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(Im)possibilities of Theatre and Transgression: the critical impact of transgressive theatrical practices

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(IM)POSSIBILITIES OF THEATRE AND TRANSGRESSION:
THE CRITICAL IMPACT OF
TRANSGRESSIVE THEATRICAL PRACTICES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Theatre

by
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For my family (blood and otherwise), for fueling my imagination with stories and songs (especially on those nights I couldn't sleep).

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Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	vi
CHAPTER	
1 ACTS OF TRANSGRESSION: THEATRE, TRANSGRESSION, AND CRITICAL IMPACT	1
2 THE STATUS OF TRANSGRESSION: FRONTERA, FRONTERAFEST, AND ALTERNATIVE THEATRE	44
3 A MARKET OF TRANSGRESSION: NAUGHTY AUSTIN, RONNIE LARSEN'S <i>MAKING PORN</i> , AND QUEER EROTIC PERFORMANCE	87
4 AN ETHICS OF TRANSGRESSION: SWINE PALACE PRODUCTIONS, HURRICANE KATRINA, AND NONTRADITIONAL CASTING	132
5 THE ARC OF TRANSGRESSION: CONCLUSIONS, QUESTIONS, AND AN EPILOGUE	187
WORKS CITED	212
APPENDIX A: LETTER OF PERMISSION, NAUGHTY AUSTIN	239
APPENDIX B: LETTER OF PERMISSION, SCRIPTWORKS	240
VITA	241

Abstract

While performance practitioners often rely on socially, aesthetically, and politically transgressive practices to critically impact the socio-political climate outside the theater walls, transgression is fraught with contradiction. Historically, acts of transgression have led to both the expansion *and* suppression of democratic rights.

(Im)possibilities of Theatre and Transgression employs a critical lens that takes into account the historical and ideological specificities of individual productions in Austin, TX and Baton Rouge, LA to argue that transgressive theatrical practices both counter and reproduce normalizing discourses and discourses of domination in local and regional culture. This study focuses on the types of aesthetically, socially, and politically transgressive theatrical practices that seek to interrogate and challenge boundaries related to individual and cultural identity—pushing toward a more plural and radical concept of democracy—and are endemic to present day US theatres located on the cultural fringe. It examines alternative theatre practices which prevailed in Austin in the nineties to argue that a transgressive critique of “normalcy” can in fact strengthen regimes of the normal locally and regionally. It looks to an LGBTQ focused company in Austin to underscore the ways in which overtly commercial, exploitative queer erotic performance practices can also serve a positively transgressive, political and identity-affirming function within local and regional culture. Analysis then turns to performances staged in Baton Rouge following Hurricane Katrina to contend that transgressive nontraditional casting practices both facilitate and fail an ethics of tolerance and inclusiveness within local and regional contexts. Finally, *(Im)possibilities of Theatre and Transgression* suggests that transgression itself achieved significance in the US through currencies of performance at the end of the twentieth century.

Chapter 1. Acts of Transgression: Theatre, Transgression, and Critical Impact

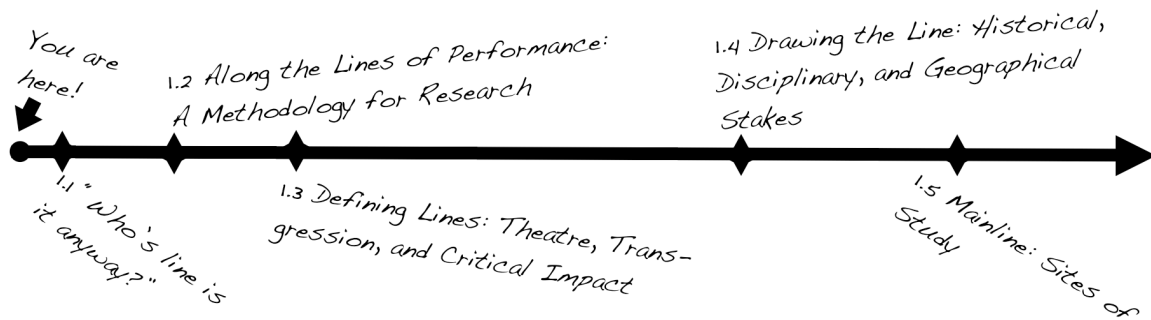


Figure 1. Schematic Diagram: Chapter 1

1.1 “Whose line is it anyway?”

“Men of most renowned virtue have sometimes
by transgressing most truly kept the law.” — John Milton

In an essay published in the November 2008 issue of *American Theatre*, playwright Naomi Wallace trumpets, “Let us transgress together—and by this heat, by the sparks that are generated, make a light to see by for all of us” (102). Titled “On Writing as Transgression: Teachers of Young Playwrights Need to Turn Them Into Dangerous Citizens,” Wallace’s manifesto serves as an ideal springboard for this research project. At once, Wallace’s essay juxtaposes three concepts in which I learned as an undergraduate theatre major at a small liberal arts university in Austin, Texas to place unquestionable faith: theatre, education, and transgression. Like those teaching-artists and scholar-practitioners under whom I studied, I enter the classroom/rehearsal space on a daily basis with a strong belief in the transformative power of performance.¹ My ethic is grounded in an

¹ There exist several varied performance practices and theories of performance that see theatre as a potential site for cultural, social, political, and personal transformation. Many are associated with artistic movements related to the mid- to late twentieth-century. European artists such as Antonin Artaud (see “The Theater of Cruelty,” *The Theater and Its*

understanding of the pedagogical functions of the medium that encourage performers/spectators to transgress the boundaries of their own lived experiences. Just as they do for Wallace, education and transgression form the bedrock of my ideology. In a post- 9/11, post-Katrina, post-Bush world rife with injustice fueled by blind faith, assumption, however, is a luxury that can no longer go unchecked.

Taking a cue from bell hooks, Wallace calls for a pedagogy of playwriting that encourages students to engage in a type of “self transgression” in pursuit of “critical awareness” (Wallace qtd. in 100). “Teaching to transgress,” according to hooks, requires teachers to push students beyond known boundaries of self so that they develop critical-thinking skills that take into account multiple perspectives (hooks 12). Wallace cites a number of playwrights, past and present, who practice “self transgression” and impel

Double) and Grotowski (see “Statement of Principles,” *Towards a Poor Theater*) and American-based performance ensembles like The Living Theatre (see “Only Connect: The Living Theater and Its Audiences” by Erika Munk and “Four Scenes of Theatrical Anarcho-Pacifism: A Living Legacy” by Alisa Solomon), The Open Theater (see “After Paradise: The Open Theatre’s *The Serpent*, *Terminal*, and *The Mutation Show*” by Carol Martin and “Ways of Working: Post-Open Theater Performance and Pedagogy by Roger Babb) The Performance Group (see “The Performance Group Between Theater and Theory” by Martin Puchner and “A Different Kind of POMO: The Performance Group and the Mixed Legacy of Authentic Performance” by Mike Vanden Huevel), and Bread and Puppet Theatre (see “‘Go Have Your Life!’: Self and Community in Peter Schumann’s Bread and Puppet Theater” by Sonja Kuftinec and “Bread and Puppet and the Possibilities of Puppet Theater” by John Bell) offer approaches to performance grounded in discourses of transformation. The performance scholarship of Richard Schechner (see “Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed,” *Between Theatre and Anthropology*) and Victor Turner (see “Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?”) take transformation as an underlying theme connecting disparate types of performance, i.e., cultural performance, ritual performance, theatrical performance, etc. Jill Dolan uses spectatorial experiences to argue that theatre engenders emotional responses which lead to transformation (see *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre*). Tim Miller and David Román find that transformation is constituted through a series of conversion experiences (see “Preaching to the Converted”).

audiences to move in similar directions through their work.² Transgression for Wallace (as it does for hooks) ultimately implies a type of pedagogy that provides students, playwrights, spectators, performers, et al. with tools for questioning the status quo. By drawing attention to the pedagogical functions of performance, Naomi Wallace marks theatre as a site of historical, political, and social importance where the construction of individual and cultural identity is rehearsed and staged.³ Transgression serves as a means through which performance often critically impacts the socio-political climate outside the theater walls. However, the nature of transgression is not as cut and dried as Wallace imagines.

A popular understanding of transgression might best be described as the crossing of a line, a boundary, or a commandment: *Imagine a line—now cross it*. Crossing from my bedroom to my bathroom, I step across the line that is represented by my hallway but do not necessarily commit an act of transgression. Acts of transgression occur when the line being crossed holds material or symbolic significance. If my brother declares the hallway to be the dividing line marking *his* quarters from *my* quarters, then maneuvering past the hallway

² For Naomi Wallace “Arthur Miller, Tony Kushner, Adrienne Kennedy, August Wilson, Dario Fo, Harold Pinter, Carol Churchill, Kwame Kwei-Armah, Tracey Scott Wilson, Debbie Tucker Green, Chay Yew, and Robert O’Hara” serve as examples of playwrights who have interrogated social injustice and questioned the status quo through their work (Wallace 100).

³ While a number of theater artists and scholars have sought a practice or promoted a concept of theatre grounded in pedagogy, Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal are the two that most often come to mind. Theatre, according to Brecht, serves as a means of education by encouraging spectators to develop awareness of social injustice. Through use of what he describes as the alienation effect, theatrical performance offers moments for spectators to critically engage with discourses represented onstage. (See “A Short Description of A New Technique in Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* for an outline of the Alienation effect as described by Brecht). For Boal theatre is more literally a practice that counters oppression. By removing barriers separating spectator from actor, Boal’s work provides spectators with a forum for considering injustice and a space for staging solutions to problems (see “From The Theatre of the Oppressed in Europe: Forum Theater”).

might constitute an act of transgression. Transgression describes a high-stakes, challenging violation of boundaries. The crossing of any ol' line is not an act of transgression.

Transgression accrues meaning when the line being crossed represents a normative limit.

As evidenced by Wallace's challenge, acts of transgression carry a certain charge. Historically, transgression has led both to the type of socio-political change Wallace seeks and to the type of violence she hopes to combat. Even a cursory look into the past proves that acts of transgression have been carried out in the service of freedom as well as oppression, e.g., The Boston Tea Party, Rosa Parks and the Civil Rights Bus Boycott, Stonewall Riots, Indian Removal Act, the Attack on Fort Sumter, The Holocaust. In Western contemporary culture it is an act of transgression for one person to end another's life: to kill is to transgress. Throughout the course of history, human rights have been won and lost through acts of transgression that involve killing. Whereas the US Civil War helped secure rights for slaves, the Afghani Civil War allowed the Taliban to limit women's rights. The moral and political implications of each act of transgression rely all too often on vantage point. Even those acts of transgression which appear to be cut and dried on the surface are not quite so black and white. Evil or good, triumphant or tragic, interpretation of an individual act of transgression depends upon the perspective of those involved. Taking the Boston Tea Party as an example, those in support of American independence might have seen the act of transgression as a symbol of freedom, whereas British sympathizers might have categorized it as terrorist tactic. As a platform for playwriting, teaching, learning,

activism, oppression, control, crime, racism, terrorism, and genocide alike, it is abundantly clear that transgression is fraught with contradiction.⁴

In *(Im)possibilities of Theatre and Transgression* I employ a critical lens that takes into account the historical, aesthetic, and ideological specificities of select productions to argue that transgressive theatrical practices both counter and reproduce normalizing discourses and discourses of domination in local and regional culture. Although a seemingly limitless number of limits render disparate actions, behaviors, and cultural products transgressive in the contemporary United States, this dissertation will not address every act of transgression. Rather, following Wallace's lead, I focus on the types of aesthetically, socially, and politically transgressive theatrical practices that 1) seek to interrogate and challenge boundaries related to individual and cultural identity, gesturing toward a more plural and radical concept of democracy, and 2) are endemic to present day US theatres located on the cultural fringe. While practitioners often rely on transgressive theatrical practices to claim for performance aesthetic, political, and social significance, their efforts do not always result in the type of leftist/populist pedagogy hooks and Wallace champion. Although socially, politically, and aesthetically transgressive tactics possess potential to encourage theatregoers and theatre-makers to critically interrogate normative boundaries, there are limits to transgression. Transgressive theatrical practices fall victim to the bounds of transgression, on one hand, and offer opportunities for reconsidering the possibilities of transgression, on the other. This project stems from my work as a theatre practitioner and is inspired by theatrical experiences stretching back ten to fifteen years. However, the performances I consider are explicitly connected to socio-historic events

