Moved By What Does Not Belong to Me:
Kinesthetic and Affective Possibilities of Staging Trauma

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Abstract

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This dissertation explores the ways in which narratives of trauma are staged and represented in contemporary drama within the United States. To do so, I engage in a close reading of Nina Raine's *Tribes* (produced at the Studio Theatre in 2014), Carson Kreitzer's *Self Defense, or Death of Some Salesmen* (produced at the University of Utah in 2016), Jeremy O. Harris's *Slave Play* (produced at the Taper Forum in 2022), and Lynn Nottage's *Sweat* (produced at ACT Theatre in 2022). These case studies engage with various intersections related to trauma, including race, gender, class, and disability, which I analyze as they appeal toward empathy. I question in what way the case studies mobilize a shared affect of empathy for audiences, and how this empathy operates in conjunction with witnessing acts of trauma. By using ethnography as a lens, I employ personal interviews and close readings of performances toward a dramaturgical analysis of these narratives. Drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed, Ann Cvetkoich, and Lindsay B. Cummings, I explore how these narratives of trauma transform audiences into witnesses, and how this implication impacts their potential and/or ability to empathize with specific characters. In tracking the affective shift for audiences, I suggest that production elements related to staging, choreography, and performance space can further intensify the visceral reactions of witnessing trauma, and in doing so shift the focus to encourage audiences to reflect on how and why they empathized. I argue that this dramaturgical work is both a necessary consideration for practitioners staging these narratives, and an important tool in analyzing the experience of shared affects.

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INTRODUCTION

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> Justice? I don't know. Maybe that's too great of an idea for the likes of us to grasp. I mean, look at us. But…but still, one part of it might be simple. It could be that it's a matter of everyone being in the same place. A place where each truth is spoken if it can be spoken. And at the end, if we are lucky, perhaps something like meaning can be drawn clean out of this chaos of blood and its claims on us. Is that what you want?
>
> Chorus C, *The Oresteia*

"We were working with the blood at one point, and somehow it got everywhere."

It's the thick of tech week when I stop by rehearsal for the University of Washington School of Drama's production of Ellen McLaughlin's *The Oresteia.*[1] I'm only there long enough to connect with one of the chorus members Michelle Conklin, who has graciously agreed to let me interview her about the process. Despite the long and difficult hours of technical rehearsal, Michelle notes that this is the point when the world of a play begins to feel real—what existed in theory in the rehearsal room is suddenly made manifest on stage. The moment she's describing to me comes at the end of act two, after Orestes has murdered his mother Clytemnestra. The chorus, briefly transformed into the furies, covers Orestes in blood to demonstrate that he must carry the consequences of these actions. For the chorus in our production, this meant surrounding MFA actor Nic Morden and dumping buckets of stage blood over his body. "I don't know what we did," Conklin says with a laugh, "but somehow the blood was everywhere, it was behind us, there was some already on the stage, it was in our hair, it was absolutely everywhere."[2]

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[1] McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. Directed by Amanda Rountree, performances by Nic Morden, Michelle Conklin, Iveliz Martel and others. 23 February 2023, University of Washington School of Drama, Floyd and Dolores Jones Playhouse, Seattle, Washington.

[2] Conklin, Michelle. Personal interview, 14 February 2023.

The blood was bound to get everywhere—both literally and metaphorically—due to the nature of the play itself. Despite the traditional mandate of ancient Greek tragedy that violence occur offstage, McLaughlin's adaptation of *The Oresteia* requires both the actual staging of traumatic events in its depiction of generational cycles of violence as well as a metaphorical understanding of how this trauma contaminates all who witness it. This becomes particularly clear in McLaughlin's retelling of events, as it falls to the chorus to debate, question, and judge what consequences Orestes must face for his crimes. I begin with this discussion of *The Oresteia* and Michelle's description as a way to illustrate the larger questions of this dissertation regarding affect, empathy, and trauma. The chorus, who in this adaptation hover around the periphery of this family as the engine that keeps things moving literally and figuratively, become the only ones who can properly assess how to move past this family's trauma. In this world, the judgement of Orestes becomes what the chorus calls "a human problem, and it demands a human solution."[3] Indeed, in McLaughlin's text and subsequently our production, this idea of the human solution operates from a place of empathy—not only being able to cognitively understand the sequence of events, but allowing oneself to be emotionally moved and changed by these events. Or potentially, as Chorus C describes it in the epigraph to this introduction, the act of gathering together as witnesses to empathize with and process traumatic events.

This dissertation explores the ways that the staging of trauma within the context of narrative drama impacts the affective experience of the audience by engaging with kinesthetic empathy. By framing empathy as an embodied act experienced through affective sensations and visceral reactions, I argue that staging trauma can provide a stronger visceral reaction for audiences, offering an embodied point of entry to empathize with individuals and communities

[3] McLaughlin, *The Oresteia*. Unpublished April 2019 draft, 73.

impacted by trauma. In this introduction, I describe the project's premise and literature review, and provide a breakdown of the chapters and the overall intentions of this project.

A Sociology of Pain: Premise

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, a leading scholar on the impact of trauma on the body, writes that traumatized individuals suffer tremendous difficulty in attempting to communicate their stories. He notes that for those attempting to share their trauma, "their bodies reexperience terror, rage, and helplessness, as well as the impulse to fight or flee, but these feelings are almost impossible to articulate. Trauma by nature drives us to the edge of comprehension, cutting us off from language based on common experience or an imaginable past."[4] It is in these moments of retelling where the trauma of past pain becomes so deep it becomes nearly impenetrable to those around. And yet, healing from trauma nevertheless requires sharing the burden with a support system. Sarah Ahmed deems this a "sociology of pain," an ethics that moves us closer to others, where the surfaces between us can touch, to feel "the trace of your pain on the surface of your body."[5] Complying with this ethical demand requires an imaginative leap into the specifics of what this pain must feel like. "I must act about that which I cannot know, rather than act insofar as I know," Ahmed writes. "I am moved by what does not belong to me."[6] This imaginative leap implicitly requires a suspension of disbelief to trust in the accuracy of pain, or as Elaine Scarry argues "to have pain is to have *certainty*; to hear about pain is to have *doubt*."[7]

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[4] van der Kolk, Bessel M. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Books, 2015, 43.
[5] Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Second ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014, 31.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, 13.

While there is significant research taking place on the safety, ethics, and care for actors who are asked to embody these narratives, my interest leads me to the spaces between performer and audience in these efforts to work with what Ahmed calls the sociology of pain. To be moved by what does not belong to us includes a level of vulnerability, and as Mark Cariston Seton suggests, "vulnerability involves the intercorporeal; that is, what transpires between bodies."[8] Unlike a rehearsal room, where these interactions are carefully charted through blocking, emotional beats, and choreography, the dynamic with an audience relies on the subjective and fluid nature of sensations, feelings, and emotions. Put another way, understanding what happens for an audience in these moments where trauma is either staged or invoked requires attention to the shifts and variations in affect. Using Michelle Conklin's example, for instance, the moment of pouring the blood onto Nic Morden as Orestes helped visually underscore the violence of his actions, but the blood also served as a tangible representation of the widespread traumatic impact on others—both for the actors interacting with the blood, and for the audiences witnessing it spread among the company. Drawing on similar approaches to those of the scholars whose work I engage, I find it most useful to employ methods of autoethnography where I can consider productions related to my first-hand knowledge to appropriately consider the impact and experience of affect within the space.

Given my attention to staging, physicality, and choreography, I use empathy as the foundation for my analysis. Unlike its counterpart sympathy, which engages the mental processes of imagining the circumstances of another in order to feel compassion or pity towards them, empathy also accounts for the physical and visceral reactions linked to these experiences as well. Within this project I engage Susan Leigh Foster's analysis in the way that empathy

[8] Seton, Mark Cariston. "Traumas of Acting Physical and Psychological Violence: How Fact and Fiction Shape Bodies for Better or Worse." *Performing Ethos* 4.1 (2013): 34.

evolved "to register a changing experience of physicality that, in turn, influenced *how* one felt another's feelings."[9] Foster applies this sense of empathy in conjunction with kinesthesia to articulate how various dances and choreographies could produce meaning "through the combination of kinesthetic sympathy, the experience of feeling what another's muscles were doing, with metakinesis, the process through which intention was deduced or inferred from movement."[10] I build on Foster's framework as it relates to dance by applying it to staged moments of trauma to investigate how empathy is deployed in my case studies—to consider, as Ahmed suggests in the sociology of pain, when we are "moved" by what does not belong to us.

Within this project, I focus on narrative drama that stages or engages with trauma rather than encompassing perspectives dramatized through verbatim theatre, documentary theatre, or staged testimonials. I do so in an effort to limit the scope of this project. (While examining the relationship of trauma and affect in these modes is a worthy and necessary scholarly pursuit, to undertake them all in a single dissertation would make the project unmanageable.) Further, narrative drama provides useful information in examining how a production appeals toward empathy due to the suspension of disbelief associated with these performances. In his analysis on emotional involvement with drama, Dolf Zillmann argues that audiences come to the theatre with "a set of empathetic response dispositions, part of which are reflexive, part of which are acquired in a large number of learning trials, part of which are acquired on the basis of a few critical emotional experiences, and part of which may derive from perspective taking."[11] Due to their prevalence, narrative dramas can function as part of the learning trials of empathetic responses as Zillmann describes, thereby reinscribing the expectation of empathizing. Zillmann goes on to

[9] Foster, Susan Leigh. *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*. New York: Routledge, 2011, 129.
[10] Foster, 156.
[11] Zillmann, Dolf. "Mechanisms of emotional involvement with drama." *Poetics*, 1994, 23, 44.

indicate that audiences "must be made to care about characters, either in a positive or negative way," and the stronger the affective disposition toward these characters, the greater emotional engagement with the narrative.[12] These affective dispositions are not concrete, however, and Zillmann indicates that "every act of [the characters], witnessed or revealed, is seen as potentially modifying affective dispositions toward them," and that an eventual "reversal of affective disposition toward characters may, in fact, greatly contribute to emotional involvement."[13] With this in mind, I suggest in this project that kinesthetic empathy experienced through staging can similarly assist in forming the affective dispositions toward characters, especially when considered with narratives of trauma.

While theatre is often celebrated for its ability to inspire empathy in audiences, empathy alone can produce gaps that limit a production's affective capabilities. These gaps, which occur when empathy appears as the final goal or achievement for an audience, can result in a lack of engagement with the larger issues discussed once they exit the theatre. (For example, in work conducted by Dani Snyder-Young regarding privilege, race, and theatre for social change, she noted that audiences typically seek to present themselves as "*good white people*" by simply attending productions that discuss themes of race and power without interrogating their own complicity in white supremacy. [14]) In considering how empathy might promote a sense of relationality rather than an insulated sense of self-satisfaction, the sensation of empathizing can function as a starting point for critical engagement and reflection. Lindsay B. Cummings suggests that empathy can function as a site of dialogue, which "shifts the question from 'did you empathize?' in which empathy itself is the end goal, to something like 'what has the process of

[12] Zillmann, 48.
[13] Zillmann, 49.
[14] Snyder-Young, Dani. *Privileged Spectatorship: Theatrical Interventions in White Supremacy*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020, 124.

empathizing caused you to think, feel, wonder, or question?'"[15] Further, Julie Burrell analyzes how empathy secures the hegemony of existing power structures, questioning "can one empathize with another's trauma when this others' pain clearly challenges ones' own narrative of self?"[16] Burrell's analysis relates directly to settler colonialism and the tension between indigenous perspectives onstage and white settler gazes, an approach that can also extend to broader conversations on white supremacy in theatre. Kinesthetic empathy becomes a useful framework for this work, as it engages with the immediate and visceral reactions to these moments of trauma as the origin point for empathy. Wanda Strukus defines kinesthetic empathy as "automatic, involuntary, kinesthetic response of one body to another" that produces a "feeling of sharing another person's movement."[17] Although these moments of automatic and involuntary kinesthetic response can produce discomfort for audiences, I suggest here that it follows Cummings' suggestion of moving from "did you empathize?" to "what did the process of empathizing cause you to think, feel, wonder, or question?" In constellating the relationship between representations of trauma, circulation of affect, and dialogic empathy, I question how productions stage and evoke trauma and how that affect lands across audiences within a particular time and location.

Literature Review

To engage with affect is to engage with trauma and all that it carries. In describing the "affective turn," cultural theorist Patricia Tincineto Clough suggests that affect theory seeks to

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[15]Cummings, Lindsay B. *Empathy as Dialogue in Theatre and Performance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 27.

[16] Burrell, Julie. "Staging Empathy's Limit Point: First Nations Theatre and the Challenges of Self-Representation on a Settler-State Stage." *Theatres of Affect: New Essays on Canadian Theatre.* Hurley, Erin, editor. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2014, 250.

[17] Strukus, Wanda. "Mining the Gap: Physically Integrated Performance and Kinesthetic Empathy." *The Journal of Theory and Dramatic Criticism*, Spring 2011, 89

respond to the "analytic challenges of ongoing war, trauma, torture, massacre, and counter/terrorism" particularly through examining the "body's capacity to act, to engage, to connect, such that autoaffectation is linked to the self-feeling of being alive—that is, aliveness or vitality."[18] Put another way, large-scale cases of cultural trauma throughout the late 1990s and into the 2000s have led to a moment that reconsiders the relationship to the body. My case studies, all of which have occurred in the last decade, highlight some of the ways the embodied experience has shifted during this timeframe.

Perhaps the most well-known scholar working in affect theory, Sara Ahmed identifies the uneven nature of affects and emotions, suggesting that these forces shape our bodies, sense of self, and sense of community. Emotions function as a form of sociality, where feelings "become a form of social presence rather than self-presence."[19] In *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Ahmed argues that emotions create our sense of boundaries—both in terms of the internal and external, and between the self and other. Emotions are both sticky and mobile, having the ability to connect us and make attachments, orienting us either close to or further away from various objects.[20] Attention to affect becomes useful in understanding how these sticky attachments get manipulated, how the boundaries of community tighten around emotions of hate, fear, or disgust. While theatre engages with the wide spectrum of emotions that Ahmed analyzes, it is her work on pain that resonates most deeply with representations of trauma onstage.

Pain, broadly considered universal in that everyone experiences it to some degree, remains limited in understanding by the boundaries of the individual. As Ahmed has observed, "I become aware of bodily limits as my bodily dwelling or dwelling place when I am in pain. Pain

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[18] Clough, Patricia Ticineto, and Halley, Jean O'Malley. *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. E-Duke Books Scholarly Collection. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, 1, 2.
[19] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotions*, 10.
[20] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10.

is therefore bound up with how we inhabit the world, how we live in relationship to the surfaces, bodies, and objects that make up our dwelling places."[21] Pain, when understood as a relational exercise of where we end and others begin, offers a potential site of connection when we invite others to understand our pain. Despite its singularity to the individual, we continue to find ways to express or acknowledge our pain beyond ourselves, through language, observation, and metaphor, so that others may sympathize and understand our pain. But what is to be done when the pain persists? How does pain, when "bound up" with how we inhabit the world, impact the connection to others when transformed into trauma? Ahmed deems this affective connection as "sociology of pain," an ethics that moves us closer to others, where the surfaces between us can touch, to feel "the trace of your pain on the surface of your body."[22] In order to comply with this ethical demand, as described in the Premise section, above, both theatre practitioner and audience member must undergo an imaginative leap into the specifics of what this pain must feel like—"I must act about that which I cannot know, rather than act insofar as I know. I am moved by what does not belong to me."[23]

To experience this sociology of pain that Ahmed outlines, it is important to note not only how affect sticks to bodies, but how it moves among groups. Published the same year as *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, philosopher Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect* similarly takes up the question of how communities transmit affect. Brennan's argument follows alongside Ahmed's, namely addressing the perspective that affects "come via an interaction with other people and an environment."[24] Like Ahmed, Brennan argues that affects "are preeminently

[21] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 27.
[22] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 31.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Brennan, Teresa. *The Transmission of Affect*, Cornell University Press, 2004. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/washington/detail.action?docID=3138638, 3.

social. And they are there first, before we are. They preexist us; they are outside as well as within us."[25] Brennan's argument stresses the importance of the senses in relation to affect. The conscious process of understanding the affect, however, becomes a different matter. Brennan notes that when we become consciously aware of something, the senses "produce knowledge that can be communicated either to oneself or another in language (when the words exist or can be learned), but the conscious awareness it produces precedes that expression, and may stumble for words, although it will run after the words when it sees or hears them."[26] Awareness of affect comes before the ability to translate it into feeling or the ability to articulate it to others. In order to apply Ahmed's sociology of pain, the awareness of affect still relies on language as the next necessary step in communication to trace the surface of pain. Without the words to properly describe the changes in affect, pain can remain isolating rather than moving individuals closer.

Given affect's connection to the traumatic, the tension between experiencing affect as an embodied sensation and the ability to describe the affect through language becomes more necessary and more challenging. Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, a leading scholar on PTSD, trauma, and its effects on the body, indicates that the feelings of trauma remain almost impossible to articulate, and that "trauma by nature drives us to the edge of comprehension, cutting us off from language based on common experience or an imaginable past."[27] Van der Kolk argues that the turning point in understanding trauma came in the 1980s, when Vietnam veterans worked with New York psychoanalysts to lobby for post-traumatic stress disorder as a legitimate diagnosis.[28] It wasn't until PTSD was formalized in this way that the biology of trauma could be studied.

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[25] Brennan, 65.
[26] Brennan, 137.
[27] van der Kolk, 43.
[28] van der Kolk, 19

Even in this moment where the diagnosis of trauma was developing, literary theory still sought ways to understand the expression of pain despite the difficulty of its communication. Elaine Scarry's work in *The Body in Pain* in 1985 and Cathy Caruth's 1996 publication *Unclaimed Experience* both include analysis of trauma and narrative and point to the inexpressibility of pain and trauma as a central feature. Caruth, drawing on Freud's psychoanalysis, indicates that traumatic experience both "defies and demands our witness." It can, however, "never be asked in a straightforward way, but must, indeed, also be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary; a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding."[29] Similarly, Scarry argues for language as the process by which pain enters the public sphere, although the problem of recognizing and addressing pain gets bound up in the problem of power. Pain becomes that which cannot be denied at the same time that it cannot be confirmed, or as Scarry reflects, "to have pain is to have *certainty*; to hear about pain is to have *doubt*."[30] PTSD as diagnosis offered an exterior recognition of the validity of traumatic pain. Language, however, still falls short in fully representing pain.

In his work on the treatment of trauma, van der Kolk describes how processing trauma cannot rely on language given the way that the brain responds to traumatic memories—when triggered, flashbacks can cause the individual to react physically and neurologically as if the trauma was currently happening, deactivating the brain's language centers.[31] In lab experiments where doctors reactivated trauma, van der Kolk observed how "the frontal lobe shuts down,

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[29] Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, 14-15.
[30] Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, 13.
[31] van der Kolk, 43-45. Dr. van der Kolk describes here that Broca's area, one of the speech centers of the brain, often goes "offline" when a traumatic flashback was triggered in a patient. With the deactivation in the speech center, the right brain reacts by recalling memories of sound, touch, smell, and emotions associated with the traumatic event, thus "rekindling" the traumatic experience in the present.

including, as we've already seen, the region necessary to put feelings into words, the region that creates our sense of location in time, and the thalamus, which integrates the raw data of incoming sensation."[32] In other words, this deactivation of the frontal lobe and the left hemisphere of the brain causes the right brain to react as if the traumatic event was taking place in the present, while also limiting or losing executive function.[33] This research supports the observations made by Scarry and Caruth—trauma exists beyond language, while its consequences can still be viscerally experienced.

Affect, as a theory responding to and negotiating the consequences of trauma, then moves beyond language to address these visceral and sensory experiences. For the traumatized individual, van der Kolk suggests self-observation based in the body, "which speaks through sensations, tone of voice, and body tensions. Being able to perceive visceral sensations is the very foundation of emotional awareness."[34] However, as both Brennan and Ahmed identify, emotions and affects cannot be contained to the individual—they circulate socially among bodies. It is not just observing the sensations that arise in the body but negotiating how those sensations relate to the larger affect. The transformation of affect, as Brennan observes, "requires being in the world, rather than living the life of the mind. It requires subjecting oneself to eddies or event torrents of affects, while somehow maintaining equilibrium."[35] Studying and utilizing affect requires both a sense of one's own subjectivity and self-awareness, as well as being open and sensitive to the influences of the affects surrounding us.

These moments when larger, community-based affects impact us emotionally often get categorized as opportunities for empathy, where we are encouraged to "feel with" another. In

[32] van der Kolk, 178.
[33] van der Kolk, 45, 178.
[34] van der Kolk, 240.
[35] Brennan, 135.

discussing the relationship between empathy and theatre, Lindsay B. Cummings highlights the close association between empathy and the theatre, where "this ability to give a distant 'other' an embodied, affective presence is what makes theatre seem, to many, an ideal medium for encouraging empathy."[36] For example, in analyzing the National Theatre of Scotland's production of *Black Watch,* Cummings describes the play's use of semi-documentary approaches to illuminate the experiences of Scottish soldiers during the Iraq war, noting how the production included choreographic and design elements to make the emotional impact of wartime tangible for the audience. These production choices proved effective—one critic called it "an expressive, hellish stress-dream," and Cummings herself admitted to flinching in her seat—calling even greater attention to the ways war and its traumatic effects could never be fully communicated.[37] Jill Dolan, engaging with affect theory in the midst of the affective turn, observes what she defines as utopian performatives, or affective moments "in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense."[38] The success of these utopian performatives for Dolan is based solely on the magnitude of the affective sensation; Dolan argues how "that feeling of hope, or that feeling of desire, embodied by that sudden hollow space in the pit of my stomach that drops me into an erotics of connection and commonality—perhaps such an intensity of feeling as politics enough for utopian performatives."[39] While the positivity

[36] Cummings, 5.
[37] Cummings, 50-53. Cummings further explores this empathetic gap as a site of productive inquiry on the traumas of war for audiences, particularly as the characters themselves comment on the inability to express their experiences. Within the play, one soldier goes so far to tell the interviewer (appropriately named "Writer"), "Go tay fucking Baghdad if you want tay ken what it's like."
[38] Dolan, Jill. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. Accessed March 29, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central, 5.
[39] Dolan, 19.

of utopian performatives may be enough for Dolan, later scholars have suggested the limits of empathy as a primary affect for theatre, particularly in relation to narratives informed by trauma. In challenging the utility of empathy, Cummings argues that empathy fills the space between singularity and generalizability, where an individualized narrative allows it to reach others, but in which these narratives threaten to rely too heavily on existing patterns that reiterate overly familiar conventions.[40] These conventions include moments of attributing the consequences of trauma to the individual themselves. As Dani Snyder-Young discusses in *Privileged Spectatorship* regarding instances of white supremacy in the theatre, white audiences viewing realistic narrative drama "misrecognized realistically drawn white characters who perform their whiteness in ungraceful hurtful ways as bad, racist white people, and find ways to distance themselves from these characters."[41]

As I pursue research more directly focused on the affective experience of the audience, I draw from Miriam Haughton's analysis on performances of trauma. In her 2018 study of Irish theatre, Haughton outlines the ways in which theatre and performance stage trauma as a process to bring the "bodies in shadow" into the center stage of discourse. Haughton identifies that her study became "confronted with, and at times overwhelmed by, the magnitude of theatre and performance which tell of crimes against women."[42] This magnitude led to an exploration of the ways that this particularly female trauma was explored by Irish theatre artists. For instance, Haughton includes analysis of ANU's production *Laundry*, a production that dramatizes the long and troubled history of the Magdalene Laundry organizations run by the Irish government and

[40] Cummings, 192-93.
[41] Snyder-Young, 124
[42] Haughton, Miriam. *Staging Trauma: Bodies in Shadow*. Palgrave/Contemporary Performance InterActions, 2018, 14.

the Roman Catholic Church.[43] Performed in former Magdalene Laundry buildings, this production provided an opportunity to "visibly and viscerally merge the bodies of the past with the bodies of the present," wherein the female body is brought out of the shadows and into public discourse through the apparatus of staging.[44] Her analysis ultimately indicates that "the efficacy of this performance encounter, however, depends on the relationship of trust that occurs between the performance and the audience within the scope of the event."[45] Furthermore, Haughton points to the specificity of each circumstance of trauma, allowing them to "constitute art in and of themselves but also become performative beyond their initial iteration."[46]

Within the scope of my project, I seek to build on Haughton's main ideas by applying these concepts of staging as a metaphorical extension of trauma to case studies from the United States. Just as Haughton recognizes the way that these instances of trauma reveal longer national traumatic histories in Ireland, I consider the traumas that connect more deeply to the specifics of American national history and identity. I further expand on Haughton's concept of bringing the traumatized body in shadow to center stage by questioning which bodies are brought to light in these cases, and how each production creates as it were, a "target point" toward which they aim to direct their audiences' empathy. I would also like to pick up one of the methodological questions posed by Haughton: "in light of this performance in the sociopolitical context it took place in, how does one theorize the role of the audience when it encounters material that is politically and socially unresolved in the contemporary moment? Does the encounter force, or

[43] Throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Magdalene Laundries were used as institutions in the place of mental and psychiatric asylums, as well as to imprison "fallen" women. Exact figures of how many women were housed at the laundries cannot be known, although according to Haughton it is currently estimated at approximately 30,000.
[44] Haughton, Miriam. *Staging Trauma: Bodies in Shadow*. Palgrave/Contemporary Performance InterActions, 2018, 118.
[45] Haughton, 31.
[46] Ibid.

offer, a role of witness rather than of audience/spectator/participant?"[47] The lack of resolution that Haughton points to addresses a significant aspect of my own research interest: when staging moments of trauma, how does the audience recognize their own complicity in the systems that created or perpetuate these acts of trauma and harm?

Julie Burrell takes up a similar question about the politics of empathy in relation to the white settler-colonial gaze in her discussion of a contemporary production of the dance-drama ritual *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi*. As a Mayan court drama that has remained relatively unchanged despite a history of Hispanic colonization of Guatemala, *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* speaks to a Mayan past that mourns a loss of sovereignty to European powers.[48] The production that Burrell analyzes was performed by Ondinnok, a Canadian theatre company with choices that specifically foregrounded contemporary struggles for Indigenous communities' existence in the Canadian settler colonial state. The challenge, Burrell argues, is to perform the Indigenous trauma and loss that exists both within the text itself and as a production choice that comments on current issues. Using critical race theory as a starting point, Burrell questions "how might we think about empathy in societies that are predicated, as Filewood and others argue, on the erasure and displacement of Indigenous populations? How might empathy with an Indigenous other pose a threat to the coherence of the settler-colonial edifice?"[49] Empathy cannot land evenly on an audience comprised primarily of non-Indigenous attendees, and recognition of empathy with the Indigenous subject requires a certain amount of acknowledgment of one's participation in the erasure and displacement of Indigenous populations. Burrell's case study echoes Cummings' argument, as Cummings questions "how often do we, as spectators in the theater, think we 'have'

[47] Haughton, 149.
[48] Burrell, 247, 248.
[49] Burrell, 255.

the story? …If we understand empathy as one of the primary goals of theater spectatorship, might we rush to 'achieve' it or to possess some part of another's experience without heeding warnings that our understanding is flawed and our empathy unwelcome?"[50]

The nature of unwelcome empathy that Cummings introduces is similarly reflected in the fieldwork conducted by Dani Snyder-Young regarding privilege, race, and theatre for social change. Coming in the wake of the 2020 summer of uprisings,[51] Snyder-Young notes that audiences typically seek to present themselves as "*good white people*" and often leave the theatre without interrogating their own complicity in white supremacy, suggesting that empathy may become a hinderance to social change rather than a tool.[52] This gap between the ways productions are interpreted by white audiences versus audiences of color speaks to the uneven and unequal nature of affect. As Burrell pointed out in her case study, productions that negotiate traumatic histories limit the use value of empathy as they often require audiences to address their own complicity. In Burrell's case, Ondinnok sought to dramatize the loss of a culture that had existed prior to colonial forces while commenting on the contemporary calls for Indigenous sovereignty and self-governance. What resulted were moments that remained impenetrable to white audiences, whether through untranslated passages of Mayan, French, or Spanish, or using multiple actors to embody the same character. Evoking the traumatic loss of culture by establishing the living, contemporary connections resulted in what one critic called "an indescribable sense of vertigo."[53] Further, the flexibility of production choices can complicate this affective gap—as Cummings observes, "is our sense of empathetic engagement with the

[50] Cummings, 17.
[51] Here I refer to the nation-wide protests, rallies, and marches that took place starting in March of 2020 after the unlawful death of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers. Within the theatre community, these protests sparked conversations on white supremacy within the industry, as well as movements like "We See You White American Theatre," organized to promote anti-racist theatre practices.
[52] Snyder-Young, 124.
[53] Burrell, 260-261.

performer, the character she represents, or somewhere in between? Can we even tell? To what degree does the performance encourage us to see that character as representative of a larger social group, to move from singularity to generality?"[54]

The complexities of uneven affect and limits of empathy deepen with the introduction of trauma. In her analysis of affect as a mode of building community in world politics, Emma Hutchison articulates the paradox of trauma, in that it "isolates individuals, yet it can also seep out, affecting those who surround and bear witness and, in doing so, shaped political communities."[55] Hutchison points to the primary requisite of a community constructed by and through trauma in that "individual experiences of trauma must be both understood by and made meaningful to others."[56] In the context of affect theory Ahmed argues the same point, that "it is because no one can know what it feels like to have my pain, but I want loved others to acknowledge how I feel. The solitariness of pain is intimately tied up with its implication in relation to others."[57] Theatre can function to make individual experiences of trauma meaningful to others, but in making the narrative more transmissible it runs the risk of diluting or misplacing empathy, as Cummings has observed, and I have previously discussed here.

Although the affective turn was precipitated by large-scale national traumas, for this project I engage with Ann Cvetkovich's framework of trauma and affect, moving beyond narratives of trauma survivors to "those whose experiences circulate in the vicinity of trauma and are marked by it," which encompasses both extreme trauma and "moments of everyday emotional distress that are often the only sign that trauma's effects are still being felt."[58]

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[54] Cummings, 194.
[55] Hutchison, Emma. *Affective Communities in World Politics: Collective Emotions after Trauma*. Cambridge Studies in International Relations; 140. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 3.
[56] Hutchison, 54.
[57] Ahmed, 29.
[58] Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings*. Duke University Press, 2003, 3.

Following the 2020 uprisings and the coronavirus pandemic, these elements of everyday emotional distress have become more visible and tangible, particularly for populations whose lived experience already included a constant state of low level trauma. (For example, BIPOC individuals living in a culture steeped in white supremacy.) The ability to sense, identify, and articulate the affects associated with and related to trauma has sharpened in this moment, magnifying the situations when empathy is not only unwelcome, but potentially destructive. Performance reviews of each of my case studies, including those from journalistic publications as well as scholarly analyses, will provide useful insight into the moments of transmitted affect, as well as potential frameworks for how audiences should interpret these affects. In a contemporary context where theatres as institutions must constantly prove and demonstrate their value to communities, the ability to measure or quantify empathy becomes a significant focus. Often, a shared affect among an audience (as described in these case studies of a shared gasp, tears, or other expressions of emotions) becomes synonymous with empathy—an example of an audiences' socially appropriate emotional engagement with the material that they've witnessed. Within these case studies, I grapple with moments where empathy does not necessarily provide a cathartic release of tears, but perhaps the discomfort of misplaced laughter, the challenge of getting lost in translation, or the unexpected realization of large-scale harm. It is necessary to evaluate how these affective shifts can potentially catalyze feelings of empathy, particularly when narratives of pain, violence, and trauma appear to be the predominant focus.

Theories and Methodologies

I draw on Cvetkovich's concept of an archive of feelings, and the "exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception."[59] In applying this concept to theatre, my analysis goes beyond examining the script itself to the specificity of a production: following Haughton's work on feminist performances related to sexual violence, I similarly utilize a dramaturgical approach that incorporates analysis of each production's location, social context, marketing and critical reception (including reviews in local publications alongside scholarly reviews), as well as the creative choices made by the production team. I pay particular attention to responses that reflect physical and visceral reactions in order to develop an understanding of kinesthetic empathy in relation to each of these case studies. (This includes investigating many of my own embodied experiences through autoethnography as part of the analysis related to these productions.) I build on the work by Cummings related to dialogic empathy, namely her conclusions that "we have to consider not whether or not we empathized, but *what empathy has led us to think and feel, and why*."[60] I analyze how these productions transmit and circulate affect to identify how the representation of trauma either evokes Ahmed's imaginative leap—to be moved by that which does not belong to me—or Scarry's lack of certainty—to only hear of pain and subsequently doubt.

The primary component of my methodology is based in ethnography. My methodological approach exists in conversation with Dorinne Kondo's theories on the racialized structures of inequality where "the racialization of imagination and creativity for the artist extends to the

[59] Cvetkovich, 7.
[60] Cummings, 194, emphasis in original.

imaginations of the audience through racial affect."[61] I similarly approach my ethnographic work by way of dramaturgy in a similar manner to Kondo, with dramaturgical critique as an "intellectual/political intervention" that offers a step towards the reparative in "creating different theatrical/political alternatives."[62] Given the ways that ethnography understands knowledge as embodied and situated, it weaves into analysis that categorizes physical reactions or emotional states as affect.

I do not define this project as an ethnographic study—rather, it is a dramaturgical study that emphasizes the ethnographic elements. Here, I draw on the definitions of ethnography by Dwight Conquergood, as he states that "ethnographers study the diversity and unity of cultural performance as a universal human resource for deepening and clarifying the meaningfulness of a life. They help us see performance with all its moral entailments, not as a flight from lived responsibilities."[63] I suggest within the context of my analysis that this understanding of ethnography also applies to production dramaturgy. Much in the same way that an ethnographer studies the contours and nuances of cultures and communities, so does a dramaturg in a specific context for a given theatrical production. The dialogic performance that Conquergood offers to create a genuine understanding of others includes "a way of having intimate conversation with other people and cultures" so that "instead of speaking about them, one speaks to and with them."[64] The production dramaturg similarly provides a space for audiences to "speak to and with" artists and practitioners based on the dramaturgical framing of a production. I utilize my experience and training in production dramaturgy towards this analysis to address the importance

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[61] Kondo, Dorinne K. *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018, 35.
[62] Kondo, 41-42.
[63] Conquergood, Dwight. "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance." *Literature in Performance*, 1985, vol 5, no 2, 1.
[64] Conquergood, 10.

of framing for each of these productions. By articulating the specific community contexts of each case study, I explore the central dramaturgical question of "why this play now" for each play. Although each of these case studies take up traumatic perspectives, I question how the dramaturgy of these productions indicate how audiences should empathize, and to what end this empathy is useful. Within these case studies, I offer that dramaturgical framing becomes imperative, particularly when productions take on narratives of trauma, so that the affective shifts that take place can be contextualized in meaningful and empathetic ways specific to their communities.

Incorporating affect alongside these methods can assist in articulating how affect lands unevenly on bodies due to the range of subjectivities. I also draw on the work of Julie Burrell in her work on *Xajoj Tun Rabinal Achi* toward what she refers to as a "desire-based dramaturgical approach."[65] At this intersection between the post-colonial and the affective, Burrell addresses the potential for unevenness of affect present in performance—unlike the utopian performatives that bring audiences together into an interpretive community, Burrell identifies that moving the focus away from empathy allows the trauma of settler colonialism to extend beyond events of the past to reverberations in the present. Similarly, for each study I take into account the specific location, community, and timeframe in analyzing these productions in order to understand how these contexts inform the meaning made onstage.

