

Performing Exposure:
Race, Empire, and Minoritarian Theatre in the 21st Century

Amna Farooqi

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Reading Committee:

Jasmine Mahmoud, Chair

Scott Magelssen

Stefka Mihaylova

Chandan Reddy

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Amna Farooqi

University of Washington

Abstract

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Amna Farooqi

Chair of Supervisory Committee:

Jasmine Mahmoud

School of Drama

This dissertation investigates contemporary minoritarian theatrical performances, from 2017 to 2026, that animate racial performativity through immersive and/or participatory theatre techniques. In particular, these works all involve direct audience engagement in dialogue with a trend I call “exposure,” which I define as: a minoritarian theatrical tactic that flips the normative script of theatre and performance—the one that has *us* in the audience watching *them*, the onstage professional performers—to enact its gaze *upon spectators* who are incited to perform. Case studies include Jackie Sibblies Drury’s *Fairview* (2018, New York), The Walk’s *Little Amal* (2023, Philadelphia and San Diego), Fix + Foxy’s *Dark Noon* (2024, Brooklyn), and Basel Zaraa’s *Dear Laila* (2025, Portland). In dialogue with these case studies, I ask: how does the solicitation of direct audience engagement by minoritarian artists produce aesthetic, social, political, and communitarian meanings that challenge racial and colonial white logics of spectatorship? Methods include ethnographic fieldwork (artist interviews and documentation of live performance); archival engagement with performance reviews and ephemera; and a survey of production histories. As an unmasking and disruptive theatrical tactic, exposure allows minoritarian theatre artists to query whose racialized gaze animates actors and spectators; reveal racial and imperial logics; and, often, produce utopian affects. Crucially, this work archives the response of global artists turning to performance to disrupt normative, hegemonic ways of viewing and being in the world by aesthetically revealing racial, colonial, and imperialist forces.

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INTRODUCTION

Performing Exposure: Race, Empire, and Minoritarian Theatre in the 21st Century

Mere miles from the U.S.-Mexico border, I find myself in San Ysidro, California. Rolling down my windows during a Lyft ride, the sight of Spanish-style houses and the smell of warm sand mixing with crisp ocean water greet me as I pull up to the town's community center. Around the back corner, I hear a celebratory drum march that is so loud, it vibrates on the sticky warmth of my skin—skin that feels like it's melting against my bones in the arid, dry heat of Southern California.

Just then, I glimpse her: Little Amal, a ten-foot-tall puppet of a twelve-year-old Brown Syrian refugee child. She wears a worn, pink skirt and has a see-through, latticed torso through which the lead puppeteer peers. Amal is wearing a smile so big across her face (am I imagining this?) that I find myself smiling too. Around five hundred people attend this event, and at least thirty are wearing hot pink “I am Amal” shirts designed by the UCSD students who are hosting her visit.¹ The students dance with her, hips swaying with the ocean breeze as they wave large rainbow wands in the air, passing through streets until we return to the community center. There, everyone is invited to write a note to refugees for Amal to take across the border to Mexico tomorrow. Migrants, community members, and visitors like myself take turns sharing personal stories of crossing the border as incense is burned, a blessing is conferred, and a “place becomes spaced” with joy and infectious dancing that will last for an hour after Amal has departed.² When

¹ UCSD stands for: University of California San Diego.

² Here, I'm in dialogue with Michel de Certeau's concept of “space” as a practiced place. Amal's walk maps new meanings on these streets in San Ysidro, reshaping how we perceive “belonging” in America. For more, see: Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. 1, 2. print (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2013).

we walk with her as either citizens, migrants, or refugees together, we actively complicate, challenge, and uncover the false national binary between “us/them.” The celebration isn’t just about Amal; it’s about all those who have come before her and all those displaced peoples who have no choice but to follow in her footsteps.

The next day, several miles north, I witness toe tags archiving migrant deaths. I am at San Diego’s Museum of Us, viewing the “Hostile Terrain 94” exhibition.³ Visiting the museum during my November 2023 trip to see Little Amal live, I stumbled upon this “participatory map installation,” created by communities that have lost loved ones along the arduous journey to cross the U.S.-Mexico border.⁴ Forced to endure a plight that Rawan Arar and David Fitzgerald would attribute to the “Refugee System,” enacted here through the “Prevention through Deterrence” border patrol policy, many migrants perished making the trip.⁵ To remember (witness, bear witness, and testify to their existence) these brave individuals, toe tags representing information known at time-of-death (names, belongings, and cause of death) are pinned to a map on the wall where each migrant died. As I peruse the wall of tags, I notice an overwhelming repetition of one word under “Cause of Death”: “*Exposure*.”

³ In response to the 1994 “Prevention through Deterrence” Border Patrol policy in the U.S., this installation has been at the Museum of Us in San Diego, California since November 14, 2021. Currently, “Hostile Terrain 94” installations can be found at various museums, universities, and cultural institutions across five continents.

⁴ This installation is created by the Undocumented Migration Project: a non-profit research and arts-education collective directed by UCLA anthropologist Jason De León. More on the “participatory map installation,” as it’s described by the creators, can be found at: “Hostile Terrain 94,” Museum of Us, accessed May 20, 2024, <https://museumofus.org/exhibits/hostile-terrain-94>.

⁵ In *The Refugee System*, Rawan Arar and David Fitzgerald utilize an approach to migration that contextualizes the flows of forced migrations beyond a simple “cause and effect” one-to-one relationship. They take a holistic view to expound upon a variety of factors that contribute to forced migrations: tracing historical lineages that lead to refugee flows beyond the immediate and looking to previously unexamined economic and political factors that might have driven migrants to flee. See: Rawan Arar and David Scott Fitzgerald, *The Refugee System: A Sociological Approach* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023).

On Exposure

This dissertation investigates contemporary minoritarian theatrical performances, from 2017 to the 2026, that animate racial performativity through immersive and/or participatory theatre techniques. In particular, these works all involve direct audience engagement in dialogue with a trend I am calling “exposure.” Exposure, as I define it, is a minoritarian theatrical tactic that flips the normative script of theatre and performance—the one that has *us* in the audience watching *them*, the onstage professional performers—to enact its gaze *upon spectators* who are incited to perform. As an unmasking and disruptive theatrical tactic, exposure allows minoritarian theatre artists to: query whose racialized gaze animates actors and spectators; reveal racial and imperial logics; and, often, produce utopian affects. Occurring from 2017 on, these performances exist within the cultural and political environment that emerged during the Trump Presidencies (including Muslim ban laws), increased Instagram “influencer” culture, mediatization of racism and other forms of hate (Charlottesville, George Floyd), and the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ This emerging political moment is one in which the specious forces of colonialism, empire, and imperialism are imbricated in an overt and prevalent racism that leads to the violent death primarily of Black and Brown peoples, particularly in America; especially as migrants and refugees become racialized as “other” and “evil.” Additionally, these works all take place within a U.S. context but are not necessarily “from” the U.S.; however, they all engage U.S. imperialism or empire.

⁶ For more on the Muslim Ban law, enforced through President Trump’s Executive Order banning people from seven majority-Muslim countries including: Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen, see: “Full text of Trump’s executive order on 7-nation ban, refugee suspension,” *CNN Online*, January 28, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/28/politics/text-of-trump-executive-order-nation-ban-refugees/index.html>.

This contemporary trend (2017-2026), which invites audience members into performance through immersion or participation, has formal theatrical precursors. Both staged in 2014, these are: Young Jean Lee's *The Shipment* (On the Boards, 2014) and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's *An Octoroon* (Soho Rep, 2014). To substantiate the efficacy of this trend from 2017 onward, I offer a list of U.S. theatrical productions (and one Canadian) that utilize “exposure”—or draw on the audience to, in some way, “participate” in the performance as a means of unveiling racial and colonial logics—premiering over the last decade. These include: Jeremy O. Harris's *Slave Play* (New York Theatre Workshop, November 2018); Alesha Harris's *What to Send Up when it Goes Down* (A.R.T./New York Theatres, November 2018), Jordan E. Cooper's *Ain't no Mo* (Public Theatre, March 2019); Lightning Rod Special's *Underground Railroad Game* (Ars Nova, October 2019); Modesto Flako Jimenez's *Taxilandia* (New York Theatre Workshop, April 2021); Sara Porkalob's *Dragon Lady* and *Dragon Mama* (Cafe Nordo, March 2022); Ray Young's *BODIES* (Boom Arts, April 2023); Justin Weak's *A Fine Madness* (Woolly Mammoth, March 2024); Nassim Soleimanpour's *NASSIM* (Portland Center Stage, March 2024); Theatre Conspiracy/Pandemic Theatre's *SWIM* (PuSH Festival, January 2025); Juan Llamas-Rodriguez's *Immigration Bureaucracy as Game* (University of Washington, September 2025); Modesto Flako Jimenez's *¡Harken!* (Public Theatre, UTR, Jan 2026); and Tarell Alvin McCraney's *Windfall* (Steppenwolf Theatre, April 2026).

If, as I have noticed, there is a constellation of minoritarian theatre artists drawing audience members into immersive moments as a means of unveiling racial, or colonial logics during the long Trump era, I ask: why, and how, is the experience of these participatory moments falling on both minoritarian and majoritarian spectators? In the contemporary political climate, how does the solicitation of direct audience interaction, engagement, and participation by

minoritized theatre artists produce certain aesthetic, social, political, and communitarian meanings? If, as I will claim in my methodologies section, there are “aesthetics of empire” present in many of these performances, how and what do these aesthetics unmask or reveal to address/re-dresses our current political climate? How do these performances produce a new social contract (Rancière) for/by the minoritarian subject, and for all audience members?

To engage these questions, I particularly examine U.S. American productions of four theatrical performances – Jackie Sibblies Drury’s *Fairview* (2018 world premiere, New York, NY), Fix + Foxy’s *Dark Noon* (2019 world premiere, Copenhagen, Denmark), The Walk’s *Little Amal* (2021 world premiere, Gaziantep, Turkey), and Basel Zarea’s *Dear Laila* (2022, London, England)—as well as auxiliary examples of exposure or proto-exposure in theatre (and iterations I have witnessed in parentheses) including Young Jean Lee’s *The Shipment* (2014 Seattle premiere, Seattle WA), Jeremy O. Harris’s *Slave Play* (2018 New York premiere, New York, NY), and Alesha Harris’s *What to Send Up When it Goes Down* (2018 New York premiere, New York, NY). My methods include attending live performances; reviewing the scripts and videos for these performances; engaging archival documents such as performance reviews and newspaper articles that analyze the live performances; surveying the production histories and geographies of these performances; and conducting ethnographic fieldwork by interviewing artistic interlocutors who have performed in, currently perform in, or have curated these performances. I draw from the fields of theatre history, performance studies, and forced migration and critical refugee studies in my analysis.

Through these lenses, I posit that exposure—as a theatrical tactic—implicates audiences, or subjects them to participate in and join the performance (sometimes through “coercion”); queries civic and societal responsibility; simulates the undesirable circumstances of an abject

“other”; and, sometimes, asks the audience members to become the only actors in the performance. As a theatrical tactic, exposure produces new political, social, and communal epistemologies of race, citizenship, and justice.⁷ More specifically, this dissertation argues that minoritarian artists are using immersive and participatory tactics in contemporary performances, which theatrically: subvert the “representational” and “presentational” aspects of performance; unveil transnational racial and imperial logics, and shape material consequences (racial performativity); and challenge normative modes of citizenship and spectatorship towards political change.

This research reconsiders contemporary participatory and immersive theatre by minoritarian artists as crucial nodes of artistic intervention in our current political moment. Each case study rehearses a progressive politics through worldmaking in theatre and performance. *Dark Noon* produces transnational “collapse” through racial and colonial technologies onstage to perform a praxis of social justice. *Little Amal and Dear Laila* engage in “brown exposure,” animated through aesthetics of mobility, accompaniment, and adjacency to envision new modes of citizenship. *Fairview* subverts blackface aesthetics and produces a Black gaze to refuse increasing anti-Black racism. This project contributes to the fields of theatre and performance studies because it contends that in their theatrical tactics, these artists use exposure to theorize the new social contract they want to produce in the political sphere. As an urgent rebuttal to our current political environment, their performances engender hope, make new worlds, and produce utopian affects.

⁷ See: Stefka G. Mihaylova. *Viewers in Distress: Race, Gender, and Avant-Garde Performance at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. University of Michigan Press, 2023.

Exposure

Flash. In photography, a camera captures a moment of liveness with the opening of its aperture, directing light towards its subject to crystalize presence into something more static; it is an attempt to capture the slippages that ephemerality luxuriates in. Exposure is the origin of the photo; it's an essential step in the process of the creation and production of a photo. If overexposed to light, everything turns white; if underexposed, images are “dark and hard to see.”⁸ In therapy, exposure is being submerged in an excess of whatever plagues a patient (e.g., rollercoasters for heights, snakes for, well, snakes). Balance isn't the goal – rather, desensitization is the ultimate objective of exposure. In medicine, exposure to harmful elements can quickly evolve into a matter of life or death—and in the case of the migrants attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border, there is a very potent danger here.

The earliest use of the word exposure on record is in William Shakespeare's play, *Troilus and Cressida* (1602). Set against the backdrop of the Trojan War, there is a moment when the leaders of the Greek Army (Menelaus, Agamemnon, Ulysses, and Nestor) gather to discuss their weak offensive attacks against the Trojans thus far. Ulysses attributes “the nature of [this] sickness” to the degradation of rank within the army: and he points to evidence of lower ranking members, like Achilles, comfortably and playfully performing mocking imitations of leaders like Agamemnon and Menelaus. This, Nestor replies, leads to a weakening of their forces, comparing the leaders to “dirt...to weaken and discredit [their] exposure,” as they are failing to succeed at

⁸ “What is Exposure?” Adobe.

war.⁹ Thus, the concept exposure was born on/borne by the stage: utilized to communicate the potential dangers that arise from those who are oppressed by class.

Exposure is an action. Defined, exposure includes: “uncovering ... unshelter[ing] or undefend[ing]; ... subjecting ... to any external influence; unmasking or ‘showing up’ of an error, fraud, or evil, of an impostor or secret offender; [and] bringing to light (something discreditable.” Exposure also means “presentation or disclosure to view; public exhibition, esp. of goods for sale; ... and an exposed or unprotected point.”¹⁰

Above, I have sketched genealogies and meanings of the word exposure: in photography and psychology; as it appears on the stage; and as it defines an action. In this dissertation, I am offering exposure as an analytic to describe and frame the work of minoritarian artists who use immersion or participation as a method for audiences to engage with racial and colonial logics. In this framing, as it uncovers, unmask, unprotects, and presents, exposure is a way of thinking through theatrical action that seeks to disrupt normative, hegemonic ways of viewing and being in the world. It is a borderlands (Anzaldúa) way of knowing, and a way of knowing “otherwise”—a distinctly minoritarian way of knowing and being.¹¹ Within the variations of the definition are detectable traces, fragments steeped in the lineages of forces of imperialism, colonialism, and empire. These fragments recall the subjection of subaltern “others” in the Global South (subjects to external influence), the Atlantic slave trade and auction of Black chattel as “goods” (available for sale), and the plight of the state of abjection more generally. If oppression is deployed through obscuring (i.e., the white gaze in *Fairview*; the legal system that

⁹ William Shakespeare. *Troilus and Cressida*. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, Rebecca Niles, eds (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.), accessed 7 May 2024, <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/troilus-and-cressida/>.

¹⁰ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “exposure (n.),” March 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7353587158>.

¹¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*, 1. ed (Aunt Lute Books, 1991).

conditions refugeehood in *Little Amal* and *Dear Laila*; and extraction through racial capitalism and settler colonial ideologies in *Dark Noon*), artists turn to theatre and performance, and to exposure, to aesthetically reveal those same forces.

The stakes of this work come from the legibility of naming and analyzing theatrical and performance tactics. In *Fairview*, this happens when minoritized audience members are asked to watch white audience members take the stage alone. In *Dark Noon*, white audience members are sold in a slave auction wherein the spectators come to know how history and inherited trauma *feels*. Once legible, exposure also becomes an analytic or methodology through which minoritized subjects can dismantle aesthetics of empire theatrically. Lineages of empire can only be dismantled *if* their apparatuses become visible; and exposure works towards precisely this: ushering in an era of visibility both on and offstage.

Conversations: Aesthetic, Legal, and Immersive Dimensions of Minoritarian Performance

This project on the minoritarian tactic of “exposure” enters into scholarly conversations that are animated under four umbrellas: minoritarian performance; racial performativity; aesthetic contracts of witnessing; and immersive performance. I detail conversations between scholars and artists across these four areas, and put them in dialogue with my four major case studies to trace the ways in which this project meaningfully contributes to conversations across these scholarly discourses.

Minoritarian Performance

This dissertation is deeply indebted to and builds upon an ever-growing body of scholarship on minoritarian performance in theatre and performance studies. Minoritarian performance is a framework that describes performances enacted by artists who are minoritized

in relation to oppressive constructs (e.g., racism, capitalism, ableism) or created by artists who fall into these categories. Theorized most famously by queer-of-color critique and performance theorist José Esteban Muñoz, minoritarian performance is “both antinormative and critical of the state,” and “labors to make worlds—worlds of transformative politics and possibilities.”¹² In other words, minoritarian performance has the capacity to create new worlds that challenge the “normative” one we currently inhabit.

French philosophers Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari define the minor in literature as: what a minoritized person writes in the majoritarian subject’s language so that they may comprehend it. Cultural, Black, and feminist studies theorist Saidiya Hartman theorizes the minor as a figure who has been left out of archives, whose story must be recovered through a careful, historical fictionalizing she calls, “critical fabulation.”¹³ Black Studies Scholar Richard Iton has coined the term “black fantastic” to describe “minor-key sensibilities,” or aesthetic interventions in Black, African American cultural performances of the post-Civil Rights Era that challenge the mobilization of U.S. politics and culture towards reinforcing the national project of modernity. Performance studies theorists, like Muñoz, have used the concept of the minor to analyze performances that emerge from ways of knowing “otherwise”—a queer or “other” way of knowing—in relation to senses like sound (Moten, Vazquez, Brooks, Huang), sight (Camp, Yapp and Snorton, Ruiz, Muñoz, Kondo), and touch/sociality (Akinbola, Muñoz, Adeyemi). While majoritarian subjects can access these sensations, it's the ways in which embodied

¹² See: José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 56; 195.

¹³ See: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “What Is a Minor Literature?,” *Mississippi Review* 11, no. 3 (Winter/Spring 1983): 13–33. Also, see: Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, First edition (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019).

knowledge emerges from minoritized individuals, through their performances—everyday or otherwise—to which the field of minoritarian performance attends.

Through minoritarian performance, Muñoz theorizes “disidentification,” as a tool for a minoritized subject to refuse *and* refigure a majoritarian gaze. Disidentification, he claims, “uses the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world.”¹⁴ *Dark Noon* dialogues with “disidentification” by using racial and colonial technologies (gunshot and auction block) as its “raw material”; while *Fairview* uses blackface aesthetics to subvert them. Each works to enact a progressive politics through theatrical worldmaking.

In chapter eight of his monograph published just before the Millenium, *Disidentifications*, Muñoz defines an additional central concept, “burden of liveness” as: “a cultural imperative within the majoritarian public sphere that denies subalterns access to larger channels of representation, while calling the minoritarian subject to the stage, performing his or her own alterity as a consumable local spectacle.”¹⁵ Through an analysis of the primary method or case study for this chapter, the play *Chicas 2000s* starring one of his favorite interlocutors, Carmelita Tropicana, Muñoz examines the ways in which minoritarian subjects must perform for the elite in a kind of “forced labor.”¹⁶ In response to this, he offers the minoritarian subjects a tool he calls “disidentification,” which is a tactic used to reject majoritarian descriptions and roles thrust upon them: a refusal of a majoritarian hailing.¹⁷ All of the artists’ works archived within the following pages invite audiences into immersive performance to refuse various

¹⁴Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 196.

¹⁵ Ibid., 182.

¹⁶ Ibid., 187.

¹⁷ I use “hailing” here in dialogue with Frantz Fanon and Louis Althusser. For more, see: Frantz Fanon et al., *Black Skin, White Masks*, New edition (London: Pluto, 2008); Louis Althusser, *On Ideology*, Radical Thinkers 26 (London ; New York: Verso, 2008).

minoritarian burdens of liveness, putting them on majoritarian subjects instead. *Dark Noon* and *Fairview* put the “burden” on white audience members; while *Little Amal* and *Dear Laila* place it on the citizen subject.

As a subfield, minoritarian performance encompasses a range of identity formations under its purview. Joshua Chambers-Letson describes this co-mingling as expansive, rather than delimiting, through its entanglements. For Chambers-Letson, “[minoritarian] describes a place of (often uncomfortable) gathering, a cover, an umbrella, expanse, or refuge under and in which subjects marked by racial, sexual, gender, class, and national minority might choose to come together in tactical struggle.”¹⁸ In his monograph, *After the Party*, Chambers-Letson stages Black and Asian performers in dialogue with one another to animate what he calls the “communism of incommensurability,” or unifying struggle in the “drive towards freedom.”¹⁹ Rather than an unproductive collapse, he senses power in activating the collective through their work toward a shared goal of freedom and futurity. This dissertation both: builds on Muñoz’s theory of “disidentification” as a tactic animating racial performativity in minoritarian theatrical performances; and amplifies Chambers-Letson’s capacious definition of minoritarian performance as one that resists, even exceeds, easy containment. Specifically, this project offers the immersive minoritarian tactic of “exposure” by charting instances of its use in African (*Dark Noon*), SWANA (*Little Amal* and *Dear Laila*), and African American (*Fairview*) U.S. based performances to critique post-2017 Trump-era politics. All of these performances chart minoritarian subjectivity through racial (Brownness in *Little Amal* and *Dear Laila*; and Black

¹⁸ Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, Sexual Cultures (New York University Press, 2018), 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

African, and African American, experience in *Dark Noon* and *Fairview*, respectively); and colonial (citizenship in *Little Amal and Dear Laila*) ideologies to query them through exposure.

Racial Performativity

I define racial performativity as the process of racialization as it is done, or constituted on the body; and as it animates how the body is discursive. It also defines how race conditions subjectivity, and how power relations, institutions, and legal frameworks constitute race; and how racialized subjects are produced in and through history and, as a result, endure material, discursive, and affective consequences. The performances that appear within this dissertation animate racial performativity through various minoritarian aesthetics including: visual (subversions of blackface in *Fairview*), sonic (gunshot in *Dark Noon*), and haptic (brownness in *Little Amal and Dear Laila*) sensations to make apparent, or expose, how race attaches to bodies to script subjectivating norms; and to subvert them through minoritarian aesthetics and immersivity. Scholars of race (Brooks, Colbert, Ehlers, Elam, Hall, Inda, Jones, Johnson, Kondo, Spillers, Thompson, and Vogel) attend to performance, and to racial performativity, to effectively challenge systemic racism deployed through legal (citizenship), social (white supremacy culture), and political (colonial) frameworks; all of which emerge and endure (repetition) through performance. This dissertation builds on the work of scholars who have theorized, with varying specificity, racial performativity of Black (African and African American), Asian, and diasporic minoritarian subjects through subversive, reparative, and imaginative tactics in U.S. theatrical performances. With clarity in mind, I divide this section into three dimensions of racial performativity: performativity, theatricality, and legality and materiality.

First, performativity. Indebted to Judith Butler's theorizations of gender performativity in the 1990s, racial performativity, it bears repeating, describes: the mechanism, or process of

racialization, as it is done, or constituted; how race conditions subjectivity, and how power relations, institutions, and legal frameworks constitute race; and how racialized subjects are produced in and through history, and, as a result, endure material, discursive, and affective consequences. As detailed above, I define racial performativity as how we sense, interpret, make, and feel, race—or subjectivization—on and through the body; how race is historically situated; and, how we endure material, discursive, and affective consequences of the process of subjectivity. I do so in dialogue with theorists including: Daphne Brooks, Soyica Diggs Colbert, Nadine Ehlers, Harry Elam Jr., Stuart Hall, Jonathan Xavier Inda, Douglas A. Jones, E. Patrick Johnson, Dorinne Kondo, Hortense Spillers, Debby Thompson, and Shane Vogel.

In the early 2000s, theories drawing on Butler's work to define race as performative emerged across the humanities. In 2000, scholar of Latin American and Latino Studies, Jonathan Xavier Inda refutes the notion that race is biological and posits what is now a largely undisputed claim for performance theorists: race is citational. Inda is the first in a long lineage of scholars that describe how race is performed:

...[W]hile "race" may have a foundation in biology since "it" divides populations on the basis of physical characteristics, it is really just a name, albeit a very powerful one, that retroactively constitutes and naturalizes the groupings to which it refers. The argument, then, is that "race" resolutely does not refer to a pre-constituted body. Rather, it works performatively to constitute the body itself.²⁰

Here, Inda explains how the process of racialization constitutes bodies, making race seem stable; and worse yet, natural. Through a study of Mexican American voting rights and racial exclusion instituted in California following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Inda demonstrates the ways in which race, as a floating signifier (Hall), gets inscribed on darker racialized bodies of *mestizos*

²⁰Jonathan Xavier Inda, "Performativity, Materiality, and the Racial Body," *Latino Studies Journal*, 11(3), 75.

to preclude them from accessing citizenship and enfranchisement. Race served as the basis of, and (legal) justification for marking darker skinned Mexicans with racial inferiority, making race seem natural and producing material effects (loss of voting rights and access to citizenship) when inscribed on the body. Whereas *mestizos* displaying darker phenotypical traits were banned from voting, “white” (passing) Mexicans were enfranchised. Here, race becomes naturalized.

Theories of racial performativity see a surge in 2003. To set the stage, this is the same year that Diana Taylor’s monograph *The Archive and the Repertoire*, a “cult classic” in the field of theatre and performance studies, comes on the academic scene. Taylor’s work, which remains a core text in the field today, establishes performance as both a method and a methodology that allows us to take embodied knowledge seriously as scholarly and rigorous; and expands how we conceive of knowledge production, particularly through non-Western frameworks. Through her analysis, Taylor foregrounds the importance of embodied praxes that resist, revise, and refute enduring, Western archives through repertoires that “both [keep and transform choreographies] of meaning.”²¹ Though Taylor does not explicitly take up “racial performativity” as a term, her work establishing performance as a site of knowledge, and as a historically situated, transformative practice through which minoritarian subjects can subvert systemic violence, is at the core of scholarship on racial performativity in theatre and performance studies.

Formally, “racial performativity” first appears as a phrase in scholarship in ethnic and racial studies-centered journals. Both Debby Thompson (*African American Review*) and Jonathan Xavier Inda (*Latino Studies Journal*)—through legal and theatrical methods, respectively—foreground the material a/effects of race. Thompson, writing on Anna Deavere Smith’s post-

²¹ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

structuralist acting method, argues that race is both a trap and a trope that operates with historical specificity.²² Inda and Thompson both highlight the importance of historicizing racial performativity; and identify the subversive potential of race as an unstable signifier that operates within ideological state apparatuses in a given historical moment. Alongside these studies, in 2003, racial performativity gets activated by scholars who analyze “passing,” and racial instability through studies of nineteenth-century African American literature (Stephen Knadler and Catherine Rottenberg).

Particularly as it is animated through “racial passing,” race is predicated on crisis: “Configured in terms of race, crisis is registered as a decisive point where the supposed ontology of race must be reaffirmed in response to a risk that renders this ‘truth’ unstable or in response to a threat that racial truth might not exist.”²³ This is sociologist Nadine Ehlers’ core argument about how race, and racial performativity, constitute and script bodies. Nowhere is the artifice of race more apparent than in the slippages that occur through the act of racial “passing.” In her 2006 article in *Culture, Theory, and Critique*, Ehlers says, “Perhaps the most threatening assault to the notion of racial ontology is executed in the act of racial passing. For, when a legally defined black subject successfully enacts whiteness, the very economy of race comes under review.”²⁴ For this reason, anti-miscegenation laws and blood quanta became necessary as stabilizing practices deployed to maintain— and naturalize — the racial order. Just as Inda and Thompson recognize the possibility of subverting, refusing, and resisting normative performances of race because of its fundamental instability, Ehlers urges readers to consider

²² Debby Thompson, “‘Is Race a Trope?’: Anna Deavere Smith and the Question of Racial Performativity,” *African American Review* 37, no. 1 (2003): 127, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1512365>.

²³ Nadine Ehlers, “‘Black Is’ and ‘Black Ain’t’: Performative Revisions of Racial ‘Crisis,’” *Culture, Theory and Critique* 47, no. 2 (2006): 149–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14735780600961619>, 149.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.

reframing the point of “crisis” as a positive space through which to enact resistance. Though each of my case studies animates racial performativity through performance, discourses of passing—and performances of Blackness in particular—are cogent to my analysis of *Fairview*. Drury’s play subverts normative ways of looking that script a/effects of Black racial performativity, particularly through deconstructing the white gaze in our contemporary political moment. As I detail in my third chapter on her play, my anxiety in the final moments of *Fairview*—centered on racial passing—induced in me an epistemology of exposure which became foundational to this project.

Second, theatricality. “The American race question is inherently theatrical.”²⁵ So begins Harry Elam Jr. and David Krasner’s anthology of African American theatre and performance (2001). In it, Elam contends that race generally, and Blackness more specifically, gains meaning through its use in given social, cultural, political, and theatrical contexts. The anthology activates the theatricality and performativity of Blackness across political performances, performances of cultural memory, and intersectional performances of race and gender, before devoting a section to scholarship on African American performativity. Elam’s article in the collection draws on Homi Bhabha’s famous concept of “mimicry” to offer the notion of “productive ambivalence,” a subversive tactic through which, “[t]he black performer can purposefully acknowledge and utilize [their] ambiguous status—as real person, as theatrical representation, as sociocultural construction—to explore, expose, and even explode definitions of blackness.”²⁶ Using nineteenth-century abolitionist and twentieth-century agitprop plays as his case studies, Elam explores how African American playwrights— particularly through their main characters— have

²⁵ Harry Justin Elam and David Krasner, *African-American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 365.

subverted stereotypes to remake Blackness onstage. These (re)configurations of Blackness, importantly, come into being through discourse; both with other characters in the play, and with the audiences that view the performances.

How “blackness” is embodied, authenticated, and appropriated through performance is at the heart of E. Patrick Johnson’s ethnographic study of racial theatrical and quotidian performances in his 2003 monograph, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. Through an examination of six cultural and quotidian racial performances that animate black American culture and queer sexuality, Johnson asserts that Blackness is both constitutive of—and constituted through—performance. For Johnson, “Racial performativity informs the process by which we invest bodies with social meaning.”²⁷ But he proffers that performance is also a place where we resist the scripting of social norms that get deployed through systems of oppression; and argues that how we understand Blackness is explicitly informed by the historical moment in which we find ourselves. Johnson warns against the trope of Black authenticity; so does Hortense Spillers, who writes on the fallacy of a true [authentic] self in “Papa’s Baby, Mama’s Maybe,” claiming, “In order to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through the layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness”²⁸ Both Spillers and Johnson point to authenticity’s false promise to render a truer self beyond what is “skin deep.” However, Johnson cautions readers against disavowing authenticity completely, as it “enables marginalized people to counter oppressive representations

²⁷ E. Patrick Johnson, “Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity,” *Duke Backfile* (Durham [N.C.]), 2003, 9.

²⁸ Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>, 65.

of themselves.”²⁹ My analysis of African American performance and the racial performativity of Blackness in Drury’s *Fairview* dialogues with both Elam and Johnson’s theories of Black, racial performativity. Drury’s play, which critiques contemporary anti-Black racism in the U.S., toys with tropes and stereotypes of Black “authentic behaviors” (i.e., dancing, drinking forties) in the third act of her play before subverting them through exposure. Rather than attempt to appropriate or authenticate Black experience (Johnson), or reconfigure Blackness for audiences (Elam), Drury shifts not only what her audience looks at, but *how* they look through their own experience, as racialized individuals, at each other. Specifically, she dispels the white gaze as a visual regime that consolidates and scripts Blackness. By subverting the representational and presentational aspects of theatre (i.e., audiences become the thing to be looked at onstage), she produces a Black gaze that physically, visually, and affectively repositions audiences in relation to Blackness through embodiment. Along the same lines, *Dark Noon* repositions the audience in relation to Blackness, but specifically through racializing whiteness within the frame of the performance in an African, American (rather than African American) context.

In dialogue with Spillers, Daphne Brooks looks at nineteenth- and early twentieth-century transatlantic performances to examine how Black artists used “embodied insurgency”: a phrase, and minoritarian tactic, which describes how newly freed Black Americans resisted oppression through self-actualizing performances in the antebellum period. À la Du Bois, Brooks traces how Black actors used performance, post-emancipation through the Gilded Age, to negotiate their new identities. They made seeing Blackness “strange” in performance to trouble stable identity categories. In other words: they staged their dissent. The invitation Keisha offers through her collapse of the fourth wall at the close of Drury’s play follows this lineage of performances that

²⁹ Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 3.

remaps the contours of how Blackness is performed and perceived in theatrical settings and troubles the notion of Black authenticity through performance.

How is race made onstage? Dorinne Kondo's monograph, *Worldmaking*, etches a response to the question of how theatre makes race. Using ethnographic, dramaturgical fieldwork conducted in dialogue Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight, Los Angeles* and David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face*; and the process of creating her own original play, *Seamless*, Kondo critiques the limitations of (largely Western) contemporary frameworks of race, gender, and genre in analyzing minoritarian theatre production and practices. Instead of using language steeped in hegemonic, Euro-centric norms—"performativity" serving as one of her key examples—she shifts us towards thinking about race-making, instead, to gesture towards the material effects of minoritarian artists' theatrical interventions. Identifying the problem of "affective violence" perpetuated through theatre and performance, which is how Kondo describes the psychic violence minoritarian subjects may experience during performances wherein they feel a dissonance with their hailing, she offers instead "reparative creativity." She defines this as: "the ways artists make, unmake, remake race in their creative processes, in acts of always partial integration and repair."³⁰ To remake race onstage, for Kondo, is a direct attempt at reinscribing the power relations between majoritarian and minoritarian subjects through the cultural sphere. In this dissertation, I analyze how *Dark Noon* and *Fairview* differently racialize the spectator contract through exposure to remake race onstage. *Dark Noon* auctions white spectators to perform a transnational social justice praxis onstage, while Drury's play manifests a Black gaze through subverting the representational and presentational aspects of performance. *Little Amal*

³⁰ Dorinne K. Kondo, *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity* (Duke University Press, 2018), 5.

and *Dear Laila* invite spectators to travel (physically and metaphorically) alongside them, in and through "brownness," to imagine new, more expansive modes of belonging outside of normative citizenship.

Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglass A. Jones Jr., and Shane Vogel also challenge the Eurocentric, privileged position of "performativity" as it anchors discourses of racial performativity. They ask: how do we conceive of the performativity of race outside of its relationship to repetition? In their edited collection, scholars including Jisha Menon, Tavia Nyong'o, and Elizabeth Son theorize new ways of conceiving the relationship between race and performance outside of repetition (as a marker of time). As "a God term in performance theory,"³¹ the term "repetition" has proven crucial to theories of performativity that have definitively shaped the fields of theatre and performance studies. Instead of reinforcing the centrality of repetition in theories of performativity (Butler, Phelan, Schneider, Schechner), they shift our critical methods and methodologies and offer an invitation to theorize racial performativity through other temporal logics. Together, their collection asks: "what other time signatures organize minoritarian performance?"³² Through tracking exposure as a minoritarian tactic, this project proffers alternative markers to repetition – activating at various moments nostalgia for a partially recovered past in *Dear Laila*, and afterlives and collapse through transnational performance in *Dark Noon*, for example – that animate racial performativity through theatrical performances.

Alongside the performative and theatrical frameworks of racial performativity, here, I turn to a third facet of racial performativity: its legal frameworks and material a/effects. Alongside scholars whose writing centers or challenges temporal constructions of racial

³¹ Douglas A. Jones Jr. et al., eds., *Race and Performance after Repetition* (Duke University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478009313>, 7.

³² Ibid., 15.

performativity, I also dialogue with scholars who attend to performances of the law and their racializing praxes.

Returning to the work of Nadine Ehlers, both she and performance studies scholar Shane Vogel publish analyses of twentieth-century judicial cases in which the legal, political, and affective discourses of racial passing are adjudicated. Here, I use racial passing per Ehler's definition, wherein she defines all racial subjects as "execut[ing] a kind of performative passing," since all humans in bodies are subject to a process of racialization.³³ Ehlers grounds her theory of racial performativity in the landmark, highly sensationalized legal case of the nineteenth century: *Rhinelanders vs. Rhinelanders* (1925). At the end of a legal trial, during which Alice Rhinelanders was accused of lying about her race as a white-passing Black woman to marry a white man, and was compelled to undress in front of the jury of twelve white men (a different kind of egregious exposure) to "prove" evidence of her Blackness, the jury was forced to rule in Alice Rhinelanders's favor. After seeing her in a state of undress, they claimed that it would be impossible not to perceive Rhinelanders's Blackness, thereby reinforcing race as a stable, perceivable trait evidenced by the naked body. Through an analysis of this trial, Ehlers demonstrates how race operates as a disciplining mechanism (à la Foucault) through performativity (i.e., Alice Rhinelanders's Blackness *had* to be physically perceivable to stabilize racial logics, which compelled the jury to rule against her white, male plaintiff husband).

Moving beyond the visual-aesthetic regimes that Ehlers identifies in her work, Shane Vogel privileges the affective resonances of racial performativity, which he analyzes through the

³³ Nadine Ehlers, *Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity, and Struggles against Subjection* (Indiana University Press, 2012), 3.

judicial proceedings of the New York State Supreme Court case *Brown v. Curtis* (1928).³⁴

Throughout this case, in which Letitia Ernestine Brown, a Black woman, sued her common-law husband Carlton Curtis, a white man, for financial support, the defense attempted to make Brown incriminate herself; and tried to frame her mixed-race body, and her lawsuit, as shameful.

Drawing on Silvan Tompkins' script theory, alongside Sara Ahmed's concept of "affective performativity" and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of "performative affectivity," Vogel demonstrates how Letitia Brown refused affective scripts of shame that were thrust upon her mixed-race body in the courtroom. By attending to the affective dimensions of performativity, Vogel decenters the notion that performativity and affect are at odds with one another, and urges scholars to consider how affect shapes race and imparts material a/effects.

Importantly, this dissertation draws on the ways that both Ehlers and Vogel define legal (and material) consequences of visual and affective racial performativity, and how they highlight the work of Black, racial subjects who, in Ehlers' words, envision new modes of "racial becoming." All of the artists who appear throughout my chapters activate new modes of "racial becoming" onstage and off. Take, for example, *Little Amal* and *Dear Laila*'s performances, which create brown structures of feeling that challenge our conception of national belonging, and expand our contemporary notions of citizenship through a global framework.

Other scholars whose work my dissertation converses with notice and account for a trend in performances on and/or offstage which discursively produce racial, legal, and/or sexual minoritized subjects, framing them through a proposed analytic (for example:

³⁴ Shane Vogel, "Performative Affectivity and the *Letitia Ernestine Brown* Divorce Case," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 40, no. 2 (2015): 417–40, <https://doi.org/10.1086/678148>.

“disidentifications,” “national abjection,” and “the racial state of exception”).³⁵ Building on performance and legal scholar Karen Shimakawa—who writes about Asian American performance via “national abjection” and whose work I’ll engage further in my methodologies section—performance studies scholar Joshua Chambers-Letson turns to that same racial minority to observe and document how the law performs on the Asian American body as evidenced onstage. In his monograph, *A Race So Different*, Chambers-Letson looks at Asian American performances that theatricalize U.S. legal proceedings. He notices a trend in these performances that he calls the “state of racial exception,” which describes a mode of insider/outsider status that is observable through performance. In dialogue with these performances, he asks: how are Asian American subjects made? To answer, he insists we must look at performance, performativity, and the law as these forces coalesce and collapse on/to the Asian American body. He claims that his “book submits that aesthetic practices directly contribute to the shaping of [legal, political, historical, national, and racial] formations by serving as vessels for the mediation of legal, political, historical, national, and racial knowledge.”³⁶ For Chambers-Letson, the aesthetics of these performances paradoxically produce the racialized Asian American subject, and at the same time, are the “vessels” through which that same process of racialization can be imagined differently, or undone. Similarly, the artists who use exposure in this dissertation query racial performativity by producing racialized subjects (with particular attention to racializing whiteness in *Dark Noon*; Brownness in *Little Amal* and *Dear Laila*; and both Blackness and whiteness in

³⁵ For more on “national abjection,” see: Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body on Stage* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2002).

³⁶ Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *A Race so Different: Performance and Law in Asian America*, Postmillennial Pop Series (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 4.

Fairview) to challenge contemporary racial capitalist and settler colonial logics; normative modes of citizenship; and anti-Black racism, respectively.