⁴ For a thorough summary of theoretical discourses related to transgression see *Transgression* (2003) by Chris Jenks.

surrounding the end of the twentieth or beginning of the twenty-first century and can be linked in various ways either to Austin, Texas or to Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Several Fourth of July weekends ago, my partner Derek and I (with the help of my younger brother Kevin) chartered a moving van and figuratively set sail from Austin to Baton Rouge. In a U-Haul that was literally the size of a small tugboat, we battled traffic in Texas and gamboled—or gambled—our way through Louisiana.⁵ We crossed the mighty Mississippi, a line on the map that marks East from West and divides more than radio and television broadcast call letters in the cultural imagination, just before midnight.⁶ Home to Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge is where I came to begin a PhD program—to start and end this research project. Although I was merely exchanging one capital city for another, at the time of my arrival Baton Rouge seemed worlds apart from Austin. As I would soon learn, however, my new hometown had been spying on my former hometown for some time. It seems that in 2003 Baton Rouge had sent a group (shall I call them explorers? delegates?) deemed the “Austin 6” to Austin to bring back news and plans for raising Baton Rouge’s prestige as a progressive cultural center. Sponsored by the Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce, the research trip was meant to explore reasons why Austin’s image was one of “speed and attitude,” whereas Baton Rouge was considered “stagnant” (A6). The Austin 6 became A6, a non-profit collective with over 2,500 members dedicated

⁵ In moving from Austin to Baton Rouge I found several excuses to delay my estimated time of arrival—gambling chief among them. Interstate 10, the highway connecting Houston and Baton Rouge, is dotted with many casinos, the first of which is only miles from the Texas-Louisiana Border. As gambling is illegal in Texas, once my brother, my partner, and I entered the state of Louisiana we stopped frequently to take advantage of the novelty.

⁶ As I learned upon relocating to Baton Rouge, radio and television broadcast call letters east of the Mississippi begin with W. West of the Mississippi they begin with K. The Federal government began using the Mississippi as a formal dividing line in January, 1923 (White, “K/W”).

to studying issues of importance to Baton Rouge communities and committed to creative growth in the Louisiana capital city (46). While I am not sure that Baton Rouge has grown into Austin, when I visited my former home in the summer of 2010 it too seemed worlds apart from the Austin I remember. Although Austin still sports an image of “speed and attitude,” the bohemian counter culture that has persisted in Austin since the mid-twentieth century has been mined for commercial growth and tourism to such an extent as to render it inextricable from mainstream culture. According to theatre artists I interviewed who currently live in Austin and have been working in Austin theatres for ten, twenty, thirty, or forty plus years, a number of changes have occurred that continue to affect the Austin theatre community. Jenny Larson, Artistic Director of Salvage Vanguard Theatre, laments the loss of artist-friendly, affordable housing. Ken Webster, Artistic Director of Hyde Park Theatre, has noted an unequal increase between producing theatre companies and arts funding. Hyde Park company member Mical Trejo has found that living in Austin occasionally has the feel of larger metropolitan areas like Houston or Dallas as opposed to the small town vibe he experienced when he first moved to Texas’s capitol city almost two decades ago.

Although in all likelihood my tendency for pinpointing differences between Austin and Baton Rouge is a natural consequence of moving from one beloved city to another, I like to blame such proclivity on the climate of comparison already in existence when I set up house on the east side of the Mississippi. It was within this climate of comparison that I embarked on my first performance project at LSU: Outworks. And while I am no longer swept up in the crosswinds of comparison, this dissertation grows from responses to those performances. During my second semester of course work (spring 2006) I began

collaborating with then LSU Theatre Department Chair Michael Tick and current Chair Kristin Sosnowsky to create Outworks, a weeklong festival of new lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) themed plays. The idea to develop an event of this sort in Baton Rouge occurred to me only a few months after I started classes in the PhD program. One afternoon in casual conversation with Michael Tick I mentioned the vast number of new plays being performed in Austin and by comparison the lack of new plays in Baton Rouge.⁷ Tick offered to fund a project that would help remedy this situation. After several discussions with friends, colleagues, and mentors, I proposed what has since become a much anticipated annual event now in its sixth season. Realizing that a large portion of the undergraduate student body at LSU self-identifies as politically and socially conservative, I anticipated a few possibly homophobic objections to an LGBTQ-themed new play festival. While no blatant protests have interrupted production to date, this is not to say that responses haven't been passionate. What spectators find transgressive or not transgressive about the pieces featured in Outworks and how these "acts of transgression" succeed or fail to critically impact student-spectators and student-performers has left me with questions regarding the (im)possibilities of theatre and transgression.

⁷ Since at least the nineties, Austin has been home to several annual festivals (some ongoing and others now defunct) that celebrate new work, including FronteraFest (see www.fronterafest.org), Out of Ink Ten Minute Play Showcase, The Texas Young Playwrights Festival, Fresh Terrain, and MOM (Mind Over Money) Fest. A handful of organizations and institutions have helped Austin become a hotbed for new and emerging playwrights, including Austin Script Works, a regional playwriting service organization located in Austin (see scriptworks.org/), the M.F.A. in playwriting program offered by the University of Texas, and the Michener Center for Writers (see www.utexas.edu/academic/mcw/). The Nationally recognized South by Southwest Music and Film Festival, although not directly related to playwriting, has also helped Austin garner a reputation for cutting edge, original performances (see <http://www.sxsw.com>).

To a large extent, I engage in this project with the goal of ensuring that my performance practices carry a critical punch by encouraging theatre makers and theatregoers to interrogate normative boundaries and normalizing discourses. Of the many various types of transgressive theatrical practices, I deal with three that seek to test the boundaries of identity by pushing them in more plural and radical directions through the aesthetic conventions of performance. I begin by looking at alternative theatre practices which prevailed in Austin in the late nineties to ask how a transgressive critique of “normalcy” can in fact strengthen regimes of the normal locally and regionally. I then look to a production staged by an LGBTQ focused theatre company in Austin at the turn of the millennium to consider the ways in which overtly commercial queer erotic performance practices can also serve a positively transgressive, political and identity-affirming function within local and regional culture. I next turn to performances staged in Baton Rouge following Hurricane Katrina to understand how transgressive nontraditional casting practices can both facilitate and fail an ethics of tolerance and inclusiveness in local and regional contexts. Finally, I interrogate the ways in which concepts of transgression in general have achieved significance through currencies of performance at the end of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. In the following sections of this chapter I describe the methodology which informs my research and analysis; provide a foundation for understanding theatre, transgression, and critical impact; delve further into the stakes and scope of my project; and offer a more thorough overview of the sites I investigate and arguments I make in subsequent chapters.

1.2 Along the Lines of Performance: A Methodology for Research

“Computers can now keep a man's every transgression recorded in a permanent memory bank.” — Lane Olinghouse

Although this dissertation aims to inform my practice, I approach the subject through a critical lens that relies heavily on methodologies grounded in performance studies. As Sonja Kuftinec notes in *Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-Based Theatre* (2003), the field of performance studies sees performance less as an independent art object and more as a product and producer of culture (8-9). Unlike approaches to performance that focus solely on textual and/or aesthetic criticism, performance studies as an anti or inter-discipline draws on a number of critical traditions.⁸ Today, several strains of performance studies exist.⁹ In the U.S. the two most prominent grew out of Theatre Studies at New York University and Speech/Communication Studies at Northwestern University in the 1980s (Schechner, *Performance Studies* 5). The program at New York University developed in part out of collaborations between avant-garde director Richard Schechner and anthropologist Victor Turner. Through Turner, Schechner articulated a course of study that called for greater emphasis on performance scholarship and less focus on theatre training (Carlson 17-18). At Northwestern University students of performance studies placed focus on embodied interpretations of non-dramatic texts (Schechner, *Performance Studies* 19-22). Inquiries into the nature of the text and what does or does not count as text led to an increase

⁸ For an overview of performance studies and critical evolutions within the field see *Performance: A Critical Introduction to Performance* (1996) by Marvin Carlson and *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2002) by Richard Schechner.

⁹ See *The Performance Studies Reader* (2004) edited by Henry Bial for a sample of essays representative of different strains of performance research.

in scholarship that marries analysis with the practice of performance.¹⁰ All differences aside, both the New York University and Northwestern University camps incorporate methodologies associated with anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, and critical theory. However, performance studies is less concerned with offering a codified set of research methods and more interested in understanding the ways in which performance becomes in and of itself a structuring and structured discourse.¹¹

What constitutes performance and falls within the purview of performance studies is, as one imagines, wide-ranging. According to Diane Taylor, performance is the domain not of the archive but of the repertoire. Whereas *archive* for Taylor signifies a textual-historical collection of documents, *repertoire* refers to the ways in which songs, gestures, expressive movements, stories, rituals, and other types of cultural performances have been passed down from one generation to the next through oral tradition and physical practice as opposed to written histories and material artifacts (19-20). The repertoire, Taylor argues, resists the archive in that any type of record ultimately fails to capture embodiment. For Peggy Phelan too, performance, as an ephemeral medium, refuses documentation. In *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (1993), Phelan defines performance as a type of representational practice that never means exactly what it intends and always conveys more. Such excess ultimately allows for multiple, oppositional interpretations (Phelan 2). For Joseph Roach performance has a similar never-hits-the-mark quality. Whereas Phelan argues that performance accrues significance through surplus, Roach finds that the nature of

¹⁰ See “A Paradigm for Performance Studies” (1987) by Ronald J. Pelias and James VanOosting for an explanation of the relationship between oral interpretation and performance studies.

¹¹ See *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (2001) by John McKenzie for an example of the way in which performance studies sees performance as a structuring and structured discourse.

performance is deficiency. According to Roach, performance works through a type of "surrogation" that never fully represents what it seeks to embody (*Cities* 2-3). Roach takes a genealogical approach to performance that relies on material traces in order to document and analyze the phenomenon.¹² This dissertation sees performance as simultaneously a cultural product, producer of knowledge, organizing framework, and embodied practice that is made legible through a nexus of discourses, codes, and material artifacts that leave the performance open to multiple readings, analysis, and criticism. While some parts of performance disappear, as Taylor and Phelan argue, Roach reminds me that others remain long after the performance event has ended. My study utilizes both ephemeral aspects of performance and material remnants that are part of a performance's historicity to craft specific arguments regarding the (im)possibilities of transgressive theatrical practices. Before launching into an explication of the arguments, however, it will be necessary for me to establish how I understand a few key concepts: theatre, transgression, and critical impact.

1.3 Defining Lines: Theatre, Transgression, and Critical Impact

"When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable,
But he who restrains his lips is wise." — Proverbs 10:19

1.3.1. THEATRE

Although it might go without saying, theatre is a type of performance but not all performance is theatre. Using categories of performance developed by performance studies scholars, theatre can be classified as a type of aesthetic performance. In the collection of essays titled *Performance Theory* (1988 and 2003), Richard Schechner defines aesthetic

¹² See *Cities of the Dead* (1996) and "Mardi Gras Indians and Others" (1992) by Joseph Roach for an example of performance scholarship grounded in a genealogical approach.

drama in opposition to social drama (i.e., sports, ritual, etc.). While the two categories share similarities, Schechner finds that aesthetic drama depends to a greater extent on a predetermined structure. It is less open-ended but perhaps more importantly can rely solely “on symbolic time and place, and in doing so, become entirely fictionalized” (Schechner, *Performance Theory* 125). In *Performance Studies: The Interpretation of Aesthetic Texts* (2007), Ronald J. Pelias and Tracey Stephenson Shaffer offer a theory of aesthetic communication that coupled with Schechner’s understanding of aesthetic drama provides a more comprehensive definition of aesthetic performance. For Pelias and Shaffer aesthetic communication involves speakers and listeners. Aesthetic speakers make conscious, creative choices to elicit reactions from listeners (Pelias and Shaffer 18-19). As a type of aesthetic performance, theatre can be understood as a structured event that utilizes (to varying degrees) symbolic time and place, that relies on creative choices, and that necessitates interaction between speakers (i.e., performers) and listeners (i.e., spectators).