In order to move through these case studies, I first identify how each play speaks to issues of trauma, and then I examine how the specific production engages that trauma on stage, paying particular attention to choreographic and sensory elements and their affective consequences. This requires being attentive to the intersections of identity and trauma in each

[65] Burrell, 258.

case and drawing on necessary methodologies. For my first chapter, I analyze *Tribes,* Nina Raine's play that centers the conflict between hearing family members and their Deaf son. This includes building on conversations of disability and performance. As Petra Kuppers argues, "the experience of disability is often figured as a traumatic personal history, culturally marked as 'private' tragedy. Within literature and film, disability often becomes the symptom of trauma: like Freud's hysterical women, disabled actors are ready to carry the stigma of their personal histories as readable signs on their bodies."[66] This shorthand of disability as a marker of past trauma offers a narrative device that defines a character's life, "open for all to read."[67] Extending this toward *Tribes,* this ability to "read" disability and trauma through the body gets further complicated by the gestural nature of American Sign Language. The kinesthetic empathy produced in watching ASL performance can extend to hearing audiences, altering the entry point into empathizing with the linguistic divides within the family. I examine the 2014 production of *Tribes* at Studio Theatre in particular due to their relationship with Gallaudet University, the only Deaf institution in the country. I analyze how specific choices related to the production (especially those related to language and accessibility) impacted the overall affective impact for audiences.

A serial killer may initially appear an unlikely figure for audiences to empathize with, but Kreitzer's approach in *Self Defense, or Death of Some Salesmen* emphasizes the body as the central location for trauma in cases of sexual violence to appeal toward a sense of empathy. In my second chapter I analyze how descriptions of assault and rape within the play's dialogue employ visceral rhetorics, the "bone deep, felt sense of communication that transpires from a position of flesh and wound in addition to the processes that seek to erase the bodies

[66] Kuppers, Petra. *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge*. New York: Routledge, 2003, 91.
[67] Ibid.

communicating from this very perspective."[68] The use of live performance to embody this rhetoric similarly continues to remind the audience of the body that exists as the site of this trauma. The type of empathy that Kreitzer's text seems to evoke seems to center on Jolene as she continually justifies and rationalizes the seven murders she committed in which case as Barbara Ozieblo argues "the spectator can hardly identify with a confessed murderer, and Kreizer does not ask her to; but she can identify with a woman who needs to work and whose life is threatened."[69] While Ozieblo's analysis focuses on the structure of Kreitzer's text, her own admitted lack of personal experience or audience recollection from a staging of *Self Defense* cannot fully speak to the affective possibilities within a production. In 2016, I worked as a dramaturg on a production of *Self Defense* produced by the University of Utah Department of Theatre. Through extensive collaboration with the director and company of actors, our production sought not only to show Jolene as an empathetic character, but to honor Kreitzer's dedication of the play "to all those whose names we don't know," a reference to the significant number of unsolved murder cases involving sex workers through choreographing a female ensemble. Taking up Ahmed's charge of the ethics within a sociology of pain, I explore how our production choices of staging, choreography, and casting recentered the body as site of trauma, particularly in terms of sex work and sexual violence, and how these choices shifted the affective experience for the audience.

Ostensibly a playwright with no consideration for the audiences' feelings, sympathetic or otherwise, Jeremy O. Harris has garnered high praise and vicious critique for his work on *Slave*

[68] Larson, Stephanie R. *What It Feels Like: Visceral Rhetoric and the Politics of Rape Culture*. Vol. 27. Penn State University Press, 2021, 4.
[69] Ozieblo, Barbara. "The Victim and the Audience's Pleasure: An Exploration of Carson Kreitzer's Self Defense and Stefanie Zadravec's Honey Brown Eyes." In *Performing Gender Violence: Plays by Contemporary American Women Dramatists*, 155. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 168.

Play, the case study for my third chapter. Critics have expressed that they play was written for a white audience and therefore "points to a misunderstanding of the white gaze on black women's bodies,"[70] demonstrated most clearly in the play's treatment of Kaneisha. Although Kaneisha is often framed as the main character in marketing and reviews, critics have challenged her lack of involvement in the play as example of the hypervisibility of Black women, where depictions frame them as both "objects of desire and scorn," and "invisible entities who fail to register as significant."[71] Indeed, I argue that Kaneisha actually becomes an example of hyperinvisibility, which, as Amber Johnson writes, builds on the hypervisibility of "stereotyping the body so much that the stereotypes become more visible, and thus believable," to the point where these stereotypes even replace bodies in interpersonal interactions, rendering them hyperinvisible.[72] Although the given circumstances of *Slave Play* appear to unite the experiences of the Black and non-white characters as they attempt to break down the racial stereotypes they experience in their relationships, Kaneisha's silence throughout the majority of the play makes it difficult to see her breaking down this hypervisibility. In developing this argument, I place my own experiences seeing the 2022 West Coast premiere of *Slave Play* at the Taper Forum in Los Angeles in conversation with the play's initial origins and development at the Yale School of Drama. I do so to articulate the importance of geographic and community context regarding *Slave Play*, suggesting that the further removed the play gets from the circumstances of its inception (a thesis project at Yale during a particularly strained moment for equity and inclusion) the greater the empathetic gap becomes—particularly in terms of Kaneisha's treatment within the play. I argue

[70] Ray, Ashley, [@theeashleyray], "I don't have the exact line…" thread. *Twitter*. 11 Feb. 2022.
[71] Joseph, Ralina L. *Postracial Resistance: Black Women, Media, and the Uses of Strategic Ambiguity.* New York University Press, 2018, 7.
[72] Johnson, Amber. "Straight Outta Erasure: Black Girl Magic Claps Back to the Hyperinvisibility of Black Women in Straight Outta Compton." *National Political Science Review* 19, no. 2 (2018): 36.

that *Slave Play,* by staging a moment of extreme harm and violence against her in the final moment actually marks Kaneisha as more hyperinvisible rather than less. In this case, the affective experience of witnessing and staging trauma works against the ethical demand associated with Ahmed's sociology of pain. Reducing Kaneisha to a hyperinvisible state moves the trauma of the event to the cultural stereotypes associated with Blackness and womanhood.

Lynn Nottage's work in *Sweat* similarly takes up Blackness and womanhood while also examining the impact of class and labor, which I engage in my final chapter. In her analysis of *Sweat* as Black feminist theatre, Julie Burrell notes that within the play "racial formation and racism are not secondary to or in proximity to questions of labor but form the very core of the US political economy," giving rise to a white nostalgia reflected among the white characters.[73] I build on Burrell's analysis of the play as a statement the "intensely personal, intimate, and physical repercussions of racial capitalism on the bodies and psyches of workers"[74] within the context of the 2022 production at Seattle's ACT Theatre. Taking up what Burrell identifies as Nottage speaking to the optimistic political moment of Obama and the predictions of the rise of Trump's conservative extremism, I explore how this background influences the affect of the play for audiences, particularly in naming the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Engaging with Cummings' work of dialogic empathy to question "*what empathy has led us to think and feel, and why*," my fieldwork considers whether or not a major labor movement within the last two years has shifted the empathetic focus within the play. Burrell's conclusion that "Nottage's vision of the 'next moment'…does not predict a bright future for US workers" may land differently among audience members on the heels of rising union participation, driven

[73] Burrell, Julie. "Postindustrial Futurities in Contemporary Black Feminist Theater: Lynn Nottage's Sweat, Dominique Morisseau's Skeleton Crew, and Lisa Langford's The Art of Longing." *Frontiers (Boulder)* 42, no. 1 (2021), 69.
[74] Burrell, "Postindustrial Futurities," 70.

predominantly by young organizers.[75] I argue that the context of the pandemic—including economic devastation, incredible strain on the labor force, and hyperawareness of physical health—reframes the appeals to empathy within *Sweat*, seen most clearly in ACT's production. In my conclusion, I return to *The Oresteia* and McLaughlin's call to community empathy in the face of traumatic events. In considering the UW production as a site of dialogic empathy, I take up Susan Cain's call toward the bittersweet, to transform pain into beauty. Building on Cummings' initial questions of "what empathizing caused you to think, feel, wonder, or question," I further ask how the embodied act of empathizing can reframe narratives of trauma.

[75] I refer here to the wins by the Amazon Labor Union and Starbucks Workers United on 1 April 2022, both of which include union organizing by young individuals within the organization rather than seasoned union officials. Given that both Amazon and Starbucks have deep corporate roots in Seattle, ACT's production may have an even stronger resonance with the labor movement.

CHAPTER ONE:

Sign of the Times:
Affect, Disability, and d/Deafness in *Tribes*

Christopher: Because this is where it gets interesting. I do words, Sylvia, that's what I do.

Ruth: He's a slut for words.

Christopher: And I would say that if your language is a bit black and white then it makes *you* a bit black and white. Because how can you feel a feeling unless you have a word for it? (*beat*)

Sylvia: Deaf people can be more honest.

Christopher: More honest? Or more tactless?

Sylvia: (*raising her voice*) Are you asking me whether signing makes you a coarser person because signing is a coarse language? Whether deaf people are emotionally deaf as well—lack empathy?

Beth: No, he's not asking that.

Daniel: Yes, he is asking that.

Beth and Ruth: Dan!

Daniel: Well, he *is*.

Sylvia: Well then I'll be coarse soon. Deaf people can be blunt and direct and tactless. And paranoid. It's true. I see it in my parents.
(*beat*)

Ruth: (*In an undertone*) Well done Dan.

Beth: To be honest *you're* both being pretty coarse and tactless, Daniel. And Christopher.
Sylvia…

Sylvia: (*loudly*) Sorry, it upsets me because I'm going deaf and actually, you're talking about my family. (*Silence. Sylvia is on the verge of tears and no one knows what to do. Billy takes her hand.*)

Beth: (*whispering*) Oh dear… (*Silence.*)

Tribes

The National Deaf Life Museum reminds me of most museums I've visited. As I enter, tall panels of text and images form a chronological history of deaf culture and language in the large open space of the former chapel. Located on the campus of Gallaudet University in Washington DC, the only institution for higher education centered on serving Deaf and Hard of Hearing students, this museum features a useful history of Deaf culture in the United States. Gallaudet has a reputation as a bilingual institution—providing education in both English and American Sign Language—but its focus and mission remains highly dedicated to the needs of the Deaf community. The exhibit at the National Deaf Life Museum is no different, as each element highlights both the specific struggles of deaf individuals since the nineteenth century as well as significant successes for advocacy and representation. The exhibit also celebrates the artistic endeavors of the deaf community—many of which are related to performances in theatre and drama.

In documenting this history, the National Deaf Life Museum focuses much of its narrative on the formation and dissemination of American Sign Language. ASL, which was initially simply referred to as "the sign language" or "the natural language of signs," has its origins in the eighteenth century, but it did not actually receive official designation as a language until 1960.[1] As the displays at the museum point out, a long history of audism (a form of discrimination based on one's ability to hear) has suppressed the cultural and public acceptance of ASL and of the Deaf community. Many deaf children have been—and continue to be—discouraged from learning sign due to outdated beliefs that sign limits a child's ability to speak or communicate. Less than 8% of deaf children receive regular access to sign language, and

[1] National Museum of the Deaf, Gallaudet University, Washington DC. Supalla, Ted, and Patricia Clark. *Sign Language Archaeology: Understanding the Historical Roots of American Sign Language*, Gallaudet University Press, 2015.

educational and medical policies continue to perpetuate language deprivation due to the exclusion of deaf people in creating these policies.[2]

As I wander through the exhibit, one space that draws my attention most strongly is the large table near one end of the room. Low to the ground, this table includes wooden models of the twenty-six handshapes that make up the alphabet in ASL. These hands, made from wood and based on original sculptures from the Maryland School for the Deaf, demonstrate that this is a language that can only truly be understood by recognizing its relationship with the body. Not only does this portion of the exhibit provide a helpful visual alongside cultural information about the Deaf community, but it also invites engagement—it is the only part of the exhibit marked with a sign encouraging participants to "please touch." The sculptures even suggest movement by including small arrows, as the signs for "J" and "Z" require the hand to move through space. I'm the only visitor at the museum on a drizzly February afternoon, and I find myself mimicking each handshape as I look at the display. Although I'm hearing, I have studied American Sign Language and have some proficiency. My skills are rusty from lack of practice, but I can't help but make each shape while looking at the sculpture to combine the physical sensation alongside the cognitive understanding of this language. This visit to the museum marks one of my first in-person encounters with Deaf culture, as much of my ASL education took place over Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a similar experience to other classes and teaching experiences, learning via Zoom brought with it specific challenges—in the context of learning ASL, the gestural and physical components of the language meant that was constantly reminded of my body in physical space and how it transmitted meaning visually. When signing, I must consider of the space that I take up, how I am oriented, and how details like my body or

[2] Hall, W.C., Levin, L.L. & Anderson, M.L. Language deprivation syndrome: a possible neurodevelopmental disorder with sociocultural origins. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol* 52**,** 762, 767.

eyebrows relate to the signs themselves. My facial expressions, often considered by my peers and colleagues as overly expressive during Zoom sessions, suddenly became useful tools in communicating grammatical and syntactic elements. Even as I stand in the museum with sculptures that remain static and fixed, the invitation toward kinesthetic engagement shifts my interpretation of the rest of the exhibit.

In this setting, however, I realize how my experience with ASL has barely scratched the surface. Not only does the language require a shift to my orientation—literally and figuratively—but the historical context of suppressing and discouraging sign among deaf communities add a deep political and cultural significance. As a hearing individual, for me to sign without fully understanding this context strips the language of its full depth and meaning within the Deaf community. I'm reminded of this cultural gap just a few weeks after my return from DC, as I watch the fallout when an Instagram influencer in the process of learning ASL volunteered herself as a translator/interpreter for the national anthem at a University of Alabama baseball game. In response, Deaf creators, influencers, and advocates took to social media to address the fact that this individual has not only taken an opportunity away from a member of the Deaf community, but she didn't even create her own translation—she "borrowed" a translation from a Deaf artist without their permission. "You're taking advantage of a language that deaf people struggled for years and years and years to protect because hearing people banned it," explained Elizabeth Harris in a video responding to the situation. "ASL would not exist without deaf people."[3] Cheyenna Clearbrook made a similar point in her response, particularly with the rise of hearing influencers using their platforms to teach. "We have to speak out about this rising concern because imagine this situation when you teach a wrong sign on social media and how

[3] Harris, Elizabeth. [@l1z.harris.] Instagram. 8 April 2023. https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cqyp4W7NhKI/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link. Accessed 18 April 2023.

many times will it be shared?" Clearbrook asked.[4] (The influencer in question later posted for anyone who "doesn't like her content" to "simply not watch it," further implying that ASL functions only as content for social media consumption.) Educator Sara Miller further expressed the importance of being a true ally for the Deaf community, particularly in regard to the cultural appropriation of ASL. "Don't use ASL to grow your social media status," Miller stated, "It is an oppressed language that society continues to look down on Deaf people for using while praising hearing people for learning. It's extremely problematic."[5] The widespread discussion on hashtags like #DeafCommunity and #LearnFromDeafPeople function as another reminder that ASL is more than simply converting words in English to handshapes and gestures—translation and communication is a fully embodied act that reflects a long history of struggle and oppression.

This relationship between the embodied act of signing and its linguistic function is central to the analysis in this chapter of *Tribes* by British playwright Nina Raine. The play charts the turbulent journey of Billy, a young deaf man alone in a hearing British-Jewish family, who finds himself pulled between bonds of blood and the community he discovers with other Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals. The characters fiercely debate the importance of language, and in doing so highlight the difference between hearing and understanding, often circling the ways that language shapes embodied experiences. The play's use of signing (specifically ASL in productions within the United States) and the gestural nature of the language make *Tribes* a unique point of entry toward kinesthetic empathy, as the physical sensations associated with these acts go beyond reactions to also communicate specific meanings in the language. The

[4] Clearbrook, Cheyenna. [@cheyennaclearbrook.] Instagram. 11 April 2023. https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cq58ilLukTS/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link. Accessed 18 April 2023.
[5] Miller, Sara. [@adventuresindeafed.] Instagram. 12 April 2023. https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cq6het7M-b_/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link. Accessed 18 April 2023.

affective impact of these moments serves to underscore the harm and traumatic consequences of language deprivation through creative and linguistic means—both for hearing audiences and members of the Deaf community. Within this chapter, I examine how the Studio Theatre's production of *Tribes* utilized and engaged translation toward these empathetic ends, questioning the deployment of linguistic, artistic, and kinesthetic elements.

Family

> *Prompt: Bring your hands in front of your body, palms facing each other. Bring the tips of your index fingers to meet your thumbs. Bring your hands together so these two circles touch, then rotate your hands around in front of you till the pinkie-sides meet and the palms face toward your body.*

Throughout this chapter, I utilize prompts that describe various signs from ASL. In describing the handshapes and gestures associated with each, I seek to engage with the relationship between kinesthetic empathy, embodiment, and signing. Within this first prompt, I have selected "family"—not only as a useful term in thinking around the larger themes of *Tribes*, but also in the way it demonstrates the linguistic gap associated with the play. In an earlier version of the script, Billy is in conversation with Sylvia, a young woman fluent in sign who is in the process of losing her hearing. In their discussion, Sylvia discusses the beauty of the sign for family because the circular movement indicates that everyone is equal. Billy, however, challenges this by saying the sign shows an implicit hierarchy, as the right middle and index fingers rest on top of the middle and index fingers of the left.[6] This observation does not work in translation, however, because the sign for "family" in American Sign Language differs from British Sign Language, rendering Billy's observation ineffective. Although Raine includes

[6] This earlier version of an interaction with Billy and Sylvia and the description of BSL come from the Studio Theatre interview with Tyrone Giordano, https://www.studiotheatre.org/plays/play-detail/2013-2014-tribes/tyrone-giordano-interview.

cultural references specific to life in England, she does not indicate which signed language should be utilized.[7] Even without necessarily intending it, the multiple and intersecting cultural contexts of Raine's work inadvertently underscores how language can shape thinking.

Although never explicitly identifying specific individuals, Raine has described that the central family of *Tribes* draws inspiration from her own family. In particular, in one interview she noted how a dyslexic family member might feel ostracized in an overly literary family. (This relates to Raine's own familial experience; although everyone in her family is hearing, she works as a playwright, her father is a poet, and her mother is a literary academic.[8]) She reflected, "I thought 'what if you take that several steps down the line to make it more extreme?'"[9] This "more extreme" version of existing outside the tribe includes Billy, a twenty-something young man born deaf, who has been raised in a hearing household. It isn't until Billy meets Sylvia, a young woman in the midst of losing her hearing, that he determines he wants to explore Deaf culture more fully. His family struggles deeply with his decision, often refusing to fully empathize with Billy's perspective. In exploring the harm and trauma of living in the hearing world as a deaf individual, sign becomes more than a form of self-expression for Billy.

First opening at the Royal Court Theater in 2010, *Tribes* had its US premier Off-Broadway at the Barrow Street Theatre in 2012, followed by a West Coast premiere at the Mark Taper Forum the following year. (These productions included ASL rather than BSL, although the play itself still took place in London.) The case study that I take up, however, is the 2014 production at the Studio Theatre in Washington DC. Given the significant presence of the Deaf

[7] In addition to regional variations of ASL throughout the United States, there are approximately three hundred different forms of sign language throughout the world.
[8] *The Telegraph: Nina Raine Interview*. 6 November 2018. Accessed 10 March 2022. https://www.hampsteadtheatre.com/news/2014/11/the-telegraph-nina-raine-interview/
[9] Ibid.

community in DC,[10] the goals and impact of *Tribes* gain a different connotation. Much like I experienced at the National Deaf Life Museum, *Tribes* provided an opportunity to not only stage a narrative about language, audism, and relationships, but to actively coordinate with the communities impacted by these debates. Lauren Halvorsen, who worked at Studio Theatre as Associate Literary Director at the time, noted that the theater had hoped to produce *Tribes* since its initial premier. "I feel like we were always looking for dynamic family dramas and Studio wanted to produce more British work," Halvorsen explained, "but the play felt particularly relevant to DC audiences because the city has such a large Deaf community."[11]
Studio Theatre partnered with Gallaudet University and Fourth Wall Gone (an outreach initiative of No Rules Theatre Company) in bringing this production to life, demonstrating a dedication to both the accurate use of the language itself and the culture associated with it. I suggest in this chapter that the affective stage directions present in *Tribes* assist in producing kinesthetic empathy in the context of performance—cultivating meaning both through ASL as a language and through the movement itself. By engaging interviews with members of the cast and creative team alongside reviews of the production, I consider how Studio Theatre's focus on accessibility and representation regarding *Tribes* created greater opportunity for dialogic empathy regarding the traumatic impacts of language deprivation.

While Raine's framing of the production focuses on the specificity of communicating within family units and other various "tribes," the play necessarily takes on the political aspects

[10] Over the last few years, the influx of students at Gallaudet who participate in nearby neighborhoods and communities has contributed to a greater awareness of the Deaf community in the city. Within H Street, a business district near the campus, there are a number of businesses who have invested in learning basic ASL or hiring deaf employees, resulting in a larger Deaf presence beyond the university itself. (Samuels, Robert. "D.C.'s H Street embedded with deaf culture." *The Washington Post*, 15 July 2013. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dcs-h-street-embedded-with-deaf-culture/2013/07/15/efd54732-e3f3-11e2-a11e-c2ea876a8f30_story.html. Accessed 1 April 2023.)
[11] Halvorsen, Lauren. Personal correspondence, 6 June 2022.

of deafness through Billy's relationship with Sylvia. Although only briefly touched on in dialogue, Raine's script identifies the difference between deafness (having no functional hearing[12]) and what it means to be Deaf ("defined as the group that chooses to be bound together by a particular sign language, social customs, and world view"[13]). Billy's family, including overbearing patriarch Christopher, perpetually on-edge mother Beth, and bickering siblings Daniel and Ruth, insist throughout that Billy's exclusion from the Deaf community has been to his benefit. Christopher even defends their decision not to teach Billy how to sign (or learning it themselves) by aggressively arguing that "defining your identity around the fact that you're deaf, it's like basing your identity on coming from *Gateshead*! Or whether you support Arsenal! …Making deafness the centre of your identity is the beginning of the end. Like being a *Northerner.* Where your flaw is made part of your personality."[14] It's not until Billy decides to stop speaking completely and utilize sign exclusively that his family fully understand how Billy's deafness relates to his sense of identity and relationship to his world.

Billy's journey highlights the traumatic impacts of language deprivation for deaf individuals—his pain of struggling to communicate remains private and unshared until he gains adequate language to articulate it. In her discussion of pain and affect, Sarah Ahmed describes the tension between private experiences of pain and the desire to communicate it with others, observing that "it is because no one can know what it feels like to have my pain, but I want loved others to acknowledge how I feel. The solitariness of pain is intimately tied up with its implication in relationship to others."[15] As I discuss in my introduction and throughout this

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[12] Bradford, Shannon. "The National Theatre of the Deaf: Artistic Freedom and Cultural Responsibility in the Use of American Sign Language." *Bodies in commotion: Disability and Performance*, ed. by Carrie Sandhal and Philip Auslander. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2005, 87.
[13] Bradford, 87.
[14] Raine, 31, 32, emphasis in original. To clarify, Arsenal is a professional British football club.
[15] Ahmed, Sara. "The Contingency of Pain." In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh University Press, 2014, 29.

dissertation, the sociology of pain that Ahmed points to includes an ethical demand based in proximity and movement wherein "I must act about that which I cannot know, rather than act insofar as I know. I am moved by what does not belong to me."[16] The idea of being moved by the pain of another takes on additional meaning in the context of *Tribes* and the centrality of sign language—Billy's family refuses to be moved by his pain by the fact that they ignore his deafness just as they refuse to be moved to communicate with him by means of an embodied and gestural language.

Although the play utilizes subtitles to aid in translating some moments of sign, the gestural nature of the language changes the audiences' relationship to the characters through kinesthetic empathy. Wanda Strukus defines kinesthetic empathy as "the feeling of sharing another person's movement, or vicariously experiencing another person's movement simply by watching,"[17] and Dee Reynolds suggests that it "can have the function of facilitating a mutual understanding, for example, by mediating interpretation of another's thoughts or motivations."[18] Kinesthetic empathy relies on the audience's experience of their own embodied nature, where witnessing the action of another body results in "an automatic, involuntary, kinesthetic response of one body to another."[19] Even if audiences lack a working knowledge of sign, witnessing the gestural language in the context of *Tribes* has the potential to evoke a kinesthetic empathy based in the movement.

Within the context of disability and performance, this dynamic of private pain gains greater tension. In her work on disability and contemporary performance, Petra Kuppers argues,

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[16] Ahmed, "The Contingency of Pain," 31.
[17] Strukus, Wanda. "Mining the Gap: Physically Integrated Performance and Kinesthetic Empathy." *The Journal of Theory and Dramatic Criticism*, Spring 2011, 89.
[18] Reynolds, Dee. "Kinesthetic Empathy and the Dance's Body: From Emotion to Affect." *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, edited by Dee Reynolds, and Matthew Reason, Intellect Books Ltd, 2012, 124.
[19] Strukus, 89.

"the experience of disability is often figured as a traumatic personal history, culturally marked as 'private' tragedy. Within literature and film, disability often becomes the symptom of trauma: like Freud's hysterical women, disabled actors are ready to carry the stigma of their personal histories as readable signs on their bodies."[20] In the case of Billy, the ability to "read" his disability is not immediately available. Indeed, Raines' script specifically indicates moments that make his deafness more tangible and readable for an audience through the use of stage directions. For instance, early on in the play when the batteries in Billy's hearing aids start to die, Raine describes that "*when Billy next speaks, his voice is fragmenting to the extent that what he says is not quite intelligible. It is like listening to someone on a mobile phone with fragmenting reception—ends and beginnings of words*."[21] This marks one of the first moments where the impact of Billy's deafness gets explicitly revealed to the audience. Rather than reading this disability through Billy's body, his deafness moves from a private experience to public when he attempts to communicate without the assistance of his hearing aids. Further, despite the fact that his family seems to ignore Billy's deafness as much as possible, the stage directions also reveal moments when his family members intentionally use his deafness to maintain his sense of private pain. For instance, during one interaction Daniel turns on the radio, creating ambient noise that makes it more difficult for Billy to hear, and as the music plays, he "*comes and stands behind Billy, unseen. He speaks. Billy is oblivious.*"[22] Daniel's choices make Billy's deafness more readable due to the knowledge that Billy won't hear or respond to Daniel's comments.

In his analysis of the relationships between disabled and non-disabled communities, Bill Hughes argues that attempts to segregate disabled individuals or make them identical to non-

[20] Kuppers, Petra. *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge*. New York: Routledge, 2003, 91.
[21] Raine, 22.
[22] Raine, 25.

disabled people (as in Billy's case) functions as "an expression of the civilizing process. In modernity the threshold of repugnance narrows and attitudes to bodily and intellectual difference…hardened into aversive emotions like fear and disgust and into the conviction that impairment is a tragedy, its 'victims' deserving of benefaction and favor."[23] Billy's family demonstrate these attitudes of fear and disgust, particularly his father, Christopher. Upon discovering that Billy has decided to learn sign and that he's dating a woman from the Deaf community, Christopher explodes:

> Christopher: "No, it's about *them* feeling persecuted."
>
> Beth: "*Who*?"
>
> Christopher: "The deaf! The fucking Muslims of the handicapped world. You feel like saying, take your hearing aids and shove them up your arse. The feeling of persecution is necessary because it *bonds*—"
>
> Beth: "/Can we just leave it? Billy doesn't feel persecuted—"
>
> Christopher: "I'm not talking about Billy, Billy's not deaf—"
>
> Ruth and Beth: (*in unison*) "Billy *is* deaf—"
>
> Christopher: "He is not, he's been brought up in a hearing family, he's been protected from all that shit! I'm talking about the hardliners, capital-D Deaf, the people who call us Audists."
>
> Beth: "You have no idea if this girl is a hardliner or not! All he's doing is learning another language!"[24]

[23] Hughes, Bill. "Fear, Pity, and Disgust: Emotions and the non-disabled imaginary." *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies,* edited by Nick Watson, Alan Roulstone and Carol Thomas. New York: Routledge, 2012, 68.
[24] Raine, 31.

Christopher's expression of disgust lies in his judgment of the Deaf community for what he deems their attitude of persecution. Although he attempts to exclude Billy from this judgement, Christopher's refusal to acknowledge Billy's deafness merely exacerbates the problem.

In placing this argument within a context of representing trauma on stage, it is important to articulate how trauma functions within *Tribes*. I do not wish to suggest that Billy's deafness in itself is a traumatic experience—rather, it is the language deprivation and ostracization that Billy experiences as a deaf individual that represents a traumatic experience. Although Billy's circumstance may appear unique within the world of the play, the language deprivation that *Tribes* refers to is a significant issue among deaf and hard of hearing (or DHH) children. Language deprivation occurs during the critical stages of language acquisition for children when they do not have full access to a natural language.[25] Despite these major concerns, pediatricians, parents, and other professionals often view signed language as inferior to spoken language, therefore excluding sign as a primary or complementary language intervention for DHH children.[26] Unlike hearing children, DHH children have much higher instances of language deprivation due to the fact that many families are advised not to use a sign language for their children. Due to this, only 1-2% of deaf children worldwide receive an education where sign

[25] Hall, W.C., Levin, L.L. & Anderson, M.L. Language deprivation syndrome: a possible neurodevelopmental disorder with sociocultural origins. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol* 52,

[26] Hall, W.C., Levin, L.L. & Anderson, M.L. Language deprivation syndrome: a possible neurodevelopmental disorder with sociocultural origins. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol* 52, 767.
This history extends back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in 1880 the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf voted in favor of oralism (teaching deaf children to speak in order to appear more similar to hearing peers), and the teaching of sign was discouraged and punished. Some students who were caught signing were required to wear white gloves that had been tied together to inhibit any kind of hand movement. Stigma against sign has also made it incredibly difficult for Deaf individuals to advocate for themselves and receive proper care—for instance, in 1986 John Canady, a Deaf advocate diagnosed with AIDS, was restrained to his bed after being admitted to a hospital, effectively rendering him completely unable to communicate. (See also: McHugh, Brendan, "Signing for Life: Deaf Gay Activists Navigate the AIDS Epidemic, 1986-1991." *Nursing Clio*, 1 December 2020. https://nursingclio.org/2020/12/01/signing-for-life-deaf-gay-activists-navigate-the-aids-epidemic-1986-1991/. Accessed 1 April 2023. Through Deaf Eyes. Diane Garey, Lawrence R. Hott. DVD, Pbs (Direct), 2007.)

language functions as the language of instruction.[27] Recent studies have suggested that language deprivation contributes to future difficulties for deaf individuals, including behavioral health concerns, emotional mental health problems, and higher likelihood of experiencing emotional abuse.[28] Christopher's constant insistence that Billy isn't actually deaf and the family's expectation that Billy continue participating as if he is hearing highlight some of the social and relational consequences of language deprivation, as well as the harmful ideologies that circulate in order to justify spoken language as the primary option for DHH children.

As Billy returns to his family and insists only on signing to communicate and relying on Sylvia to translate, he finally states "this is the first time you've ever listened to me properly and it's because I'm not speaking."[29] By asking his family (and by proxy, the audience) to empathize with this, Billy also requires an acknowledgment of the harm he has experienced throughout his life. Tyrone Giordano, as Director of Artistic Sign Language for the Studio Theatre Production, identified that this moment was particularly difficult to translate. "Since the script is written originally in English, I had to have Billy's signs align with the idea that if someone were to watch his ASL, they would conceivably be able to 'back-translate' it into English that would 'land' at the same places and in the same fashion as the script," he described. This process of "back-translating" included a literal translation of Billy's signs into English to determine how it conveyed the meaning of the translation. In addition to appropriately communicating the language of the scene as written in the text, the translation had to appropriately convey the spectrum of emotion for Billy as well. In this way, the translation appeared successful, as

[27] Hall, M. L., Hall, W. C., & Caselli, N. K. Deaf children need language, not (just) speech. *First Language*, *39*(4), 2019, 367–395.
[28] Hall, W.C., Levin, L.L. & Anderson, M.L. Language deprivation syndrome: a possible neurodevelopmental disorder with sociocultural origins. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol* 52, 762-63.
[29] Raine, 56

Washington Post reviewer Peter Marks described how, "in demanding the family learn to speak to him in his newfound language—American Sign—he asserts for what seems like the first time how completely the blood of this contentious, troubled, self-centered clan flows in his veins."[30] In an unexpected turn, even with his struggles to communicate with them it would seem that Billy has picked up more of his family's behavior than audiences may have expected.

Different

> *Prompt: Make your hands into fists, palm-side away from the body. Extend both index fingers, bringing the fingertips to the middle to touch, before flicking them apart and away from each other.*

In tracing some of the history of Deaf culture and theatre, I briefly return to the National Deaf Life Museum. As I walk around the exhibit, one panel invites me to scan the QR code for more information about the 1942 Gallaudet College Dramatic Club production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*, considered the first public performance of a play in sign language at the Fulton Theatre on Broadway.[31] For this one-night-only presentation, the cast from Gallaudet's club stepped in for the Broadway cast under the direction of their faculty director Frederick H. Hughes and in collaboration with the production's original director, Bretaigne Windust.[32] The play included a few adjustments and alterations—blocking that ensured actors could properly communicate, the use of luminous gloves so that signs could be seen in dim lighting, and the removal of offstage sound effects or dialogue—all of which served both the artists involved and

[30] Marks, Peter. "Theatre review: A family's divisions come to the fore in 'Tribes' at Studio Theatre." 13 January 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/theater-review-a-familys-divisions-come-to-the-fore-in-tribes-at-studio-theatre/2014/01/13/6270fbf6-7c9c-11e3-97d3-b9925ce2c57b_story.html Accessed 1 April 2023.
[31] "Play In Sign Language: The Gallaudet College Dramatic Club to Give 'Arsenic' May 10." *New York Times (1923-)*, 1942, p. 12.
[32] "Play in Sign Language," 12.

the audience's experience. Although the intention of these changes focused primarily on the actors' ability to perform, these adjustments also demonstrated points of accessibility for the Deaf community.

While the museum highlights actor Eric Malzkuhn's delight in sharing the dressing room usually occupied by Boris Karloff, reviews of this particular performance speak to the hearing audiences' surprise at the ease of understanding sign language. *The New York Times* review recorded the positive reception for the performance, including that "these persons of normal hearing were astounded at the lucidity of the play as presented and scarcely needed the aid of a reader who spoke the lines in monotone while the deaf actors made their speedy signs."[33] This review also identified that even though the applause "was less vocal" than usual, "it was as enthusiastic as that which nightly greets the familiar comedy."[34] Indeed, as the archived video footage transitions from clips of the production to the post-show reception hosted by Gallaudet alumni, the only indicator of deafness was the use of ASL. Around the three-minute mark, the video pans across a group of attendees, catching some as their attention is pulled by someone signing just out of frame. An unidentified young woman (potentially either Frances Lupo or Arlene Stecker from the cast) grins widely as her gaze dances between the camera and someone across from her, and for a moment her attention is completely absorbed as she signs a response. Without the context of this particular one-night production, it's possible to assume this woman is hearing—it's not until she signs that her deafness is revealed. Although *Arsenic and Old Lace* received positive reception, ASL would not receive recognition as a language for another twenty years. As Stephen C. Baldwin describes in his analysis of the production, "sign language as an

[33] "All Is Quiet at 'Arsenic and Old Lace'; Deaf Actors Give a Lucid Performance." *New York Times (1923-)*, 1942, p. 18.
[34] "All is Quiet at 'Arsenic and Old Lace,'" 18.

artistic medium for the stage was not a favorable perception of society at the time."[35] Hearing audiences could comprehend the production through sign. Widespread acceptance and integration of sign, however, still created cultural and social barriers for the Deaf community, reinforcing the need to "pass" as hearing.