Aesthetic Contracts of Witnessing

In a different but related legal-aesthetic framework, this project aligns with the work of theorists who contribute to a long lineage of witnessing in the theatre, to animate the relationship between the spectators and the actors in a performance. Augusto Boal activates witnessing through his *Theatre of the Oppressed* by making audiences into active instead of passive spectators—turning them into what he calls “spect-actors.”³⁷ For artist Bertolt Brecht, witnessing takes effect through his concept of the “alienation effect” to call spectators to action. Whereas, for performer and scholar Anna Deavere Smith, it entails engaging documentary theatre to perform her ethnographic subjects as truthfully as possible.

French theorist Jacques Rancière outlines the shift between three “aesthetic-political” regimes: from the ethical regime of images during the time of Plato; to the representative regime of Aristotle; and finally, to the post-May 1968 regime which is the aesthetic regime, or modernity.³⁸ Central to his argument is the claim that the political is always, already conditioning the aesthetic which is evoked in a work of art. He coins a phrase, “distribution of the sensible” to mean: “the system of divisions and boundaries that define, among other things, what is visible and audible within a particular aesthetico-political regime.”³⁹ In other words, aesthetics condition how and what we witness through performance. Because of how imbricated politics is in the

³⁷ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (PLUTO Press, 2019).

³⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Pbk. ed (London ; New York: Continuum, 2006), 22.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

aesthetics of art, he urges us to consider the potentiality of a shift in the aesthetic field of vision that can produce an upending of the political forces that currently shape it.

I imagine aesthetics of exposure to intervene in the racist, imperialist, and colonialist logics (re)produced in our current political moment. *Fairview* compels a “response-ible” spectator to respond to anti-Black racism by producing a Black gaze; *Dark Noon* subverts racial and colonial technologies (auction block and gun) to highlight transnational intimacies across racial capitalist and settler colonial contexts, and perform social justice; and *Little Amal* and *Dear Laila* activate a “brown exposure” that refuses normative modes of citizenship in favor of more globally expansive futures.

If, as I argue, we’re in a new political moment initiated with the long Trump presidency—one in which mass genocide is being violently committed in Gaza, in which Ukraine is being decimated daily, in which the President of the United States is declaring war in Iran...again—I ask: what is the new aesthetic contract that’s being negotiated in theatrical performance, and why are minoritized artists turning to exposure as a tool? Differently asked: what is the “(re)distribution of the sensible” in this political moment and why? How is it useful as an analytic to describe this mode of witnessing that emerges through exposure?

To answer these questions, I dialogue with Stefka Mihaylova’s *Viewers in Distress* (2023), which examines contemporary U.S. and U.K. performances that require the negotiation of *correct distance*: “the ethical question of how to relate to one’s cultural others.”⁴⁰ Specifically, Mihaylova inquires how the proper distance is negotiated between Western spectators, and minoritized others in her case studies, to redress past failures. Mihaylova’s work

⁴⁰ Stefka G. Mihaylova, *Viewers in Distress: Race, Gender, and Avant-Garde Performance at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (University of Michigan Press, 2023), 59.

animates how I think about to aesthetic contracts of witnessing. In a different context (immersive theatre), I analyze the progressive politics that exposure, as a worldmaking practice, imagines through different minoritarian aesthetics including: the sonic aesthetics of the gunshot in *Dark Noon*, the visual aesthetics of whiteface in *Dark Noon* and subversions of blackface in *Fairview*, and the haptic aesthetics of brownness in *Little Amal* and *Dear Laila*.

Immersive Theatre, Participatory Performance

Immersive theatre activates the aesthetic contract of witnessing primarily through its formal qualities; mainly, through audience participation or embodied engagement. As a theatre form, or genre, immersive theatre has become more mainstream and popularized in recent years—so much so that theatre scholars have argued its “ascendance” characterizes the twenty first century.⁴¹ We can think of the popularity of Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More*, which ran for fourteen years in New York City’s McKittrick Hotel (2011-2025). One issue with immersive performance (perhaps also its strength) is that its definitions are wide-ranging; it is a category that encompasses a variety of performance aesthetics and practices under its charge. Though scholars (Carlson, Machon, Magelssen and Hunter, White) differ in how they categorize and compel audience engagement (participant, audience member, spectator), all of them focus on animating both *how* people who attend the performance are called in to participate, and *why* this creates particular meanings within the spaces in which they occur.⁴²

Non-western lineages of immersive performance often credit Augusto Boal with the first foundational text on participatory immersive praxis, *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Often catalogued

⁴¹ Scott Magelssen and E.B. Hunter agree with Brian Herrera who makes this claim on the podcast, *On TAP*. See: E.B. Hunter and Scott Magelssen, eds., *Enveloping Worlds : Toward a Discourse of Immersive Performance* (University of Michigan Press, 2025), 1.

⁴² Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

as its own type of immersive performance, this characterizes what has come to be known as theatre for social change. Both the Peking Opera and Japanese Noh Theatre conventions provide precursors for immersive theatre. Mei Lanfang's Peking Opera performances in Moscow, for example, inspired Bertolt Brecht's "alienation effect." Western theorizations of immersive theatre descend from the work of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre, and Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. Much like Brecht, Artaud was inspired by the Balinese theatre he saw while attending an exhibition in Paris. Whether either of these are truly "Western" lineages, then, is contestable. Some scholars, like Marvin Carlson and Erick Neher, instead trace the Western lineage of participatory performance all the way back to fifth-century Athens.

Because of its wide signification, scholars of immersive theatre have chosen to discursively center it, at times, through aesthetics of mobility (Susan Bennett), agency (Marvin Carlson), invitation (Gareth White), and neoliberal "risk" (Adam Alston). Certain scholarship has been specifically devoted to cataloguing the history of British immersive theatre company Punchdrunk (Rose Biggin, Emma Cole, Josephine Machon). Some scholars have been interested in tracing immersivity across media, specifically attending to technological advances in AR and VR (Hunter, Ren et, al.). Still, others have illuminated the utility of immersivity as a pedagogical mode or practice involving spectatorship/participation (Freize, Magelssen). I name these many diffuse strands of immersive and participatory performance scholarship to highlight the breadth of work "immersive" and "participatory" theatre comprises.

In 2013, Josephine Machon makes one of the first formal attempts at synthesizing various modes of immersivity and immersive performance in her landmark text, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*. She defines immersive performance in relation to the audience, wherein the audience must play some fundamental role to make the

performance happen; in other words, they “*become* the event.”⁴³ Without the audience, unlike with traditional theatre (characterized by a proscenium stage, distanced, seated audience, intermission and clear ending to the performance), the performance could not proceed. Machon links the lineage of immersive theatre to Antonin Artaud’s “total theatre,” and his influence on Avant Garde art forms like Allan Kaprow’s “Happenings” and Richard Schechner’s “Environmental Theatre” all of which activate audience participation—particularly through haptic sensation (touch)—as a formal critical component. Machon defines immersive performance multiple ways throughout her monograph, but most cogent to the arguments in this dissertation is the following: “experiential performance that requires embodied participation.”⁴⁴

Immersive theatre is about activating the audience participant’s full sensorium, which is what Machon’s pivotal intervention in the field—a scale of immersivity, attempts to track. She charts a trajectory of varying degrees of immersivity based on elements grouped by: first, location (submersion, space and place, scenography (topography and light), sound, duration, interdisciplinarity); second, audience (bodies and witnessing contracts); and third, knowledge (expertise and intention). With the emergence of immersive theatre as a formal category in the early 2000s, Machon’s scholarship provides us with one of the initial attempts to coalesce multiple theatrical forms under a (somewhat) cohesive umbrella of immersivity. The four main case studies in the following chapters attach to different areas of this scale. For example, *Dear Laila* and *Little Amal* activate the “duration/al” aspect of immersivity Machon puts forth; while *Fairview* and *Dark Noon* focus on audiences, bodies, and subverting the “normative” spectator contract in their performances.

⁴³ Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 28.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

Specifically linking it to immersive performance, Machon draws on Jacques Rancière's theory of the "emancipated spectator," which Rancière defines as those spectators who "become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs," to define immersive performance.⁴⁵ Marvin Carlson also highlights how Rancière envisioned a democratic experience of the theatre, wherein spectators and actors had equal authority in the play space. Citing Rancière, Carlson writes: "In order for the theatre to achieve its real essence, says Rancière, the spectator must be liberated from his traditional role of mere passive observer, submitting to the authority of the performer."⁴⁶ The artists I archive here are not as interested in ensuring their theatrical performances provide spectators and artists with equal freedoms, so much as they are concerned with enacting a progressive politics by unveiling racial and colonial logics through theatrical exposure.

While immersive theatre scholarship has grown in the intervening years since Machon's book-length contribution, much of it has focused on immersive theatre emerging from British companies (Punchdrunk, dreamthinkspeak) in the UK. Scott Magelssen and E.B. Hunter have recently intervened in this discourse to ask: what does American (U.S.) immersive theatre contribute to this scholarly field of study? Through their edited collection, *Enveloping Worlds: Toward a Discourse of Immersive Performance*, Magelssen and Hunter seek to "foreground and interrogate the meaning of a US-based positionality within the rapidly growing repertoire of discursive tools for the analysis and critique of the field's immersive turn."⁴⁷ Magelssen and Hunter link these meanings in response to flawed American, oppressive systems of democracy and capitalism. They expand on democracy in immersive theatre, stating, "By abolishing the

⁴⁵ Jacques Rancière et al., *The Emancipated Spectator*, Paperback ed (Verso, 2011), 3.

⁴⁶ Marvin Carlson, "Immersive Theatre and the Reception Process," *Forum Modernes Theater* 27, nos. 1–2 (2012): 17–25, <https://doi.org/10.1353/fmt.2012.0002>, 22.

⁴⁷ Hunter and Magelssen, eds., *Enveloping Worlds*, 3.

proscenium arch and hierarchical, price-differential seating, much immersive work promises audience members equal access to an experience that is immediate, intimate, and corporeally embracing.”⁴⁸ Much like democracy in the U.S., democracy fails in its promise of equality in immersive theatre, often, too. Capitalism also touches (and attempts to subsume) immersive theatre. The instances of theatrical performance this dissertation chronicles attempt to challenge the notion of democracy (transnationally in both *Dark Noon* and *Little Amal* and *Dear Laila*) and capitalism (through a reversal of the spectator-actor contract in *Dark Noon* and *Fairview*) that shape not only theatrical attendance, but also political existence outside of the theatre space.

Through my case studies, I also address the question of how U.S. immersive theatrical performances respond to our collapsing democracy in late-stage capitalism. In chapter two, I invite my readers to consider how The Walk’s *Little Amal* and Basel Zarea’s *Dear Laila* use participation to discursively, materially, legally, and politically challenge how “refugeehood” coalesces under contemporary neoliberal logics, particularly in the U.S. I describe the ways in which this project dialogues with critical refugee studies further in my methods section. For now, I want to emphasize that the key intervention in my dissertation is anchored in its specificity: this project archives the work of *minoritarian* artists turning to immersive theatre *specifically* to uncover racializing and colonial logics as a rebuttal to our contemporary moment.

This dissertation about immersive, minoritarian performance is the first compendium of its kind attuned to minoritarian aesthetics animated through immersivity in theatrical performances. While scholars of immersive performance have analyzed twenty-first century audience participation through various positionalities, including archetypal (i.e., audience

⁴⁸ Ibid., 2-3.

participants take on archetypes that meaningfully develop the performance towards its dramaturgical goals, characterized by E.B. Hunter’s “enactivity”); and racial (white liberal “complicit participation” in Carrie J. Preston’s work on theatre of racial justice), few have written about audience immersion in theatre through a framework of minoritarian performance.⁴⁹

In dialogue with the work of scholar artists such as Michelle Cowin Gibbs, who offers an analysis of her autoethnographic performance *They Don’t Really Care About Us: PO-lice, PoPos, Sandra, and Me (TDRC)* in her chapter in *Enveloping Worlds*, my project intervenes in discourses of immersivity to reveal how race is unveiled—particularly through the subversion of the presentational and representational aspects of immersive performance. Describing a work in progress that has not yet been performed, Gibbs invites her audiences, through interactions that take place through a plexiglass wall, to participate based on their “minoritarian racialization.”

While Gibbs does not explicitly define minoritarian racialization (though she does gesture to Jamal Harewood’s performance, *The Privileged*), one can glimpse its meaning by looking at the dialogue she offers from intermission of her show:

If you identify as Black, you are also welcome to take a 10-minute intermission with me. You may talk among yourselves; you are also invited to move past the plexiglass wall to join me onstage for a quick check-in about the performance. This is an opportunity for Black people to gather and attempt to form some acts of community care. Black folx, please enjoy free refreshments from the bar. Folx that identify as People of Color can also take a break but they must do so to support the Black people in the room. It is noted among scholars and mental health experts that as Black people we often find it difficult to be unapologetically Black in White-centered spaces. So, White folx, continue to remain behind the plexiglass wall. Let us be unapologetically Black. There are white post-it notes and pens near your seats. Attach your thoughts directly to the plexiglass. Whatever you do, please do not cross the plexiglass wall. Your participation is much appreciated.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ E. B. Hunter, *Acting the Part: Audience Participation in Performance*, Theater: Theory/Text/Performance (University of Michigan Press, 2025); Carrie J. Preston, *Complicit Participation: The Liberal Audience for Theater of Racial Justice*, 1st ed (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2024).

⁵⁰ Gibbs, Michelle Cowin, “The Other Side of the Plexiglass Wall: Fear, Terror, and Defining the Rules of Engagement in a Solo Autoethnographic Performance Tragedy,” in *Enveloping Worlds: Toward a Discourse of Immersive Performance*, ed. E. B. Hunter and Scott Magelssen (University of Michigan Press, 2025), 41-42.

Gibbs invites spectators to dialogue with her performance based on how they are racialized *in relation* to her Black, performer's body. I extend the important work that Gibbs has offered on this subject through this larger, comprehensive analysis.

My goal in bringing together various instances of minoritarian, immersive theatre in project is twofold: one, it lends credence to my claim that there is an increasingly noticeable trend for minoritarian artists to turn to this genre, particularly to unveil colonial and racial logics; and two, it intervenes in overwhelmingly white discourses of immersive theatre at present. Though I was initially reticent to engage “immersive theatre” as a crucial structuring concept in animating this project because of my own tendency to associate it with white, highly commercial performances (like those of Punchdrunk and dreamthinkspeak, which I have attended in the past), I assert that the artists of color that I archive within the following chapters theorize through the types of embodied, participatory engagement that characterize immersivity in theatrical performance.

Methodologies

In this project, I define exposure as a minoritarian theatrical tactic that flips the normative script of theatre and performance—the one that has *us* in the audience watching *them*, the onstage professional performances—to instead enact and uncover its gaze *upon spectators*. I conduct my analysis following the work of performance studies scholars like José Esteban Muñoz (“disidentifications”) and Karen Shimakawa (“national abjection”), who notice a trend in performance and coin a term to describe and further analyze that phenomenon. In what follows, I utilize embodied and archival methods and analyze them through the lenses of minoritarian performance, critical refugee studies, and immersive theatre to ask: how and why are

minoritarian artists employing exposure in their work? How does this tactic work to uncover contemporary racial and colonial logics through performance?

I follow the work of Dwight Conquergood, who draws on Clifford Geertz to theorize critical and performance ethnography as: a discursive praxis that, “allow[s] the on-the-ground embodied practices of subaltern groups to generate their own theories of self-hood and resistance.”⁵¹ Conquergood and Geertz help me to meaningfully engage embodied methods in my analysis of minoritarian performances that require spectator participation. Thinking about my own scholarly work in this larger project as dialogic, as “co-produced” with my performance interlocutors—the artists—I take seriously artist- as- theorist.⁵²

Ethnographic methods anchor my data collection process. For the performances I have attended, I have engaged in what Clifford Geertz defines as “thick description” in his now-famous essay by the same name. Borrowing the term from Gilbert Ryle, Geertz defines thick description as the intellectual project of attending to details (semiotics) of a particular culture with specificity—so as to be able to distinguish, say, between the meanings of a “wink and a twitch” within that culture—in order to read that culture felicitously. Ethnographic work requires thick description to read a culture defined as, “a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed or knotted into one another, which are at once strange and irregular...”⁵³ If, as Geertz claims, “culture is public because meaning is,” and theatre is a cultural praxis that makes meaning, then thick description becomes crucial to interpreting the kinds of

⁵¹ Lorne Dwight Conquergood and E. Patrick Johnson, *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 10.

⁵² I am in dialogue with Maya Stovall, who theorizes artist-as-theorist in her work *Liquor Store Theatre*, and ethnographic study wherein Stovall dances in front of liquor stores in Detroit, positioning them as “sites of sociality and news sharing” through which she theorizes the city. See: Maya Stovall Dumas and Christopher Y. Lew, *Liquor Store Theatre*, *Black Outdoors: Innovations in the Poetics of Study* (Duke University Press, 2020).

⁵³ Clifford. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures : Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 314.

culture-specific, public codes of meaning-making to see where, and what, is exposed in these performances.

To engage thick description, I collected data through: fieldnotes taken at *Dark Noon*'s U.S. premiere in New York (July 2024); fieldnotes that I jotted after *Fairview*'s world premiere at Soho Rep in 2018; and fieldnotes that I have taken at multiple Little Amal performance sites, including: South Passyunk and Center City in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (September 2023) and San Diego and San Ysidro, California (November 2023) as well as at Basel Zaraq's *Dear Laila* in Portland (March 2025). My fieldnotes attend to theatrical details and sensorial elements (aesthetics of costumes, lighting and scenic design, music) and dramatic details (when are where the spectators are called to participate, how, and why). Ethnographic interviews also inform my analyses throughout these chapters. As part of my methodology, I intersperse substantial portions of interview transcripts with various artistic collaborators throughout my analysis, including from my interviews with: David Lan, Producer, and Amir Nizar Zuabi, Artistic Director of The Walk, and Lillian Tshabalala-Malulyck, one of the intrepid actors who devised and performs in *Dark Noon*. In my conclusion, I analyze my own minoritarian performance ethnography: *Do you see it too? A Diptych* (Seattle, 2022) to consider my positionality, my own embodied performance of "selfhood and resistance" in dialogue with Conquergood's theory of performance ethnography. Utilizing data from my major case studies in which I co-produce knowledge through my own spectatorship, I analyze how embodied knowledge emerges from minoritarian performance. Further, I used my embodied knowledge (acquired through all of the performances I analyze) to query how embodied knowledge gained through performance differs from other ways of knowing the oppressive forces of race, empire, and refugeehood that I analyze in this larger project.

Regarding both the observational and embodied analytical methods that I detail above, I frame this project as a collection of oral histories that attempt to outline specific minoritarian strategies and aesthetics, rather than produce generalizable knowledge; therefore it is exempt human research as defined by my institution's IRB requirements. Further, my constituents are all adult artists who are written about in the public sphere (e.g., in published interviews, performance reviews in major newspapers and journals) and I have obtained fully executed consent forms from all of my interlocutors. Finally, I have successfully filed the "Use of Human and Animal Subjects for UW Graduate Student Theses and Dissertations" form with our Drama department, as required by the UW Graduate School.

In addition to ethnography, I also draw upon archival methods. I engage production reviews across major news outlets (*BroadwayWorld*, *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and *Vulture*) for my case studies, as well as local major news sources for regional productions of the shows, to gather evidence on spectator reception and widen my body of evidence. By conducting an analysis using fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and performance reviews in dialogue with each other, I generate rich performance descriptions that help me to illuminate the public codes of meaning-making that moments of exposure in my case studies, both major and minor, make.

If cultural theorist Stuart Hall is correct when he says, "how we are represented is how we are treated," then the stakes of this project, of shifting how minoritarian artists represent, uncover, and unveil the ideological oppressive forces (race, colonialism) engaged by the majoritarian sphere, couldn't be higher.⁵⁴ To analyze them, I engage "minoritarian performance"

⁵⁴ D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, 3rd edition (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2020), 4.

as one of my core methodologies, which centers knowledge produced by and for the minoritized subject, as I detail in my literature review above.

Rather than theorizing *onto* minoritarian subjects in ways that perpetuate a sort of oppression-through-methodology, I follow Maya Stovall and Catherine Cole: two performance ethnographers who emblematicize honoring the work of the artist-theorist in their monographs, *Liquor Store Theatre* and *Performance and the Afterlives of Injustice*, respectively. I dialogue with artists by taking them seriously as theorists in their own right. To do so, I engage in performative writing (Della Pollock, Barbara Browning): the kind that José Esteban Muñoz utilized as a core part of his analyses throughout *Disidentifications*, *Cruising Utopia*, and *Sense of Brown*.⁵⁵ Another way of putting this: I let the objects (in this case, the minoritarian performances I utilize throughout my case studies) speak, centering them in my analysis as they emerge from these artists. My scholarly methodology, following Muñoz, is to read the objects to expose (reveal or unmask) the work they are doing.

To conduct analyses of/through minoritarian performance, I follow in the footsteps of performance theorists like Karen Shimakawa and José Esteban Muñoz who notice a trend in performance and coin an analytic to explain it. For Muñoz, this is “disidentification,” and for Shimakawa, it’s “national abjection.” In her monograph: *National Abjection*, Karen Shimakawa surveys the history of Asian American theatre in the United States to document the paradoxical history of abjection as a project that aims to constitute, “stable borders/subjects...; but by definition that process of constitution can never be complete because in [Julia] Kristeva’s words,

⁵⁵ In the introduction to *Disidentifications*, José Esteban Muñoz clarifies this approach to his work. As he analyzes Marga Gomez’s performance, *Marga Gomez Is Pretty, Witty, and Gay* (1992), he claims, “I want to note that, for me, the making-of theory only-transpires after the artists’ performance of counterpublicity is realized for my own disidentificatory eyes.” Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 5.

the process of abjection, ‘does not radically cut off the subject from what it threatens—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger ’” citing Kristeva, *Approaching Abjection*, 2.⁵⁶ Shimakawa points to the racial and legal subjugation that Asian Americans experienced in the United States: for example, through the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and more recently, the Japanese-American period of incarceration during World War II. She utilizes Kristeva’s conception of “abjection” to give a name to these instances of racialized Asian American oppression onstage and links them in her analysis to the portrayal of racialized, often stereotyped, Asian American subjects onstage. In doing so, she establishes “national abjection” as an analytic for Asian American plays, performances, and “counterperformances” that addresses the paradoxical, precarious position of the abjected that must constantly be “reiterated or re-presented” (onstage). Here, I harken back to Joshua Chambers-Letson (who draws on Shimakawa) and his monograph, *A Race So Different*, to cite how he methodologically situates his analytic, “the state of racial exception.” Like Shimakawa, he looks to theatrical performance and embodiment as a methodology for analyzing how “formations” like race and nation are represented and produced through theatrical aesthetics. Through employing his analytic, the “state of racial exception,” he demonstrates how the law and aesthetics coalesce onto the body through performance, and it’s through performance that they, “... assume their greatest significance.”⁵⁷ I lean on his analysis to query how exposure performs that same collapse of the political and the aesthetic onto the minoritarian body.

Tracing the ways in which the political is always in dialogue with the aesthetic is something that Faye Gleisser has accomplished in her 2023 monograph, *Risk Work*, as well.

⁵⁶ Shimakawa, *National Abjection*, 9-10.

⁵⁷ Chambers-Letson, *A Race so Different*, 4.

Gleisser considers how systems of power attuned to race shape aesthetics, paying attention to state violence deployed through U.S. law, and the risks inherent in challenging that work through art. Gleisser says, "*Risk Work* proposes that we...take these moments of potential or realized state violence not as an endpoint or as mere symptoms of artistic transgression, but as a structural field that shapes artists' decisions to make art."⁵⁸ Through her case studies, performances labeled “guerilla” that span the years 1967-1987 produced by a “constellation of artists” including Pope L., Tehching Hsieh, and Adrian Piper, Gleisser tracks how, “artists expanded the contours of artmaking and reframed relations between punishable subjects, as their varying vulnerabilities to state-sanctioned violence differently informed the decisions and tactical forms each made.”⁵⁹ Like Gleisser, though I focus predominantly on one case study in most of my chapters, I put other minoritarian performances from a “constellation of artists” in dialogue with the major case studies in order to track a larger trend in theatre and performance from 2017 to the present.

I attend to exposure in my project as an analytic tool akin to the one Muñoz offers through disidentification—one that refuses majoritarian ways of knowing through embodied practice, and that can also function as a tool for the minoritized individual to move beyond a “burden of liveness.” While all of my case studies contribute to the dialogue that Muñoz begins in *Disidentifications*, my study of The Walk’s *Little Amal* and Basel Zaraq’s *Dear Lalia*, which both position audiences within B/brown refugee subjectivities, continue the conversation that Muñoz put forth posthumously in his *The Sense of Brown*.⁶⁰ He writes about a brown sociality, a structure of feeling that arises when a brown commons emerges against the white, normative

⁵⁸ Faye Raquel Gleisser, *Risk Work: Making Art and Guerrilla Tactics in Punitive America, 1967-1987* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2023), 15.

⁵⁹ Gleisser, *Risk Work*, 20.

⁶⁰ I use a lowercase “b” in brown when I reference Muñoz, who uses the lowercase to denote gathering in brownness, collectively. I use Brown (capital B) when I refer to the racial category of Brownness.

one. He defines brown, saying: “How these things are brown, or what makes them brown, is partially the way in which they suffer and strive together but also the commonality of their ability to flourish under duress and pressure.”⁶¹ In dialogue with Muñoz—alongside other scholars concerned with brown studies like Armando Garcia, Amber Musser, Sandra Ruiz, and Nitasha Tamar Sharma—I ask in my second chapter: how do Amal’s performances and *Dear Laila* dialogue with U.S. empire and position the racialized Brown refugee? How do audience accompaniment and refugee hospitality (aesthetically and affectively) work to create that structure of feeling “brown” (Muñoz)? And, by walking with Amal and visiting home with *Dear Laila*, why and how do audiences destabilize and expose the concept of “nation” to imagine alternative forms of belonging and citizenship beyond national borders? I argue that audiences form a brown commons when they walk through a city alongside Amal, or travel to the Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria with Basel Zaraa. Through this brown commons, they both activate non-normative, alternative modes of citizenship through their performances.

To animate the discursive, legal, political, and social forces that shape refugee subjectivity through these performances, I draw on a (relatively) new methodological framework in international studies called: “Critical Refugee Studies” (CRS). Coined by forced migration studies scholar Yen Le Espiritu, critical refugee studies aims to engage interdisciplinary and autoethnographic approaches to analyses through methods such as citing the voices of refugees throughout scholarship, and highlighting the importance of embodied epistemologies as rigorous research (Espiritu, Hamlin, Arar and Fitzgerald). At its core, CRS asks: who determines the legitimacy of the label, “refugee”? How do institutions (governmental, fiscal, social, etc.)

⁶¹ See: José Esteban Muñoz, Tavia Amolo Ochieng’ Nyongó, and Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *The Sense of Brown, Perverse Modernities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 1.

function to oppress refugees and—a term I’ll draw on in my second chapter—forced migrants? How might academic scholarship participate in discursively shifting the blame for refugee status from the individual, rightly so, to the institution?

In centering migrant (refugee) experience, the second chapter of this dissertation on *Little Amal* and *Dear Laila* interweaves CRS and performance ethnography to follow Eve Tuck’s call for a “desire-centered analysis” rather than a damage-centered one. Anchored in Indigenous Studies, Tuck describes the latter as that which “reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of [marginalized] people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless.”⁶² Instead, Tuck pushes scholars towards engaging in desire-centered analyses; analyses which utilize desire as an epistemology to move past the “binary of reproduction vs. resistance” and hold all of the complexities that lie within minoritarian lived experience.⁶³ Through CRS, I put this project in dialogue with Tuck’s to highlight a Chambers-Letsonian “communism of incommensurability” through which Indigenous and refugee subjects are subjected to violence and displacement by settler colonial and racial-capitalist ideologies; not to collapse them, but to demonstrate some parallels in their collective resistance to these oppressive forces.⁶⁴ This desire-centered project demands a rich futurity, and itself serves as an act of refusal by and for the minoritarian subject.

Exposure is one tactic that activates how minoritarian performances requiring audience participation animate racial performativity to unveil racial and colonial logics operating in our current political sphere. The artists who engage it ask: how do these performances gather communities to forge new worlds through immersive performance? Why frame immersive

⁶² Eve Tuck, “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 409–28, <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15>, 409.

⁶³ Tuck, “Suspending Damage,” 419–20.

⁶⁴ Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, 16.

performance through minoritarian aesthetics? Exposure is an analytic that tracks a growing and urgent trend; one that unabashedly attends to the violent political moment that we are in by turning to the stage, or theatrical performances, to explore oppression through: racializing and colonial technologies (auction block, gun), minoritarian tactics of mobility, accompaniment, and refusal; and subversive gazing. Through this project, I archive the under-documented work minoritarian artists are creating to aesthetically animate our political present and activate audiences; theorize in dialogue with participatory theatre, which remains a largely white field at present; and ethnographically attend to artists who theorize through their performances and interviews to imagine more equitable and just futures for minoritarian subjects.

Constellations of Exposure: A Roadmap and Chapter Summary

This dissertation analyzes four major case studies (in dialogue with minor ones) by U.S., U.K., South African, and Syrian artists throughout its three chapters to theorize exposure as a minoritarian theatrical tactic deployed through immersive performance.

Chapter one: “Performing Exposure: Racial Performativity & Reverberations of Empire in Fix + Foxy’s *Dark Noon*,” foregrounds how I define my key term for this project, “exposure.” *Dark Noon* is a devised play that features six Black South African actors in whiteface alongside one white actor, and tells the story of European western expansion in the U.S. as the violent, genocidal settler-colonial project that it was. As they narrate and re-tell the history of 1800s western expansion in what is now the United States, artists immerse audiences both physically and affectively; primarily through the use of two racial, colonial technologies: the auction block (visual) and the gunshot (sonic). Through these technologies, and through exposure, they implicate spectators in ongoing legacies of settler colonial and racial violence both in and beyond the United States. This chapter asks: how does *Dark Noon* animate racial performativity through

immersive tactics to transform the genealogy of slave auction performances?⁶⁵ In what ways do the sound of the gunshot and stereotypical theatrical archetypes work as aesthetics of empire that unveil settler colonial logics in *Dark Noon*? What utopian possibilities lie in “telling the truth” through this performance and what do they reveal about our contemporary political moment through instances of exposure? And finally, why use the Western as a framework to expose mythologies—past and present—of empire? Drawing largely on my ethnographic interview with actor Lillian Tshbalala-Malulyck; my fieldnotes from performances I witnessed at St. Ann’s Warehouse in Brooklyn, New York in August of 2025; and archival materials including: performance reviews, dramaturgical notes, and recorded interviews, I argue that this decolonial performance uncovers the intimacies between South African Apartheid, European colonization, and American racial/settler/colonial capitalism. *Dark Noon* utilizes immersive theatre tactics—including what I’ll call “aesthetics of empire”—to expose the ways in which logics of imperialism and racism haunt the present. To conclude this chapter, my analysis prompts a consideration of the play as a restorative justice praxis.

In chapter two: “*Little Amal, Dear Laila, And Four Theses on Brown Exposure*,” I analyze The Walk’s *Little Amal* and Basel Zarea’s *Dear Laila* through four theses on “brown exposure.” I invite a chorus of brown exposure to dialogue with scholars theorizing “brownness” including: Armando Garcia, José Esteban Muñoz, Amber Musser, Sandra Ruiz, and Nitasha Tamar Sharma. Using ethnographic methods to examine these performances through performance studies, critical refugee studies and migration studies, and immersive theatre, I investigate what their participatory theatre performances uncover for audiences about refugee

⁶⁵ Joseph R. Roach, “Slave Spectacles and Tragic Octoroons: A Cultural Genealogy of Antebellum Performance,” *Theatre Survey* 33, no. 2 (1992): 167–87, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557400002398>.

movement, migration, hospitality, and utopian futurity. I use fieldnotes from September 2023 in Philadelphia, and November 2023 in San Diego when I walked with Little Amal; as well as from my experience visiting Basel Zaraa's performance *Dear Laila* in March 2025 in Portland. Selections from my own interview with the Producer, David Lan, and Artistic Director, Amir Nizar Zuabi, of the Little Amal project are interspersed throughout, alongside a podcast by the PuSH Festival, hosting Basel Zaraa. Both performances theorize brown exposure as an artistic tactic that requires spectators to take on refugee subjectivities through which brown structures of feeling emerge. Together, they challenge our discursive understanding of refugeehood through minoritarian affects of accompaniment and refusal and assert alternative modes of citizenship through embodied praxis.

Chapter three, "Toward a Response-ible Spectatorship in Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview*," closes this project where it initially began. Drury's play slowly reveals—before quickly subverting—the "white gaze" as a means of critiquing anti-Black racism in America. Seeing this play's premiere at Soho Rep in New York City in July of 2018 induced an epistemology in me through what I term exposure throughout the following pages. Over the course of 2018, two other productions that animate exposure, in some shape, mounted their off-Broadway premieres: Jeremy O. Harris's *Slave Play* (New York Theatre Workshop, November 2018) and Aleshea Harris's *What to Send Up When it Goes Down* (November 2018, A.R.T./New York Theatres). Both Harris's plays take up exposure in interesting ways: *Slave Play* presents us with a "proto-exposure" through using a mirror wall as a permanent fixture on set, while *What to Send Up When it Goes Down* formally utilizes exposure through primarily scripted, verbal interactions between audience members and cast members, who play mostly characters, but sometimes themselves throughout the course of the participatory production. Through their

productions, each of these artists asks: how do we use theatre as a rebuttal to increasingly racist and anti-Black ideologies in our particular contemporary moment? Harkening back to Young Jean Lee's 2009 play, *The Shipment*, this chapter traces how artists aesthetically subvert blackface and blackface minstrel figures through their performances, and through proto-exposure (Lee, Jeremy O. Harris) and exposure (Drury and Aleshea Harris), call audiences into new political, social, and communal epistemes through "response-ible" spectatorship. Collectively, their performances activate a structure of feeling, particularly for Black audiences, through differing but complementary exposures.

Perhaps most importantly, this project is animated through hope as a core methodology by a minoritarian subject. I conclude by reflecting on my autoethnographic performance, *Do You See it Too?: A Triptych*, which is a performance in which I center creative, ethnographic praxis by inviting audience members into an immersive one-on-one experiment to query how my Brown body carries a "burden of liveness" (Muñoz). Through moments of either compulsory or voluntary audience participation, this performance—alongside those I analyze in the first three chapters—contributes to this dynamic and growing trend of artists' works that use minoritarian tactics to animate racial performativity to reveal racializing logics. In the face of oppression related to race, immigration status, and ongoing forces of colonialism and empire (what Eve Tuck would call favoring damage-centered analyses), this project centers minoritarian resistance and critical hope to usher us toward minoritarian futurity.

As we live through a moment largely characterized by increasing racist rhetoric and racialized violence, the minoritarian artists who use exposure create performances that shift audiences' aesthetic frameworks for sensing contemporary racial and colonial regimes to

destabilize them towards legal, social, and political change. Through exposure, these artists produce new political, social, and communal epistemologies of race, citizenship, and justice.

CHAPTER ONE

Performing Exposure: Racial Performativity & Reverberations of Empire in Fix + Foxy's *Dark Noon*

Introduction

“Once, life was fragile. They lived by the law of the gun.”⁶⁶ Actor Lillian Tshabalala-Malulyck utters these opening lines as the lights dim at St. Ann’s Warehouse in Brooklyn, and the words “Dark Noon” appear on a screen. The play’s title continues to hover on the screen upstage center as five South African actors – Bongani Bennedict Masango, Kaygee Letsholonyana, Mandla Gaduka, Siyambonga Alfred Mdubeki, and Joe Young – take their places lining either side of the thrust stage. Young (the only white actor in the cast) whistles as Masango rolls across the floor imitating a tumbleweed, which elicits a large laugh from the audience viewing this matinee on July 4, 2024, America’s 248th birthday.

Once, life was fragile. They lived by the law of the gun. The performance begins with a standoff. As if imaginary “Western” cowboys, Mdubeki and Gaduka—each in their imaginary cowboy boots—walk towards center stage with dramatically wide, exaggerated paces in order to confront each other. There, they slow their motions, reach for their guns, and fire their weapons. In the wake of their “high noon” – an ode to a classic of the Western genre—darkness consumes the theatre as the lights go out.⁶⁷

⁶⁶Fix + Foxy, *Dark Noon*, unpublished manuscript, January 11, 2025.

⁶⁷ The title of the play, *Dark Noon*, is a reference to Fred Zinnemann’s popular 1952 western film *High Noon*, which is hailed as an “achievement of mature dramatic expression in the genre.” In the film, the town marshal stays in town to confront a killer released from jail the day of his wedding, culminating in a shootout between the two at noon. See: By BOSLEY CROWTHER, “A WESTERN LEGEND: ‘HIGH NOON’ A MAJOR FILM IN A POPULAR GENRE,” *New York Times* (1923-) (New York, N.Y.), August 3, 1952, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (112464024).

The narrator, Tshabalala-Malulyck, reminds us, “The scenario you just witnessed was from a time where people shot at each other for no apparent reason. It was a time where [even] white lives didn’t matter.”⁶⁸ We’re no longer in the (U.S.) American present, but rather, grounded on the Western frontier sometime between the emergence of Manifest Destiny (1840s) and the close of the nineteenth century, as European settlers make the journey to America to become land-owning pioneers. Through immersive, direct audience engagement, the play animates various instances of everyday life on the frontier. Over *Dark Noon*’s two hours, we’re thrust back in time: into a reimagined colonial past performed through a decolonial, transnational framework intended to usher us into a more hopeful future.

Fix + Foxy’s *Dark Noon* is a devised, participatory play by a company of six Black South African actors (Lillian Tshabalala-Malulyck, Bongani Bennedict Masango, Kaygee Letsholonyana, Mandla Gaduka, Siyambonga Alfred Mdubeki, and Thulani Zwane) and one white South African actor (Joe Young). Led by co-directors Tue Biering, Fix + Foxy’s white, Danish Artistic Director, and Nhlanhla Mahlangu, a renowned Black South African vocalist, composer, and educator who also choreographed this work, *Dark Noon* has been performed across various countries on three continents. These include: in Denmark (2019, World Premiere), France (2021), Spain (2022), Germany (2022), Scotland (2023), England (2024), the U.S. (2024), and most recently, Australia (2025).

The play takes place between roughly the mid-1800s and 1890 on the Western frontier, and recounts various historical moments during European migration and U.S. western expansion in the mid-to-late nineteenth century: including the history of Black slavery and Indigenous

⁶⁸ Fix + Foxy, *Dark Noon*, unpublished manuscript, January 11, 2025

genocide in the U.S. and the exploitation of Chinese labor migrants during the California Gold Rush. In contrast to these outwardly violent histories, *Dark Noon* also stages more covertly grim popular representations of western expansion in national memory, like a domestic scene from Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* demonstrating family life on the frontier; and the evolution of American capitalism with the emergence and subsequent expansion of Coca Cola, a beacon of American enterprise. During the second half of the play, bottles of Coke are sold to audience members shortly before Young, appearing as a traveling salesman, touts the benefits of opening an account at the "Bank of America" to a wary audience. And it turns out the audience is right to be wary. Because instead of repeating the same history of expansion that 1950's golden-age Westerns were quick to glorify—the ones that reaffirm American values as reliant upon white supremacy culture—*Dark Noon* stages these historical moments as the violent, imperialist, racist, and genocidal instances they were. Hailed by its creators as "An African Western about European Migration," the play reimagines colonial time by staging the story of America's mythology of the "Wild West" from the vantage point of "the vanquished."⁶⁹ In this play, the myth of America's origin becomes rehearsed as something that it *was*: an extreme act of violence committed through settler colonialism and forces of racial capitalism that resulted in mass casualties.

Though history repeats itself in *Dark Noon*, it does so with a *différance*.⁷⁰ Structurally, the play is divided into nine "chapters," or episodes; each vignette depicts a scene/site of settler colonial expansion. It begins with starving European migrants traveling to the American West in

⁶⁹"The vanquished" here refers to Indigenous Americans, Black Americans, Chinese migrants, and Black South Africans simultaneously. Within the play, they are the minoritized "other;" collectively, they are what José Esteban Muñoz posits as minoritarian "citizen-subjects who, due to antagonism within the social such as race, class, and sex, are debated within the majoritarian public sphere." See: José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Sexual Cultures (New York University Press, 2009), 56.

⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Northwestern University Press, 1988).

search of food and property, and ends when those Europeans (now Americans) have fully settled the vast “empire of liberty,” the final frontier.⁷¹

Over the course of the play’s nine chapters the set evolves from a bare space to a bustling town: complete with a community church, a Chinese takeaway, and a prison for Indigenous natives to the land who threaten the settlers’ claims to ownership.⁷² The town is physically constructed onstage over the course of the play’s two hours; with each chapter, a new element of the town is built. The actors construct the house for “Little House on the Prairie” upstage left, and the local “proto-bodega” center stage, where they sell their bottles of Coke. By the end of the play, the entire town has been “settled,” and each portion of the stage has been colonized. As the town transforms, so do the actors—taking on new characters with almost every changing scene.