Like other forms of performance, theatre is both a cultural product and producer of culture that derives meaning from a complex web of technologies. Taking a cue from Michel Foucault, I use the term technologies to refer to the matrix of practices that render a specific object or concept knowable.¹³ Technologies of theatre include (but are not limited to) what Richard Schechner has described as the performance sequence: “training,” “workshop,” “rehearsal,” “warm-up,” “public performance,” “event/contexts sustaining the public performance,” “cooldown,” “critical responses,” “archives,” and “memories” (Schechner, *Performance Studies* 225). Each of these categories can be broken down into more specific technologies and each of those can be divided further still, *ad infinitum*. For

¹³ See “Technologies of the Self” (1982) by Michel Foucault.

example, the category of “public performance” might consist of acting, lighting, sound, costumes, etc., whereas the subcategory of costumes often includes rendering, patterning, stitching, color, line, shape, and material. Material is most likely composed of weaving, thread, dye, dying, and so on. As such, inventories of the technologies of theatre are imperfect. Schechner’s performance sequence cannot and does not attempt to offer an exhaustive list. Rather, he provides a heuristic device that structures performance, i.e., makes performance knowable as performance. In other places and at other times, he offers different models that serve a similar purpose. I choose this one because it most clearly marks theatre as a series of practices and events that includes—but is not limited to—ephemeral embodiment.

The performances that form the bulk of this dissertation make use of the technologies of theatre in multiple ways to various ends. Some are immediately recognizable as theatre. Others are not. In *Theatricality* (1972) Elizabeth Burns argues that theatre is defined by convention. For Burns two sets of conventions work cooperatively to define a traditional theatrical practice: rhetorical and authenticating. Rhetorical conventions are those that let spectators know what types of interactions are appropriate for a given theatre event. These provide clues as to the genre of the play and serve as a funnel through which other conventions are then siphoned. For example, when watching a production of *A Doll’s House* by Henrik Ibsen rhetorical conventions tell me that I am watching a realistic drama as opposed to a melodrama. Instead of booing or throwing popcorn at the antagonist (as might be acceptable with melodrama), I am only allowed internal or private responses until the end of the performance when I am expected to show approval through applause. In contrast, authenticating conventions help spectators make sense of the onstage world. Authenticating

conventions are how I know that Nora, the leading female character, is an upper-class married woman who struggles with late nineteenth-century gender roles. Whereas the set and costumes suggest things that I associate with a certain period and status, dialogue, movement, and emotion allow me to read Nora's dissatisfaction.

Although Burns deals primarily with the conventions of theatrical realism (i.e., plot, character, etc.), Baz Kershaw has shown how her analysis has broader implications in his study *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (1992). For Kershaw theatre is best described as an "ideological transaction" that takes place between spectators and performers (16). Ideology, according to Kershaw, "provides the framework" that allows audiences to "decode" the rhetorical and authenticating conventions (16).

Taking up *A Doll's House* again, it is only through a shared ideology that I recognize the onstage action as theatre and am able to read Nora's unhappiness. Within the world of the play, I realize that Nora and Torvald are married only because I am familiar with modern Western discourses governing marriage. During other time periods or in other places different signifiers might be required to convey a state of marriage or, on an even simpler level, mark the event as theatrical performance.

Kershaw emphasizes that theatre *does* something—creates ripples that can be felt outside the theater walls (1). This happens when "the micro-level of individual shows and the macro-level of the socio-political order . . . interact" (1). In Kershaw's study rhetorical and authenticating conventions provide the framework through which it is possible to analyze interactions between the micro- and macro-levels of the theatrical production. Borrowing from Burns, Kershaw uses rhetorical conventions for referencing those that structure relationships between the audience and performer and authenticating conventions

to describe others that deal with relationships between characters in the play. Rhetorical conventions, Kershaw points out, “are not confined solely to the performed show itself,” however (25). They also structure the “gathering and dispersal phases of performance” (25). Rhetorical conventions, then, are more generally those signs that allow spectators to know that the performance is indeed a theatrical event and not, for example, a sporting event. They provide a frame and reference point for interpretation and involve technologies of theatre related to the public performance and contexts leading up to and following the performance. In some cases, the stage, lighting, sound, and costumes can all serve as rhetorical conventions—as might ticket sales, advertising, marketing, post-performance cool down, and critical responses. Authenticating conventions are a bit more complicated under Kershaw and “enable an audience to perceive the specific ideological meaning of the show in relatively explicit ways” (26). While Burns sees authenticating conventions as that which merely enables audiences to read plot, Kershaw argues that they provide insight into the ideological underpinnings of the production in a way that might effect the offstage world. Going back to *A Doll’s House*, authenticating conventions for Kershaw not only allow me to register Nora’s persecution but also open my eyes to the ways in which women have historically been subjugated. Kershaw locates possibilities for the micro-level of the individual show to affect the macro-level of the socio-political order in these and similar moments.

In practice, however, the relationship between authenticating and rhetorical conventions is perhaps messier than Kershaw indicates. Although several of the theatrical events I discuss make use of authenticating and rhetorical conventions in traditional ways, others do not. Some devise and deploy a unique set of rules for interpreting theatrical reality

or for defining/navigating audience-performer interactions. In chapter 2, I describe a performance orchestrated by the guerilla improv company Well Hung Jury that utilizes rhetorical conventions associated with a sporting event or relay to mobilize authenticating conventions related to shopping. The muddled yet fruitful interplay between rhetorical and authenticating conventions allow me to read the performance as a comment on the consumer market—where capitalism is a game played by winning and losing teams. Examining the technologies of theatre to see how the micro-level of the individual show transgressed the macro-level of the socio-political order facilitates a reading of critical impact as it relates to the performance. Whether or not such acts of transgression countered or reproduced normalizing discourses and discourses of domination within local, regional, and historical contexts remains to be seen. In the following sections I delve further into topics of transgression and critical impact.

1.3.2 TRANSGRESSION

The types of actions and behaviors that register as transgressive vary considerably from culture to culture and from age to age. As cable programs like *Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern* or a cursory knowledge of pre-twentieth-century medical practices suggest, one society's customs are another's transgressions. In a comprehensive study of theoretical thinking on transgression which spans several historical periods and crosses many disciplines simply titled *Transgression* (2003), Chris Jenks argues that concepts of transgression are crucial to understandings of modernity and postmodernity and finds transgression to be a double-edged sword—one that simultaneously reinforces the very borders it tests (2). Anthony Julius's *Transgressions: The Offences of Art* (2002) also provides a useful introduction to the phenomenon of transgression. Throughout, Julius

develops an idea of transgression that interrogates and explicates modern art movements. For Julius transgression takes on four meanings: “the denying of doctrinal truths; rule-breaking, including the violating of principles, conventions, pieties or taboos; the giving of serious offense; and the erasing or disordering of physical or conceptual boundaries” (Julius 19). There exist “many social practices that are multiply transgressive,” according to Julius, “art-making chief among them” (Julius 19). However, Julius does not propose to laud transgression. Rather, he seeks to identify and examine the various ways in which transgression became the status quo within visual art movements throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth century. Julius argues that “[m]any of the major artworks of the past 150 years or so may usefully be described as transgressive” and that “[d]uring this time, the opportunities for certain kinds of transgressive art were exploited to the full” so much so that “[o]ne could say . . . that the transgressive was hegemonic” (Julius 53). According to Julius, relationships between the visual arts and transgression in the late twentieth century can be characterized by a headline in *Art Newspaper* that reads “Transgression + Media Coverage = Big Bucks,” which he argues announces the unfortunate truth that “[c]apitalism has at last dissolved the opposition between system and transgression” (Julius 201). While consumer markets have capitalized on transgression, I argue in chapter 3 that relationships between the market, transgression, and critical impact are not as black and white as Julius imagines.

While there exists only a limited number of book-length studies dedicated specifically to transgression, there are many and varied monographs connected to ideas associated with transgression. Several cultural and historical projects have provided me with contexts for considering the topic. Although not explicitly using the language of

transgression, concepts and practices of transgression abound and are embedded in cultural and historical narratives in the West across time. Those regarding social change usually imply, rather than detail, transgression. Histories of consumer-culture, counterculture, art, and popular culture that engage in discourses of revolution and subversion are grounded in a type of rule breaking process associated with transgression. Thomas Frank, author of *The Conquest of Cool* (1997), suggests that business culture, counterculture, and consumer-culture from the 1960s onward have navigated discourses of revolution in ways that sanction and vilify transgression. In the introduction to the collection of essays titled *But is it Art: The Spirit of Art as Activism* (1997), Nina Felshin provides a history of art practices that grew out of the cultural revolutions of the 1960s and, like the environment in which they were birthed, specifically seek to transgress established boundaries (Felshin 9-20). These and an almost endless number of studies that connect cultural, social, and political changes in the mid- to late twentieth century to discourses associated with transgression (i.e., revolution, subversion, the counter-culture) tempt me to craft a narrative that sees transgression as a central, unifying theme. And while such a project would not be impossible to undertake, it runs dangerously close to normalizing transgression, perhaps confirming Anthony Julius's contention that the transgressive has become more the status quo and less the exception.

Queer theory provides me with a framework for understanding the ways in which individual identity is formed and performed in and through acts of transgression so as to simultaneously test and solidify normalizing discourses. Although the term queer is often associated with gay and lesbian, the two are not synonymous.¹⁴ Whereas gay and lesbian

¹⁴ I draw on a wide range of work on queer theory. For an introduction see the following

have become markers of a stabilized identity rooted in homosexual desire, *queer* refuses stable categories.¹⁵ As a practice “queer” seeks transgression.¹⁶ As an ever-expanding loosely defined body of theories, “queer” questions transgression.¹⁷ To be queer or to live queerly has less to do with sexual object choice and more to do with a belief in the fluidity of identity, including (but not limited to) sexuality and desire.¹⁸ To take the practice of queer to its impossible extremes would require the perpetual transgression of all identity markers so as to make a person unknowable. By necessity, then, queer plays more formally with some identity markers while foregoing and fixing others. Stemming from Judith Butler’s idea of performativity, queer theory sees identity as simultaneously contributing to and drawing on historical and cultural codes in a way that both challenges and reinscribes normative concepts of identity. Butler, building on J.L. Austin’s idea of the performative utterance, argues in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) that

key texts: *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1996) by Annamarie Jagose provides a concise overview of the topic. *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology* (1996) edited by Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason presents a collection of essays that serve as a primer on the subject. *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (1993) by Alexander Doty offers a critical in depth study. *A Queer Sort of Materialism* (2003) by David Savran illustrates the ways in which queer theory has influenced theater studies. For a sample of foundational lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer writing see *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (1993) edited by Henry Abelove, Michele Barale, and David Halperin.

¹⁵ See *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (2000) by Rosemary Hennesy and *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (2000) by Alexandra Chasin for a discussion of gay, lesbian, and queer identities in relation to the consumer market and capitalism.

¹⁶ See *That's Revolting: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation* (2004) edited by Mattilda Sycamore for a collection of essays written by queer activists, artists, performers, public servants, etc. about the material realities of queer life.

¹⁷ See from *Identity to Politics: The Lesbian and Gay Movements in the United States* (2002) by Craig Rimmerman for a critique of LGBTQ activism and movements.

¹⁸ See “Is this Theater Queer?: The Mickey Faust Club and the Performance of Community” (2001) by Donna Nudd, Kristina Schriver, and Terry Galloway for an example of subversive theatrical practices grounded in an idea of queer theory outside of sexual desire.

gender is constituted through performative acts. According to Austin, performative utterances "*do* something" (Austin 12). Simply stated, "I pronounce you man and wife" said by the right person in the right contexts constitutes a performative utterance for Austin. It is not a statement of fact—i.e, verifiable. Rather, saying the words establishes the marriage. For Butler performative acts are similar to performative utterances in that they *do* something. Unlike the officiant who brings a marriage into being through pronunciation, there "need not be a doer" behind the performative act as "the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed" (Butler, *Gender* 142). As such, action constitutes subjectivity for Butler—there is no subject prior to performativity. In *Excitable Speech* (1997) Butler notes that performativity should be understood "as a renewable action without clear origin or end" (40). While gender is constructed through performativity, one does not chose to perform gender in the way that one chooses a pair of pumps as choice would assume a preexisting subject. In her later work *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler argues that gender is "a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (1). Individual performances of gender reflect and construct notions of gender. For Butler gender develops out of and is controlled by historical and social contexts—past performances that have no point of origin. Viewed through the lens of queer theory, transgression contributes to the repertoire of performative acts—less a revolutionary or radical break from the status quo and more a double-edged sword, expanding and cementing normative and dissident notions of identity.