The experiences described by audiences of *Arsenic and Old Lace* can be seen as examples of interlanguage between ASL and English. Linguistics defines interlanguage as "a natural language, reflecting learners' attempts at constructing a linguistic system that progressively approaches the target system."[36] In other words, the interlanguage operates in the space between a learner's primary language and the target language they seek to acquire. Interlanguages operate within particular developmental stages as the learner progressively gains more experience and skill with their secondary language, and instruction can only be effective once a learner has mastered each stage.[37] The challenge in terms of American Sign Language comes from the way in which that it overlaps and interweaves with English, making some aspects of an interlanguage more accessible to hearing participants. Anne Post Fife, a theatre artist and member of the Deaf community, notes that in her experience, audiences with little to no experience with ASL still understand it in their own way. "Like, for example, my parents," Post Fife explains, "they know just enough ASL to be able to communicate with me and my Deaf husband, [but] as they watch an interpretation of a play or me performing, they *know* it and understood it so well."[38]

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[35] Baldwin, Stephen C. "Broadway 1942: *Arsenic and Old Lace*," *The Voice*, Nov/Dec 1989, 22. https://www.davideo.tv/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/ARSENIC.pdf

[36] Jiang, Jingyang, Jinghui Ouyang, and Haitao Liu. 2019. "Interlanguage: a Perspective of Quantitative Linguistic Typology." *Language Sciences (Oxford)* 74. Elsevier Ltd: 85–97. doi:10.1016/j.langsci.2019.04.004.

[37] Boers-Visker, Eveline, and Beppie Van Den Bogaerde. "Learning to Use Space in the L2 Acquisition of a Signed Language: Two Case Studies." *Sign Language Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, Spring 2019; 412.

[38] Post Fife, Anne. Personal correspondence, 12 April 2023.

The moments of interlanguage between ASL and English include both visual and aural elements due to the form and function of both languages. Post Fife similarly recognizes the overlap, describing how "actors do things certain ways, they'd learn accents, body movements, etc., same with ASL. We are both storytellers. It is how we portray it."[39] The theatre as a space and art form that employs similar tactics can also offer potentially generative explorations for this interlanguage. A prime example of this overlap can be seen in terms of recent calls for greater accessibility, as theatre productions seek to integrate ASL into their existing plays or seasons—and while this impulse speaks to a positive intersection of communities, it is rarely so simple as placing a d/Deaf actor onstage to sign the text of a play. As Shannon Bradford puts it in her analysis of the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD), "the complex process of negotiating ASL and English occurs in rehearsals, allowing the impeccable merging of these two languages in the performative moment. This carefully crafted seamlessness, while aesthetically riveting, inadvertently encourages the conflation of ASL and English."[40] Her call illustrates theatre's challenge in terms of this interlanguage, wherein the purpose of the ASL performance seems to prioritize this "aesthetically riveting" spectacle rather than addressing the nuances of the language itself. Much like Giordano's description of 'back-translating,' finding the balance between the aesthetic moments of performance with sign and the need to communicate specific dialogue adds further difficulty in translation. Historically, the NTD has utilized hearing actors to voice the lines for d/Deaf actors, typically locating them on the periphery to allow full attention to the signing. This overlap combines the two languages wherein "the main characters' voices do not emanate from the bodies that physically enact them, and since the bodies of the

[39] Post Fife, 12 April 2023.
[40] Bradford, Shannon. "The National Theatre of the Deaf: Artistic Freedom and Cultural Responsibility in the Use of American Sign Language." *Bodies in commotion: Disability and Performance*, ed. by Carrie Sandhal and Philip Auslander. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2005, 89.

voicing actors usually remain still during speech (…), the spoken lines of the play seem to hang in the air until one becomes accustomed to this convention."[41]

In regards to Studio Theatre's production of *Tribes,* I take up Bradford's final question regarding the NTD—"where does the balance lie between artistic freedom and cultural responsibility?"—to inquire how portrayals of ASL within theatre grapple with the tension between kinesthetic empathy and linguistic significance. Within the frame of theatre, ASL triggers a sense of kinesthetic empathy for the audience but doing so has the potential to undercut the cultural significance of ASL as a language. *Tribes* presents a unique opportunity for theatre practitioners navigating this integration of ASL, given how Raine centralizes the question of (inter)language and communication. Raine's use of affective stage directions with open-ended possibilities for translation offers an opportunity for ASL representation that honors the nuances of d/Deaf existence within an audist world while still leaving space open for artistic exploration. In analyzing *Tribes* in the context of language deprivation, the characters themselves provide useful context in understanding the stigma against sign. Although Sylvia tries to explain the grammatical rules of signing (namely syntax, she describes how questions in ASL are structured in an opposite manner to English), Christopher maintains that it's simply an inferior form of English. In an attempt to counter this, Billy points out that it seems this way "only if you translate [sign] literally. If you translated any language literally it would sound like broken English."[42] Indeed, Billy's observation frames the approach within Studio Theatre's production as well, namely stressing the importance of translating between the two. Studio Theatre's

[41] Bradford, 87-88.

[42] Raine, 39. Billy's observation echoes conclusions from other significant writers, particularly Amy Tan, who describes her own familial experience with language, expressing the "limited" or "broken" aspects of her mother's English. Tan reflected that her mother's language "shaped the way I saw things, expressed things, and made sense of the world," even though it appeared "fractured." (Tan, Amy. "Mother Tongue." Read (Middletown), vol. 56, no. 4, 2006, p. 20.)

collaborations with Fourth Wall Gone helped provide many of the institutional supports regarding accessibility, allowing Giordano to focus more of his attention on working with two actors playing Sylvia and Billy, Helen Cespedes and James 'Joey' Caverly, respectively. Rather than creating prescriptive translations that each actor could use, Giordano closely collaborated with both of them. For example, he noted that in his work with Cespedes he would "draw signs out of her based on her character work and choices for Sylvia, and we would fine-tune sign choices based on if they worked for her personally and whether they were expressed clearly enough and were appropriate sign choices for that moment or situation."[43] Post Fife similarly echoes the importance of willingness in these circumstances, stating that "collaboration is what makes it work. Like any production member—it is just that *if* they are willing to learn or work with me, *great*."[44] Alternatively, translating with Caverly operated in a much different capacity, as Caverly is fluent in ASL. "I had to ask him to do a kind of 'unlearning' of ASL for the character," Giordano described. Beyond the actors who would represent Deaf characters, Halvorsen noted that the theatre's preparation for *Tribes* had begun long before rehearsals were underway. "I still think constantly about when the Studio team visited Gallaudet months before rehearsal, which was our first immersion into Deaf culture," she noted. "I was unfamiliar with the concept of Deaf space, which is an architectural approach that creates spaces that promote maximum visual access and interaction for Deaf people. It really expanded my understanding of accessibility—how do you create a welcoming and inclusive environment in an artistic *and* physical sense?"[45] More than just a framework, interlanguage becomes a tool within these

[43] quoted by Elizabeth Dinkova. "An Interview with Tyrone Giordano, Director of Artistic Sign Language." Studio Theatre, https://www.studiotheatre.org/plays/play-detail/2013-2014-tribes/tyrone-giordano-interview. Accessed 1 April 2023.
[44] Post Fife, emphasis in original. 12 April 2023.
[45] Halvorsen, 6 June 2022.

collaborations in crafting these translations—providing a way for actors, translators, and audience to cultivate a unified understanding of the text.

(Mis)communication/Disruption/Breakdown

> *Prompt: Hold your hands in front of your face, palms facing each other. Curve your fingers around as if you were gripping a glass, forming two C-shapes. Slide each hand back and forth, alternating each hand moving away from your body and returning back toward you. ("Communicate")*
>
> *Pause. Sharply drop the right hand, still in the C handshape, effectively "breaking" the smooth movement. Facial expression can change to express a slight wince in frustration or distaste.*
> *("Miscommunication")*

An example of interlanguage and translation toward a sense of kinesthetic empathy can be seen specifically with Sylvia, the only character outside the family, given that she functions as both a conduit to the Deaf community and as translator between English and sign. During one of her first introductions to Billy's family, she defends the status of signing as a full language and not just broken English, taking the opportunity to emphasize her point when Daniel challenges her to translate poetry. The lines that Daniel recites for Sylvia (pulling in part from Milton's *Paradise Lost*[46]) rely on the abstract, making it all the more challenging for Sylvia to translate in the moment. Without providing a prescriptive indication of how this moment should be translated, the stage directions for this moment instead describe how "*Sylvia's hands move into the shape of a boat. Then she 'bobs' the boat out and away from her body, towards Daniel. …Sylvia makes the signs. They are expressive.*"[47] By staging a moment of improvised translation,

[46] Raine, "Note on Poem," 66. Raine clarifies that some of the lines Daniel gives Sylvia to translate come directly from Milton, while others Daniel improvises to reflect his own emotional state.
[47] Raine, 40.

Raine allows both languages to exist in parallel, but the active transfer of poetry between Daniel and Sylvia opens up an active site to explore the interlanguage.

I argue that this moment draws on what Bess Rowen defines as spoken stage directions, where "the words written and spoken are then signified by the actor's body and words in that moment, where the actor's body *becomes* those words."[48] The cases used by Rowen in defining this variety of affective stage direction include moments where the spoken line combines with the stage direction to create a performed action—for instance, characters narrating their actions in a self-conscious way. In my example, Sylvia does link the stage direction to the spoken words, and Raine further triangulates this moment by including Daniel's audible spoken words to Sylvia's signed "spoken" words. This moment works against what spectators may expect with integrating signing into performance given this constellation of actors. The translation, which included input from Giordano and Cespedes, creates an interlanguage that helps illustrate the moment for both deaf and hearing audiences.

The affective shift that follows Daniel's final line, "my heart belongs to you," transformed into sign as Sylvia "*clenches her fist in front of her chest. Then presents it to Daniel*" can be found in Billy's response as he "*playfully budges her arm so that her hand is presented to him, instead*."[49] Although Raine similarly does not prescribe the change in affect, Billy's response demonstrates that the kinesthetic reaction between Daniel and Sylvia is palpable to the rest of the characters. Indeed, for Studio's production, Sophie Gilbert in her review for *The Washingtonian* identified the strength of Cespedes' work, particularly that she "has one of the hardest jobs portraying both sides of the play's universe, speaking fluently and with an almost

[48] Rowen, Bess. *The Lines Between the Lines: How Stage Directions Affect Embodiment*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021, 46.
[49] Raine, 40.

aristocratic confidence to Billy when she first meets him and signing poetry so emotively to Billy's brother that the entire room falls silent."[50] Keeping Billy on the outskirts of this interaction, one where he has to actively insert himself by moving Sylvia's hand, makes his lack of connection with his family and his community even more present.

The interaction between Sylvia and Daniel layers this kinesthetic empathy with the additional aspect of poetry. Translating poetry into sign calls for what foremost ASL scholars Bernard Bragg and Jack R. Olson refer to as creative signing, a category associated with artistic or theatrical signing. They indicate that "signed poetry in the aesthetic sense is like no other form of interpretation of literature, since it offers poetic license to take the imagery that someone else has formed in written words, and transform it into a medium which captures the eye."[51] In fact, as John Lutterbie suggests

> Metaphors already structure our understanding of and interactions with the world. Indeed, the distinction between emotion and reason is based on metaphors, some of which have to do with containment and tactility; reason is hard-edged and bounded while emotion is soft and open-ended.[52]

These metaphors communicate even greater meaning when used with signing, as Phyllis Perrin Wilcox argues. Metaphorical mapping "is complicated by the issue of an actual, physical form—and isomorphic handshape—motivating an additional level of iconicity. ASL metaphoricity involves a great deal of iconic transferal from the physical source domain to its physical

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[50] Gilbert, Sophie. "Theatre Review: 'Tribes' at Studio Theatre." *The Washingtonian*, 15 January 2014. https://www.washingtonian.com/2014/01/15/theater-review-tribes-at-studio-theatre/ Accessed 1 April 2023.
[51] Bragg, Bernard and Jack R. Olson, *Meeting Halfway in American Sign Language*, Deaf Life Press, 1994, 27.
[52] Lutterbie, John. "Neuroscience and creativity in the rehearsal process." *Performance and Cognition*, ed. by Bruce McConachie and F. Elizabeth Hart. New York: Routledge Press, 2006, 163.

manifestation on the signer's body."[53] When asked about her approach to translating theatrical text, Post Fife asserted that thinking through metaphors functions as a foundational element. "*Signed English* is so old," she states, "Unless the scripts ask for it (depending on the playwrights or how the dialogue goes, yes, it makes sense. And only if a d/Deaf/HoH translated for this purpose.)"[54] Instead, Post Fife starts with the "pictures behind the words" that she associates with the lines before signing as she usually would. "It's very different from other speaking languages being translated," Post Fife continues. "ASL is very visual and expressive even with body languages."[55]

Metaphors, which already rely on the embodied experience to be understood, when signed get remapped onto the body. For audiences witnessing this interaction between Daniel and Sylvia, the metaphors that Daniel describes ("My heart is a boat on a rough, rough sea./From morn/To noon he fell, from/Noon to dewy eve…"[56]) draw on the audiences' own embodied experience (perhaps imagining what a boat on a "rough, rough sea" feels like). To then watch Sylvia translate these metaphors into the gestures of sign stimulates a sense of kinesthetic empathy, where rather than reflecting on past embodied knowledge, the audience can figuratively share in the movement created by Sylvia's body. Additionally, as Raine frames this moment as active translation, the play resists the temptation to conflate English and signing by instead activating both experiences—the metaphor as an appeal to the body and kinesthetic empathy—in the same moment. The work done by Giordano and Cespedes in translating this

[53] Wilcox, Phyllis Perrin. "What Do You *Think*? Metaphor in Thought and Communication Domains in American Sign Language." *Sign Language Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, Spring 2005, 276.
[54] Post Fife, 12 April 2023.
[55] Post Fife, 12 April 2023.
[56] Raine, 40.

dialogue ensures that the sign choices reflect the actor's character choices while also ensuring that the signs clarify and communicate the meaning of the text.

Many (Many, Many)

> *Prompt: Place hands in front of your body, palm side up. Keep your hands relaxed. Bring all five fingertips together, and flick them outwards and upwards. ("Many.")*
>
> *Repeat this gesture, moving it out and away from the body, giving an illusion of expansion, space, multiplicity. ("Many, many, many, many.")*

Raine's lack of direct translation for the moment of poetry between Sylvia and Daniel, or Billy's ultimatum at the end of the play could create significant roadblocks in the process of producing *Tribes.* After all, it requires that the collaborators create their own translation of the text in a way that attends to both the dramaturgical and linguistic needs of the scene. Additionally, returning to Giordano's observation, developing these moments also requires a process of "back-translating" to ensure that both languages are effectively communicating the dialogue. Returning to the work of Bess Rowen, I suggest that this open-ended stage direction includes not only spoken stage directions, but what Rowen terms multivalent stage directions, or those "which give multiple performance possibilities for a given moment, character, or situation by posing a series of questions or providing ways of proceeding with the scene in different situations."[57] Based solely on this definition, Raine's stage directions neither pose questions or provide alternative routes. The implicit need for translation, however, requires an active engagement with these stage directions in a similar way to what Rowen outlines. As Rowan emphasizes the possibilities and potentiality of these stage directions, Raine's work offers a

[57] Rowen, 153.

similar path for *Tribes*. Reading these stage directions as opportunities for theatrical intervention allows actors and production teams to more effectively engage with signing in a way that suits the needs of their given production. The variety of dialects in ASL—not just creative signing but traditional ASL, modern ASL, Englished ASL, and Rarefied ASL, as well as regional and cultural dialects[58]—suggests that each signed interaction can allow for a multitude of creative choices for the actors. Furthermore, even if audiences have no explicit knowledge of ASL, the possibility of kinesthetic empathy will provide a unique entry point based on the translation offered. To fully take creative and theatrical advantage of the text as written by Raine is to fully develop and explore an interlanguage between signing and English that attends to the specific needs of a community and the production itself. By considering the nuances of signing as language, rather than just a form of English, *Tribes* combines the necessary ideas, metaphors, and signs with the most generative and productive context of its production.

One useful example of these multivalent stage directions comes during Billy's heated explanation of why he refuses to speak with his family. Sylvia, functioning as intermediary and translator, initially begins by translating Billy's complete thoughts once he's finished signing them. As the conversation continues, however, it gets to a point where "*she starts to talk simultaneously, with only a short lag between sign and speech.*"[59] For this type of real-time translation, this time from sign into English rather than the other way around as seen with Daniel's poem, emotions would come from Billy himself, rather than interpreting emotion of a text. Raine specifies that "*At first Sylvia does not overlay any 'emotions' over what she says, her tone is simply that of concentration—on giving the most accurate translation possible. But*

[58] Bragg and Olson, 22.
[59] Raine, 54.

emotions start to surface as the scene progresses."[60] While the audience can clearly read Billy's emotions based on his signs, Sylvia's narration can assist in underscoring the affective shift toward empathy for Billy.

Returning to Ahmed's sociology of pain, to be "moved" by the pain of another, it's useful to consider the embodied experiences of emotions. In considering the relationship between the body and emotion, Bill Hughes suggests that "this interpretation of emotions embeds them in *corporeal being in the world,*" and indicates that this embodiedness can also shed light on the emotional relationship between disabled and non-disabled actors.[61] After all, as Hughes argues there is no true escape from the recognition of emotions that circulate in our social lives, given that "emotions are, of course, bodily forms of knowing, corporeal moments of sensation. The effects are 'enfleshed,' even when they are shared and circulating in groups and communities."[62] So where might that leave Billy, in his desperate attempts to express his emotions but with an inability to communicate with his family without a mediator? Post Fife discusses that the "expressionate" nature of ASL means that emotion can easily be read through the body, much in the same way that vocal tone or inflection functions with hearing individuals.[63] While audiences may not directly understand Billy's dialogue without Sylvia's voice, the emotion still bleeds through. The affective, visceral reactions of watching Billy's signing pushes toward a kinesthetic response from audiences toward empathizing with him. His struggle extends beyond a desire to find his own community, but to have a language that adequately communicates what he has gone through.

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[60] Raine, 54.
[61] Hughes, Bill. "Fear, Pity, and Disgust: Emotions and the non-disabled imaginary." *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, edited by Nick Watson, Alan Roulstone and Carol Thomas. New York: Routledge, 2012, 67.
[62] Hughes, 68.
[63] Post Fife, 12 April 2023.

While the act of empathizing with Billy created judgment for his family, it also offered reflection on the audience's personal failures to empathize as well. As *Theatre Guide* reviewer Robert Michael Oliver indicated, "as family members are forced to step into the role of empathizer—to know as nearly as possible what life is like for the Other—their understanding of themselves and the world changes."[64] Peter Marks similarly distilled the story as a play "about the emotional signals that we pick up or choose to ignore, about the myriad ways we convey and withhold our feelings and the allowances we make, or fail to, for the people we hold dear."[65] Perhaps most tellingly, Marks equates Billy's deafness with his family's lack of understanding, also noting that it's "of course, a play about what it is like to grow up deaf (or go deaf)—and on a more poetic level, what happens when the sense that has to be compensated for is the one for empathy."[66] Ultimately, the only character who seems to empathize with Billy to the point of being "moved" literally and figuratively by his struggle, is Daniel. Of everyone in the family, only Daniel attempts to sign with Billy, a halting, hesitant attempt at fingerspelling in the final moments of the play. For a moment, in the space between languages, kinesthetic mirroring, and embodied emotions, the brothers fully inhabit the sign for 'love'—two crossed arms in front of the chest—as they embrace, their crossed arms wrapped around each other's backs.

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[64] Oliver, Robert Michael. "Theatre Review: 'Tribes' at Studio Theatre." *Theatre Guide*, 13 January 2014. https://mdtheatreguide.com/2014/01/theatre-review-tribes-at-studio-theatre/ Accessed 1 April 2023.
[65] Marks, Peter. "Theatre review: A family's divisions come to the fore in 'Tribes' at Studio Theatre." 13 January 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/theater-review-a-familys-divisions-come-to-the-fore-in-tribes-at-studio-theatre/2014/01/13/6270fbf6-7c9c-11e3-97d3-b9925ce2c57b_story.html Accessed 1 April 2023.
[66] Marks, np.

CHAPTER TWO

"Those Whose Names We Don't Know": Sexual Violence and Visceral Rhetoric in *Self Defense, or Death of Some Salesmen*

> An' I'll tell you why they're not buying that Self-Defense.
> What Self?
> Plain an' simple.
> Ask any one of 'em. They don't see a self there to defend.
> They even say—she sold herself for money. Sold her Self. No right to fuckin' defend it now.
>
> Daytona
> *Self Defense, or Death of Some Salesmen*

The sequence started with the thud of bare feet against the floor. Approaching the thrust stage from all sides, an ensemble of five women entered at a light jog, falling into place as they circled the stark metal table downstage center. Isabella Reeder, the undergraduate student playing Jolene Palmer, joined the movement as the women continued their pace. According to the play text, at this point Jolene waits alone in her jail cell for trial after killing seven men in cold blood. Reeder uses Jolene's speeches, often long reflections on her past and justifications for her violent acts, as opportunities to speak directly to the audience. In this moment, joined by her castmates as they move in tandem, Jolene seems to speak on behalf of the entire female ensemble—forming a unified collective not just in physicality but in objective and intent. Without ever explicitly mentioning the words, Reeder-as-Jolene recalled the first time a man attempted to rape and kill her. "I made a vow to myself," she said. "I made the vow that nobody was ever gonna do that to me again."[1] The ensemble circled at a consistent pace—footfalls landing in tandem, inhales and exhales syncing up. The theatre, an already small thrust performance space, seemed to close in around the ensemble as they ran. "I was never gonna feel

[1] Kreitzer, Carson. *Self Defense, or Death of Some Salesmen,* New York: Playscripts, Inc., 2004, 75.

that fear. Again," Jolene vowed. "Anybody who fucked with me. Was gonna feel that fear." The ambient sounds—feet on floor and sharp exhales—mean the audience has to lean in just a little more to hear Reeder's words, adding a sense of apprehension to the air. Meanwhile, the ensemble traveled as a complete unit circulating the stage in synchronicity. The rhythm of their bodies—hair swinging, arms pumping—punctuated Jolene's promise to herself: "The only way I could go back out there again. Was knowing. In my body. I'm not gonna die out here." The sound of their unison movement of the ensemble fills the background behind Jolene's description of a knowing within her body, drawing attention to both Reeder and the other performers physically present onstage with her. The push and drag of their breathing reminded those watching of the very alive-ness of these bodies, juxtaposed against Jolene's memory of violence and promise of self-preservation.

Reeder's performance and this particular staging, used in the 2016 University of Utah production of *Self Defense, or Death of Some Salesmen*, came organically out of rehearsal collaboration as the company and creative team sought innovative ways to illustrate the various experiences and elements of trauma present in the text. Drawing heavily from the realities of the crimes of Aileen Wuornos, the play raises questions related to justice and bodily autonomy, as well as the long-term impacts of constant, persistent trauma. I participated on the production team as dramaturg, working closely with director Alexandra Harbold to translate the concrete research of statistics, legal procedures, and terminology of violence and assault into embodied moments of performance. Within the text, *Self Defense* peels open the ramifications of sexual violence (particularly against sex workers and other at-risk populations), which can be magnified further through the embodied nature of performance. Although the play (much like other

retellings of the Wuornos case[2]) heavily emphasized the specifics of this particular individual reacting to a very specific set of circumstances, our production sought to honor playwright Carson Kreitzer's dedication to both Alieen Wuornos and "to all those whose names we don't know."[3]

In approaching the dramaturgy of our production, my goal extended beyond providing meaningful research and resources for the production team. I also worked to ensure that our production balanced the specifics of the criminal acts of Jolene Palmer with the commentary from surrounding characters. This approach of keeping both elements in mind helped our production to highlight the structures of power that catalyzed in Jolene's actions and how these structures also impacted the circumstances of the other characters. With this in mind, our production sought to activate empathy along two fronts: one, cultivating a sense of empathy for Jolene in a way that validated and justified her anger and subsequent violent acts, and two, directing empathy toward the female characters who provided necessary nuance to additional experiences of trauma and harm. As argued by Dolf Zillmann, empathetic reactions in drama rely on the audience caring about the characters, either in a positive or negative way.[4] Zillmann suggests in his analysis that "the better these affective dispositions are developed by dramatic events, the stronger will be the emotional involvement with the dramatic presentation," where audiences will become more emotionally engaged based on character development.[5] Given the possibilities of emotional engagement by way of kinesthetic empathy, I argue that the act of staging and choreography can deepen these affective dispositions to promote more opportunities

[2] Some of these retellings, discussed in more detail in this chapter, include the 1992 TV movie *Overkill*, the 2003 film *Monster*, the inclusion of Wuornos in season 5 of Ryan Murphy's *American Horror Story*.
[3] Kreitzer, 5.
[4] Zillmann, Dolf. "Mechanisms of emotional involvement with drama." *Poetics* 23 (1994): 48.
[5] Zillmann, 48.

for dialogic empathy. With the benefit of hindsight, this production of *Self Defense* serves as a useful case study for the ways that literal bodies inspire kinesthetic empathy to alter the circulation of affect, particularly in relation to the trauma associated with sexual violence, and how these affective shifts can amplify opportunities to empathize.

In this chapter, I draw on three staging tools our company explored and utilized in choreographing these encounters with trauma. The first, which we referred to as "record rips," embraced the jarring, clashing discomfort of unexpectedly getting caught off guard. This term referred to the sensation of a turntable needle jumping out of a record groove and jolting the listener out of the audio experience into something more discordant and grating. These record rips similarly served to cause an immediate affective shock, moments where the specificity of circumstances suddenly snapped into a realization of the scope and scale of trauma. We also staged the ensemble in "illusions," choreographed moments intended to embody extreme trauma or violence in ways that appealed to the physical risks at stake in circumstances of sexual violence. Unlike a visual illusion to deceive or trick the audience, these illusions provided opportunities for the audience to kinesthetically empathize with the physical action of the bodies on stage, without actually putting performers at physical or emotional risk in embodying traumatic acts. Finally, on the other end of the spectrum, we included "zoom lenses," which provided moments of stillness to juxtapose against the speed and intensity present throughout the production. As these moments slowed down the pace of the narrative, they provided greater opportunity for the audience to sit with the discomfort in witnessing this trauma and further interrogate their sense of empathy.

In her work on dialogic empathy, Lindsay B. Cummings questions "to what degree does the performance encourage us to see that character as representative of a larger social group, to

move from singularity to generality?"[6] Cummings suggests that this balance between singularity and generality make for a potential roadblock for audiences' empathy, where audiences empathize only with the singularity of a character without extending that same empathy toward the larger social group the character stands in for.[7] On the page, Kreitzer's text invites this tension between the singular and the general, as Jolene Palmer frequently takes it upon herself to directly acknowledge the social groups she believes that she represents. Jolene does not remain the only voice on these matters—Kreitzer's incorporation of other female perspectives potentially assists in offering multiple opportunities for audience empathy beyond the singularity of Jolene's experience, depending on production choices. As we moved to embody this tension in performance, Alexandra Harbold and I questioned the best ways to find a balance between the audiences' empathy towards Jolene in her singularity and their empathy towards the female ensemble as they stood for the generality of "those whose names we don't know." The staging methods that resulted (including record rips, illusions, and zoom lenses) produced significant affective shifts that reoriented where we targeted the audience's empathy to serve the production's overall dramaturgical goals.

In pursuing this approach to *Self Defense*, our production relied heavily on input and collaboration from performers. With a cast of seven female and five male undergraduate students, (all but one were members of the same acting program and the same graduating class),

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[6] Cummings, Lindsay B. *Empathy as Dialogue in Theatre and Performance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 194.

[7] While this aspect of dialogic empathy is particularly relevant in the case of *Self Defense*, it's useful to note that the flexibility between singularity and larger generalizability often works in reverse when dealing with race and white supremacy. As Dani Snyder-Young points out, white audience members leave theatres "without interrogating their own complicity in white supremacy" because they view the white characters in realistic narrative drama either as "proof of [the audiences'] own moral goodness (by identifying with good intentions) or proof of their own moral superiority (by distancing from racist others)." (*Privileged Spectatorship: Theatrical Interventions in White Supremacy*. [Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020], 124.) I discuss this dynamic more explicitly in studies of *Slave Play* and *Sweat*.

attempts to stage and evoke trauma and violence also needed to consider the ways in which we asked both male and female performers to embody and carry this emotional burden. In his proposal for an actor training that integrates cognitive and embodied approaches, Mark Cariston Seton suggests that students receiving acting training "should also be encouraged to be critically aware of the embodiments of the discourses by which they are in-formed as embodied persons," going on to ask, "how might critical embodiment, as a practice of bodily sustainable consciousness, function in these institutional contexts?"[8] I suggest here that the structure of *Self Defense* as a text offers a springboard into critical embodiment, and that the staging methods described in this chapter allowed performers to collaborate in both cognitive and embodied ways to represent this trauma. Engaging with critical embodiment in rehearsal shifted the performers' relationship to the story they told, which, in turn, altered where we anticipated (and hoped) audiences would direct their empathy. These production choices cultivated a more engaged sense of empathy—borrowing from Cummings' work, we encouraged the question "what empathy has led us to think and feel, and why"[9] for performers and audiences. By shifting the dramaturgical focus away from the true crime elements of the plot to the larger, systemic sources of trauma and harm, our production provided empathetic gateways to ground the fantastical nature of the text in the emotional reality of trauma and its consequences.

Within the text, Jolene directs her speeches to the audience, but in dealing with situations that typically go unwitnessed—rape, sexual assault, murder—the presence of the ensemble could provide Jolene with a validating gaze. Our production also found that the very act of watching and witnessing could build empathy from a different angle, and we approached this through our

[8] Seton, Mark Cariston. "The Ethics of Embodiment: Actor Training and Habitual Vulnerability." *Performing Ethos* 2.1 (2010): 15.
[9] Cummings, 194.

staging of the female ensemble. Rarely appearing simply as passive watchers, we integrated the ensemble into the action of the scene, often drawing attention to the liveness and presence of the performers. Particularly in scenes that explicitly discussed sexual violence, this choice allowed us to continually draw attention back to the body as the site of trauma without asking performers to embody this violence in a way that might generate physical or emotional harm. For instance, as Jolene makes her vow that she would never feel the fear of getting attacked again (the moment described in the opening of this chapter), the embodied ensemble suggests the lives lost in similar moments of unwitnessed violence. Jolene names this as the moment she became a threat: "couldn't just be kicked around anymore. *Had blood on my muzzle. Blood on my fur*."[10] When taken in isolation her animalistic descriptions retain a sense of aversion, casting the murders in a different light. Surrounded, however, by an actively engaged ensemble, for a moment they transform into a wolf pack—a force to be reckoned with. The familiar motion of running shifts from the fear and anxiety of the chase to a collective, unified entity. Jolene's actions no longer exist in the isolation of a single person's choices, but as part of a network of larger cultural shortcomings that leaves populations like sex workers vulnerable to this violence. By turning the focus to the bodies of the performers, this sequence called upon the potential risk of violence without embodying the harm of violence directly—or as we referred to it, an illusion. The ensemble, as a central feature of many of these staging methods, had the most significant impact in directing the audiences' empathetic gaze, which in turn shifted the affect present in the room.

[10] Kreitzer, 75. Emphasis in original.

Monsters in True Crime

The ambiguity of the ensemble, appearing in a multitude of roles and circumstances, necessitated an additional consideration from audiences to connect their presence to the spoken dialogue. While the staging methods described could initially appear as simply stylistic directing choices, they also supported the goals that the playwright set out within the text. In a 2002 interview with Laura Deni discussing her new work, Kreitzer giggled and replied, "I am trying to startle people."[11] Her comment directly referenced a scene in *Self Defense,* mere months from premiering at the time of this interview, involving a "show stopping" moment where coroners seamlessly transition into strippers. Despite the heavily violent material, Kreitzer grapples with the more complicated nuances of violence and popular culture—present even with the tongue-in-cheek subtitle: *or Death of Some Salesmen*. Harbold remarked that this levity helped in subverting expectations, where within our production she "could feel the audience sort of riding that wave, like knowing that they actually had permission to laugh at certain things," often releasing the tension built in the more emotionally heavy interactions.[12]

The play functions as the final piece in Kreitzer's triptych of "Women Who Kill," a series in which she explores women who ultimately resort to violence.[13] Referencing her 2001 play *Valerie Shoots Andy*, Kreitzer reflected on the fictionalized nature of her work, stating "I really write about the myths that we as a culture have of these real people."[14] Unlike *Valerie Shoots Andy,* which includes a moderately fictionalized version of real-life Valerie Solanas, the

[11]Deni, Laura. "Crime Fascination Motivates Playwright." *Broadway to Vegas.* 12 May 2002. http://www.broadwaytovegas.com/May12,2002.html Accessed 20 January 2022.
[12] Harbold, Alexandra. Personal interview, 11 January 2022.
[13] The first, *Heroin/e (Keep Us Quiet)* utilizes a cast of two performing intertwining monologues to explore the lives of Anna Pankiev, the older sister of Freud's patient "the Wolf Man" who committed suicide, and Ellie Nesler, who shot and killed the man accused of molesting her son. In 2001 Kreitzer's second piece in the tryptic, *Valerie Shoots Andy,* focused on the actions of Valerie Solanas, who shot the American artist Andy Warhol.
[14] Quoted by Deni.

protagonist at the center of *Self Defense* Jolene Palmer merely borrows the living circumstances and traumatic history of Aileen Wuornos. Kreitzer surrounds Jolene with a constellation of police detectives, Hollywood producers, johns, reporters, coroners, and sex workers in a whirlwind of quick cuts and sharp velocity. As illustrated in the transition between coroners and strippers, this ever-shifting ensemble aids in giving the text of *Self Defense* the mythic quality that projects its themes beyond the Wuornos case to larger concerns about trauma and harm. Within the American pop culture imaginary, the fascination with Aileen Wuornos seems to stem from the potential justification for her crimes—if we can believe the circumstances she described, who wouldn't violently react in an act of self-defense?

Coming from a troubled childhood marked with abuse and neglect,[15] police arrested Aileen Wuornos in 1991 after discovering seven bodies along the I-95 highway system in Florida. Wuornos eventually confessed to all seven murders, citing that she had encountered these men as clients during her time as a sex worker, and in each situation, these men had attempted to rape and/or murder her. Despite the fact that Wuornos insisted she had acted in self-defense over the course of the trial, a jury found her guilty of murdering Richard Mallory, the first victim discovered. Wuornos ultimately pled no contest to the other six counts, although over the next few years she proceeded to contradict herself regarding her innocence.[16] After receiving the death penalty, the state executed Wuornos ten years later in 2002. In their coverage of the

[15] Broomfield records in his 2002 documentary *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* that as a child, Aileen's mother abandoned her and her brother at six months, leaving her with her grandfather Lowry. It has been said that Lowry abused both Aileen and her mother, and Aileen began trading blow jobs for cigarettes at the age of nine. At age thirteen, Aileen gave birth to a baby boy who was later put up for adoption, and she spent two years living in the woods at the end of her street. By age sixteen Aileen had moved to Florida to work as a hooker, although she also had a reputation for a violent temper.

[16] Wuornos was at the center of much controversy in regard to her mental state and potential illness. At one point on death row, she insisted that she killed her victims "as cold as ice, and I would do it again, and I know I would kill another person because I've hated humans for a long time." (Burkeman, Oliver. "Florida executes woman serial killer." *The Guardian*, 9 October 2002. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/oct/10/usa.oliverburkeman Accessed 15 June 2022.)

execution, ABC News noted that Wuornos was "the first woman ever to fit the FBI profile of a serial killer."[17]

Given the nature of the crimes both committed by Aileen Wuornos and reimagined by Kreitzer, it would be impossible to separate these acts of violence from the gendered implications. In their study of the ways gender shapes criminality, Dana M. Britton, Shannon K. Jacobsen and Grace E. Howard identify that "crime, like all behavior, takes place in a gendered social context that shapes and directs both the performance and rewards of that behavior."[18] According to their studies, the second-wave feminists initially targeted the link between male dominance and the social values that facilitated various crimes against women. This research has since evolved into considering how "viewing men *as men* rather than generic criminal actors" illuminates the social connections between masculinity and crime. Ultimately, the cultural association between masculinity and criminality results in "an environment favorable to crime," where "crime in turn serves as a powerful vehicle for doing masculinity."[19] Based on data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), Britton notes that men are more likely than women to be victims of all violent crimes—with the only exceptions being cases of rape and domestic violence.[20] NCVS indicates that 74% of all sexual assaults of women are committed by a non-stranger and 46% are committed by a friend of acquaintance, a statistical pattern also reflected in reports of assault.[21] Despite the significantly high levels of risk for rape, sexual violence, and assault among women, Kreitzer observed that "the women who do cross that line and become dangerous are such a tiny, tiny minority compared to the men who become violent.