Rather than individual, specific characters, the actors most often play stereotypes of characters (“Native Americans,” Chinese labor migrants, white slave auctioneers). They don whiteface throughout most of the performance, with some interspersed moments of redfacing and yellowfacing throughout. Simultaneously, the actors play both themselves and their characters—often referring to each other by their real names during the course of the show. In other words: the play is both presentational and representational. The actors are both consciously

⁷¹ This is a reference to Thomas Jefferson’s conception of manifest destiny and western expansion in the U.S. as essential to forming an “empire of liberty.” According to historian David Reynolds, rather than an empire as an oppressive construction (which, as he clarifies, seems paradoxical to want considering America had recently freed itself from the British empire), Jefferson sees it as “a free association of likeminded communities. This was an association constructed horizontally, as it were, through a union of states spreading out across America and also vertically, in layers of self-governing but interdependent republics.” David Reynolds, *America, Empire of Liberty: A New History of the United States*, First published paperback (Basic Books, 2011), 115-116.

⁷² Titles of each chapter are not included within the script, but from my ethnographic fieldnotes, they (in order) are: Go West; Little House on the Prairie; Gold Gold Gold; A Primitive Civilization; The Love of God; Laws of the Jungle; The Genocide; and End of the Wild.

playing themselves and the “other”—which is akin to what Richard Schechner would famously herald “Not me, not *not* me” as the basis of everyday performance.⁷³

Throughout the participatory performance, audience members who are seated along the perimeter of the stage on benches marked “Gold Rush seats” are invited to actively join the performance and participate in moments of colonial encounter. These spect-actors take on various roles including: chattel slaves auctioned off and sold to the highest bidder; parishioners who are invited to contribute to the weekly tithing; and patrons who are held hostage during a Bank of America takeover by ruthless criminals (townspeople) who will have the face the wrath of the newly-appointed town sheriff.⁷⁴ In addition to the conceit that some audience members will become actors within the space of the stage, the actors break the fourth wall to speak directly to all audience members throughout the performance, invoking everyone in the history that is being framed onstage through the American Western—which categorically operates a colonial technology of imperialism and (trans)nationalism, as I’ll discuss in depth later on.

Dark Noon is minoritarian theatre that uses direct audience engagement as a tactic to animate racial performativity towards political change. That tactic, which I call “exposure,” flips the normative script of theatre and performance—the one that has us in the audience watching them, the onstage professional performers—to enact its gaze upon spectators who are incited to perform. In *Dark Noon*, these immersive moments are both maximal (calling audience participants actively to perform onstage) and minimal (actors breaking the fourth wall to implicate them in the goings on). Both types of exposure onstage work to implicate the

⁷³ Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, Nachdr. (Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

⁷⁴ I use the term “spect-actor,” in dialogue with Augusto Boal’s description of audience participants in *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (PLUTO Press, 2019).

spectators in ongoing legacies of settler colonial and racial violence both in and beyond the United States.

In this chapter, I ask: how does *Dark Noon* animate racial performativity through immersive tactics to transform the genealogy of slave auction performances?⁷⁵ In what ways do the sound of the gunshot and stereotypical theatrical archetypes work as aesthetics of empire that unveil settler colonial logics in *Dark Noon*? What utopian possibilities lie in “telling the truth” through this performance and what do they reveal about our contemporary political moment through instances of exposure? And finally, why use the Western as a framework to expose mythologies—past and present—of empire? Together, the sonically and visually overlapping geographies of South Africa and the U.S. onstage manifest the violence of racial capitalism and settler colonialism that disciplines Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian bodies. More specifically, I aim to look at moments of discomfort that force the spectator to contend with their own involvement in perpetuating these legacies of violence (exposure).

To analyze these moments of discomfort, and implication, I draw on various methods including fieldnotes from two performances of *Dark Noon* in June and July of 2024, theatre reviews of national and international performances in professional news publications, online interviews with the artists who devised this work, and my own interview with actor Lillian Tshabalala-Malulyck. I examine these methods through performance ethnography, decolonial theory, critical race theory, and transnational and empire studies in theatre and performance. As a

⁷⁵ Joseph R. Roach, “Slave Spectacles and Tragic Octoroons: A Cultural Genealogy of Antebellum Performance,” *Theatre Survey* 33, no. 2 (1992): 167–87, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557400002398>.

critical ethnographic method, I include large portions of interviews within my writing to honor the work of the artists-as-theorists with whom I am in dialogue.

I argue that this performance produces a transnational frame to uncover the intimacies between South African Apartheid, European colonization, and American racial/settler/colonial capitalism. Thick descriptions of two moments frame my analysis of the racial and colonial logics that the performance seeks to uncover: a surprise slave auction wherein white audience members are auctioned to cast members (racializing) and a football game between racial archetypes of “Settlers” and “Natives” that activate the gun as a character and its reverberation as an epistemology of empire (colonial). By looking at these specific moments of audience participation that are heightened in dialogue with complementary theatrical aesthetics (whiteface, archetypes, and the sound of the gunshot), I reveal how the South African artists in *Dark Noon* utilize these aesthetics of empire alongside immersive theatre tactics to expose the ways in which logics of imperialism and racism ghost the past and persist into the present. By appealing to the truth in our contemporary moment and uncovering these logics, the artists of *Dark Noon* imagine “alternative vistas” to inspire and compel us toward meaningful political change.⁷⁶

Exposure: Racializing Logics, Whiteface, and Auctioning the Audience

In Chapter 3, “Little House on the Prairie,” eight white (presenting) spectators are invited to take center stage to participate in a folk dancing lesson. Tasked with forming two parallel lines, standing across from one another, audience members are instructed to grapevine by their (now) fellow actors, the original five Black South African actors in whiteface who have devised

⁷⁶José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2 (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 181-200.

this performance. After about five minutes, as the line dancing quickly winds down, audience members are shuffled towards the front of the stage. With excited grins on their faces anticipating what we've been told is the "awards ceremony," they wait to see who will be awarded the grand prize.

Suddenly, in a moment that is as shocking as it is stunning, Masango invites an audience member to step forward, and instead of awarding them a prize, he begins to start a bidding auction. We hear him shout, "One dollar! One dollar! Do I hear a dollar?" Cast members bid in increments up to ten dollars on the first specimen/audience member up on the auction block.

The first white audience member auctioned opens their eyes wide; initial surprise morphs into terror at the prospect of being sold. After bidding is complete, that audience member is swiftly guided to sit stage left as a second audience member— this time a white-presenting man in his late twenties or early thirties — is brought up for auction. He is thoroughly inspected by Tshabalala-Malulyck, who plays a potential buyer. The inspection includes a firm squeeze of his calf muscles and an uncomfortable moment of scruffing and rifling through his hair to ascertain his strength and finesse, or his desirability.

At the July 4th performance, a spectator seated in the goldrush section—white-presenting, forties, male—suddenly calls out a bid for ten dollars. This spectator fails to perform as a proper liberal subject, expected to express sympathy during the auction. We might think of this moment as an Austinian infelicitous uptake of sorts— a miscalculation or misunderstanding of the implicit contract to bear witness to what theatre scholar Vivian Patraka would call a kind of "spectacular suffering."⁷⁷ Instead of accepting this mismatch passively, Zwane breaks out of

⁷⁷ Vivian Patraka, "Spectacular Suffering: Performing Presence, Absence, and Witness at U.S. Holocaust Museums," in *Memory and Representation: Constructed Truths and Competing Realities*, ed. Dena Elisabeth Eber and Arthur G.

his role as the auctioneer to yell at the transgressive spectator: “Shut the fuck up!” Without missing a beat, he awards the second audience member, a surrogate dancer-turned-slave, to Tshabalala-Malulyck for the small sum of one U.S. dollar.

This scene is a pivotal example of what I theorize as “exposure” in performance. Exposure, as I defined in my introduction, is a minoritarian theatrical tactic that flips the normative script of theatre and performance—the one that has us in the audience watching them, the onstage professional performers—to enact its gaze *upon spectators* who are incited to perform. As an unmasking and disruptive theatrical tactic, exposure allows minoritarian theatre artists to reveal racist and imperialist logics, and to produce utopian affects. In addition to the slave auction, *Dark Noon* stages moments of exposure by inviting audience participation at a (U.S.) football game between “the Natives” and “the Settlers”; during a heist at the opening of the Bank of America; while holding mass at the town’s Christian church; and to celebrate the opening of the local bodega stocked full of Coca-Cola. Collectively, these moments work to uncover and reveal the *longue durée* of chattel slavery’s afterlives and settler colonial violence as they operate transnationally across both the U.S. and South Africa.

In what follows, I analyze the auction scene as a paradigm of exposure through frameworks of performance ethnography, phenomenology, and theories of racial performativity to ask: how are racial logics uncovered through this particular scene of subjection?⁷⁸ How does whitefacing become what I will deem an “aesthetic of an empire” that exposes racial logics of oppression? What new political, social and/or communal meanings are made by compelling the

Neal (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2001); Stefka G. Mihaylova, *Viewers in Distress: Race, Gender, and Avant-Garde Performance at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (University of Michigan Press, 2023).

⁷⁸ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, *Race and American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

audience to participate in this scene; or, how does it produce what Jacques Rancière would call, a “(redistribution) of the sensible” in our contemporary moment?⁷⁹

How the process of racialization as it is done, or constituted on the body; how race conditions subjectivity, and how power relations, institutions, and legal frameworks constitute race; and how racialized subjects are produced in and through history and, as a result, endure material, discursive, and affective consequences, is the concern of scholarship on racial performativity. Many theories of racial performativity are self-hailed as indebted to Judith Butler’s work on gender performativity; rather than stable, Butler positions gender as citational in a now-familiar assertion that, “identity [is] instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.”⁸⁰ These theorists posit that like gender, racial identity is produced through institutions and ideologies and normalized through repetition. Race becomes visible through *doing*. For example, Peggy Phelan aligns racial performativity with the emergence of identity politics in theatre performance by drawing on psychology and feminist theory to trouble the assumption that racial visibility, or the ability to be “marked” through the process of racialization, aligns with an increase in political power for racialized subjects. Phelan maintains that there’s power in being “unmarked.”⁸¹ Contemporary performance scholars of Black studies complicate the visual field (double entendre) of racial performativity; Nicole Fleetwood queries how we see Blackness discursively, while Tina Post examines Black aesthetic practices of withholding.⁸² Saidiya

⁷⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Pbk. ed (Continuum, 2006).

⁸⁰ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>.

⁸¹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, digital print (Routledge, 2006).

⁸² Nicole R. Fleetwood, ed., *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (University of Chicago Press, 2011); Tina Post, *Deadpan: The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression*, 1st ed, Minoritarian Aesthetics Series, v. 1 (New York University Press, 2023).

Hartman's work on terror, slave auction performances, and performances of resistance in *Scenes of Subjection* bridges the visual and affective resonances of racial performativity.⁸³

Shifting from the visual aesthetics of racial performativity towards its affective implications, Shane Vogel expands the contours of racial performativity beyond its “illocutionary” (as a *doing in saying*) discursive force – and compels us to consider its perlocutionary (as a *being in saying*) impact and “affective registers.”⁸⁴ Using the legal case *Brown v. Curtis* as his primary case study, Vogel tracks Jim Crow era miscegenation trials that “plot shame, disgust, guilt, and (sexual) interest” as affective scripts that “stick” to the mixed-race bodies on trial.⁸⁵ Through compelling historiographical, legal, and performance frameworks, Vogel demonstrates the affective power of improvisation in disrupting those scripts and successfully attunes scholars to affective performativity (“an attempt to compel certain actions or provoke certain feelings”).⁸⁶ It is this affective register of racial performativity that I draw on to analyze the improvisational “affects” of exposure in the slave auction; and, how the minoritarian artists who devise and perform this piece refuse normative scripts of slave auction performances. Rather than repetition—which Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglas A. Jones Jr., and Shane Vogel challenge in their 2020 edited collection—as the overarching conceptual framework for racial performativity, alongside them, I ask: how we might understand the staged white slave auction as

⁸³ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

⁸⁴ Vogel is in dialogue with J.L. Austin's reflections on speech act theory and theorizations of performativity. Shane Vogel, “Performative Affectivity and the *Letitia Ernestine Brown* Divorce Case,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 40, no. 2 (2015): 417–40, <https://doi.org/10.1086/678148>. 419.

⁸⁵ Sara Ahmed theorizes the stickiness of affects in her work on affective economies. See: Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 117–39, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79. 117.

⁸⁶ Vogel, “Performative Affectivity,” 434. Here, he is drawing on Sara Ahmed's term “affective performativity.”

restorative rather than repetitive? What does this approach activate or uncover about contemporary racializing logics?⁸⁷

Actively invoking audiences in the performance, particularly through embodied action, is a literal form of improvisation into a normative script; one that is inherently risky in terms of the unpredictability of the audience. When I asked Tshabalala-Malulyck about this, with particular attention to the slave auction scene, she told me:

...in that moment, we really are in control. But we also make the audience think they are in control. And that's also the biggest note that we've worked with throughout the years: never make it feel like it's your show. Make the audience feel like they are actually the ones...it's *their* idea. They *wanted* to dance. They *wanted* to have a good time. And, you know, they walk up. Bongani calls them. He doesn't drag them to the center. He literally just asks them to come to the set. And even once people have seen that [they are about to be sold as] they've seen with the first person [on the auction block]-- the second person will still *willingly* come. So, we're all about making people do things willingly.

People, especially with the one dollar, once the guy realizes that they've been sold...most of the time I have upset old men who look at me with angry faces. And it's funny because, after the entire slave market we sort of have to go whisper to them and say, "Thank you so much. You may go take your seat. Thank you for joining us on stage." But it becomes so weird when someone is really upset with me. And I would just have to go and, you know, be nice. And there's no time to make it long. I need to make sure that these people are safe.

And also, I leave you with it. I leave you with the feeling. Because it's the truth of what has happened in the past, of how people were treated, and the certain kinds of feelings that were evoked in them that were not necessary. It was not necessary to put people through that. But guess what? It happened. And people were devalued, or put down.⁸⁸

According to Tshabalala-Malulyck, the goal of the slave auction within the performance is to move spectators beyond hearing or seeing Black, racialized oppression through a normative visual-aesthetic regime of slave auctions – into *feeling* subjectivization. The actors in *Dark Noon*

⁸⁷Douglas A. Jones Jr. et al., eds., *Race and Performance after Repetition* (Duke University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478009313>.

⁸⁸ Lillian Tshabalala-Malulyck (actor) in discussion with the author, January 2025.

do this through two main tactics: framing white participants as willing subjects who choose to accept an invitation into the unknown, and refusing to ameliorate their feelings of being demeaned, shamed, and publicly embarrassed. Through exposure, Tshabalala-Malulyck and the rest of the *Dark Noon* actors recast the white body within this performance as the racialized, discursively devalued body in both the visual field, and the affective one.

As Tshabalala-Malulyck describes, angry white audience volunteers feel “devalued, or put down,” and that feeling lingers beyond the end of their participation in the auction scene. The “stickiness” of feeling “less than,” or depreciated, slides uncomfortably backward (to the time of real slave auctions in pre-emancipated America) and sideways from the Black South African actors onstage to the white spectators now seated offstage.⁸⁹

But who, racially, to pick for the auction shifted with the play’s development. In our interview, Tshabalala-Malulyck described the initial handful of shows where cast members sourced participants of any race for the auction scene. She explains the idea behind this: to “put value” onto bodies of color; however, the cast soon realized that they were inflicting trauma on participants who already have it “in their system,” as she puts it. In other words: the feeling of devaluation wasn’t shifting anywhere—it remained within the hypervisible body of color sold to the highest bidder. The artists then developed a more (a)effective choice, to force white audience spect-actors to *feel* the truth. Alongside participatory theatre’s purposeful negation of the divide between actors (us, onstage) vs. audience (them, watching), the contours of “us” (white, natural, neutral) vs. “them” (non-white, other, unnatural) shift through an affective economy that circulates through the imagined slave auction.⁹⁰ As participants in this scene, through their

⁸⁹ Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 117-39.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

alignment with longer historical processes of slave auctions, histories of racial segregation and Black death in the U.S., South Africa, and other (post)colonial outposts, white participants auctioned off feel themselves exposed as racialized subjects – or perhaps more accurately, objects.

Staging an unexpected slave auction is one of the most excitingly horrifying moments of *Dark Noon*—for both the audience members who are called to bear witness, as well as those who are coerced to participate in their own—albeit momentary—dehumanization. *Dark Noon* performs a particularly interesting contribution to what Joseph Roach calls the "genealogy of [slave auction] performance." He defines this genealogy as a performance that "document[s] the historical transmission and dissemination of cultural practices and attitudes through collective representations."⁹¹ Specifically, using slave auctions in performances with intent to generate empathetic audiences is part of a much larger, complex performance repertoire: particularly through surrogation.

Surrogating a white body for a Black slave's on the auction block was a fairly common, especially successful practice; Joseph Roach makes this clear through his analysis of Zoe's character in Dion Boucicault's popular (1850s) classic, *The Octoroon*. Zoe, who is white-passing (but legally one-eighth Black) is auctioned off at the end of the play; her whiteness cannot save her from her fate, because as she describes, "Of the blood that feeds [her] heart, one drop in eight is black— bright red as the rest may be, that one drop poisons the flood."⁹² Roach claims that it is her whiteness makes the sale "even more exciting" and erases the (legally) Black body from slavery within the confines of this popular theatrical performance. But the fervor that Zoe's fate

⁹¹ Roach, "Slave Spectacles," 169.

⁹² Dion Boucicault, *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana* (Project Gutenberg, n.d.), accessed April 7, 2024, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/46091/pg46091-images.html>, 19.

instilled in audiences moved beyond the space of the stage; and spectators in Britain (which had already abolished slavery when *The Octoroon* came to London) complained so much that Boucicault had to change the ending and save Zoe from her tragic fate of being sold in slavery.⁹³

Similarly, Henry Ward Beecher performed successful slave auction surrogations to inspire his flock at Plymouth Church in the early 1850s. For example, Beecher purposefully employed light skinned Black formerly freed slaves to play the part of “slave” on his fake auction blocks— performative auctions that rendered real capital to purchase the “freedom” of enslaved Black southerners and brought them to the North. According to theatre historian Jason Stupp, “By effectively extinguishing blackness as a physical marker in his auctions, Beecher succeeded in making slavery a cause fought by white people for white people.”⁹⁴ Once again, Black erasure through surrogation is the means by which white spectators can empathize with the dehumanized subject. The hypervisible (normalized) Black, enslaved body is cannibalized by the white, novel substitute who can be recognized as out of place in a slave auction and therefore, worthy of saving. Therefore, the affective economy of empathy remains intact (white “us” empathizes with Black slave (who can only be recognized, visually, as white “us”)). Rather than contribute directly to this late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century lineage of surrogation in slave auction performance, I propose that the actors in *Dark Noon* are using the slave auction onstage to theatrically and affectively racialize whiteness in response to our contemporary moment.⁹⁵

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Jason Stupp, “Slavery and the Theatre of History: Ritual Performance on the Auction Block,” *Theatre Journal* 63, no. 1 (2011): 61–84, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2011.0009>. 74.

⁹⁵ On Henry Ward Beecher’s mock slave auctions, see: Lisa Merrill, “‘May She Read Liberty in Your Eyes?’ Beecher, Boucicault and the Representation and Display of Antebellum Women’s Racially Indeterminate Bodies,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 26, no. 2 (2012): 127–44, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2012.0007>.

Dark Noon stages a white slave auction in immersive performance not to surrogate the Black experience of chattel slavery through displacement, nor to generate an empathetic response from hegemonically-situated, white audience members; instead, they use the auction to expose the logic by which racialization occurs and how oppression *feels*, as white participants become objectified without consent. Within the play, the auction-as-performance produces an “aesthetic of empire”—a phrase I employ to describe the ways in which our senses are attuned to the discursive, often specious forces of empire as they are rendered visible onstage—that manifests through exposure. Rather than re-inscribing trauma or normalizing the commodification of Black flesh through the reproduction of a “realistic” slave auction, the performers instead expose the white body as commodified flesh on a racialized, dehumanized body.

Joseph Roach claims, “The ‘normal’ thrives by *exposure* (and construction) through extraordinary performances.”⁹⁶ By this, he means that the more slave auctions normalized the circulation of Black flesh as property (the more *exposed* the public was to the practice), the more normal observers perceived it. If “exposure” as Roach describes it, was the means for dehumanizing Black flesh-as-commodity, in *Dark Noon*, exposure as a minoritarian tactic of immersion becomes the means through which that normalizing process is revealed—and undone. Through this moment of exposure, white spectators neither “save” nor “embody” the figure of a Black slave. Even though the production’s professional actors are in whiteface, their race is evident. Black actors onstage are selling white spectators for a price; and that price is unraveling and revealing their ontological whiteness.

⁹⁶ Roach, “Slave Spectacles,” 172, *my emphasis*.

In her meditation on the, “Ontology of Whiteness,” scholar of Africana Studies Sadhana Bery reminds us that, “when whites can no longer repress and contain the haunting specters of slavery, they are compelled to account for them in the present.”⁹⁷ Using living history museums’ slavery re-enactments as her primary methodology, in which white spectators are sometimes required to adopt or role-play a Black chattel slave (the now-defunct “Follow the North Star”) she argues that ontologically, whiteness requires the continual production of Black social death and abjection (reiterating white supremacy culture) in order to sustain itself. Bery argues that the problem with white spectators performing history through slavery reenactments is that ultimately, they can only produce a failed approximation to the real experience: one that problematically, privileges emotion over thought. She says, “Thus, they not only consume black suffering as their own, but they also surrogate their suffering for the suffering of enslaved black subjects.”⁹⁸

In *Dark Noon*, the white audience members who are called into the performance don’t consume or surrogate the Black body. After all: it’s their white bodies that are for sale at auction. They don’t consent to being sold onstage. While Bery is right to be wary of prioritizing emotion over intellect in white reenactments of slavery in performance, I would argue that the artists in *Dark Noon* know precisely the utility of the embodied praxis *as* an effective way of knowing otherwise. However, they’re deploying it in a way that disallows for white intellectual consumption to take precedence over embodied knowledge production. White spectators come to

⁹⁷Sadhana Bery, “Making Whiteness in Reenactments of Slavery,” in *The Construction of Whiteness: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Race Formation and the Meaning of a White Identity*, ed. Stephen Middleton et al. (University Press of Mississippi, 2016).150.

⁹⁸ Bery, “Making Whiteness,” 164.

know the objectification (literally becoming objects for sale) of slavery in relation to their own body, rather than by approximating the body of the enslaved.

As a theatrical aesthetic that visually complicates but theatrically complements the white slave auction, whitefacing plays a key role in exposing racial logics in this performance. All six of the Black South African actors onstage “white up” at the beginning of the play, just after the “high noon” standoff occurs. Using what appears to be chalk powder as their means, the actors make their faces nearly opaque and clown-like at the beginning of the play; what theatre and performance scholar Faedra Carpenter describes as “optic whiteface.” As the play continues, the whiteness slowly fades into a more transparent hue or “tinted whiteface,” in Carpenter’s aesthetic grammar of contemporary (1964-2008) African American whiteface performance. These types of whiteface differ in their theatrical and semiotic accompaniments which collectively build towards a representation of “whiteness” onstage. By attending to tactics like the use of masks, creating characters who represent familiar revered or authoritative figures, and assigning characters material signs that approximate whiteness (i.e., the protagonist in Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro* places photos of random castles around her apartment to “mask evidence of her blackness.”), these theatrical tactics work to unsettle normative, hegemonic, and naturalized notions of whiteness as privileged over Blackness.⁹⁹

Extending Carpenter’s analysis of whiteface performance in a different African, American context, I argue that the actors in *Dark Noon* use whiteface to further expose the racializing conditions that the slave auction unconceals. By donning whiteface and positioning the immersed spectators as commodities, they make whiteness “strange.” Whitefacing becomes

⁹⁹Faedra Chatard Carpenter, *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance*, Theater: Theory/Text/Performance (University of Michigan Press, 2014), 21.

an aesthetic of empire that both reveals whiteness and makes it possible to confront it through performance.

Lillian Tshabalala-Malulyck described the correlation between the slave auction and the use of whiteface when she told me:

Actually...the beginning part of me whitefacing on camera, directly correlates with that moment of the folk dancing turning into a slave market. Because our very first slave that we choose is a white woman. So, it sort of correlates because sometimes you can, I mean, you can suspend your reality up to so far, right? So, in the beginning, I think people also laugh [at the initial moment of whitefacing] because they know this person is Black and they're just like, whitefacing, you know? But then for me, it kind of...it starts from there in my head, and zooms directly into that tight shot we have when Bongani goes from saying, "Look! Our best dancer of the day!" Everyone is laughing, and then he starts counting, "One dollar, one..." You can literally see the actual face change from this big smile to, like, her entire life crumbling, you know?

So, I do think the whitefacing does hit, but it hits together with the slave market. And both of those are a response to our history. I think it's also trying to be true to history. I feel like for many years, when it comes to certain topics, especially colonization, a lot of things are just romanticized or brushed away. "Oh, ha ha ha ha ha." You know? And this play aims to...it's very, it's dark humor. It aims to, "ha ha ha ha ha." But in a way of: no, actually, it's not funny. Actually, blood was shed. Actually, people have died. Actually, people have been displaced.¹⁰⁰

Whitefacing, as Tshabalala-Malulyck claims, complements the slave market scene as a response to history. Staging the sale, the objectification of a racialized human body is one of the most egregious, forceful consequences of racial performativity's precarious nature. If the slave auction is the moment when the whitefacing "hits," it is a response to the dissonance that that must be reconciled in white spectators to conceive of their own bodies other than "neutral" and to reconceive of the Black body in relation to their own denaturalized body. In response to whitefacing, laughter may serve more than simply as a marker of discomfort. The reason that the audience laughs at whitefacing when "they know the person [doing the whitefacing] is Black,"

¹⁰⁰ Lillian Tshabalala-Malulyck (actor) in discussion with the author, January 2025.

lays bare how race is socially constituted, and the uncomfortable humor made by Black actors performing whiteness.

In thinking about *Dark Noon*'s use of whiteface, two other moments stand out. In both, Young, the only white actor in the cast, plays a character in a position of power who is tasked with ensuring the other actors in whiteface are indeed, "white." First, when the white Europeans arrive to the West by boat, they're inspected. Young, as the Inspector, asks "How white are you?" To which, Mdubeki in whiteface replies, "Yes, I am very very white." This generates immediate and uproarious laughter from the audience. A few scenes later, Mdubeki plays a different white settler who has arrived at the frontier to stake his ownership on a plot of land. Once again, Young, as the story's narrator, interrogates Mdubeki's character. To legitimize his right to colonize the land, Young inquires about Mdubeki's character's racial identity. Young asks, "You're not one of those Asian fellas are ya?" He goes on to ask if Mdubeki's character is Black, before concluding that he must be "tan," which he finds acceptable. Through these two instances, whiteface reveals the construction of whiteness which becomes evident through its exposed constructedness. Together, the use of whiteface as a theatrical aesthetic that marks and makes whiteness apparent onstage, and the feeling of being racialized through exposure in the slave auction scene work to unobscure how racialization occurs and *feels* through a transnational, decolonial praxis.

Exposure: Colonial Logics, Theatrical Archetypes, and the Sound of Empire

"This is a race for the land, and the competition is fierce."¹⁰¹ Tshabalala-Malulyck utters these words during chapter one, "Go West," just before the crowd-pleasing 90's pump-up hit

¹⁰¹ Fix + Foxy, *Dark Noon*, unpublished manuscript, January 11, 2025.

“Get Ready For This” by 2 Unlimited roars throughout the theatre. The set, which up until this point has been completely barren save two dress racks upstage center, transforms into a modern-day football stadium. Four actors: two in whiteface (Mdubeki, Masango), and two in redface (Gaduka, Zwane), pair off and occupy opposite sides of the stage. Tshabalala-Malulyck announces, “It’s the Natives versus the Settlers!” Zwane and Gaduka, representing “the Natives” adorn themselves in stereotypical “Native American” garb: headdresses; red, yellow, and black face paint; and tan leather with fringe.¹⁰² Playing the “Settlers” are the other two actors onstage in whiteface who wear modern-day NFL uniforms and matching helmets. Theatrical cues—like the Settlers’ taunting harsh language echoed by the boos of audience members—suggest that to root for the Settlers, with their menacing, unsettling presence onstage, would be to support the wrong team.

The audience oozes with anticipation as Letsholonyana, in whiteface, approaches the bench positioned center stage right. He is dressed as an “ESPN-type” sports commentator. Sitting and turning to the audience member seated directly next to him—a middle-aged white man named Robyn—Letsholonyana offers the microphone and we hear Robyn exclaim, “I hope the right side wins!” As the game begins, a large screen framing the back end of the stage projects close-ups through adept camera work. The audience shouts in support as Tshabalala-Malulyck announces that the Natives win the game. As they run their victory lap, the Settlers storm offstage.

But it’s not long before the Settlers make haste with a speedy return. Quick as a whip, one Settler raises his gun and shoots a Native victor dead on the spot. In the theater, there is a

¹⁰² Philip Joseph Deloria, ed., *Playing Indian*, Yale Historical Publications (Yale University Press, 1998).

complete, all-consuming silence. The arena is thick with palpable terror, sadness, and utter dismay shared by most of the actors and the audience. A choreography begins as the disposed Native slowly rises from the ashes before he's shot, and he collapses into the dirt. This choreography transforms into an iterative repertoire that's repeated over the course of two excruciating minutes. He is shot again, and then slowly rises. He is shot *again*, and then slowly rises. He is shot *again*, and then slowly rises. It is a painful refrain that recurs nine times before the actor rises one final time, reapplies his whiteface, and solemnly exits the stage. In the audience, it is horrendous to watch the first time; but it becomes unbearable by the time Zwane, playing the Native, leaves the stage. In the thrust space, it is clear to see the agony that paints the faces of most of the audience members as they take in this terrible scene, this scene of terror.

This scene collapses the past onto the present to expose the audience—through sight (including racial archetypes and violence against representational Indigenous people) and sound (the gunshot)—to the settler colonial logics of exclusion and extermination that were formative to shaping the U.S. and South Africa. Exposure, as I define it, is a minoritarian tactic that uses immersion or direct audience participation to query civic and societal responsibility to produce new political, social, and communal epistemologies. During the football game, in the audience we're compelled to take sides, boo and cheer, and in the case of at least one audience member, comment on the proceedings. Forced to watch the terrible repetitious shooting of the Native player at the close of the scene, through our participation (exposure), we become complicit in the violence and extraction of both life and land that this moment entails.

I theorize exposure as an epistemology in this section through the concept of “reverberation.” I offer the three visually prominent archetypes (native, slave, and settler) and the sound of the gunshot as aesthetics of empire within the performance and through careful

analysis, examine how these aesthetics of empire expose the U.S. and South Africa's shared legacies: as countries largely defined through their extractive violence, power, and exclusionary tactics. I analyze them through transnational, ethnographic, and performance geography lenses to show how exposure uncovers (settler) colonial logics of empire in this performance. These colonial and settler colonial logics continue to shape the contours of racial capitalism and exclusion presently, which is why *Dark Noon* unobscures them through performance and instead, works to uncover the "truth."

The gun is a central theatrical device in *Dark Noon*. There is nary a scene where its presence goes unnoticed or unfelt. When I interviewed Lillian Tshabalala-Malulyck, she described the gun as its own character, stating, "it's there because we don't want to romanticize the story of colonization anymore. We want to tell the truth. And the gun has its own life in the story. It's its own character, really." She told me that when the cast was in rehearsals to perform *Dark Noon* in Australia in early 2025, they were only permitted to rehearse using plastic guns. "It felt like we were missing a person on stage," Tshabalala-Malulyck said. "And that's how powerful the gun is. That's how powerful that character is in the entire story. But that's also how powerful that character is in the universe right now, in our lives. In, you know, in the world."¹⁰³ As a character, the gun serves a dramaturgical purpose to signal to the end of most scenes. It has the last "word," which is of course, to say, no word at all; only noise.¹⁰⁴ As an epistemology (exposure) and a device, the gun shapes and conditions the body both physically and sensorially.

¹⁰³ Lillian Tshabalala-Malulyck (actor) in discussion with the author, January 2025.

¹⁰⁴ Both Amber Musser and Jennifer Lynn Stoeve have theorized the Black racialization of the aesthetic and affective registers of noise in their recent monographs. See: Amber Jamilla Musser, *Between Shadows and Noise: Sensation, Situatedness, and the Undisciplined* (Duke University Press, 2024); Jennifer Lynn Stoeve, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, Postmillennial Pop 17 (New York University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.18574/9781479899081>.

The origins of the “gun as a character,” stem from how the show actually used to be much rougher with the audience, putting them more “at risk” of feigned gunfire. Tshabalala-Malulyck told me:

So, when the play was done for about the first two years, two and a half years, the audience was at risk all the time. We were pointing guns in their faces every time. It was a directorial choice to point the gun in someone's face, and we really enjoyed it. Until it was another choice to actually, slowly but surely...it was quite weird, it was quite interesting, because I think...[in Manchester] we were basically not allowed to point guns directly at the audience. And it happened *slowly*.¹⁰⁵

Once the gun was removed, re-establishing ways to communicate the stakes of the performance came into question. Tshabalala-Malulyck continues:

...Once we did take the guns out—and I think a lot of us were like, “Urgh!” But once we worked without actually putting a gun on people's faces, a big part of me, I guess, also felt some relief. But also, I was like, “Actually, I'm still telling the story. I'm still, it's still, you know, getting to people. People are still understanding and people are still affected by it. I don't need to point a gun at someone in order for them to hear me.”¹⁰⁶

The mere presence of the gun is enough to make audiences listen. Through her response, Tshabalala-Malulyck clarifies the cast's concern with spectators listening to *Dark Noon*'s story. She theorizes the gun's proximity, its potential, as viable a force in orienting spectators' sensoriums (how they think, speak, feel) as the moments when the actors compel audience members to actively and physically join them on the space of the stage. As artist-theorist, Tshabalala-Malulyck enlivens exposure beyond its utility in moments of physical, visible spectator immersion; and extends its scope by transforming it into an epistemology that frames the sensorial, auditory, and affective ways that audiences uncover the violence settler-colonialism and racial capitalism.

¹⁰⁵Lillian Tshabalala-Malulyck (actor) in discussion with the author, January 2025.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

What does a gun sound like? How can and do audiences *hear* the echo of U.S. empire through the gun? And its firing shot? What does an epistemology of artillery reverberation expose about empire's colonizing logics across time (1840's to present) and space (U.S. and South Africa)?

The sound of the gunshot is reproduced at the end of almost every chapter in the play—shifting it from a novel occurrence to a normalized one. Its recurrence is reflected in one of the final lines of *Dark Noon*, in which Letsholonyana (playing Donald Trump) says, “our minds are made of steel and gunpowder that we rule by.” Gunpowder (released through the gun's fire) is both a way of knowing and a way of producing power. Through the repetition of the gunshot, empire is sonically reproduced. In its release, it signifies the liminal space between life and death, and works across time and space—which is another way of saying, the sound of the gunshot reverberates.

That reverberation is an epistemology of empire: it is a way of knowing that occupies the space of both the past and the present synchronously. Much like the gunshot, the forces of empire and its colonial tactics reverberate throughout history. The gunshot, as a site of reverberation, is what I would call an “aesthetic of empire”; a term I use to describe the ways in which our senses are attuned to the discursive, often specious forces of empire as they are rendered visible onstage. If, as Katherine McKittrick tells us in *Dear Science*, “discipline is empire” when she describes the ways that methods and methodologies dictate how bodies are characterized, separated, and performed upon, then the gun is the means—and the gunshot the tactic—of empire's disciplining power.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*. Duke University Press, 2021, 36.

Reverberation is a sensation; it's a way of knowing through embodiment. Thinking with Black geographer Katherine McKittrick, Black feminisms and queer of color critique scholar Amber Musser offers a theory of "sensual cartographies." Musser claims, "If...we link discipline to empire, [a] turn towards situatedness and representational density offers methods of surviving the ongoing aftermaths of empire by feeling through what is in plain sight."¹⁰⁸ In other words, feeling moves beyond what can be disciplined "in plain sight." This is not to discount the possibility of minoritarian subversion through visual aesthetics (for we need only look to Gayatri Gopinath's work on queer "unruly" visual sensations to know the possibilities that lie therein). Rather, Musser's conception of "situatedness" allows us to attend to multiple sensations and affective resonances at once; for instance, both sight and sound.¹⁰⁹

Dark Noon engenders a form of critical situatedness, producing a "sensual cartography," by offering audience members a way to "feel through plain sight." Though audience members aren't ever the targets of gunfire, they see the gun's presence onstage; and through their perception of its firing shot—and non-intervention in preventing what they know becomes an inevitable, ritualistic pattern of fire at each scene's end—they feel implicated in its disciplining finality. Take, for example, chapter six, "The Love of God." Masango, as the bodega owner, shoots Gaduka, playing the Chinese migrant railroad worker, in exchange for payment. While it is not completely clear why the migrant worker was murdered, one can deduce from context—the fact that this takes place in the scene following the completion of the transcontinental railroad—that it is because the migrant worker has become expendable. Audiences are primed for what's about to take place; they see the gunshot, and they feel its power to quickly render

¹⁰⁸ Musser, *Between Shadows and Noise*, 15.

¹⁰⁹ See: Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*. Duke University Press, 2018.

death. Just because they are not formally called into the scene through active immersion does not mean they are not compelled into embodied, sensory participation. They become attuned to the critical situatedness that *Dark Noon* demands of them.

To animate this argument further, let's briefly return to the football game in "Go West." Specifically, to the gunshot that fires during the Natives vs. Settlers game. Zwane (as the player), gunned down multiple times, rises up only to repeat the same fate. The sound of the gunshot ricochets, at that point, through the still-empty-space. As we imagine it strikes the Indigenous "NFL" player, three timelines concurrently collapse into the present: first, the Indigenous genocide of American (U.S.) settlement in the 1800s; second, the racial violence of South African apartheid in the late 1900s; and third, the contemporary American National Football League's perpetuation of the carceral state. The sound of the gunshot is the disciplining force of empire across the centuries; through reverberation-as-exposure, it situates spectators watching this performance in all three locations simultaneously. As they're called on to actively participate in almost every scene, audiences have no choice but to continue to "feel" through the reverberations of the gunshot throughout this performance.

As I've described, the sound of the gunshot is prolific throughout *Dark Noon*'s nine chapters. Its persistent presence is textually reproduced through reviews of the show's short run during the 2023 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Mark Fisher, writing for *The Guardian*, claims, "Scarcely a scene goes by that does not end with a bullet"; while Diep Tran in *Playbill* tells us that "every scene ends with a gunshot".¹¹⁰ Reading the primacy of this sound in the production

¹¹⁰ See: "Playbill Pick: Dark Noon at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe." *Playbill*, playbill.com/article/playbill-pick-dark-noon-at-the-edinburgh-festival-fringe. Accessed 1 Mar. 2024; "Dark Noon Review – Extraordinary Outsider Vision of American History." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 7 Aug. 2023, www.theguardian.com/stage/2023/aug/07/dark-noon-review-extraordinary-outsider-vision-of-american-history.

across these reviews indicates the importance of the repetition of the sound of violence, the harbinger of death, to the performance itself.

I propose the gunshot is what Performance Studies scholar Catherine Cole (drawing on Saidiya Hartman) would call the “afterlife” of Westward expansion here in the U.S; or more specifically, U.S. empire.¹¹¹ By utilizing the repetitive gunshot onstage as both a sonic and a visual afterlife, the South African artists collapse the violent past of Apartheid with a longer history of enforcing Black subjugation through settler colonialism – and chattel slavery – here in the U.S. Their repertoires, as Diana Taylor would say, are complicated through their overlay; and in dialogue with each other, they illuminate a long, cross-continental history of imperialism’s afterlives.¹¹² The collapse, in this case, through the gunshot, reverberates the feeling of empire across time and space through exposure.

Each time the shot fires within the play, it re-members the fragmented, uneven histories of violence that guns served by controlling subjugated Black populations: both in the U.S. under the Second Amendment (and later, in response to the constitution’s expansion to include the thirteenth and fifteenth amendments), as well as in Apartheid South Africa—where guns were used as weapons to control the geographical separation of the racialized populations crucial to Apartheid’s work. Rather than other technologies that were prominently used in the U.S. to discipline and kill Black subjects under slavery and during the Jim Crow era, like whips and lynching ropes, *Dark Noon* employs the gunshot in the production. By using the gunshot as the sound of reverberation within a historical context in which guns were not the primary weapon of control, *Dark Noon* amplifies the sounds of the lynching rope and the whip through the gun’s

¹¹¹ Catherine M. Cole, Cole, *Performance and the Afterlives of Injustice*. University of Michigan Press, 2020.

