of payoff and considered satisfaction cheap,"

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<sup>20</sup> Faedra Chatard Carpenter, "Fairview by Jackie Sibbies Drury (review)" *Theatre Journal* 72, no. 3 (2020): 369.

<sup>21</sup> Paul J. Edwards, "Catering to White Audiences: *Fairview* at Woolly Mammoth" *TDR: The Drama Review* 65, no. 2 (2021): 178.

observing that Drury's offering, an equally disturbing and frustrating instance of entertainment, "made us wonder what we were all doing in that room, watching black actors perform being human."<sup>22</sup> In addressing the relation between whiteness and spectatorship (or, conversely, between blackness and performance), an attention to the complexity of tonal differences between the various statements that comprise the body of writing on *Fairview* reveals a range of affective investments with striking clarity, as evidenced in comments from Green, Holdren, and Edwards, respectively, on the critical stakes of viewing the play:

Of course, hearing myself say all that, I worry about the desire to "virtue signal," to say "Oh look, I've done something good because I went to this play and was momentarily uncomfortable." Or, as a critic, to say I've done something good because I've written a positive review. Perhaps that's unavoidable, but if I respond so strongly to "Fairview" or, to name another, "Slave Play," I think it's because my taste and my self-image come together when confronted by a powerful playwright who wants to push me around. (*Fairview: Watching a Play in Black and White*)

That's why this review — if you can call it that — has taken an unconventional form. I could tell you more about the actors, who are uniformly excellent and in step with Drury and Benson's heightened, demanding vision, but even as I write the word "excellent," I think, *Here it is. Your assessment. Your "fair view" of these performers.* That view is my job, and it's also on trial in Drury's play. Thinking back now, I don't see the energetic, fussy supermom, Beverly; instead I see Heather Alicia Simms's face in the moments after the fourth wall comes down. Her mask is gone. Her shoulders slump a little as Boateng speaks to us, and her eyes look blank, drained. She's exhausted. And she's watching us now. (*Reviewing Fairview, a Play That Almost Demands That I Not Do So*)

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<sup>22</sup> Hilton Als, "Fairview: Watching a Play in Black and White," *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/07/theater/fairview-ending-debate.html#>.

If they identified with the Black family introduced in act 1, as I did, there is a moment of embarrassment for recognizing ourselves in this “good old family” — especially because *Fairview*’s first act harkens to Black family sitcoms, playing upon their well-known tropes. Yet those same sitcoms were not meant just for white audiences as Drury seems to use them here. They were important forms of representation for various communities that had not experienced a spectrum of representations of themselves on television (Bogle 2001:290–303). To be sure, these shows were not paragons of social justice but they certainly catered to Black audiences. Authentic representation or not, we saw faces like ours written by Black screenwriters. (“Catering to White Audiences: *Fairview* at Woolly Mammoth.”)

I quote these evaluations at length in this way to provide an impressionistic illustration of how theater criticism on *Fairview* functions similarly to the affective amplification that serves as the basis of Ngai’s theory of tone. This returns me to Jesse Green’s questions about theater criticism and the “distorting element” of the white gaze. My aim is not to decipher what I might take to be the affective investments of certain critics, stopping at the suggestion that performances of race externalize and display unacknowledged or unconscious biases. Rather, what interests me in the discourse surrounding these plays is the way questions about whiteness, as well as the power relations perpetually implied and made explicit in art and criticism, echo and rebound, are colored by a sense of discomfort that seems to both pervade conversation and elude attempts to locate the source from which it emanates. A brief mention of *Fairview* appears in an article by Ditte Marie Munch-Juriscic, in which she makes reference to Drury’s contention that “People need to be uncomfortable” in order to frame her inquiry into the moral utility of discomfort as a tactic for addressing the issue of implicit bias in dialogic approaches to the problem of racial injustice. In this essay, Munch-Juriscic offers a skeptical analysis of the moral and political utility of discomfort. Drawing on research in the affective sciences and