While queer theory, historical and cultural studies related to transgression, and contemporary studies on transgression have contributed to this project, my understanding of transgression is derived more explicitly from a very specific lineage of writings on the subject. In *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1986—previously published as *L'Erotisme* in

1957 and *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* in 1962) Georges Bataille lays the groundwork for what is arguably the primary critical discourse of transgression.¹⁹ Michel Foucault's "A Preface to Transgression" (1977 and 2003), which originally appeared in a 1963 issue of *Critique* devoted to Bataille, attempts to push the study of transgression to its poststructuralist limits—where meaning is derived from the simultaneous juxtaposition of the limit and the taboo that transgresses it. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986) respond to Foucault and seek to situate conversations of transgression in relation to Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque.

For Georges Bataille transgression can be understood as a process that goes hand in hand with prohibition. One can only transgress that which is prohibited. If theft were not prohibited, then it would not be an act of transgression for me to steal my neighbor's car. On the simplest level, prohibitions place limits on behavior. Without limits it would be impossible to transgress. While some limits are juridical in origin, others are cultural. It is against the law for me to steal, whereas it is not against the law for me to wear a dress—although both are transgressive in contemporary Western culture. I might choose not to steal so as to avoid arrest. I might choose not to wear a dress for a variety of reasons that aren't directly related to legal status. Most limits are grounded in both cultural and juridical discourses in such a way as to naturalize the limit. An act of theft is governed by both legality and Western cultural ideologies, not in the least of which are those that specifically sanction capitalism. To steal is to transgress the law and the social order. Leaving

¹⁹ See *Reading Bataille Now* (2007) edited by Shannon Winnubst for a collection of recent essays that place Bataille's work in relation to contemporary discourses on a variety of subjects.

complicated discourses regarding property, ownership, and the penal system behind, there are prohibitions against stealing cars to protect property and rights of ownership. According to Bataille, prohibitions result from a need to control violence: in the case of the stolen vehicle, violence toward my neighbor, his property, etc. Acts of transgression set violence free (Bataille 55-70). Prohibitions like those against theft that result from complex relationships between cultural and legal discourse are not so straightforward, however. If instead of stealing my neighbor's car I steal vegetables from his garden to feed my hungry children, other cultural discourses tied to (and that perhaps romanticize) poverty, family, and survival render my actions less transgressive. Both prohibition and transgression are context specific. Outside of explicit cultural and historical circumstances, the limit—the line—is fluid.

Prohibitions (or *taboos* as Bataille most often refers to them) tempt transgression. Quoting the Marquis De Sade, Bataille writes, “[t]he best way of enlarging and multiplying one's desires is to try and limit them” (Bataille 48). In simplest terms, I crave cookies in part because I cannot have cookies, either because I am on a diet, I can't afford cookies, or my partner told me not to eat the chocolate chip cookies he baked for his students and placed on the counter to cool. At once my partner's edict against eating the cookies draws attention to the cookies—gives the cookies voice, so to speak, meaning that I can now hear the cookies calling my name (and quite loudly I might add). For Bataille *taboos* are more than laws or edicts enforced by outside authorities (i.e., my partner) or ruled by cultural norms. He believes them to be deeply rooted in the human psyche: “This is clear to us,” Bataille writes, “in the anguish we feel when we are violating the taboo. . . . If we observe the taboo [i.e., do not break it] . . . we are no longer conscious of it. But in the act of violating it we

feel the anguish of mind without which the taboo could not exist” (Bataille 38). I want to forget about the cookies (no easy task) to focus on another example that might better explain Bataille’s argument: *taboos* against cross-dressing. According to the rubric Bataille establishes, cultural prohibitions in the contemporary United States against cross-dressing lead to a desire to cross-dress. This does not necessarily mean that all men in the twentieth-century US harbor fantasies for wearing women’s clothes. Limits placed on cross-dressing give cross-dressing a certain type of symbolic and material significance that it would not otherwise accrue. When one cross-dresses, one engages in the material and symbolic discourses that (as a result of cultural *taboos*) surround cross-dressing. We are only aware of cross-dressing as a *taboo*, however, when one cross-dresses. The exception proves the rule. The limit or line achieves significance through prohibition. Transgression announces the line giving the *taboo* power over it.

Bataille goes on to argue that “[t]here exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed” and that transgression itself is often proscribed by the prohibition (63). He offers prohibitions against murder as an example: “We feel like laughing when we consider the solemn commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ followed by a blessing on armies. . . . [M]urder is connived at immediately after being banned” (Bataille 63). Capitol punishment serves as another instance wherein an act of transgression is proscribed by a set of laws that govern the very same behavior. Transgression, according to Bataille, is not characterized by a free-for-all, anything-goes quality but marked by guidelines and regulations—as evidenced by rules of warfare: “At such and such a time and up to a certain point this is permissible” (Bataille 65). Bataille warns, however, that “once a limited license is allowed, unlimited urges towards violence may break forth” (65). This is not an uncommon scenario during

times of carnival. The sanctioned transgressions that are permissible over the course of Mardi Gras occasionally spark moments of real violence.

For Bataille death represents the ultimate taboo or prohibition and, as the final barrier that tempts crossing, drives life. To die, according to Bataille, is to defeat the “gulf that separates” individuals (or to borrow Bataille’s language, “discontinuous beings”): it is to return to a “continuity of being” (12-13). The need to experience continuity of being structures sexual intercourse. Bataille argues that “[t]he transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity” (17). Bataille’s account of the sexual act is, on the one hand, grounded in a heterosexist and anti-feminist discourse that sees the male partner as an active penetrator and the female partner as a passive receiver where through penetration the two bodies climax as one. On the other hand, his description can be applied more generally to the arousal/climax sequence wherein climax leads to a type of loss of consciousness that allows one to transgress the limits of rational thought—to experience, if only for a fleeting moment, a state of liminality that exists outside of ordered time.²⁰ Orgasm becomes a threshold between existence and non-existence where continuity of being can thus be achieved with or without a partner. Sex, then, for Bataille is literally a *petit mort*, a miniature version of the ultimate transgression that is death. According to Bataille, acts of transgression in general spring from the desire to achieve continuity—to experience death without actually dying.

We are incessantly trying to hoodwink ourselves, trying to get at continuity . . . without actually crossing the boundaries of this discontinuous life. We want to get across without taking the final step, while remaining cautiously on the

²⁰ See “Liminality and Communitas” by Victor Turner, originally published in 1969 and included in the *The Performance Studies Reader* (2004) edited by Henry Bial, for a critical framework of liminality.

hither side. . . . We cannot accept the fact that this has limits. At all costs we need to transcend them and maintain them simultaneously. (141)

For Bataille transgression and prohibition, sex and death all intertwine to form the core of human experience. Acts of transgression, according to Bataille, test limits as they reinforce limits in an effort to simultaneously transcend and maintain the limit. Transgression is less an exercise in academic discourse for Bataille and more a matter of life and death where all lines lead back to the lifeline.

Foucault's "A Preface to Transgression" written in response to Bataille's body of work takes Bataille's idea of transgression to its poststructuralist limits. Transgression for Foucault can serve a poststructuralist framework by replacing Hegelian dialectical thought characterized by thesis, antithesis, and synthesis (Foucault, "A Preface" 455). Foucault argues that transgression is not a process of contradiction but an interrogation of limits—where meaning is derived from the simultaneous juxtaposition of the limit and the taboo that transgresses it. For Foucault the need to test limits has resulted from changes in epistemology. The belief in an omnipresent, omnipotent god that once unified all discourse provided in Foucault's estimation an experience of the limitless—as god is by definition without limits. Contrastingly, the death of God has denied individuals an understanding of the limitless, offering in place of the limitless an endless number of limits—"the limitless reign of the Limit" (Foucault, "A Preface" 444). "The death of God restores us," Foucault writes, "not to a limited and positivistic world but to a world exposed by the experiences of its limits, made and unmade by that excess which transgresses it" (444). Notably, transgression does not imply a type of forward, oppositional, or violent movement that seeks to transcend limits for Foucault. Rather, acts of transgression reveal difference, simultaneously giving both the taboo and the limit meaning. Foucault illustrates his point

via reference to an electrical storm: a streak of light that flashes across the night sky does not break through the darkness as one breaks through a wall or symbolic boundary but gives meaning to the darkness (446). It is only through light that the concept of darkness is known just as it is only through darkness that the concept of light is known. One does not destroy the meaning of the other as is implied by forward oppositional violent movement (in the way that bursting through a wall might destroy at least a portion of the wall) but gives meaning to the other. Transgression, then, for Foucault is not a technology of resistance.

“Transgression does not seek to oppose one thing to another,” Foucault writes (446).

Rather, it exposes the boundaries that structure social reality without positive or negative connotations and as such, “must be detached from its questionable association to ethics” (Foucault, “A Preface” 446). I take issue with Foucault’s assertion regarding the ethical neutrality of acts of transgression in chapter 4. When placed within the specific temporal and geographical contexts of production, merely exposing boundaries or limits carries material and symbolic consequences.

Although only metaphoric, it is possible to represent Foucault’s idea of transgression by imagining a map. Visualize, if you will, a map of any major contemporary city that consists of several grids made up of individual lines organizing a number of spaces. To your surprise the map has been drawn in disappearing ink. Watch the lines, although still very present, fade from sight. Now, pick a spot and move across the seemingly blank page. As you cross the many and varied undetectable lines, they briefly reappear (perhaps even flash or change colors), revealing (if for only a moment) the various spaces structured by the lines themselves. If we had access to Google maps, we could click “street view.” Dragging your cursor from one block to the next you are able to glimpse bits of geography. Foregoing

maps altogether, step outside your front door as if you had never before left your house. Take a walk. Planting your bare feet in your yard allows you to feel the sensation of grass for the first time, standing in the street, the physical qualities of asphalt. Now traipse up and down the block following the same path ten, twenty, or thirty times. Notice how the pavement stays intact. Transgression is not destructive for Foucault. No matter how many trips you make you will not break the surface. For this task, one requires heavier tools—technologies other than walking.²¹

In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* Peter Stallybrass and Allon White see transgression as capable of performing such a job. In short, they seek to give transgression the teeth Foucault denies it. Transgression, according to Stallybrass and White, does not merely expose the boundaries that structure social reality as it does for Foucault. It also reorders social structures and intervenes in the formation of cultural identity. Transgression, according to Stallybrass and White, is directly involved in the construction and reification of symbolic hierarchies that render cultural identity knowable—make visible the often-naturalized concepts of culture (200). *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* focuses on four “symbolic domains” where the fight for cultural identity is staged: “psychic forms, the human body, geographic space, and social order” (Stallybrass and White 3). As Stallybrass and White argue, it is through these four domains that individuals make meaning of the world. The domains themselves are relationally constructed within and without.

Transgression for Stallybrass and White works both on the vertical and horizontal axis to contest discourses that compose the individual and collective domains (1-26). Horizontally,

²¹ See “Walking the City” in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988) by Michel de Certeau for an analysis of walking which sees subversive potential in the act of walking, allowing for contrasting arguments.

the domains derive significance from each other. Vertically, high and low discourses within each domain shape the individual domains themselves. Just as Foucault's lightning gives meaning to the dark sky, high and low discourses within each domain are relationally constructed. The top is known through the bottom and the bottom is known through the top *via negativa*. Up is not down. A monarch is not a subject. A mouth is not an anus. Discourses that define the top are those that define the bottom through opposition. The mouth is an entrance point—where food presumably enters the body. The anus is a point of exit—where waste exits the body. Within the cultural imagination the top is valued over the bottom. In practical terms, however, both the top and the bottom are equally necessary as they stabilize each other. Monarchs require subjects just as subjects require monarchs.