¹¹² Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Duke University Press, 2003.

fire; discursively merging the past and the present.¹¹³ The gun in this play semiotically serves as a technological innovation that both recalls legacies of violence and marks ongoing Black violence in the U.S. in the present. The repeated deployment of the gunshot in this production collapses these two (not so) disparate locations on/into one another. Through a sonic, embodied remapping from the vantage point of South Africans, it becomes impossible to know the history of Black oppression in the U.S. (and for this New-York-based audience, presumably, their own place in it) without knowing segregation's disciplining force under Apartheid implicitly at the same time. Through the repetition of the gunshot, these locations become entangled.¹¹⁴

Growing up in post-Apartheid South Africa, Tshabalala-Malulyck didn't experience the same relationship to the gun as her parents, or even some of her castmates who vividly remember their experience as Black South Africans living through racial segregation during Apartheid. And yet, reverberations of the gun's necropolitical power, exercised to the fullest extent just years before, linger.¹¹⁵ She explains that Apartheid was not something that she learned about in school—even the multiracial English and Afrikaans one she attended in the suburbs; instead, she was advised, in a romanticized (whitewashed) version of history, that Jan van Riebeeck, the Dutch Colonial Administrator of the Dutch East India Company, came to South Africa to save the “savage, unruly, uncivilized” people of color. She told me:

When we tell the story of people of color, there's always some form of violence or unruliness or savageness attached to any native who belonged to a certain country—any people who were of the land, who were the first people in the land. They told the story of those people as people who were violent, and people who were unruly, and people who were not civilized. And the story of the colonizer is always the story of the savior. The story of the person who came to, you know, build, bring the high buildings and to save us from our savaghood. You know? It was so romanticized.

¹¹³ See: Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

¹¹⁴ I'm in dialogue with Catherine Cole's conception of “entanglement” here. For more, see: Cole, *Performance and the Afterlives of Injustice*.

¹¹⁵ Achille Mbembe and Steve Corcoran, *Necropolitics*, Theory in Forms (Duke University Press, 2019).

But when you dig deeper into it and you look at the gun, you realize that actually it's very, it's literally the opposite. The story of my people is a story of softness. It's a story of my grandparents sitting around a fire with their grandchildren and the family members singing songs of hope of peace, singing songs about our people, about our ancestors, about where we come from, about life, about the birds, about nature, and the story of the colonizers and the story of the one who brought the guns, who brought the alcohol, who brought the tobacco and gave it to people, and fed it to people. And they drugged people of the land, literally. And did an exchange and got them addicted to stuff so that they could control them. And that is the story of the colonizer. So, I think bringing the violence in the gun, is really the story of, "This is what this really is. And this is what the truth of the matter is, and we're not going to sugarcoat it. We can't sugarcoat it. In order for us to move forward, we need to actually tell the truth first."¹¹⁶

Not a novel assertion, the gun is perhaps one of the most powerful tools in the colonizer's arsenal; as a weapon of irreversible consequence, it conditions behavior by curtailing "savagery," dictates where and if (racialized) bodies can exist in space, and attempts to conceal the visual and aesthetic field outside of its own fixity. In doing so, it conceals the story of "softness" that Tshabalala-Malulyck fondly recalls during our interview. By placing the gun's power in the hands of those who were most affected during Apartheid, the presence of the gun becomes a decolonial aesthetic: one that demands revealing the truth in the wake, the reverberation, of its fire.¹¹⁷

The gun is one means through which *Dark Noon* reveals settler-colonial logics; another equally potent one is the play's invocation of three prominent racial archetypes: Black chattel slaves, Indigenous people, and Asian (Chinese) forced migrant laborers who were largely responsible for constructing the western half of the transcontinental railroad. Though these three archetypes may seem distinct, in the United States, they are closely interrelated. Through her concept of "Alien Race" critical ethnic and Asian American studies scholar Iyko Day

¹¹⁶ Lillian Tshabalala-Malulyck (actor) in discussion with the author, January 2025.

¹¹⁷ Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822373452>.

demonstrates how settler colonialism and racial capitalism have an especially symbiotic relationship in the U.S. Rather than operate as two discrete systems: settler colonialism (extermination) vs. racial capitalism (exclusion & surplus extraction), these two systems join forces to discursively produce one conceptual alien(nation). Alien(nation) refers to a heterogeneous racialized alien that encompasses “the African American, whose *indisposability* in the settler state requires a heightened form of racialized exclusion as a form of domestic social control, and the Asian North American, whose *disposability* from the settler state produces a less fixed and more volatile racialization by virtue of the exclusionary power of immigration restriction.”¹¹⁸ In other words, via settler colonial logics that operate through racial performativity, both African American slaves and Asian labor migrants fall under the same racial category of “alien,” or “Other.” “Alien race” becomes a signifier that accounts for this dialectical racialization, while providing a term against which Indigenous extermination can be more accurately perceived.

How might we—through Iyko Day—consider the triangulation of alien(nation) (African American indisposability, Asian North American disposability, and Indigenous extermination) as a framework for understanding settler colonial logics unraveled through this play? I posit alien(nation) as a term that shorthands Day’s crucial work here because it foregrounds the ways in which all three racialized, oppressed subjects were formative to building the United States, and establishes a compelling framework through which to analyze *Dark Noon*’s collapsing of racial archetypes. By having Black South African actors perform all three racialized groups onstage (through yellowface and redface), *Dark Noon* performatively exposes their

¹¹⁸ Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2016), 33.

entanglements through this provocative collapse – and pushes the settler colonial logics that tether them into a South African context.

At the beginning of the play, the stage is covered in rust-colored dirt. Exposed brick lines the interior walls of the venue. A costume rack sits to the left of three cameras that are perched on tripods that stand upstage right in the otherwise empty space. In an interview with *Playbill*, choreographer Nhalanhla Mahlangu describes the emptiness of the set as it resonates with his experience growing up during apartheid in the Phola Park informal settlements of Cape Town, South Africa where “poor Black communities erected makeshift homes out of corrugated iron, plastic and wood. Officials would regularly order those homes bulldozed. But the residents would not leave; they would rebuild.”¹¹⁹ In this emptiness, he sees “home,” rather than the vast expanse of the American frontier.

In a similar episodic (rather than climactic) fashion, the residents of the town of *Dark Noon*, the cast members, slowly build their set throughout the duration of the performance. With each new episode comes a new set piece – a new business or focal point of the expanding frontier town – including places like: the town chapel with its minister; the local prison, which houses at various points both Indigenous inhabitants and select audience members of various racial and ethnic identities; and the Chinese restaurant (which, we’re ensured, is not racist because it is modeled after a real one in present-day Johannesburg) owned by local Chinese migrants whose labor is exploited to build the first railroad, which runs through the town center. With each passing episode, a new portion of the frontier is colonized, until eventually, the town is seeping with the vestiges of colonial encounter.

¹¹⁹Diep Tran, “Under the *Dark Noon*,” Program for Fix + Foxy’s *Dark Noon* at St. Ann’s Warehouse, New York, Playbill, 2024,2-4.

Aesthetically merging these two colonial outposts (antebellum, reconstruction, and industrial periods in America with contemporary South Africa) makes apparent the settler colonial project of Apartheid in South Africa. As Day, drawing on Patrick Wolfe's critical theoretical model of settler colonialism, clarifies: there is a crucial difference between (periphery) postcolonial nations wherein, during their period of colonial reign by a larger outpost (i.e., Britain or Dutch Empires), surplus value was extracted, but the majoritarian (white) population didn't move or settle there; and (centre) colonial outposts that were settled *with the intent* of becoming postcolonial after white settlers from the mainland brought "civility" to the colony.¹²⁰ The United States and South Africa both fall into the latter category. While much scholarly attention has been directed at the former, the case of Apartheid in South Africa has less often been analyzed as a settler colonial project. Failing to analyze Apartheid through this framework conceals the systems of power and oppressive forces that gave it shape in the first place.

Speaking to this concealment, sociologist Augustine Park has demonstrated how the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), as a transitional justice project aimed at reconciliation post-Apartheid, effectively framed the egregious settler colonial project of Apartheid as a fault at the individual level, rather than a violence enacted at a highly organized systemic level throughout the country. Park reminds us that, "The 'organizing grammar' of settler colonialism is race," and, drawing together racial capitalism and settler colonialism within a South African context, she tracks the history of settler colonialism in South Africa to establish Apartheid as a settler-colonial project that the TRC would have benefited from addressing as

¹²⁰ Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*, Writing Past Colonialism Series (Cassell, 1999).

such. She uses the phrase “ambivalent denial” to communicate the reluctance of the TRC to fully engage the concept of “settler colonialism” in relation to Apartheid. This ambivalent denial, she argues, “contributes to a problem of democratisation without decolonisation.”¹²¹ Park proposes that scholars revisit South African Apartheid through the lens of settler colonialism—and *Dark Noon* theorizes precisely the ongoing effects of settler colonialism post-democratization. The performance unobscures the logics of colonialism—specifically, settler colonialism—that made South African Apartheid (and U.S. Western expansion) possible; in doing so, it deconstructs the past, unveils colonial logics that operate in the present, and opens up utopian possibilities for the future.

The Imperative to “Tell the Truth”

In Chapter 4 of *Dark Noon*, “Gold, Gold, Gold,” the transcontinental railroad is nearly complete. Gaduka, who plays one of the 12,000 Chinese migrant railroad laborers that built the railway system in the late 1800s, is seen diligently hammering nails in, one by one, along the tracks. In an anachronistic moment, Masango, as the overseer of the railroad’s completion, is accosted by Tshabalala-Malulyck, playing a modern-day television news journalist. Tshabalala-Malulyck as reporter is on location to get to the harsh truth about Chinese labor migrants who were forced into indentured servitude through debt bondage and (eventually) subject to juridical citizenship exclusion in the U.S. After warning her to stop her line of questioning, as Tshabalala-Malulyck impels him to tell the truth, Masango’s character shoots her dead on the spot.

¹²¹Augustine S.J. Park, “Settler Colonialism and the South African TRC: Ambivalent Denial and Democratisation Without Decolonisation,” *Social & Legal Studies* 31, no. 2 (2022): 216–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09646639211022786>, 233.

The importance of the truth—and telling the truth—is a recurrent theme in *Dark Noon*. It makes sense that in an increasingly mediatized world, where social media apps like TikTok, Instagram, and X make it easy for individuals to circulate misinformation on a global scale (“influencers” who report without the fact-checking infrastructure of journalism can have legitimate careers); and where news corporations are increasingly polarizing for profit, drawing in audiences that perceive their reporting as the most “truthful,” that the truth becomes a performative, ideological weapon within a mired semiotic framework.¹²² When there are different versions of the stories being shared, tracking down the truth becomes an even more important imperative than before. It is this imperative towards the truth, which has become increasingly controversial in our post-2016 political moment, that frames—even provokes—exposure in this performance.

For South Africans, bearing witness to the truth was a crucial part of the transitional justice process known as the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC). Lillian Tshabalala-Malulyck comments on how the search for the truth shows up in *Dark Noon*:

You know, I don't know if you know about the Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa, but it's a place where people came to really actually say, “This is what I did during Apartheid. This is who I killed. This is how I killed them. This is where their body is (if they were not found yet).” You know, “Tell the truth. Tell the truth.” And I have one of the characters, the journalist, who is literally confronting—when the railway is being built—she's confronting one of the railway managers. And she keeps saying, “Tell the truth. Tell the truth.” And then he ends up shooting her. And that's just a clear image of what the colonizer does. He will not speak. He doesn't have to say anything because there are things that work on his behalf. I feel sad talking about this because I immediately thought about the war that's happening right now in Congo. Right now, the Black-on-

¹²² By this, I mean that we no longer share the same cultural framework within which to interpret the meaning of “truth.” A recent example that highlights our increasingly polarized cultural sphere is Frances Haugen’s whistleblower testimony about Facebook’s intended use of divisive algorithmic practices in front of the U.S. Senate’s Sub-Committee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security in 2021. See: Frances Haugen, *Protecting Kids Online: Testimony from a Facebook Whistleblower*, Statement to the United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, Sub-Committee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security, 117 Cong., 1d sess., S. HRG. 117–769, <https://www.congress.gov/117/chrg/CHRG-117shrg54110/CHRG-117shrg54110.pdf>.

Black violence that is going on is literally fueled by money that's coming in from the West because people want...I'm so sorry. It's just crazy. We've had thirteen South African soldiers die in the Congo because they were deployed there. And I'm just like: the Black-on-Black violence that happens every day that we see *now* is because of colonization, it's because they displaced us. It's because they displaced us.¹²³

Here, Tshabalala-Malulyck brings together the overlapping timelines of the past in *Dark Noon* to bear on our geopolitical present. In other words, *Dark Noon* is uncovering or revealing a connection to the colonial present (i.e., the West's continued influence on South Africa, via the Congo). To “uncover/reveal/unconceal” is one way of defining “exposure.” It is fair to say, then, that exposure is an epistemology of getting to the *truth* of something. In *Dark Noon*, this truth becomes apparent through the use of exposure – that is through the participatory theatrical tactics in this play – which reveals systemic violence enacted through racial capitalism and settler colonialism through visual and sonic aesthetics of empire.

Telling the truth, a fundamental practice to the TRC process, was essential to pursuing restorative justice during the transition from the Apartheid state of South Africa to a democratic government under President Nelson Mandela. Legal scholar Carrie Menjek-Meadow defines restorative justice as: “the name given to a variety of different practices, including apologies, restitution, and acknowledgments of harm and injury, as well as to other efforts to provide healing and reintegration of offenders into their communities, with or without additional punishment.”¹²⁴ As a system, it depends upon a tripartite input: from the transgressors of harm, the individual(s) affected, and *the larger community* to make restitution that “heal[s] at both the

¹²³ Lillian Tshabalala-Malulyck (actor) in discussion with the author, January 2025.

¹²⁴ Carrie Menkel-Meadow, “Restorative Justice: What Is It and Does It Work?,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 3, no. 1 (December 1, 2007): 161–87, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.lawsocsci.2.081805.110005>, 10.2.

individual and social or group level.” *Dark Noon*’s artists draw on their theatrical community to take part in a healing process through their performance.¹²⁵

Catherine Cole aptly argues that Apartheid’s regime committed crimes at the level of the individual Black body, which is why it is useful to look at the body of performance that emerges from those most harmed by Apartheid. I want to push this logic further, within the framework of restorative justice. Cole insists in Apartheid’s aftermath, that “Bodies become primary sites for resisting old orders and disorders and for awakening new sensibilities, for activating and instantiating otherwise possibilities.”¹²⁶ In dialogue with her analysis of the Black body in the wake of Apartheid, and in thinking about how racial performativity operates within given, shifting social contexts, I expand the definition of the body in my analysis to imagine otherwise by putting the individual in dialogue with the social body. I posit that since harm was affected at the level of the social (community) body during Apartheid as well, *Dark Noon* is performing an act of restorative justice that attempts repair at the level of the community (of spectators). Crucially, the performance invokes the audience through immersion to a) reveal the racial and colonial logics that pervade the afterlives of slavery and racial segregation under Apartheid; b) foreground their transnational entanglements; and c) locate the individual within the larger social framework of the audience as a collective that’s implicated through the performance.

But the TRC also had failings. Some individuals felt that transgressors were forgiven too easily without fit adjudication and reprimand, while others condemned its failure to acknowledge the structural violence of Apartheid. *Dark Noon* attempts to redress the latter concern. If, as Augustine Park argues, the TRC failed to account for systemic violence that affected the

¹²⁵ Menkel-Meadow, “Restorative Justice,” 10.3.

¹²⁶ Cole, *Afterlives of Injustice*, 19.

community (rather than solely the individual), *Dark Noon* exposes the systemic violence through involving communities of spectators. Although one could argue that play hasn't been performed in South Africa, this doesn't detract from the assertion that the play is still performing a kind of restorative justice practice globally. To be clear: I mean to imply that precisely by using tactics of exposure (aesthetics of empire: whiteface, racial archetypes, and the gunshot) to unobscure systems of oppression through overlapping timeliness/places/spaces, *Dark Noon* recognizes community responsibility at a global level. Through involving spectators across various countries, they reveal that these histories of violence (American/European/South African) are not discrete. They are all informing, even reinforcing each other, well into the present. Where the TRC failed, *Dark Noon* succeeds: it involves the community to unveil racializing and colonial logics that remain obscured until they are revealed through exposure—opening up the possibility of a more productive restorative justice, which is, “[oriented] to the future, to the extent possible, to make right what was wrong and to rebuild new relationships and new communities.”¹²⁷

Although it may initially seem counterintuitive, I believe that the moments of audience exposure in *Dark Noon*, though often the most violent, are also moments of what Jill Dolan calls “utopian performatives.” Dolan uses this term to describe finding utopia in interspersed moments of performance that are “imagined and experienced affectively...[to] train our imaginations, inspire our dreams and fuel our desires in ways that might lead to incremental cultural change.”¹²⁸ The minoritarian artists who perform in *Dark Noon* collapse time and space across three different timelines and two locations, unveil racializing and colonial logics throughout the performance, and implicate the audience in all of the above to “redistribute the sensible”: in other

¹²⁷ Menkel-Meadow, “Restorative Justice,” 10.4.

¹²⁸ Jill Dolan, “Performance, Utopia, and the ‘Utopian Performative,’” *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 3 (October 2001): 455–79, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2001.0068>, 406.

words, to make racial and colonial logics visible, audible, and tangible.¹²⁹ *Dark Noon* creates new communal and social epistemologies by inviting audience members to witness and engage in restorative justice through their performance. The production utilizes aesthetics of empire to invite audiences to imagine beyond the boundaries of our own bodies, timelines, and nationalities into better global citizenship. Through the “interspersed moments” of exposure I detail above, *Dark Noon* expands not only how we sense: hear, feel, and visualize our contemporary moment; but compels us towards collective political change through performance.

Returning to the Wild, Wild West

In *Dark Noon*, why do the artists use the West? Why the “wild” West, and why the Western? This section examines why the framework of the Western is enduring, and how it is particularly suited to exposing intimacies across the three timelines that *Dark Noon* stages. An analysis of the genre’s historically contingent formation alongside its present-day resonances provides a firm background against which the colonial and racializing logics I have endeavored to un-obscure thus far, speciously operate. By attending to performance studies and ethnographic methodologies, and informed by frameworks of transnationalism and empire, this analysis seeks to understand what the Western exposes about our current political moment in the United States within a national and transnational, global context.

The Western has a reputation as being a distinctly American cultural art form: one which maintains an enduring resonance today in media and film, with recent Western hits doing well on contemporary streaming platforms (*Yellowstone* starring Kevin Costner, 2018, NBC’s Peacock) as well as in the box office (*Eddington*, starring Pedro Pascal, Joaquin Phoenix, and Emma

¹²⁹ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

Stone, 2025, A24). During Beyonce’s recent *Cowboy Carter* Tour (2025), a film interlude between sets featured Carter pacing away from her opponent, gun in hand, before turning to face him with her gun cocked and loaded in a classic Western standoff.

Prior to its recent resurgence, at the height of its popularity in the 1950s following World War II, the Western provided a shape and a direction for American nationalism to inhabit. The convergence of looming Cold War fears, nuclear threats, and “the revelation of an almost unfathomable evil spawned by the Nazis...left many people groping for some basic values in the fabric of an older, more tradition-bound time in American history.”¹³⁰ Films such as *The Searchers* (1956), featuring John Wayne’s grittiest role of the decade and directed by John Ford, wherein a veteran’s daughter is kidnapped by a local indigenous tribe; and *3:10 to Yuma* (1957), directed by Delmer Daves and starring Glenn Ford and Van Heflin in a plot that revolves around capturing an assailant in a race against the clock, or train time (not unlike the titular inspiration for *Dark Noon*), are both excellent examples of returning to values of a recent, pre-world war past. Though the storylines were set in the mid-1800s to late nineteenth century, it was the Western’s mythologizing capacity—the one that was so adept at clearly labeling the “good guys” come to the rescue and the bad, savage, uncivilized individuals who occupied the land—that made them comforting for (white) Americans to turn to in an age increasingly defined by commitment to moral binarism. This fueled national moral sentiment both after WWII and as the U.S. approached the Cold War and the impending Red Scare.

¹³⁰ “Westerns Dominate Postwar American Film, 1946-1962,” in *DISCovering U.S. History* (Gale, 1997), Gale In Context: College, https://link-gale-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/apps/doc/BT2104240946/CSIC?u=wash_main&sid=bookmark-CSIC&xid=7cc91dc6.

Part of why the Western has endured is because of its general applicability as a mythology that extends beyond U.S. borders. In an article on Post WWII Westerns, folklorist and anthropologist JoAnn Conrad describes this generalization as the process wherein mythologization “empties” the people and place of the “West” and instead, “[refills it] with meaning—resignified—to appear as if natural.”¹³¹ Beyond the ideology of American exceptionalism it traffics as its chosen cargo, the Western has become a transnational phenomenon. Contemplating the endurance of the Western, cinema studies scholars Hervé Mayer and David Roche write, “The Western is easily and widely appropriated in a multiplicity of contexts—whether international, national, or regional—because its ideological structures were shaped by transnational histories of empire that still frame much of the cultural exchanges in the global present. The Western is particularly suited to transnational circulation and cocreation because its imperial language of oppression and emancipation is global, its premises and arguments shared and felt everywhere.”¹³² In other words, as a technology of coloniality and empire, the Western not only displays empire and the U.S.'s imperial tendencies: it performs them. And, the Western is generalizable enough as colonial cinema to be translated to other places where settler colonial and imperial histories exist.

That is why *Dark Noon*'s use of the Western, as a framework, is pointedly applicable. The devising artists use the mythology of the U.S. Western to trace settler colonial and imperial tendencies between the late nineteenth-century U.S., the mid-twentieth-century U.S., and the late

¹³¹ JoAnn Conrad, “Consuming Subjects: Making Sense of Post–World War II Westerns,” *Narrative Culture* 2, no. 1 (2015): 71, <https://doi.org/10.13110/narrcult.2.1.0071>.

¹³² Hervé Mayer et al., *Transnationalism and Imperialism: Endurance of the Global Western Film*, New Directions in National Cinemas Ser (Indiana University Press, 2022), 9. It is important to note that in their introduction, the authors also argue that cultural representations of settler colonialism and imperialism are not distinct, and therefore, the genre's generalizability extends even more broadly within a representational context. In other words, they claim that processes of exclusion (devastation) and/or hybridity are malleable enough within a representational paradigm to travel to various contexts.

twentieth-century Apartheid-South Africa. By disidentifying with the prominent Western narrative that criminalizes the “savage” East (Said, Mbembe), they flip the narrative to center their Black, South African bodies to create an alternative Western mythology.¹³³ As they colonize the set and literally build it during the course of the play, they deconstruct the Western.

When asked about the Western, co-director Tue Beiring replied that he conceived of the project as a story about African migration told through the Western genre. In an interview with Australian playwright and theatre critic John Shand, Beiring claims:

That was why I went to South Africa...and asked these amazing actors, performers and creatives to do a performance about Africa, with the western genre as a format or dramaturgy.” But he soon realised he was in danger of imposing a western story on the African cast, which was the opposite of his intentions. “So I said, ‘How about you tell *my* story?’” he continues. “And everybody had a lot of fun by reversing the representation, and also by reversing the power of who is telling whose story.”¹³⁴

The story that Beiring insists upon in this interview is one that is his own; but given that he is a Danish artist, it is curious that *Dark Noon* became a play devised through the lens of American Western set on the frontier, rather than a production reflecting on the long arm of Danish imperialism in the Caribbean or in Africa on the Gold Coast, for instance. Instead, choosing to set the *Dark Noon* in the U.S. provides a similar context to the Danish one through which to explore—in particular—the colonial logics that the play exposes. The conceptual choice also clarifies the ways in which the Western metonymically slides across locations of colonial outposts and transnational frameworks.

¹³³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

¹³⁴ John Shand, “Tue Biering Talks About the High Stakes behind Dark Noon,” John Shand - Writing in the Dark, April 21, 2025, <https://johnshand.com.au/tue-biering-talks-about-the-high-stakes-behind-dark-noon/>.

Given its origin story: how then, does the play constitute immersive *minoritarian* performance? The production takes up what José Esteban Muñoz describes as minoritarian performance: “both antinormative and critical of the state,” and [how it] “labors to make worlds—worlds of transformative politics and possibilities.”¹³⁵ In other words, minoritarian performance has the capacity to create new worlds that challenge the “normative” one we currently inhabit. In addition, it’s devised and performed, primarily by a group of Black South African actors, who have been forced to know “otherwise” as racialized subjects—all of them having lived through, or suffering the continued effects of the Apartheid (Afrikaans for “separateness”) government that ruled South Africa for almost half a century, from 1948 to 1994. Evidenced by a vision board documenting the devising process, the mainly Black cast of actors’ impulses, experiences, and memories are fused into the membrane of the play itself. For example, take the sticky notes on the board. One reads: “Gold! Gold! Gold!,” which becomes the fourth chapter title in the play. Another two notes next to each other read, “vigilante justice” and “tar and feather,” which is precisely the vengeance enacted on Mdubeki/robber when he steals Masango/salesman’s Coca-Cola.¹³⁶

If examples of the actors’ integral roles in constructing *Dark Noon* weren’t clear enough before the play, they are crystalized through the incorporations of the actor’s reflections at the end of the play. At its conclusion, the actors (playing themselves) monologue to a camera projecting their faces to the audience. They share an anecdote, a memory, or a challenge that inspired them to revise the myth of the American West(ern). Letsholonyana reminisces on his fascination with the gun in Westerns, claiming, “To this day, I love the gun. I just wanna shoot

¹³⁵ See: Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 56; 195.

¹³⁶ “Dark Noon,” Fix + Foxy, accessed May 10, 2026, <https://fixfoxy.com/en/project/dark-noon/#photos>.

things.”¹³⁷ Zwane, one of the actors in the cast who experienced Apartheid in South Africa, tells the story of his town growing up. He describes being terrorized by gangsters, and ends his recollection by likening colonialism and capitalism to similar gangsters. Finally, Gaduka takes a seat, faces directly to the camera, and recalls a lesson from his childhood:

My teacher told my parents “Booyesen [Gaduka’s Anglicized name] will need to speak a lot of English at home in order to command the language”. Obviously my parents weren’t about that shit, so the next best thing to do was to get material with a lot of English in it. And I remember the first movie we got, a VHS, was a western movie and we watched that shit over and over and over again. And somehow I managed to absorb the language.

But I look back now, and I wonder if it was really necessary or healthy for me as a young black boy to have been exposed to that kind of violence and to see movies where the white man was always the hero.¹³⁸

As Gaduka makes clear, the Western was successful in more than teaching him English; it instilled in him, even as a young boy growing up in South Africa, that the “white man” is the savior who is *meant* to win, naturalizing this as the dominant racial order. Conrad writes in support of this, claiming, “The Myth of the West, and by extension the Western is...an explicitly gendered and racist ideology whereby American identity is coded white, male, aggressive, and violent; one in which racial superiority is not only normalized but also provides the justification of conquest.”¹³⁹ Bringing Gaduka’s lived experience and Conrad’s assertion together, one can conclude: if the “West” was lawless before, its proper male, racial stratification that tames it, rather than civility or empty tropes of “the Other.”

To return to the title of this section and the initial question it asks, I circle back to the present to inquire: why the wild, wild West *now*? The Western, as I’ve endeavored to demonstrate, is generalizable enough (within a modern/colonial context) to be a transnational

¹³⁷ Fix + Foxy, *Dark Noon*, unpublished manuscript, January 11, 2025.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Conrad, 74.

phenomenon which extends not only across distances (space), but across time too. Mayer and Roche claim that if the Western has endured, it's due to the genre's inherently political nature.¹⁴⁰ *Dark Noon* has three very clear overlapping timelines: the 1850s, which they draw on in the content of their play; the 1950s, which they invoke through the title of their play as well as their reflections at the end of the play; and Apartheid, South Africa in the late 1900s. Additionally, there are theatrical aesthetics, or what I call “aesthetics of empire” (how minoritarian artists attune our senses to the discursive, often specious forces of empire as they are rendered visible onstage) that appear in the play to signal that the artists are also talking about lineages of racism and colonialism very much present in our contemporary political moment.

At the July Fourth performance of *Dark Noon*, towards the very end of the play, Letsholonyana wears a Trump wig on top of his head (an aesthetic of empire, surely). He sits at his desk chair to stare directly at the camera, looking prepared to deliver a presidential address. His office is neatly positioned between the proto-bodega and the Little House on the Prairie home, upstage left. Letsholonyana delivers the first part of his speech somewhat calmly, beginning with the phrase “We are the people.” This turn of phrase is noticeably different enough from “we *the* people,” the preamble of the U.S. constitution. Perhaps, more chillingly, it implies that there are non-people—or more poignantly, that some people are non-human. As he continues, the speech ramps up in fervor until he is screaming at the top of his lungs. In the second to last line of the play, before the reflections begin, he shouts, “WE ARE THE PEOPLE! WE ARE THE PEOPLE! WE ARE THE PEOPLE! Custodians of civilization—that’s what we

¹⁴⁰ Hervé Mayer et al., *Transnationalism and Imperialism*, 1.

are. Happy Fourth of July!”¹⁴¹ The last line is ad-libbed, and does not appear in the play’s script. Sitting in the audience, the last words are delivered like a warning, rather than a celebration.

After this, Tshabalala-Malulyck announces the closure of the western frontier. In the final words of the play, she claims:

In 1890 the frontier officially closed. There was no more land left to be claimed, and the settlers had finally settled. This meant, in some ways, the end of the wild wild west. For the first time in history, the Europeans who now called themselves American were without a frontier. The frontier was a part of their identity, felt by all and expressed by many in literature, art, and western movies. With the end of the frontier it meant the end of the romance of the Wild Wild West.¹⁴²

One thing to note here, in particular, is the importance of frontier-as-identity. The two, as the play posits through its many chapters, are co-constitutive. The frontier’s integrity to American identity was famously theorized by historian Frederick Jackson Turner at the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893. During his lecture, Turner asserts, “Movement has been [America’s] dominant fact; and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise,” Plainly, Turner means that expansion will seep beyond the “open space” of the West and into sovereign other countries or territories. The expansion of the frontier is a never-ending project in the U.S. because it is an iterative praxis essential to forming American national identity; one that extends from the past well into the present.¹⁴³ In other words: the frontier **never** closes.

If the Wild, Wild West “closed” at the turn of the nineteenth century, it has revitalized itself in the present-day U.S. political landscape: “Manifest Destiny” has been replaced with

¹⁴¹ Fix + Foxy, *Dark Noon*, unpublished manuscript, January 11, 2025.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ See: Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Frontier in American History*. H. Holt and company, 1940. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/102108155>, 37.

“Make America Great Again” nationalism and ICE raids, illegal detainments and deportations are touted as "civilizing" savage trespassers by sending them away. The mythology of the Western finds renewed meaning in our contemporary moment in America: an ironically lawless land wherein the President could break the law, “walk down 5th Avenue in New York City and...shoot somebody, and [he] wouldn't lose any voters,” while simultaneously enforcing mass deportations to convict “felons” and “illegal immigrants” who have ostensibly also broken U.S. law (according to his logic).¹⁴⁴ This dangerous mythology, created and sustained through Donald Trump’s rhetoric of “relentless lying and inaccuracy,” is a legacy of the Western.¹⁴⁵

This legacy— which *Dark Noon* endeavors to show exists trans-temporally and transnationally – is yet another example of Roach’s "genealogy of performance.” By unveiling this genealogy through moments of audience exposure in *Dark Noon*, its artists draw us beyond borders into a better global community by making apparent racial and colonial logics that this Western mythology has endeavored to obscure over centuries. It is precisely exposure’s capacity for imagining (and feeling) beyond the enclosures of borders into a global framework, in particular, that the following chapter further develops.

¹⁴⁴ Colin Dwyer, “Donald Trump: ‘I Could ... Shoot Somebody, And I Wouldn’t Lose Any Voters,’” NPR, January 23, 2016. www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/01/23/464129029/donald-trump-i-could-shoot-somebody-and-i-wouldnt-lose-any-voters.

¹⁴⁵ Daniel Dale, “Fact Check: Debunking 100 Trump False Claims from His First 100 Days,” CNN, April 29, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/politics/fact-check-trump-false-claims-debunked>.

CHAPTER TWO

Little Amal, Dear Laila, And Four Theses on Brown Exposure

Fragmented on the beach, her body parts lie scattered and sideways. One puppeteer sheds a tear while grasping her lifeless leg; two others reach towards her empty, hollow torso; and a fourth embraces her unmoving head. She—Little Amal—is only a puppet: but this cautionary Instagram post featuring images of her disassembled body on an otherwise placid Southern California beach is meant to elicit sympathy for the ongoing refugee crisis that Little Amal’s performance attempts to circulate.¹⁴⁶

“Children are not collateral. Stop the Gaza massacre. Ceasefire now,” is the text accompanying the post (Figures 1 and 2), which was released approximately a month after Hamas’ attack on Israel in October 2023 and Israel’s responding genocidal actions.¹⁴⁷ As an international symbol of hope, through this video, Amal’s Brown *and* Syrian body becomes



Figure 1. And 2. Screenshots of the Instagram post that displays Amal’s dismembered body. (Walk with Amal [[@walkwithamal](https://www.instagram.com/walkwithamal)]. Children are not collateral. Stop the Gaza massacre. Ceasefire now. 2 Nov. 2023, [www.instagram.com/ reel/CzKfTk8PIvr/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/reel/CzKfTk8PIvr/?hl=en).)

¹⁴⁶ See: Walk with Amal [[@walkwithamal](https://www.instagram.com/walkwithamal)]. Children are not collateral. Stop the Gaza massacre. Ceasefire now. 2 Nov. 2023, [www.instagram.com/ reel/CzKfTk8PIvr/?hl=en](https://www.instagram.com/reel/CzKfTk8PIvr/?hl=en).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

aligned with the bodies of Brown Gazans who know the violence of displacement and extermination amidst our contemporary, ongoing refugee situations.¹⁴⁸

Stateless, searching, and spent, the twelve-foot-tall Syrian refugee puppet of a ten-year-old girl named Little Amal has caused a plethora of mixed reactions from spectators, journalists, and academics. There are critiques of how Amal does not represent the real-life average refugee child in our contemporary moment (a roughly seventeen-year-old Ethiopian boy).¹⁴⁹ There's also praise for her ability to foster dialogue and performative hope that circulates empathy for the refugee plight.¹⁵⁰

Made by the South-African-based Handspring Puppet Company, and brought to life in 2021 by the London-based production company called, "The Walk," Amal is a puppet, operated by three puppeteers (two on the outside, one inside of her torso) that travels the globe to meet various communities near their homes to bring attention to the Syrian refugee crisis.¹⁵¹ The Walk describes Amal as, "an international symbol of compassion and of human rights."¹⁵² Prolific in her travels, at the time of writing this chapter, she's visited 166 towns and cities in seventeen countries (including USA, Canada, Chile, Turkey, Greece, Mexico, Dublin, and Adelaide) and she's "been welcomed by two million people on the street and by tens of millions online."¹⁵³ In

¹⁴⁸ There has been movement away from the instinct to label mass refugee displacements as "crises" because this terminology reinscribes the nation-state's perspective, rather than centering the real, lived experiences of refugees. For more, see: Y  n L   Espiritu, *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies*, with Lan P. Duong, Critical Refugee Studies, v. 3 (University of California Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520386396>.

¹⁴⁹ Amir Nizar Zuabi (Artistic Director) in discussion with the author, August 2024.

¹⁵⁰ Claudia Orenstein; Little Amal's New York Journey: The Big Puppet in the Big Apple. *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 2023; 45 (1 (133)): 12–21. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/pajj_a_00637; Vinson Cunningham, "Immigrants and Refugees Seeking a Home," *The New Yorker*, October 3, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/10/10/immigrants-and-refugees-seeking-a-home#rid=40818231-5a34-4616-9499-671215d79e23&q=little+amal..>

¹⁵¹ Although she began as a symbol of the Syrian refugee crisis, she's become a stand in for refugees everywhere.

¹⁵² "The Walk: Little Amal," *The Walk*, accessed October 19, 2025, <https://www.walkwithamal.org/>.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

each city she visits, local institutions (governmental, private, and NGOs) invite her to participate in an activity alongside community members and visitors.¹⁵⁴ These have included artistic activities (painting and drawing), active movement (beachfront walks and city strolls), and communal meals.

Significantly, Amal's visits are interactive, immersive theatrical performances that invite community members to engage with her and gather to support her on her journey to find her displaced mother; these have included local, sponsored trips to a botanical garden in Australia, attending a primary school in the U.K., and seeing a national opera house in Ukraine. Beyond challenging notions of what it means to be a refugee—indeed, to be human—Amal's performance compels us to question not only how we assemble in times of political crisis, but also how nation is conceived and how empire shifts discursively through her bodily assemblages and her performative framework.

Elsewhere, a refugee artist's installation invites us to travel to their home located in Yarmouk Camp right outside of Damascus, Syria. Basel Zaraa's *Dear Laila* is at once both an installation (Zaraa isn't present, and audience members interact with archival objects one at a time) and a performance (requires us to take on the subjectivity of Laila, is an ephemeral experience, and is produced by Portland, OR-based theatre company BOOM Arts). Throughout the course of the performance—which is the term I will use heretofore to frame Zaraa's work in the context of this chapter—an absent Zaraa instructs participants to follow instructions written on note cards that are neatly stacked in a pile sitting atop the singular desk that inhabits the set of

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. For example: The Museum of Natural History in New York, NY; Hierapolis-Pamukkale UNESCO World Heritage Site in Pamukkale, Turkey; and Cologne Cathedral in Cologne, Germany.

this piece. Over the course of roughly twenty minutes, participants are instructed to interact with multiple familial archival artifacts from Zaraa's past and present. Through various modes of engagement including: reading letters, listening to voice recordings, and touching family memorabilia, Zaraa transcends national borders to theatrically welcome people into his home. In doing so, he challenges audiences to inhabit alternative, embodied, and affective refugee subjectivities.

In this chapter, I examine refugee performances that challenge discursive normative modes of citizenship through immersivity: specifically, through minoritarian tactics that are animated through what I call "brown exposure." Case studies in this chapter include various performances by The Walk's *Little Amal* and Basel Zaraa's *Dear Laila*. I ask: how do Amal's performances and *Dear Laila* dialogue with U.S. empire and position the racialized Brown refugee? How do audience accompaniment and refugee hospitality (aesthetically and affectively) work to create that structure of feeling "brown" (Muñoz)? And, by walking with Amal and visiting home with *Dear Laila*, why and how do audiences destabilize and expose the concept of "nation" to imagine alternative forms of belonging and citizenship beyond national borders?

I use ethnographic fieldnotes from my trips to see *Dear Laila* in Portland, Oregon in 2025, as well as Amal over two separate two-day periods: first, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in September 2023 and later in November of 2023 in San Diego, California, to conduct my analysis. I also use interviews with Producer David Lan and Artistic Director Amir Nizar Zuabi, as well as audience testimonies published by the production company: The Walk. Together, I put these in dialogue with another recent refugee-driven participatory theatrical performance (Good Chance Theatre's *The Jungle*), and scholarship across the fields of performance studies, critical refugee studies, and immersive theatre to investigate what *Dear Laila* and Amal's participatory

theatre performances uncover for their audiences about refugee movement, hospitality, and utopian commons-as-futurity (as opposed to enclosures and borders). This chapter animates how both *Little Amal* and *Dear Laila* reveal different approaches to generating brown refugee movement through theatrical, minoritarian aesthetics of mobility, hospitality, and refusal. In *Dear Laila*, Basel Zaraa metaphorically moves us across the Syrian border amid the detritus of a refugee camp; whereas in *Little Amal*'s performances, we meet her and physically walk alongside her to—quite literally—mobilize our support. Together, these theatrical performances illuminate brownness' liberatory potential to move us, through sensorium and feeling, beyond transnational frameworks of existence; they challenge our discursive understanding of refugees by asking audiences to take on refugee subjectivities themselves, through embodied acts of accompaniment and adjacency (Campt).¹⁵⁵

To frame my argument, I develop a theory of brown exposure below through theses that attend to brownness' legality, mobility, and liberatory potential to uncover what brown exposure in immersive, theatrical performances reveals about our current sociopolitical climate; and, how these works envision a more inclusive global citizenship. First, I establish how my theory of brown exposure is in dialogue with brownness, brown studies, and brown affectivity in theatre and performance by inviting a chorus of brown studies scholars into conversation (Armando Garcia, Amber Musser, José Esteban Muñoz, and Sandra Ruiz) to make legible the discursive framework into which this analysis enters. Next, I pose four theses that articulate how both *Little Amal* and *Dear Laila* productively produce a collapse between refugee and citizen through immersive performance. Together, I argue through these theses that brown exposure is an artistic

¹⁵⁵Tina Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*, First MIT Press paperback edition, 2023 (The MIT Press, 2023).

tactic that requires audience participants to take on refugee subjectivities throughout performances; in doing so, these performances produce brown structures of feeling that challenge our discursive understanding of refugeehood through minoritarian affects of accompaniment, hospitality, and refusal, and compel audiences to expand their contemporary notions of citizenship through embodiment.