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[17] ABC News, "Female Serial Killer Has Been Executed." 9 October 2002. https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=124614&page=1 Accessed 15 June 2022.
[18] Britton, Dana M., Shannon K. Jacobsen, and Grace E. Howard. *The Gender of Crime*, 2nd ed. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018, 40.
[19] Ibid, 39.
[20] Ibid, 87.
[21] Ibid, 91.

And, the men who kill women are *everywhere* in this society and it is just treated as normal. It is not news. It's nothing."[22] Her observation illustrates in part why the Wuornos case might quickly capture the imagination of the public—a woman, after living through numerous traumatic situations and faced with potential danger, ultimately resorts to the most extreme violence.

Britton also observes that criminal women often get neglected in criminological theory simply as "oddities," namely due to the fact that "criminal women are either *not women* and thus safely outside the purview of a discipline focused on studying them or *not criminal* and their apparent offending need not be considered."[23] For a case like that of Aileen Wuornos, her violent actions most certainly make her criminal, therefore putting her femininity in question to determine her status as "*not woman*." Dramatizations of the Wuornos case tend to underscore this point, further emphasizing Aileen as someone "not woman," and typically playing on the singularity of Wuornos as America's "first female serial killer." In doing so, Wuornos becomes even more extreme than the average true-crime tale—even more extreme than "not woman," Wuornos becomes monstrous. Although it remains possible to empathize with the circumstances that contributed to Wuornos' actions, further isolating her as both monster and "not woman" limits this empathy to the specifics of her situation. Framing the Wuornos case as true crime limits empathetic engagement with her experience—making her criminal acts appear singular and exceptional rather than as symptoms of larger social issues.

As Mark Seltzer argues, true crime "is crime fact that looks like crime fiction."[24] Unlike its fictional genre counterpart "crime," true crime "operates in that counterfactual region between truth and falsity; the region of social and collective belief, the situation of modern credibility."[25]

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[22] Quoted by Deni.
[23] Britton et. al., 40-41, emphasis in original.
[24] Seltzer, Mark. *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 2007, 16.
[25] Ibid, 38.

It offers "a way of returning to the scene of the crime by way of its recreation and representation. True crime always involves the aesthetics of the aftermath: a forensic realism."[26] While some mark the origin of the true crime as a literary form with Truman Campote's 1966 publication *In Cold Blood*, the last thirty years have seen an acceleration of visibility for the genre—beginning with the launch of channels like CourtTV in 1991, which included nonstop coverage of criminal justice programming, and the OJ Simpson trial giving the general public a heightened level of familiarity with the legal process.[27] Despite the popularity and fascination with other proclaimed serial killers around the same timeframe, the Wuornos case has received relatively little of the true crime treatment—limited primarily to the 1992 CBS TV movie *Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story* starring Jean Smart in the title role, and two documentaries produced by Nick Broomfield: the 1992 film *Aileen: The Selling of a Serial Killer*, and *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*, released in 2003. Rather than emphasizing the possibility of Wuornos as "not woman," these renderings seem to categorize her closer to "not criminal," suggesting that contextual circumstances led to her crimes. Given the limitations of the true crime genre however, the "aesthetics of the aftermath" cannot deny the extreme violence of the murders Wuornos committed.

Perhaps most tellingly, the most contemporary (and popular) reimaginings of the Wuornos case lean heavily on fictionalizing the events rather than viewing them through the genre of true crime. In 2003, the year following the death of Wuornos, Charlize Theron won a Golden Globe for her portrayal of the serial killer in *Monster*. Wuornos also became a feature in Ryan Murphy's anthology series *American Horror Story* in its fifth season, played by Lily Rabe.

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[26] Ibid, 37.
[27] Cruz, Lenika. "The New True Crime." *The Atlantic*, 11 June 2015. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/06/true-detectives-serial-the-jinx/393575/ Accessed 14 June 2022.

Framing Aileen Wuornos as a monster (either through evocative titles or alongside fictions of the paranormal) function as a reminder that culture provides the basis that creates monsters, a process that takes place "when we lose our grasp of the slippery line between fantasy and reality,"[28] not unlike the tenuous boundary between fact and fiction in true crime. In justifying the selection for the University of Utah as part of the 2016-17 season, Dr. Sydney Cheek-O'Donnell noted how the play "shows us a victim of sexual violence who then reacts with extreme violence. The play asks us to reconsider the circumstances that have created a 'monster.'"[29] These slightly more monstrous imaginings of Wuornos certainly make her appear criminal, and so extremely "not woman" that perhaps even her basic humanity becomes questionable.

Empathizing with Wuornos, regardless of whether her violence could be justified, requires negotiation between "not criminal" and "not woman." Rather than focusing on Wuornos as a singular exception, Kreitzer's script seeks empathy through the broader contexts of the circumstances. By using Wuornos predominantly as inspiration for a highly fictionalized version of events, Kreitzer seems to remove some of the challenges of the true crime genre. Without the limitations of the "forensic realism" in true crime, Kreitzer's mythic approach to the story can play on the whiplash of emotions rather than facts. Critics of *Self Defense*'s early productions described the quality of the script as "nightmarish," and potentially counterproductive. As one critic described, "it is certainly intentional…it fuzzes up what might have been a clearer, more compelling inquiry."[30] Others criticized Kreitzer's attempt to humanize Jolene Palmer, the

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[28] Chemers, Michael. *The Monster in Theatre History*. London: Routledge, 2018, 63.
[29] Quoted by Koldewyn. Casey. "Student Production 'Self Defense' Takes on Rape Culture." *The Daily Utah Chronicle*. 22 October 2016. http://dailyutahchronicle.com/2016/10/22/student-production-self-defense-takes-on-rape-culture/. Accessed 25 January 2022.
[30] Papatola, Dominic. "Self Defense, or Death of Some Salesmen: The Reviews are In." *FrankTheatre.org*. https://franktheatre.org/events/self-defense-or-the-death-of-some-salesmen/. Accessed 15 November 2017.

fictional parallel for Wuornos, stating how "she wants it both ways—ignoring enough of Wuornos' story to create a sympathetic fictional persona while insisting the real-life case makes a specific point."[31] I argue that this reading of *Self Defense* misjudges Kreitzer's goal, as it would not seem that the playwright is particularly interested in whether audiences empathize with Jolene's actions at all. After all, she dedicates the play only in part to Aileen Wuornos, in addition to "all those whose names we don't know." Within the text itself, it seems Kreitzer encourages audiences to empathize with Jolene's emotional reactions to her circumstances (often mirrored by other female characters, including the coroner and Daytona). This reconfiguration resists categorizing *Self Defense* along the lines of true crime and the subsequent limitations of considering Jolene Palmer as either not-woman or not-criminal. In this mythic imagining, with coroners transforming into strippers and sex workers appearing as angels, the priority of the story centers on conflicting emotions, negotiating affect, and the underlying social conditions that would necessitate a sex worker committing murder.

Translating Trauma: Record Rips, Illusions, and Zoom Lenses

When considering the gray area between the "real" and "representational," Lindsay B. Cummings asks, "to what degree does the performance encourage us to see that character as representative of a larger social group, to move from singularity to generality?"[32] Kreitzer's text offers some flexibility between singularity and generality based on her sprawling collection of characters. Jolene Palmer functions only as a representation of Aileen Wuornos, heightening this

[31] Royce, Graydon. "Self Defense, or Death of Some Salesmen: The Reviews are In." *FrankTheatre.org*. https://franktheatre.org/events/self-defense-or-the-death-of-some-salesmen/. Accessed 15 November 2017.
[32] Cummings, 194.

sense of singularity for the "first female serial killer." While her surrounding characters include some references to real-life participants in the Wuornos case, the mythic quality of Kreitzer's text relies on fluctuating between the specifics of singularity and gestures toward generality. Our production used this flexibility to bring attention to Kreitzer's dedication, often locating particular moments to direct the audiences' empathetic gaze more effectively towards "those whose names we don't know" rather than entirely focusing on Jolene. Most often, this included paying particular attention to the characters Chastity and Daytona.

Strippers by trade, Chastity and Daytona initially appear when police officers bring them in for questioning on recent murders. Their background as sex workers further informs this first interaction with police, as the officers quickly move from assuaging the women's apprehension ("We're Homicide, not Vice"[33]) to propositioning them for oral sex. For Harbold, this moment functioned as the first of many "record rips" for audiences—a sharp, jolting realization of the precarity that comes with sex work, and the ways that legal systems leverage power in these situations. With each appearance of the performers playing Chastity and Daytona—even when they had morphed into other characters—the audience had a visual and embodied reference to the constant state of risk and harm for this demographic.

In discussing the larger questions of the play, Kreitzer revealed that "the central question for me is one of self-defense. In this society can we see a prostitute as having a 'self' or is she disposable? Has she given up the rights of citizens by becoming a prostitute?"[34] Prostitution and sex work highlight the most straightforward discrimination in terms of state laws—although most states consider acts of both purchasing and selling such services illegal, states typically

[33] Kreitzer, 16.
[34] Quoted by Deni.

penalize selling sex more harshly than purchasing it.[35] This approach results in an imbalance, where "in effect, women who sell sex are punished more severely than the men who buy it."[36] The law not only places women who engage in sex work in a position of legal precarity—the nature of their work also places them at severe physical, mental, and emotional harm. At the time of our production in 2016, statistics showed that 68% of female and trans sex workers reported being raped at some point since the beginning of their careers, and 75% reported receiving emotional and psychological abuse in the course of their work.[37] Further, at this time sex work qualified as the most dangerous job in the United States, with murder as the cause of death for 204 out of every 100,000 workers.[38]

Kreitzer includes a number of speeches where Jolene herself comments on the danger of sex work, though these moments predominantly magnify Jolene's rage in order to justify her crimes. On the other hand, Chastity and Daytona offer more nuanced and affectively charged reflections on this harm and trauma through their speeches. In fact, Daytona is the first to explain why Jolene's argument of self-defense failed, particularly in the speech quoted in the epigraph of this chapter. Daytona observes that sex work forfeits Jolene's right to defend her "Self" because of the cultural associations with sex work as an act of selling one's body. The "self" that Daytona references simultaneously refers to an actual person—a performer embodying Jolene, just as the judgements circulated in the play about sex workers refer to the performers playing Chastity and Daytona.

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[35] Britton, et. al, 55-56.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Martinez, Theresa. "Deviant Behavior: Rape." University of Utah. Social and Behavioral Science Auditorium, Salt Lake City, UT. 22 March 2016. Lecture.
[38] Ibid.

If Jolene represents the retaliation of trauma pushed to the extreme, Daytona stands to embody the wear-and-tear of living alongside trauma. When asked about her experience in the production, actor Bailey Walker-Seiter reflected that out of all the characters she played, she had the strongest relationship with Daytona. "She knew that this was the way her life was going to be," Walker-Seiter stated, "but also owning who she was, owning that some of these were her choices and that some of them weren't but at the end of the day she was going to make a life for herself."[39] Daytona quickly became that "truth-teller"[40] of our production and, offering moments that could ground the narrative in the consequences of reality for the audience. As Jolene fiercely claims that her actions saved the lives of other women, Daytona goes on to clarify in direct address to the audience why police and law enforcement had ignored many of these cases in the first place. Jolene insists that the number of NHI cases has decreased since the murders took place, while Daytona explains that

> NHI.
>
> Is a police term.
>
> Prostitutes. Biker girls. If no family comes forward to put the heat on. Or if the family is powerless. Poor. Non English speaking.
>
> Goes in a file marked NHI.
>
> No Humans Involved.[41]

This moment cultivated a sense of cognitive dissonance, as Daytona would likely fit the category of NHI, but watching a live performer recite this speech made it nearly impossible to deny her humanity. In this context, Daytona serves as an example of the phenomenon Cummings

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[39] Walker-Seiter, Bailey. Personal correspondence, 20 January 2022.
[40] A term borrowed from director Alexandra Harbold during the rehearsal process. Based on my own reflections, and a sticky note I have saved that reads: "what is it saying to have Daytona as the narrator/voice of reason?"
[41] Kreitzer, 56.

describes, where the production encourages audiences to move beyond the singularity of Walker-Seiter's performance to see Daytona as a representation of a larger population. Since our production already framed Daytona as a character to empathize with, this moment opened up the space to shift from the singular to the general. In addition to the high risk of violence and murder for sex workers, Daytona magnifies how the harm extends even after death by stripping away any sense of humanity for these individuals. While this speech resisted some of the immediate, jolting energy of a record rip, the final line produced a similar dissonant and distressing affective result—the sensation of a gut punch. The jaded cynicism that Walker-Seiter brought to Daytona amplified the normalization of this violence and the traumatic consequences when society has determined you've relinquished your self.

As the text asked audiences to bear witness to the realities of violence and trauma, Harbold sought to further embody these realities through staging the female ensemble members throughout, following Kreitzer's suggestion of emulating a contemporary Greek chorus. In a recent conversation, Harbold described this chorus as "increasingly invested as witnesses and watchers, and it felt like they amplified certain experiences."[42] This approach wove together the elements of trauma, disorientation, and visceral rhetoric, where the bodies of actors onstage served to both witness Jolene's journey, and to give the audience a model for how to watch, listen, and empathize with her. Staging the female ensemble in this way also cultivated moments of kinesthetic empathy, a term defined by Wanda Strukus as "the feeling of sharing another person's movement, or vicariously experiencing another person's movement simply by watching."[43] Combining the visceral rhetoric of the text with the kinesthetic empathy of the

[42] Harbold, 11 January 2022.
[43] Strukus, Wanda. "Mining the Gap: Physically Integrated Performance and Kinesthetic Empathy" *The Journal of Theory and Dramatic Criticism*, Spring 2011, 89.

staging allowed our production to alter the entry point for audiences' empathy by appealing to the physical sensations and affects of trauma.

Bessel van der Kolk, a leading scholar on trauma and the connection between brain, mind and body, describes that traumatic memories differ from other memories in that "they are dissociated: The different sensations that entered the brain at the time of the trauma are not properly assembled into a story, a piece of autobiography."[44] Our ability to remember particular events depends on the emotions we experience at the time, and in the case of traumatic memories the precision of our recollections can be measured by the amount of adrenaline that we secrete—but that does not mean they integrate into our memories.[45] Instead, these detached traumatic memories become "fragmented sensory and emotional traces; images, sounds, and physical sensations."[46] Perhaps most significantly, van der Kolk identifies the way that traumatic memories resist our reliance on language. The reactivation of traumatic memory—through sounds, images, and sensations—shuts down the frontal lobe, the region of the brain that puts feelings into words.[47] This shutdown of the rational brain, "which expresses itself in thoughts," leads to reliance on the emotional brain, "which manifests itself in physical reactions."[48] Sensations that we culturally associate with distress—a pounding heartbeat, a twist in our gut, shallow breathing—reflect the emotional tumult of these memories.

While the text of *Self Defense* includes speeches that describe past experiences of violent trauma, the tension between traumatic memory and language made it more challenging to

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[44] van der Kolk, Bessel M.*The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Books, 2015, 196.
[45] Ibid., 178.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid. Later in his writing van der Kolk goes on to describe that "…the language center of the brain is about as far removed from the center for experiencing oneself as is geographically possible" (239). This spacial consideration may offer useful insight into the struggle to understand oneself through language alone.
[48] Ibid., 206.

communicate the long-term, emotional implications of such experiences. Evoking a sensory experience for the audience through movement and kinesthetic empathy became an important staging method to further appeal to the audiences' empathy without distracting from the overall structure of the production. In her notes on production, Kreitzer broadly refers to the "velocity" of the production, as "this play lives and dies by pacing."[49] The play's rapid-fire movement through time and space helps distance it from anything close to the "forensic realism" of true crime. The breakneck emotional shifts, however, can produce a level of "nightmarish" discomfort. When discussing discomfort as an affect, Ahmed suggests that discomfort can be categorized as disorientation, where "the sense of out-of-place-ness and estrangement involves an acute awareness of the surface of one's body, which appears *as* surface, when one cannot inhabit the social skin, which is shaped by some bodies, and not others."[50] Discomfort brings awareness to the boundary of one's own body and how it fits and functions in the world—the discomfort, for instance, of recognizing one's privileged position. This discomfort only increases when the play asks audiences to imaginatively enter the experience of a traumatized former sex-worker-turned-serial-murderer on death row. Intersecting between kinesthetic empathy and sensations of discomfort, the illusions that we choreographed cultivated an affect of unease in an effort to communicate the impacts of trauma.

The significance of discomfort also extends to the sexual violence that traumatized Jolene and motivates her to commit these crimes. Jolene reports the uncertainty of whether the men planned to rape or kill her, often employing the most literal and sensory terms. When pondering the question of whether or not a tree falling in the forest makes a sound, Jolene retorts to the audience

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[49] Kreitzer, 8.

[50] Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014, 148.

> Well that's a stupid fuckin' question. But I'll tell you the answer, 'cos that was nearly me. An' yeah, you make a lotta sound. Even if it's just your own breathing. And blood pounding an' little twigs under your feet. Even if you don't scream, 'cos you know there's nobody gonna hear you. Yeah, you make a lotta sound. The sound of being alive.
>
> Right up until you're not.[51]

This technique demonstrates what Stephanie Larson terms visceral rhetorics, the "bone deep, felt sense of communication that transpires from a position of flesh and wound in addition to the processes that seek to erase the bodies communicating from this very perspective."[52] Larson argues that visceral rhetorics appear in instances related to sexual violence as tools to move audiences to persuasion, where the use of the body is used to "uncover the messy, bloody, material aspects of violation to remind audiences of the physical, corporeal body at the center of the problem."[53]

Pulling on examples like Chanel Miller's testimony against Stanford rapist Brock Turner and Emma Sulkowicz's performance art piece *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*, Larson identifies the strength of these performances to "create conditions under which audiences might sense *what rape feels like*—seeking to produce a shift in public opinion over rape crimes."[54] Miller's victim impact statement against Brock Turner, which circulated widely by media outlets just months before rehearsal for *Self Defense* began, included a number of appeals to the physical body, particularly in identifying a sensation of dissociation. After her initial

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[51] Kreitzer, 64.
[52] Larson, Stephanie R. *What It Feels Like: Visceral Rhetoric and the Politics of Rape Culture*. Penn State University Press, 2021, 4.
[53] Ibid, 115.
[54] Ibid, 114, emphasis in original.

examination in the hospital, Miller reflected, "I don't want this body anymore. I was terrified of it. I didn't know what had been in it, if it had been contaminated, who had touched it. I wanted to take off my body like a jacket and leave it at the hospital with everything else."[55] Rather than appealing to the physical experience of rape, Emma Sulkowicz illustrated the enduring burden of violation by carrying the dorm-standard 50-pound mattress—essentially identical to the one another student had raped her on—around the Columbia University campus. While Sulkowicz could not ask for help to carry the mattress, she could accept when others offered it. In her efforts to bring attention to the lack of action from the university after reporting the assault, Sulkowicz literally dragged the weight from her dorm room into public view, where others could witness the physical manifestation of the burden. Larson indicates that visceral rhetorics serve to shift public opinion by recentering the body that bears the violence. Similarly to both Miller's statement and Sulkowicz's performance art, *Self Defense* continually reminds the audience of the potential for violence and harm that a person like Jolene or Daytona would constantly face by drawing attention to the bodies of the performers. Pairing visceral rhetorics with the embodiment of performance amplifies the affective power of discomfort.

During this speech, as Jolene explains all the sounds of "being alive," our production further underscored the visceral rhetoric by staging the ensemble to create the soundscape that Jolene references. Reeder, positioned downstage right, maintained a level gaze with the audience. Meanwhile, as Jolene began speaking, two members of the female ensemble ran from the two downstage entrances to the furthest points upstage, jumping into the arms of two

[55] Baker, Katie J.M. "Here is the Powerful Letter…." *Buzzfeed*. 3 June 2016. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/katiejmbaker/heres-the-powerful-letter-the-stanford-victim-read-to-her-ra. Accessed 1 August 2016. The article cited here was initially circulated at the time of the People v. Brock Turner trial, and therefore did not include identifying information about Chanel Miller. Miller did not come forward as "Emily Doe" until her memoir *Know My Name* was published in 2019.

members of the male ensemble. Although these two female actors played Chastity and Daytona throughout the production, in this moment they stepped away from the singularity of those characters. As they wrapped their limbs around their male counterparts and were lifted entirely off the ground, giving the illusion of being carried against their will, their presence activated the histories of the NHI cases and "those whose names we don't know." Although the male actors stood stock-still throughout, their six-foot frames and backlighting made them appear all the more menacing. As Reeder described how "yeah, you make a lotta sound," the female actors clawed the air, actively pushing against their male counterparts and thrashing against their constraints. Their breath, coming in short bursts and gasps, never drowned out Reeder's narration, providing a tangible example of what this distress might sound like "even if you don't scream, 'cos you know there's nobody gonna hear you." Maintaining the overall velocity of the production, the tension broke immediately following Reeder's final line—"Yeah, you make a lotta sound. The sound of being alive. Right up until you're not." At that cue, the two female actors immediately fell silent, slumping over, carried off as dead weight.

Moments like Jolene's description of the sounds of being alive provided a certain amount of concrete detail ("just your own breathing" and "blood pounding and little twigs under your feet") served as initial inspiration in the collaboration process, however, Kreitzer's text, however, provided our company far greater opportunities to think metaphorically. Harbold framed our approach to these moments as "illusions," a process built on "a shared experience of 'okay, what's this illusion, how do we create it together?'"[56] Inspired by the work of artists like Frantic Assembly and Crystal Pite, we utilized the term "illusion" to describe moments of highly choreographed sequences that represented or evoked trauma in order to give the impression of

[56] Harbold, 11 January 2022.

physical danger or harm. In hindsight, Harbold defined it as a process of building "physical agreements, a physical container that we can return to, so that it looks incredibly risky from the outside, but actually is really supportive of the actor on the inside."[57] This example of the female ensemble members "captured" by male counterparts served as our illusion to embody and accompany Jolene's description of the sound of being alive. These illusions cultivated a sense of kinesthetic empathy for the audience in understanding the physical reactions sustained during traumatic events, but perhaps even more effective for the affective experience was the juxtaposition of live performers moving from singular characters to the imagined generality of "all those whose names we don't know."

At this intersection between discomfort and kinesthetic empathy, illusions remained flexible in how we transmogrified Kreitzer's words into staged moments. Illusions proved effective in dramatizing the action Jolene described (as in the previous example), and in some cases they provided an opportunity to bring Jolene alongside the female ensemble to demonstrate a sense of cohesion. The presence of the ensemble provided Isabella Reeder with scene partners to interact with, and her character Jolene with witnesses to validate her experience. As Jolene makes her vow that she would never feel the fear of getting attacked again (the moment described in the opening of this chapter), the embodied ensemble suggests the lives lost in similar moments of unwitnessed violence. Whether Jolene moved alongside the ensemble (seen in the evocation of the wolf pack) or stood outside the action as narrator (as seen in the moment of describing the sound of being alive), the dynamic between performers aided in contextualizing Jolene's acts of violence. By underscoring the constant state of risk and harm, an audience could perhaps justify Jolene's crimes.

[57] Harbold, 11 January 2022.

Although our collaborative illusions often relied on physicality, incorporating the ensemble through stillness in "zoom lenses" illustrated the scope and scale of trauma. Unlike illusions, which drew on physicality to represent trauma, or record rips, which relied on sudden affective shifts, the stillness of these zoom lenses gave the audience time to process the speech of the text alongside the embodied presence of the ensemble. While Daytona pragmatically explained what precisely an NHI designation meant for sex workers, the meditation on technical and legal implications of these cases came instead from the coroner. Much like fellow cast member Bailey Walker-Seiter, Ashley Marian Ramos portrayed a multitude of characters in *Self Defense*, and of all these characters, Ramos identified the coroner as the most challenging to embody. "It's a challenge to make something of cold, scientific text," she noted, "and then to not over-emotionalize her monologue but also not leave it so clinical."[58] For Ramos, the ability to cultivate authentic physical and embodied sensations in her work signals that she has appropriately "transmuted the material" to a point where it's "materializing physically." When performing a character that emphasizes the rational, scientific perspective like the coroner, Ramos noted that the sensory aspect becomes more challenging to access. Further, the analytical approach for the coroner's speech also proved difficult for our company to physicalize through staging. The coroner appears periodically throughout the story but without ever directly interacting with Jolene or the other female characters, although for our production, Harbold included the female ensemble during one key speech. In this case the ensemble did not serve as watchers or witnesses for the coroner—they haunted her.

During this particular speech, the thrust stage was configured with two metal staircases upstage center, and a long metal table downstage right. At first, Ramos began the speech midway

[58] Ramos, Ashley Marian. Personal correspondence, 16 January 2022.

up the stage right staircase, with two ensemble members on stairs above her. The three remaining ensemble members spread through the rest of the downstage playing area. The ensemble all stood, waiting as the coroner describes listening to the bodies of women desecrated in violent ways. They appeared to listen, but unlike their interactions with Jolene, the ensemble appeared as passive. Anticipating. Finally, once Ramos had finished describing the bodies she inspected, those laid out on her table awaiting her judgment on cause of death, the ensemble moved. In a slow, practiced motion, they all laid down on their backs, dotted across the stage. Ramos watched them, the only figure still standing upright on the stage. As she descended the stairs to come center stage, the coroner reflected on what brought these bodies to her:

> The ideas about justice—started springing up at me. After the bodies had been piling up. For a while. Girls, women, who should not have been on my table. Sure, I get some ODs, suicides, but it's the others. The ones who shouldn't have been on my table for another forty years. Who should never have gone through what they went through to get to my table.[59]

The coroner bears the weight of witnessing the violence done to these women, and the presence of the ensemble in this position gives the audience a visual cue of that weight. Ramos slowly walks down the stairs to center stage, clearly distressed by what she sees. Although the coroner's speech did not include the visceral rhetoric so often employed by Jolene, the audiences' imagination can fill in what the coroner leaves unsaid in describing these bodies. "And they're whispering to me—" Ramos paused briefly as the ensemble rose to stand once more, this time actively watching her. No longer the anonymous and shape-shifting ensemble, they embodied those whose names we will never know, for whom justice will never come. With whispering

[59] Kreitzer, 45

voices, they joined her in speaking the final line in unison as they exit: "Unsolved. unsolved. unsolved. unsolved."[60]

For Ramos, it wasn't until she walked down the stairs to join the ensemble on the same plane—orienting herself toward these women face-to-face—that she felt the shift from viewing these bodies as strangers to recognizing their full humanity.[61] The choices in staging this particular moment ultimately created an affective shift for the actors to comprehend the scale and burden this trauma, particularly as Harbold staged members of the ensemble alongside Ramos. Cummings argues that empathetic engagement requires attending to the ways a performance encourages the audience to see a character as a representative of a larger social group, "to move from singularity to generality."[62] In this way, performance can infuse a greater sense of empathy toward a particular group or population by calling attention to their unseen or unrecognized challenges. In many ways, our production fits this definition outlined by Cummings, as our staging encouraged audiences to view the characters or the ensemble as standing in for larger populations. Our goal with the coroner's speech seemed to invert this approach—to move from the generalized ensemble toward singularity. As the coroner appeared to interact with the ensemble, it created a sense of recognition that every NHI case related to an individual person who had suffered unimaginable violence. The simplicity of the ensemble's movement underscored the trauma of sex work and sexual violence without glamorizing or romanticizing it, and instead asked the audience to focus their empathy toward the bodies onstage in front of them. Further, by this point in the production the female performers resist a truly neutral reading,

[60] Kreitzer, 45.
[61] Ramos, 16 January 2022.
[62] Cummings, 194.

even in their capacity as an ensemble, since the full range of their characters hovers just at the periphery.

In questioning an audiences' potential for empathy in such moments, Cummings asks, "is our sense of empathetic engagement with the performer, the character she represents, or somewhere in between? Can we even tell?"[63] I suggest that in this particular case, the answer to is yes to all. The combination and blending between performer, character(s), and situation offers a unique power in cultivating empathy in this moment precisely because the staging has offered so many targets for the audience's empathy. The affective shift for the audience arrives in the moment of understanding that the ensemble has embodied the victims of NHI cases, and whether the audience empathizes with Bailey Walker-Seiter in that moment or her character Daytona (or any of her other characters) produces the same result—a sense of horror and despair over lives lost. During the run of the production, the air in the theatre grew heavy in this moment. For some, the realization caused a sharp intake of breath, while for others it had the opposite effect of a groaning exhale. Harbold categorized it as a "temperature drop," as if a sudden chill overtook the room. If the goal of dialogic empathy (as argued by Cummings) hinges on questioning not whether the audience empathized, but "what empathy has led us to think and feel, and why,"[64] then this staging functions as a prime moment of dialogic empathy wherein the audience connected the dots between the ensemble, the action they performed, and the dialogue from the coroner. Rather than reacting based on the thoughts and conclusions of the rational brain, the emotional brain responded through physical reactions for the audience. What this all makes clear is that even without portraying the traumatizing actions and violence imagined in the speech, the staging resisted a reliance on language in order to cultivate empathy.

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[63] Cummings, 194.
[64] Cummings, 194.

Although Kreitzer insists that the play "lives and dies by pacing," allowing the pace to slow in moments like the coroner's speech gave emotional and mental space to let the impacts and consequences of trauma land more fully. For Harbold, these opportunities became "zoom lenses" to explore the specific circumstances or reactions for particular characters, especially those providing the most cultural context for Jolene. For the coroner, this "zoom lens" imagined a perspective from within the legal system of this harm. We took advantage of another "zoom lens" during a moment with Daytona, in order to develop the perspective of a character living within these circumstances. Daytona, our narrator and truth-teller of the play, rarely appeared onstage alone until her final speech, differentiating this moment from earlier interactions, including the moment she defined No Humans Involved. At this point, Daytona reflects on one of Jolene's murder victims, a john she had had as a client. Initially Daytona simply states how weird it feels to know someone who winds up dead, but she goes on to divulge that "the kinda stuff he was into, the kinda *impulses* he was useta gettin' satisfied," it doesn't surprise her that he's dead.[65] For once, Daytona can appreciate being the one who gets to be "not surprised." "Just like people are not surprised when one a my kind turns up dead," she states. With the same practicality that she applies to Jolene's self-defense argument, Daytona realizes that her body, her Self, lacks any sense of worth in society's eyes. She uses the public outrage regarding the deaths of female college students to contrast reactions to her potential murder, stating that

> I ain't no fuckin' College Girl. My body winds up in a ditch, they're not gonna waste too much of a day on it. And whoever it was that decided I didn't count and no-one would give a shit if he dumped me out by the side of I-95, whoever it was driving the last car I got into, he's hangin' around going to the grocery store,

[65] Kreitzer, 70, emphasis and spelling in original.

> playing with his fuckin' kids maybe, watching the five-second blip about it on the evening news and probably none the worse for wear.[66]

Unlike the coroner's speech, the power of Daytona's reflection comes from the stark juxtaposition of articulating that no one will remember her while focusing all of the audience's attention on the single human in front of them. Daytona's observation that her murderer would likely not face any legal consequences if she wound up dead speaks to the same central core of the coroner's speech—what does empathizing with those who constantly live at risk of rape, assault, and murder cause us to think about expectations related to criminality and justice, and perhaps alter our feelings on the matter?

It became clear for our collaborators that Daytona's speech had the potential to deeply impact the message of our production. During table work, an early stage of rehearsal that included all cast members reading and analyzing the text, we discussed reactions to this moment. For the most part, performers expressed ways that they related to this moment, or how this moment helped them in understanding the world of the play. Then, one of the male actors spoke up, stating that he was unsure why this speech was necessary to the text at all and questioning what purpose it served. I witnessed as every female member of the company shifted uncomfortably in their seats and dropped their gazes to the floor, with a few raising slightly indignant eyebrows. I recall the twist in my own gut in hearing his words. It felt almost as if an invisible line had come down in the rehearsal room, putting those who understood Daytona's point in a tangible, substantial way on one side against those who didn't. (As perhaps expected, this boundary existed along gender lines.) How could he be so dismissive? Did this actor not

[66] Kreitzer, 70. The case that Daytona is referencing in this moment is that of Danny Rollins, or the Gainesville Ripper. In 1990, five female college students were murdered over a period of four days. Bodies were typically decapitated and placed in provocative positions. Daytona contrasts the reactions to this event against the hypothetical consequences of her own murder.

realize how often women and female-identifying individuals worried for their safety when out in public, the constant vigilance required to protect ourselves? Did he realize that out of every 1,000 sexual assaults, 975 of the offenders walk free, meaning if any of us were ever assaulted our chances of retribution were slim to none?[67] Although we never explicitly discussed this reaction after it occurred, it motivated a level of attention for this moment, as it gave Bailey Walker-Seiter an opportunity to challenge whom our culture deems worthy of empathy in similar cases. Realizing that our audiences may arrive with a similar perspective to this particular male actor, Daytona's speech became an opportunity for audiences to perhaps investigate their own judgements or biases regarding sex workers.

Uniquely, Daytona's observations come from a more rational and cognitive place rather than the emotional or visceral appeals elsewhere in the text. For once, Daytona gets to experience the other side of the line, where she's "not surprised" that this violence transpired at Jolene's hands. During early rehearsals of the speech,[68] Harbold offered her set of keys for Walker-Seiter to experiment with, giving a tactile cue to go along with each reiteration of being "not surprised." This exercise provided two benefits simultaneously: one, a physical representation of long-term trauma, and two, a gesture that could symbolically speak to Daytona's appeals to empathy. After all, the burden of the keys was not the weight, but their constancy—an ever-present, disruptive force that she had to deal with. Finding organic ways to integrate the motion of picking them up had its challenges, but it spoke to awkwardness of Daytona finding herself on the other side of the equation. Harbold's keyring was unwieldy—two

[67] This statistic comes from the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN). While rape and sexual assault are notoriously difficult to measure, related to many of the issues discussed in this chapter, including definitions of the crime, whether a victim chooses to report, and other cultural and social factors. RAINN gathers data through the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), as well as studies conducted by the Justice Department and the Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system

[68] The use of the set of keys is pulled from my own memory of attending rehearsals.

rings full, with a carabiner and a large decorative charm shaped like a Victorian skeleton key. Walker-Seiter left the set on the table in front of her until the acknowledgement of being "not surprised," and each time she picked them up the weight seemed to catch her slightly off-guard. The skeleton key charm made the weight of the entire keyring unbalanced in her hand, so for the first few references the physical cue accented a sense of astonishment for Daytona, particularly when Walker-Seiter picked them up only to nearly drop them back on the table. A few times, after discussing with Harbold what it might mean to Daytona to try and relate to people who wouldn't investigate her death, Walker-Seiter gestures with the key ring as if to offer them toward the imaginary audience. The keys provide an opportunity to physicalize Daytona's attempts at finding common ground with a public who would categorize her death as an NHI case. By the sixth time that Daytona insists that she's not surprised, the keys seemed to grow heavy, and Walker-Seiter gestured with them less and less. Although the keys themselves hadn't changed at all, Walker-Seiter's handling of them throughout this speech demonstrated how a small thing—a lack of recognition, of feeling like she "doesn't count"—would continue to wear on a person's sense of self. Rehearsing this speech raised the question: rather than empathizing with the individual, can Daytona build empathy on a shared experience of being not surprised by circumstances?