philosophy of emotion, she makes a distinction between “awareness discomfort” and “interaction discomfort” in order to “argue for a *contextual* understanding of discomfort that accounts for the complex phenomenology of aversive affect” (238). The former can be “interpreted as a form of *cognitive dissonance*, i.e. a product of a conflict between the agent’s implicitly biased attitudes (and potential implicitly biased behavior) and his or her explicit values and principles,” which “can be experienced with explicit awareness of the conflict but also a vague feeling of discomfort that the agent does not associate with such a conflict, like ‘when two adjacent piano keys are being struck, but one of them so softly that its vibrations can’t be heard’” (241). The metaphor of adjacent piano keys simultaneously struck strikingly illustrates the way in which the problem of discomfort stems from its unclear status in this complex of relations; discomfort is both definitive of the discursive situation and vague in terms of its location as the dissonant object of that discourse. As it concerns performance, aesthetics, and the problem of racial difference, the result of this ambiguity is a critical context composed of layered and overlapping articulations which struggle to accurately describe their object: multiply voiced versions of the question “*what do we do?*” Dissonance rather than distortion, then, might offer a way of thinking more carefully with the simultaneity and dispossessive force of this voicing.

In this chapter, I have attempted to think through the contours of the affective dimension that corresponds to this collection of reviews, which constitutes a kind of undercurrent that reveals itself at varying levels of intensity. This is an effect these plays produce by way of a series of cleavages in the sense that Josette Feral attributes to

theatricality as a process of inference on the part of the spectator. Taken together, *The Shipment* and *Fairview* enact multifaceted, and at times contradictory, attempts to disrupt or transform that mode of engagement with performance as an event. We might even say that there is a play of looks unfolding within and between the scripts themselves and the rehearsal processes, stagecraft, paratextual material, and theater criticism that, when put in conversation with the play, unsettles the spectator's claim on inferential authority. By now, the attempt to disrupt or transform the normative binary between performer and spectator is understood as a basic tenet of experimental theater; however, I argue that an invitation emerges in excess of given discursive frames when we allow ourselves to linger in the play of looks, in a kind of para-performative attunement to that visual interplay. The problem is that the possibility of lingering is in constant tension with the temporally circumscribed space of performance, a concern which stems from the fact that this tension is painful. Lee, in an interview following the premier of *The Shipment*, laments:

“Audiences have been laughing more enthusiastically since the positive reviews have been published, and it's so painful sometimes,” she said. “I know that's unfair of me because I wrote it to be funny, and the performers are funny, but I feel there is so much in there that people should not laugh at. Part of me would rather have them sit there in silent uneasiness” (Healy).

It strikes me that, while the pain Lee describes can be ascribed to the content of her work and what might be viewed as an improper engagement with that content on the part of audiences, that pain can also be ascribed to where and how performance is situated as a form of social engagement. Lee's route to becoming a playwright (abandoning a dissertation on King Lear), and her approach to writing drama (casting a show first and

then producing a script collaboratively through a workshopping process), can be seen as interventions in how we normatively engage with the structural limitations of performance and representation. Counterintuitively, this intervention is manifest in the questions *Fairview* presents to its audiences, and Drury's work seeks to integrate Lee's compositional practices into the space and time of performance itself. The intervention I hope to make involves a careful attention to what Lee's and Drury's approaches to theatrical production demand for theatrical practice in performance and in criticism. Rather than approaching theater criticism as a body of writing that analyzes the plays as art objects, then, I seek to illustrate the way in which the plays and various bodies of secondary literature are engaged in a collective reckoning with the pain and discomfort caused by the structural limitations of performance and representation. In this version of things, the "affective dimension" might be considered the para-performative (non)place where this reckoning is always already happening.

# Coda

## The Movement of Double Consciousness

In conclusion, I want to offer a few reflections I have arrived at by way of Adrian Piper and a certain pedagogical practice. I want to express what I've learned to see in the relay between (de)composition and para-performance that describes the experiments in representation I have explored over the course of this project. What follows are some reflections on the relation between movement and thought in theorizations of black cultural production. In the third chapter of *Afro Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (2018), "Brer Soul and the Mythic Being," Tavia Nyong'o considers the underexplored relationship between Adrian Piper, Melvin Van Peebles, and formations of black queerness and gender non-conformity. Nyong'o cites L.H. Stallings argument that funk is "a performance modality that disrupts heteronormative embodiment and straight time" (78). In clarifying this point, Nyong'o writes: "we often think of funk as the sound of the 1970s, but funk is also a set of aesthetic and corporeal possibilities, which have a much older provenance in black life and culture. Funk is arguably present across the entire history of black music and might be most succinctly defined as musical unabashedness" (78). This definition succinctly describes something that is anything but succinct: funk at once invokes a genre of music and of dance, as well as a certain aesthetic and style; furthermore, the aesthetics of funk are not necessarily bound to the 1970s as a historical period.