A Chorus of Brown Exposure

It is mid-afternoon, around 2:00 pm, and about two hundred people across a diverse spectrum of demographics (ages, races, and genders)—both locals and visitors—are gathered around the rotunda just outside of The Old Globe theater in Balboa Park: a well-known tourist site in the heart of San Diego, California. As we wait for Amal's arrival, we are greeted by the Haneen (Arabic for nostalgia) Choir; an Arab women's choir whose task is to keep Syrian tradition alive through music. They are one chapter in a network of Haneen choirs worldwide, initially established in Gaziantep, Turkey with members across three continents (Asia, Europe, and North America).¹⁵⁶ As we listen to the dulcet tones of the approximately twenty or so members of Haneen, we are invited to sing alongside the chorus. We rehearse singing in unison with the conductor, in Arabic, before Amal enters. As we sing, we enliven Syrian traditions nostalgic of a past we cannot all recall, but we access and affirm together through this practice.

How do we sense brown, and why evoke Brownness through its collective entanglements in this chapter? By collective entanglements, I mean to suggest that Brownness, as a racial formation, widely signifies. As a signifier, Brownness can refer to, for example: being

¹⁵⁶Julie Gallant, "Musicians, Choir and Dance Troupe to Perform for Arab American Heritage Month," San Diego Union-Tribune, April 24, 2024, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/2024/04/24/musicians-choir-and-dance-troupe-to-perform-for-arab-american-heritage-month/>.

Latino/a/x, Arab, North African, South Asian, South American, and Indigenous peoples. Because brownness is wide-ranging, this list by no means captures the full possibility of its scope; instead, I offer it here to suggest, in particular, some of the ways I will be positioning Brown in this chapter.

A note on B/brown: I toggle between the two throughout this analysis. I use Brown, with a capitalized “B,” to reference specifically the racial formation under which a variety of people both subscribe to and are hailed into, specifically in a U.S. context.¹⁵⁷ When I use brown with a lowercase “b,” I intend to allude to both the racialization of Brown people, as well as the sense of brown that extends affectively beyond racial abstractions that Brown signifies, into an affective sphere (Muñoz).¹⁵⁸ I methodologically interchange them throughout this chapter to demonstrate how these two types of B/brown outlined above are not discrete, but rather, intrinsically constitutive.

Dialoguing with other scholars who have drawn on theorizations of brown most often aligned with Latinidad experience (Muñoz and Ruiz), this analysis attempts to extend the archive of brownness’ potentiality—both as a racial formation and way of knowing through difference. Take for example, Amber Musser’s description of a Muñozian sense of brown in Filipinx visual artist Maureen Catbagan’s work. Musser reminds us that: “Muñoz draws...the way that brownness, through its multiple and various marginalizations, is used to consolidate a racialized implicitly white norm. This version of brownness is capacious because the historic and geographic forms of marginalization are vast.”¹⁵⁹ For Musser, José Esteban Muñoz’s invitation to

¹⁵⁷ Louis Althusser, *On Ideology*, Radical Thinkers 26 (Verso, 2008).

¹⁵⁸ José Esteban Muñoz et al., *The Sense of Brown*, Perverse Modernities (Duke University Press, 2020).

¹⁵⁹ Amber Jamilla Musser, “Sensing Brownness,” *Afterimage* 49, no. 1 (2022): 45–52, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aft.2022.49.1.45>, 46.

consider brownness as a racial alliance against normativity activates Cataban's work as a Filipinx, Brown artist. As a broad racial formation, particularly in the U.S.—and as African and Asian American Studies scholar Nitasha Tamar Sharma suggests—brown “refers not to a thing or person as much as to the processes through which these are given meaning.”¹⁶⁰ The ways in which brownness is perceived politically and racialized, within the U.S., will be formative to understanding the definition of brown that this chapter animates through its two U.S. based productions that serve as methods.¹⁶¹

The work of this chapter is indebted to conceptions of brownness theorized in dialogue with *Latinidad* and—as in the example of Musser's work—Filipino culture. In applying these theories of brownness to, with increasing specificity: SWANA, Arab, and refugee populations, I do not mean to deny the important distinctions between these various cultural and political enmeshments; instead, much in the way that Josh Chambers-Letson exemplifies in his monograph *After the Party*, I intend to activate their similarities (“SWANA, Arab, and refugee” are often racialized as Brown in the U.S.) alongside holding space for their important cultural distinctions.¹⁶² Doing this work expands the structure of feeling brownness in a U.S. context; and importantly, to draw on Chambers-Letson again, traces a communal striving towards freedom outside of normative modes of citizenship for all of those who fall under varying striations of brownness' aesthetic and affective implications.

Theorizations of brownness' affective resonance, particularly in theatre and performance studies, are indebted to the work of performance studies and queer-of-color critique theorist José

¹⁶⁰ Linda Trinh Võ et al., *Keywords for Asian American Studies*, Keywords (NYU Press, 2016), 18.

¹⁶¹ Sharma writes that broadly, “brown” references Africa, Asia, Europe, the Pacific, and Latin America. *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁶² Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, Sexual Cultures (New York University Press, 2018).

Esteban Muñoz. In his posthumous monograph, *Sense of Brown*, Muñoz offers the concept of a “brown commons” that is always, already present. By this, he means that the commons encompass, “feelings, sounds, buildings, neighborhoods, environments, and the nonhuman organic life that might circulate in such an environment alongside humans, and the inorganic presences that life is very often so attached to.”¹⁶³ It is an expansive human and nonhuman ecology that both a) describes how things are collectively unified through brownness in their suffering and b) illuminates how they are equally tethered through their refusal to endure the suffering. Importantly, racialized or ethnic Brownness is affectively experienced in and through this simultaneous suffering and refusal, but a brown commons and the affective experience of sensing brown are not limited to those who are hailed as, or self-identify, as brown. In brief: the racial performativity of Brownness, for Muñoz, produces an affective collective rendered through different feelings of brown; and it is precisely this feeling, in and through difference together, that he identifies as holding utopian and liberatory possibilities for the minoritarian subject.

If brownness, as Muñoz posits, is, “being with, being alongside,” its affective density is sensed through accumulation. To that end, I rehearse that accumulation by reciting some of the ways that Muñoz identifies brownness in his monograph here: brownness is “a minor structure of feeling” and “an encounter,”¹⁶⁴; brownness intervenes in a national normative affect of whiteness and discourses of citizenship; brownness is linked through affective exclusion; brownness operates as fugitive; and “brownness is a kind of uncanny persistence in the face of distressed

¹⁶³ Muñoz et al., *The Sense of Brown*, 2.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

conditions of possibility.”¹⁶⁵ The feeling of brownness shifts through these various affective registers with the ebbs and flows of the commons.¹⁶⁶

Sandra Ruiz builds off Muñoz’s work by situating Brownness in grief and mourning, analyzing both as citational practices that “reframe [minoritarian] archival repositories.”¹⁶⁷ In her 2024 monograph, *Left Turns in Brown Study*, through a series of poems that generate an archive of Brownness to form their own commons, Ruiz theorizes a methodology of “the turn,”: a return or turning back to loss, grief and mourning which, like her declaration of Brownness, is “always citation.”¹⁶⁸ Brownness, for Muñoz and for Ruiz, is both a theory of racial performativity’s affective registers; and a form of accompaniment that, through feeling disbelonging, challenges normative structures of empire, coloniality, and national citizenship.¹⁶⁹

Brownness, and how it conditions the contours and limits of citizenship, is central to Latinx studies scholar Armando García’s work on minoritarian illegality. In his article on racial performativity, illegality, and brownness, he interrogates the performative force of U.S. law as it indexes brownness as “illegal.”¹⁷⁰ Engaging art by undocumented—or in his parlance “illegal”—

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 4.

¹⁶⁶ All of these references to brownness are culled from the first and second chapters of Muñoz’s monograph. See: Ibid., 1-21.

¹⁶⁷ While Muñoz does not capitalize the “b” in “brownness,” Ruiz does. See: Sandra Ruiz, *Left Turns in Brown Study* (Duke University Press, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.125384>, 6.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ In her 2025 monograph, *Transatlantic Disbelonging*, Bimbola Akinbola uses her term, “disbelonging” to describe a sensation of belonging in difference for minoritized, diasporic subjects. She offers disbelonging as “language for thinking through how marginal subjects use their anti-respectable positionalities—as displaced, as ‘lost,’ as too hybrid to belong in just one place—as a mode of self-fashioning, which gives them a platform from which to challenge oppressive ideologies and envision new ways of relating.” I draw on it here, in dialogue with Muñoz and for Ruiz, to consider: how is the brown commons a generative place of anti-respectability across shades and variations of “Brown”? Particularly, within the U.S. as brownness refers to a collective of people on the margins: South Asian, South American, and SWANA diasporic individuals. See: Bimbola Akinbola, *Transatlantic Disbelonging: Unruliness, Pleasure, and Play in Nigerian Diasporic Women’s Art*, 1st ed (Duke University Press, 2025), 2.

¹⁷⁰ Armando García, “The Illegality of Brownness,” *Social Text* 33, no. 2 (2015): 99–120, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2869247>.

forced migrants across visual and aural aesthetic modes (poetry, drawing, music), Garcia asserts that their artistry theorizes the answer to the question: what modes of being exist outside of illegality? Garcia's intervention is to highlight not only the socio-political landscape of "brownness" that Muñoz envisions, but also, the legally instituted one. While Muñoz's work concerns normative citizen subjects who technically have "legal status but are nonetheless denied access to official political ontology," Garcia's article focuses on undocumented forced migrants who are hailed as "illegal" and have no political recognition or rights under the law.¹⁷¹ Rather than trying to assimilate brown forced migrants into community through a neoliberal framework of inclusion by exclusion, or what Jodi Melamed calls "neoliberal multiculturalism," he urges readers instead to linger in the negative affect of brownness that undocumented brown migrants feel without negating or fending off feelings that emerge.¹⁷² Garcia envisions this will bring about a discursive shift that renders illegal brown bodies to register as human *within* the legal and political boundaries of the nation.

While Garcia's attempt to shift the affective and discursive needle within our current geopolitical framework is a worthwhile endeavor, the artists I archive here ask us to envision something different: what does it look like to gather and imagine living in community beyond the confines of the nation and its borders? *Little Amal* requires us to labor to walk alongside her as an act of affective solidarity across a global audience; while *Dear Laila* grounds us locally within a Syrian refugee camp to gesture at the possibilities of living in a community that thrives in its non-normative conceptions of belonging outside of national boundaries.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 103.

¹⁷² Jodi Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism," *Social Text* 24, no. 4 (2006): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2006-009>, 3.

My work on brown exposure intends to enliven the crucial work of an already, always-present, brown commons. Both Muñoz and Ruiz generate and experience brownness through an accumulation of declarative (performative) statements that discursively render brownness. Framed particularly by their conceptions, but more broadly in dialogue with the sense of brown, brownness, and the brown commons that these collective, citational, dialogic—and most importantly, affective—analyses these theorists proffer, I develop a theory of brown exposure through assembling the four theses that follow on refugee public performance, immersivity, accompaniment, and global citizenship. Collectively, they animate how brown exposure challenges normative conceptions of U.S. empire, citizenship, borders, and belonging through theatrical performances that center minoritarian brown aesthetics of immersivity, mobility, and radical hospitality and accompaniment.

Thesis 1: Brown exposure understands that refugees are—in their public performances—discursive, juridical, political, and theatrical ¹⁷³

Little Amal in Meteora

It is the last day of August in 2021. Amal is in Larissa in Greece, a municipality of Thessaly that spans across the Pineois River. There, both refugee children and non-displaced children gather to greet Amal. They bring her dolls that they have made to comfort her and accompany her on her journey. The celebration is cut short; rightwing protestors arrive and begin hurling rocks. The rocks are thrown not only at Amal, but at the children participating in the

¹⁷³ This framework for these theses on brown exposure is drawn from Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's foundational work that grounds monster theory in theatre and performance studies. See: Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

event too.¹⁷⁴ Days later, Amal is scheduled to appear in the Meteora region of Thessaly, which is known for a collection of stunning historic monasteries. Meteora, which means “suspended in the air” in Greek, hoists these monasteries on sandstone peaks. Before Amal can sojourn there her trip is eclipsed; she’s been uninvited by the local council to enter the home of the UNESCO heritage site. Her Brown, puppet body is to blame.¹⁷⁵

World Heritage sites, like the Greek Orthodox Monasteries at Meteora, supposedly “belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located.”¹⁷⁶ Of course, given Amal’s swift rejection, this universal application seemed to be withheld for her visit. This is because, as the *New York Times* writes, “[The Monastery] Council members [said] a ‘Muslim doll from Syria’ shouldn’t be performing in a space important to Greek Orthodox believers. (Amal’s religion, in fact, has never been specified).”¹⁷⁷ Although Amal’s religion hasn’t been specified in any of the online rhetoric included in The Walk’s official descriptions about her performances, both Artistic Director Amir Nizar Zuabi and Producer David Lan identified her as a Muslim girl in our conversations. But what about Little Amal’s refugee body, if she is in fact Muslim, seems dangerous? And in what ways does her puppet body, ascribed not only as Muslim, but also as simultaneously real and unreal, present a very *real* danger as she performs the role of the refugee? To address these questions, I trace the

¹⁷⁴ Amelia Gentleman, “‘People Felt Threatened Even by a Puppet Refugee’: Little Amal’s Epic Walk through Love and Fear,” *The Guardian*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/oct/18/threatened-puppet-refugee-little-amals-epic-walk>.

¹⁷⁵ “Meteora - UNESCO World Heritage Centre,” UNESCO, accessed January 19, 2026, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/455/>.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Alex Marshall, Carlotta Gall, and Elisabetta Povoledo. “Four Months, 5,000 Miles: A Refugee Puppet Looks for Home.” *The New York Times*, November 10, 2021, sec. Theater. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/10/theater/little-amal-the-walk.html>.

ways in which Little Amal's strategic performance represents the body of the Brown refugee in Greece, and in so doing, causes crisis.

They can't seem to contend with her body. By implying that welcoming Amal would welcome those following in her footsteps **is to interpret her body as human**, undoubtedly making and marking a performative act.¹⁷⁸ In other words, by denying her entry based on the assumption that *other* real refugees would follow suit, the council at Meteora ushered in a new reality in the world. Fearing her “mere representation” of a refugee, they must not have foreseen that in rejecting her visit, they indeed performed a felicitous uptake and effectively marked her as human, endowing her performance with even more efficaciousness than they had intended. In this way, Amal becomes the very thing they feared the most; she becomes a real human, and one they're forced to contend with at their doorstep.

Part of the backdrop of this response in Greece is a structure of feeling that arises within the framework of The Greek Orthodox Church as the national church of Greece; a church which indelibly binds religion to the nation-state, and the religious to the political.¹⁷⁹ In his work on Islamophobia and the “Muslim Threat,” Sociologist and Greek scholar Alexandros Sakellariou has analyzed the role of the Greek Orthodox Church in inciting moral panic that leads to Islamophobia. Sakellariou explains that the Greek Orthodox church has deployed fear as a metaphor that separates “us from them” and incites moral and religious apprehension. Further, he states, “In the Greek context, this kind of panic relates to the broader historical legacies of the creation of the Greek nation-state after centuries of Ottoman rule. Not only was

¹⁷⁸ I draw on Judith Butler's theorizing on gender performativity and her extension of J.L. Austin's “performative utterance” into what she calls embodied “performative acts.” See: Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *The Performance Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Bial and Sara Brady, Third edition, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.

¹⁷⁹ Raymond L. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, repr, Marxist Introductions (Oxford Univ. Press, 2009).

the Greek state established as an ‘Orthodox’ political entity, but it was also created as an antidote of the Ottoman occupation and its religion, Islam.”¹⁸⁰ Framing Islam as an illness, a poison that requires something as strong as an antidote like the Greek Orthodox Church to cure its scourge explains why Amal’s visit to a church site would be so hotly contested. Sakellariou goes on to describe the ways in which the Greek Orthodox Church has been particularly hostile to Muslim immigrants and refugees who enter the country. Welcoming them, with the possibility of eventually allowing them citizenship, enables them to corrupt the Greek nation-state: marking it Islamicized and making it “unclean.” He says, “Islam and Muslims are seen as a threat to the national identity and Greek-Orthodox values since they are coming from a complete ‘other’ culture and way of life, which are incompatible with the Greek one. This argumentation is clearly Islamophobic because it generalises events like Islamist terrorist attacks, for example, and uses them in order to characterise Islam and Muslims as violent.”¹⁸¹ Clearly, these associations with violence and terrorism are landing on Little Amal as well.

If Little Amal is simply a lifelike representation of a Syrian refugee, then, following this logic, the council at Meteora should have been able to welcome her with no qualms or hesitations. In fact, it seems like hosting Amal would be an easy means to signify their status as a world heritage site that welcomes all, without bearing the stakes of welcoming a literal human refugee onsite. And though the council characterizes her as a “Muslim girl doll,” they *must* realize Amal isn’t to be *toyed* with. There is some inherent danger in her bodily presence. The council claims, “The bitter truth is those who said ‘Yes’ to Little Amal actually said ‘Yes’ to all

¹⁸⁰ Alexandros Sakellariou, “Islamophobia in Greece,” in *The Routledge International Handbook of Islamophobia*, 1st ed., ed. Irene Zempi and Imran Awan (Routledge, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351135559-17>, 199.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 206.

those who come after her.”¹⁸² Already, in the language they deploy, they imply that Amal is indeed representative of the fleshy, human refugee who might arrive at their doorstep.

Simultaneously, they identify her as a “doll” and as akin to the “human.”

South-African based scholar and artist Jane Taylor, who has worked with the Handspring Puppet Company numerous times in the past, writes about the ways in which puppets become real—moving from prop to personhood. She claims:

The puppet, which can be anything from a sock to a bundle of sticks and cloth, is in some ways akin to the prop but rather radically veers toward personhood, becoming a materialization of the rhetorical device, *prosopopoeia*. It thus provides an object-based site for the projection from a speaking subject. The puppet is that “other being or thing” onto which a speaking/ thinking being is projected. Yet the puppet is a particular kind of illusionist, wedded to maintaining the fiction of its autonomy. A puppet would rather die than admit that it is not alive.¹⁸³

Through her strategic performance as a refugee child traveling the world and interacting with various communities at welcome events, Little Amal occupies the space between puppet and person that Taylor animates here, standing in for many of those who have perished making the same journey. She represents a refugee who must always exist outside of the scope of “belonging” to any one place, which means her body is always in a state of crisis: one of constant exception, moving between borders to escape harm at home.¹⁸⁴

Amal’s performance/reception in Larissa and Meteora, Greece, demonstrates the stakes of theatrical intervention, particularly for a Brown racialized, refugee subject. The site leaders reject her visit solely on the basis that they are frightened that the theatrical gesture will create a new

¹⁸² Marshall et. al., “Four Months, 5,000 Miles.”

¹⁸³ Jane Taylor, “From Props to Prosopopoeia,” in *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance* (Routledge, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315850115.ch21>, 231.

¹⁸⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.

reality in the world, extending an invitation to real Brown refugees who may travel to Meteora to seek refuge. If—as this example in Meteora suggests—negative attachments to brownness may adhere discursively, politically, and affectively to Brown bodies, how does Amal’s performance theatrically challenge these formations? Here, I want to turn to thinking about *how* Amal requires us to discursively attune our gaze.

How we’re gazing is determined by who and/or what we’re gazing at. For example, Amal, positioned as a ten-year-old Brown Syrian refugee girl, is situated to garner a more sympathetic gaze than her more representative male, Black refugee counterparts. In my interviews with David Lan and Amir Nizar Zuabi, Producer and Artistic Director of *The Walk*, respectively, they both cite how critics of Amal’s performance argue that her body (that of a ten-year-old Syrian refugee girl) is not reflective, or representative, of the average refugee. Lan told me:

...Occasionally people say things like, “Look, if your puppet was a seventeen-year-old boy, people would not be as sympathetic. They would not be as sympathetic.” Yeah. You know, “You’re sentimentalizing it. You get, you know, an extremely beautiful ten-year-old girl child. What do you expect?” Of course. Right. And I don’t really have an answer to that. I don’t have an answer to that. Yeah, maybe, I don’t know. I’m not going to try. The play we’re doing is the play we’re doing.¹⁸⁵

Similarly, Zuabi remarks:

You know, one of the things that I was asked quite early on —“Yeah, it’s very easy. She’s gorgeous and she’s ten. Why isn’t she a 17-year-old Afghani boy?” And that’s a very, very, very legit question. It’s a question I ask myself. Yeah. And the truth is: she’s a ten-year-old girl because...that’s the tolerance...the tolerance level of the median. It’s the tolerance level of the median of the audiences. I wish the tolerance level of the median was a 17-year-old Black Congolese child. It’s not. But I hope that by walking after her for an hour and welcoming a refugee, the next time you see a 17-year-old Congolese or African or Eritrean, or...you will remember that he was Amal a couple of years ago. Or he’s got

¹⁸⁵ David Lan (Producer) in discussion with the author, June 2024.

Amal as a sister, or... And the welcome you had for a fictional character that was beautiful and joyous to walk with should be extended into the real world.¹⁸⁶

Both Lan and Zuabi describe how people converge around Amal as a Brown, little girl is driven particularly by how far they can extend their affective solidarity. In other words—their “tolerance,” as they put it, has a limit. Interestingly, this critique emerged at different points in our conversations. I asked Lan about how he thinks about exposure in Amal’s performances. He replied that for him, the job of the Amal project is to offer people a chance to convene around a refugee in places where they generally aren’t welcome; particularly, it is an opportunity for an alternative affect to emerge that opposes abjection. Comparably, Zuabi activates Amal’s performance in our conversation as an honest attempt to invite audiences to engage with a refugee in an accessible way (through street theatre, which is free and deconstructs barriers to entry in a way that normative theatre does not). Admitting that a more truthful representation of the average refugee child might not garner the same level of interaction, or “tolerance” in his parlance, he hopes that once audiences interact with Amal, they will be more likely to extend their sympathy and support to the average, real, refugee that they might encounter in their lived experience.

This critique speaks directly to the theatrical efficacy of Amal’s performances. While their criticisms are fair, as Zuabi acknowledges, he hopes that her work will help spectators to reorient their senses through embodied praxis, and to forge what we can understand as a sense of brown alongside future real-life refugees they encounter towards meaningful change.

¹⁸⁶Amir Nizar Zuabi (Artistic Director) in discussion with the author, August 2024.

Political, Social, and Communal Brown Exposure

In our contemporary long-Trump Presidency moment (2016- present), the concept of the refugee, as a discursive figure, has become a catch-all; a blanket term to index anyone who has arrived—either through juridically sanctioned channels or through extralegal means—as "threatening" to the health and stability of the nation. During his 2024 election campaign, Trump ran largely on the issue of migration; villainizing migrants as "illegal" (regardless of the absence of evidence to suggest this is true) and promising, according to the National Immigration Forum, to "initiate 'the largest domestic deportation operation in American history,' targeting not only undocumented immigrants but also, potentially, individuals currently protected under programs such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), Temporary Protected Status (TPS), Deferred Enforced Departure (DED), and humanitarian parole programs established during the Biden administration."¹⁸⁷ In doing so, he promised to eclipse the "refugee invasion."¹⁸⁸ In his first year in office since his inauguration in January 2025, Trump has consistently made headlines about delivering on those promises—most recently, with unlawful ICE raids in Minneapolis in response to the brutal murder of Renee Good and Alex Pretti—regardless of legal precedence.¹⁸⁹ Devastating in their ramifications, these headlines include: "Trump administration asks Supreme Court to strip legal protections from 350,000 Venezuelan migrants" (*Associated Press*, May 2025), "Trump Stops Refugee Admissions Indefinitely" (*Forbes*, January 2025), and "Afghans who helped Americans fear Taliban retribution after U.S. suspends refugee program"

¹⁸⁷ "First 100 Days: Trump Administration Roils Immigration." National Immigration Forum, April 28, 2025. <https://immigrationforum.org/article/first-100-days-trump-administration-roils-immigration/>.

¹⁸⁸ "Federal Court Blocks Trump Administration Efforts to Completely Shut Down Asylum at the Border ." American Civil Liberties Union, July 2, 2025. <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/federal-court-blocks-trump-administration-efforts-to-completely-shut-down-asylum-at-the-border>.

¹⁸⁹ Tom Bateman, "Trump Tests Boundaries of His Power as Minnesota Pushes Back," BBC News, January 18, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cpqy5q1eeywo>.

(*PBS News*, March 2025), among others.¹⁹⁰ The last of these is a stark reminder of the oft-cited sentiment and title of Ian Sanjay Patel’s monograph by the same name, which discursively renders evident the *cause* of refugee movement: “We’re *here* because you were *there*.”¹⁹¹ In other words, and in plain terms regarding refugee movement specifically: Afghans wouldn’t have needed to seek refuge had the U.S. not declared war against Afghanistan in 2001, which eventually led to the circumstances that this headline references in 2025. Refugee movement doesn’t exist in a vacuum, as I’ll explain more thoroughly in a later section. It’s often directly an effect of U.S. intervention elsewhere that prompts movement to the region at a later time.

Rather than a just “catch-all” descriptor, the category of “refugee” is also a legal designation that applies to a limited number of forced migrants who receive juridically instituted protections (financial, legal, and medical). To contextualize this, according to the UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency), the number of refugees in 2024 worldwide was 31.0 million, whereas the entire population of forcibly displaced people (internally or otherwise) reached upwards of 123.2 million.¹⁹² This statistic lays bare the small percentage of forced migrants that are not only recognized, but also protected by law.

According to the UN Refugee 1951 Convention (and 1967 Protocol), one of the internationally recognized commissions that safeguards the legal rights of refugees, the definition

¹⁹⁰ I cite these headlines to provide a sense of the contemporary structure of feeling in the U.S. about refugees: Mark Sherman and Lindsay Whitehurst, “Trump Administration Asks Supreme Court to Strip Legal Protections from 350,000 Venezuelan Migrants,” AP News, May 5, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-venezuela-immigrants-deportation-protection-80f61585197eaff8b254c9b621976780>; Stuart Anderson, “Trump Stops Refugee Admissions Indefinitely,” *Forbes Magazine*, April 27, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2025/01/21/trump-stops-refugee-admissions-indefinitely/>; Nick Schiffrin and Sonia Kopelev, “Afghans Who Helped Americans Fear Taliban Retribution after U.S. Suspends Refugee Program,” PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), March 12, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/afghans-who-helped-americans-fear-taliban-retribution-after-u-s-suspends-refugee-program>.

¹⁹¹ Ian Sanjay Patel, *We’re Here Because You Were There: Immigration and the End of Empire* (Verso, 2021).

¹⁹² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 2025. *Global Trends: Forced displacement in 2024*. Copenhagen, Denmark: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

of a refugee is: “A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”¹⁹³ In legal terms, refugees are constructed solely through their individual experience of persecution according to these categories. Belonging to an oppressed group isn’t a legitimate reason for pursuing the protections of a refugee status; instead, the onus is on the individual to prove that they, specifically, were the target of persecution. For that reason, the phrase “forced migrations/migrants” better describes the situation of most migrants who are forced to flee their homes by circumventing the delimitations of refugeehood. It is particularly useful because it centers on the socio-political, material consequences of displacement rather than solely hinging on the legal meaning of one limited designation.

Both “forced migrant” and “refugee” animate bordered subjectivities, which Little Amal’s performances attempt to destabilize through an activation of a brown commons. Though “forced migrant” is a more fitting term for most people forced to flee their homelands, it has no legal determination. I bring the term into conversation here to further highlight the multitude of lived experiences that coalesce under the discursive term “refugee.” The term “forced migrants,” for example, accounts for internally displaced people (IDPs) whereas “refugees” does not.¹⁹⁴ Two of the most recent examples of IDPs that were highly mediatized were (largely white)

¹⁹³ UN General Assembly, 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 189, p. 137, 28 July 1951, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/unga/1951/en/39821>.

¹⁹⁴ “The only difference between an IDP and a refugee is that an IDP never crossed an international border.” Rawan Arar and David Scott Fitzgerald, *The Refugee System: A Sociological Approach* (Polity Press, 2023), 32.

Ukrainians fleeing their homes in 2022 due to the recent Russian invasion and ongoing war, and more recently, the Gazans along the Gaza Strip when Israeli strikes between late 2023 and throughout 2024, forced them to relocate. One recent, highly conspicuous example of the toll forced migrations take on IDPs is the AI generated image (Figure 3) that went viral online during the “All Eyes on Rafah” campaign following an Israeli Air strike on Rafah in Palestine the week of May 26, 2024.



Figure 3. “All Eyes on Rafah” AI generated image uploaded by @shahv4012. Alys Davies and BBC Arabic, “All Eyes on Rafah: The Post Shared by 47M People,” BBC News, May 30, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cjkkj5jejleo>.

Some deterrents of the image’s circulation, like Palestinian-Iraqi-American artist and researcher Ameera Kuwash, critique the photo for its lack of depth and grounding in reality. Kuwash, for example, claims that it “undermines Palestinian testimony and lived experience” because it

neglects the lived reality of Gazans.¹⁹⁵ Others, according to the BBC, commend it for its effective engenderment of sympathy on a worldwide scale that forces social media users, if they do not take action to “acknowledge their complicity.”¹⁹⁶ Particularly salient for its supporters is the fact that the image doesn’t show blood, or violence, or death on a mass scale; rather, it achieves its purpose by driving the viewer’s gaze towards the city of Rafah, the mass of people who have been displaced. In doing so, it compels the viewer not to look away. Through consuming the AI generated image, viewers are implicated in the destruction. The choice to collapse authenticity in favor of a less damage-centered visual narrative is one way of ensuring that in attempting to portray forced migrant suffering and destruction, we don’t also lose sight (double entendre) of humanity and the perseverance that they exhibit on a daily basis.¹⁹⁷

I give the example of Brown Gazan IDPs above to foreground a larger brown structure of feeling that emerges in and beyond solely legal refugee subjectivities. Even though this chapter specifically takes refugee performance as its methods, the idea of a brown exposure that I put forth here extends more broadly, encompassing forced migrants as well. Discursively and politically, to put forced migrant and refugee life and perseverance at the center of a narrative (rather than destruction) requires decentering the preeminence of the nation-state. Both refugees and forced migrants (which also includes refugees, in addition to a more expansive framework of violence leading to migration) are abject subjects against which the state constitutes its enclosure; subsequently determining who belongs inside/outside of its non-porous borders.

¹⁹⁵ Sarah Shamim, “What Is ‘All Eyes on Rafah’? Decoding a Viral Social Trend on Israel’s War,” Al Jazeera, May 30, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/29/what-is-all-eyes-on-rafah-decoding-the-latest-viral-social-trend>.

¹⁹⁶ Leah Asmelash, “How a Likely AI-Generated Image of Gaza Took over the Internet,” CNN, May 30, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/30/world/all-eyes-on-rafah-image-ai-cec>.

¹⁹⁷ Eve Tuck, “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 409–28, <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15>, 409.

Recognizing the juridical, political, and discursive systems that animate the bounds of the nation is a first necessary step towards destabilizing its force. Theatrical interventions, like Little Amal's walks, are the second; they help us to imagine alternative modes of existence in community with each other. Amal's visit to Meteora, Greece, for example, exemplifies how potent theatrical refugee encounters can be.

Thesis 2: Brown exposure seeks immersive, participatory, and intimate engagements

Immersive, Participatory Intimacy: Little Amal in Philadelphia and Dear Laila in Portland

September 2023. It's 12:55 pm on a sunny Wednesday afternoon in Philadelphia. I'm driving to Columbus Square Playground, just south of Passyunk Square, at the south end of the city. As I make my way through the side streets to find parking, I pass a U.S. Customs and Border patrol car— a harrowing reminder of the ever-present surveillance state in which we live. This semiotic sign, the car signaling migrant detainment as a public service (good), is at odds with the collective gathered just inside the worn, steel gates of the park waiting to warmly greet The Walk's *Little Amal*. As I enter, I see young schoolchildren who seem to be between seven and twelve representing a wide variety of the racial and ethnic spectrum. They hoist up hand-drawn signs that say, "Vare-Washington welcomes you," which I learn refers to a local elementary school in the area. Sounds of drumming, the chatter of adult chaperones, and the laughter of young students all meld together.

A hushed tone falls over the crowd as the lead producer, David Lan, introduces himself. He begins his remarks:

Amal is one of the hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of young people, who have had to leave the places where they grew up, where they live, until war came to find them there. And we know that the causes of war in Syria, the war in many other countries that force people to leave their homes, are...and I'm gonna keep this really simple...are

terrible people doing terrible things. However, the whole *Little Amal* project rests on the premise that there are hundreds of millions of people of good will. And we know that there are hundreds of millions of people of good will in this country which is why we are so pleased to be able to walk behind Amal on her long forty city journey through your country.¹⁹⁸

As the audience members, through this speech we are positioned as morally benevolent. The hope is that our benevolence will transform into formal patronage, because next, Lan makes a request for donations for the “The Amal Fund [via Choose Love]” which supports refugee children worldwide. At the time of writing, the page has garnered just under a million dollars in support – lending credence to the “adoptive gaze” that Suhaila Meera so aptly theorizes as “[constructing Syrian children] as at-risk, devoid of prior kin or belonging, and malleable—in other words, worthy of national ‘adoption.’”¹⁹⁹ Coercing an adoptive gaze by pairing the appeal to people of “good will” with the request for donations framed my initial encounter with Amal’s creative team and thus, Amal’s performance. However, I soon felt that this messaging at the beginning of the performance—refugee children positioned as helpless, thrown into destruction and destitution—to be at odds with the feeling of brownness that Amal’s performance circulates. Instead of counterproductive, this dissonance clarifies the breadth of Amal’s affective potential, rather than the limitations of the discursive one that the producers have designated for her.

It is later that day, around 7:00 pm, and I have just arrived in Center City for Amal’s evening performance. Gathered at the front doors of Philadelphia Theatre Company, a group of about 100 people, a diverse mix of adults and children, are lined up along Broad Street awaiting Amal’s grand entrance. I notice that there is a large police presence—which is not unprecedented for a sizable public performance (especially since we’ll be walking for about 45 minutes down

¹⁹⁸ Author fieldnotes, East Passyunk, Philadelphia 13 September 2024.

¹⁹⁹ Suhaila Meera, “(Not So) Minor Encounters: Little Amal from The Jungle to The Walk.” *Theatre Journal* 75, no. 3 (2023): 321–40. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2023.a917481>, 325.

the main stretch of the city). As opposed to the experience a real refugee might encounter, the police have cleared a path for Amal, and for us to safely accompany her to the planned ending point for tonight's walk. The goal is to walk with Amal to City Hall, where we will sing her a lullaby as she sleeps on a makeshift bed prepared in her honor.

Emerging as if out of nowhere, Amal rounds the corner of the theatre as the walk begins. She immediately lays her head against the concrete wall of the theatre, already exhausted. Initially, she leads us on a walk south down Broad Street, also known as the "Avenue of the Arts," toward City Hall (Figure 4).

As we walk, Amal sways unevenly on her feet, looking incredibly tired. At points, I genuinely fear that she will topple over from exhaustion. When we reach a stopping point, Amal pauses to take a break on the stoop of a church entrance. Just as she closes her eyes, actors wearing black t-shirts—who had, until then, blended in with the crowd—surround her. They each hold up miniature flashing police lights, which are accompanied by the sounds of sirens emerging from a portable boombox in the vicinity. Without saying a word, Amal is forced to pick up and depart. Interspersed throughout the walk there are a noticeable amount of real police sirens dispatched from patrol cars whizzing by the opposite side of the road. This echo of sirens—real and presumably consequential—that accompany the ones in Amal's performance reminds us of the very real dangers that her performance embodies.

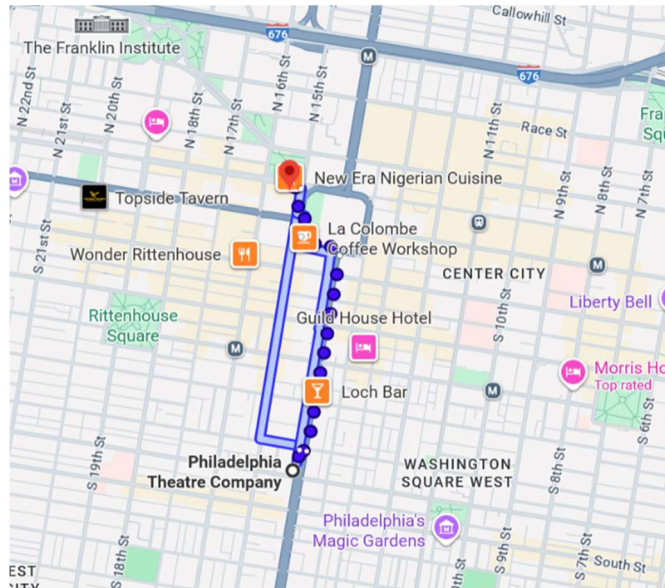


Figure 4. Google Maps, Walking directions from Philadelphia Theatre Company to City Hall, Philadelphia USA.

Later, Amal pops into an alcove in front of Ormandy Ballroom to rest before being attacked by a rat (another puppet). Finally, we enter City Hall, which looks like a sprawling marble fortress topped with a massive clock on its spire that watches over the city (Figures 5 and 6); more specifically the entrance is marked, “Hall of Justice.” We enter and process towards the right into a small open-air commons that frames the anterior of the building. There, we find a small twin sized bed prepared for Amal to crawl into. The puppeteers depart her body seamlessly, preparing her for a good night’s rest. We are invited by team members of The Walk to sing her a lullaby (an adaptation of Frère Jacques, I believe) as they tuck her in for a night of sleep. In their most lilting voices, people sing until we’re assured by the flutter and ultimate close of her eyes that Amal is indeed peacefully and blissfully asleep. Having guaranteed her access to shelter and rest, we depart knowing that we’ve participated in safeguarding her survival for at least one more night.



Figures 5 and 6. Photos of Little Amal at City Hall in Philadelphia on September 13, 2023 (credit: Amna Farooqi).

Amal's invitation to walk alongside her, as we did in Philadelphia both in East Passyunk and Center City, can be characterized as an immersive performance. I define immersive performance as participatory, intimate performances wherein spectators are called upon to meaningfully participate and help shape, or animate, the performance. In dialogue with scholars of immersive performance including Josephine Machon, Gareth White, and Scott Magelssen and E.B. Hunter, I situate *Little Amal* and *Dear Laila* as minoritarian immersive performances that animate theatrical intimacy and collapse. This work expands the archive of immersive performance, specifically attuned to minoritarian performance, to consider how brownness' aesthetic and affective qualities labor towards alternative modes of citizenship and belonging that activate more human and equitable communal existences.

Josephine Machon's scholarship is foundational to theorizing immersive theatre and performance. Machon's fundamental discursive contribution to immersive theatre in performance is her scale of immersivity, which unequivocally positions the audience as, "a pivotal criterion." For Machon, audiences make immersive performance meaningful. She claims, "Immersive performance events which are stimulated by the potential human bodies have to make and interpret meanings truly exploit and expose this potential for live[d] experience."²⁰⁰ In other words, immersive performances both evoke representations and generate embodied responses, both of which are necessary for performances to fully resonate.

Theatre scholar Gareth White approaches immersion through form: more specifically attuned to what he calls "interiority" and the "invitation." Across his scholarship, he analyzes immersive theatrical events through the interiority of their environments and metaphors; and through the audience invitation to performance.²⁰¹ Germane to this chapter's analysis, the invitation—as it is received and responded to by audience participants (or those who choose to reject it)—produces its own set of aesthetics in immersive performance, which orient the spectators' senses. While White calls for a deeply formalist reading of the aesthetics of immersion in theatre and performance, I depart from him by attending to the political resonances of the performances in this chapter.²⁰²

Most recently, in their edited collection, *Enveloping Worlds : Toward a Discourse of Immersive Performance*, E.B. Hunter and Scott Magelssen invite discourse centered on the

²⁰⁰ Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 44.

²⁰¹ Gareth White, "On Immersive Theatre," *Theatre Research International* 37, no. 3 (2012): 221–35, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883312000880>.

²⁰² Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1-28.

“immersive turn” in theatre and performance as a twenty-first-century phenomenon.²⁰³ If

Machon’s focus is audience, while White’s is form, then Magelssen and Hunter build on these foci to concentrate on time and space (location) in activating immersive performance.

Particularly interested in archiving U.S. immersive performance across an array of immersions, the essays in their collection speak directly to the works I engage in this chapter. I hope to animate their conversations further by archiving the work of brown exposure as minoritarian immersive performance in U.S. based performances *Little Amal* and *Dear Laila*.

Why are *Little Amal* and *Dear Laila* immersive performances? How do the artists making these performances define them? How do these performances illuminate, specifically, minoritarian immersive performance? First, *Little Amal*. When I asked both David Lan and Amir Nizar Zuabi about characterizing Amal’s performance as immersive, they were both reticent to fully engage “immersive” as a project descriptor. Lan told me:

If I'm going to be....cautious about what I say, then, I don't like this idea of immersive theatre. I don't like separating out different kinds of theatre, and saying that one is immersive, and one is not. I know what people mean. But, theatre is theatre. Either it's working or it's not working. Theatre is a relationship between a bunch of people doing one sort of thing and another bunch of people doing another sort of thing. And your purpose is to bring them together in some intimate way, which affects people intellectually, emotionally, [and] physically.²⁰⁴

Lan chooses to define Amal’s performance through the intimacy that she generates with her audiences. This intimacy is achieved across audiences through affective and physical proximity. For Lan, bringing audiences together to experience this intimacy is what makes Amal’s performances resonate with the spectators that convene around her.