Transgression for Stallybrass and White reorders social structure and contests cultural identity through hierarchy inversion. Hierarchy inversion blurs boundaries between high and low discourses unsettling distinctions between the two categories. To explain what they mean by hierarchy inversion Stallybrass and White rely on two separate but complementary strains of thought: world upside down and symbolic inversion theories. Carnival marks a time expressly set aside for hierarchy inversion where the world is turned upside down. As Bakhtin argues in *Rabelais and His World*, vulgarity and laughter supplant the sanctioned language of the state as the low and base triumph over the elevated and sacred during Carnival (Bakhtin 10-12). Carnival time, unlike ordinary time, according to Bakhtin, is marked by the grotesque and excess (25-39).²² Normal identities are reversed: subjects rule monarchs and mouths leak waste. Critics of Bakhtin find the world upside down motif which characterizes the carnivalesque lacking in political efficacy. As the

²² For a critical study of the grotesque see *Staging the Savage God: The Grotesque in Performance* (2004) by Ralf E. Remshardt.

argument goes, carnival is a time of sanctioned transgression where individuals are permitted to blow off steam so as to be more productive during the workweek.²³ By placing the carnivalesque within a framework of symbolic inversion Stallybrass and White are able to “move beyond . . . the . . . debate over whether carnivals are politically progressive or conservative” (Stallybrass and White 26). Writing in *The Reversible World* (1978), Barbara Babcock suggests that symbolic inversion as a technology of language, literature, art, religion, and culture that contradicts normativity and normalizing discourses exists apart from carnival (Babcock 32). Unlike the world upside down theories associated with Bakhtin, symbolic inversion creates space for hierarchy inversion outside of carnival time. Taken as an instance of symbolic inversion, the carnivalesque for Stallybrass and White represents “a wider phenomenon of transgression” that allows the top to supplant the bottom and the left to displace the right (Stallybrass and White 26).

While subjects do not literally become monarchs and mouths cannot literally replace anuses, transgression subverts hierarchy to reveal the ways in which the two concepts derive meaning from each other. Anuses do not perform the same function as mouths. However, both are sites of production. Mouths produce words, whereas anuses produce waste. Both words and waste are useful and useless. Acts of transgression disclose the ways in which strict distinctions between words and waste, anuses and mouths, monarchs and subjects contribute to normalizing discourses that seek to maintain the status quo. Like an enzyme or microbe that encourages the top to seep into the bottom and the bottom to creep into the top, transgression initiates a process of deterioration. Even in the best of circumstances,

²³ See the chapter entitled “The World Upside Down” included in *Transgression* (2003) by Chris Jenks for a critical grounding of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque in relation to transgression and a summary of arguments opposed to the carnivalesque (Jenks 161-174).

however, symbolic hierarchies are slow rotting. As I argue in chapter 2, deterioration is difficult to sustain at best.

As a lineage of critical thinking on transgression, it is perhaps not unfair to characterize Bataille's idea of transgression as one that implies a type of violent interrogation of the limit that completes and simultaneously reifies the limit, to think of Foucault's idea of transgression as a revelation of limits that signifies difference, or to see Stallybrass and White's idea of transgression as the breaking down of limits through subversive practices that counter bourgeois hegemonic discourse. In the *(Im)possibility of Theatre and Transgression* I draw on all three concepts. It will not be my intention, however, to mark one theatrical practice as an example of a Foucauldian understanding of transgression and another as one grounded in a notion of transgression advocated by Bataille or Stallybrass and White. Rather, I characterize transgression in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century US as a context specific phenomenon related to a combination of these three theories. Throughout, I explore in depth the temporal and geographical contexts that allow different theatrical practices to register as transgressive within regional and local cultures. In the following section I offer a definition of critical impact before providing a more thorough overview of the disciplinary stakes and chapter arguments.

1.3.3 CRITICAL IMPACT

The body of work on transgression represented by Bataille, Foucault, and Stallybrass and White along with Queer Theory and Kershaw's model of theatrical conventions gestures toward an understanding of critical impact as it relates to transgressive theatrical practices. However, my analysis also draws on concepts of pedagogy—specifically those associated with radical pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and activist pedagogy.

In *Teaching to Transgress* bell hooks refers to her teaching practice as a “radical pedagogy” that is grounded in “critical and/or feminist perspectives” and includes “a recognition of differences—those determined by class, race, sexual practice, nationality and so on” (hooks 11). Radical pedagogy for hooks teaches students to step outside their own lived experiences to consider social construction and question the status quo. In short, it is “the practice of freedom” (hooks 11). While critical pedagogy is in line with radical pedagogy, it is markedly not confined to the classroom. Although critical pedagogy is not necessarily in opposition to hooks’s concept of radical pedagogy, *Teaching to Transgress* seeks to specifically influence the “classroom experience” (hooks 10). In “Cultural Studies, Public Pedagogy, and the Responsibility of Intellectuals” (2004), Henry A. Giroux, a leading scholar of critical pedagogy, argues that discussions of pedagogy have for too long been confined to educational institutions. Pedagogy for Giroux is a technology of learning. As a number of disparate cultural sites offer opportunities for learning, topics of pedagogy must be “taken up as part of a broader public politics” (Giroux 60). For Giroux critical pedagogy “expand[s] the possibilities of a democratic politics, the dynamics of resistance, and the capacities of social agency” (60). It is both a discourse regarding the social “construction of knowledge” and a “performative practice” (Giroux 61). Pedagogy under Giroux is a type of doing that is structured by and contributes to cultural literacy. As a cultural product and producer of culture theatre serves a critical pedagogical function.

Like Giroux, Jill Dolan too finds that pedagogy is less a theory of education and more an embodied practice—a type of activism. “[T]eaching is activism,” Dolan writes in *Geographies of Learning* (120). Dolan’s use of the term activism, however, implies a leftist/populist ethic. Unlike the activism of Fred Phelps which is grounded in a politics that

seeks to limit rights, Dolan's brand of activism strives for an expansion of rights. In measuring the critical impact of transgressive theatrical practices I look to concepts of 1) radical pedagogy that champion freedom, 2) critical pedagogy which sees pedagogy as a performative act occurring across a number of cultural sites—including theatre, and 3) activist pedagogy that seek an expansion of rights for disenfranchised groups.

1.4 Drawing the Line: Historical, Disciplinary, and Geographical Stakes

"Laws are sand, customs are rock. Laws can be evaded and punishment escaped but an openly transgressed custom brings sure punishment." — Mark Twain

To be sure, performance is no stranger to transgression. Some of today's most popular entertainments ground themselves in transgressive practices. An almost unlimited number of television shows, videogames, websites, and pop musicians utilize technologies of transgression to garner profits, win attention, and achieve social and political relevance. From *South Park* to *Grand Theft Auto*, Xtube to Lady Gaga, transgression seems to be the motif of the moment. Theatre has also made a good bedfellow of transgression. Although questionable, it would not be hard to craft a theatre history around themes of transgression. One might begin with romanticism, continue through to naturalism and the first and second waves of the avant-garde, move on to the radical performance experiments in the sixties, incorporate feminist and queer performances that proliferate in the eighties and nineties, and so on. While I am, on the one hand, intrigued by such a project, I am, on the other, skeptical of any study that takes transgression as a unifying, historical narrative as acts of transgression are geographically and temporally specific. A history of transgressive theatrical practices (if it is to claim intellectual integrity) must by necessity take into

consideration material circumstances and ideological frameworks related to the micro-level of the individual production and macro-level of the sociopolitical order. A study that demonstrates rigor of this sort—one that reaches, perhaps, into antiquity or beyond—would fill volumes.

While there is to my knowledge no such project to date, there are several valuable historiographies and case studies on the critical impact of transgressive theatrical practices that do not specifically ground themselves in theories of transgression. Many focus attention on the avant-garde and/or theatrical experimentations following World War II leading up to the twenty-first century. In *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History* (2000), Arnold Aronson frames transgressive American theatre practices of the mid-twentieth century within discourses of the historic avant-garde to show how the work “strives toward a radical restructuring of the way in which an audience views and experiences the very act of theatre, which in turn must transform the way in which the spectators view themselves and their world” (Aronson 7). Theodore Shank in *Beyond the Boundaries: American Alternative Theatre* (2002) places transgressive theatrical practices that emerged out of social and political transformations which occurred in the US throughout the sixties and into seventies under the rubric of alternative theatre (1). Stephen Bottoms, author of *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960’s Off-Off-Broadway Movement* (2004), complains that there exists no critical classification that does justice to the type of multivalent transgressive work that comprises Off-Off Broadway Theatre. He chooses for his study the language of the “underground” as it implies multiplicity—as in multiple undergrounds instead of the type of singularity the terms avant-garde and alternative connote (Bottoms 7-11). Although Aronson, Shank, and Bottoms provide excellent readings

of the type of transgressive theatrical practices that seek to test the boundaries of identity by pushing them in more plural and radical directions through the aesthetic conventions of performance, they do not interrogate theories of transgression, contribute to a discussion of transgression as a social phenomenon, nor allow space for transgression to question concepts related to the cultural products of theatre. Each also decidedly focuses more or less on performances and performance practices associated with the North East if not New York City more exclusively.

My study, on the other hand, places transgressive theatrical practices which strive to interrogate and challenge boundaries related to individual and cultural identity—gesturing toward a more plural concept of democracy—and are endemic to present day US theatres located on the cultural fringe within a larger framework of discourses on transgression. Socially, politically, and aesthetically transgressive performances possess potential to encourage theatregoers and theatre makers to interrogate normative boundaries and normalizing discourses, on the one hand, and fall victim to the bounds of transgression, on the other. Notably, Bataille, Foucault, and Stallybrass and White argue that transgression as a practice and concept occupies a prominent place in the history of Western culture and contemporary thought. In line with such a lineage of critical thinking on transgression, Chris Jenks finds that “a feature of modernity, accelerating into postmodernity, is the desire to transcend limits—limits that are physical, racial, aesthetic, sexual, national, legal, and moral” (Jenks 8). Jenks’s assertion along with Anthony Julius’s move to situate modern art movements in relation to transgression suggests that theatre, as a cultural product, producer of culture and knowledge, organizing framework, and embodied aesthetic practice, has much to add to contemporary and historical understandings of transgression. This

dissertation provides space for the discipline of theatre to participate in expanding and timely discourses on transgression through the examination of three different transgressive theatrical practices: alternative theatre, queer erotic performance, and nontraditional casting. By viewing alternative theatre, queer erotic performance, and nontraditional casting through a framework of transgression, the *(Im)possibilities of Theatre and Transgression* also contributes to discourses related to these historically specific yet pervasive practices. While theatre practitioners often rely on tactics of transgression to give performance political and social significance, their efforts both counter and reproduce normalizing discourses and discourses of domination in local and regional cultures. Employing a critical lens that takes into account the local and regional contexts of production allows me to measure the historical and geographical impact of transgressive theatrical practices. Debating whether full frontal male nudity onstage outside of specific circumstances violates taboos, points to the ways in which concepts of the body have been socially constructed in relation to public and private space, or inverts notions of public and private in a way that destabilizes fixed categorization can prove problematic as the naked male body in performance derives meaning from historical and ideological circumstances related to the micro-level of the individual production and the macro-level of the socio political order. Acts of transgression that draw on conventions and technologies of theatre also offer opportunities for reconsidering the possibilities of transgression.

Because transgression is a site-specific phenomenon, my focus on theatrical performances related to Baton Rouge and Austin will contribute uniquely to discourses

regarding transgression.²⁴ Neither Baton Rouge nor Austin can be considered theatrical epicenters. Both lack LORT theatres. Located, then, on the fringes of American theatre, Baton Rouge and Austin are sites ripe for an investigation of transgression. Although the two cities are rich in community-based and cultural performance, both occupy regions that continue to be under theorized in the field of theatre studies. As Jill Dolan wrote in “Performance, Utopia, and the ‘Utopian Performative’” (2001) published in *Theatre Journal* nearly 10 years ago at the time of this writing, Austin offers “a different experience of theatre going and it matters to what happens [onstage]” (Dolan, “Performance” 462). Baton Rouge too frames theatre uniquely through regional discourses that shape the performance event. By drawing on and contributing to archives and repertoires specific to these two closely related but markedly different regions, this dissertation participates in discourses related to regional and community-based theatre. Marking the two cities as sites where “acts of transgression” matter—where debates regarding cultural and national identity are staged and contested through transgressive theatrical practices—transgresses the more pervasive, traditional narrative of theatre in the US which positions transgressive approaches to the stage in relation to performances located above the Mason Dixon line.