The keys, of course, functioned only as a rehearsal tool—in performance Harbold stripped down the moment and relied on stillness and space to create a sense of "zooming in" to the moment. The physical movement of picking up the keys to gesture for each "not surprised" evolved into touchstone later in rehearsals, a shorthand to indicate when Walker-Seiter needed to make that weight more palpable in her performance. By refocusing on a physical and tactile experience, the message of the speech remained clear without sinking the performer in

imaginings of trauma. Walker-Seiter stood upstage right, just a few steps up on the tall metal staircase, still decked out in leather crop top and shorts, staring defiantly at the audience. "I remember…standing on the stage in those bright white lights," Walker-Seiter recalled with a laugh. "I'm sweaty, I've been running around and changing clothes the whole show, and I'm allowing that to affect what's going on with me, as an actor." The sensations of exhaustion only added to the emotional tension for the audience as the speech reveals Daytona's own resignation for her position. In performing the speech, Walker-Seiter described it as realization where "Daytona is very angry about that…but also at the same time, it's like she's resigned to this fact. And I think that really surprised me, as an actor and a character, that she's resigned that this might be her fate."[69] Keeping the staging limited to one location with minimal movement physicalized this resignation—a reflection of a woman not necessarily unable to move, but simply accepting where she stands. Once again moving between the singular and the generalized, the audience could see Daytona as the singular character they had come to recognize over the course of the play, but in this moment, she spoke on behalf of the women who "didn't count." In my own recollections of this speech, I remember the way Walker-Seiter's gaze tracked across the audience, as if daring anyone to look her in the eye. The air felt taut. Although Daytona might be resigned to this life, the implicit question she seemed to ask hung in space. After all this, the NHI cases, being alive "right up until you're not," of being "not surprised," who deserved empathy in this situation?

[69] Walker-Seiter, 20 January 2022.

Vessels for Empathy

Although not initially a consideration in our rehearsal process, affect offers a useful tool to analyze our approach in staging these moments of trauma. Trauma, as an experience directly related to the body and emotions, gains greater possibility to be communicated across boundaries in the act of performance. In his research on PTSD and the effects of trauma on the body, Bessel van der Kolk writes that traumatized individuals suffer tremendous difficulty in attempting to communicate their stories. He notes that for those attempting to share their trauma, "their bodies reexperience terror, rage, and helplessness, as well as the impulse to fight or flee, but these feelings are almost impossible to articulate. Trauma by nature drives us to the edge of comprehension, cutting us off from language based on common experience or an imaginable past."[70] It is in these moments of retelling where the trauma of past pain becomes so deep it becomes nearly impenetrable to those around. Indeed, as Judith Lewis Herman argues, "psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless," which renders the individual as helpless.[71] Herman goes on to point out that "traumatic events violate the autonomy of the person at the level of basic bodily integrity," and that "at the moment of trauma, almost by definition, the individual's point of view counts for nothing."[72] If anything, Kreitzer's depiction of trauma through Jolene Palmer explicitly reveals this reaction to trauma—to lose one's self, only to have that self further invalidated through legal and criminal penalties.

As our production and my analysis here suggests though, the trauma threaded through *Self Defense* does not belong only to Jolene. In fact, some of the most affective and emotional realizations of trauma come via her female counterparts, albeit in small fragments. Our

[70] van der Kolk, 43.
[71] Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York, N.Y: BasicBooks, 1992, 33.
[72] Ibid, 53.

collaborators quickly realized how performing trauma becomes a challenge of expressing that edge of comprehension. Miriam Haughton puts this challenge into words when she asks "how can one design the unknowable, perform the unspeakable, and stage the unrepresentable? How does one stage narratives and experiences historically consigned to shadow?"[73] Haughton argues that staging traumas that "are more often than not shadowed in public discourse and cultural consciousness as a result of historical, social, and cultural agendas" serves to bring them to light.[75] Similarly, our production of *Self Defense* attempted to bring experiences of trauma to light in a way that spoke to the embodied process of experiencing trauma, particularly related to sexual violence. Through characters like Daytona, the coroner, and the female ensemble as a whole, we could express consequences of trauma and relate it back to the experience of the body. Not only did these staging methods attempt to communicate the embodied aspects of trauma, but we hoped that it would simultaneously offer an opportunity for audiences to engage in an act of dialogic empathy. In thinking around what empathy caused audiences to think and feel, and why, our production focused on the larger goal of Kreitzer's dedication. Over the two-weekend run of *Self Defense*, I hosted two post-show discussions to dive more deeply into the themes of our production. As audiences reacted to what they had just seen, the focus of the conversation rarely dove too deeply into the particulars of the Aileen Wuornos case. Instead, our conversations focused predominantly on the ways the play explored systems of power and discrimination. The affect that came up in these reactions often included a sense of discomfort, particularly as audiences negotiated the space between the singularity and generality present in the production.

[73] Haughton, Miriam. *Staging Trauma: Bodies in Shadow*. Contemporary Performance Interactions. London, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 26.
[75] Haughton, 31.

What began as empathy (whether toward a performer or a character or both) often led to distress when that individual embodied traumatic situations and experiences within the play.

The affect of staging such encounters of trauma did not include the same level of discomfort, namely due to the ways in which Harbold utilized the staging methods described here to focus on the body without internalizing aspects of trauma. By physicalizing trauma in specific choreographed ways, our production drew attention to the body as the site of trauma and actively shifted the affect of the space. Remaining critically aware of how they embodied these narratives, performers identified these moments in service of a larger dramaturgical goal. In much the same manner as the shape-shifting ensemble, who swiftly moved between characters and identities, the production team as a whole sought to move between singularity and generality in order to direct the audiences' empathy from the specific characters toward the unnamed and unknown.

CHAPTER THREE
Of Flesh and Bodies:
Intersections of Race and Gender in *Slave Play*

> *Kaneisha lets out a scream that sends the gag falling out of her mouth and her body shivering from groin to skull.*
>
> Kaneisha: Starbucks! Starbucks! Starbucks!
>
> *Kaneisha falls off the bed and begins to cry. It is a full-bodied, all-hands-on-deck type of cry.*
> *Jim looks at Kaneisha, not sure what came over him, not sure why he did what he did, as the last light of the Virginia dusk begins to fade away, and a slight breeze knocks their window against the pane.*
> *Jim begins to crawl over to Kaneisha slowly when suddenly the all-hands-on-deck cry becomes a guttural laugh. Kaneisha is overcome.*
>
> *Slave Play*

Sitting in the dark, surrounded by everything from nervous chuckles to bold guffaws to anxious silence, I've never had such a strong urge to fold myself into a pretzel and disappear into my seat. In the crowded auditorium at the Taper Forum in Los Angeles, amusement rolls across the audience as the characters of Jeremy O. Harris's *Slave Play* portray increasingly awkward and ridiculous sexual interactions.[1] What initially appears in the first act as a series of racially charged sexual exploits on a slave plantation—including a white mistress taking advantage of the young Black man working in her household, and an overseer awkwardly seducing a Black woman—turns out to be a set up constructed by a pair of present-day Yale graduate students to help three interracial couples work through their relationship issues. These characters spend the

[1] Harris, Jeremy O. *Slave Play*. Directed by Robert O'Hara, performances by Antoinette Crowe-Legacy, Jonathan Higginbotham, Devin Kawaoka, Chalia La Tour, Irene Sofia Lucio, Paul Alexander Nolan, Jakeem Dante Powell, and Elizabeth Stahlmann. 19 February 2022, Center Theatre Group, Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles, California. This production was the West Coast premiere of *Slave Play* and featured the full creative team from the original 2018 Broadway production, including additional fight and intimacy direction by Teneice Divya Johnson, based on the original fight/intimacy direction by Claire Warden and Teneice Divya Johnson. *Slave Play* was first performed as part of the 2017 Langston Hughes Festival at Yale University and had its world premiere at the New York Theatre Workshop in 2018.

entirety of the play parsing out the baggage unique to these interracial relationships through the unconventional practice of therapeutic role play, and in doing so come to name and interrogate some of the more sensitive issues of race. As the play hurtles toward the climactic third act—which includes an ambiguous and violent sexual interaction between Kaneisha, the central Black female character, and her white male partner Jim, described in the stage direction excerpted above—I struggle to articulate what meaning this particularly traumatic exchange produces for audiences. Judging from the numerous reactions around me, including the two women on my row who sat just as silently as I did, it seems uncertain what the play invited us to conclude about this moment.

It's not that I don't find the premise intriguing, or the physical comedy of the first two acts amusing. Most of it is just not funny enough for me to laugh. The play swerves away from absurdity like a slow-motion car wreck away from absurdity towards the assault I know is coming, and even my growing discomfort feels disconnected from the action onstage—it's not the sexual exploits or explicit language that twists my stomach into knots, but the awareness of the actors behind the characters who must embody this story night after night. Playwright Jeremy O. Harris has remarked that *Slave Play* exists in a world set up by fantasy and performance, but that does not negate the fact that on a visceral level, bodies cannot distinguish between reality and fiction. As Mark Cariston Seton observes, "the body does not distinguish between fiction and actuality, or between the trauma of one body and the empathetic resonance of others."[2] While the potential to empathize with Kaneisha specifically as a result of this staged traumatic act exists, I discuss in this chapter how the production limits depth of this empathy due to Kaneisha's treatment in the first two acts. Given the horizon of expectation set by the

[2] Seton, Mark Cariston. "Traumas of Acting Physical and Psychological Violence: How Fact and Fiction Shape Bodies for Better or Worse." *Performing Ethos* 4.1 (2013), 30.

production—including the aura of mystery to maintain the "surprise" at the end of the first act and the way the play toys with satire—empathizing with any of the characters does not seem a priority, which makes Kaneisha's position particularly troublesome. While it's possible for audiences to emphasize with Kaneisha, the fact that her character (and the audiences' relationship to her) gets so quickly sidelined in favor of debating the satirical elements of the play seems to downplay the significance of her experience. The visceral reactions to the violence Kaneisha goes through in this final scene only become more complicated when considered alongside kinesthetic empathy, where the involuntary response of the audience mirrors the movement occurring onstage.

"…a play about audiences being in conversation with other audiences."

Part of my attraction to *Slave Play* as a researcher stationed on the West Coast initially came from the mystery surrounding details of the production. Early marketing for the play revealed little about the story or the given circumstances—merely that "the Old South lives on at the MacGregor Plantation" where "nothing is as it seems, and yet everything is as it seems."[3] Reviews of the New York productions similarly seemed to honor this approach, with one essay announcing that their content was "riddled with spoilers. The play is lit though. So we're not ruining it."[4] Another states "If you're seeing the play—and there are plenty of reasons to see it—stop reading this now. Come back afterward."[5] More than a marketing ploy, these reviews insinuated that audiences' ability to truly understand the play relied on as much ignorance about

[3] Cover copy, *Slave Play*, Theatre Communications Group, 2019.
[4] McDonald, Soraya Nadia."The subversive 'Slave Play' peels back veneer of racial innocence in Northern whites." *Andscape*, 14 December 2018. https://andscape.com/features/slave-play-theater-off-broadway-racism-peels-back-veneer-of-racial-innocence-in-northern-whites/. Accessed 13 July 2022.
[5] Holdren, Sara. "Theatre Review: *Slave Play* Blends the Terrifying and the Tantalizing." *Vulture*, 10 December 2018. https://www.vulture.com/2018/12/slave-play-jeremy-harris-review.html. Accessed 12 July 2022.

the circumstances as possible. As the play garnered greater accolades and productions beyond its initial Broadway run, however, the reputation that precedes *Slave Play* makes it difficult to attend without any prior knowledge—despite Harris's insistence that the less the audience knows, the better. As the written text of the play seems to oscillate somewhere between comedic satire and distressingly realistic harm, the intention of the original production seems to operate in a similarly ambiguous margin, where the gap between the visceral reactions to the production and the text itself create an affective dissonance.

I suggest in this chapter that the predominant source of empathy (if one exists) in *Slave Play* comes from kinesthetic empathy, the "automatic, involuntary, kinesthetic response of one body to another" that produces a "feeling of sharing another person's movement"[6] produced through the staging and choreography, particularly in the final scene. Without the dramaturgical scaffolding between the text of the play itself, the staging, and the audience's understanding though, this kinesthetic empathy leads to an increased affect of discomfort and distress. Initially I hoped my analysis could focus on specific choices of the production team in the process of developing and staging *Slave Play*, as untangling the pervasive ambiguity between intentions, meaning, and interpretation seems central to understanding the play's purpose. (Even in research inquiries some members of the professional production team admitted they didn't feel qualified to speak on these matters.) Although *Slave Play* does not seem interested in appealing to the audience for much, let alone empathy, the kinesthetic and affective responses from witnessing the final act still direct audiences toward an act of dialogic empathy—questioning what this moment intended audiences to think, feel, or question. The affective dissonance, however, makes

[6] Strukus, Wanda. "Mining the Gap: Physically Integrated Performance and Kinesthetic Empathy." *The Journal of Theory and Dramatic Criticism*, Spring 2011, 89

this opportunity for dialogic empathy too ambiguous, creating a deeply felt visceral experience that lacks a frame of reference.

In considering the racial implications of *Slave Play*, particularly in terms of empathizing, it is necessary to evaluate why I utilize empathy as the point of entry. Adam Smith, in his nineteenth century publication *The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* categorized sympathy as an act of "fellow feeling," of feeling the emotions of another throughout a full range of passions. Smith argued that the emotions felt as a result for sympathizing belong to the individual, although they can never directly inhabit someone else's body and experience. This framework of sympathy was taken up by abolitionists in their anti-slavery work. Although abolitionists recognized the inability to truly grasp another's emotions, sympathy aided in developing a connection to the enslaved population. Sympathy functioned as a significant component of abolitionist performance during the nineteenth century, based in Adam Smith's conceptualization that "reason alone is insufficient to prompt ethical action; moral judgment—particularly moral *action*—also requires emotional engagement."[7] As Gay Gibson Cima has argued, the key to anti-racist and anti-slavery activism came from "performing *as if* one finds oneself in someone else's material circumstances" in order to cultivate a sense of sympathy.[8] The fellow feeling of sympathy could thus provide the emotional engagement for this type of moral action, prompting active participation on behalf of others. Fellow feeling is limited, however, on the individual's ability to recognize and engage their own emotions. Or, as Sara Ahmed argues, it involves "fantasy" where "one can 'feel for' or 'feel with' others, but this depends on how I 'imagine' the other already feels."[9] Ahmed suggests that sympathy as fellow feeling is predicated on the

[7] Cima, Gay Gibson. *Performing Anti-Slavery: Activist Women on Antebellum Stages.* Cambridge University Press, 2014, 52.
[8] Cima, 53.
[9] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion,* 41n9.

emotional depth of the individual, where "*one feels with or for others only insofar as one feels 'about' their feelings in the first place.*"[10] Empathy provides a more generative framework for this project, given that its evolution from sympathy altered the approach to address physical experiences and reactions related to these emotions.

For my analysis of *Slave Play,* which predominantly engages aspects of staging in analyzing affective shifts, this attention on physical engagement proves more useful than Smith's original definition of sharing emotion. Rather, I take up Susan Leigh Foster's analysis on the way that empathy came about "to register a changing experience of physicality that, in turn, influenced *how* one felt another's feelings."[11] Foster traces the trajectory of empathy as it evolves out of historical definitions of sympathy in conjunction with evolutions of neuromuscular organization and interiority. In applying this toward dance scholarship, Foster links empathy's expansion with kinesthesia, where dance meaning could be "apprehended through the combination of kinesthetic sympathy, the experience of feeling what another's muscles were doing, with metakinesis, the process through which intention was deduced or inferred from movement."[12]

Due to the dissonance between intention, meaning, and story, *Slave Play* becomes a useful case study in examining the intersections between appeals for audiences' empathy based in kinesthetic responses and their affective consequences. Building on the argument of Dolf Zillmann that empathy towards characters depends on whether the audience cares about characters, and that emotional engagement can increase with the characters' development,[13] I suggest that *Slave Play*'s use of satire blocks the opportunity for empathy. Instead, the heavy

[10] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 41n9, emphasis in original.
[11] Foster, Susan Leigh. *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*. New York: Routledge, 2011, 129.
[12] Foster, 156.
[13] Zillmann, Dolf. "Mechanisms of emotional involvement with drama." *Poetics,* 1994, 23, 48.

emphasis on visceral, kinesthetic reactions to the play produces a charged affective experience that sharply contrasts with the play's material. In terms of empathy, gaps and interruptions may mark a need for further "dialogue, action, or reparation" to cite Lindsay B. Cummings, but Harris makes a point of never fully addressing this empathetic gap. "It's a play that structurally ends before the catharsis happens," he notes in one interview, going on to indicate that "right at the moment where catharsis *can* happen, the play ends and then the audience takes that and makes it discursive."[14] Harris has seemingly accomplished precisely what he set out to do—to get people talking—I argue that the empathetic gap combined with the lack of catharsis moves the focus away from the larger issues the play takes on regarding race and power dynamics toward simply understanding what exactly took place. This gap is felt most tangibly in relation to Kaneisha, the closest thing to a main character in *Slave Play*, creating a particularly troublesome choice as she embodies Black womanhood within the play. Although responses to *Slave Play* seem to suggest a deep concern with the final violent act, emphasis is placed on the discomfort of those watching and witnessing rather than empathizing with Kaneisha. I suggest that this sidestep undercuts the goals of *Slave Play*, turning its character into a placeholder while simultaneously demanding greater nuance in conversations on race.

Harris prefers that audiences know little or nothing about the events of the play before they see it, and while I typically appreciate adhering to a playwright's intentions, the possibility of attending either the 2018-19 Off-Broadway production or the subsequent Broadway productions[15] was out of the question, so my initial analysis developed from the script after its publication in 2018. I withheld my skepticism regarding the text in hopes that a fully realized

[14] Quoted by Cate Young. "Interview: Jeremy O. Harris Knows You Hate 'Slave Play.'" *Thirty, Flirty + Film.* 11 March 2022. https://30flirtyfilm.substack.com/p/jeremy-o-harris-slave-play?s=r. Accessed 13 July 2022.
[15] *Slave Play* first premiered on Broadway as part of the 2019-20 season at the John Golden Theatre in New York City and was later remounted for the 2021-22 season at the August Wilson Theatre.

production would illuminate what others had found so vital. When Center Theatre Group announced that the West Coast premiere would take place in Los Angeles in February of 2022, I took the opportunity to confirm for myself what impact, precisely, *Slave Play* had on audiences. To my benefit, the Taper Forum production kept the entire Broadway creative team intact, ensuring that I would see a production as close to the original iteration as I could get. That said, the Taper Forum also produced new meaning due to the space—unlike the Broadway houses, the Taper is configured as a thrust. Both Harris and director Robert O'Hara spoke to the benefits of this alteration, with Harris in particular observing that "as the play happened, I got to watch people watch each other. That, for me, became the play. It became a play about audiences being in conversation with other audiences."[16] By attending, I knew I would become part of this conversation among audience members, entering into the exclusive space limited based on who has seen the play.[17] While my prior knowledge, research, and experience with the text make me a less than ideal audience member in Harris's terms, I nonetheless left the possibility open for visceral, kinesthetic reactions.

Harris suggests in the opening to his text that perhaps the various locations at this plantation "are literalized with deep verisimilitude." Alternatively, should this verisimilitude be unavailable, Harris indicates that the plantation "would be presented with the bareness of a black box. An aesthetic that will telegraph to the audience: 'If only they had more money, but they are doing what they can…'."[18] I keep this in mind while walking into the auditorium at the Taper, although my immediate reaction to the set is "astroturf"—it seems the only appropriate way to

[16] Quoted by Ashley Lee. "How the Radical Set of 'Slave Play' Transforms LA's Mark Taper Forum." *The Los Angeles Times*, 16 February 2022. https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2022-02-16/slave-play-set-transforms-la-mark-taper-forum. Accessed 16 June 2022.
[17] Additionally, my experience in the thrust space of the Taper made me far more aware of the audiences' reactions throughout. Much like my experience with ACT's production of *Sweat*, discussed in the next chapter, auditorium configuration allowed me to observe the audience just as much as the production itself.
[18] Harris, "Notes on Style," np.

describe the bright, unreal shade of green that carpets the entire stage. Not quite verisimilitude, but not exactly black box either. Still, I know what's coming, and this choice seems to foreshadow the unreality that's about to unfold. Meanwhile, the back of the set includes floor-to-ceiling panels of mirrors, forming a large wall. Many of the reviews have applauded this choice, citing how it literally forces the audience to view themselves in relation to the play's content, but this effect seems to fall short in the Taper. Without viewing the mirrors head-on, it's less a matter of reflection and more a matter of distortion. Hanging from above as a large three-dimensional text in a similar mirror-like material, are the words "nuh body touch me you nuh righteous," a lyric from Rhianna's song "Work." It's not that I recognize the lyrics at all, but I know the significance of the song in the context of the play. Even the pre-show soundtrack—a blend between upbeat harpsichord tunes and the background noise of groaning, creaking wood and the clank of chains—offers what feel like small in-jokes to those who, like me, "know" what's about to take place.

For the first act, I wonder if it would be more accurate to describe it like watching a *Saturday Night Live* sketch or a badly written porno film. The scenes transition between three couples, all with their own sexual hang-ups and particularities, as they pursue sexual relations. The play emphasizes the ridiculous in these interactions, placing the humor somewhere between shock and absurdity. In these first interactions, the hyper-awareness of the characters makes their actions seem overdrawn—funny, sure, but their relationships appear to lack any depth beyond the sexual. These interactions don't seem to adhere to a sense of historical accuracy either. As Kaneisha[19] taunts "Mista" Jim[20] (he refuses the term "massa"), insisting that he must surely want to punish her for behaving so poorly, his awkward stammering and hesitation reveal a deep

[19] Played by Antoinette Crow-Legacy.
[20] Played by Paul Alexander Nolan.

discomfort with taking charge in this setting—subverting expectations on how a white overseer might actually interact with an enslaved Black woman. Kaneisha's dissatisfaction with his inability to take charge becomes more apparent as she rolls her eyes and sighs in exasperation when he chooses to go down on her rather than dominating her.

Of all the couples, Kaneisha and Jim appear to have the most difficulty connecting on a sexual level, perhaps most clearly revealed when Jim calls "Starbucks." The laughter from the audience, so prevalent up until this moment, seems to stop short in response to the out-of-place term within the vaguely antebellum circumstances. The affect of the characters similarly shifts immediately, dropping some of the comedic pretense, leaving audiences either slightly agape or delighted in confirming their skepticism of the circumstances. Two new characters enter—surely the therapists hosting this role play, I realize, especially since they look vaguely like stage managers—heightening the confusion. Even the lights underscore this point, changing in a snap from the bright, oppressive simulated sunshine to darker tones of red and magenta, quite literally ensuring audiences question what exactly they're seeing.

I wonder briefly if my discomfort comes from the thrust space of the Taper itself, and the way it brings the action directly into the audiences' faces. It seems to intensify the affect of humor in the first act, but as the characters shift into act two (titled "process"), the fourth wall appears to dissolve entirely. The confusion at the end of the first act gets recontextualized as grad students Teá[21] and Patricia[22] explain the extensive role play that the couples just engaged in as part of their research on Radical Antebellum Sexual Therapy—a process for interracial couples to grapple with the challenges of their intimate relationships. The two wander out into the aisles and the crossover during the second act, leaving me uncertain how exactly the audience fits into

[21] Played by Chalia La Tour.
[22] Played by Irene Sofia Lucio.

the scenario. The house lights are frequently kept at half, and the therapists continually gesture to us as if we are also sitting in on the group session. It is during these conversations that the white partners must confront their participation in the fantasies of their Black partners—what uncertainties, discomfort, or revelations occurred. Kaneisha remains silent for the vast majority, although Jim manages to take up a significant amount of airtime trying to negotiate the fact Kaneisha asked him to use the term negress when he only sees her as a "queen."[23] The laughter, I notice for this act in particular, comes predominantly at the expense of the white characters, which is to be expected. The white characters are easy to laugh at, and as I discuss more fully in relation to Dani Snyder-Young's work later in this chapter, recognizing this humor can signify audience members as "*good white people.*" The over-the-top hand gestures and twenty-dollar SAT words peppered throughout are amusing, but I'm still unsure how I'm supposed to be implicated in the moment. Am I on the side of the overly academic therapists, or the couples struggling to put words to emotions and sensations? Where am I supposed to direct this satirical laughter?

Just as the first act includes the reveal of sexual role play, one of the predominant revelations of the second act is built around the incorporation of Rhianna's song "Work." The song, which the audience first heard as Kaneisha danced alone to it at the opening of the play, is a symptom related to Kaneisha's OCD. Kaneisha hears the song in her head during particular moments of emotional stress or anxiety, and she only reveals this information (along with additional definitions related to alexithymia and anxiety) when she relates it to the experiences described by the other Black partners in the role play. As the tension between Kaneisha and Jim builds to a head near the end of the second act, the audience begins to hear "Work" steadily

[23] Full quote from the text: "This was not hot. you made me call my wife who I love a 'negress' a…. She made me call her a 'negress.' and that's—She's my queen." (Harris, 80)

rising in the background, which we now understand as a direct reference to Kaneisha's state of mind. As Kaneisha attempts to express her growing frustration with Jim, describing him as "THE virus" and the source of their relationship problems rather than "a pathogen, a disorder with some new name, an anagram, an acronym, some UNDIAGNOSED, UNDIAGNOSABLE thing in ME,"[24] the song amps up in volume. The act finishes as the song bursts into an explosive crescendo and the lights flash to unsettling shades of purple, orange and red as Kaneisha falls to her knees, screaming in frustration.

The humor of previous two acts manages to leak through to the troubling interaction between Kaneisha and Jim in the third act, titled in the script as "exorcise." During the transition, the set pieces seem to mimic my sense of impending anxiety—the wall of mirrors that has acted as backdrop for the first two acts slides forward, right and left panels angling inward and a top panel dropping to a 45° above the actors. Moving away from the fantasy antebellum plantation, the space feels more like a strange, liminal operating theatre,[25] which seems to heighten the tension. Rhianna still plays in the background, echoing and distorting as it fades. For the first time, the audience sees the characters closer to reality than fantasy—a double bed sits center stage, with the top view visible in the mirrors, with two suitcases and clothes strewn across it, implying that we are no longer in the world of role play or therapy but back in conventions of realism. Jim enters while Kaneisha packs her luggage, initially offering to just listen to whatever she wants to share. In response, Kaneisha describes her childhood experiences of visiting plantations, of feeling her ancestors watching her, and these effects on her early relationship with Jim where his whiteness defined her blackness. As she does so, the affect in the auditorium

[24] Harris, emphasis in original, 144.
[25] This choice resonates back to C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides*, and the history of how American gynecology constructs biology, the relationship between sex, gender, and racialized flesh. Given the context of this scene, it's unclear whether this was an intentional historical reference or a production design coincidence.

begins to shift just under the surface. There is a darkness, a heaviness in the room now, underscored by the darkened purple tones of the lighting design. Jim begins taking off his clothes, making his intentions of copulating clear, and bubble of laughter bursts and trickles through a small population in the audience. The laughter sounds masculine, and perhaps it's simply because I know the assault is coming, but it feels insidious.

Watching Jim assault Kaneisha is more than uncomfortable, I find it distressing. In the moment where he finally seems to embrace aggressively dominating his partner, Jim pins Kaneisha down on the bed, her head nearly dangling off the downstage side. It feels like no matter where I look on stage—the bed itself, or any of the reflections in the mirrors—I see Jim, not Kaneisha. I can really only see her hands, reaching up to claw at Jim as he appears to thrust into her. The amount of time between watching Kaneisha banging her palms on Jim's chest to pushing him off of her and ultimately removing the whip from her mouth so she can breathe takes much longer than I expected from just reading it on the page. I don't even know if I hear the guttural cry that Harris's script calls for because I've tensed every muscle in my body, as if I can shove Jim off of Kaneisha by sheer psychic force. I don't often find myself in a theatre urgently waiting for the last line to finish the play, but I'm hanging on waiting for what I know is Kaneisha's final statement: "Thank you baby. Thank you for listening."[26]

When the line finally hits, it rings with more emptiness than the script implies. I realize I'm less concerned about Kaneisha as a character—somehow all of the characters flatten as the play goes on rather than getting more complex—but my empathetic response draws toward Antoinette Crowe-Legacy during this sequence, which surprises me. Considering *Slave Play* alongside Lindsay B. Cummings's work in dialogic empathy, I question not what empathy

[26] Harris, 161.

caused me to think and feel, but what this lack of empathy caused me to think and feel. The indifference produced by this lack of empathy would make *Slave Play* of little interest, had it not included the final assault on Kaneisha. I suggest here that the lack of empathetic tether between audience and characters turns the audiences' attention away from the racial power dynamics that the play itself takes up and instead toward attempting to understand precisely what the playwright and production team intended. Further, by staging such an extreme act of violence alongside questionable satire, *Slave Play* seems to justify the trauma Kaneisha endures due to the "conversation" it elicits for (predominantly white) audiences.

"You should not work to make the audience comfortable with what they are witnessing."

As argued by Dolf Zillmann, empathetic reactivity relies on the respondents (or audience) caring about the characters in either a positive or negative way, wherein they will respond to the characters as if they were friends or enemies.[27] Further, Zillmann suggests that "the better these affective dispositions are developed by dramatic events, the stronger will be the emotional involvement with the dramatic presentation."[28] The reveal that the characters have been engaging with an elaborate antebellum roleplay at the end of act one may produce a shocking and unexpected twist for audiences, but it also cultivates an empathetic gap similar to my own experience where any initial feelings toward any given character evaporate upon realizing the situation isn't what it seems. The humor at this twist nearly carries the second act, but this unpredictability makes it difficult to interpret the threat of harm in the final act. At what point does *Slave Play* cease to function as a comedy?

[27] Zillmann, Dolf.. "Mechanisms of emotional involvement with drama." *Poetics*, 1994, 23, 48.
[28] Zillmann, 48.

Harris has instructed that discomfort should exist at the core of *Slave Play*, but the kinesthetic empathy produced by watching Kaneisha reaffirms the power dynamic that Harris seeks to critique. Namely, the actual violence and distress that Kaneisha suffers gets displaced as white audiences can only process their own individual feelings and attitudes about the play. This results in a similar situation to those observed by Dani Snyder-Young, wherein the "whiteness" of a theatrical event gets reinforced, moments that "tell the very people of color whose lived experience and perspective the play represents that the event is not for them—it is for the consumption and benefit of the white audience."[29] Placing Kaneisha front and center—literally and figuratively—while reinforcing this whiteness ultimately renders her hyperinvisible to audiences. I observed this during various interviews, as responses from my interlocutors focused more on their own experience rather than empathizing with Kaneisha, while critical reviews reflected a similar conclusion. Kinesthetic empathy in this case creates a gap, since it is "limited by our own first-person experience," where "what we simulate is our own experience of the movement, not the experience of the other. There will always be a gap between what we receive and what we experience."[30] (The simulation Strukus references refers to the cognitive process wherein we use our own mental experience as a model for another person's mind and behavior.) Without the additional support of the text to cultivate a sense of empathy towards Kaneisha, the primary frame of reference for the audience to empathize lies in their own embodied experiences. The consequences of these choices result in a moment of deeply felt kinesthetic empathy, but without acknowledging the individual who experiences the trauma—whether the trauma of a violent sexual assault, as in Kaneisha's case, or the more subtle and constant trauma

[29] Snyder-Young, Dani. *Privileged Spectatorship: Theatrical Interventions in White Supremacy*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020, 7.
[30] Strukus, 103, 104 n1.

of microaggressions throughout the play. Harris initially sought to set the horizon of expectation for the play by encouraging ignorance, stating that "I didn't want anyone to know anything about it," because in his mind "not having preparation is a good thing for the theatrical moment."[31] As audiences adjust their horizon of expectation for the experience of the production, it also alters the potential affective impact—particularly as the play moves away from its brand of comedy toward darker themes.

In his introductory "Notes on Style," Harris describes the world of the play as "a comedy of sorts" that "should be played as such."[32] Harris does not include any additional guidance on this sense of comedy, although I notice that many of the reviews include references to the "satiric" elements of the play, particularly within the overly academic second act. "I always see *Slave Play* as a tryptich," dramaturg Amauta M. Firmino told me in an interview. "The first act is the artifice of the thing, right? It's the role playing. And then the second act is a comedy of manners…that unmasks the role play and kind of talks about all of the issues behind it, and the third act is reality, right, the third act is the most real."[33] Unlike the first act, which elicited laughter through staging sexual roleplay in a way that bordered on the ridiculous, the second act gets caught up in language, particularly as Téa and Patricia dance around buzzwords like "processing," "interventions," and "unpacking." The "Critic's Pick" review in the *New York Times* suggested that the satire "of academic gassiness and self-help psychobabble" operated on two fronts, as both "hilarious, (even if a bit overdrawn), and yet illuminating."[34] Another in *Vulture* indicted that the play only occasionally engaged with satire, while remaining "ultimately

[31] Quoted by Tonya Pinkins. "'Slave Play': Racism Doesn't Have a Safe Word." *American Theatre Magazine*, 1 July 2019. https://www.americantheatre.org/2019/07/01/slave-play-racism-doesnt-have-a-safe-word/. Accessed 12 July 2022.
[32] Harris, np.
[33] Firmino, Amauta M. Personal Interview, 18 August 2022.
[34] Green, Jesse. "Review: 'Slave Play,' Four Times as Big and Just as Searing." *New York Timesi*, 6 October 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/06/theater/slave-play-review-broadway.html Accessed 12 July 2022.

humane."[35] The slippery quality of satire only adds to the complicated nature of *Slave Play*—creating even more possibility for misreading given the lack of empathetic connection.

In her studies on the use-value of satire in political humor, Heather L. LaMarre defines it as a genre that "uses laughter as a weapon to diminish or derogate a subject and evoke towards it attitudes of amusement, disdain, ridicule, or indignation."[36] At its heart, satire relies on mimicry in order to exploit other existing literary genres.[37] LaMarre's initial study included categorizing two primary forms of satire: Horatian, which mimics comedy and comments on social and ethical problems by "[telling] the truth, laughing," and Juvenalian, which mimics tragedy, and therefore includes a more definitive, bitter approach.[38] The goal of Horatian satire seeks to evoke laughter, which "calls audiences to laugh at the folly of political circumstance without giving much credence to arguments."[39] This laughter can quickly reduce any commentary to "just a joke," or "not serious," in what LaMarre refers to as message discounting. Message discounting exists in Juvenalian satire as well. The more complicated structure of this genre, however, makes it more difficult to interpret. Juvenalian satire seeks to evoke indignation and potentially a stronger sense of urgency for the audience rather than producing laughter. This approach theoretically requires more from the audience—in order to reconcile the humor, a negotiation must take place in the widening gap between what the satirist says and what they mean.[40]

The challenge for *Slave Play*'s audiences to understanding the play comes in large part from Harris's use of satire—engaging with both Horatian and Juvenalian satire gives observers

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[35] Holdren. Sara. "Theatre Review: *Slave Play* Blends the Terrifying and the Tantalizing." *Vulture*, 10 December 2018. https://www.vulture.com/2018/12/slave-play-jeremy-harris-review.html. Accessed 12 July 2022.
[36] LaMarre, Heather L., Kristen D. Landreville, Dannagal Young, and Nathan Gilkerson. "Humor Works in Funny Ways: Examining Satirical Tone as a Key Determinant in Political Humor Message Processing," *Mass Communication and Society*, 2014, 17:3, 402.
[37] LaMarre, "Humor Works in Funny Ways," 402.
[38] LaMarre, "Humor Works…" 402.
[39] LaMarre, "Humor Works…" 405.
[40] LaMarre, "Humor Works…" 405.

whiplash in attempting to understand how to read the emotionally charged situations the characters find themselves in. The description that Harris provides in the script suggests that some elements can (and perhaps should) emphasize the possibilities for comedy. Part one, which finds all characters in an elaborate antebellum sexual role play seems to initially come off as Horatian, allowing characters to "tell the truth" of their relationship dynamics "while laughing." The second and third acts get decidedly more complicated, as it gets increasingly unclear whether or not *Slave Play* remains satirical, and if so, what exactly it satirizes. In this manner, *Slave Play* appears to move closer toward a Juvenalian satire.