²⁰³ E. B. Hunter and Scott Magelssen, eds., *Enveloping Worlds: Toward a Discourse of Immersive Performance* (University of Michigan Press, 2025).

²⁰⁴ David Lan (Producer) in discussion with the author, June 2024.

Artistic Director Amir Nizar Zuabi also resists the label “immersive theatre”; instead, he offers an alternative conception of it, which is “participatory theatre.” Zuabi says:

For me, the beauty of the Amal is kind of, without the definitions, is [that] it is a participatory art form. We're asking people to walk with her. We're asking people to be part of her journey in a city. We're asking people to do something with us. But they're not...they're not confined by anything. So, if they don't want to, they can just stop. And if they've had enough, they can go and have a coffee. And if they...you know, it's, we don't even have the kind of...now you're in a building or now you're in a room with us. So now you're...it's the beauty of...and that's why street theatre is such a, such a difficult, demanding and yet so beautiful if it's... if it works.²⁰⁵

Zuabi offers “participatory street theatre” as a viable alternative to immersive theatre to describe how participants interact with Amal’s performance. For him, “participatory” more accurately describes the level of buy-in required for attendees to want to engage with, and remain at, performances. The choice to engage, and the option to continually revisit and renew that choice over time, is what defines the act of asking audiences to immerse themselves in Amal’s walks.

We can read Lan and Zuabi’s refusals of “immersive theatre” as indicative of the term’s failure to accurately reflect the ethos of the *Little Amal* project. Popularly associated with a company like Punchdrunk—which only produces immersive, commercial, and highly mediatized theatre and where the cachet of talking about the work is more important than the work itself—their rejection of immersion points to a dissonance in their work with Amal. In contrast, Amal’s performances lack frivolity, and they are free and open to the public. Rather than highlight immersivity, they want to enliven Amal’s affective resonances (intimacy and freedom [of choice]) which are activated by inviting audiences in close proximity. However, this project aims

²⁰⁵ Amir Nizar Zuabi (Artistic Director) in discussion with the author, August 2024.

to expand the notion of immersivity to include the affective resonances of intimacy and participation that the case studies in this chapter activate through minoritarian performance.

In a different, refugee-driven immersive minoritarian performance—*Dear Laila*—Basel Zaraa, the creator and performer, also defines his work through intimacy. As opposed to Amal's walks, however, this intimacy is achieved by inviting audience members to engage the performance one at a time. In a recent interview with PuSh festival director of programming, Gabrielle Martin, Zaraa commented on the choice to engage audience participants individually. He told Martin:

I decided... *Dear Laila* to be experienced by one audience member at a time...in order to try to get audience more closer to the story I'm telling. So I hope this personal approach can get or can make the audience member more connected to that experience by...getting involved or interacting with the installation and the space. So, for example, at one moment I ask the audience to open one of the books and they find some photos inside. And this is the photo that we saved from our destroyed home in Yarmouk camp and is the only link that we still have that connect us to that place that we lived there for like three generations. And I feel by touching these photos, I hope that the audience might get more connected to the story behind these photos. And I'm like, I'm trying to invite the audience to sit in Laila's room, Laila's my daughter, and to try and to imagine that they're hearing the story of a story of one of their parents. And I hear what I want to say also, Like I'm trying to tell a story about like how big events sometimes are experienced by normal people, people like them...So yeah, I feel like by touch and stuff, all this and then like I'm trying as much as I can to make it more personal with them.²⁰⁶

Zaraa explains how he believes that engaging audiences through individual interactions is what will effectively and affectively make the story feel personal for each of his interlocutors. In short: he wants us, as his audience, to feel closer to his story. More specifically, Zaraa implies that to connect with his story—and further, to be implicated—we need to consider our own subjectivity, the ways in which refugeehood is a political and social construct that any of us

²⁰⁶“Push Play Episode 8: ‘Dear Laila’ Transcript,” PuSh Festival, accessed October 19, 2025, <https://pushfestival.ca/podcasts/push-play-episode-8-dear-laila-transcript/>.

could be subjected to. He achieves this attempt to bring us close through immersion by inviting participants to toggle between taking on the experience of a refugee (Zaraa, when he helps us affectively feel our way through his former home), occupying the positionality of a young five-year-old child trying to understand exile and destruction (his daughter), and of course, ourselves. We experience all three of these positionalities fluidly, exposing the precarity of “refugeehood” as a slippery subjectivity that any of us could be forced to just as easily inhabit. This slippage is even further animated through Amal’s performances; particularly her first appearance in the 2017 premiere of *The Jungle*.

Amal’s Immersive Origins in The Jungle

Little Amal is the brainchild of Producer David Lan, former Artistic Director of the Young Vic, and award-winning playwright and director Amir Nizar Zuabi, Artistic Director of “The Walk.” Though neither Zuabi or Lan are refugees themselves, they’re both from high-conflict areas that have a history of deeply violent forced displacements: Palestine and South Africa, respectively. The puppet, Amal, was brought to life by Artistic Director Adrian Kohler and Executive Producer Basil Jones of the now-famous Handspring Puppet Company (*War Horse*).

While there are presently multiple Amals walking around at once (the demand for her presence is so high that more than one of her needed to be made), the original Amal was made in 2021 to withstand the rugged terrain she needed to traverse. Her torso is made of molded cane, whereas her extremities are made of carbon fiber: “the lightest, strongest material [Kohler and

Jones] could learn to work with.”²⁰⁷ Clocking in at twelve feet tall, she often dresses in the same outfit: hair tidily tied back in a bow, she clads a “tattered”-looking see-through latticed torso of a shirt, a worn pink and faded cream-lined mid-length skirt, and a pair of maroon tights or pants that reach down to her ankle-high, distressed, red boots (Figure 7) . Amal is always accompanied by three puppeteers; meaning she’s literally and figuratively held by them as they walk with(in) her on her journey. Some puppeteers include refugees from the Calais “Jungle” – a refugee migrant camp that is now defunct (2015-2016), although some refugees remain in perilous conditions there.



Figure 7. Amal in San Diego, California on November 4, 2023 (credit: Amna Farooqi).

²⁰⁷ “Creating Little Amal - by Handspring Puppet Company,” Little Amal (The Walk), YouTube, posted October 7 2020, 5 min., 16 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwoy0ve3b1g>.

In fact, that is the basis of *Little Amal*'s origin story. The Calais "Jungle" was the inspiration for David Lan's first artistic production featuring Amal: a play called, *The Jungle*, which premiered in December of 2017 at the Young Vic in London. In *The Jungle*, which takes place in from March 2015 to February 2016, about eighteen refugees from across the globe (including Syria, Afghanistan, Palestine, Eritrea, Sudan, Iraq, and Iran) arrive at the encampment in Calais, France: known colloquially as "The Jungle".²⁰⁸ The play moves backwards in time, opening amid chaos as the French government is about to close the camp. Boxer, a camp volunteer who is determined to become a better father, whisks away a parentless little girl named Amal. A young Afghan boy, Norullah, is dead. His body was found near the highway. As the community of migrants plan his funeral, a judge renders her legal decision to evict The Jungle. Suddenly, French police descend upon the camp and deploy tear gas and pepper spray. During the chaos, the play jumps backwards in time to the emergence of the camp when all these various characters were figuring out how to live in communion with one another. The performance charts the trajectory of The Jungle: from its nascent stages to its violent, destructive closure.²⁰⁹

The British playwriting duo responsible for *The Jungle*: Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, two white British volunteers who spent seven months at the camp in Calais, refer to it as, "a place of hope, in many ways"; perhaps foreshadowing Amal as the symbol of "hope" that was yet to emerge as a worldwide phenomenon. Describing the framework of the camp, they highlight the bustling local economy driven by the migrants who occupy it: more specifically, the

²⁰⁸ For more on the Calais "Jungle," see: Imran Rahman-Jones, "The History of the Calais 'jungle' Camp and How It's Changed since 1999," BBC News, October 24, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-37750368>.

²⁰⁹ Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, *The Jungle*, New edition (Faber & Faber, 2018).

various cafes, restaurants, and shops that serve the community, which they gesture towards in “The Jungle.”²¹⁰

As part of that infrastructure— and in community with the refugees— the two helped to create “Good Chance” theatre: “a [makeshift] theatre in the shape of a geodesic dome, which has since become Good Chance’s signature pop-up venue.”²¹¹ Humble in its stature and flexible interior space (read as: bare bones and largely unfurnished interior), the dome is hailed as one of the few spaces in the camp where no matter nationality, spiritual beliefs, type of performer, etc., everyone was invited to gather peacefully. According to Good Chance Theatre’s website, “Artistic styles and traditions as varied as Eritrean circus, French opera, Chilean theatre, Sudanese drumming, Kurdish Kung Fu and Iranian stand-up comedy (to name a few) met and fused in extraordinary ways, always resulting in something new.”²¹² There were modes of intracultural and intercultural theatre co-mingling; these inspired the immersive play, *The Jungle*, as it was performed both in London and then in New York City.

Although critics who reviewed the New York production of *The Jungle* disagree on its efficaciousness as a well-structured play, one thing they all agree upon is that it’s an immense undertaking and an extraordinary piece of immersive theatre. *The New Yorker*’s Alexandra Schwartz claims it is “immersive in the true sense. The show does not so much present its story as directly plunge us into it, to astonishing emotional effect,” while Ben Brantley of *The New York Times* heralds it as “a work of absorbing theater, which uses the immediacy of that art to

²¹⁰ “The Jungle’ comes to the West End in Stephen Daldry-directed play,” AP Archive, posted June 25, 2018. 6 min., 5 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XC0zk0-1kyc>.

²¹¹ It has since traveled to London, France, NYC, and various other locations. For more, see: Amelia Parenteau, “At Europe’s Good Chance Theatre, Refugees Have a Dome and a Home,” American Theatre, April 23, 2019, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2019/04/23/at-europes-good-chance-theatre-refugees-have-a-dome-and-a-home/>.

²¹² “The Domes,” Good Chance, accessed March 22, 2026, <https://www.goodchance.org.uk/domes>.

conjure the paradoxes and confusions of a world dealing with an unprecedented flux of uprooted lives.”²¹³

Co-directors Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin put the audience at the center of the camp’s activity, collapsing the distance between “them” and “us”: the audience members, who can, and will return home after the event has passed; and the refugees who may never get the chance to return home ever again. Lacking aesthetic distance compels spectators, situated as refugees in the camp, to consider the slipperiness of their own subjectivity. Rather than personal fault, they learn through embodied knowledge in their participation that systems of power (juridical, political, aesthetic) frame and determine who accesses claims to citizenship.

The audience at the Young Vic’s 2017 performances were seated on either sides of what most closely resembles an elevated traverse stage, at long wooden tables dressed with checkered table covers that evoke memories of outdoor summer picnics, or family-style restaurants. As the reviewers describe it, while the audience isn’t explicitly called to take part in the production as a cog in its larger machinery to move the “plot” forward (as in Punchdrunk’s *Sleep No More*, dreamthinkspeak’s *In the Beginning Was the End*), by being thrust into the center of the action, they are implicated in the refugee situation alongside migrants who are forced to flee home and make the journey, who become what Achille Mbembe refers to as the “living dead.”²¹⁴ The immersion is strengthened even more by the fact that the play features a number of refugees from Calais. Safi, the intrepid narrator from Aleppo, is played by Ammar Haj Ahmad: a refugee from Syria who left in 2011, just before civil war broke out.²¹⁵ He is one of three refugees from Calais

²¹³Alexandra Schwartz, “The New Yorker Recommends: ‘The Jungle’: A Play That Conjures Life inside a Refugee Camp,” *The New Yorker*, January 3, 2019.; Ben Brantley, “‘The Jungle’ Review: Migrants’ Heartbreaking Search for Home in Calais,” *The New York Times*, December 9, 2018.

²¹⁴ Achille Mbembe and Steve Corcoran, *Necropolitics*, Theory in Forms (Duke University Press, 2019).

²¹⁵ Schwartz, “The New Yorker Recommends.”

in the cast; all of whom encountered difficulties traveling to the U.S. to perform due to President Trump's Muslim Ban.²¹⁶

Ahmad's casting is one example in which the distance between the conflict "over there" and the world "over here" productively collapses in this immersive performance. While *Variety* critic Nicole Saratore insists that the production is "excessively theatricalized" and "puts distance between its subject and the audience when it could be collapsing it," I argue that involving real refugees does effectively perform this collapse. The theatricality (Brecht) is precisely what makes this performance so e/affective—the audience, forced to contend with the presence of real refugees, is implicated without absolution.²¹⁷ Specifically, they are exposed to Brown refugees onstage and invited in to take on the role of refugees themselves. They join an already, always present vibrant brown commons of different ethnic and racial brown subjects on stage in a compelled praxis of "being with, being alongside."²¹⁸ Though of course, spectators know that the ephemeral experience of taking on a brown, refugee subjectivity will eventually come to an end with the play.

Recognizing the slippery terrain of asking audience members to become refugees within the play, critic Ben Brantley warns audiences. He says, "...don't be lulled into basking in your admiration and empathy for this diverse tribe of nomads. As exciting and entertaining as their

²¹⁶ William Jones, "'The Jungle' Tells The Stories Inside A Real Refugee Camp In Northern France," NPR, December 14, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/14/676652888/a-new-play-opens-in-new-york-based-off-a-real-refugee-camp-in-north-ern-france>.

²¹⁷ I link this particular lineage of theatricality to Bertolt Brecht's v-effekt, or alienation effect. Drawing on the Chinese "other", after traveling to Moscow to see Mei Lanfang perform, Brecht formalizes the nature of this alienation effect in his essay, "On Chinese Acting," wherein he says that audiences must awaken to what they take for granted everyday to see things from a social standpoint and to "meet the imperative demands of an age of transition." The alienation effect is at the core of his epic theatre, which actively moves the theatre into the overtly political realm, requiring audience response. See: Eric Bentley, tran., "On Chinese Acting," in *Brecht Sourcebook* (Routledge, 2000), 19-20.

²¹⁸ Muñoz et al., *The Sense of Brown*.

exertions may be, the scarring pasts these characters carry and the profoundly uncertain futures they face are beyond the comprehension of those of us with homes, or even countries, to call our own.”²¹⁹ As a result of immersion, audience members *feel* the ways in which systems of power: political, juridical, and social, create the conditions of forced migration and refugee crises— rather than personal failure. *The Jungle* uncovers neoliberalism’s capacious false promise—the one that assumes inequality as rational based on hierarchies of individual drive and ability—and locates this knowledge at the site of the body.

Animating Immersive Brown Exposure

The thick descriptions and definitions of refugee, participatory, immersive theatre that I offer above collectively generate a sense of brown exposure. Exposure, as I define it, is a minoritarian tactic that flips the normative script of theatre and performance to land its gaze on spectators; this tactic works to reveal racial and colonial logics, and to reveal utopian possibilities by suggesting new communal, social, and political epistemologies through theatrical performances. Brown exposure describes how this tactic is deployed by brown refugee immersive performance to create an affective commons through which audiences are directly implicated to “sense brown” together.²²⁰ More particularly, audiences are asked to engage intimately with the work and with one another, and to situate themselves in an uncomfortable, likely unfamiliar and undesirable subjectivity (that of the refugee figure). As I see it, collectively, these tactics offer an innovation in immersive theatre. They activate minoritarian performances

²¹⁹ Brantley, “‘The Jungle’ Review.”

²²⁰ Alongside Muñoz, I am theorizing “Brown exposure” in dialogue Elizabeth Maddon Dillock’s evocation of the “performative commons” as a commons produced through relations (rather than economic or material means) in eighteenth-century Atlantic performance. See: Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649-1849*, New Americanists (Duke University Press, 2014).

that speak to audience, form, and time and space but foreground intimacy and participation to advance and expand our current definition of immersion in theatre.

Further, brown exposure imagines social, political, and legal utopian futurities that envision a world beyond borders, beyond the boundaries of a colonial empirical nation-state. These theatrical performances provide aesthetic interventions that generate a feeling of brownness, both racially and affectively, in community with audience members. In what follows, I argue that both *Little Amal* and *Dear Laila* mobilize brownness—through minoritarian affects of hospitality, mobility, and refusal—to strive towards a global humanity.

Thesis 3: Brown exposure thrives through radical hospitality

Dear Laila in Portland

*“Dear Laila, you are five now and have started to ask me where I grew up, and why we can’t go there. This is me trying to give you an answer.”*²²¹

On a crisp, winter Saturday in March 2025, I step off the bus in Portland, Oregon to find the SWANA Rose Culture + Community Center in Portland's Eliot residential neighborhood, where the performance I’ve traveled to see, *Dear Laila*, will take place. Across the street from the bus stop, I find a modest folding sign with a single sheet of paper haphazardly pasted with one tiny piece of tape across the top. As it sways in the wind, I glimpse it enough to see it directs me towards a quietly marked red door front. At first, I mistake the entry for another of the many homes that flank this suburban street. It is not until I peer through the iron security door that I see the check in desk through the transparent glass just behind it. As I open and cross the door’s

²²¹Dear Laila (Palestine/UK),” Boom Arts, accessed October 19, 2025, <https://www.boomarts.org/202425/dear-laila-palestine-uk>.

threshold, it strikes me that I was expecting to enter a space rendered recognizable by aesthetics that normally accompany a business or performance venue (uniform and/or harsh seats, concessions or a cafe with snacks and drinks for purchase, and formal signage instructing you where to go or how to move properly through the space). Instead, what I walk into is a very warm, incredibly beautiful home.

The space, which appears to be a living room, is decorated with artwork that depicts Palestine through the eyes and work of Palestinian artists. Works like “Gaza Rising” and “Gate to the Past” (Figures 8 and 9) by Palestinian pharmacy student and artist Bashar Alimour frame the space, and thus, the performance. In contrast to the depictions of the genocidal destruction in Gaza that dominate news cycle narratives (and with good reason), these pieces generate sites of Gazan beauty and serenity. We can sense this in the calm of the water glistening in the golden sun, hosting one serene fisherman amidst a sea of canoes in “Gaza Rising”; and the gorgeous, vibrant colors framing a tree so expansive it attempts to jump out of the frame—nestled alongside a seated, resting camel in a landscape encased in a beautifully scripted invitation to “come to Palestine” in “Gate to the Past.”



Figures 8 and 9. “Gaza Rising” and “Gate to the Past” by Palestinian artist Bashar Alimour, @bashargram. (credit: Amna Farooqi).

Bookcases sit against two walls in the room. They contain academic monographs (Isa Blumi’s *Destroying Yemen*, Paul A. Bové’s *Edward Said and the Work of the Critic*), popular literature (Kaveh Akbar’s *Martyr!*, Suheir Hammad’s *Born Palestinian, Born Black: & The Gaza Suite*), and children’s books (Zohreh Ghahremani’s *Memory Garden*, Rashin Kheiriyah’s *Rumi*) centered on or speaking to SWANA culture, politics and revolution, and geography. The collection is scattered, in no particular order, across their shelves.

Upon entering the space, I am greeted by a staff member of Boom Arts, the company producing Basel Zaraa’s *Dear Laila*. The interactive installation, described in Boom Arts’ press materials as “An intimate, interactive installation experienced by one audience member at a time [that] uses the retelling of memories and tactile details to bring this now destroyed place [in Syria’s Yarmouk refugee camp] to life,” is what this chapter takes up as immersive performance; it requires audience members to activate it.²²² *Dear Laila* has been shown at over fifty venues across five continents. Cities include: Berlin, Brussels, Cairo, Leeds, Vancouver, and Zurich, among others. At the center of this performance is the notion of home: who has access to one, what constitutes one, and when, if ever, can one return? A physically absent Zaraa engages audience members one-on-one, instructing them to move through the performance through analog media including cassette player recordings and four handwritten notecards. Each notecard instructs the audience on how to interact with the installation, orienting the audience’s behavior and aesthetic sensations: where to look, what to touch, and how to imagine the world Zaraa remembers his childhood home in Syria.

²²²Dear Laila (Palestine/UK),” Boom Arts.

Once I check in, I'm kindly offered the opportunity to sit down and rest and enjoy a cup of sage or hibiscus tea and small nonpareils or shortbread cookies from the station that is set up neatly in a corner of the large, open foyer space, free of charge (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Tea, cookies, and tissues at *Dear Laila* in Portland, Oregon on March 8, 2025. (credit: Amna Farooqi).

This gesture of hospitality reminds me of visits to my Dadi Ama (Urdu for paternal grandmother) in Pakistan, where the same kind of warm reception is not only commonplace, but expected. I decide to wait until after the performance to indulge in the tart and refreshing taste of the hibiscus tea, and instead, turn my attention to the fixture that ensconces the “interactive installation,” which the Boom Arts employee advises me begins beyond the black curtain. Just inside this small nook, no larger than a standard bathroom (5x8 ft), there is a desk and at its center are four thick square note cards neatly stacked. I’ve been advised by the greeter at the door that they’ll contain instructions for how I’m meant to proceed through the “interactive installation.”

The notes (and the entire performance) are a response to Zaraa's daughter, Laila, who has inquired about his home and where he grew up. The desk chair, pulled back as if waiting for me to take a seat, is familiar; it is the same brown leather, slightly distressed chair rimmed with gold that my parents had at their living room desk as I was growing up. I take a seat. In addition to the stacked cards, I notice an ornate box, no larger than the palm of my hand, decorated with jewel-tone flowers to my right, a replica of a three-story house with miniatures in the center, and family photos flooding the wall to the left. While there is a standing lamp next to the desk, most of the light enters through the large three-panel window just behind my seat. A wave of warmth washes over me as I turn over the first card.

Card one instructs me to open the box to my right, and inside, I find a note from the playwright Basel Zaraa. With handwritten writing in black, thick ink on the delicate, pocket-size paper, the note informs me that Zaraa's parents left after the Nakba in Palestine in 1948 and moved to a refugee camp in Syria: Yarmouk, where he was born in 1985. The note ends with a careful list of contents: one, the prayer beads Zaraa's mother left Palestine with, hoping they'd return to gather the rest of their belongings days later; two, the key to their house: big and heavy, like a rusty key to an old, well-hidden attic; and three, pieces of detritus in a bottle nestled on top of an ornate pouch. All are pieces of an archive that generate a landscape of a home that can never be recovered.

On the second card, I'm instructed to put headphones on which are located in the desk drawer. I click play and realize that he's instructing Laila (and us, as Laila in this moment) to close her eyes. I do, and as I listen, Zaraa transports us back: asking us to imagine the smell of concrete, and listen for the sounds of birds flying overhead. Once we're instructed to open our eyes again, we are directed to view the miniature reconstruction of his home in the Yarmouk

refugee camp. Zaraa re-members, reconstructs the happy memories that took place in various parts of the house. The roof is where his parents got married, where he and his wife got married, and where they refused his grandmother's warning to sprinkle salt to keep away evil and instead, basked in the joy of youth, of creating a growing community in a place where to have community is itself an act of political defiance.

In the recording, Zaraa also recalls his loving, exhausted mother who raised him and his siblings while his father was away fighting in Palestine. They have a vegetable shop, contributing to the economic landscape of the bustling refugee community, providing nourishment through a venture that eventually prospers enough to allow them to build a second, and then a third story onto their home. We are tasked to imagine the wind blowing through the curtain on the third floor, relieving the house of the heat from the day as the cool night sets in to lull them into sleep. And then the sound of bombs comes crashing into the otherwise serene soundscape.

They grab their belongings and, having left Palestine and now Syria, become twice-removed refugees. But Zaraa doesn't leave us, as Laila, with that violence for very long. Instead, card three instructs us to open a tattered photo album, which his father found upon returning to Yarmouk in 2018 amidst the rubble of their former home. Its insides are scattered with photos that have been loved, worn at the edges as if leafed through a thousand times before, containing memories of major milestones like birthdays and marriages; signaled by candle flames and flowing white silk dresses that indicate special occasions. They're alternated with photos that present moments of normalcy for refugees. In one, a mother smiles as she feeds her baby in a high-chair; in another, a baby jokingly holds a hookah to its mouth. In another, a woman dressed

in a white gown smiles at the camera, gesturing with her hands as if mid-dance, as a man—perhaps a family member—looks on from the background.

As both Laila/myself, the fourth and final note card instructs me to open the top drawer of the desk to my left. Inside, I find salt and a box inscribed with the words “Dear Lalia” on it in which to place the salt for safekeeping to take home with me, in order to be protected from evil should my future warrant any dubious or dangerous encounters.

The inability to remain or return home safely is one of the conditions of possibility that ontologically determines political refugeehood. Much like Good Chance Theatre’s *The Jungle*, whose central question is “When does a place become home?”, Zaraa’s performance – which was commissioned by Good Chance Theatre – attempts to provide recourse for an answer to that very same question; one that resonates years later, traveling laterally to a different contextual political and historical moment.²²³ In response, Zaraa offers an intimate invitation to tour his home in Yarmouk, Syria, where he guides us through aesthetic engagements with archival remnants (a house key, family photos, and a miniature reconstructed version of his house) from his time at the refugee camp to compel us to question not only the notion (material and imagined) of home, but also, our own subjectivity in relation to it.

For Zaraa, home is felt through quotidian moments. Zaraa compiles an inventory of everyday traces—including miniatures, detritus, and photographs—and invites us, his interlocutors, to interact with these archival keepsakes. He utilizes memories of home linked intergenerationally across time and space. His mother’s house key, a key to a home that predates

²²³Jones, “‘The Jungle’.”

his birth, serves as what Marianne Hirsch terms “postmemory,” or shards of memories of traumatic events [that] persist to mark the lives of children of survivors [of trauma].”²²⁴

Home is also futurity for Zaraa. If home, as Una Chaudhuri posits through deploying her term geopathology, is a problem, she claims that performance is the solution. In her landmark text, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, Chaudhuri tracks twentieth-century theatre (fin-de-siecle to the millennium) to query how minoritized subjects and cultural others have been mapped on the realist stage, and gestures to the possibilities that theatre, as a form, affords for shaping selfhood through place. Drawing on Chaudhuri then, rather than theorizing home, I offer that Zaraa theorizes refugee futurity *through* the home by what Chaudhuri qualifies as “remapping the possible terrain of subjectivity.”²²⁵ He locates home as an affective experience. While we aren’t able to look inside of the miniature home, we’re tasked with imagining how Zaraa remembers feeling in each room; joy during the rooftop wedding; and comfort in a shared third-floor bedroom with five children on the floor. Rather than lingering in the loss of the home (which is still felt through the rust, rubble, and tattered photographs), Zaraa re-stories refugee houselessness by locating home in one’s own body, rather than in a physical location.

Through this performance, home becomes an epistemology by which audiences come to know the refugee experience through their own embodied knowledge.²²⁶ This affective remapping of home happens through brief moments of recognition or familiarity, like my own example with the brown leather desk chair. For others, it might be the waves of the ocean that

²²⁴ Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(Es)* (University of California Press, 2014), 141.

²²⁵ Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, Theater--Theory/Text/Performance (University of Michigan Press, 1995), xv.

²²⁶ The Critical Refugee Studies Collective, accessed October 19, 2025, <https://criticalrefugeestudies.com/>.

bathe their ears while they “walk” through the house with Zaraa, or the collection of family photographs that recall important life events that participants may have experienced in their own lives: marriages, birthdays, and celebrations of life. Zaraa activates a brown exposure that animates an affective brown commons of shared experience in difference.

By inviting us into his former home, through brown exposure, Zaraa deconstructs the home from a private refuge and transforms it into a public experience. It is a dual experience, as he claims: “Home is our land that we are struggling to return to, and home is also people. So I believe that wherever I go, I can make home through the people I meet.”²²⁷ Unveiling the home, making the private public, is a powerful act of refusal. In their collection *Performing Refusal*, Lillian Mengesha and Lakshmi Padmanabhan define refusal as, “[naming] precisely those tactics of illegibility, opacity, and inaction, that remain outside of the field of political action properly conceived.”²²⁸ Inaction and illegibility, for them and their co-authors, are minoritarian aesthetics that become illegible under extractive economies of racial capitalism that aim to assimilate the “other.” Zaraa's invitation into his recreated home, including his performance's nostalgic, tactile archive, together make illegible the discursive and material “homelessness and helplessness” out of which juridical and political refugeehoods, supposedly, emerge.

Refusing Surveillance and Abstraction, and Performing Radical Hospitality

In our contemporary surveillance state, ICE agents are making targeted home visits to intimidate immigrant communities. The safest response, in this case, is to keep one's door firmly

²²⁷ Naomi Webb, “Basel Zaraa: Good Chance Commissioned Artist on ‘Dear Laila,’” Good Chance, July 24, 2025, <https://www.goodchance.org.uk/stories/basel-zaraa>.

²²⁸ Lilian G. Mengesha and Lakshmi Padmanabhan, “Introduction to *Performing Refusal/Refusing to Perform*,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 29, no. 1 (2019): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2019.1574527>, 3.

closed. Through his participatory performance, Zaraa uses brown exposure and aesthetics to welcome an alternative engagement through radical hospitality that traverses borders. His performance, which stages a warm welcome to refugee camp, stands in stark contradistinction to our current dystopian reality. One wherein ICE detention centers are rapidly expanding as citizens and non-citizens alike are racialized, criminalized, and dehumanized as they are snatched from their homes. In the face of this violent surveillance, *Dear Laila* aesthetically evokes embodied responses that compel us to question how we might imagine collective existence beyond the limited juridical parameters of citizenship, borders, and the constitutive power of both in conferring humanity.

This section asks, how might brown exposure refuse surveillance? I dialogue with Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembe to trace both the historical and contemporary modes of surveillance and abstraction, respectively, that describe current operations in the U.S. to “secure the border.” In a moment like ours, where Brownness’ illegality is even further heightened, Zaraa’s interactive performance saturates his audience with alternative sensations of Brownness, and depictions of refugeehood. They collide to eschew the popular narrative of the helpless and destitute Brown refugee as one who is repeatedly rendered illegible outside of this limited discursive framework, thereby justifying their continued surveillance by the nation-state.²²⁹

Most famously theorized by Michel Foucault, surveillance is best understood through the metaphor of the panopticon. In dialogue with Jeremy Bentham’s nineteenth-century prison design, this analytical framework, in its most basic sense, describes power relations wherein the Panopticon “[induces] in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that

²²⁹ I use “saturation” in dialogue with the term as it is defined through C. Riley Snorton and Hentyle Yapp’s recent edited collection on race and circulation as they relate to value. See: C. Riley Snorton and Hentyle Yapp, eds., *Saturation: Race, Art, and the Circulation of Value*, Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture (The MIT Press, 2020).

assures the automatic functioning of power.”²³⁰ The possibility of being watched at any moment is the force that extracts, consolidates, and routinizes the exertion of power. More specifically, Foucault’s panopticon describes how the state uses seemingly innocuous systems of power to coerce individuals into modes of self-surveillance. A requirement to confirm citizenship status on a job application, for instance, is just one example.

State surveillance has advanced with digital technological innovation. Achille Mbembe has analyzed how our digitized processes of self-surveillance lead to extraction (data mining) and most importantly, abstraction (separating data from bodies to authenticate their identity as if static, discrete entities), through which we comply with migration regimes. National and international policing organizations obtain our biometric data through infrared screenings, microchips, and other digital technologies.²³¹ Mbembe explains the reason we partake in this process, curious enough, through the concept of exposure. Mbembe says:

...We are more than ever before at any other time in human history, not only in close proximity to each other but also exposed to each other. This close proximity and exposure is experienced less and less as opportunity and possibility and, more and more, as heightened risk. But entanglement and exposure to each other are not all that characterize the now. Wherever we look, the drive is simultaneously and decisively towards contraction, towards containment, towards enclosure.²³²

For Mbembe, exposure is akin to risk; risk that can only be contained through policing the movement of undesirable bodies that do not belong. Unlike how I theorize it in this project, Mbembe’s concept of exposure is one of the driving forces towards enclosure. In contrast, I theorize exposure in this chapter as forging a commons that differently animates and imagines

²³⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd Vintage Books ed (Vintage Books, 1995), 201.

²³¹ Achille Mbembe, “The Multiplication of Perspectives: Borders, Dialogue. Achille Mbembe,” MoMA C-MAP, March 16, 2020, YouTube video, 14:25, <https://youtu.be/pmgeLOqbmIA?si=zPFRx3FrO59LPRxO>

²³² Achille Mbembe, “Bodies as Borders,” *From the European South*, no. 4 (2019): 5–18,8.

aesthetic, political, juridical, and legal racializations of brownness. Mbembe's describes the tendency towards enclosure as part of a process he calls borderization: "the process by which certain spaces are transformed into uncrossable places for certain classes of populations, who thereby undergo a process of racialization; places where speed must be disabled and the lives of a multitude of people judged to be undesirable are meant to be immobilized if not shattered."²³³ As a racializing, extractive, and abstracting process, borderization determines whose lives are worthy of movement, of mobility, and as a result, of continuation of life.

If abstraction is the heart of the process of borderization, as Mbembe suggests, the artists I archive here use brown exposure to offer embodied knowledge as one possible response. Embodied knowledge is the antithesis of abstraction; based in lived experience, embodiment requires a deep attunement with one's thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they produce unique, individual, and grounded knowledge formations. Stuart Hall reminds us that race, too, is an abstraction that has material effects.²³⁴ Centering Brown embodied knowledge does not negate the abstractedness of race, but only recognizes that processes of racialization do have real, material consequences that produce situated, embodied knowledge in Brown subjects that know and feel what it is to be "othered"; to exist together in difference.

Artists like Basel Zaraa create works of art like *Dear Laila* to produce embodied knowledge which entangles affect and reason. This is why Zaraa's work refuses enclosure as the basis for his performance. *Dear Laila* vividly reconstitutes a miniature version of his home in Palestine, in a tactile manner for his audiences, so that through their embodied knowledge they might come to know refugeehood differently than they've previously conceptualized it. In other

²³³Ibid., 9.

²³⁴ See: Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, eds., "Race, the Floating Signifier: What More Is There to Say about 'Race'?", in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, by Stuart Hall, Stuart Hall (Duke University press, 2021).

words, he re-maps borders through his performance; he opens his own home in an act of radical hospitality to his audience members.

I draw on the work of Vivian Huang to define what I am calling radical hospitality. Attending to the work of artists Yoko Ono and Laurel Nakadate, Huang offers a new epistemology of hospitality by reading the works of these artists through relational paradigms of inscrutability, parasitism, and silence. Huang sees hospitality as pleasurable, even though the “pleasures...are not uninformed by a colonial hierarchy of identity production that are not wholly coterminous with their means.”²³⁵ Neither Ono nor Nakadate shy away from hospitality in their performances; instead, they take pleasure in the act of hosting by challenging hospitality as rendered through Western, orientalist frameworks of Asian femininity. Huang sits with the discomfort that her interlocutors demand, allowing her to read their hospitality as a more complex sociality; one wherein normative power relations are dynamically challenged through strategies of parasitism and silence, both of which are inscrutable. Specifically, Huang offers inscrutability as a minoritarian tactic that refuses normative forms of Asian American, feminized hospitality.

My use of hospitality in reading Zaraa’s performance resonates with Huang’s, particularly because of how Zaraa troubles normative expectations of who can host, or offer hospitality; in other words, who can seek versus offer refuge. Rather than the way that he hosts, it is the hosting itself that makes Zaraa’s hospitality radical. If Huang offers inscrutability as a minoritarian tactic that refuses normative modes of hospitality, I see exposure as Zaraa’s. Zaraa refuses the current structure of feeling centered on “illegal” Brown migrants in the U.S. through his invitation to

²³⁵Vivian L. Huang, “Inscrutably, Actually: Hospitality, Parasitism, and the Silent Work of Yoko Ono and Laurel Nakadate,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 28, no. 3 (2018): 187–203, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2018.152461>, 193.

visit his home in a refugee camp; a place wherein the mainstream assumption is that its inhabitants are homeless (and houseless) by definition. By asking participants to embody Zaraa's experience through brown exposure and walk through his house as if they themselves have been transported there, he redefines "home" and uses radical hospitality to refuse borderization and its racializing indices; instead, Zaraa's work invites us to forge a commons through brownness that moves us across borders; all the while, staying put right at home.

Thesis 4: Brown exposure dreams beyond borders

Little Amal in California and the Contours of Global Citizenship

November 2023: When I arrive at the community center in San Ysidro, a border town about 20 minutes south of San Diego, CA, I decide to peruse the neighborhood to get a sense of place before I go and wander alongside Amal. I see a couple of neighbors (or at least, they seem neighborly), fixing a car that juts just beyond the driveway and into the sidewalk space. I say "good morning," to some, and proceed to walk around the corner, where I spot what seems like a bodega. I'm reminded of the bodegas in New York City that I used to visit regularly before moving to Seattle for graduate school. The bodega is a sacred place of community: a space of gathering where your soul and satiations are nourished, where non-human life flourishes (have you even been to a bodega if you've never encountered a bodega cat?), and where you can find just about anything you need in a pinch. A product of immigrant, transnational communities, the site of the bodega is at once a familiar (general) and distant fixture (locally in San Ysidro) to me that captures the ways in which I am feeling inside this primarily Latinx neighborhood.²³⁶ As I

²³⁶ For more on the bodega, transnationalism, and its history to immigration, see: Pine, Adam M. "The Bodega on the Corner: Neighborhoods, Transnationalism, and Redevelopment in Philadelphia." ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2007.

continue to meander through the neighborhood, I sense that perhaps I and the surrounding community are different kinds of Brown; and when I arrive in space, a Brown structure of feeling begins to emerge.²³⁷

San Ysidro is a border town. It is the southernmost community in California, right on the border of Tijuana, Mexico. Known as the “Gateway to the Americas” the city welcomes many tourists, like me, year round.²³⁸ Amal’s event in San Ysidro is one filled with music, dancing, and celebration. At the community center, known as “Living Rooms at the Border,” participants are invited to write notes of well-wishes for “migrant families living across the border in Tijuana,” where Amal will take them when she travels there in the following days. Living Rooms at the Border is a relatively new development project (2018), funded by Casa Familiar: an immigration support agency that also serves as a co-sponsor of the event.²³⁹ After some brief welcome remarks, Amal moves towards a table where the note-writing takes place. Volunteers who are associated with the various sponsoring institutions (Casa Familiar, UCSD Center on Global Justice, UCSD Department of Theater and Dance, and Friends of Friendship Park) wear pink or black t-shirts that said “I am Amal” on some, and “Yo Soy Tu” (“I am you”, in Spanish) on others. A guitarist begins to play an unfamiliar bright and cheerful melody. During the intervals between verses, they shout out various words—the messages on the papers—in Spanish, which translate to: “compassion, heart, hope, Amal, family, happiness, peace, [and] friendship,” among others. More music commences as we sing “Cielito Lindo” together before the event concludes.

²³⁷ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*.

²³⁸ San Ysidro, City of San Diego Official Website,” San Ysidro | City of San Diego Official Website, accessed October 19, 2025, <https://www.sandiego.gov/citycouncil/cd8/communities/sanysidro>.

²³⁹ According to their Casa Familiar’s website, “Living Rooms at the Border is a 13,469 square-foot mixed-use project in the historic heart of San Ysidro, a predominantly Latino community in the City of San Diego. This economic development project also contains 10 units of affordable housing and is less than one mile from the U.S.-Mexico Border and includes expansion space for Casa Familiar’s immigration services and the *El K-Fe* Barista Youth Training Program.” For more, see: <https://www.casafamiliar.org/living-room-project/>

After Amal leaves, a large dance circle ensues, with various members of the community sticking around to either watch, or to participate by jumping into the center of the circle to “bust a move,” as it were.

Towards the close of that day, just before sunset (5:30 pm), Amal is scheduled to meet spectators at Mission Beach in San Diego; a popular destination located about twenty minutes northwest of Balboa Park, it borders the Pacific Ocean. As she arrives, she walks us to the edge of the sand where it meets concrete near the parking lot closest to the entrance. We pause, and quickly learn that there is an issue with the puppeteers’ stilts. Spectators are asked patiently to clear the area as the production team works towards a resolution. After fifteen minutes, Amal is ready to engage us once again. She rounds a sand dune and begins her planned walk. Striding along the beach, she encounters three items half-buried into the sand. First, a treasure chest. Second, a neon orange life vest covered in thick, wet chunks of sand. She picks up the life jacket and the puppeteers on either side of her help her grasp onto it. The third and final object she encounters is a sandal sticking out of the sand. She picks up the sandal, brings it towards the ocean, and places it just above the tide mark. Her movement as she bends down to deposit the sandal feels prayer-like and ritualistic. As she stands, participants hoisting thirty or so seagull puppets on sticks into the air gather in a circle to surround her. They lead her away from the crowd as she continues her walk, her journey to find her family.