1.5 Mainline: Sites of Study

“Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.”— Psalm 32:1

How do transgressive tactics work locally and regionally within existing and pervasive models and practices of theatre? How does a push for a transgressive radicality

²⁴ Jenks argues that “transgressions are manifestly situation specific and vary considerably across social space and through time” (2-3).

impact the social or cultural structures outside the theater walls or (re)structure an audience's relationship to the performance? How have legal and cultural limits affected the reception of transgressive theatrical practices? How have transgressive theatrical practices constructed and reflected notions of individual and community identity? What are the critical limits and ethical implications of a transgressive approach to theatre? To address these questions I mine the archive and the repertoire—utilizing both ephemeral aspects of performance and material remnants involved in the entire sequence of performance to consider the critical impact of alternative theatre, queer erotic performance, and nontraditional casting in local and regional culture. I organize my research into three separate case studies. Chapter 2 looks at alternative theatre practices in Austin, TX in the late nineties; Chapter 3 examines the critical potential of erotic performance practices as staged by Naughty Austin, a community-based gay niches theatre located in Texas's capitol city; Chapter 4 focuses on Baton Rouge, nontraditional casting, and the performance of identity following Hurricane Katrina; Chapter 5 places sites of performance from previous chapters in conversation with each other to reveal further insight into the phenomenon of transgression in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century US.

In chapter 2, "The Status of Transgression: Frontera, FronteraFest, and Alternative Theatre," I concentrate on Frontera and individual performances which compose FronteraFest's day-long site-specific performance event known as *Mi Casa Es Su Teatro* (My House Is Your Theatre) to investigate how an ostensibly radical, transgressive critique of "normalcy" can in fact strengthen regimes of the normal in local and regional culture. I begin by providing a history of Frontera, contending that current concepts of alternative theatre do not adequately describe Frontera or alternative theatre in Austin throughout the

1990s. I place Frontera within the contexts of the national grassroots radical alternative theatre coalition known as RAT and Austin's own "rebel theatre scene" to offer a category of alternative theatre that more accurately accounts for Frontera's transgressive praxis and ideological complexities. I then provide a reading of two Frontera productions, *Race of the Ark Tattoo* (1998) and *Cab and Lena* (2000), to argue that Frontera utilized transgressive theatrical practices to encourage spectators to think critically about the "alternative" and the "mainstream" while simultaneously drawing on and contributing to discourses that preserve the alternative/mainstream theatre binary. Next, I examine site-specific work which occurred within the context of FronterFest's *Mi Casa Es Su Teatro* to contend that individual performances that composed the day-long site-specific event in 2002 blurred boundaries between public and private space, onstage and offstage, scripted and unscripted event, spectator and performer, art and entertainment, and highbrow and lowbrow, but often reinforced the very limits they sought to challenge. Finally, I question assumptions made about the radical potential of transgressive alternative theatre practices to infest the status quo and interrogate the possibilities of sustaining a theatrical model grounded in the type of boundary-blurring transgressive practice of inversion advocated by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*.

In chapter 3, "A Market of Transgression: Naughty Austin, Ronnie Larsen's *Making Porn*, and Queer Erotic Performance," I concentrate on a 2002 production of Ronnie Larsen's play *Making Porn* staged by Naughty Austin, an LGBT focused theatre company located in Austin, to see if overtly commercial, exploitative performance practices might also serve a positively transgressive, political and identity-affirming function within local and regional culture. Centered on the gay male pornographic film industry, productions of

Making Porn (Naughty Austin's included) have often employed exploitative practices and commercial conventions associated with gay pornography to attract and titillate spectators. Although critics have frequently denounced the play as prurient fluff, Naughty Austin relied on the rhetorics of gay pornography to provide a springboard for collective action and highlight the ways in which bodies serve as sites of knowledge involved in the construction and deconstruction of identity. Placing the script within the context of a history of the gay pornographic film industry and in relation to critical debates surrounding gay pornography casts *Making Porn* in a new but not unproblematic light. I begin by providing an overview of the play's plot and sketching the historical details surrounding initial and subsequent productions. Because *Making Porn* relies on rhetorical and authenticating conventions associated with gay pornographic films, I next turn to the roots of the industry in the US, contending that gay porn operates and develops both as a money-making endeavor and as an expression of queer freedom/power and that *Making Porn* stages this present day/historical tension. Following, I examine legal, feminist, and queer perspectives on pornography to consider whether or not gay porn must remain a hopelessly compromised capitalist/misogynist venture or can serve as a source of transgressive affirmation. Finally, I challenge general black and white assumptions made about the critical limits or utopian promise of a transgressive, commercially-based, market-driven queer pornographic performance practice and specifically interrogate Anthony Julius's assertion that "[c]apitalism has at last dissolved the opposition between system and transgression" (201).

In chapter 4, "An Ethics of Transgression: Swine Palace Productions, Hurricane Katrina, and Nontraditional Casting," I move from an examination of theatre in Austin, the Texas State capital, to an exploration of Swine Palace, the only Equity theatre company

located in the capital city of Louisiana, Baton Rouge, on the Louisiana State University campus. Throughout, I focus on Swine Palace in general and performances of *Arms and the Man* by George Bernard Shaw and *Big Love* by Charles Mee that took place in Baton Rouge at Louisiana State University following Hurricane Katrina to investigate how transgressive nontraditional casting practices facilitate and fail an ethics of tolerance and inclusiveness within local and regional culture. Baton Rouge and Louisiana State University played a central role in post-Katrina rescue and recovery operations in Louisiana. The number of displaced African Americans that sought refuge in Baton Rouge and at Louisiana State University following Hurricane Katrina highlighted historical/present day racial tensions that plague Louisiana's capital city putting notions of tolerance and inclusiveness to the test. The Louisiana State University Department of Theatre and Swine Palace, the professional repertory theatre company associated with LSU, offered audiences a platform for considering the tragedy surrounding Katrina through productions centered on themes of refuge that spoke to the refugee/host experience within South Louisiana. I begin by providing an overview of Baton Rouge and theatre at LSU before Katrina to contend that Swine Palace served an important pedagogical and civic function within Louisiana's capital city in part through transgressive theatrical practices that included nontraditional casting which opened dialogues centered on issues of ideology, inclusivity, and tolerance within local and regional contexts. Following, I transition to a history of debates surrounding transgressive practices of nontraditional casting to argue that the practice of "casting without limits" advocated by Richard Schechner in an essay published in the November 2010 issue of *American Theatre* differs from other types of "blind" casting as it seeks to defamiliarize or even queer identity through a pointed resistance to realism. Next, I consider the effects

Katrina had on LSU and the Swine Palace 2005-2006 season as well as local and personal responses to the crises which surrounded the storm to suggest that within the racial environment of post-Katrina Baton Rouge the type of transgressive nontraditional colorblind casting practice employed alongside conventions of realism in the Swine Palace production of *Arms and Man* aligned themes of refuge already prevalent in the script with overly simplistic discourses on race perpetuated by the mass media following the storm—demonstrating the embarrassing results of pretending spectators are race-blind when they clearly aren't. Finally, I look to *Big Love* to challenge the critical limits of a transgressive “casting without limits” practice and (re)consider Foucault's assertion that transgression “must be detached from its questionable association to ethics” (446).

In chapter 5, “The Arc of Transgression: Conclusions, Questions, and an Epilogue,” I return to the challenge Wallace initiates to determine if sparks generated in local and regional culture by alternative theatre, queer erotic performance, and nontraditional casting have made “a light to see by for all of us.” I look to a production I directed for the initial Outworks festival in 2006 to suggest that transgressive theatrical practices often accrue significance in relation to each other and rely in part on processes of defamiliarization to achieve the type of impact Wallace champions. I consider differences between that which spectators in Austin and Baton Rouge generally consider transgressive, arguing that the status of transgression affects what transpires onstage as well as the critical impact of performance outside the theater walls. Placing Louisiana's capital city alongside Texas's capital city reveals important if not unsettling insights into relationships between theatre and transgression that require further examination. I then revisit Foucault's “A Preface to Transgression” to articulate a trajectory for future research that investigates the ways in

which transgression achieved significance through currencies of performance at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century and structures concepts of individual and cultural identity raising not a torch but a wildfire that—continuing to burn—affects the current economic, political, and cultural landscape of the US.

Chapter 2. The Status of Transgression: Frontera, FronteraFest, and Alternative Theatre

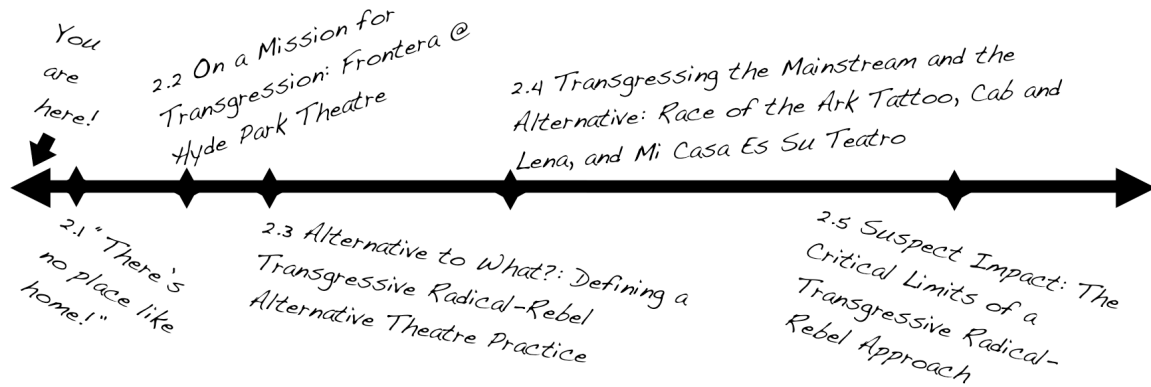


Figure 2. Schematic Diagram: Chapter 2

2.1 "There's no place like home!"

"Free speech means the right to shout
'theatre' in a crowded fire." — Abbie Hoffman

On February 9, 2002, my partner Derek and I started our day in the parking lot of a shopping center just north of the University of Texas campus in Austin where Well Hung Jury, a local guerilla improv troupe, was orchestrating a relay as part of the annual day-long site-specific performance event known as *Mi Casa Es Su Teatro* (My House Is Your Theater). Occurring annually within the contexts of the larger performance festival FronteraFest, *Mi Casa* offers outside-of-the-box opportunities for spectatorship. More a collection of "Do It Yourself" (DIY) performances that take place mostly in residences (but also parks and businesses) than a slick fringe festival, *Mi Casa* leaves few material traces. There is usually a map detailing performance locations which may or may not include brief descriptions of each show posted in the newspaper days before the event. Evidence of foot

traffic, leftover snacks, empty water bottles, and beer cans are also signs that *Mi Casa* has come and gone.

Created and originally curated by Frontera, a small defunct production company that garnered national attention as Austin's leading alternative theatre in the nineties, FronteraFest takes place over a five-week period.²⁵ Although Frontera closed its doors in 2001, audiences can still experience the unique whimsy offered by *Mi Casa Es Su Teatro* as FronteraFest is currently co-produced by Hyde Park Theatre and Austin Script Works.²⁶ In 2009 FronteraFest featured 80 twenty-five minute pieces referred to as the "Short Fringe" (as in short form), 18 full-length plays called "Long Fringe" (as in long form), and multiple site-specific performances that make up the daylong event known as *Mi Casa es Su Teatro*. Occasionally, the festival also includes late night jamborees—free-to-the-public open-mic-nights—following Short Fringe performances. Although the cost of registration for FronteraFest has risen over time, prices have remained reasonable. A slot in the 2009 Short Fringe sold for only \$45.00—which averages out to less than 2 dollars a minute. The Long Fringe costs considerably more—\$500.00 to participate in the 2009 festival. However, each production receives 100% of the proceeds earned from their ticket sales.²⁷ Participation in *Mi Casa*, on the other hand, is free. Since its inception in 1993, FronteraFest has remained an un-juried festival across the board. Spaces in the Short Fringe, Long Fringe, and *Mi Casa*

²⁵ For an example of the type of national attention Frontera received, see "Vicky Boone: Frontera Spirit" by Jamie Cantara published in the September 1998 issue of *American Theatre*.