Mirroring the same pitfalls that LaMarre illuminated in her comparison of the two satires, however, *Slave Play* limits the possible agency in analyzing the performance by requiring such a significant amount of individual interpretation. Based on her studies, LaMarre describes that "Horatian satire leaves agency in the hands of the message recipient while Juvenalian satire places most of the agency in the hands of the message producers."[41] As the characters in *Slave Play* move through their Antebellum Sexual Performance Therapy experience, they move from Horatian satire to Juvenalian—from humor that audiences can write off as "just a joke" (a conclusion many came to, as described in critical reviews) to interactions so steeped in ambiguity it becomes unclear whether we should laugh with a character or at them. The more interpretation an audience must process in order to understand the argument, the less ability they have to properly analyze the argument presented. In the case of *Slave Play*, reviews express that the writers could more easily identify humor in the sexual exploits of the characters in act one—witnessing Jim quickly clarify his position as "overseer" rather than "master," or the fact that he can't seem to tell the difference between watermelon and cantaloupe, for instance. As the satiric

[41] LaMarre, "Humor Works…" 421.

quality of the play gets more muddled though, so does the play's message. Should the audience brush off the moment when Kaneisha casually refers to the problems in their relationship, or the moment she echoes her friends' recommendations of "have you tried choking? A little rape play?"[42] Or does this dialogue merely set up the appropriate pay off when Jim presses her face first into the bed later?

Throughout her study, LaMarre identifies that Juvenalian satire requires a heavier cognitive load for audiences in order to reconcile the humor and meaning of what they watch. In fact, LaMarre indicates that audiences of Juvenalian satire report lower argument scrutiny. Put another way, the audience of these kinds of comedy becomes so preoccupied attempting to negotiate what the satirist says versus the actual intended message, they cannot fully articulate and analyze the actual arguments presented. LaMarre goes on to argue that these forms reduce their motivation or ability "to think about the issues, assess the strength of relevant arguments, and attend to the political issues being presented," and that consequently "we are entering a world where opinion, sarcasm, innuendo, parody, and satire may have more influence on our democracy than facts and relevant truths."[43] The stakes that LaMarre lays out become useful in examining *Slave Play* in order to understand its impact and critical responses. By moving from Horatian satire to Juvenalian satire to realism in such quick succession, *Slave Play* makes it difficult for audiences to parse out where one ends and another begins—and similarly, what the play considers "just a joke," and what elements audiences should take seriously.

In interviews, Harris has noted his intention that the play function as "a litmus test for the audience that was engaging with it."[44] Harris's original goals for *Slave Play* included getting the

[42] Harris, 155.
[43] LaMarre, "Humor Works…" 422.
[44] Quoted by Cate Young. "Interview: Jeremy O. Harris Knows You Hate 'Slave Play.'" *Thirty, Flirty + Film.* 11 March 2022. https://30flirtyfilm.substack.com/p/jeremy-o-harris-slave-play?s=r. Accessed 13 July 2022.

audience talking about the relationships and dynamics they witnessed, which would seem to make it an excellent opportunity for dialogic empathy through this dramatic "litmus test." Should Harris' ideal audience read *Slave Play* as a satire, it becomes necessary to identify the intentions of the satirist and the actual message. Extrapolating from LaMarre's work, as this gap between the goals of the production and what actually occurs onstage increases, the audience's attention redirects to analyze what they just saw rather than engaging with the actual themes present. Reviews of *Slave Play* provide evidence of this redirection, where rather than considering the emotional impact of racial inequalities, critics and audiences get preoccupied trying to discern whether Jim assaulted Kaneisha and the potential traumatic implications.

"There sure are a lot of white people here."

In her work on theatre as a potential site of intervention against white supremacy, Dani Snyder-Young observes that white theatre audiences often desire to present themselves as "*good white people*," which significantly impacts the conclusions they draw from these performances. She describes that these white audience members "misrecognized realistically drawn white characters who perform their whiteness in ungraceful, hurtful ways as bad, racist white people, and find ways to distance themselves from these characters," without reading these characters as representative of a generalized class of white people.[45] Just as Cummings argues that empathy exists in the space between the singular and the generalizable, denouncing these racist white characters provides "good white people" a chance to distance themselves from racism without personal interrogation.

[45] Snyder-Young, 124.

Within *Slave Play*, the question of interrogating and denouncing whiteness became a particular flashpoint for audiences. A recorded clip from a talkback held during the initial 2019 Broadway run reveals a middle-aged white woman defiantly calling out Harris with complaints that his work was "racist against white people," namely because she didn't feel represented by any of the characters onstage.[46] The clip, which went viral, illustrates Snyder-Young's point, as vocal white audience members seemed more interested in distancing themselves from the comically overdrawn and extreme behavior of the white characters than interrogating their own expectations on race.

While the clip of this particular interaction (and what Firmino categorized as similar knee-jerk, "hot take" responses to the play) seem to reveal a desire for white audiences to distance themselves from the characters within the play, it also reveals an appeal to whiteness in relation to *Slave Play*'s use of satire. White audiences who can find the humor in the hapless attempts of the white characters to solve their relationship problems must surely possess more self-awareness than those who cannot take the joke. In this way, the ability to read *Slave Play* as satire also relies on the imagined contemporary "postrace" America. Ralina L. Joseph defines postrace as "a term used by race commentators to sometimes describe, sometimes decry, and sometimes imagine another racialized world. Postrace is far from neutral; indeed, as a racial ideology, it is so loaded and powerful that it delimited the iterative space for race critics in the Obama era."[47] Joseph points to the pitfalls of imagining America as "postrace," as the term suggests that race is no longer significant, implying that we have moved past discrimination

[46] This exchange, while circulated widely on Twitter and other social media, was reported on most fully by Hannah Knowles for the Washington Post. (Hannah Knowles. "A Broadway-goer railed against a play as unfair to white people. The playwright responded." *The Washington Post*, 1 December 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/12/01/broadway-goer-shouted-play-was-racist-against-white-people-playwright-responded/)
[47] Joseph, 7.

based on race. Instead, Joseph argues that "postraciality remains embroiled in precisely what it claims not to be," as it both contains the immediate awareness of different race and an acknowledgement of that race.[48] The implication that American politics and culture are beyond or past race allows the discussion of race to seemingly disappear from the conversation. The white characters of *Slave Play* highlight this phenomenon, as Jim and Alana in particular express significant discomfort at having to name the complexities of race at all. Given the stylistic choices of *Slave Play*, it's uncertain if this approach to discussing race should be considered Horatian or Juvenalian satire—that is, whether this inability to discuss race comes across as "just a joke" to laugh about the ignorance of the few, or as a pointed critique of pretending that America is "postrace" at all.

Slave Play's Broadway opening predates the 2020 uprisings and the subsequent national conversations on race (including potential concerns regarding Loving v. Virginia), but Harris's portrayal of white characters and their inability to discuss and even truly recognize aspects of race magnify the shortcomings of what it means to be "postrace." The implication that American culture has moved past racism as a significant form of discrimination would potentially eliminate the need for many of the conversations depicted in *Slave Play,* namely acknowledging the implicit power dynamics of interracial relationships. Firmino, who served as dramaturg for *Slave Play* from its origins at the Yale School of Drama through its Broadway premier, recounts that the origin story begins at a dinner party. "[Jeremy] was at a dinner party, and there's…this conversation about a couple who, these two white people… They had been getting into roleplay in sex, and he had wanted to sort of…scare her or…surprise her or something. And people were joking at the dinner table about, like, pretending to rape his wife in a way, in role play, right?"[49]

[48] Joseph, 8, 10.
[49] Firmino, 18 August 2022.

This initial conversation led to questions of how power dynamics become visible in these moments, particularly if one partner is Black. "Suddenly the power dynamics shift radically," Firmino notes, "everyone is completely off their footing, right? And they're no longer sure if they should be laughing or not, right?"[50]

In the transition from New York to the West Coast, however, *Slave Play*'s infamy and attitude toward discussions on race have generated a more cynical affect. Reactions to the 2022 production at the Taper Forum seem to pay greater attention to Kaneisha's position within the play, critiquing Harris for her general lack of agency and her victimization. These critiques (which have elicited surprise, anger, and frustration toward Harris, as well as a general feeling of being hit by a car after watching[51]) have illuminated Kaneisha as an example of the hyperinvisibility of Black women. Kaneisha exists at the difficult intersection for Black women that Ralina Joseph describes, being "both hypervisible—objects of desire and scorn—and invisible entities who fail to register as significant."[52] The hypervisibility that Joseph defines evolves further, as Amber Johnson argues to "stereotyping the body so much that the stereotypes become more visible, and thus believable," to the point where these stereotypes even replace bodies in interpersonal interactions, rendering them hyperinvisible.[53] The structure of Harris's text and his use of satire alter the ways that Kaneisha can appear empathetic. Although she goes through the most extreme cases of violence that produce the most intense affective shifts, reactions and even her dialogue suggest that her presence serves to further the education and knowledge of white audiences. Kaneisha's hyperinvisibility becomes another feature to question

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[50] Firmino, 18 August 2022.
[51] Quoted by Karu F. Daniels. "Rising Playwright Jeremy O. Harris Addresses the Backlash Over Controversial *Slave Play*." *The Root*, 7 January 2019. https://www.theroot.com/rising-playwright-jeremy-o-harris-addresses-backlash-o-1831545447. Accessed 12 July 2022.
[52] Joseph, 18.
[53] Johnson, Amber. "Straight Outta Erasure: Black Girl Magic Claps Back to the Hyperinvisibility of Black Women in Straight Outta Compton." *National Political Science Review* 19, no. 2 (2018): 36.

in terms of negotiating satire—rather than addressing the actual harm represented and the potential traumatic consequences, the question of what messages the play offered and what meaning it intended takes up the majority of the cognitive load.

"The moment you know [*Slave Play*] has no consideration for black women is in act 3 when kaneisha sys something like 'the ancestors don't mind that we lay with demons cuz they laid with demons too," writes Ashely Ray on Twitter.[54] Although Ray mentions she doesn't have the exact line, her reference in this moment lands almost directly on the actual dialogue from the play. Ray, a Los Angeles-based polyamorous black queer comedian/actor/writer,[55] received a significant amount of praise for her observations, along with some significant pushback from the playwright himself. Followers on Twitter described how Ray put words to their own distaste for *Slave Play*, while afterwards Jeremy O. Harris frequently referenced Ray and her comments in other interviews.[56] At the heart of Ray's critique (with similar sentiments echoed by writers Cate Young and Kay Barrett) lies the mistreatment and misunderstanding of Kaneisha. Her silence through the second act leaves any depth to her character unexplored, or as Ray observes, "when we think we Kaneisha's actual motivations might be revealed, a Rihanna song plays instead."[57] Indeed, the fact that Kaneisha cannot articulate her emotions through words functions as a primary plot point, with these musical interventions representing her experience of alexithymia. This disconnect appears throughout much of the "process" section of act two, as Kaneisha's

[54] Ray, Ashley. @theeashleyray, 11 February 2022. Formatting in original. Ray has since taken down the original Twitter thread, although she provides a more thorough analysis and explanation of her thoughts on *Slave Play* and Harris in her piece "Why I Saw Slave Play Twice" published in March 2022 on her Substack. (https://ashleyray.substack.com/p/why-i-saw-slave-play-twice.)
[55] "About," https://theashleyray.com. Accessed 27 July 2022.
[56] As Ray put it, "But then Jeremy did another goddamn interview where he couldn't keep my name out of his mouth, so here we are." "Why I Saw Slave Play Twice." *tv i say w/ Ashley ray*, 12 March 2022. https://ashleyray.substack.com/p/why-i-saw-slave-play-twice. Accessed 12 July 2022.
[57] Ray. "Why I Saw Slave Play Twice."

dialogue primarily consists of defining terms, concepts, or sensations for her fellow participants rather than exploring her own experience.

During their final interaction, Jim offers an opportunity to talk to Kaneisha, wherein she tells him that during the fantasy she realized she felt "the elders watching me. They are watching me lay in bed every night with a demon who thinks he's a saint. And the elders don't care that you are a demon, they lay with them too…they just want you to know it."[58] This dialogue, which comes directly before the assault, marks a brand of normalization in terms of violence against Black women. Although Kaneisha and Jim's relationship up to this point has included explorations of kink and sadomasochism, the framework within which they explore these dynamics still remains rooted in existing power structures. Sadomasochism broadly references relationships based on giving and/or receiving pain, ultimately relying on a binary power dynamic such as teacher/student, nurse/patient, or in the case of *Slave Play*, slave/master. The sadomasochistic dynamic between Jim and Kaneisha may edge toward a historical reenactment where Harris evokes the actual legacy of Black women raped by white masters, but as many critics have pointed out, he does so in a way that reaffirms the structures of white supremacy.[59] In an interview with Harris, Cate Young, a self-described Black woman from the West Indies who is a descendant of slaves, mentioned how Kaniesha's lines during this interaction "bumped" for her, leading to questions about Kaneisha's relationship to whiteness. "If it's about whiteness in general," Young described, "why is whiteness so central to [Kaneisha's] identity? Why is interacting with whiteness in this intimate way so central to [her] identity that [she] can't just *not do that anymore* when it doesn't work for [her]?"[60] Ray followed a similar line of questioning in

[58] Harris, 180.
[59] This idea also relates to Spiller's argument on whether or not Black women could give consent in these circumstances, discussed in more depth later on.
[60] Young, emphasis in original, np.

her review, noting that whatever liberation could exist through utilizing sadomasochism and kink occurs only "when it is removed from systemic structures of whiteness and traditional power dynamics," a situation that does not exist in the world of this play.[61] As this scene appears as the closest to reality, it would seem that Kaneisha's behavior affirms white supremacy rather than a liberatory act that critiques it.

In his introduction to the play's style, Harris states that "I've chosen to present a performance of antebellum life that is in conversation with the ways in which that time has been presented to and informed the world's collective imagination of life in the American South during slavery."[62] His statement places the play in conversation with a highly specific moment and location in American history—evoking not only the aesthetics and lifestyles of the American South preceding the Civil War, but the inescapable consequences of enslavement within plantation societal structures. Harris' use of "imagination" for this era operates in two ways: for the audience, imagining their way into the world of the play, and for the characters who use the backdrop of the nineteenth century as a vehicle to explore their relationships. Unlike some of their therapy counterparts[63], Jim and Kaneisha select roles of master and slave in a way that reads as "historically accurate"—that is, Kaneisha playing the "negress" and Jim performing as her overseer. The layers of fantasy, roleplay, and historical reenactment converge and blend into each other to a point where it's practically impossible to differentiate which elements might be sincere critiques of American culture and which elements exist for shock value. Staging role play

[61] Ray, "Why I Saw Slave Play Twice," np.
[62] From "Notes on Style" published in the script. No page listed.
[63] There is much to be unpacked in the ways that Gary and Dustin's relationship further complicates the S/M roleplay dynamic, both in terms of queerness and in the shifting of power balance, but not in this iteration of the project.

within this imagined antebellum complicates the boundaries between reality, history, and imagination, adding to the audiences' cognitive load to parse out the play's intentions. For the audience, Kaneisha becomes at once both hypervisible and invisible in this space, particularly in attempting to negotiate power in these moments of roleplay. Initially, Kaneisha's participation (and Jim's, for that matter) should allow her to "reengage intimately with white partners for whom they no longer receive sexual pleasure," as Teá describes in act two.[64] The dynamic that Kaneisha seeks, however, challenges Jim because he cannot reconcile this difference between the fantasy of Kaneisha's sexual desires and how he views her in his reality.

To describe this fluctuation, Hortense Spiller's descriptions of body and flesh may prove particularly useful. According to Spillers, the ability to differentiate between flesh and bodies also allows for an expansion of understanding personhood. The flesh, which exists prior to the body, functions as "that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or that reflexes of iconography."[65] The categorization of individual as body allows for the obscuring of violence, whereas the category of flesh allows for recognition of the marks and remembrances of the violence.[66] Spillers also suggests that the dynamic of body and flesh remains in flux throughout this narrative of enslavement, allowing space to exist as either a captive body, or as a site of crimes against the flesh. Each term offers separate possibilities in justifying racialized violence and the commodification of human life. The way that Harris evokes enslavement, both in the content of the text and the title itself, suggests a bleeding between these categories. As Ray chronicled the social media reactions to the play, she noted how "some people seemed to think it was a play about actual slavery which

[64] Harris, 75.
[65] Spillers, 67
[66] Spillers describes this in the atomizing of the captive body on page 67.

sparked the 'I'm tired of slavery time stories!' debate. (*Slave Play* is not, technically, about 'slavery times.')"[67] The term "slave" in this context carries both the American history of enslavement and the play's portrayal of BDSM. This troubling of bodies, flesh, enslavement, and kink contributes heavily to the hyperinivisibility of Kaneisha due to the intersections of identities she inhabits. Kaneisha-as-body becomes hypervisible as a subject for her white partner Jim, but Kaneisha-as-flesh remains invisible and he cannot bring himself to sexually satisfy her. Her engagement in S/M, particularly a historical scenario rooted in an unequal racial power balance, becomes an attempt to render both her Blackness and her sexuality-as-flesh visible.

Black women face the most significant consequences based on this dynamic between flesh and/or body due to occupying a constellation of racialized and gendered categories. Spillers addresses that "the captive female body locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange"[68] due to the female body's ability to reproduce a labor force. This reproductive capability renders the Black woman as flesh rather than body. Black women could remain categorized as flesh by breaking the biological/genetic relationships with children, which also served to further render them socially ambiguous. Black women also hold a particularly tenuous position in this capacity, given the reliance on sexuality to operate in this reproductive capacity. Spillers argues that pleasure would not be at all be possible in these sexual scenarios, articulating that "whether or not the captive female and/or her sexual oppressor derived 'pleasure' from their seductions and couplings is not a question we can politely ask. Whether or not 'pleasure' is possible at all under conditions that I would aver as non-freedom for both or either of the parties has not been settled."[69] Given that the

[67] Ray, np.
[68] Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*, 1987, 75
[69] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 76.

Christian paradigm that typically categorizes sexuality as a "desire of the flesh,"[70] Black women were categorized and recognized as flesh to support their position within the economic system, but not flesh capable of experiencing "fleshly" desires. Black women continued to hold this space of ambiguity—flesh unable to experience fleshly desire, only bodies in terms of labor production—in the same way that Spillers describes the captive personality as "unmade." Kaneisha's initial appeals to Jim in act one illustrate a desire of the flesh, particularly as she encourages him to dominate her in ways he finds degrading. By viewing Kaneisha as separate from her flesh (which in this case also includes her sexuality and her blackness), Jim makes her both an object of desire and an invisible entity that fails to register as significant—he participates in her hyperinvisiblity. For those who have felt comfortable distancing themselves from "those white people" during the first two acts, the assault alters whether they should categorize Kaneisha as flesh or body—to empathize with her as body is to obscure the assault, whereas to empathize with her as flesh acknowledges the affective and kinesthetic reactions to witnessing the assault. For audiences, to acknowledge Kaneisha's blackness is to also acknowledge the long legacy of Black women raped at the hands of white men—and the question Spillers engages of the impossibility of consent for Black women. Kaneisha's blackness and desires of the flesh makes the power dynamic visible while obscuring her body.

[70] In the King James Bible: Ephesians 2:3 "Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others." Galatians 5:19 "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness."

"What if that was your daughter?"

Despite the overall treatment of Kaneisha throughout the play, the production continues to center her as the main character through staging and choreography, particularly in the final act when Jim assaults her.[71] Unlike the kinesthetic empathy that our company built in *Self Defense*, which sought to underscore the violence and trauma through imaginatively choreographed moments, the staging of *Slave Play* seems to utilize the visceral, kinesthetic reactions of witnessing this assault in place of character development. Staging the assault in this particularly ambiguous fashion seems to implicate the audience as witnesses to this act of traumatic violence. Judith Lewis Herman suggests in her work on trauma and recovery that the phenomenon of struggling to communicate about traumatic experiences extends from survivors outwards to those who witness it. She notes that "it is difficult for an observer to remain clearheaded and calm, to see more than a few fragments of the picture at one time, to retain all the pieces, and fit them together. It is even more difficult to find a language that conveys fully and precisely what one has seen."[72] Indeed, Sara Ahmed discusses a similar challenge in describing pain, that "it is the apparent loneliness of pain that requires it to be disclosed to a witness," and yet "it is because no one can know what it feels like to have my pain, but I want loved others to acknowledge how I feel. The solitariness of pain is intimately tied up with its implication in relation to others."[73]

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[71] In many reviews and reactions to *Slave Play*, the question of whether this moment qualifies as rape or sexual assault is unclear. Actress Antoinette Crowe-Legacy emphasizes in one interview that "at the point [Kaneisha] says, 'No,' it stops. How it gets there is up to the interpretation of the audience." (Felicia Fitzpatrick, "Antoinette Crowe-Legacy on Causing Conversation with *Slave Play*." *Broadway Direct*, 7 December 2021. https://broadwaydirect.com/antoinette-crowe-legacy-on-causing-conversation-with-slave-play/. Accessed 25 July 2022.) In her review, Ray reflects that on both occasions she saw the performance she thought she heard the actor playing Kaneisha say "stop," and she "realized she uses the safeword when I read the script later." ("Why I Saw *Slave Play* Twice.") Based on the critiques that my analysis is in conversation with, I similarly categorize this moment as assault.

[72] Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York, N.Y: BasicBooks, 1992, 2.

[73] Ahmed, Sara. "The Contingency of Pain." In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, NED-New edition, 2., 20–41. Edinburgh University Press, 2014. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g09x4q.6. 29.

The witness provides a necessary element in negotiating trauma, but that does not mean witnessing comes without risk. As Mark Cariston Seton argues, this risk becomes particularly salient in theatre in part because both acting out these traumas and witnessing them can lead to retraumatization.[74] As previously noted, Harris has argued that the lack of catharsis at the play in his mind allowed the audience to "take that and [make] it discursive," however, in doing so audiences are opened to the potential risks and consequences of witnessing racially charged sex-based violence. Further, to witness the violence that Kaneisha endures at the end of *Slave Play* and avoid acknowledging the larger cultural associations of the sexual assault perpetuates Kaneisha's hyperinvisibile status.

Harris acknowledged early on in *Slave Play* that providing opportunities for his ideal audience to reflect on the play would prove beneficial, although these situations would take the form of more casual discussions than the more formal post-show discussion structure with artists and audiences in dialogue typically seen in theatre spaces.[75] Firmino similarly described that "the play was not made to be lauded, the play was made to be talked about. And if you have interesting criticisms, we're all for it."[76] As *Slave Play* has evolved, these conversations have mostly moved from informal interactions with trained moderators available in the lobby (designated with "talk to me about the play" buttons) at the New York Theatre Workshop, to more formal post-show talkbacks with some members of the cast and creative team on Broadway, to the relatively brief conversation among audience members and facilitators I

[74] Seton, 29.
[75] As Harris describes in his interview with Tonya Pinkins: "Another thing I said at New York Theatre Workshop was, 'I would really like to have some facilitated talkbacks afterward so people can process however they're feeling about the play.' Because we couldn't have a talkback every night, we decided to have two facilitators come in every night. We put up trigger warnings as well." (Tonya Pinkins, "'Slave Play': Racism Doesn't Have a Safe Word." *American Theatre Magazine*, 1 July 2019. https://www.americantheatre.org/2019/07/01/slave-play-racism-doesnt-have-a-safe-word/. Accessed 12 July 2022.)
[76] Firmino, 18 August 2022.

experienced at the Taper Forum.[77] These interactions provide useful reflections on how particular audiences have responded to the material, however it is significant to note that these groups are typically self-selecting—individuals who desire a space to discuss the play will take advantage of such opportunities. During the discussion I attended, I identified the lack of language among participants to describe the traumatic acts (most frequently referencing the assault on Kaneisha at the end of the play either in terms of violence or trauma generally), as well as the difficulty of placing all the pieces of the play together. Placing the assault alongside the ambiguity of satire makes interpreting this moment even more challenging, where the intentions of the play resist easy understanding. The negotiation that must take place includes acknowledging the physical, visceral reactions based in kinesthetic empathy from watching the assault and the argument scrutiny in attempting to clarify the satirical elements, while also facing the difficulties of witnessing that impede the ability to articulate the traumatic event in words. Although Harris emphasizes over and over again that the conclusions drawn from the play should ultimately reveal the unconscious biases of the audience, I suggest here that the lack of empathetic connection toward the characters impedes this negotiation.

With the current iteration of the text and production, the imaginative leaps required of the audience distract from the social critiques that could exist within the interracial relationships. Much like my own initial reaction that I used in the opening of this chapter, responses that particular evening at the Taper included similar reactions from other audience members, where responses to the play necessitated some form of extended imagining into the situations and relationships rather than relating to specific characters. (For one thing, many of the folks driven

[77] Firmino described that the New York Theatre Workshop partnered with an organization to provide mediators/moderators after each performance. These individuals had had conversations with the creative team about the play and had been trained in mediation, providing audiences with highly informal opportunities to ask questions about what they just saw.

to speak explicitly mention that their reactions "aren't about the race thing, really," as a disclaimer before commenting.) The elements that seemed to resonate with these audience members related to queer relationship dynamics, the discomfort of witnessing the vulnerability of others, and toxic partnerships. At one point, the facilitators invited audience members to reflect on moments when they wanted to utilize a "safe word" during the play.[78] I noticed a small, giggling scuffle a few rows behind me, and then a middle-aged Black female presenting audience member behind me raises her hand. I included the following description of the event in my own field notes:

> "Well," she starts, "it's not really a 'Starbucks' moment, per say, but the moment of anal sex, I saw it happening and thought, 'oh my God, she is going to fuck him,'"[79] (a beat while the crowd laughs) "I mean, I'm just saying!" she clarifies. "And I turned to my friend"—she gestures to a woman next to her—"and was like, 'what if that was your son?'" She shrugs a little, "I don't know, I have three boys, so I was thinking about it as a mom. And then later, with Kaneisha at the end, thinking (I just thought it this time, I didn't say it to anyone), but, what if that was your daughter, y'know?"[80]

This reaction speaks to a level of empathetic disconnect with the characters themselves. Putting this reflection in conversation with Cummings's framework for dialogic empathy, it would seem that the play required this audience member to manufacture their own empathetic connection to the situation in order to engage with the subject matter. The sounds of affirmation and agreement from other attendees might indicate that the play caused this particular audience to think and feel

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[78] After some initial set-up articulating the difficulty of some of these conversations, the facilitator posed the question in terms of the world of the play, asking "what were the moments you wanted to say, 'Starbucks' during the show?" The response described here was the final comment before the conversation moved to a new question.
[79] The moment this audience member is referring to is in the first act of *Slave Play*, with Alana, a white woman, roleplaying as a wealthy plantation owner's wife with her black male partner Philip roleplaying as her servant. Within their roleplay, Alana penetrates Philip with a large black dildo.
[80] Excerpt from personal field notes, 19 February 2022.

related directly to how they imagined themselves in connection with the material—a productive start to conversation, perhaps, but leaving little to no regard for the consequences for Kaneisha.

While conducting interviews with specific audience members with various connections and experiences with *Slave Play*, the lack of language in response to articulating traumatic elements became apparent, especially when discussing the assault in the final scene. One respondent, Shreya Desikan reflected that

> "…the end is so hard because, like, that last line where she says, like, 'thank you for listening' makes it very confusing, and like, ambiguous because…as it, like…if there had been that, like, one line I think people would take away from…the fact like, oh my God, like, this guy like, assaulted her, and it was not okay, but you're not sure if she's like genuine or being sarcastic in that comment, and so I think that's like, very, like…it leaves you a bit unsettled which I think is a good thing."[81]

Desikan, who attended the Broadway remounting in 2021, initially expressed that the play did reflect her own experiences related to the cultural and social pressure that gets put on interracial relationships. She appreciated the play's appeal toward conversation, but she and her partner didn't come to any particular conclusions beyond the general unsettled affect. Similarly, Erika Vetter-Fontana, who also saw the Broadway remounting, reacted to the moment with uncertainty and distress while struggling to find the words to describe it. Vetter-Fontana had read the text prior to attending the production, although the surprise of the plot twist at the end of act one had taken her completely off-guard. Vetter-Fontana also recognized that she had a much stronger visceral reaction in watching the action, stating

[81] Desikan, Shreya. Personal interview, 9 February 2022.

> "Yeah, there was something exposed about it, I think, in watching it versus reading it that made it seem more like a surprise, despite the fact that I had read it before, that I knew it was coming. I don't know.
>
> …
>
> There's something about…If you read words on a page (*gestures, reading*) But you can't it, it's…I don't know how to put it, you… When you're reading words on a page you read a word, like, you know, (*voice drops*) rape, read a word like, you read something like that, yes, has this whole connotation, but when you're watching somebody experience it in real time it hits…like, 1000 times more intensely. Because you actually have to watch that person experiencing that trauma. And there's nowhere to go."[82]

Even in the process of attempting to describe what it was like witnessing this moment, neither Vetter-Fontana nor Desikan discussed the implications for Kaneisha as a character, although both describe the moment in relation to violence and potential trauma. Even as Vetter described it as "having nowhere to go" while watching the assault, her comments centered primarily on her own desire to recoil rather than the broader entanglements. I understand Vetter's description of feeling trapped in this moment, especially since the Taper Forum required restaging various moments due to the thrust structure of the stage. Director Robert O'Hara stated that the thrust allowed for more natural and fluid movement for actors, a sentiment similarly echoed by Antoinette Crowe-Legacy regarding the third act, who noted "it's actually easier, because, since the space is a little bit smaller, I can feel like I'm whispering and know that people will still hear me and they'll still be drawn in to what's happening on the stage. And that is, in some ways, a little bit gentler."[83] While staging this assault proved evocative in terms of affect and visceral

[82] Vetter-Fontana, Erika. Personal interview, 23 February 2022.
[83] Quoted by Ashley Lee, "How the radical set of 'Slave Play' transforms LA's Mark Taper Forum," np.

response, its disconnect from the character who experiences it discourages deeper critique on the representation of Black women in the play.

In the gaps where language feels inadequate, the residual impact of witnessing this trauma lies in the viscerally experienced affect. (As one creative team member put it to me early on, "you can't really get a full feeling for it until you have experienced it.") When I asked Firmino about the affect of rehearsing and developing *Slave Play* with Harris, his language reflected the same challenge of finding the right words, and the dilemma of how to rehearse such a moment. "That final scene of intimacy was always one that we worked in a closed room," he noted, "that I think was our attempt to kind of protect Kaneisha, protect our Kaneisha…I think we did it once all the way through, and it was tough, you know? It think it was very tough for everybody in the room to experience and to see it and to feel it." [84] During that particular run, director Em Weinstein allowed actors to do whatever they found necessary. Firmino did not describe what those choices entailed, only that "we all decided, like, okay, that was amazing but let's not do that again. That's like, you know, that was, it was just such a, an example of real, true catharsis, that we were like, let's kind of hold off on that, because it's scary. And we didn't do it again until the final room run."[85] These broad reflections—seeing the moment as tough, scary, exposed, ambiguous, unsettled—resist the visceral rhetorics that might be expected when discussing sexual violence. Stephanie Larson defines visceral rehtorics as "bone deep, felt sense of communication that transpires from a position of flesh and wound" in a way that recenters the body in order to "uncover the messy, bloody, material aspects of violation to remind audiences of the physical, corporeal body at the center of the problem."[86] Even though all accounts come

[84] Firmino, 18 August 2022.
[85] Firmino, 18 August 2022.
[86] Larson, Stephanie R. *What It Feels Like: Visceral Rhetoric and the Politics of Rape Culture*. (Penn State University Press, 2021), 4, 115.

from individuals who watched the assault on Kaneisha, very few of them draw attention back toward the material body at the center of the experience.

In her investigation of the affective potential within stage directions, Bess Rowen argues that the moment of assault in *Slave Play* offers the most important moment in the text, namely, a stage direction for "*the actress playing Kaneisha does whatever she feels is right before she looks at [Jim].*"[87] Rowan suggests that Harris's metatheatrical link—speaking to the performer rather than the character—illuminates the power contained in affective stage directions "because they empower us to put our own embodied truths into someone else's narrative, and in doing so, make its resonance more specific to a given time, place, and situation."[88] The affective flexibility of this stage direction does offer precisely what Rowan describes, in that the performer playing Kaneisha actively participates in creating meaning for the audience based on her interpretation of this stage direction. This direction becomes even more impactful when considering its origin. After a particularly heated and discouraging response from faculty, Harris and Firmino met with Antoinette Crowe-Legacy (in addition to playing Kaneisha on Broadway and in Los Angeles, Crowe-Legacy originated the role at Yale) to determine the best way forward. "Jeremy was seriously considering sort of, like, figuring out a new ending, and he wanted Antoinette to tell him what to do," Firmino reflected. Ultimately, Crowe-Legacy advocated for keeping the final scene. "I do remember Antoinette sort of sat up and said, 'no,' like, 'there is no other way this play can end,'" Firmino continued, "'This is how the play must end, this is how Kaneisha's journey ends, and this is exactly what she wants to say.'"[89] This moment opens up not just the kinesthetic and visceral responses for audiences, but the knowledge that the actor playing

[87] Harris, 161, and Rowan, 229.
[88] Rowan, Bess. *The Lines Between the Lines: How Stage Directions Affect Embodiment.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021, 229-230.
[89] Firmino, 18 August 2022.

Kaneisha should drive whatever choices regarding staging, reactions, and emotion come across in that moment may similarly provide audiences with additional insight to the play's meaning.

Of course, the challenge of including such a stage direction is the very fact that it is a *stage direction*—a tool within the text for creative teams and casts to create their production. Harris's offering to the actor playing Kaneisha provides agency to the performer, but generally audiences rarely (if ever) have access to the process of staging and negotiating those moments. (Even Vetter-Fontana, who like me read the script in advance of attending the play, recognized the much more significant affective impact of seeing the fully embodied production choices versus the written stage direction.) Instead, audiences who attend *Slave Play* witness the production on its own terms, which in this case includes witnessing Kaneisha getting assaulted, thanking her partner, and then the play ends. At the Taper Forum, one attempt to illuminate the play occurred when one of the facilitators read notes from the script out loud to the remaining audience, stating "you wouldn't have known this unless you read the script beforehand."[90] (I had, in fact, read the script beforehand.) When I asked Firmino about his experience within the process of *Slave Play*'s creation, he emphasized the ways that he and Harris sought to bring together theoretical perspectives and art, wherein "our goal was kind of, like, legitimize theatre discourse or legitimize theatre as discourse in a way that, both Jeremy and I feel that theatre has become sort of anti-intellectualized, de-intellectualized…at least in the States."[91] This goal fits most clearly with the play's first production, taking place at the Yale School of Drama and speaking to an academic community in a moment of "identity crisis"[92] with equity, diversity, and inclusion training occurring in tandem alongside seminars in dramatic theory and Afro-

[90] Excerpt from personal fieldnotes, 19 February 2022.
[91] Firmino, 18 August 2022.
[92] A term utilized by Firmino during the interview regarding his experience at Yale.

pessimism. As *Slave Play* has expanded beyond those initial circumstances though, the dialogue between audiences and artists of what the play brings up has become stilted. Although the play seeks to stir more questions than it can answer, the impact of Kaneisha's silence and her assault lacks nuance. Or, as one patron at the Taper Forum, an older Black female-presenting participant sitting near the back, put it, "I would say I'm disappointed. There was nothing here that was as shocking, or…daring as everyone said this play would be. It was pretty typical. A white man having sex with a Black woman like she's a slave? That's expected."[93]

The risks of *Slave Play* extend beyond the imaginary world of the fictionalized MacGregor plantation. Performing a harmful, violent act without developing an empathetic connection with the characters produces excess affect through reactions of kinesthetic empathy—a viscerally experienced reaction that may resist language. I do not suggest that audiences should avoid discomfort, rather that the circumstances of this particular discomfort only perpetuate damaging narratives of race, gender, and violence. As Dorinne Kondo argues, the theatre participates in "making race" through the act of creating theatre, identifying racial affect as one key site of this process, suggesting how "the hauntings of the stage by intertwinings of structural and affective forces" relate to racial representations.[94] The racial affect present in *Slave Play* reproduces many of the structural inequalities that it claims to subvert—particularly seen through the treatment of Kaneisha. By creating a central Black female character who remains hyperinvisible throughout, *Slave Play* maintains stereotypical expectations for Black women. Additionally, the inclusion of such a violent act at the end of the play produces an extreme visceral affect detached from the actual character under the guise of satire. Without the

[93] Excerpt from personal field notes, 19 February 2022.
[94] Kondo, Dorinne. *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018, 31.

clear intentions of who the audience should empathize with, whether the play fits in the parameters of satire, or full development of Kaneisha's character, *Slave Play* avoids investigating the harm it evokes in the name of adding shock to satire. While this may diverge from the play's initial intentions, these visceral responses and critiques can still serve the play's call to theatre as discourse.