I’ve been struggling to write about Amal’s performances because I’m less interested in investigating the contrived narrative—of a Syrian female refugee child searching for her family who is destined, by virtue of the performance’s setup, to never find them—that her performance engenders and more intrigued by the collective possibilities of moving with her, and of accompaniment, or adjacency, as a radical hospitality. A moment to explain my terms: first,

accompaniment, which describes how we walk alongside Amal, together, to support her. Laurel Mei Sang illustrates accompaniment as “mutual collaboration” in her work on abolition ecologies; whereas Michelle Castañeda defines accompaniment through physical approximation: “In accompaniment, physical presence is not a metaphor. Accompanying another person means sharing space with them, moving with them wherever their journey leads.”²⁴⁰ These two forms of accompaniment – physical and collaborative– also encapsulate what I mean by accompaniment in Little Amal’s performances. Second, adjacency. Tina Campt activates a form of accompaniment, or what she calls “adjacency” in her theorizing a Black gaze. She defines adjacency as: “the reparative work of transforming proximity into accountability; the labor of positioning oneself in relation to another in ways that revalue and redress complex histories of dispossession.”²⁴¹ Adjacency, for Campt then, is a form of accompaniment “plus”– alongside the kind of physical and collaborative support that accompaniment requires, adjacency compels one to take responsibility for causing or perpetuating harm, and subsequently redressing it. Together, accompaniment and adjacency activate the work Amal compels. She requires spectators to walk alongside her (accompaniment), or to labor physically as a refugee must and temporarily take on her subjectivity (adjacency). Through embodied accompaniment that extends into adjacency, then, Amal’s performances are an attempt to shift the prevailing discursive cause of refugeehood: from personal failure that can be avoided to a deeper understanding of the systemic flaws that produce the circumstances driving refugees from their homes. Instead, Amal’s performances

²⁴⁰ See: Laurel Mei-Singh, “Accompaniment Through Carceral Geographies: Abolitionist Research Partnerships with Indigenous Communities,” *Antipode* 53, no. 1 (2021): 74–94, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12589>; Michelle Castañeda, *Disappearing Rooms: The Hidden Theaters of Immigration Law*, with Molly Crabapple, Dissident Acts (Duke University Press, 2023).

²⁴¹ Campt, *A Black Gaze*, 171.

drive spectators to imagine alternative modes of citizenship that they might collectively pursue as a redress to our current, faulty, deeply harmful conceptions of national belonging.

If “Brownness is a being with, being alongside,” what kind of utopian futurity does Amal’s performance open up, or uncover, when she asks us to “feel brown,” as citizens and non-citizens, in solidarity with her?²⁴²

Here, I harken back to Sandra Ruiz and her methodology of “the turn” to return to the work of Muñoz. In his posthumous monograph, *Sense of Brown*, he reminds us to think of “brownness” as a more expansive methodology; an affective and vibrant structure of feeling: one that is not becoming but is always, already present. Brownness describes a movement towards a utopian, affective commons; one that privileges affective alliances over identitarian formations through feeling brownness. Importantly, Muñoz doesn’t resist the notion that Brown bodies feel brownness as “otherness” through their racialization and interpellation as “othered.” Instead of dwelling in difference, he mobilizes (literally) the affective feeling of brownness towards liberatory utopian potentialities.

Muñoz asserts the affective feeling of “brownness” as a methodology of refusal, working against the larger hegemonic “national affect” of whiteness that circulates predominantly in the United States. Muñoz claims:

...There is an unofficial, but no less powerfully entrenched, [U.S.] national affect. It is thus critical to analyze the material and historical import of affect as well as emotion to better understand failed and actualized performances of citizenship. May Joseph has brilliantly explicated the ways in which the performative aspects of citizenship have been undertheorized in previous discourses on citizenship. She reminds readers that within the important discourses on citizenship and participatory democracy, ‘performance emerges as an implied sphere rather than an actually located process.’ Following Joseph’s lead, I position performance as an actualized sphere, one that needs to be grasped as such to enact an analysis of citizenship. Citizenship is negotiated within a contested national

²⁴² Ibid.

sphere in which performances of affect counter each other in a contest that can be described as official national affect rather than emergent immigrant. The stakes in this contest are nothing less than the very terms of citizenship.²⁴³

I quote Muñoz at length above to a) center the importance of performance to discourses of citizenship and the material consequences of being recognized by the state and b) to locate affect as a crucial node of embodying citizenship.

In dialogue with Muñoz, I argue that each time we walk together, as citizens and noncitizens alongside Amal – particularly as she’s an identifiably Brown (human/nonhuman) subject – we mobilize a brown commons that functions as what Jill Dolan calls a “utopian performative,” or finding utopia in interspersed moments of performance that are “imagined and experienced affectively...[to] train our imaginations, inspire our dreams and fuel our desires in ways that might lead to incremental cultural change.”²⁴⁴ Whereas Dolan considers liveness and presence as fundamental to her concept of utopia, Muñoz (2009) theorizes the utopian as a queer futurity that cannot focus on the “here and now” (ephemerality of live performance) but is more concerned with a “then and there,” a “crashing wave of potentiality” that utopia actively works towards.²⁴⁵ Though contrasting, together, these visions of utopia describe how Amal positions audiences to imagine belonging in solidarity with one another in our contemporary political moment and beyond.

²⁴³ Ibid., 12.

²⁴⁴ Jill Dolan, “Performance, Utopia, and the ‘Utopian Performative,’” *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 3 (October 2001): 455–79, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2001.0068>, 406. For more on Ernst Bloch and utopia, see: Ernst Bloch and Jack Zipes, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988).

²⁴⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 185.

Amal is particularly situated to engender a brown commons that activates utopian performatives because of her capacity to inhabit both nonhuman and human presence simultaneously. As Amir Nizar Zuabi claims, Amal is nearly a “vessel” until the spectator interacts with her, and gives her meaning.²⁴⁶ In other words, she gains meaning through our affective associations which emerge as we walk alongside her. If Achille Mbembe is correct when he claims that increasingly in the twenty first century, “to be alive, or to survive, is more and more co-terminus with the capacity to move,” then activating a brown commons through movement that refuses normative, hegemonic modes of citizenship is quite literally life-sustaining work.

Conclusion

Both *Little Amal* and *Dear Laila* employ brown exposure through theatrical tactics that animate and challenge normative (white) modes of citizenship. These performances reject Brown, racialized state surveillance and borderization through minoritarian affects of intimacy, refusal, radical hospitality, and accompaniment. I invite these two U.S. based performances in conversation, which, together ask: how does sensing brownness affectively activate embodied knowledge to expand our contemporary notions of citizenship? The following chapter continues this investigation into minoritarian aesthetics of immersive exposure, specifically attuned contemporary African American performances that query historically and contemporarily situated methods of racialized gazing, and Black racial performativity, to refute anti-Black racism through theatre and performance.

²⁴⁶Amir Nizar Zuabi (Artistic Director) in discussion with the author, August 2024.

CHAPTER THREE

Toward a “Response-ible” Spectatorship in Jackie Sibblies Drury’s *Fairview*

Spoiler alert: what I write next will reveal how *Fairview* ends. During the pivotal moment of Jackie Sibblies Drury’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 2018 play, she prompts one of her Black characters, Keisha, to break the (thus far intact) fourth wall. In a feat of theatricalism, Keisha turns out to the audience to ask to switch places with white spectators. She says:

KEISHA Could I say,
 Come up here folks who identify as white,
 you know who you are.
 You can choose to come up here
 to where I’ve always been, where my family has always been.
 Sit on the couch.
 Make yourself a plate.
 Look out from where I am.
 And let me and my family go out
 to where you’ve always been.²⁴⁷

In the final moments of the play, Keisha invites white spectators to take the stage while she, and her fellow Black cast members, sit down in the audience. It is the way that Drury compels audiences to racially identify and engage with one another in this crucial moment; and, how she positions spectators in relation to each other through this specific instance of theatricality (exposure) that grounds this chapter. As a compelling theatrical tactic with high political stakes, her aesthetic intervention reveals how anti-Blackness is ingrained in the predominant white gaze, conditioning how we visualize—and feel—race.

This chapter argues how Jackie Sibblies Drury’s *Fairview* animates a Black gaze (Campt) and subverts blackface minstrel performance through exposure, or audience immersivity, to

²⁴⁷ Jackie Sibblies Drury, *Fairview: A Play*, First edition (Theatre Communications Group, 2019).

produce what I am calling, “response-ible” spectators.²⁴⁸ Drury’s play is one in a constellation of performances—particularly Jeremy O. Harris’ *Slave Play* and Alesha Harris’s *What to Send Up When It Goes Down*—that premiered between 2016-2019 in New York City by Black playwrights, addressing increasing anti-Black racism and police brutality during (and continuing after) the first Trump presidency. I assert that *Fairview*, as a core part of this emergent structure of feeling, does three things: provokes audiences visually, physically, and discursively to shift the way they think about themselves, racially, in relation to each other; subverts the presentational and representational aspects of theatre, which enacts a space for new visual structures to emerge; and generates a Black gaze through its remapping of the terrain of the theatrical space through racializing the theatrical contract.

Additionally, I argue that Black playwrights including Jackie Sibblies Drury, Jeremy O. Harris, and Alesha Harris use exposure (or a proto-exposure) to create a structure of feeling that combats increasing anti-Black racism in our contemporary moment. To do so, the artists in this chapter compel audiences to reconsider how they perceive their own racialization, particularly in relation to Black racial performativity, and its enduring effects. Artists (including Asian American playwright Young Jean Lee) do this by devising advanced forms of blackface performance that subvert the caricaturing infamously associated with nineteenth-century blackface minstrel performances. They uncover systems (visual and affective aesthetic regimes) through which Black racial performativity oppressively operates. Together, they chart an effort to build and sustain more equitable futures, particularly for Black, minoritarian subjects.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ Tina Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*, First MIT Press paperback edition, 2023 (The MIT Press, 2023).

²⁴⁹ Raymond L. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, repr, Marxist Introductions (Oxford Univ. Press, 2009).

Throughout my analysis, I employ a variety of archival and ethnographic evidence including newspaper reviews, scholarly articles, artist interviews, and my own experience as an audience member at performances to query the ways in which Black artists are compelling contemporary audiences to respond to—and for white audiences in particular, to take responsibility for—increasing anti-Black racism in the late 2010s. I attend to aesthetics in their performances activated through theatricality, specifically animated through subversions of blackface; and in *Fairview*, purport how they produce a Black gaze and response(ible) spectators.

The Theatricality of Exposure

Let's return to *Fairview*'s final scene. During Act Three, when Keisha formally breaks the fourth wall of the proscenium stage, she says to the audience: "I've been trying to talk to You. This whole time. Have you heard me?"²⁵⁰ After she asks white audience members to come onstage, Keisha proceeds to ask a series of questions: "If I asked, would they do it? How long would it take?; "Do I sound naive? Does that matter?; and, "[If] I were out [there] with my colorful people, could I tell us a story?" Keisha goes on to narrate the story she'd tell us, which she says is, "about us, by us, for us, and only us."²⁵¹ Alongside the Black actors, who are now seated in the audience, the people of color who stay seated in the theatre—including me, a biracial Brown-presenting cisgender woman, at the time, in her mid-20s—stare at the sea of white faces looking out at us.

A few things are remarkable about this moment: first, the semiotics of a proscenium stage (distanced audience, raked seating) communicate to audiences that they're intended to *gaze at*

²⁵⁰ Drury, *Fairview*, 121.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

what's within the frame of the proscenium arch, not physically participate within its structure. This lulls the white audience members into a false sense of comfort; or at least, one they will be challenged to give up. Second, an avid theatregoer would expect the advertising materials to signpost an immersive or participatory feature as part of the show; both to draw in audience members interested in becoming formal actors in the production, and to flag this facet for accessibility reasons. Yet, *Fairview* does not; and I suspect that Drury risks the latter concern in favor of ensuring the moment is a surprise.

In dialogue with this crucial moment in the play, I ask: how does it orient us to each other as spectators and spectator-cum-actors?²⁵² And how does exposure animate theatricality in *Fairview's* performances?

A capacious and complex term, “theatricality” has been contested as a central concept to theatre and performance across historical contexts and has largely defined the emergence of performance studies as a field. It describes both: a theatrical aesthetic relationship between the spectator and the performer (opposed to a fin-de-siecle realism, that is); and a mode of understanding presentations and representations through theatre and everyday performance. At the core of arguments about theatricality, particularly in theatre and performance though, is a debate about truth and truthfulness in or through representations. Let me begin by examining two recent contributions to this discourse. The first, Michelle Liu Carriger's, animates presentation and representation through theatricality in everyday performance; while the second, Stefka

²⁵² I offer spectator-cum-actor here in dialogue with Augusto Boal's “spect-actor.” Augusto Boal. *Theatre of the Oppressed*, PLUTO Press, 2019.

Mihaylova's, queries theatricality through avant-garde aesthetics that activate the relationship between performers and the audience within the space of the theatre.

In her recent monograph, Michelle Liu Carriger defines theatricality as: “appearances (or representations) that float free of definite true or false value.”²⁵³ Through her analysis of Victorian-Era British and Japanese Meiji dressing practices, she argues for theatricality as a dynamic that oscillates between the presentational (false) and representational (true) aspects—in her case, of nineteenth-century dressing practices—which, alongside performativity, conditions subjecthood and identity. Carriger uses the theatricality of quotidian clothing and fashion, its “detachability” and unreliability, to offer an epistemology of identity expression; one that troubles the notion that “what you see is what you get,”—which assumes a truthful, at times liberatory praxis of individual expression—and instead, forces you to sit with the theatricality, the anxiety, of not knowing whether someone's performance of dress is truthful or deceitful, or perhaps oscillating somewhere in between.

Moving forward in time to the turn of the twenty-first century and back inside the theatre proper, Stefka Mihaylova's adept analysis of Forced Entertainment's *First Night* stitches a nineteenth-century liberal sympathy (Adam Smith) to discourses of witnessing and spectatorship in avant-garde twenty-first century performance.²⁵⁴ Using evidence from a recording of the 2001 devised production of *First Night* at The Palace (London) and her own experience attending the

²⁵³ Michelle Liu Carriger, *Theatricality of the Closet: Fashion, Performance, and Subjectivity between Victorian Britain and Meiji Japan*, Performance Works (Northwestern University Press, 2023), 31.

²⁵⁴ Drawing on Director Tim Etchells, Mihaylova describes the spectator-cum-witness as, “someone who is present at the performance event ‘in some fundamentally ethical way,’ someone who ‘feel[s] the weight of things and one's own place in them, even as that place is simply, for the moment, as an onlooker.’ She goes on further to claim, “In this definition of witnessing, one can see an affinity with Adam Smith's concept of sympathy as conferring personhood on another by recognizing their suffering or joy, a ‘fundamentally ethical’ process in which the observer's own sense of self gets reshaped, however modestly or fleetingly, through the imaginative act of inhabiting the other's circumstances.” See: Stefka G. Mihaylova, *Viewers in Distress: Race, Gender, and Avant-Garde Performance at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (University of Michigan Press, 2023), 57.

production in 2005 at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, Mihaylova describes the opening scene, in which a character, Robin, is (perhaps?) being tortured. Though her argument is ultimately against using "theatricality" as the best descriptor of the spectator's hesitant response to Robin's possible pain in the first scene (audiences are supposed to watch with sympathy), she provides an excellent definition of it. Citing Tracy C. Davis's definition, she defines theatricality as: "the deliberate suspension of sympathy toward an individual in pain that enables insight into the systemic cause of their suffering."²⁵⁵ Drawing on Davis's definition, Mihaylova argues that theatricality, in this case, animates an aesthetic distance.

Carriger argues theatricality as dynamic between truthfulness and falsity in representations; Mihaylova defines theatricality, "pace Tracey Davis," as a kind of aesthetic distance. In the context of this chapter, I situate theatricality in the moments wherein the audience is directly acknowledged and called upon. In chapter one on *Dark Noon*, I traced this through transnational "collapse" activated through racial and colonial technologies onstage. In chapter 2, on *Little Amal and Dear Laila*, I traced this through "brown exposure" animated through aesthetics of mobility, accompaniment, and adjacency. Here in *Fairview*, I am framing it through subversions of blackface aesthetics and theatricality. All of these examples are what I define as exposure. Across this dissertation, I argue that exposure is a tactic that minoritarian artists use to formally invite audience members into the performance as means to query contemporary racial and colonial logics. As such, exposure often exists in immersive and/or participatory theatrical works that draw on both components of theatricality as Carriger (confusing meanings between representation and presentation) and Mihaylova (meanings created

²⁵⁵Ibid., 68.

by aesthetic distance) position them. These artists who create works from 2016 to the present through exposure, I am arguing throughout this dissertation, use immersive and participatory tactics to create new social and communal meanings that make an urgently needed rebuttal to our current political moment.

A Theatrical Black Gaze

Fairview uses exposure, as a method of theatricality, to explicitly—and physically—problematize the white gaze in favor of animating a Black gaze (Campt). I start where Drury begins in her play: by examining the white gaze; not to center it, but to deconstruct it effectively. The “gaze,” which sutures itself to a white, male, heteronormative lens, is most strongly associated with Laura Mulvey’s foundational essay in film and media studies.²⁵⁶ Mulvey articulates this gaze through a psychoanalytic analysis of Western narrative film. Initially, she suggests that the male, active, patriarchal gaze frames how audiences are guided to look through its pleasurable structures, before swiftly destroying that pleasure, which she assures her readers is in fact the goal of her writing. Remarking on why cinema is the best place to trace the work of this gaze, she claims:

It is the place of the look that defines cinema, the possibility of varying it and exposing it. This is what makes cinema quite different in its voyeuristic potential from, say, strip tease, theatre, shows, etc. Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself.²⁵⁷

Mulvey argues that it is cinema’s capacity for gazing – that is gazing through a white, patriarchal male lens – that is its defining feature. Jill Dolan, however, has argued that theatre also

²⁵⁶ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

addresses the male, white, heteronormative spectator. She says: “Performance usually addresses the male spectator as an active subject and encourages him to identify with the male hero in the narrative. The same representations tend to objectify women performers and female spectators as passive, invisible, unspoken subjects.”²⁵⁸ As a result, she argues that feminist critics are always working to subvert the “main frame,” for “[R]epresentation— visual art, theatre and performance, film and dance – creates from an ideological base meanings that have very specific, material consequences.”²⁵⁹ While Dolan offers a feminist intervention to the white gaze in theatre, I argue that Drury, as artist-theorist, substantiates a racial intervention through theatrical exposure.

The first act in Drury’s play, *Fairview*, centers the white gaze. In fact, as a result of its centering, Act One seems almost mundane. Beverly, the matriarch’s daughter, eagerly and anxiously prepares for her mother’s birthday celebration. Her husband Dayton, her sister Jasmine, and her teenage daughter Keisha put additional stress on her party preparations. The family discusses some of their relatives who are due to arrive later that day before Beverly faints at the prospect of her cake burning in the oven, and the stage blacks out. It has some funny moments, but overall, the act feels quite tedious, even predictable. And that is because it is; it is just that the spectators do not yet (consciously) know why.

Act Two develops the white gaze further. The same scene repeats from the beginning. This time though, the Frasier family pantomimes their actions. As they do, four white voiceover characters—who we later learn are named Bets, Jimbo, Mack and Suze—have a conversation about race. We cannot see them; only hear their thoughts.²⁶⁰ Bets, Jimbo, Mack and Suze animate

²⁵⁸ Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (University of Michigan Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.5169198>, 2.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ I am thinking here with Jennifer Lynn Stoeber’s work analyzing how white supremacy culture operates through visual as well as aural aesthetics of race. See: Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural*

the race they'd like to "try on" through a series of uncomfortable stereotypes; for example, when Jimbo tells Suze that he would like to be Asian, he asserts that, "...every Asian [he] knows is like tortured by their parents expectations."²⁶¹ Immediately, though, Suze expresses her discomfort with such a sweeping statement, and Jimbo responds that he too, feels uncomfortable, before quickly mocking Suze by hailing her reaction as apropos of a proper liberal subject. But it is too late—the part that was supposed to be kept quiet, Jimbo has already spoken aloud.

This tactic in the second act simultaneously defamiliarizes the scene spectators witnessed in act one play out, and positions audience members as (unwitting, in my case) stand-ins for the onlookers narrating their feelings about race. In other words: we are indoctrinated into their worldviews without our consent.

Drury activates and then subverts the white gaze, which she thinks about in this play through the work of Frantz Fanon. After the character list and setting of the play, in the text, Drury writes in the script: "'Dirty n*****! or simply 'Look! A Negro!' -From *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon. This, reversed, is the play, in a way."²⁶² A familiar line to any scholars who engage poststructuralist, postcolonial critical theory and critical race theory, Frantz Fanon writes this at the beginning of his fifth chapter, which engages in a phenomenological analysis of anti-Black racism. The line, which a white child exclaims at/about him as he is sitting on a train, is soon followed by declarations that she is "scared!" Fanon describes how his "body schema, attacked in several places, collapsed, giving way to an epidermal racial schema. In the train, it was a question of being aware of my body, no longer in the third person but in triple."²⁶³

Politics of Listening, Postmillennial Pop 17 (New York University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.18574/9781479899081>.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 47.

²⁶² Drury, *Fairview*, 12.

²⁶³ Frantz Fanon et al., *Black Skin, White Masks*, New edition (Pluto, 2008), 92.

Reflecting on the “attenuated layers of meaning” (Spillers) thrust on his: body (first), his race (second), and ancestors (third), Fanon says that he exists “in triple.” He cannot escape the gaze of the white man; the same male, white, colonial gaze that has conditioned how the little girl hailing him has reacted. Later in the chapter, Fanon charts an attempt to circumvent his interpellation by the white “Other.” Toward the close, he is at a loss and asserts that “The white gaze [is] the only valid one” within a systemically racist and colonial framework.

Some scholars and theatre critics writing about *Fairview* ironically center the white gaze that this performance attempts to destabilize. Titles of recent scholarly articles like, “Making Whiteness Visible and Felt in Fairview (Pearce)”²⁶⁴, and, “White Gaze In Jackie Sibblies Drury's Drama Fairview (2018) (Fadlina and Wahyuni)”²⁶⁵; and news articles such as Ben Brantley's New York Times review of the 2018 premiere at Soho Rep titled, “Catering to White Audiences Go See This: It'll Make You Feel Just Awful: Jackie Sibblies Drury's ruthless comic drama on perceptions of race plays the cat to an audience of white mice” illustrate this point.²⁶⁶ In the former two, focus is concentrated on the white gaze and whiteness; in the latter one, the title assumes the play's primary audience is white. Brantley's title, in particular, points to the prevalence of the white gaze as it discursively shapes our epistemological frameworks for analyzing theatrical performance; and the fact that off-Broadway theatre audiences are overwhelmingly (middle class and) white.

Back to *Fairview*. In Act Two, additional white voices join in the conversation about what race one would choose to be. They offer their opinions and insights, with apologies for

²⁶⁴ Michael Pearce, “Making Whiteness Visible and Felt in Fairview,” *Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2021): 81, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h10020081>.

²⁶⁵ Rizka Fadlina and Delvi Wahyuni, “White Gaze In Jackie Sibblies Drury's Drama Fairview (2018),” *English Language and Literature* 13, no. 1 (2024): 268, <https://doi.org/10.24036/ell.v13i1.127689>.

²⁶⁶ Ben Brantley, “Go See this: It'll Make You Feel Just Awful: Jackie Sibblies Drury's Ruthless Comic Drama on Perceptions of Race Plays the Cat to an Audience of White Mice.” *New York Times*, June 18, 2018, C5.

stereotyping scattered throughout. All the while, the audience is meant to understand that the conversations they're having are politically incorrect; they make a painstaking number of blunders, and a lot of "um"s and "uhhs" are littered throughout their dialogues to fill the space of their discomfort in the presence of one another's racist foibles. The stereotypes are boring, tired, and uninspired, which make it all too easy to write off this act as an exercise in white fragility on mass display. Contrastingly, a close reading of the discussion of stereotypes reveals something deeper. Take, for example, Mack's diatribe on his choice of race:

MACK It's interesting, you know?
 Like, if I was going to like Become a different
 Race,
 And I could choose that.
 It would be like...I mean based on what
 Criteria,
 You know?
 Like if I just think about, like,
 Would I want to choose a race
 That is more like who I actually am?
 To express something essential about myself?
 OR would I want to choose a race that is
 Totally different
 From who I actually am,
 To try like, something new,
 I feel like I would want to try something
 That expresses
 More of who I am maybe.²⁶⁷

Mack eventually lands on "Latinx" as the race he would choose because it would properly capture his wild side, which of course, firmly lands us back in the realm of harmful troping and stereotypes. However, Mack's dialogue stands out because it illuminates the way that racial performativity is perceived through whiteness. The assumption that race—a social construct with material and discursive consequences—would express something deeper about

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 52 (*my emphasis*).

oneself is to misunderstand racial performativity: as I've written about it at length in my introduction, it doesn't facilitate the expression of any essence hidden beneath the surface. In *Fairview*, Drury aims to make this especially clear in her play— particularly when it comes to Black racial performativity in an American (U.S.) context.

Stuart Hall, Daphne Brooks, E. Patrick Johnson, and Hortense Spillers have written on the racial performativity of African American Blackness as it produces material, discursive, and affective social and cultural meanings that land on Black bodies. Animating race's constructedness as a “floating signifier” (Hall), Johnson asserts that Blackness and performance are co-constitutive; together, they produce a historically contingent framework for “black” culture.²⁶⁸ He toggles between analyzing archival case studies, like Marlon Riggs's film *Black Is ...Black Ain't*; and performance ethnographies (his grandmother's experience as a live-in-domestic in North Carolina in the 1960s, his personal experience of teaching an African American Literature course) as his methods. Pointing to performance itself as a trope that allows for the appropriation of blackness, he troubles Black “authenticity”: positioning it as a liminal space out of which harmful stereotypes of Blackness emerge, but so, too, do Black subversive practices of resistance.

Hortense Spillers problematizes “Black authenticity” in the opening lines to her foundational article, “*Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book*.” They are worth quoting at length below:

Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. “Peaches” and “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire” and “Earth Mother,” “Aunty,” “Granny,” God's “Holy Fool,” a “Miss Ebony First,” or “Black Woman at the Podium”: I describe a locus of confounded

²⁶⁸ Regarding “floating signifier,” see: Stuart Hall et al., *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, Stuart Hall (Duke University press, 2021).; E. Patrick Johnson, “Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity,” *Duke Backfile* (Durham [N.C.]), 2003, 2.

identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.²⁶⁹

By stating she is “a marked woman,” Spillers animates how she is marked by the histories (à la Fanon) of her race, particularly animated by the legacy of chattel slavery in the U.S. Spillers implies through this reflection that though she is hailed in a variety of ways, none of the identities thrust upon her reach some essential being buried underneath her. She clarifies this particular point further when she claims, “In order to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through the layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness.”²⁷⁰ The throughline here is consistent: Spillers is implying that unraveling the “layers of meaning” that mark her Black, female body still would not reveal anything intrinsic about her (for flesh is always mediated). Attending to the violence of chattel slavery that defines matrilineal relations produced through systemic rape and sexual exploitation by white slave owners illuminates the lineage of systemic violences that shape how Black women are discursively poised to perceive themselves, and how others perceive them through the white gaze (Du Bois) that conditions her “markedness.”

Looking at nineteenth- and early twentieth-century transatlantic performances, Daphne Brooks draws on Spillers’s work to examine how Black artists—like Henry Box Brown, who escaped slavery by mailing himself in a box from Virginia to Philadelphia; and Aida Overton Walker, a famous vaudevillian cakewalk dancer who “dared to yoke her modern dance

²⁶⁹Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

choreography with New Negro revisionist racial and gender ideologies”—resisted oppression (and the meanings put on their bodies) by using their uncertain identities as newly-free slaves post-emancipation to self-actualize through performance: or what she describes as “embodied insurgency.”²⁷¹ She animates this resistance through minoritarian tactics she catalogues as “Afro-alienation acts,” which are strategies that examine and challenge our ways of looking that produce normative scripts of identity expression (racial performativity) through non-realist performances.²⁷² As an interrogation of Du Bois-ian “double-consciousness,” Brooks highlights in particular how Black actors from the antebellum period to the Gilded Age, in Britain and America, made seeing Blackness “strange” in performance to trouble stable identity categories. In other words: they staged their dissent.

I want to link Brooks’s argument to *Fairview*, especially to the end of the play. The invitation Keisha offers through her collapse of the fourth wall at the close of Drury’s play follows this lineage of non-realist performance that remaps the contours of how Blackness is performed and perceived in theatrical settings, and troubles the notion of Black authenticity through performance.

Drury’s play attempts to invert the predominance of the white gaze by asking white audience members to step onstage to be observed. She invites the white spectators—the ones that often feel most comfortable watching, and not being observed—to step onstage specifically to endure being looked at. Drury positions them to take on a Muñozian “burden of liveness,” which

²⁷¹ With their new uncertain identities as emancipated slaves, what she calls an “ontological dislocation,” Brooks describes how Black artists interrogated a Du Bois-ian double-consciousness through their work; and used their art to mold their identities as acts of embodied resistance. See: Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Duke University Press, 2006), 4.

²⁷² Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Duke University Press, 2006), 2-4.

he describes as “a cultural imperative within the majoritarian public sphere that denies subalterns access to larger channels of representation, while calling the minoritarian subject to the stage, performing his or her own alterity as a consumable local spectacle.”²⁷³ Here, instead, the majoritarian subject is called to the stage to perform their “alterity.” This reversal is core to how Drury theorizes “exposure,” as a minoritarian tactic, in her work.

If *Fairview* succeeds at driving white audiences to labor (get onstage to be looked at) through active, immersive spectatorship, and to take on a Muñozian “burden of liveness” in its final moments, in many cases, it simultaneously forces audience members of color to work to reposition themselves; in ways that are both undue and warranted. In his *TDR* article describing his experience seeing *Fairview* at Woolly Mammoth Theatre (2019) in Washington D.C., Paul J. Edwards reflects on the moment of Keisha’s invitation. As a Black audience member, he recounts having to stand up to make space for a white spectator seated some chairs down from him:

Second, I sat relatively close to the middle of my row and when the white audience members went up to the stage, they had to pass me, a person of color. This required me to get up and make way for these now active white participants. So, while the audience of color sat, passive and irresponsive, white members had an active role in the theatre-making. The production counted on a white audience making an active choice in their engagement with Keisha’s request, but it offered nothing for people of color to show their active participation in her play, except as an attentive audience.²⁷⁴

Fairview’s choice to cater to white audiences, as Edwards positions this moment, is one that goes unmatched in its offering to audience members of color. True, no “active” participation is offered. While I agree that *Fairview* is not perfect in its attempt to fully disavow any attempt to

²⁷³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2 (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 182.

²⁷⁴ Paul J. Edwards, “Catering to White Audiences: *Fairview* at Woolly Mammoth,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 65, no. 2 (2021): 173–78, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204321000150>.

cater to whiteness, in this moment of exposure, I argue that the play succeeds in restructuring the field of vision to offer new ways of seeing, knowing, and feeling the racializing affects/effects of gazing through embodied knowledge; not only for white spectators, but for people of color as well, myself included.

Fairview asserts a particularly complex politics of gazing by asking audience members to racially self-identify before proceeding to sit or stand accordingly. One's choice is put on public display to be judged by other spectators. And I must be honest: as an audience member, this moment was *excruciating* for me. I turned to my colleague sitting beside me, who self-identifies as a light-skinned Brown, Latinx woman. We both looked a bit terror-stricken. As a biracial person who is somewhat ethnically ambiguous, who identifies as Brown and is often hailed as such, but who has a proximity to whiteness and, in some instances, has been white-passing, this was a moment of reckoning. What to do as a spectator who falls somewhere in-between?

This moment produced in me an epistemology of exposure, becoming the basis of what has evolved into this comprehensive research project. You could say exposure, that is the tactic used by Drury at the play's end which asks white spectators to go to the stage, activated a negotiation of critical relationality: how am I racialized in relation to the people around me?

To avoid risking this analysis centering whiteness in this play that clearly refuses that instinct any further, I turn here to think through *Fairview* using Tina Campt's Black gaze as a methodology. For Campt, a Black gaze emerges from artists who build new visual frameworks that require interlocutors to labor, as witnesses, to see Black life differently together. Campt animates a Black gaze as, "a gaze that forces viewers to engage blackness from a different and discomforting vantage point,"; one which requires spectators to labor to see differently, and

positions them to witness contemporary Black precarity anew.²⁷⁵ She foregrounds this gaze within film and digital media in her Prelude, through Arthur Jaffa's direction of JAY-Z's 4:44 (2017); activates it in her First Verse, through mundane intimacy and large scale in the photography of Deana Lawson; and returns to animate a Black gaze through film in her Sixth Verse, in which she analyzes Luke Willis Thompson's "autoportrait."²⁷⁶ Thompson's video installation features a silent Diamond Reynolds—the partner of the late Philando Castile who was murdered at the hands of police as she sat beside him in the car—glancing downward, perhaps in meditation. In each of these works, artists confront audiences, compelling them to reposition themselves in relation to Black precarity. In Lawson's, witnesses are required to encounter intimate moments of Black quotidian life through immense scale; whereas in Thompson's, viewers are compelled to confront Black suffering through "adjacency," which Campt uses to describe a mode of spectatorship that "[transforms] proximity into accountability."²⁷⁷ In both, a Black gaze emerges from artists who are building new visual frameworks that require interlocutors to labor, as witnesses, to see Black life differently together.

The guiding question at the center of Campt's work is this: "Rather than looking at Black people, rather than simply multiplying the representation of Black folks, what would it mean to see oneself through the complex positionality that is blackness—and work through its implications on and for oneself?"²⁷⁸ I think alongside Campt's methodology, through a theatre and performance framework, to ask: how does *Fairview* position audiences to gaze through—to borrow Campt's language—the "complex positionality that is blackness" through immersivity as

²⁷⁵ Campt, *A Black Gaze*, 8.

²⁷⁶ Campt notes that Luke Willis Thompson identifies as a black artist, but one who is related (adjacently) through his Aboriginalness as a New Zealander who has Fijian heritage. See: Campt, *A Black Gaze*, 171.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 171.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 7.

theatrical exposure? What political, social, and communal meanings does Drury's play compel through audience participation?

The use of "exposure" in *Fairview* generates a Black gaze through its remapping of the terrain of the theatrical space through racializing the theatrical contract. Drury subverts the representational (the actors onstage representing their characters) to center the presentational (the white participants onstage) – and how meanings accrue to bodies within both domains. Through exposure here, which asks white audience members to come on stage at the end of a play charged with racialized meanings, Drury compels white spectators to step into the limelight, which both defamiliarizes and discomforts them unexpectedly. Although not explicitly required, the white spectators are urged (if, for no other reason than to avoid the negative affects of shame that will accompany their choice to remain seated) to step onstage to open a space—literally—for a new visual structure to emerge.

Crucially, unlike Campt's theorization of Black gazes—which she explicitly determines are "not defined by race or phenotype" (there is not just one; and it does not solely constitute a gaze that can only be accessed by Black spectators)—*Fairview's* purposefully amplifies different, personalized modes of gazing through racial stratifications; dividing the audience between "white" and "people of color" at its most pivotal moment.²⁷⁹ The uncomfortable labor that Drury's play compels white audience members to undertake emerges precisely in the shift from engaged anonymous audience member "who looks"; to reticent, racialized immersed participant who is gazed upon. This work offers both a metaphorical and embodied repositioning for the white spectator. Through deploying theatrical exposure, Drury joins a cohort of

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 172.

contemporary Black artists that “make audiences *work*. They refuse to create [normative] spectators....Their work requires *labor*- the labor of discomfort, feeling, positioning, and repositioning— and solicits visceral responses to the visualization of Black precarity.”²⁸⁰ The amplification of this trend, and these Black artists’ (Harris, Harris, and Drury) plays which theatrically respond to the heightened political stakes of Black precarity and premature Black death in the U.S., is the concern of the following section.

Constellations of Blackface Performance, Subverted

Between 2016 and 2019, programming across New York off-Broadway theatres reflected an increasing interest in activating a Black gaze to combat anti-Black racism, through immersive (exposure) and implied immersivity, in live performance. This section details a constellation of performances that both led up to, and premiered alongside, the main performance that this chapter centers on, *Fairview*. Each of these performances invoke blackface, and often the blackface minstrel figure, specifically, in order to aesthetically subvert them, evoking an affective shift in their audiences. My goal in rehearsing their subversive tactics here is to demonstrate that this trend of performances created a structure of feeling, as I will argue, of resistance and resilience to a particularly heightened moment of anti-Black racism in the United States.

An example of an early precursor with immersive qualities that pre-dates this formal trend is Young Jean Lee’s *The Shipment* (2009). This play draws on forms of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century minstrel performance to critique contemporary racial stereotypes and racist ideologies of Blackness (and, as it turns out at the “surprise” ending, whiteness). A cast of

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 17.

Black actors perform three formally distinct acts that structure the show, which is a direct referent to the three sections of the classic Jim Crow era minstrel show (Opening, Olio, and Afterpiece).²⁸¹ Critically, in writing this play Lee asked the actors – for the last act – to name a character they always wanted to play.

The play opens with a standup comedy show. In a recording of a 2009 production of *The Shipment* at On The Boards, an experimental performance venue in downtown Seattle, we watch a standup comedian (Douglas Scott Streater) perform to an engaged, and implicated, audience. He begins his set by making jokes at the expense of the white audience spectators. They laugh at what initially seems like a low stakes set; Streater as the comedian informs the audience that he does not want to be talking about race but would rather be making scatological jokes. After a few more jokes, he delivers a gut punch. Describing white people's love for "even stevens," he refers to them humorously as "crackers." In an unexpected turn of events, Streater then raises his voice to deliver a reprimand to the crowd: acknowledging that although it might not be nice to call white people crackers, "the fact of the matter is that no one ever called anyone a cracker before lynching them."²⁸² Just one example, he moves through a range of stereotypes that his standup evokes, including Black, White, and Asian racial depictions throughout. This is the first and last time the audience is formally acknowledged by the actors as part of the performance.

In the second act, we see all five Black actors in the cast dramatize reductive, Black racialized stereotypes including: a drug dealer (Prentice Onayemi), a mammy figure (Amelia

²⁸¹ For a more thorough analysis of Lee's *The Shipment* and the avant-garde aesthetics her play uses to situate race and spectatorship, see: Stefka G. Mihaylova, *Viewers in Distress: Race, Gender, and Avant-Garde Performance at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (University of Michigan Press, 2023).

²⁸² *The Shipment*, Written by Young Jean Lee, dir. Young Jean Lee in collaboration with Jordan Barbour, Mikéah Ernest Jennings, Okieriete Onaodowan, Prentice Onayemi, Douglas Scott Streater, and Amelia Workman, On The Boards, Seattle, WA, November 18, 2009, 11:38.

Workman), an aspiring rap competitor (Aundré Chin), a nondescript evangelist named Mr. Extreme (Streater), and Sashay, a self-proclaimed gay hairdresser (Mikéah Ernest Jennings) who performs a song and dance about his work with a deadpan face that can really only communicate that he's being made to do this against his will. Instead of writing a flat and uninteresting, predictable one-dimensional critique of racial stereotypes that might tempt her largely white audience into complacency, Lee complicates race discursively and materially to unsettle audiences. Take, for example, a moment during the second act where Jennings, playing a cop, says, "I don't like Black people," to which Chin, playing Omar, confusedly replies, "But you're Black..." Jennings snaps back rather matter-of-factly, "no, I'm not," before quickly moving on. This moment resonates with the third act, which is wholly defined by a fancy dinner party in which all five actors play attendees. Everyone dresses in cocktail attire, and this is the only semiotic cue that we are given in the audience to interpret these new characters. The actors portray stereotypes of upper-class whiteness (having a plethora of dietary restrictions and romanticizing AA meetings) before the evening comes to a fore when one of the characters, played by Streater, has an urgent mental health crisis. As they all await an ambulance's arrival, they play a game called "Library." For this round, they have to guess the first in a list of "Black superstitions." The final line of the play leaves us, in the audience, agasp. Jennings, expressing his anxiety about playing the game, tells the other guests, "I just don't think we'd be doing this if there was a Black person in the room."²⁸³ Animating whiteface without whiting up, as Black actors, is an effective subversion of the troping that blackface minstrelsy relied upon to affectively, and effectively, move its audiences.

²⁸³ Ibid., 1:24:05.

Blackface minstrelsy was the most popular theatrical form of entertainment in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century in the United States. Read: it was, and is, a *uniquely American art form* that continues to influence how we – spectators across race – gaze today. Perhaps the most famous lineage, though certainly not the only one, was enacted through T.D. Rice’s popular character of Jim Crow. Blackface minstrelsy performances, like Rice’s in 1830, began with white (often Irish) actors applying burnt cork or shoe polish to perform prolific, harmful, egregious stereotypes mired in racist ideologies of their perceptions of Blackness in pre- and post-Civil War America. Perhaps the pithiest definition of blackface minstrelsy is offered in an analysis of blackface performance more broadly, by theatre historian Ayanna Thompson. She writes, “Blackface minstrelsy is a specific comedic performance tradition that, according to its own logic, imitates, celebrates, and mocks the actions of black Americans.”²⁸⁴ Though it is heralded primarily as an American art form, Kellen Hoxworth uses the term “transoceanic blackface” to describe the transnational political formations, particularly in the Global South and specifically South Africa, that emerged through a trafficking of blackface minstrelsy as part of a larger imperial performance praxis that traveled South as early as 1838. Through his analysis, Hoxworth moves us beyond the “Jim Crow [that] haunts racial discourses of the Global North” into a more expansive understanding of this complex figure, who he argues is more a product and signifier of coloniality broadly, rather than antebellum America.