²⁶ See "FronteraFest at 9" (*Austin Chronicle*, 2002) by Robert Faires for an explanation of changes in festival management.

²⁷ FronteraFest 2009 statistics have been provided by current FronteraFest producer Christina J. Moore who also reports that each Long Fringe festival has featured between 17 and 20 productions over the past five years and that the festival offers "early bird" registration discounts for both Long and Short Fringe participants.

are divvied up on a first-come, first-served basis. In the following chapter I focus on Frontera, a 1998 Frontera production of *Race of the Ark Tattoo* by W. David Hancock, a performance of *Cab and Lena* by Grisha Coleman and Daniel Alexander Jones which was produced by Frontera in the winter of 2000 as part of the inaugural Long Fringe Festival, and individual site-specific events that took place during *Mi Casa Es Su Teatro* in 2002 to investigate how an ostensibly radical, transgressive critique of “normalcy” can in fact strengthen regimes of the normal in local and regional culture.²⁸ I begin by providing a history of Frontera to contend that Frontera’s brand of alternative theatre achieved legibility through discourses on transgression but that current concepts of alternative theatre do not adequately describe Frontera. I then place Frontera within the contexts of the national grassroots radical alternative theatre coalition RAT and Austin’s own “rebel theatre scene” to offer a category of alternative theatre that more accurately accounts for Frontera’s transgressive praxis and ideological complexities. I next shift to a reading of *Race of the Ark Tattoo* and *Cab and Lena* to argue that Frontera’s brand of alternative theatre often encouraged spectators to think critically about the “alternative” and the “mainstream” yet drew on and contributed to discourses that preserve the alternative/mainstream theatre binary. I then focus on independently produced site-specific events which composed *Mi Casa* 2002 to suggest that *Mi Casa* performances transgressed normalizing concepts that separate public from private space, onstage from offstage, scripted from unscripted event, spectator from performer, art from entertainment, and highbrow from lowbrow but also reinforced the very boundaries they sought to challenge. Finally, I interrogate the

²⁸ For an overview of FronteraFest 2000 see “FronteraFest 2000” (*Austin Chronicle*, 2000) by Robert Faires. See “FronteraFest 2002” (*Austin Chronicle*, 2002) also by Robert Faires for an overview of the 2002 Festival.

possibilities of sustaining a theatrical model grounded in the type of boundary-blurring transgressive practice of inversion advocated by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* and question the potential of transgressive radical-rebel alternative theatre practices to infest the status quo in the local and regional contexts of Austin.

2.2 On a Mission for Transgression: Frontera @ Hyde Park Theatre

"The New Frontier I speak of is not a set of promises—it is a set of challenges."— John F. Kennedy

For co-founder and artistic director Vicky Boone and co-founding members Annie Suite and Jason Phelps, the name Frontera itself was meant to symbolize the type of high-stakes, challenging violation of boundaries associated with transgression. In a 1998 interview with Austin-based theatre critic Jamie Smith Cantara, Boone recalls, "We selected the name for its many meanings—the idea of borders and definitions—of crossing and opening borders" (qtd. in Cantara, "Vicky"). Founded in 1992, Frontera sought "to explore the space between absolutes" throughout its almost ten-year life span (Boone; "Mission").²⁹ This spirit of transgression guided both the company's business and aesthetic practices.

²⁹ Frontera's full mission as provided by Vicky Boone in email correspondences and published in a 1999 program for *Millenium Bug* (performed at the Mary Moody Northen Theatre on the St. Edward's University campus) is as follows: "Frontera commissions, produces and presents bold new works by America's most fearless and innovative artists working in theater, dance, film and music in an environment that values community participation and openness. Our goals include exploring the space between absolutes, serving Austin as a popular arts center, promoting freedom of expression and a dialogue between citizens, partnering with organizations that support teenagers and making art in the streets and neighborhoods of Austin. Among our goals for the year 2001, is the development of Frontera Arts—a versatile home for contemporary performance in Austin, equipped with a 300-seat theater, rehearsal space, shops and classrooms" (Boone; "Mission").

Frontera stepped outside its own borders by sharing offices and employees with other not-for-profit businesses, by forming partnerships with community-based organizations, by collaborating with artists that defy strict categorization, and by providing young and burgeoning performance practitioners with inexpensive opportunities for staging their work. In general, Frontera's season consisted of a mix of premieres, commissioned scripts, and previously produced plays.³⁰ Boone's 1994 production of Phillis Nagy's *Weldon Rising* marked Frontera's "real breakthrough" for local critic Michael Barnes (Barnes, "Frontera Ventures").³¹ *Enfants Perdus* (1996), written by RAT founder Erik Ehn, brought together a team of collaborators from across the US.³² *Managed Care* (1997), *Millennium Bug* (1999), and *Curb Appeal* (2000), written and performed by then University of Texas Economics professor Steve Tomlinson and directed by Austin Script Works Executive Director and current FronteraFest Producer Christina J. Moore, addressed issues of interest to gay and lesbian audiences.³³ Co-productions with Teatro Humanidad (a community-based, Spanish-speaking theatre company) helped Frontera better serve its demographic composed of "granola meets high-tech meets college intelligentsia meets cowboy-stock meets Hispanic

³⁰ For a complete production history see the Hyde Park Theatre website at www.hydeparktheatre.org/site/index.html.

³¹ For information regarding the production of *Weldon Rising* see the review "'Weldon' Ensemble is Letter Perfect" (*Austin American-Statesman*, 1994) by Michael Barnes.

³² In "Frontera Ventures Far Without Getting Lost" (*Austin American-Statesman*, 1996) Michael Barnes argues that "[p]art of Frontera's punch comes from its geographical reach" (Barnes). For information regarding the production of *Enfants Perdus* see the review "Moving Drama 'Enfants Perdus' Swirls Artistic Effects with Dizzying Success" (*Austin American-Statesman*, 1996) by Jamie Smith.

³³ For information regarding the production of *Managed Care* see the review "*Managed Care* Prescribes Laughter" (*Austin American-Statesman*, 1997) by Jamie Smith. For information regarding the production of *Curb Appeal* see the review "Two Plays Peer into the Heart of Austin" (*Austin American-Statesman*, 2000) by Michael Barnes and Jeanne Claire vanRyzin. For information regarding the production of *Millennium Bug* see the review "Steve Tomlinsons' Cents and Sensibilities" (*Austin American-Statesman*, 1999) by Courtney Barry.

meets black meets straight meets gay meets East and West Coast transplants” (Cantara, “Vicky Boone”).³⁴ FronteraFest, (which premiered in 1993 and has been offered annually ever since), *Mi Casa Es Su Teatro* (added to festival programming in 1997), and The Long Fringe (added to festival programming in 2000) have provided local and national artists with economical opportunities for experimentation.³⁵

With few exceptions, Frontera staged these and other productions at Hyde Park Theatre. A small storefront space located in the Hyde Park neighborhood above the University of Texas Campus on West 43rd Street less than half a block from what is referred to as “the drag,” Hyde Park Theatre became Frontera’s permanent home in 1993 (Martini and Faires). Former producer of Hyde Park Theatre Eva Paloheimo merged with Frontera in 1994 serving as the company’s Managing Director from 1994 to 1997 (Martini and Faires).³⁶ Afterwards, Frontera became known as Frontera @ Hyde Park Theatre. In 1998 Boone expressed her hopes that Frontera @ Hyde Park Theatre would become “an internationally respected performance center and . . . an open-door community hub” (qtd. in Cantara, “Vicky”). Three years later Boone announced her resignation as Artistic Director. Local critic Michael Barnes reports that Boone, exhausted by ten years of artistic leadership and business management, intended to focus “on an individual creative vision rather than an organizational one” (Barnes, “At”). The board of directors made the decision to drop Frontera from the title in honor of Boone’s “unique place in the history of the company” and

³⁴ For information regarding Frontera’s collaborations with Teatro Humanidad, see the review of *Watsonville: Some Place Not Here* by Cherrie Moraga: “Humor Punctuates Story of Watsonville” (*Austin American-Statesman*, 1998) by Jamie Smith Cantara.

³⁵ Personal experience as well as email correspondences with one-time Frontera Artistic Director Vicky Boone provide a base for historical information on Frontera.

³⁶ Eva Paloheimo, the former producer of Hyde Park Theatre and one-time Managing Director of Frontera, resigned in 1997 to pursue other interests in Santa Fe, NM. See “Entrances and Exits” (*Austin Chronicle*, 1997) by Adrienne Martini and Robert Faires.

merge with Subterranean Theatre—founded and managed by Ken Webster (Faires, “New”). By merging with Subterranean Theatre to become Hyde Park Theatre, the board secured a future for both the venue and the festival.³⁷ Although Webster continues today as the artistic director of Hyde Park Theatre and co-producer of FronteraFest, the company no longer seeks the same transgressive edge pursued by Boone.

While Frontera may not have achieved international recognition during its ten year run as Boone hoped, it did help shape the landscape of theatre in Austin throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. In a memoranda written in honor of Frontera's closing, Robert Faires argues that Austin theatre would have suffered greatly had Frontera never existed.

[T]he stage scene would be missing several of the most acclaimed productions of the Nineties . . . numerous artists from across the country who found a creative home in Austin with Frontera . . . FronteraFest . . . [and] all the performances and productions—all 650 of them—that have been affiliated with the festival since its inception in 1993" (Faires "A Boone").

On the one hand, Frontera's successes testify to the impact of theatrical practices grounded in transgression. On the other, Boone's resignation—attributed in part to burnout—and the decision to retire the Frontera namesake along with the transgressive spirit the title implied suggests the difficulties involved in sustaining an organizational model rooted in transgression.

Locally influential but difficult to sustain transgressive performance practices earned Frontera a reputation as Austin's premiere alternative theatre only two years after the

³⁷ See “New Day for Hyde Park” (*Austin Chronicle*, 2001) “Boone Resigns at Frontera” (*Austin Chronicle*, 2001) and “Whither Hyde Park Theatre” (*Austin Chronicle*, 2001) by Robert Faires for information regarding Frontera's closing and the Subterranean/Frontera merger. See also “At Hyde Park 2 Troupes Make 1 Happy ‘House’” (*Austin American-Statesman*, 2001) by Michael Barnes.

organization's inauguration. In 1994 Michael Barnes argued that out of those companies "dubbed 'the next generation of Austin Theatre,' . . . Frontera finished strongest" (Barnes, "Frontera Strongest").³⁸ In 1996 Jamie Smith called Frontera "Austin's foremost alternative theatre" (Smith, "Theater"). That same year, Barnes went so far as to suggest that "Frontera may be the true frontier of theater in Texas" (Barnes, "Frontera Ventures"). As such comments exemplify (Smith's to a greater extent and Barnes's to a lesser extent), Frontera's transgressive theatrical practices achieved legibility through discourses that govern alternative theatre. Theodore Shank, author of *Beyond the Boundaries: American Alternative Theater* (2002), offers a model for understanding alternative theatre that divides alternative theatre in the sixties, seventies, and eighties into two separate camps: "outward" and "inward" focused practices.

There were those who looked outward, exploring human beings in society, analyzing social institutions, considering political issues, and sometimes advocating social change. The other perspective was inward-looking and involved a consideration of how we perceive, feel, think, the structure of thought, the nature of consciousness, the self in relation to art. (Shank 3)

Shank goes on to argue that while alternative theatre since the 1980s has continued to be grounded in "inward and outward" discourses most are "part of the cultural mainstream" (193). Although Frontera held cultural and economic status which some alternative theatres in the past had been denied, describing Frontera through the framework provided by Shank ignores Frontera's transgressive praxis and ideological complexities. Neither Frontera nor the other alternative theatres throughout Austin or the US that subscribed to the model of

³⁸ None of the three companies "dubbed 'the next generation of Austin Theatre'" (i.e., Frontera, Troupe Texas, and Public Domain) remain in existence today. Frontera, however, was the last to cease operations.

alternative theatre offered by RAT (a national grassroots initiative spearheaded by Erik Ehn in the nineties) fit neatly into Shank's concept of alternative.