In acknowledging the relationship between pain and history, Sara Ahmed indicates that the two come together through the body. She observes that "harm has a history," and that "pain is not simply an effect of a history of harm; it is the *bodily life of that history*."[95] The potential for pain that exists at the core of *Slave Play* could potentially offer a way in to America's exceedingly painful relationship to enslavement. This approach, however, would require an acknowledgement of the specifics of this pain, rather than the ambiguity that actually takes place. Empathy cannot always access pain, as Ahmed argues, and the call of this pain "is a call not just for an attentive hearing, but for a different kind of inhabitance" that results in a politics "based not on the possibility of what we might be reconciled, but on learning to live with the impossibility of reconciliation, or learning that we live with and beside each other, and yet we are not as one."[96] The call of pain demonstrated in *Slave Play*, particularly in relation to Kaneisha, seems to hinge on keeping her in a state of hyperinvisibility. Her trauma, without a basis of empathy for her character, merely produces a kinesthetic, visceral affect of distress where audiences are encouraged to think only about their personal reactions rather than the stakes of the individual at risk. *Slave Play* asks audiences and characters to imagine themselves into Kaneisha's position in order to sympathize with her situation. Doing so, however, ignores the actual harm and risk posed to Black female bodies. But, as Seton points out, the body cannot

[95] Ahmed, 33-34. Emphasis in original.
[96] Ahmed, 39.

tell the difference between reality and fiction. The kinesthetic empathy the audience endures leaves little to no space for self-investigation when the brain is preoccupied with deciphering real, visceral feelings from abstracted concepts and unempathetic characters. Harris achieved what he wanted—getting people talking—but *Slave Play* must also acknowledge its potential for harm.

CHAPTER FOUR

"That's How It Oughta Be": Affects of Race, Labor, and Class in *Sweat*

> *Jason contemplates whether or not to leave. Then Stan, severely crippled, enters. A traumatic brain injury. He moves with extreme difficulty; it is painful to watch. Finally:*
>
> Chris: Hey Stan. Stan.
>
> *Stan doesn't register their presence*.
>
> Oscar: He can't really hear good.
>
> Chris: Jesus.
>
> *Stan goes about wiping tables. They all watch. Stan drops his cloth. He struggles to get it. Jason runs over and picks it up.*
>
> Stan (*garbled*): Thank…you.
>
> Jason: It's nice that you take care of him.
>
> Oscar: That's how it oughta be.
>
> *There's apology in their eyes, but Chris and Jason are unable to conjure words just yet. The four men, uneasy in their bodies, await the next moment in a fractured togetherness.*
> *Blackout.*
>
> *Sweat*

Nothing makes me aware of my breathing quite the way that wearing a mask does. I'm surprised by how much face masks, used as preventative measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, have changed the theatre-going experience. Attending Lynn Nottage's *Sweat* at A Contemporary Theatre (ACT) in Seattle, I'm pleased that the organization continues to require masks for all of their patrons for the entire 2021-22 season, despite the fact that the mask mandate has lifted as the number of COVID cases continue to decline. *Sweat* had initially been slated for ACT's 2020 theatre season, but two years after its initially scheduled opening, this

production was taking place in a much different cultural context.[1] As I watch the narrative surrounding the community of small, factory town Redding, PA, oscillate between events taking place first in 2000 and then in 2008, the pressure of the present weighs heavily on this production. Seeing Jason, a young white man released from prison with his face covered in white supremacist tattoos carries additional meaning after the racial uprisings in 2020. According to data from the Anti-Defamation League, reports of white supremacist events and propaganda have risen to historic highs in the last five years, including nearly five thousand cases in 2021 alone.[2] Similarly, listening to Oscar complain about his inability to join the union has a different connotation when organizations like Amazon and Starbucks have made headlines for their union-busting efforts. Three weeks before I attended *Sweat*, warehouse workers in Staten Island, New York finally won their union election, becoming the first Amazon warehouse to successfully unionize—despite the fact that Amazon reportedly spent $4.2 million on labor consultants attempting to thwart their efforts.[3] Even prior to the win at Staten Island, Starbucks employees reported that they "were subjected to a massive campaign of overwhelming psychological force from the moment they expressed the desire to form a union."[4] Although *Sweat* portrays a specific historical moment for the United States given the specificity of location and time period, the

[1] Nottage, Lynn. *Sweat*. Directed by John Langs, performances by Anne Allgood, Shawn Belyea, Reginald Andre Jackson, Sara Waisanen, Miguel Castellano, Tracy Michelle Hughs, Anthony Leroy Fuller, Tré Scott, and Cap Peterson. 15 May 2022, A Contemporary Theatre, Allen Theatre, Seattle, Washington.
[2] "US White Supremacist Propaganda Remained at Historic Levels in 2021, with 27 Percent Rise in Antisemitic Messaging." 3 May 2022. https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/us-white-supremacist-propaganda-2021. Accessed 10 November 2022.
[3] D'Innocenzio, Anne, and Hadero, Haleluya. "Amazon's first US union overcomes hurdles, faces new ones." *The Associated Press*, 4 April 2022. https://www.seattletimes.com/business/amazons-first-ever-union-overcomes-hurdles-faces-new-ones/. Accessed 10 November 2022.
[4] Thompson, Carolyn. "Labor board certifies union at a US Starbucks store." *The Associated Press*, 17 December 2021. https://www.seattletimes.com/business/union-objects-to-results-of-two-starbucks-unionization-votes/. Accessed 10 November 2022.

larger conversations on labor, trauma, and community resonate in ways that are both chilling and comforting.

Constellating all three of these major themes—everyday trauma, memory, and affect—this particular production of *Sweat* emphasizes the sensory rhetorics within Lynn Nottage's text. These appeals to the sensory rely less on the staging of bodies, as seen in examples like *Self Defense* or *Slave Play*, but still heighten the audiences' kinesthetic awareness. The present is inescapable—in the arena theatre I'm reminded of my own masked face anytime I glance across and see the similarly masked audience members directly across and adjacent to me—but the impact of the pandemic and how we understand our own bodies seems to have fundamentally changed. Within the text, the play focuses on calls to empathy, but to press forward to consider what this empathy causes audiences to think or question is also to navigate the relationship between bodies and labor in 2022. In this chapter, I consider the origins of *Sweat* starting with Lynn Nottage's research and interviews to its 2017 Pulitzer Prize win. After considering the delay of ACT's production, I address how issues heightened by the COVID pandemic revealed alternative approaches to empathy within the text, predominantly in the ways we understand the impact of labor on the body. Finally, I analyze how the pandemic altered our approaches to the sensory, and how this was revealed in ACT's production of *Sweat.*

In her description of an archive of feeling, Ann Cvetkovich defines it as "an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception."[5] *Sweat* as a case study offers a unique archive of feelings—both in terms of the history that it portrays, and the context of ACT's production. Cvetkovich's work on the archive

[5] Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings.* Duke University Press, 2003, 7.

of feeling seeks to produce an archive of trauma, because "trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation," which often means that no archive can be accessed at all. *Sweat* archives the trauma to communities in the wake of the "deindustrialization" of the United States, paying particular attention to the way racial tensions made themselves known. Similarly, ACT's production seemed to tap into the traumas related to the pandemic surrounding labor and bodies.

The audience's relationship to *Sweat* is one predicated on the past. Many of the individuals that Nottage interviewed framed their city in terms of the past, making references to the way "Reading *was*…" rather than Reading in the present.[6] Nottage recognized that "this is a city that cannot conceive of itself in the present or future tense," making it a microcosm for the United States as a whole. "We are a country that has lost our narrative," Nottage described in 2018. "We can't project our future because we don't know where we are going."[7] Contemporary memory scholars Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, Brian L. Ott and Jon Louis Lucaites argue that memory, particularly public memory, functions in service to the present, where "we select, distill, distort, and transform the past, accommodating the things remembered to the needs of the present."[8] While history is "the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer," memory becomes dynamic, "embodied in living societies…subject to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting."[9] Cvetkovich takes up a similar claim regarding the memory of trauma, particularly in what "counts" as public culture. National traumas specific to "American" history, as argued by Cvetkovich, are deeply buried, but "they continue to haunt the present, and

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[6] Nottage, quoted by Sarah Crompton. "Playwright Lynn Nottage: 'We are a country that has lost our narrative.'" *The Guardian*, 2 December 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/dec/02/lynn-nottage-interview-play-sweat-america. Accessed 20 September 2022.
[7] Nottage, quoted by Sarah Crompton.
[8] Dickinson, Greg, Carole Blair, Brian L. Ott, and John Louis Lucaites. "Introduction." *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, edited by Greg Dickinson, et al., University of Alabama Press, 2010, 7.
[9] Dickinson et al., 8.

they take surprising forms, appearing in textures of everyday emotional life that don't necessarily seem traumatic and certainly don't fit the model of PTSD."[10] Lauren Berlant takes up a similar argument in examining the affect of cruel optimism—or the "relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility," noting that what makes these attachments specifically cruel rather than inconvenient or tragic "is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being."[11] Berlant's discussion of cruel optimism becomes particularly useful in the ways that capitalism in the US perpetuate this affect.

The American memory evoked in *Sweat* calls for the remembrance of traumas embedded in labor rights and class disparities, particularly those that occurred as a result of the 2008 recession and subsequent economic fallout. Francesca Betancourt, who served as the intimacy director for ACT's production, observed the ways that "violence and intimacy are both cultural and relational acts, and are deeply influenced by identity, intersectionality, and societal behavior." With this intertwining of violence and intimacy, Betancourt recognized that the affect within the world of the play could easily spill over to the experiences of the actors. "We [the company] had multiple conversations around this idea as it pertains to race," she described, "as well as conversations about how actors might manage the big feelings that come with the themes in the play and take care of themselves."[12] For ACT, *Sweat* functioned as an archive for both the historical moment it depicted, as well as the present experience of actors who renegotiated the dynamics of what violence and intimacy mean in this contemporary circumstance.

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[10] Cvetkovich, 6.
[11] Berlant, Lauren. "Cruel Optimism." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 17, no. 5, 21.
[12] Betancourt, Francesca. Personal correspondence, 27 June 2022.

As I consider this archive of feeling as an opportunity for dialogic empathy, questioning what the process of empathizing caused the audience to think, feel, wonder, or question, it is useful to consider who is permitted empathy within the world of the play. Because of the generational conflicts that Nottage takes up, I suggest that the empathy that *Sweat* calls forth is less preoccupied with those who experienced the impact of the Great Recession as the characters do, but rather the "lost generation" of millennials who are nearly guaranteed at this point in time to be the first generation in modern American history to end up poorer than their parents.[13] *Sweat* provides a sense of validation for millennials through the archive of feelings and cultural context that Nottage captures, as it points to the human costs of capitalism and industrialization.

"I want them to have empathy."

As Cvetkovitch points out, living and working under the rule of capitalism is inherently traumatic, and these traumas quickly became exacerbated in the era depicted in *Sweat* due to the economic crash of 2008 and its far-reaching consequences. The sudden downward slide of individuals who had gone from financial stability to near ruin led to questions of what, exactly, was going on. The Great Recession, which began in late 2007 and lasted until mid-2009, marked one of the most substantial economic downturns for many countries, including the US, first marked by the bursting of the US housing bubble. As housing prices began to fall, borrowers were left unable to pay loans, and as banks ceased lending to customers, demand and prices continued to fall.[14] In 2011, the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission reported that the Great

[13] Lowrey, Annie. "Millennials Don't Stand a Chance." *The Atlantic*, 13 April 2020. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/millennials-are-new-lost-generation/609832/. Accessed 20 September 2022.
[14] Duignan, Brian. "Great Recession". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 19 April 2019, https://www.britannica.com/topic/great-recession. Accessed 20 September 2022.

Recession was "an 'avoidable' disaster caused by widespread failures, including government regulation and risky behavior by Wall Street."[15]

The economic and financial crises similarly impacted the manufacturing sector, leading to what some referred to as the "de-industrialization of America."[16] Authors Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison compiled an extensive study of the last major instance of deindustrialization in 1982, defining it as "a widespread, systematic disinvestment in the nation's basic productive capacity."[17] Bluestone and Harrison noted that corporate managers continued to invest, but "that they are refusing to invest in the basic industries of the country," reflected in both subtle choices like redirecting profits to the more dramatic moving of equipment and plants to facilities outside the country.[18] Notably, Bluestone and Harrison avoid placing this burden on the American worker, despite the fact that conservative sociologists blame a "crisis of spirit" for the larger crisis of American capitalism. Instead, Bluestone and Harrison indicated that the worldwide economic patterns that contribute to deindustrialization, namely capital mobility—the threat of businesses relocating should unions and workers refuse to moderate their demands.[19] Although written nearly thirty years prior to the Great Recession, some of the consequences and conflicts of deindustrialization appear much more clearly in the wake of 2008. In 2010, the US lost half a million manufacturing jobs, and in the ten years between 2001 and 2011, the US had lost 42,400 factories, of which 75% employed over 500 people.[20] The process of America's deindustrialization gave Nottage significant inspiration toward creating *Sweat*, as she noted that

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[15] Field, Ann. "What Caused the Great Recession?" *Business Insider*, 8 August 2022. https://www.businessinsider.com/personal-finance/what-caused-the-great-recession. Accessed 20 September 2022.
[16] Referenced by Nottage in interviews with Crompton, Weinert-Kendt, and Brown.
[17] Bluestone, Barry, and Bennett Harrison. *The Deindustrialization Of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, And The Dismantling Of Basic Industry*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1982, 6.
[18] Bluestone and Harrison, 6-7.
[19] Bluestone and Harrison, 17.
[20] Cited by Ashby, Barry. "The De-Industrialization of America." *Industrial Heating*, 3 January 2011. https://www.industrialheating.com/articles/89873-the-de-industrialization-of-america. Accessed 20 September 2022.

her original commission from Oregon Shakespeare Festival (where the play premiered in 2015) prompted writers to explore "big plays about American history." She later reflected, "by the time I write this play it will be history. I think it's one of the more pivotal moments; I do think it's going to be a moment that will impact the next 100 years."[21] Indeed, the moment that Nottage depicts in *Sweat* carries clear threads connecting it to the social movements and cultural conversations taking place in the last three years.

Sweat examines the relationships and tensions of a community in Reading, Pennsylvania, as the lifeblood of their economy begins to dwindle. Shifting between events in 2000 and 2008, the play follows an ensemble of characters, including best friends Tracey and Cynthia, who work at the nearby manufacturing plant, and their sons Jason and Chris. While the group retains a sense of friendship and camaraderie in 2000, the scenes set in 2008 reveal the aftermath of a violent altercation that put both Chris and Jason in prison. Much of the action for both eras takes place at a local bar, run by Stan, a former worker at the plant who left due to an injury, and Oscar, a young Columbian American. Starting back in 2000, the cracks among these friends start to show when Cynthia gets promoted to management, although her success is short lived as contract negotiations between management and the union lead to a plant lockout. Despite Cynthia's insistence that she's doing everything she can to support her friends, they view her as a traitor and Tracey asserts that Cynthia only got the job because she's black. As the situation continues to worsen, Chris places all of his hopes on attending college and getting out of Reading, while Jason takes out his growing frustration on Oscar, who has used the lockout to finally secure a job at the plant. Jason's anger eventually reaches a crisis point, and he jumps

[21] Quoted by Rob Weinert-Kendt. "How Lynn Nottage, Inveterate Wanderer, Found her way into Reading and 'Sweat.'" *American Theatre Magazine*, 10 July 2015. https://www.americantheatre.org/2015/07/10/how-lynn-nottage-inveterate-wanderer-found-her-way-to-reading-and-sweat/. Accessed 20 September 2022.

Oscar. Chris, Stan, and the others try to intervene, but Stan is knocked to the ground and suffers a traumatic brain injury. These events are interspersed with flashes forward to 2008, showing that Tracey suffers from addiction to pain medication, and Cynthia works multiple jobs in an attempt to make ends meet. Meanwhile, on the recommendation of their parole officer, Chris and Jason attempt to put aside their blame and guilt as they return to the bar, where they witness a much-impaired Stan working under the watchful eye of Oscar. Their final interaction, included as the epigraph of this chapter, suggests a moment of uncertainty for all four men in attempting to find a way forward.

When first considering the project, Nottage returned to her own experiences in 2011 of the recession's impact. As her friends began expressing their financial difficulties, Nottage set about answering the question of "how they could go so quickly from a situation where they were doing quite well to being in dire straits."[22] This line of inquiry led her to Occupy Wall Street, the 2011 movement that originated in New York and quickly spread throughout the United States and abroad. Although Occupy never truly had a designated leadership structure or explicit demands, the movement did bring much greater attention to the issue of income inequality and the influence of money in politics. When a close friend revealed that she was completely broke and merely trying to keep a smile on her face, Nottage suggested that they participate in the actions with Occupy Wall Street. "At the end of the day, she said to me, 'Nothing has changed, but I just feel a little better about my circumstances,'" Nottage later told reporters.

The type of affective engagement that Nottage recalls in her experience with Occupy speaks to one of the major tools of social movements and protest. Appealing to and validating

[22] Quoted by Brown, Emma. "Lynn Nottage's Sweat and Blood." *Interview Magazine*, 13 December 2016. https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/lynn-nottage-sweat. Accessed 20 September 2022.

emotions assists in bringing a group together toward a common goal. In their analysis of various social movements in the United States, sociologists Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward recognized that in order for a protest to arise, "people have to perceive the deprivation and disorganization they experience as both wrong, and subject to redress. The social arrangements that are ordinarily perceived as just and immutable must come to seem both unjust and mutable."[23] Furthermore, Piven and Cloward observed that these protests in response to the traumas of everyday life "do not arise during ordinary periods; they arise when large-scale changes undermine political stability. It is this context, as we said earlier, that gives the poor hope and makes insurgency possible in the first place."[24] The context of the 2008 recession clearly provides the large-scale change that would precipitate a movement like Occupy Wall Street. Based on the framework outlined by Piven and Cloward, it would seem Occupy failed as a social movement—as one reporter put it, "it never solidified a specific set of demands, nor did it generate a concrete platform. There's no significant flesh-and-bones organization to point to as its heir. And it never anointed a leadership team."[25] Still, Nottage's own experience with Occupy demonstrates its success, particularly sense of belonging that allowed for participants to feel like part of a larger collective. The affect experienced by those who attended the protests across the country—moving from a state of "paranoia" in its early days in Zuccotti Park to "a lot of hope"[26] in the first week. Occupy benefitted from having a few major celebrities attend, including movie star Mark Ruffalo, who described his feelings of being "moved by the sweetness of the place,

[23] Piven, Frances Fox., and Richard A. Cloward. *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*. 1st ed., Pantheon Books, 1977, 12.
[24] Piven and Cloward, 28.
[25] Anderson, James A. "Some Say Occupy Wall Street Did Nothing. It Changed Us More Than We Think." *Time Magazine*, 15 November 2021. https://time.com/6117696/occupy-wall-street-10-years-later/. Accessed 20 September 2022.
[26] Vlad Teichberg, quoted by Jaime Lalinde et. al., "Revolution Number 99: An Oral History of Occupy Wall Street." *Vanity Fair*, 10 January 2012. https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2012/02/occupy-wall-street-201202. Accessed 20 September 2022.

and just the amount of hope and dignity that they comported themselves with. It was the power of democracy at its purest."[27]

Although *Sweat* takes place before the events of Occupy, in some ways its move toward empathy speaks to similar goals. As Nottage began researching cities that bore the consequences of American deindustrialization, she came across Reading, Pennsylvania, which in 2011 was considered the poorest city in America for its size.[28] "I found it fascinating that one of the poorest cities was in the Northeast, because we usually think of the Rust Belt, we think of the South, but the poverty is so close to us," Nottage later stated in an interview. "In fact, six of the poorest cities in America were in the Northeast, in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. I thought: we have a warped perception of what poverty is."[29] As Nottage conducted various interviews for her research, she noted the deeply emotional experiences of each space. "There was a level in some rooms of desperation, of profound sadness. In some rooms you could feel the nostalgia for what was and the longing for that to return," she stated in one interview.[30] Ultimately, she found a group of steelworkers who had been locked out of their plant for 93 weeks. She would later describe these steelworkers as the direct inspiration for the play, and that after hearing their stories "I hadn't anticipated I would be moved in the way I was. I hadn't anticipated that, sitting with them in a circle, I would feel we had a shared narrative—one of struggle, disillusionment and frustration with our government and our society."[31] The empathy that Nottage experienced with that particular group of men became the foundation for *Sweat.* Nottage expressed early on that the play should function as an opportunity for dialogic empathy,

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[27] Mark Ruffalo, quoted by Jaime Lalinde et. al., np.
[28] Brown, np.
[29] Quoted by Weinert-Kendt, np.
[30] Quoted by Weinert-Kendt, np.
[31] Quoted by Crompton, Sarah. "Playwright Lynn Nottage: 'We are a country that has lost our narrative.'" *The Guardian*, 2 December 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/dec/02/lynn-nottage-interview-play-sweat-america. Accessed 20 September 2022.

indicating that she wanted "the audience, when they leave, to think of the characters on the stage in three dimensions. I want them to have empathy. I also want them to think about engaging more with where we are culturally."[32]

The further removed audiences get from the events of 2000 and 2008, the more reflection is required to understand where we are culturally. *Sweat* initially opened at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Oregon, in 2015, followed by an Off-Broadway premier at the Public Theatre in New York City in 2016 and then moved to Broadway in 2017. Nottage pushed for the play to run during the 2016 election, offering a comment on some of the charged political rhetoric of that moment. "The play is not about Donald Trump's America," Nottage has clarified. "It just is not, and I want to be clear about that. I think that's one way for people who feel guilty for not being more alert interpret it."[33] For ACT's audiences in 2022, the seeds of discontent tempt toward a prescriptive political reading, as critic Michael Strangeways suggests that the play "eerily portrays events that led to the rise of Donald Trump."[34] While Seattle critics generally praised the production for the high levels of emotional investment, it seemed that the main goal for audiences should only be their empathy. "*Sweat* isn't always an easy show to watch," noted Strangeways, going on to describe that "it's heartbreaking to see these characters' lives be upended and their relationships destroyed, not only between friends and coworkers but between family members."[35] The conflict that Nottage portrays speaks directly to Berlant's cruel optimism, framing the two categories defined by Berlant: "with little cultural or economic

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[32] Quoted by Brown, np.
[33] Quoted by Thomas, June. "Lynn Nottage on Her Broadway-Bound Play, *Sweat*, and Why She's Wary of 'Poverty Porn.'" *Slate*, 6 December 2016. https://slate.com/culture/2016/12/lynn-nottage-on-her-broadway-bound-play-sweat-and-why-shes-wary-of-poverty-porn.html. Accessed 20 September 2022.
[34] Strangeways, Michael. "Review: 'Sweat" is the Best Theatre Production in Town." *Seattle Gay Scene*, May 2022. https://seattlegayscene.com/2022/05/review-sweat-is-the-best-theater-production-in-town/. Accessed 20 September 2022.
[35] Strangeways, np.

capital, and bearing the history of a racial disinheritance from the norms of white supremacy, you work yourself to death or coast to nonexistence; or, with the ballast of capital, you hoard against death, deferring life, until you die."[36] In some reviews, critics attempted to move away from the weight of cruel optimism by distancing from the events and struggles within the play. For instance, Jerald Pierce of the *Seattle Times* described a moment after the curtain call, when actors Ann Allgood and Tracy Michell Hughes (playing Tracey and Cynthia, respectively) hugged. "It's easy to get to the blackout at the end of *Sweat* and feel frustrated or angry, but that small hug, one not meant for me or any audience member, felt like the only appropriate response to making it through this play," Pierce concluded.[37]

From my own experience attending *Sweat*, I would agree that the play's conflict makes it easy to feel frustrated or angry. While the play does chart some of the political shifts and catalyses of the most recent presidency, however, I don't believe that the primary message of *Sweat* is merely a "desperate plea for all of us to find a way to pull together."[38] Given the context of this particular production, including the 2020 uprisings, the COVID pandemic, and the 2021 insurrection, *Sweat* validated the experiences of those of us still negotiating the everyday traumas of capitalism and deindustrialization. Even though Occupy brought discussions of income inequality into the public political conversation, the pandemic only exacerbated these issues, and Jason's turn toward white supremacist culture appears as a strange forewarning of the extremism put on display in Washington DC on January 6th, 2021. The fact is, *Sweat* is not so far distant to be considered history, but far enough in the past to be memory. To evoke the memory of a

[36] Berlant, 31.
[37] Pierce, Jerald. "Review: ACT's 'Sweat' challenges us to stop and listen to each other." *Seattle Times*, 12 May 2022. https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/theater/acts-sweat-challenges-us-to-stop-and-listen-to-each-other/. Accessed 20 September 2022.
[38] Pierce, np.

suffering Reading just as the American economy was set to crash invites a deeper sense of dialogic empathy—like the critics quoted here, we may empathize with the intrapersonal conflicts depicted by the characters, but what else might be gained from seizing this memory in the context of Seattle in 2022? I return to Oscar's firm pronouncement at the end of the play when Jason thanks him for taking care of Stan—"that's how it ought to be," Oscar replies. The archives of trauma discussed by Cvetkovich and Berlant's cruel optimism seep into the affective experience, but in the aftermath of uprisings and major economic crisis, this production of *Sweat* seems to resist the optimistic fantasy that capitalism relies on. Reopening the plant or recommitting oneself to this broken system will not fix the lives of these characters, nor will a dedication to capitalism save those watching. In some ways, Oscar's insistence feels like a hopeful turn toward community care, even in spite of the ways this community fell apart, that reforging community is still possible. But in 2022, Oscar's line has a sharpness to it. Not unlike Tony Kushner's Ethel Rosenberg in *Angels in America*, who insists that "history is about to crack wide open," the more distance the audience has from this moment, the easier it becomes to question whether we're any closer to "how it ought to be."

From Moved to Movement

The consequences of trauma that *Sweat* takes up are wrapped in generational struggles. Tracey recounts stories of her German grandfather, a carpenter who prided himself on what he could build with his hands, and both Chris and Jason take great pride in following their mothers' footsteps working at the factory. Nottage points to some of the more damaging ideologies that can be passed down among families—namely the unspoken discomfort from the white majority

with diversity and inclusion[39]—but *Sweat* speaks to the trans-generational aspects of trauma as well. In their research on epigenetics, Amy Lehrner and Rachel Yehuda note that exposure to adverse events can impact an individual to such an extreme extent that their offspring also find themselves grappling with their parents' post-traumatic state.[40] They identify that intergenerational trauma produces effects based on the offspring's direct exposure to the trauma, whereas transgenerational effects of trauma can be observed in generations "not directly exposed to the triggering environment."[41] Put another way, intergenerational trauma occurs when individuals are directly exposed to the trauma of their parents, while transgenerational trauma occurs when individuals who did not experience the trauma still negotiate emotions and challenges related to the trauma. All of the characters in *Sweat* experience trauma directly, although they choose to respond to that trauma in a variety of ways.

One element of Lehrner and Yehuda's research that becomes particularly important for *Sweat* comes from their work on the offspring of trauma survivors. Early in her career, Yehuda described organizing a clinic for Holocaust survivors in New York City. While the survivors themselves did not attend, their children attended the clinic, illuminating patterns across their experiences to Yehuda and her fellow researchers. Yehuda and Lehrner published a study of with these findings in 2015 that explained a number of behavioral difficulties observed in the offspring of Holocaust survivors, including

> feelings of over-identification and fused identity with parents, impaired self-esteem stemming from minimization of offspring's own life experiences in comparison to the

[39] Crompton, np.
[40] Yehuda R, Lehrner A. Intergenerational transmission of trauma effects: putative role of epigenetic mechanisms. World Psychiatry. 2018 Oct;17(3):243-257. doi: 10.1002/wps.20568. PMID: 30192087; PMCID: PMC6127768.
[41] Lehrner, Amy and Rachel Yehuda. "Cultural trauma and epigenetic inheritance." *Development and Psychopathology*, 30: (2018), 1768.

> parental trauma, tendency towards catastrophizing, worry that parental traumas would be repeated, and behavioral disturbances such as experiencing anxiety, traumatic nightmares, dysphoria, guilt, hypervigilance, and difficulties in interpersonal functioning.[42]

While *Sweat* does not name these behaviors specifically, the relationships between mothers and sons demonstrate some of these phenomena associated with trauma passing through generations. (After all, it's Tracey who riles up Jason to the point of inflicting physical harm on Oscar, asserting that he is the one to blame for Jason's economic hardships and losses.) By implicating how trauma travels through generations, *Sweat*'s call to empathy must take the various traumatic consequences into account.

As Dr. Bessel van der Kolk has observed, and as I have discussed in previous chapters, traumatic memory functions differently from other types of memory. Van der Kolk argues that "imprints of traumatic experiences are organized not as coherent, logical narratives but in fragmented sensory and emotional traces; images, sounds, and physical sensations."[43] Furthermore, our ability to remember any given event relies on our emotional connection to that moment—the higher our level of arousal during the event, the stronger and more precise the memories of it.[44] For those who experienced the fallout from the 2008 recession, it would follow that those who experienced the most traumatic and large-scale losses at that time would remember it with more precision and more deeply felt emotions. These private experiences may not relate to the larger narrative that exists in the American public memory. Public memory, that

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[42] Yehuda R, Lehrner A. Intergenerational transmission of trauma effects: putative role of epigenetic mechanisms. World Psychiatry. 2018 Oct;17(3): 244.
[43] van der Kolk, Bessel M.. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Books, 2015, 178.
[44] van der Kolk, 177.

is, beliefs about the past that are shared among members of a group, do not function as "ready-made reflections of the past," but instead operate as "eclectic, selective reconstructions based on subsequent actions and perceptions and on ever-changing codes by which we delineate, symbolize, and classify the world."[45] By introducing the memories and experiences of the steel workers of Reading into the public memory through *Sweat,* Nottage assisted in ensuring the personal traumas of deindustrialization remain part of the public memory.

Rather than relying on literalizing these stories, Nottage's work on *Sweat* maintains the emotional and affective impressions of witnessing these stories in order to identify similarities across demographics. This approach requires, in part, appeals to the sensory. For instance, as Cynthia describes her joy and delight at no longer working on the factory floor, she tells her friends "I'm not wearing my Carhartt, not gonna be on my feet for ten hours, I loosen my support belt, I don't have to worry about my fingers cramping or the blood blister on my left foot. I can stop sweating because goddamn the office has air-conditioning. These muthafuckers got air-conditioning."[46] Regardless of actual experience working in manufacturing, details like cramped fingers or blood blisters help articulate the impact of this labor on the body. These kind of appeals to our physical presence allow us to "experience the trouble of the people described vicariously, imagining their worries and their hurts with a visceral intensity, feeling it in our own bodies."[47] Through indirectly inviting the audience to imagine (or recall) these physical ailments, it becomes easier to understand and empathize with Cynthia's joy over something like air conditioning.

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[45] Dickenson et. al., 6,7.
[46] Nottage, Lynn. *Sweat*. Theatre Communications Group Inc., 2017, 53.
[47] Killingsworth, M. Jimmie. Appeals to Modern Rhetoric. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005, 75.

That said, even though Nottage clearly stated that *Sweat* was not about "Donald Trump's America," subsequent productions still have to negotiate these public memories with current politics. Indeed, as Dickenson et. al. address in their work on public memory, "memory is historically and culturally specific; it has meant different things to different people and cultures at different times and has been instrumentalized in the service of diverse cultural practices."[48] Although the production may not have directly addressed the cultural specificity of *Sweat* in 2022, the affective experience of ACT's production spoke to the transition from intergenerational trauma to transgenerational trauma. As a millennial, I was only in high school during the events of the Great Recession, and I have watched the way my generation has struggled as we enter peak earning years in the midst of a major economic cataclysm. During the recession, half of recently graduated millennials were unable to find work, and as reported in 2020 members of Gen X had four times the assets and double the savings of their younger counterparts.[49] Even though millennials may not have dealt with the immediate aftermath of the 2008 recession to the same degree that our parents or Gen X did, the long-term effects still impact economic opportunities and quality of life. The memory of how the economic downturn of the early 2000s carries a different weight because we still live under that burden, and the economic destruction of the pandemic has only intensified it. Exploring the affect of this memory as an archive of feeling not only provides a sense of validation for members of the population who suffer the greatest consequences due to income inequality, but it provides a counternarrative to the belief that millennials somehow brought these struggles upon themselves.[50] In an unusual contradiction, millennials (and Gen-Z) generations are far more

[48] Dickenson et. al., 11.
[49] Cited by Lowrey, np.
[50] In a particularly evocative description, writer-performer Bo Burnham used the following lyric in his pandemic-era 2020 special *Inside* to mark the millennial state of mind: "You say the ocean's rising like I give a shit/You say the

supportive of socialism than previous generations, however, according to Pew Research millennials are also far more distrustful of their peers and the government.[51] Even though this may make millennials appear misanthropic, the support of socialism seems to recognize that rebuilding social trust and community might be the only way out.

Oscar's call of "how it ought to be" rings less with the despair that our communities have not achieved greater successes, and instead stokes a sense of injustice that more progress has not been made. Producing *Sweat* in a moment where protest movements are not only supported but incredibly present in public discourse works in tandem with the necessary elements that produce such movements—that people perceive their deprivation as wrong, and that "the social arrangements that are ordinarily perceived as just and immutable must come to seem both unjust and mutable."[52] In 2022, income inequality has become a major political talking point, with figures like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren often referring to the necessity of taxing the 1% (a carry-over term from the original Occupy movement), suggesting a recognition that these social arrangements are both unjust and mutable. Movements, in this case, can refer to both the organized social action taken to create institutional or organizational change, as well as literal physical movement. Sara Ahmed suggests in her work that emotion and affect are directly related to movement, particularly in how emotions create attachments and connections. She indicates that this relationship is instructive because "what moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place. Hence movement does not cut the body off from the 'where' of its inhabitance, but connects bodies to other bodies: attachment

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whole world's ending, honey, it already did/You're not gonna slow it, heaven knows you tried./Got it? Good, now get inside."

[51] Levitz, Eric. "America's Most Socialist Generation is Also the Most Misanthropic." *New York Magazine*, 15 August 2019. https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/08/polls-millennials-and-gen-zers-are-dystopian-socialists.html. Accessed 10 November 2022.

[52] Piven and Cloward, 12.

takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others."[53] By participating in such social movements, we allow ourselves to be literally and figuratively moved by our collective emotional experience.

"What is mundane, and what has altered my soul?

At the time of this writing, the COVID pandemic has shifted from an immediate, life-altering danger to a constant, dull ache of anxiety, although it's uncertain what some of the long-term impacts on culture, the economy, or individual lives might be. In order to contextualize ACT's production, I chart some of the largest and most immediate impacts of the pandemic, paying particular attention to labor and embodiment. For the purposes of this analysis, I focus primarily on responses in Washington State and King County. This is in part to illustrate the specific community contexts for this production, as well as an attempt to position my own subjectivity—as a graduate student at the University of Washington, I witnessed these events unfold in real time.

First reported in December 2019, the coronavirus quickly jumped to the public's awareness with the first confirmed case in the US located in Snohomish County in Washington state.[54] By February of 2020, the virus had been renamed COVID-19 by the World Health Organization and had spread to 24 countries worldwide.[55] The virus, considered part of the same viral family as SARS and MERS, spread through close contact, including coughing, sneezing, or

[53] Ahmed, Sarah. "Introduction: Feel Your Way." *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014, 11.
[54] Blethen, Ryan. "Coronavirus FAQ: Answers to your most common questions." *The Seattle Times*, 27 January 2020. https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/answers-to-your-most-common-questions-about-the-wuhan-coronavirus/#coronaviruses. Accessed 10 November 2022.
[55] "New name for disease caused by virus outbreak: COVID-19." *The Associated Press*, 11 February 2020. https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/new-name-for-disease-caused-by-virus-outbreak-covid-19/. Accessed 10 November 2022.

touching. Objects like doorknobs, elevator buttons, and touchscreens quickly became anxiety-inducing due to potential exposure. Shortly after Washington governor Jay Inslee declared a state of emergency in early 2020, King County public health officials recommended that the public stay home and avoid large groups whenever possible to slow the transmission of the virus. By March 4th, school districts closed and transitioned to online learning, followed two days later with the University of Washington shutting down their Seattle campus.[56] Restaurant dining rooms were closed as of March 16th, all schools were closed by March 17th, and a state-wide Stay-at-Home order went into effect on March 23rd.[57] In order to limit community spread, the Center for Disease Control encouraged maintaining a distance of approximately six feet from other individuals—a challenging recommendation for jobs like food service that required close proximity.[58] These shutdowns, closures, and restrictions altered nearly every aspect of everyday life, seen perhaps most clearly in the economic consequences.