If, as Eric Lott posits that, “studying the most popular entertainment form of the nineteenth century together with its characteristic audience is perhaps the best way to understand

²⁸⁴ Ayanna Thompson, *Blackface*, Object Lessons (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501374043>, 34.

the affective life of race in that time and in ours,” then this chapter takes the position that it is equally important to query why there are a constellation of African American artists activating moments of blackface in contemporary immersive performance.²⁸⁵ Lott’s exploration of blackface minstrelsy toggles between affective resonances of appropriation: a Bhabhian “ambivalence” and a Lottian “love and theft,” to use his examples.²⁸⁶ The racial structure of feeling (Williams) that he traces in antebellum America through the blackface minstrel figure is one that is fraught with negotiation tactics; white actors both consumed the other through their performance, while refusing to perform truthful representations (if possible) of the Black other their performances desired to approximate. Lott goes on to claim, “It appears that during this stretch of American cultural history the intercourse between racial cultures was at once so attractive and so threatening as to require a cultural marker or visible sign of cultural interaction.”²⁸⁷ In other words, Lott argues that white performers wanted to approximate Blackness through blackface minstrelsy performances as a way to exert control over anxieties and pleasures that shape both the contours of racial performativity, and the color line as they were animated in the nineteenth century.

Amplifying this lineage, a constellation of other works followed *The Shipment* in the years after the first Trump presidency, taking up the blackface performances (and often specifically the minstrel figure) in order to subvert it through performance; specifically, immersive performance. Drawing on stereotypical archetypes of antebellum plantation owners, slaves, and indentured servants, Jeremy O. Harris’s *Slave Play* first premiered in New York in

²⁸⁵ Eric Lott and Greil Marcus, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Race and American Culture (Oxford University press, 2013), 26-27.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 27.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 27.

2018 at New York Theatre Workshop. The play initially positions its Black actors in minstrel-like roles including a slave working the plantation (Kaneisha); a slave and overseer of the plantation (Gary); and a “mulatto” house servant (Phillip).

“You should not work to make the audience comfortable at all.” This is Harris’s opening note advising on style that foregrounds his play text. He also states, “color play, shade play, should be of interest to those casting this piece.”²⁸⁸ Racial performativity, in other words, is at the heart of this play. It opens on the MacGregor plantation in the antebellum south, set just before the Civil War begins. *Slave Play* focuses on the relationship of three mixed-race couples: Kaneisha and Jim, Phillip and Alana, and Dustin and Gary. In the first act, we see each of the couples role-playing a slave/master sexual encounter, all of which come with varying degrees of complication: especially because the audience doesn’t yet know that the couples are merely role-playing their parts. At the opening of the second act, the audience learns that these couples have agreed to engage in “Antebellum Performance Sex Therapy” through a sort of fantasy play. Throughout the remainder of the play, the therapists, along with the participants, dissect their experiences of racial trauma. The play ends in a deeply distressing and contentious scene where Jim and Kaneisha return to their play-roles as master and slave (respectively), and in a moment of murky consent, Kaneisha thanks Jim for “finally listening” to her wishes.

While the audience invitation to engage in *Slave Play* isn’t what we might formally characterize as immersion, it fits into the way in which I posit exposure in this chapter, and within my larger project. The set design for New York Theatre Workshop’s production featured a floor to ceiling mirror. In a recent *Daily Show* segment featuring his release of the HBO

²⁸⁸ Jeremy O. Harris, *Slave Play*, First edition (Theatre Communications Group, 2019), 9.

documentary on the play, Jeremy O. Harris comments on the design choice: “The entire show, you get to watch people watch the play, *and that becomes the play for me*. Watching people squirm is fun.”²⁸⁹ Harris explains that the audience’s ability to watch themselves in/at this play *is* the play; another way of saying, they are immersed and become a part of the production in a meaningful way.

One major critique of the play that Harris ran into during both the off Broadway and Broadway runs of *Slave Play* is that he wrote this play for white spectators; or, as I might reframe this claim, for a white gaze. On the same press tour as his *Daily Show* appearance, this time in conversation with Tanya Mosley of NPR’s *Fresh Air*, Harris refuted this critique:

I would laugh to myself because I would be like, no, I obviously wrote it for me because I’m a weird freak. Like, I’m a weird Southern Black satirist, you know, and I want to laugh in the way I want to laugh...And so I wanted to make a play for me.²⁹⁰

Harris animates in this claim that the play, which is for him, is for Black spectators and much as white audiences as well as anyone else who might purchase a ticket. Unfortunately, in some cases, Black female spectators, in particular, who attended left the performance traumatized rather than affirmed.

Garnering twelve Tony Award nominations, *Slave Play* marks a return to the popularity of stereotyping that characterizes blackface. It begins with stereotypes of Black and mixed-race Black slaves as they’re dominated (sexual kink) by their white counterparts. Crucially, it differs in that no white actors are asked to engage blackface at any time throughout the performance.

²⁸⁹“Jeremy O. Harris - Theater Supremacy in “Slave Play. Not a Movie. A Play.” | The Daily Show,” The Daily Show, YouTube, posted June 12, 2024, 17 min., 8 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_7W3RoHFww.

²⁹⁰Tonya Mosley, ““Slave Play” Playwright Jeremy O. Harris Is on a Mission to Diversify Theater,” *Fresh Air*, NPR, June 21, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/06/21/g-s1-5489/slave-play-playwright-jeremy-o-harris-is-on-a-mission-to-diversify-theater>.

But it absolutely draws on racial performativity and excess to generate white tropes of imagined Black chattel slaves in pre-emancipated America. By forcing audiences to see themselves in the performance, Harris forces them to actively “work” in Campt’s parlance, to gaze at the play through their own reflection. They can’t see the play without seeing themselves implicated in its narrative.

Just up the way, in midtown at A.R.T./New York Theatres, Alesha Harris’ *What to Send Up When it Goes Down* premieres in the same month as *Slave Play* (November 2018). Harris’s play is a self-proclaimed ritual and healing praxis. As a participatory event, it invites audiences to collectively interrogate anti-Black racial violence, particularly animated through police brutality of African Americans. Carried out by eight Black actors, the first act is a workshop; while the second is more traditional, according to Harris’ opening notes on “how to read [her] play.”²⁹¹ The play takes place in three “movements.” Not unlike Drury’s play, the three movements are iterative; the pace increases with each movement, and the third movement takes place at “breakneck speed.”

At the beginning of the play, participants are invited to introduce themselves (they have an option of refuse), name aloud someone they know who has been subjected to Black racialized violence, and write a note in support of Black folks who live in an anti-Black society. Structurally, the workshop, and ritual, is a racially divided experience. The opening lines of the play foreground that this ritual is explicitly for Black spectators attending, but that all are welcome. Harris writes:

As Black people, we must contend with living in a country which continually marginalizes and actively oppresses us. The emotional and physiological toll of this concerns us and is the reason for this ritual. Let me be clear: this ritual is first and

²⁹¹ Aleshea Harris, *Is God Is / What to Send up When It Goes Down*, 1st ed (Theatre Communications Group, Incorporated, 2022), 111.

foremost for Black people. Again. We are glad non-Black people are here. We welcome you but this piece was created and is expressed with Black folks in mind. If you are prepared to honor that through your respectful, conscientious presence, you are welcome to stay.

Parts of the piece you're about to experience as participatory. Whether or not you choose to participate, be respectful. We are very serious about honoring real people who have died and offering strategies for those who need a way to heal.²⁹²

Unlike Jeremy O. Harris's *Slave Play*, Alesha Harris asserts that she wrote this play to be performed as primarily attentive to Black audiences, particularly as a way to collectively heal. Though it is unequivocally a play for Black audience participants, everyone regardless of race, is explicitly called upon to engage in Harris's ritual.

Soon after collecting the notes written by participants, the eight Black actors who formally perform the majority of the play escape to the "margins" of the theatrical space. At times, they come back onstage to play both themselves and their characters, who are named by number only (i.e., One, Two, Three). This—numbering the character names—is one of many theatrical devices utilized in the play that performs the dehumanization of Black characters, before the play works to swiftly subvert them.

Another is stereotyping. During a play within a play, three characters: Made, a maid who is "a woman of her own devising"²⁹³; Man, who plays a driver; and Miss, an older white woman with a southern accent, interact. At the opening of the play, Man approaches Miss to ask her to employ him; he cannot stay out of the margins without being assigned a proper role to play, so she makes him her driver. Miss interacts with Man, who speaks in colloquial modern English. But Miss claims she cannot understand him unless he speaks in what Harris cues up as a "negro dialect." Man complies, and gets on all fours so that Miss can ride him. When she encounters her

²⁹² Ibid., 113-114.

²⁹³ Ibid., 120.

maid, Made, ironically, she does not find Made sharpening a knife (first movement), loading a revolver (second movement), or oiling a machete (third movement) to be of concern. Instead, she finds her demeanor lacking, insisting she is rude and curt. When Miss tries to engage Made in conversation about her children, Made slaps Miss across the cheek. In the first two movements, Miss does not take the hint; she increases her insistence that perhaps Made is worried about her children, which would be understandable.

In the final movement, after being slapped numerous times, Miss finally explodes. She yells that she does not want to apologize continually on behalf of her race before accusing Made of wanting to take what is hers:

MISS Because everything I have
 this job
 this car
 this house
 is rightfully yours no matter how hard I worked for it, right?
 R i g h t?²⁹⁴

Miss looks around for other white spectators in the audience to affirm her diatribe. When none do, she dies soon after. Man asks Made if she is dead, and Made responds: “Nah. I give her about fifteen minutes.”²⁹⁵

This play within a play draws on the lineages of stereotyping that characterize blackface performance to subvert them in order to challenge anti-Black racism in our contemporary moment. Miss cannot hear Man unless he speaks in a troped AAVE; her whiteness doesn’t allow her to perceive his Blackness outside of racist stereotypes that have been ingrained in her. Also, Made, whose decorum is of course, perfectly reasonable is critiqued for not performing overly

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 170.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 171.

affectionate gratitude towards Miss. As a result, she is perceived as acting insubordinate to her employer; even though she insists, repeatedly, that she needs to keep working and proves her dedication to her job through her dialogue, and her actions. And of course, the culminating event: when Miss rages against her Black employees, and the Black audience members more broadly, to suggest that they want to take all that she has worked for from her. Miss cannot comprehend an equitable future; instead, she can only perceive one in which whiteness is oppressed in relation to Black superiority.

Harris invokes the misapprehensions and misattributions in the play within a play, the subversion of blackface, to make evident the ways in which white supremacy culture perpetuates anti-Black racism (through traits like defensiveness, power hoarding). White supremacy culture, which reinforces the white gaze through its operational apparatus, is both cyclical and pervasive. As Made remarks, the white woman will be revived in just a quarter of an hour to perform the same scripts and draw on the same tropes of Blackness all over again. Harris also puts the minstrel figures, here, in dialogue with other subversions of stereotyping Blackness throughout the play. For example, in the second movement, “Six” walks normally to “fuck with” white people’s perceptions of Blackness; and in the first movement, a call and response is initiated with the audience that becomes increasingly violent in its caricaturing of “Black people.” The audience is called upon to shout “Yeah” in response to prompts like: “Loud Black People”; “Stupid Black People”; and “Criminal Black People”.²⁹⁶ All of these work to evidence the ways in which anti-Black racism sticks to Black bodies to authorize violence that leads to premature Black death.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 137-138.

At the close of the play, Black spectators are invited to stay for a shared ritual, while all non-Black audience members make their way out of the performance space. Unlike in Drury's *Fairview*, white audience members are asked to evacuate, creating a literal "new world" in the theatrical space, through performance, to emerge (after all, ritual is at the heart of how modern conceptions of performativity, in performance studies, functions); one that does the work of reparative creativity (Kondo) by centering Black joy and hope. In an interview with Alesha Harris in *American Theatre*'s 2019 issue, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins remarks on his experience of this moment. He tells Harris, "I remember at the end a feeling of giddiness among everyone who was left in the theatre. Everyone became sort of silly and childish; it was actually very moving in some ways—its own kind of catharsis."²⁹⁷ This catharsis emerges in the space Harris offers for Black participants to chant refrains like, "You are here, Black people" and "You belong, Black people." These evocations center Black futurity and refuse anti-Black racist, deadly violence. The title of his interview is "'What to Send Up When It Goes Down': A Black Gaze." Released in 2019, it predates Tina Campt's theory of a Black gaze; and it's worth noting that neither Jacobs-Jenkins nor Harris ever formally invoke the phrase "Black gaze" in their discussion. Instead, they manifest a Black gaze through their discussion and through uplifting Harris' work. During the interview, Harris has this incredible moment where she recalls the ending of her play; she describes the move to compel white audience members to leave the auditorium as "marginalizing the thing that typically marginalizes us."²⁹⁸ To me, this is Harris' evocation of a Black gaze. She uses the theatrical space to invite first, a Camptian "adjacency" in the ritual's

²⁹⁷ Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, "'What to Send Up When It Goes Down': A Black Gaze," *AMERICAN THEATRE*, April 5, 2019, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2019/04/05/what-to-send-up-when-it-goes-down-a-black-gaze/>.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

opening, before she fully enacts a new world rooted in Black futurity for, and by, Black participants.

Six months later, back downtown, *Fairview* premieres in New York City (June 2018). In *Fairview*, the legacy of blackface manifests most clearly in two distinct moments. In the first act, Beverley and Jasmine begin to dance as they recall their mother's birthday dance. As the audience, we have not yet seen Mama Frasier, their mother. They describe their Mama's appearance in great detail: "Her birthday outfit was a gown, an Ivory gown...And a Golden turban...And she'd work her hands like this, like charming the snakes out the gates..." Eventually, Dayton and Keisha join in the dancing frenzy until they're interrupted by a phone call. It is not until the third act—when the moment of dancing is recalled by the white actors, who are inhabiting racialized stereotypes of Black characters—that the audience is clued in to the fact that what initially seemed like a harmless if not strange, slightly off-putting moment of dancing is actually in the direct lineage of minstrel performance. Jimbo, playing Tyrone, inquires why there is no music on at the party. "Isn't there supposed to be music?", he asks, before the stage directions instruct the audience on the dancing that ensues:

*(Upbeat music comes on. Jimbo starts dancing. Jimbo gets Suze up and dancing. Somehow they know the same dance. They do that thing – like an exaggerated wave, and Jasmine and Dayton jump up and join in. Keisha marks it.)*²⁹⁹

The audience comes to understand that everyone knows the same dance *because* the white characters (Jimbo, Suze, Bets, and Mack) imagine communal dancing as a stereotypical social norm that takes place at Black familial social gatherings. Worse yet, it is in this moment that the audience fully comprehends that what they have seen play out on stage thus far is a whitewashed

²⁹⁹Drury, *Fairview*, 101.

vision of the Frasier family's daily life. Ayanna Thompson writes in regard to blackface minstrelsy that, "blackface's consistent exculpatory fiction [is] that the performance genre is based on replicating real life."³⁰⁰ Both times that the Frasier family dances, the audience is seeing a feigned authenticity that draws on a direct legacy to this racist and colonial nineteenth-century performance practice. If this is a moment where theatricality fails to approximate authenticity, it is a moment when theatricality (as a style) succeeds in shifting how audiences perceive Blackness.

Why am I charting the trajectory of a trend in which minoritarian— here, Asian American (Lee) and Black American (Harris, Harris, and Drury) – artists query and subvert blackface and the minstrel figure in contemporary immersive performance? How does this aesthetic subversion activate new political, communal, and social meanings for modern audiences?

Minoritarian artists, like the ones I discuss here— Lee, both Harrises, and Drury – all evoke modernized versions of the troping that were at the core of racist stereotyping central to blackface performances. Even though none of them specifically employ blackface in their performances—and this is important to note because historically, towards the late nineteenth century, Black actors and other actors of color would engage in blackface minstrel performances because they offered them an entry point into the performance market—they all mock an advanced iteration of blackface performance (drawing on nineteenth-century blackface minstrel performances) through a tactical subversion of normative forms of spectatorship. For Lee, this is most explicit in the structure of her play, which follows the three-part structure of nineteenth-century blackface performance (which is why it is a proto-exposure, rather than formal exposure

³⁰⁰Thompson, *Blackface*, 31.

as I theorize it). For Jeremy O. Harris, it is encouraged through a reflection; the audience is invited to look into the mirror and query not only what they see on stage, but how their voyeurism implicates them in the racial, colonial, and gendered systems of power; and firmly places them in stratified relations to power within a given system of subjectification based on these constructs. Alesha Harris invites audience participants to collectively grieve the deaths of Black individuals murdered at the hands of police. She animates and subverts the harmful stereotypical tropes of Blackness that minstrel performance relies upon to uncover how white supremacy culture sustains itself, as we participate in it, in our daily lives. Positioned as a performance for Black spectators, the last ritual is reserved for Black participants alone. Drury's work, specifically calls out (in?) white audience members to move them beyond simply *noticing* towards *action*. This is important because it is the move that formally eclipses the white gaze in the play in favor of a Black gaze; a Black gaze that animates racial performativity towards meaningful political change. How these artists are orienting our aesthetics, our ways of looking, to combat increasing anti-Black racism activates the stakes of their work and the rebuttals they make to our contemporary climate through their performances.

The Response-ible Spectator

So, how do these frameworks and tactics shape a contemporary response-ible spectator? How do the artists I archive here use exposure, in performance, to respond to this increase in political and racist anti-Black ideologies that pervade in the twenty first century? And why does Drury, specifically, attempt to do this by formally subverting the theatrical contract?

I argue that through immersive exposure, these artists provoke a “response-ible” spectatorship. I fracture “response” and “ible” to query, for instance, the doubling Drury asks of the audience members who attend her play. I posit this in dialogue with Augusto Boal's theory of

the “spect-actor” in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, to suggest a contemporary form of spectatorship that emerges through artists—like Drury, Harris, Harris—using exposure in performance to compel audiences to bring about social, political, and cultural change. Through an invitation to take the stage, Drury offers the white audience members the opportunity to respond— to become a formal part of the play and to make a meaningful shift in the landscape of what is visible, if only for a few minutes. Second, she offers them the opportunity to take responsibility for their privilege, conditioned by a presumed white gaze that oppresses, racializes, and “others” nonwhite or minoritarian subjects. In this way, white spectators become responsible and responsive through the use of exposure in this production.

Drury’s play, alongside the ones I catalogue above, create opportunities for response-ible spectators. They offer theatrical means to respond to increasing racist violence and anti-Black racism through tactics like: activating a Black gaze, subverting the minstrel figure, and animating immersive exposure. The *Washington Post* reports that between 2019 and 2024, there were 1,533 Black victims of police murders in the U.S. alone. In response to high-profile police murders—like Breonna Taylor’s (2020), and George Floyd’s (2020)—and the many non-mediatised police brutality fatalities of Black and Brown Americans in the United States between 2019 to the present, these artists activate exposure to change the way we see both Blackness, and to unveil or make blatantly apparent how white supremacy culture continually works to subjugate and oppress Blackness. Artists like Drury, Harris and Harris in particular use theatrical performance, and exposure, to animate the mission of the Black Lives Matter movement (2013) to “envision a future fully divested from police, prisons, and all punishment paradigms, a future which invests in justice, joy, and culture”; a movement which has surged again in recent years and as a continued response to the egregious police shooting and murder of Michael Brown in

Ferguson, Missouri in 2014.³⁰¹ I argue that the artists that appear in this chapter are using the aesthetic space of the stage to provide a rebuttal to the racial and colonial logics that underpin white supremacy culture, alongside the surveillance state, which authorizes the repeated murder of Black Americans, at about twice as high a rate as their white counterparts as of 2024.³⁰²

In 2018, when Drury's *Fairview* landed at the end of Soho Rep's 2017-2018 season, it emerged against the backdrop of the second half of Trump's first term as President. More than any other president, in his three campaigns, and throughout his two presidencies, he has repeatedly relied on racialized, colonial, and gendered stereotypes to describe both his supporters, and to critique his dissenters. He has been particularly vocal in his anti-Black racist rhetoric. A series of examples to drive this point further: Trump retweeted a cartoon of Hillary Clinton in blackface (2016)³⁰³; he pointed to an individual in the crowd of one of his rallies and said, "'Oh, look at my African American over here!' (2016)³⁰⁴; and most recently, he posted an offensive video clip of Barack and Michelle Obama caricatured as apes set to the song "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," from *The Lion King*.³⁰⁵ The last of these clearly draws on racist tropes that

³⁰¹Black Lives Matter, accessed April 23, 2026, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/>.

³⁰² Nancy Jones and Damon Krometis, have written about the surveillance state as it is animated through Drury's *Fairview*. For Jones, surveillance is a main theme of the play; she illuminates Drury's agenda as "[a] plan to embroil White spectators in the act of witnessing a performative surveillance of Blackness" which she describes unfolds slowly over the play's three acts. Krometis, on the other hand, animates the play's use of surveillance as a challenge to what Dorinne Kondo frames as, "racial spectatorship." See: Nancy Jones, "Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview* : Affect in Three Acts," *Comparative Drama* 59, nos. 1–2 (2025): 157–77, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2025.a962006>. ; Damon Krometis, "Sitting on the Couch: The Conundrum of Spectatorship in Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview*," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 37, no. 1 (2022): 67–86, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2022.0015>. For more on statistics, see: Woody Evans, "Data Resources for Tracking and Understanding Police Violence," *Information Today* 38, no. 5 (2021): 14+. Gale In Context: High School (accessed April 23, 2026), https://link-gale-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/apps/doc/A667587864/SUIC?u=wash_main&sid=summon&xid=493c6514.

³⁰³Nia-Malika Henderson, "Race and Racism in the 2016 Campaign | CNN Politics," CNN, September 1, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/08/31/politics/2016-election-donald-trump-hillary-clinton-race>.

³⁰⁴Nick Corasanti, "'Look at My African-American over Here,' Donald Trump Says at Rally (Published 2016)," *The New York Times*, June 3, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/04/us/politics/donald-trump-african-americans.html>.

³⁰⁵Erica L. Green, Isabella Kwai, and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, "Trump Declines to Apologize for Posting Racist Video Portraying Obamas as Apes - The New York Times," *The New York Times*, February 6, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/06/us/politics/trump-obamas-video-apes-truth-social.html>.

emerged during the nineteenth century and were used to justify inhumane acts, specifically the lynching of Black Americans.

In activating a Black gaze, and subverting blackface stereotypes and tropes through exposure, Drury calls spectators into responsibility, to respond to anti-Black racism through performance. As part of a larger structure of feeling of Black artists emerging from 2016-2019, Drury's *Fairview* marks an attempt to shift audiences' discursive, aesthetic, and affective understandings of Blackness in contemporary American culture towards meaningful social and political change. By inducing an epistemology of exposure by provoking response-ible spectatorship in audience members, as it did in me, her play aesthetically provokes a new relationality between spectators and actors; one that challenges audiences to refuse oppressive racializing constructs to enact a more "fair view." And one that ushers in a more equitable future for Black minoritarian subjects through exposure in performance.

CONCLUSION

Do You See it Too?

Thus far, this dissertation has endeavored to track a trend, from 2017 onward, of minoritarian artists using what I have expounded upon as exposure in the previous chapters: animated at times through collapse (*Dark Noon*), accompaniment, adjacency, and mobility (*Little Amal* and *Dear Laila*), and theatrical Black gazing (*Fairview*). As I conclude, I offer reflections on my own autoethnographic minoritarian performance, *Do You See it Too? A Triptych*, which I hope to contribute to exposure's legacy in contemporary performance.

Through entangling thick descriptions and analysis below, I animate how this project's three parts engage with the tactic of exposure. I weave between both as a method to imitate a kind of "immersivity" through performative writing. Finally, I end this chapter by reflecting on, and summarizing, both the key terms and discursive interventions this dissertation has put forth.

A Three-Part Experiment Unfolds

How does immersive minoritarian performance expose racial and colonial, normative, and hegemonic ways of being in the world? How might a minoritarian subject utilize "exposure" as a technique towards dismantling normative ways of being, and at the same time, generate utopian affects? The intersection of these two guiding questions animates the three experiments in my autoethnographic performance *Do You See It Too?: A Triptych*. This work is largely indebted to José Esteban Muñoz's scholarship archiving and enlivening minoritarian performance and his contemplations on sensing B/brown; Vivian Huang's work on "inscrutability" as a form of minoritarian refusal; and 600-Highwaymen's triptych, "*A Thousand Ways*." A moment of reflection on how I'm thinking about "minoritarian": in dialogue with José Esteban Muñoz work, Tavia Nyong'o succinctly defines minoritarian as: "Different than a

demographic minority (which the non-white peoples of the global majority are not), the minoritarian explores the political outside of the representation of formal or aspirational civil subjects.”³⁰⁶ It is to feel a Munozian “burden of liveness” as I have defined it elsewhere in the preceding chapters, and to refuse it.

The experiment takes place in three separate parts. Each was developed over the course of a graduate seminar at the University of Washington: Dr. Jasmine Mahmoud’s “Minoritarian Performance,” during the Autumn quarter of 2022. Two in-class workshops—during which I developed the first two experiments—led to a final public performance workshop at the quarter’s end. At that public workshop, I debuted the third part of my experimental triptych. This was the first time any part of this performance triptych was presented for public viewing.

Each of the three experiments engages audience members one-on-one. The total performance time is thirty minutes, divided equally into ten-minute segments for each portion of the triptych. The first experiment invites audience members to line up across from me, standing in a straight line opposite my body. A voiceover plays. The past collides onto the present as I expose participants to hold my direct gaze while they listen to me narrate a memory of the first time I felt “othered.” Inspired by 600 Highwaymen’s *A Thousand Ways*, my second experiment asks audience members to self-identify as minoritarian or majoritarian. We play a game that requires picking up a series of index cards and answering different questions based on how participants self-identify. Each question determines the question that follows—making for a unique experience for each participant. Finally, we return to the same format as my first experiment for the third part—except in this iteration, I interact vocally with my interlocutors to

³⁰⁶ Tavia Nyong’o, “José Muñoz, Then and There: On the Afterlives of the Pioneering Queer Theorist.” *The Baffler*, February 10, 2021. <https://thebaffler.com/latest/jose-munoz-then-and-there-nyongo>.

query what it means to feel a Muñozian “sense of brown” with my audience. I invite them to narrate my own personal stories to me, while holding my gaze, to see how they feel inhabiting my racialized Brownness through their own embodied experience.

In all three parts of the triptych, through my gaze and my silence, I activate minoritarian aesthetics of inscrutability (Huang) and refusal (Mengesha and Padmanabhan); but particularly during the second part, as we stare across the table at one another and play a game. I invite spectators to accompany me (through adjacency, per Campt) as I recall instances of being racialized as “Other;” and more specifically, my experience of being racialized as Brown within a post 9/11 U.S. context. As I remember these various moments of minoritization, I compel spectators at times to participate in rehearsing those memories through active listening, and at others, through embodied praxis. In each experiment of my triptych, I invite spectators to racialize themselves in relation to my body, and through exposure, compel them to feel at times, affective solidarity; and at others, discomfiting dissonance in relation to my own experiences of Brown racial performativity as it shapes the contours of my being.

I use the word “experiment” to define this performance practice for two reasons: first, it clarifies the kind of one-on-one engagement I compel my spectators to participate in. I invite them to join me, but they have full autonomy to refuse my invitation at any time. Second, “experiment” signals that there are unknown factors in the performance: if/how participants will choose to engage in the first part; how they will self-identify (and often, self-racialize) in the second part; and in part three, how they will embody my thoughts when the onus is placed on them to narrate. Each time this tripartite performance is enacted then, it changes greatly based on the intersectional identities of the audience members in relation to each other, and to me.

In the following sections, I provide thick descriptions of each of the parts of this triptych as they've been performed for various audiences. I have performed this piece as the full triptych on two occasions (December 2025, virtually, at PSi in Brazil; and January 2026 at University of Washington's School of Drama [UW]). Individual experiments, as I have previously stated, were developed throughout a graduate seminar in the Autumn of 2022 at UW. The thick descriptions I share below are of specific iterations that have been performed at the University of Washington, including: *Part One*, performed in the "Minoritarian Performance" seminar at the UW; *Part Two*, performed for a recording of the full triptych with UW colleagues; and *Part Three*, performed during the public presentations that took place at the close of the Autumn quarter in 2022.

Part One: October 2022

It is October 2022, and we are participating in the first of two workshops throughout the duration of our "Minoritarian Performance" graduate seminar. I have volunteered to go third, and my name has just been called. After instructing audience members to stand across from me, I hit "play" on the voiceover recording, recalling the first time I felt "Othered."

We hear: "I was trying to recall the first time I remember feeling *seen*. Not in the way the kids use it today. In the way it means you've been interpellated. Become privy to the burden of liveness that's going to be continually placed onto you. Reiterated over and over like a practice, or a mantra. Like a thing you start to believe exists inside of you. Like I said, it starts with a feeling. Let me take you to that moment. Oh. I'm eight."

As the recording of the voiceover plays, I stand in front of each audience member for about ten seconds, confronting them before moving on to hold the next person's gaze. I feel my

heart rate slow, my breathing steady, and I feel more at ease; grounded in the task at hand. I move on to the next audience member, proceeding down the line every ten seconds or so.

As I confront the third person in line, we hear: “I’m in kindergarten, breathing in the gravel-laden smell of a well-worn playground. My best friend at the time, Allie, has made up a “game”; it is one that I don’t yet understand. She informs me that she is going to tell our recess instructor, Mrs. O., that I called her a ‘dirty, dirty pig’—even though she concedes, I have not. I wonder: how is this a game? What is the fun part?”

I move onto the next person. And the next. After a beat, I stare at the sixth person in line, as I hear my own defeated voice state, “Mrs. O promptly sentenced me to the next two recesses in time out. I didn’t tell my parents. I didn’t fight back—I knew it wouldn’t have mattered. I didn’t have the words to describe what had happened.”

By the time this section ends, I’m down to confronting the last two people in line. There are approximately ten total. The last two people, depending on how they feel, either luck out or feel the gut punch of the following two lines. The penultimate person hears, as I gaze at them: “I do now.” Instead of a statement, the final sentiment is a question directed at the very last person. As I stare at them, we hear: “Do you see it too?”

Part Two: January 2026

I sit across from my colleague in one of the rehearsal spaces at Hutchinson Hall, Room 201, in the University of Washington’s School of Drama. We are playing the game I have devised for the second part of my performance: a “choose your own adventure” style experiment, based on how one (most often, participants assume, racially) identifies. I am silent throughout the course of this second part. Instructions are written on notecards (Figure 11). If my interlocutors

get lost, I gesture and point to the next pile of cards to consider, though sometimes that communication gets lost in translation.

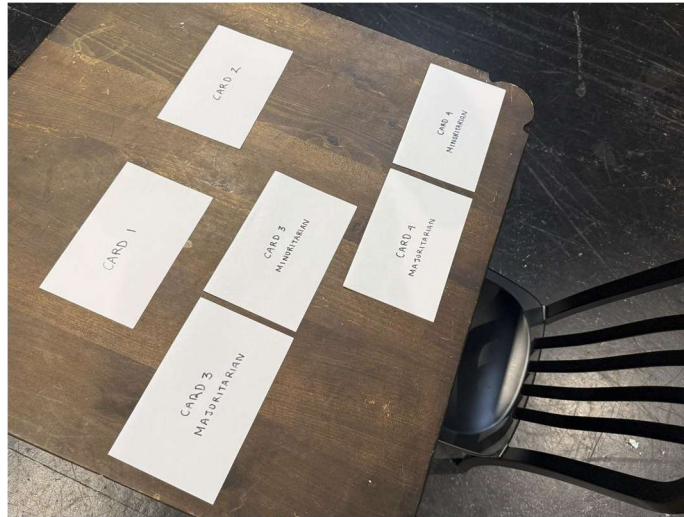


Figure 11. Cards on table, Part 2. (credit: Amna Farooqi)

My colleague self-identifies and picks up the second “minoritarian” card that says, “Take two moments to breathe and be present. After, respond: how do you feel?” (Figure 12). After placing that down, and not knowing what to do next, she stares into my eyes and holds my gaze. We say nothing. Suddenly, tears gently pour down her face. I did not anticipate her reaction. I wonder to myself if they are tears of joy, sadness, or profound despair? I hope for the former.

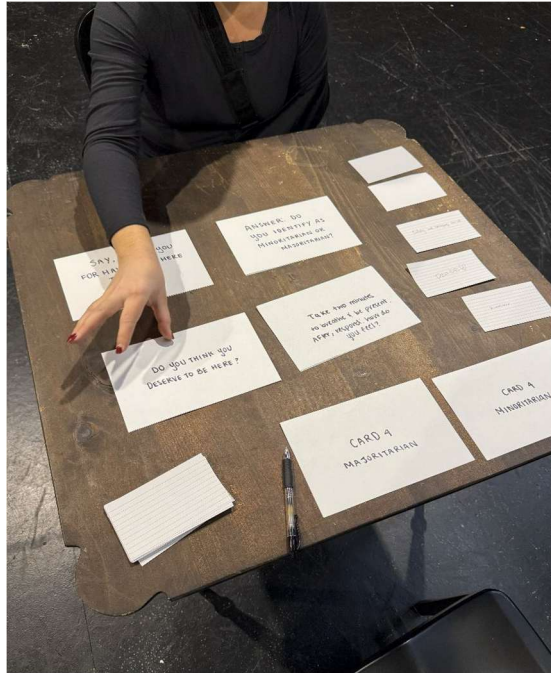


Figure 12 Cards on table, Revealed, Part 2. (credit: Amna Farooqi)

As that colleague departs from the table and exits the room, another colleague enters. Upon seeing the first prompt—to self-select your card based on your identity as “majoritarian” or “minoritarian”—she hesitates. She picks up the “majoritarian” card and utters aloud, “given who I’m in proximity to, I would say majoritarian—though at other times, in other circumstances, I identify as minoritarian.” Later, she clarifies that her decision was informed, primarily, by her white racialization in relation to my Brown body seated across from hers.

Part Three: December 2022

Following the format of the first experiment in my triptych, I line my interlocutors up across from me. One by one, I dole out an index card to each. This time, there are only six audience participants. Each index card contains a handwritten story; a memory of a time I have felt the material, affective, and discursive a/effects of Brown racialization. After the index cards

have been equally distributed, I remind participants to hold my gaze as often as possible while they read. Then, we begin. The first person across from me reads a story:

“When I was little, I liked a boy. His name was Marcus. I went to a Catholic school growing up. We did Secret Santa every year and that year, Marcus had me as his Secret Santa. His mom got me a Barbie doll for him to give to me. As he was about to hand it to me, he asked: is your dad a terrorist? I looked down and cried. It was three months after 9/11. Marcus didn't like me back.”

The next, reads the following: “My name signifies before I've even stepped into the room. ‘Where are you from’ It happens before the first ‘hello.’ My answer changes to this question depending on who asks it. While this question seems simple, the answer is always very, very complicated. You don't want to hear New Jersey, do you? But I am also not from Pakistan. My father is, but my Mom is not. I usually give the funny anecdote about how my mom's maiden name is ‘O'Connor.’ Then hopefully, you get it enough to stop asking questions. Questions for which there are no easy answers.”

The next person, who reads from an index card, asks, “Is that not the answer you wanted? Am I too Pakistani, or not enough? Are you wondering why I have fair skin but ‘eyes that give me away’? Did you perhaps ask me this when you met me? Did you consider it?” [Beat] “Are you white?”

Two more people read from index cards, before a final participant reads the last card aloud. It says: “Yesterday was different. The Lyft driver kindly asked, prefacing the question by saying ‘I'm from Egypt.’ He reminded me that ‘Amna’ in Arabic means ‘peaceful.’ He said it is

his sister's name. I smiled. I felt seen.” A brief pause ensues, followed by one last question: “Do you see it too?”

Thinking With, Thinking Alongside, and Future Constellations³⁰⁷

I utilize “exposure” as both an analytic and, through my own strategic performance, an epistemology to examine how my body makes meaning and receives meaning placed onto it from both the majoritarian and minoritarian spheres within a theatrical space. Knowing that these (seemingly) dialectical spheres are constantly in motion, seeping and slipping as audiences shift and shape each performance, I consider the ways in which the audiences I encounter vary intersectionally across identifiers of difference to account for the ways in which the all-encompassing term “minoritarian” functions to shape these fluctuating spheres.

Specifically, my performance asks: how does exposing my own inner dialogue through representational practices (whether recordings or voices that aren’t my own), in conjunction with the imperative to take in my live, fleshy presence, inform how my body makes meaning in space? How am I racialized in moments with individual audience members? If exposure is created through our relationship to one another—and I contend that it is—how does performing exposure become a productive means to investigate how and what my audience members feel, and what they take away from our performances based on their own identities? What is the relationship between exposure and endurance, time and racial capitalism, and how is this informed by the fact that I demand one-on-one attention with each audience member-cum-performer? In short: what happens when you can’t look away?

³⁰⁷ José Esteban Muñoz et al., *The Sense of Brown*, Perverse Modernities (Duke University Press, 2020).

Through their exposure—in addition to my own—in each part of this triptych audience members are interpellated as they simultaneously interpellate me; and our relationality is constantly re(in)formed with each passing part. There are two moments that stand out across the thick descriptions of my performances that animate this claim. The first is in *Part Two*, when my colleague began to weep. There was a profound “sense of brown” (Muñoz) that emerged during the experiment. Between her Asian body (Korean) and mine (Pakistani American), both racialized as Brown, we forged a worldmaking “sense of Brown” (Muñoz) that provided a moment of unexpected respite. Instead of a burden of liveness, I experienced a shared sense mutual understanding, and a moment of cathartic care. In the second, also during *Part Two*, my white colleague self-identified as “majoritarian,” but specifically in relation to my own racialized Brownness. This moment animates one way in which the a Muñozian “burden of liveness,” which Muñoz defines as, “a cultural imperative within the majoritarian public sphere that denies subalterns access to larger channels of representation, while calling the minoritarian subject to the stage, performing his or her own alterity as a consumable local spectacle,” is activated unevenly across intersectional identities.³⁰⁸ Both examples animate Brown racial performativity to query how the burden of liveness shifts through relationality between myself and my spectators.

Do You See it Too?: A Triptych engages exposure in dialogue with each of the performances I have put forth thus far: it provokes a racialized relationality between spectators and myself (*Fairview*); engenders Brown exposure (*Little Amal* and *Dear Laila*); and collapses the past onto the present, even transnationally at times (*Dark Noon*). Particularly, as I perform future iterations in different locations—for example, as I did in PSi in Brazil this past winter—I

³⁰⁸ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 182.

am curious to see how race, as a historically contingent formation, will ebb and shift; perhaps to create what Joshua Chambers-Letson calls a "communism of incommensurability" between me and my participants.³⁰⁹ Various trajectories will likely chart different "response-ible" spectators that react to, and engage my performance.

In lieu of a conclusion, let me summarize the key concepts and discursive interventions that emerge from this dissertation. I offer "exposure" as a framework to describe theatrical tactics, used by minoritized artists, that animate racial performativity through immersive or participatory performances. This dissertation intervenes in contemporary discourses of participatory theatre to consider how minoritarian aesthetics activate immersivity in performance across its three chapters. In chapter one, I analyze *Dark Noon* as a transnational performance that collapses three timelines to outline exposure's capacities for unveiling racial and colonial logics. Specifically, *Dark Noon* unveils legacies of racial capitalism and settler colonialism to animate how they presently operate. Chapter two provides four theses on "brown exposure" to examine refugee subjectivity through discursive, legal, and affective frameworks. It also charts minoritarian refusal as it is enacted through aesthetics of mobility, radical hospitality, and accompaniment in immersive performance. I use thick descriptions in my analysis throughout the first two chapters, strategically, to archive performance works that all circulate outside of print at present. In chapter three, I theorize the "response-ible" spectator as one who is sometimes invited, and at other times compelled, to challenge anti-Black racism and take on a Black gaze through participatory performance. Together, these chapters ask: how does the solicitation of direct audience engagement by minoritized theatre artists produce aesthetic, social,

³⁰⁹ Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, 9.

political, and communitarian meanings that challenge racial and colonial white logics of spectatorship?

The many minoritarian artists whose performances form the constellations of exposure in the preceding pages imagine—and forge—worldmaking performance practices that produce new political, social, and communal epistemologies of race, citizenship, and justice. All of them work to enact change in our political present, and to collectively usher in rich minoritarian futurities. Now that you’ve immersed yourself in minoritarian exposure, and you have reached the final pages of this dissertation, I would like to end by asking *you* a question: do you see it too?

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