At the same time, my initial reaction to the phrase “musical unabashedness” was one of distrust. While Nyong’o is right to identify an unabashedness in funk that follows from moments “when a person loses inhibitions in music or dance and connects with the immediacy of the body in its sweaty, stinking presence” (78), my mind immediately connected that word, “unabashed,” to the commonly understood notion of a split between mind and body; and therefore, the more insidious implication that the fun and vitality associated with black popular artistic and social life can be traced simply to an allegiance to or awareness of bodily presence over and against the constraints of the mind. In short, the idea that black popular art is so lively and jovial because we are unashamed and don’t think too much about what we do and create. Of course, Nyong’o is aware of this, and this portion of the chapter functions as a rejection of respectability politics, positioning funk as belonging “to the ‘changing same’ of black music, as Leroi Jones/Amiri Barak famously termed it,” which stands as a “historiographic principle for getting into step with the back and forth, the to and fro, of black history” (78). This historiographic principle has been immensely important in its call for black people to embrace and explore everything we are, especially in our queer and non-heteronormative manifestations. However, I had a strong reaction to the term “unabashed” that I don’t want to let go of.

This led to a consideration of the relationship between a notion of unabashedness and my own tendency to overthink, which, for me, recalled W.E.B. DuBois’s famous formulation regarding “double consciousness,” a term so widely used, it might be argued

that its meaning has been taken for granted. In “On Our Spiritual Strivings,” from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), DuBois writes:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (45)

For me, the key phrases here are: “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,” a phrase which accompanies the fact of being made to inhabit a “world which yields him no true self-consciousness.” I am interested in the simultaneously specific and abstract character of this particular articulation and the way it can be applied to almost any example of what it is to “feel most colored when thrown against a sharp white background” (“How It Feels to be Colored Me” 154). It strikes me as important that double consciousness not be read *only* as a quality or property that can be resolutely attributed to black being. Along those lines, Zora Neale Hurston’s observation is most useful to me when “feel” is activated as a verb. Following this, we might think about the verbs “yield,” “measuring,” “torn,” and the various forms of the verb “to see” that appear in DuBois’s definition of double consciousness. While this may be an obvious point, the “looking” and “seeing” integral to an understanding of double consciousness is intensely active and sensory, which, for me, is crucial insofar as the peculiarity of the sensation DuBois describes as double consciousness prevents any attempt to resolve and settle

upon the “strange *meaning* of being black,” as he puts it a few pages earlier in the book (*Souls of Black Folk* xi, emphasis mine). Consequently, this sense of activity offers a way connect the thinking we might associate with DuBois to the “immediacy of the body” Nyong’o is asking us to participate in connecting to.

The other reason I have been struck by this passage from *Afro-Fabulations* is that I have been wanting to write about the conceptual and performance artist Adrian Piper for a long time, and I have always been unsure about where to begin. While the main focus of Nyong’o’s chapter is Piper’s Mythic Being, a character or figure Piper developed in the early 1970s who became the focus of a multi-media proliferation of creative projects, her later *Funk Lessons* most immediately came to my mind as a set of performance pieces that happens to directly engage with a collective connection to the “immediacy of the body.” *Funk Lessons* (1983) was a series of performances from the early 1980s in which Piper would advertise “lessons” in funk, which would include lectures on the music itself as well as attempts to instruct attendees in how to dance and properly engage with the music in a social setting. In a recording of one session that took place at the University of California, Berkeley, Piper can be seen showing a fairly large crowd how to two-step, thoroughly explaining how to shift weight from foot to foot in concert with the music, proceeding to calmly perform the move while clapping as the camera pans out to a shot of the crowd following along as the words “two-step” flash in the middle of the screen. A similarly striking scene involves Piper pontificating in an emphatic professorial manner, offering the crowd a concise and straightforward breakdown of funk’s structure, as well as what she experiences as a common complaint: that “funk is boring and monotonous,

which seems to mean, basically, that it has no structure” (“Excerpt from *Funk Lessons*”). As she says this, she painstakingly copies, “boring + monotonous” to a green chalkboard, the chalk click-clacking at an equally painstaking volume, finishing up with “no structure,” inscribed just below the addition.