Based on data compiled by the Seattle Jobs Initiative, the rise of unemployment between March of 2020 and May of 2020 was "unprecedented," a term that has since become ubiquitous with the pandemic and its aftereffects.[59] During those initial eight weeks, the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue Metropolitan Statistical Area had lost 608,688 jobs, with 323,989 of that total in King

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[56] Balta, Victor. "UW classes will no longer meet in person through the end of the quarter." *UW News*, 6 March 2020. https://www.washington.edu/news/2020/03/06/uw-classes-moving-online-beginning-march-9/. Accessed 10 November 2022.
Takhama, Elise. "Northshore School District closes all schools for coronavirus concerns: 'We are no longer able to provide quality instruction.'" *The Seattle Times*, 4 March 2020. https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/education/northshore-school-district-closes-all-schools-beginning-thursday-school-will-resume-online-monday/. Accessed 10 November 2022.
[57] Carson, Kathleen, and David Katz. "COVID-Recession & Recovery." *Seattle Jobs Initiative*, May 2020, 1. https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/economicDevelopment/workforce/COVID-19-Recession-and-Recovery-Brief%20%281%29.pdf. Accessed 10 November 2022.
[58] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Transcript for the CDC Telebriefing Update on COVID-19," 3 March 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/t0303-COVID-19-update.html. Accessed 10 November 2022.
[59] Carson and Katz, 1.

County alone.[60] The arts and entertainment industry lost the largest percentage of workers, although industries like education, accommodation and food service, construction, and manufacturing also faced significant losses.[61] Nationally, pandemic shutdowns led to numerous business closures, with Los Angeles, New York City, and Chicago recording the greatest number of business closures among all US metro areas.[62] The unemployment rate spiked to 14.7%, the worst it had been since the Depression era, due to the 20.5 million people that abruptly loss their jobs.[63] As reported in *The Washington Post*, "the speed and magnitude of the loss defies comparison. It is roughly double what the nation experienced during the entire 2007-09 crisis."[64]

This contrast to the Great Recession hits a particularly tender sore spot for millennials. Noam Scheiber, a *New York Times* reporter who specializes in economic policy, observed that "what was especially tough about that recession is that people who had recently graduated from college had an incredibly difficult time finding jobs, at least, jobs that were on par with their skill set."[65] Further, Scheiber noted that these effects of the recession "actually continued on until about a decade or so after the Great Recession, really, right up until the eve of the pandemic."[66] Scheiber credits that this demographic—college graduates who struggled finding jobs on par with their education and skills—in part for the rise of union activism. He has also observed that the trauma of the pandemic, similar to the trauma of the Great Depression, cultivated a desire for

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[60] Carson and Katz, 1.
[61] Carson and Katz, 5.
[62] Tanzi, Alex, Pickert, Reade, and Rockeman, Olivia. "US economic rebound is a patchwork of virus risk and rules." *The Seattle Times*, 22 December 2020. https://www.seattletimes.com/business/u-s-economic-rebound-is-patchwork-of-virus-risk-and-rules/. Accessed 10 November 2022.
[63] Long, Heather and Van Dam, Andrew. "US unemployment rate soars to 14.7%, worst since Depression Era." *The Washington Post*, 8 May 2020. https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/jobless-rate-soared-to-14-7-in-april-as-u-s-shed-20-5-million-jobs-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/. Accessed 10 November 2022.
[64] Long and Van Dam, np.
[65] quoted in "Are Unions Making a Comeback?" *The Daily from The New York Times*, hosted by Sabrina Tavernise, produced by Diana Nguyen, Rikki Novetsky, Mooj Zadie and Asthaa Chaturvedi. 2 May 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/02/podcasts/the-daily/unions-amazon-starbucks.html. Accessed 10 November 2022.
[66] quoted in "Are Unions Making a Comeback?"

security. "Suddenly, you feel vulnerable. You feel betrayed. You feel like these things you knew to be solid have disappeared," he explained, "and you want an institution, maybe something like a union, to give you more security going forward."[67]

For those who managed to work through the pandemic, especially those defined as frontline essential workers,[68] this sense of vulnerability related to both employment and physical well-being. By August of 2020, reports of "crushingly low" morale among grocery store workers were attributed to overworking, taking on extra hours, and dealing with "hostile customers," while "employees who took sick leave at the beginning of the pandemic say they cannot afford to take unpaid time off now, even if they feel unwell."[69] Fox Wingate, a 24-year-old employee at a Safeway in Maryland, told a reporter how "at the beginning they valorized what was deemed a dead-end job, but four months later they don't even treat us like humans anymore."[70] Employees at warehouses described similar experiences of extreme physical demands and little administrative support. Ricardo, a warehouse worker who did not reveal his last name to reporters out of fear for losing his job, reflected that "I feel like I'm doing the work of six people. You know when you're worked to the bone, and you just want to go home, eat and sleep? It's like that all the time."[71]

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[67] quoted in "Are Unions Making a Comeback?"

[68] The CDC defined these workers as "the subset of essential workers likely at highest risk for work-related exposure to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, because their work-related duties must be performed on-site and involve being in close proximity (<6 feet) to the public or to coworkers." ["Interim List of Categories of Essential Workers Mapped to Standardized Industry Codes and Titles." *CDC.org*, 29 March 2021 (archived). https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/categories-essential-workers.html. Accessed 20 September 2022.]

[69] Bhattarai, Abha. "Grocery workers say morale is at an all-time low: 'They don't even treat us like humans anymore.'" *The Washington Post,* 12 August 2020. https://www.seattletimes.com/business/grocery-workers-say-morale-is-at-an-all-time-low-they-dont-even-treat-us-like-humans-anymore/. Accessed 10 November 2022.

[70] quoted by Bhattarai, Abha. "Grocery workers say morale is at an all-time low."

[71] quoted by Bhattarai, Abha. "Warehouse jobs—recently thought of as jobs of the future—are suddenly jobs few workers want." *The Washington Post/The Seattle Times,* 14 October 2021. https://www.seattletimes.com/business/warehouse-jobs-recently-thought-of-as-jobs-of-the-future-are-suddenly-jobs-few-workers-want/. Accessed 10 November 2022.

On the other hand, for those of us who worked remotely through the pandemic, the toll on the body manifested in slightly different ways. Rather than living in a state of physical harm, with the constant risks of infection, exhaustion, and injury, the shift to work-from-home and virtual learning impacted our approaches to embodiment. Like most schools and institutions for higher learning, the University of Washington transitioned to online learning for the entire 2021-2022 academic year. Along with my students and colleagues, my entire world shrank to the confines of my apartment. Teaching felt like an exercise in the abstract—for hours each week in a small, designated corner of my kitchen, I talked at a Zoom screen filled with black tiles. The silence had no texture, no affect. It felt like shouting into a black hole. I paced in circles between classes. When professors would ask how we were holding up, I'd report that no matter how many times I counted, it was still twenty-seven steps from my kitchen to my front door. In her work on cognitive science, Rhonda Blair argues for "situated cognition, which views cognition as embodied, embedded, and extended; that is, cognition depends not just on the brain but also on the body, exploiting structures in our environments and extending beyond the boundaries of individual organisms."[72] More often than not, the ability to analyze, theorize, and even imagine theatre at a time with little to no physical proximity felt impossible. To "be moved" in the way that Ahmed argues toward seemed entirely out of reach.

Sarah E. Smith, an instructor who shared personal experiences of leading classes during the pandemic on the QMW Project blog, described teaching as "an exercise in balancing the utterly mundane with the profoundly traumatic—the sort of things that alter your soul."[73] Smith

[72] Blair, Rhonda. "'How much is a loaf of bread?': ASTR Presidential Address (Montreal, 17 November 2011)." *Theatre Survey*, vol. 53, no. 2, September 2012, 302.
[73] Smith, Sarah E. "Response to Student Evaluations." *Queer Mormon Women and Gender Diverse Folks Project*. 26 July 2021. https://www.qmwproject.com/post/response-to-student-evaluations-sarah-e-smith. Accessed 27 August 2022.

reflected on her courses in bioethics, a course that prompted students to consider what does the most good and what does the least harm. Her case study examples, including situations of taking patients off life support, no longer functioned as a thought experiments because students were often negotiating those decisions for their own family members. "What is the debt we owe each other?" Smith asks herself. "What is mundane, and what has altered my soul?"[74] In the hesitant theatre re-openings in 2021 and into 2022, these questions seemed to hover just at the periphery. The suspension of disbelief seems to require more effort—it requires imagining back to a time prior to the major economic downturn and the magnitude human loss of the pandemic. In prompting these memories, these moments served as a reminder that this world of masks, social distancing, and supply chain limits was a recent development, and that, potentially, a different world could exist on the horizon. What of this pandemic world what have we accepted as mundane? And what has altered our souls?

"I feel like I'm having an identity crisis."

Attending live theatre in 2022, no matter the content of the production, carries an air of cautious optimism. ACT staged *Sweat* in the Allen Theatre, a ballroom converted into an arena theatre, and from my seat I can easily observe the masked faces of the audience that surrounds me. I attended the show with two colleagues, and as I glance around the auditorium, I feel like we're on the younger side of the general demographic. It looks like mostly silver-haired white folks, although there are a handful of nonwhite audience members as well. I'm curious how that will impact the overall affect of the story, particularly with the moments of racial tension. Unlike

[74] Smith, "Response to Student Evaluations," np.

Slave Play or *Self Defense*, which emphasized extreme moments of violence and trauma, *Sweat* remains predominantly text and dialogue driven. Even without this kind of extreme violence (either staged directly or imaginatively choreographed), *Sweat* exemplifies the traumatic experiences associated with capitalism. That type of trauma, as observed by Cvetkovich, can include too much feeling, or hyperarousal, as well as the absence of feeling, or numbness. Cvetkovich argues that "the feeling of life under capitalism may manifest as much in the dull drama of everyday life as in cataclysmic or punctual events," so trauma must take into consideration "both intense sensation and numbness, both everyday and extreme circumstances."[75] Taking *Sweat* as an example of the "dull drama" and "numbness" that can come from everyday trauma, the affective experience of watching the ACT production speaks to the historical specificity of the play. Since an audience in 2022 has been living under a very different "dull drama" of everyday trauma, one that includes constant masking, social distancing, and a low-level hum of anxiety and uncertainty, the traumas of labor exploitation become slightly defamiliarized. Our relationships to our bodies have changed, as so many are hyperaware of any sniffle, tickle, or cough, and we still haven't gotten used to being in such close proximity to others.

Unlike other instances of gathering field data when I've attended productions alone, the three of us are caught up in conversation prior to the beginning of the show. Our shared background in theatre and theatre research greatly impacted our conversation on the production itself, both in preparation for attending and once we arrived at the theatre, and somehow it seems right to attend a play about community with my own community. Within our group, Amna Farooqi and I had seen other iterations of this play, and we danced our conversation around the

[75] Cvetkovitch, 43.

reveal of the violent conflict as much as we could to avoid spoiling details for the third member of our party. Our discussion, however, was constantly interrupted and sidetracked by the pre-show music. In an attempt to put us in the particular historical context of the play, the playlist included a variety of hits from the early 2000s, like Rhianna's "Shut Up and Drive" and Taylor Swift's "You Belong With Me." It what appeared to be an attempt to speak to the working-class population centered in the play, the songs bounced between these top-40 pop hits and songs that after some debate we categorized as "country pop." Any time a particularly twangy song started, Amna and I would start dancing before almost immediately falling into fits of giggles. During one particularly involved dance break, Amna bops to the tune for a moment, before looking at me seriously and exclaiming, "I feel like I'm having an identity crisis!"

"Because of the music?" I ask, laughing.

"Exactly!" she replies emphatically.

We discussed that we weren't "the kind of people" who listened to this music, and yet we couldn't help dancing in our seats when it came on. Amna's identity crisis seems to highlight a particular feature of *Sweat*—an ability to relate to demographics we may initially resist. These moments of "identity crisis" helped link the action on stage to our memories of that particular moment in time, with much of our conversation recalling the high school dances, college parties, or social outings associated with particular songs. Building this affective association into the world of the play made the memory feel closer to our own experiences, even if we didn't have direct experience with the political or economic realities of that time. Nottage cited that during her initial research interviews with a group of steel workers who had been locked out of their plant for 93 weeks, she found that "their story was incredibly compelling and representative of a lot of what I was hearing from other people in that they had been solidly middle class—they had

completely and totally invested in the American dream—and then had found that the rug was really pulled out from under them."[76] Even if the audience lacks an analogous experience to that of the characters, the stakes of their "every day trauma" are clearly communicated. Francesca Betancourt, who served as the intimacy director for ACT's production, expressed her desire that the moments of staged intimacy "allow these characters' humanity to shine through." Betancourt told me, "I think it was important that the audience understood how high the stakes were for these people—how much they cared about each other, how much history they all had with each other, and as a result how deeply they could hurt each other."[77]

The affective experience of attending *Sweat* lends itself toward a sense of anger and frustration. Despite the growing conflict between the characters, however, it is easy for the audience to identify that "the real decision makers in this play, from the top factory bosses to the owner of the bar in which they sit, are offstage."[78] Nottage's choice reflects Piven and Cloward's analysis of protest movements almost exactly, where "people experience deprivation and oppression within a concrete setting, not as the end product of large and abstract processes," thus resulting in situations where "when the poor rebel they so often rebel against the overseer of the poor, or the slumlord, or the middling merchant, and not against the banks or the governing elites to whom the overseer, the slumlord, and the merchant also defer."[79] For characters like Jason and Tracey, these moments of rebellion became moments of racially charged outbursts, where their frustration and desperation were directed first at Cynthia and Chris, and in the final fight, at Oscar.

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[76] Nottage, quoted by Brown.
[77] Betancourt, 27 June 2022.
[78] Pierce, np.
[79] Piven and Cloward, 20-21.

One of these moments came early on in the play, during a sequence that took place in 2008. Jason sat across from his black parole officer Evan, who pressed him on whether he'd adjusted to life outside prison. I noticed an already palpable sense of discomfort in the auditorium with Jason's entrance, which I suspected had to do with Jason sporting facial tattoos of white supremacist symbols. In a moment of exasperation, Jason hurled a racial slur at Evan, and the tension in the auditorium sharply increased—I heard a few sharp intakes of breath, and in the silence following the slur the awkward shuffle of people adjusting in their seats. In my interview with her, Betancourt indicated this as one of the primary moments she worked on with the cast, given that she expands the definition of intimacy "to include any content that may *feel* particularly intimate to either performer or audience member."[80] Based on my experience in the audience, I agree with Betancourt's description, that this exchange felt particularly intimate among those present.

Knowing so early on in the story that this would be where Jason—a seeming devotee of white supremacy—ended up made it a challenge to fully trust him as an empathetic figure throughout the rest of the play. It would be easy for audiences to attempt to distance themselves from Jason, and his mother Tracey, in the moments where they express the roots of their anger through racist rhetoric, as is so often the case for white audiences.[81] For this particular moment so close to the beginning of the play, I get the impression that the younger audience demographic present (one I would broadly categorize as millennials) seems to lean forward into the moment, while the older demographic (that I might categorize as Boomers more so than Gen-X) seems to

[80] Betancourt, 27 June 2022.

[81] This is a phenomenon observed by Dani Snyder-Young in her work on theatre as an intervention to white supremacy, where she notes that white audiences "misrecognized realistically drawn white characters who perform their whiteness in ungraceful, hurtful ways as bad, racist white people, and find ways to distance themselves from these characters," in an effort to portray themselves as "good white people." (*Privileged Spectatorship: Theatrical Interventions in White Supremacy*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020, 124.) I discuss this in more depth in my analysis of Jeremy O. Harris' *Slave Play* and its reception in previous chapters.

brace themselves and lean back. I suggest that the variance in these reactions speaks to the perceived proximity to the issues present in the play, predominantly race and class. For a generation that remembers the economic crash of 2008 with greater clarity and more direct memory, the leaning back would signal a kind of distancing, suggesting that this behavior or interaction would belong in the past. For those of us leaning forward, however, it felt like a very present recognition of the ways this kind of racist ideology made itself known. This was not a memory of the distant past for us, but a recognizable representation of our present. Witnessing this moment in a not-too-distant past helped in contextualizing some of the tensions and rhetoric of Black Lives Matter uprisings by linking this behavior and thought process to external economic and social factors. Empathizing with Jason may cause a sense of "identity crisis," as it complicates the audience's expectation. Dolf Zillmann argues that an audience's ability to empathize relies on their ability to care about a character, either positively or negatively, and that "the more strongly respondents react to protagonists as friends and to antagonists as enemies, the more strongly they will be emotionally engaged: the more they will hope for some outcomes and fear others, and the more intensely they will experience empathic distress and pleasure."[82] Nottage plays on this heightened emotional engagement by introducing Jason in such a way that most audiences would likely react with displeasure or disdain. However, as the play moves between eras and explains in more depth how Jason ended up this way, this emotional engagement becomes more complex—perhaps Jason is redeemable, and perhaps we can still empathize with the circumstances that led him to this point.

For millennials, the generation that has borne much of the economic burden for both the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic, the ability to consider "how it ought to be"

[82] Zillmann, Dolf. "Mechanisms of emotional involvement with drama." *Poetics*, 1994, 23, 48.

remains tightly wound up with affects of grief and activism. In charting the connections between trauma and activism through the lens of affect, Cvetkovich notes that "being inside a crisis, particularly as an activist, does not always provide adequate opportunities for mourning."[83] Utilizing AIDS activism as a case study, Cvetkovich suggests that oral history provides "a public space for the emotional work of mourning at a time when the collectivity of activism may have faded and people are more isolated."[84] Although not an oral history in the strictest sense of the term, I suggest that *Sweat*'s portrayal of history and the traumatic impacts of capitalism aid in providing a similar public space for mourning—especially for millennials. After living through two major economic crises and making up the largest population present during the numerous protests on racial justice in 2020,[85] millennials not only empathize with the plight of these characters but feel and recognize it deeply.

One of the more vocal responses to the play came from a moment with Cynthia, in her conversation with Stan. After she locks her friends out of the plant, her community has in many ways deserted her. Alone at the bar with Stan, he asks how she's doing, to which she explains:

> Shit. I locked out my friends, Stan. I explained, I fought, I begged. But those cowards upstairs still had me tape a note to the door telling 'em they weren't welcome. Ninety-five degrees. I'm standing in the door watching some irritable fat guy change the locks. Shut outta the plant. And you know what? I wonder if they gave me this job on purpose. Pin a target on me so they can stay in their air-conditioned offices. Do you know what

[83] Cvetkovich, 208.
[84] Cvetkovich, 210.
[85] Frey, William H. "The nation's racial justice protests are a pivotal moment for millennials and Gen Z." *Brookings*, 9 June 2020. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/06/08/the-nations-racial-justice-protests-are-a-pivotal-moment-for-millennials-and-gen-z/. Accessed 28 April 2023.

> that feels like, to say to the people you've worked with for years that they're not welcome anymore?[86]

The crowd hums in response, a vocal affirmation to the sensation that Cynthia has described. The phenomenon Cynthia goes through in this moment could be considered moral licensing, wherein individuals will take preemptive action to demonstrate their morality before engaging in potentially dubious behavior.[87] In this case, the plant can demonstrate their progressive approach by promoting a black woman as factory manager before locking out the workers. Witnessing such a distinct response to this moment feels questionable, as there is no way to determine if the audiences' affirmation of Cynthia's plight is in itself an act of moral licensing. Making empathy the end goal of *Sweat*, as Nottage hoped, might mark this vocal reaction as the end of the engagement—after all, the audience has appropriately empathized with Cynthia, so the production achieved its goal. *Sweat* seems to resist such an easy conclusion, however, as tensions among the characters continue to rise. Indeed, the fact that Cynthia is moved to the periphery of the story as these tensions lead to more physical and harmful interactions suggests that empathy alone may not solve these issues.

As the play went on, the arena staging functioned as both a benefit and a hinderance to the play's material. On the one hand, I found it incredibly useful to observe my fellow audience members throughout various moments of the play. That said, it clearly posed a challenge to

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[86] Nottage, 77-78.

[87] This term has been defined and studied by social psychologist Daniel Effron, where his studies observe the ways that moral licensing particularly relates to race. For instance, when individuals endorsed Obama for president, there was an increased tendency to later express politically incorrect views on race. Individuals could use their support of Obama to prove they weren't racist, therefore licensing them to make these racist statements. Similar studies showed how individuals participated in moral credentialing as a preemptive measure before engaging in morally dubious behavior, like favoring white individuals over black individuals for funding or employment opportunities. See also: Anna C. Merritt, Daniel A. Effron, Steven Fein, Kenneth K. Savitsky, Daniel M. Tuller, Benoît Monin, "The strategic pursuit of moral credentials," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, V: 48, I: 3, 2012, Pages 774-777 and Effron, D.A., Cameron, J.S., Monin, B., "Endorsing Obama Licenses Favoring Whites" *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2009), *45*(3), 590–593.

staging, particularly in terms of the final fight scene. The altercation, which began with Jason going after Oscar, quickly picked up speed as Stan and Chris attempted to intervene. In such small quarters and audience at all angles, steps of the choreography that ensured no actor actually suffered physical harm occasionally broke the illusion of realism. Still, watching Chris and Jason whale on Oscar with a baseball bat, sickening thuds ringing through the auditorium, the audience seemed to wince with every blow that landed. In the final moments, as Stan gets caught in the fray and slammed his head into the edge of the bar, I noticed a woman sitting kitty-corner from me nearly jump out of her seat. Her hands flew up, palms toward the stage, simultaneously in a motion of protecting herself from getting hit and almost to catch Stan as he careened toward the ground. The action was so instantaneous and reflexive she seemed embarrassed to have reacted at all—her hands quickly came to cover her mouth and I watched her lean over and say something to her seat partner, shaking her head self-consciously. Although the rest of the play lends itself toward passive observation (one reviewer of the Broadway production criticized the play's use of "how-I-got-this-way monologues"[88]) this reaction demonstrates how reflexive these reactions—to protect oneself, while also attempting to assist another—can be.

The Ultimate Paradox

The emotional turmoil of *Sweat* is not nearly as outwardly expressive as a production like *Self Defense*. The audience's knowledge of what is still to come for these characters creates a sense of grief, that despite all these struggles things are bound to get worse before they get better. While the dramatic violence at the end of the play produces the strongest visceral reactions, including jumps, twitches, or hands rising, witnessing the ways that the everyday desire, longing,

[88] Brantley, Ben. "Review: 'Sweat' Imagines the Local Bar as a Caldron." *The New York Times*, 26 March 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/26/theater/sweat-review-broadway.html. Accessed 20 September 2022.

and despair sustain a level of trauma give *Sweat* a sense of gravity. The archive of feelings that *Sweat* contributes to provides an explanation for and a validation of the burnout carried by millennials. Although this was not the generation who suffered most immediately during the era depicted in the play, our relationship to this trauma and the continued stress of economic pressures compounds this trauma.

In her work on examining the bittersweet place of sorrow and longing, Susan Cain addresses that grief and impermanence are part of what bring us together toward the communal longing of being human. She describes this place as the ultimate paradox, that "we transcend grief only when we realize that we're connected with all the other humans who can't transcend grief because they will always say, because we will always say: But even so, but even so."[89] In order to transcend, or even just to move through these traumas, we must realize we are connected to all the other humans who similarly experience this grief and trauma.

Oscar's invocation of "the way it oughta be" offers a glimmer toward a utopian performative. While Dolan defines a utopian performative as "small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like,"[90] the hope of Oscar's commentary does not seem to function that way. Particularly in the context of ACT's production, performed on the heels of major social movements and a nationwide reckoning with racial justice, "the way it oughta be" is far more complicated. Perhaps more accurately, Oscar's description functions as a moment of what Juana María Rodríguez defines as queer sociality, or "at its core, an attempt at recognition. It is a utopian space that performs a critique of existing

[89] Cain, Susan. *Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole.* New York: Crown, 2022, 182.
[90] Dolan, Jill. "Introduction." *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005, 5.

social relations of difference and enacts a commitment to the creative critical work of imagining collective possibility."[91] We critique the way we currently experience everyday trauma by committing toward the way things ought to be—and we transcend our grief only in recognizing that we have all suffered under this grief and trauma. To be moved by a production like *Sweat*—both literally, in terms of physical reaction, as well as emotionally—speaks to how we attach ourselves and what we are attached to.

Nottage has considered theatre one of the most efficient processes by which to build empathy because of how it brings together a collective audience. "I think that in this fast-paced, disconnected culture, the one thing that can really still us and get us to sit down and listen is when we sit down in a theater," she described. "You have two hours to make either a persuasive argument or delight or titillate people in ways that you can't do in any other medium."[92] For *Sweat* in 2022, the persuasive argument seems to suggest that empathy does not mark the end of the journey—more is required in order to get close to "how it ought to be." We may not be able to transcend our trauma, but through careful recognition we may find connection to all other humans in similar circumstances. To have empathy is to inspire towards movement.

[91]Rodríguez, Juana María. "Queer Sociality and Other Sexual Fantasies," *GLQ* (2011) 17 (2-3): 332.
[92] Quoted by Thomas, np.

CONCLUSION

> And I know that I don't talk a lot
> But I know that you don't care a lot
> As long as we move our bodies around a lot
> We'll forget that we forgot how to talk
> When we dance, when we—
>
> "Bodies"
> Car Seat Headrest

By asking audiences to witness acts of trauma on stage, the case studies I have engaged here evoke empathy as an initial step toward greater engagement. In this approach, I suggest that the audience is cast as the role of witness to these acts. When operating as witnesses, empathy does not function as an end point, rather, it can invite the basis for further engagement. The emotional experience of this witnessing, even alongside the suspension of disbelief, can evoke what Judith Herman describes with the dialectic of trauma. "It is difficult for an observer to remain clearheaded and calm, to see more than a few fragments of the picture at one time, to retain all the pieces, and fit them together," Herman stated. "It is even more difficult to find a language that conveys fully and precisely what one has seen. Those who attempt to describe the atrocities that they have witnessed also risk their own credibility. To speak publicly about one's knowledge of atrocities is to invite the stigma that attaches to victims."[93] Further, it is the victim who requires more from the witness. Herman continues that "the victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering."[94] Herman's indication that the bystander share in the burden of pain returns to Sara Ahmed's description of the ethics of pain. The action, engagement, and remembering

[93] Herman, 2.
[94] Herman, 7-8.

demanded of the witness implicitly requires that they "act about that which [they] cannot know" as Ahmed prompts, and to be "moved by what does not belong to [them.]"[95]

For Billy, communicating the harm he has endured for his entire life requires a shift to silence. In this way Billy is literally moved to make a change in order to appeal to his family's sense of empathy. Although most audiences lack a working knowledge of ASL, the immense physicality of these moments in *Tribes* can cut across languages toward an involuntary kinesthetic response. Furthermore, Billy's silence demands that the audience remember and engage with his family's constant casual exclusion. In a location with such a large Deaf community, the 2014 Studio Theatre production provided a space to witness Billy's desire to be seen and celebrated to underscore the importance of Deaf solidarity and advocacy.

By incorporating an all-female ensemble to function specifically as witnesses, our 2015 production of *Self Defense* sought to keep the focus on "those whose names we don't know." These nameless characters, ultimately framed as victims of gender-based violence, connect to the audience through staging to constantly remind audiences of the scope and scale of their trauma. In removing the heightened spectacle of Jolene's story, this ensemble provided an alternative point of entry for the audience's empathy.

Implicating the audience in actual acts of sexual violence, rather than the mere suggestion of it, *Slave Play* invites the audience to share in Kaneisha's pain without providing an easy solution. Although audiences may be invited to carry Kaneisha's burden with her, Kaneisha as an individual gets forgotten. While the play as a whole takes on a number of important discussions, Kaneisha's suffering can easily be lost in the complications of discourse. Empathizing with Kaneisha is to recognize and engage with the ways in which she is mistreated within the contexts

[95] Ahmed, 31.

of her personal relationships and this "therapeutic" treatment, and by extension to understand how Black women are similarly lost in such discussions of racial justice.

Witnessing a recent past recontextualizes the economic and social struggles of our current situation and *Sweat* provides a sharp reminder toward critical hope. Empathizing with the plight of this Pennsylvania community is to recognize the large-scale systemic failures that have perpetuated these issues for entire generations. Oscar's recognition that community care is "how it ought to be" can function as a reminder that the current capitalist conditions will not sustain us. We must be moved literally and figuratively by the suffering of those around us in order to create a future for ourselves and our posterity.

Finally, I return to the example of *The Oresteia* to address how the affective experience of witnessing staged trauma can produce a more visceral foundation toward empathy. In the case of *The Oresteia*, the chorus functioned predominantly as witnesses to the atrocities of the House of Atreus—the chorus first witness Clytemnestra dragging the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra to the grave, and Orestes stabbing his mother, and it is the chorus who are charged with ultimately making the house "clean." Director Amanda Rountree made it clear from early on that this was not the kind of mess that a little bit of Windex would solve—the rot went further down, into the foundations of the structure itself. "I kept having this vision of a moldy bathroom," Michelle Conklin described, "because, like, it's moldy. And so, like, you wipe off the counter. And you might not see it, but the mold is underneath. …and then, how your body physically changes, if you're in a moldy situation, like the cells within your lungs change."[96] In order to attempt cleaning out the trauma of this family, the chorus must admit to themselves and each other of the full scale of trauma they have witnessed over the generations. As the chorus

[96] Conklin, Michelle. Personal interview, 14 February 2023.

attempts to find a way forward, their actions invite the audience to empathize with not only those who witness trauma, but those who seek to change the root causes of harm.

As much as the chorus attempts to hide and distract from the rot at the foundation, it is Cassandra, the Trojan princess-turned-prophet, who recognizes their deeply held shame and reflects it back to them. Upon her arrival, the chorus quickly attempt to ignore her despite her vocal reminders of the violence that has taken place within this family line. Initially, the chorus try to rewrite Cassandra's own traumatic past, observing that she's "such a brave girl."[97] Cassandra quickly rejects this by stating that "people never say that to the lucky, do they?"[98]

Instead, she demands that they remember what has come before and how it impacts the present of this family in order that they may move forward. Iveliz Martel, who played Cassandra in the University of Washington production, identified that much of Cassandra's burden related to the fact she was caught between past and present—always the witness to past atrocities through her prophetic visions and always warning of the future consequences, but always ignored. Although Martel described Cassandra's initial objective as revenge for the destruction of her homeland when she arrives at the House of Atreus, this objective quickly changed after Cassandra experiences a vision of the children murdered at the hands of their uncle generations ago. Not only did this vision move Cassandra to empathize with the children constantly suffering in these cycles of violence, but the staging also required that Martel be actively moved by this past trauma as she threw her body around onstage—seemingly "possessed" by the god Apollo during these visions. Although the pain and trauma did not belong to Cassandra, she still bore the burden of it. Just as Herman identified, through Cassandra's insistence on communicating these

[97] McLaughlin, *The Oresteia,* 34
[98] McLaughlin, 34.

past atrocities, she also summoned the stigma of the family's trauma. "It's too shameful," Chorus C pleaded during the visions, "make her stop."[99]

These extreme moments of choreography and physicality aid in representing the divine control over Cassandra, but the staging of her visions also jolted the audience into the discomfort of the despair and pain within this family.[100] Martel further reflected that these moments required a significant change in objective that shifted how Cassandra viewed her purpose to something beyond herself. This communion with past victims of this pain invited Cassandra toward action, remembering and engagement, especially given that these victims were children. Rather than viewing Cassandra as a figure driven by the gods, Martel indicated that her motivation came from a place of empathy. "That changed my thought of coming into the scene with the objective of revenge," Martel described, "to surrender for the sake of the children so that no more children get killed in this house."[101] In order to seek a way forward, then, the conversation turned from vengeance on those who had committed previous crimes toward a protection of future generations. Cassandra, thoroughly moved by the pain of slaughtered children, embraces this empathy as a first step toward reconciliation.

Going beyond Ahmed's ethics of pain, which necessitates that we must "act about that which [we] cannot know" and be "moved by what does not belong to [us]," McLaughlin's version of *The Oresteia* moves beyond empathizing with the pain of trauma to actively seeking ways to heal a community. McLaughlin's text remains fairly ambiguous on whether the

[99] McLaughlin, 32.
[100] During discussions with my undergraduate students in a script analysis course, some described Cassandra's prophetic visions as disturbing and dark. Some cited how her physicality also made her appear more threatening, particularly as she threw chairs and chased various chorus members.
[101] Martel, Iveliz. Personal interview, 2 March 2023.

community actually forgives Orestes for what he has done. He is left apologizing as the family's former nurses clean him and his sister of the remaining blood, but without an official judgement.

It is possible to interpret this moment as a continuation wherein the chorus will simply continue to clean a house that will never be cleansed. It is also possible though, to see a hopeful future where justice does not rely on the spilling of blood. In some ways, this moment becomes representative of what writer Susan Cain characterizes as the ultimate paradox: "we transcend grief only when we realize that we're connected with all the other humans who can't transcend grief because they will always say, because we will always say: but even so, but even so."[102] Cain further goes on to question how the pain of the past can be transformed into beauty, and how

> we can set ourselves free of the pain. We can see that our forebears' stories are our stories, but they're also not our stories. We may have inherited an echo of our ancestors' torment, but it was not our flesh burned in the ovens; we may have inherited their grief, but it was not us torn naked from our children. The tears they shed ran down their cheeks, not ours, just as their accomplishments were earned by them, even if we may have inherited some of their stature.[103]

Even though Orestes and Electra have inherited the pain and trauma of their family, the possibility of forgiveness for Orestes suggests there is a path away from the cycles of violence. In her description of a love ethic, bell hooks argues that "faith enables us to move past fear. We can collectively regain our faith in the transformative power of love by cultivating courage, the strength to stand up for what we believe in, to be accountable in both word and deed."[104] The act

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[102] Cain, *Bittersweet*, 182.
[103] Cain, *Bittersweet*, 229.
[104] hooks, bell. *All About Love*. New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 2001, 93.

of empathy includes the physical, visceral reactions to the pain of another, but once this pain has been witnessed and felt it can be transformed to love through faith. hooks goes on to suggest that embracing a love ethic requires "cultivating awareness. Being aware enables us to critically examine our actions to see what is needed so that we can give care, be responsible, show respect, and indicate a willingness to learn."[105] The awareness of how emotions can stir physical and kinesthetic reactions, particularly when empathizing, can provide greater foundation toward this love ethic. Although we can never transcend the remaining grief and scars left from trauma, being moved to empathize with it can allow it to transform into love.

This hope toward the future can be seen perhaps the most with Cassandra, riddled with prophecies that others refuse to believe. When I asked Iveliz about the emotional burden of playing such a character, she told me about imagining the exhaustion and the frustration and the pain of these constant visions. But, Iveliz concluded, there was always a hope for Cassandra. "I think that the only way Cassandra has been like going through this is with the hope that the next vision is gonna be something good. … So that's, that's how I feel that those two things are there, like, the hope, the hope in the middle of all this distortion and pain and suffering."[106] Perhaps, then, there is still hope for Orestes. Perhaps it is the recognition of the work to be done, of the children who have inherited pain beyond their comprehension, that suggests a more hopeful future. And may that finally wash the blood clean.

[105] hooks, 94.
[106] Martel, 2 March 2023.

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