As a supplement to the video documentation, Piper gives a fuller account of the motivations and goals which compelled her to carry out these “lessons” in “Notes on Funk I – IV,” a series of ruminations on the origins and contexts of the performances that were written during and after their production. In part one, Piper recalls hosting guests for dinner or a drink, and, in accordance with “standard middle-class behavior,” proceeding to supply “background music from the Usual Gang of Idiots (Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, etc.)” (*Out of Order, Out of Sight* 196 – 7). As time went on, Piper writes:

I would then interpose some funk and watch people become puzzled, agitated, or annoyed, and then I would attempt to initiate systematic discussion of the source of their dismay (in fact these reactions to my unreflective introduction of the music into this social context were what initially alerted me to the need to confront the issues systematically and collaboratively in the performance context). (197)

Piper is ultimately concerned with negative reactions to the music, the reasons for those reactions, and significance of those reactions for what they reveal about the negotiation of American, middle-class, and white identity, especially the context of its formation in relation to black, working-class culture. In elaborating upon the desired outcome of the experiment, Piper lets her readers know:

The aim was to transmit and share a physical language that everyone was then empowered to use. By breaking down the basic movements into their essentials, these apparently difficult or complex patterns became easily accessible to everyone. Needless to say, no prior training in or acquaintance with dance was necessary. Because both repetition and individual self-expression are both important aspects of this kind of dance, it was only a matter of a relatively short time before these patterns became second nature. (196)

In one sense, these performances are a humorous response to the stereotypical assumption that “white people can’t dance.” In the video, this phrase is displayed at one point, again in the middle of the screen, while Piper is asked about the validity of that proposition by an interviewer. Piper responds, “It’s just a matter of practice, I really believe that. I mean, if you grow up in a culture where, you know, kind of dancing and, you know, being attuned to a beat is part of what you do every day, then you get good at it, and it gets easy. If you grow up in a culture where you don’t do that, then it’s harder” (*Funk Lessons*).

For me, Piper’s various comments on the proceedings can be very hard to sort out. On the one hand, Piper’s address of these issues is at times so dryly academic as to appear parodic. On the other hand, her aforementioned analysis of the maxim, “white people can’t dance” can be juxtaposed with this observation from “Notes on Funk,” that the music

sometimes elicited anxiety, anger, or contempt from middle-class, college-educated whites: anxiety, because its association with black, working-class culture engenders unresolved racist feelings that are then repressed or denied rather than examined; anger, because it is both sexually threatening and culturally intrusive to individuals schooled exclusively in the idiom of the European-descended tradition of classical, folk, and/or popular music; contempt, because it sounds “mindless” or “monotonous” to individuals who, through lack of exposure to musicological training, are unable to discern its rhythmic, melodic, and topical complexity. (197 – 8)

In my reading I've been pushed to wonder: when exactly is Piper speaking with reticence, sarcasm, or genuine reflection? Given the variety of responses to her experiment, I would argue that all three qualities are present at any given moment, depending on the disposition we assume as a once-removed audience encountering any documentation of the work. "Disposition" can at once denote "the action or faculty of disposing," and "the condition of being disposed" ("Disposition"). For me, there is a connection between the encounter Piper is attempting to stage and the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" that describes double consciousness, and this connection can be seen in the interplay between the words "action" and "condition" that color the definition of disposition. What is the relationship between the "essentials" of the "basic movements" Piper attempts to break down, and a notion of "second nature?" What is the relationship between "exposure," "schooling," and an acceptance or rejection of funk and its working-class blackness? According to DuBois, the negro is "*gifted with second-sight*" (*Souls of Black Folk* 45, emphasis mine). Piper, in carrying out *Funk Lessons*, makes the assertion that "black working-class culture has invaluable gifts to offer that audience [white, upper-middle-class], and not just the other way around" (203). What can we say about the content of that gift?

In an essay entitled "The Real Thing Strange," published in the accompanying catalogue to the retrospective exhibit of her work,<sup>1</sup> Piper argues for the importance of being open to "unsynthesized intuitions," a term she derives from her study of the

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<sup>1</sup> See *Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuitions, 1965 – 2016* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018)

transcendental aesthetic in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Unsynthesized intuitions can be described as appearances that "on the one hand, do achieve the status of discrete presences, but for which, on the other, it is an open question whether or not they achieve the higher cognitive status of comprehensible objects" ("The Real Thing Strange 83). Piper explicates Kant's navigation of these phenomena using best and worst-case scenarios. In the worst case, an overwhelming presence of unsynthesizable appearances can "foreclose empirical experience of any kind—of self, of action, of objects, of world—altogether" (82). More frighteningly put, they can "threaten to overtake and decompose the soul back into the unsorted mass of representations with which it began; to obliterate the distinction between subject and object; and to dissolve the subject as an independent psychological entity into the very things that he fails to understand" (91).

In the best case, one would simply be able to understand and synthesize every appearance/intuition, which strikes Piper as "not all that good" because it "just seems wrong, and perhaps most obviously wrong in the case of trying to understand works of contemporary art" (83). For Piper, the significance of this passage in Kant's work is that he "means to acknowledge the possibility of unsynthesized intuitions on the one hand, yet to deny their cognitive significance on the other: yes, they might exist, he admits, but where they do, they are cognitively unimportant" (86). Piper's purpose in thinking through this aspect of Kant's work is to direct us "to that place in the mind where my art work lives and where *you* have to live and be comfortable, if you want to meet any contemporary artwork, including mine, on its own territory" (91, emphasis in original). She adds: "To be at home in this place means to be comfortable with unsynthesized

intuitions: with unfamiliar things and happenings and states and presences that confound and silence the mind and decompose the ego. This is the place you are called on to visit if you want to get acquainted with a contemporary work of art at the intuitive level I have been discussing” (91).

How do we become comfortable with remaining open to that level of intuition? In juxtaposing her insights from this essay with her work in *Funk Lessons*, I am not making the argument that funk and the practices entailed there can be counted among what Piper calls unsynthesized intuitions; rather, my aim has been to think about how synthesis is an active possibility that does not move *wholly* in service of establishing understanding. Even if an appearance can be said to properly satisfy “the criteria of synthetic unity required by the understanding,” that synthesized object will inevitably make its unmediated appearance again, undoing the unity of the understanding, even if only for a moment. When Piper says, “The funk idiom of black working-class culture is an unbelievably rich and enriching art form that I disseminate in the performances not only to facilitate comprehension of my other work but also for the cultural benefit of my largely white, upper-middle-class audience,” it strikes me as important to consider the way in which that cultural benefit had been gifted to her as well, precisely because of her position as a black person thinking through the problematic of double consciousness in her navigation of middle-to-upper-middle-class institutions (“Notes on Funk I – IV”).

Keeping this in mind helps me think through what is dynamic about double consciousness, and the way DuBois’s theory carries the potential for change or transformation and functions as a description of what is so difficult about existing as a

black person in an antiblack world. The movement and activity implied in the act of “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” denies settlement, which is both a source of oppression and the condition for creative expression. Nyong’o addresses *Funk Lessons* at the close of “Brer Soul and the Mythic Being” by making the argument that the performance marks a shift in her work from the solipsistic to the social. He writes that “through her artful refusals of art-world self-consciousness, Piper has over time come to epitomize it. *Funk Lessons*, I would suggest, was an early response and acknowledgement of this dead-end; it was an experiment in pluralizing an experience she had up to that point in her career approached solipsistically” (*Afro-Fabulations* 96). I am curious about whether or not that dead end is the space of double consciousness, and whether it is possible to disentangle the solipsistic and the social in the kind of self-analysis (as in loosening up of the self) that Piper has been engaged in. Piper’s theory of unsynthesized intuitions, in combination with an emphasis on double consciousness as a verb, gives us a way to think about how this cultural benefit manifests itself, without turning that gift into property. Along those lines, *Rehearsing Blackness in the Theater of (Non) Being* is where autobiographical (de)composition and para-performance converge in a *Love of Things to Come*.

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