2.3 Alternative to What?: Defining a Transgressive Radical-Rebel Alternative Theatre Practice

"Basically, everything I try to do is to present an alternative to what somebody else is doing."— Matt Groening

The word alternative—made almost ubiquitous in the last decade of the twentieth century perhaps due to alternative music's rise in popularity—regularly describes such disparate terms as theatre, medicine, investments, etc. The National Library of Medicine (NLM) "classifies alternative medicine under the term complementary therapies" and defines these "as therapeutic practices which are not currently considered an integral part of conventional . . . medical practice" (Wessel), whereas Executive Director Craig E. Asche of the Chartered Alternative Investment Analyst Association (CAIA) which publishes the *Journal of Alternative Investments* notes that alternative investments are often defined by "what they are NOT" (Asche).³⁹ Although not an adequate description of the diverse genre of alternative theatre, broad generalizations that might read like the explanations of alternative medicine or alternative investments offered above carry truth: practitioners of alternative theatre know that when it comes to public funding their art is often viewed as "complementary" to more conventional theatrical practices. It is perhaps not farfetched for one to imagine a stodgy theatre critic or disgruntled theatregoer claim that alternative theatre is best defined by what it is NOT—i.e., "traditional" theatre. However, as a descriptive category for theatre the term alternative is problematically fuzzy as it continues to beg the

³⁹ Investopedia, a Forbes Digital Company, clarifies that what alternative investments are NOT are "one of the three traditional asset types (stocks, bonds, and cash)" (Investopedia).

question "alternative to what?" and implies the answer "alternative to the mainstream."

Defining alternative theatre in opposition to mainstream theatre becomes exponentially more difficult with the passage of time as yesterday's alternative often becomes today's mainstream. While a queer puppet show like *Avenue Q* or a hip-hop musical like *In the Heights* might have been considered alternative theatre productions in the early nineties, today they receive a mainstream seal of approval as Broadway hits.⁴⁰

In an essay published in the 2002 October issue of *American Theatre*, Jaan Whitehead, the Current Board Chair of The SITI Company (as of this writing) and a founding member of the National Council on American Theatre, places alternative theatre companies in opposition to institutionalized mainstream theatre companies, arguing that the division is based on both aesthetic practices and organizational structures.⁴¹ Whitehead finds that in opposition to institutionalized theatres alternative theatres "have remained artist-based theatres, theatres created and run by artists who choose what work they want to do and what audiences they want to reach . . . [d]espite the constant battle for funding and recognition" (Whitehead 33). Like Shank, Whitehead also divides alternative theatres into two categories: experimental and community-based theatre.

One is the tradition of experimental or avant-garde theatre, theatre that constantly pushes the art form in new directions, breaking boundaries and redefining ways of creating theatre. [...] The other tradition is that of community-based theatre, theatre deeply rooted in a particular community, which itself is an essential partner and collaborator in the work." (Whitehead 34)

As a community-based organization that challenged aesthetic and conceptual boundaries, Frontera participated in both of the traditions Whitehead identifies.

⁴⁰ For information on *Avenue Q* see the official website at www.avenueq.com. For information on *In the Heights* see www.intheheightsthemusical.com.

⁴¹ For information on SITI see www.siti.org.

As Baz Kershaw argues in his study of British alternative theatre *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (1992), discourses that place concepts of alternative in opposition to the mainstream set up a problematic binary fraught with material and symbolic consequences (Kershaw 52-56).⁴² To better understand the ideological implications of British alternative theatre, Kershaw sketches five main phases: “initial experimentation” (1965 to 1970/71), “proliferation” (1970 to 1975/6), “consolidation” (1975 to 1980/81), “retrenchment” (1980 to 1985/6), and “fragmentation” (1985 to 1990/91). In the first phase Kershaw associates alternative theatre with the countercultures and the avant-garde. In the second phase Kershaw notes that alternative theatre reaches a wider demographic. In the third phase Kershaw finds that alternative theatre begins to imbed itself in other institutionalized theatrical practices. In the fourth phase Kershaw sees alternative theatre as a fractured set of theatrical practices, each appealing to separate ideological discourses. In the fifth and final phase Kershaw argues that alternative theatre becomes even more fragmented and ultimately loses its “oppositional thrust” (87-89).

Although Kershaw does not offer a concise definition or history of alternative theatre in the US, his study does provide contexts for a historical understanding of alternative as it applies to Frontera and similar theatres throughout Austin that subscribed to the model of

⁴² Kershaw identifies four “generic terms” that have been used historically to classify performance practices that oppose mainstream theatre: “‘experimental’, ‘underground’, ‘fringe’, and ‘alternative’” (Kershaw 52). “[H]istorians and critics who wish to stress the aesthetics of theatre” often rely on the term ‘experimental’ according to Kershaw (53). ‘Underground,’ Kershaw argues, came to prominence in the late 60s and 70s and “signif[ies] . . . counter-cultural origins and ideological affiliations” (53). Kershaw sees “fringe” as a derogative term derived from the Edinburgh festival that implies marginality and “alternative” as one that might describe the larger movement of oppositional theatre (56).

alternative theatre offered by RAT. Without suggesting any sort of historical continuum between the experimental, underground, fringe, and alternative British theatres of the 60s, 70s, 80s, and early 90s that concern Kershaw, I argue that RAT begins where Kershaw finds British alternative theatre to end: during the early to mid-nineties and in a period of fragmentation. Although partially conceptualized as “a ‘national assembly of small theaters,’ along the lines of the League of Resident Theaters” that would stand in opposition to the legitimate institutionalized LORT structure (Phillips), RAT proposed a model of alternative theatre that achieves significance through anarchic, rather than cohesive, discourses. RAT (an acronym that for some participants stood for Regional Alternative Theatre, Radical Alternative Theatre, or Raggedy Ass Theatre and for others meant nothing at all) was the brain trust of Bay Area Playwright Erik Ehn.⁴³ Established in December 1994 during the first RAT conference led by Ehn and hosted by the University of Iowa, RAT sparked debate and encouraged collaboration among small theatres year-round via the RATBASE website/listserv and annually during the 10 subsequent conferences. Frontera and three other Austin-based companies—Salvage Vanguard, Public Domain, and Physical Plant—were among the original 20 theatres that attended the first RAT meeting.⁴⁴ During

⁴³ “In By Any Name, a New Rat Pack’s in the Offing” (*The San Diego Union Tribune*, 1994) Michael Phillips writes that other names Ehn and company considered included “Art Workers Hostelry” and “League of Non-Paying Regional Theaters” (Phillips). In “Conference of Rats” published in the December 1995 Issue of *American Theatre*, Mary DeDanan reports that other names included “Big Cheap Theater,” “Assembly of the Wondrous Head,” and “A Vaudeville of Cheap Theaters” (DeDanan). DeDanan goes on to write that “at the first national meeting ... theatre artists who showed up resolved not to name themselves at all” (DeDanan).

⁴⁴ In “America’s Alternative Theatres Unite” (*Austin Chronicle*, 1995) Robert Faires reports 20 theatres in attendance. Whereas Michel Barnes, in the “The Big Cheap Theatre Movement” (*Austin American-Statesman*, 1995) reports 17 and Erik Ehn in “Up Front: A Gargle of Rats” (*Theater*, 1995) reports 30. The summary of the “First Annual Rat

the initial conference Austin was represented by more companies than any other city and Texas by more than any other state.⁴⁵ Although the RAT conference officially disbanded in 2004 (holding its last meeting in Argentina in December 2003), as of this writing the RAT Conference website continues to be maintained and houses archival materials related to the original RAT conferences—including articles, essays, and manifestos.⁴⁶

As it was staged individually or collectively within Austin throughout the nineties, “alternative” skirts a single definition or stabilized reading. Placed within the context of RAT, alternative is slipperier still. Founded in 1994, RATs proliferated within—fed on—the type of fragmentation that leads Kershaw to question the constituency of British alternative theatre in the early nineties. According to Faires, the alternative theatre companies that attended the RAT conferences “had many differences—from the sizes of their respective groups and the number of people in them . . . to the amounts of money with which they work . . . to the focus of their work” (Faires, “America’s”). Rather than hindering the organization (or dis-organization as some refer to it), these disparities were at the heart of RAT. Ehn reported that founding member Karl Gajdusek of Theatre E went so far as to recommend that “we be weakest when together, strongest when apart” (qtd. in Ehn, “Up”). According to Ehn and the many community-based theatre critics who have written about RAT since its inception, an “everyone does everything” way of working and a belief in theatre not as a business but as an ethic—that is “a way of seeing or behaving”—are what unified this “Gargle of Rats” (Ehn, “Up”). When asked to define RAT, Ehn evaded the

Conference” housed on the RAT Conference website reports that 15 theaters formed the core of the initial conference (“First”).

⁴⁵ See the “First Annual Rat Conference” archived on the RAT Conference website site at www.ratconference.com/iowacon.htm.

⁴⁶ See the RAT Conference website at <http://www.ratconference.com>.

question arguing that “[d]efinition is historical, and we’re just now present. Brochures are way down the pike” (qtd. in Faires, “America’s”). In “Write Your Own Damn Manifesto,” which loosely served as the RAT manifesto, Ehn trumpets:

We are anarchic: unregulated and unstructured, collecting no dues, electing no officers, maintaining no centralized calendar, lawless. / We are an association: . . . caring for bodies in space through acts of hospitality. [...] / We share work and ways of working: . . . We cast each other, co-write, seize each other's resources, make problems with each other. / We are outside the market on the theory that every use of a dollar represents a failure of hospitality. Money is morally neutral but imaginatively stunted; we promote barter and unmediated exchanges of goods and services. [...] / “rat” because: every city has them; because they build the new in the shell of the old; cunning; unlovely, ineradicable. [...] / This is the Big Cheap Theater - mutual, tawdry, unstoppable We hold the right to fail, to scatter, to let go, to re-form improbably, to infiltrate, interdict, self-contradict . . . to make space when all space was thought collapsed (Ehn “Write”)

While RAT did not offer a single definition of alternative, it did provide a model for thinking about alternative theatre in relation to a complex web of ideologies grounded in transgression.

RAT throughout its ten-year lifespan maintained close ties to Frontera and several Austin-based theatre companies. In 1998 a group of local critics led by Robert Faires christened Frontera along with ten other Austin-based theatre companies “rebel theatre” (Faires, “Rattling”).⁴⁷ Organizations Faires also placed under the “rebel theatre” rubric included Salvage Vanguard Theater, Rude Mechanicals, Public Domain, Physical Plant Theatre, Root Wym’n Theatre, VORTEX Repertory Company, and Tongue and Groove

⁴⁷ In the 2006 article “Austin Power and Light” published in the *Austin Chronicle*, Faires added ten more alternative theatre companies to the list: Rubber Repertory, St. Idiot Collective, Yellow Tape Construction Company, Shrewd Productions, Capital T Productions, Coda Theatre Project, Getalong Gang, Gobotrick Theatre Company, RoHo Productions, and Loaded Gun Theory. While several of the companies and artists that composed Austin’s rebel theatre scene have come and gone, all have contributed to an understanding of what alternative means in Austin.

Theatre.⁴⁸ For Faires the term “rebel theatre” captures the “creative community's willingness to venture out of the mainstream and insistence on bucking convention in making theatre while still calling itself theatre” in ways that alternative cannot (Faires, “Rattling”). As Austin lacked a mainstream institutionalized LORT theatre and steady access to commercial theatre throughout the 1990s, all theatre in Austin during the period can be termed in effect alternative theatre. Although Austinites could on occasion see commercial touring productions at Bass Concert Hall located on the University of Texas Campus, for a LORT theatre experience we had to travel to the Alley in Houston.⁴⁹

Differentiating between the general descriptor “alternative theatre” and the specific designation “rebel theatre” provides critical space for the particular brand of radically transgressive alternative theatre that was performed in Austin and espoused by RAT in the last decade of the twentieth century. As a sub-category of alternative theatre, rebel theatre implies the type of high stakes challenging violation of boundaries Frontera and RAT sought. “The rat,” Mary DeDanan writes in an essay published in the December 1995 issue of *American Theatre*, “doesn't seek to change or reform the dominant structures . . . but to infest them” (DeDanan). Through transgressive theatrical practices, radical-rebel alternative

⁴⁸ Of the ten original “rebel theatres” listed, the Rude Mechanicals have perhaps received the most critical attention. Continuing to produce intellectualist, ensemble-based work grounded in a rock-n-roll aesthetic, the Rude Mechs tour nationally and internationally. For information on the Rude Mechanicals’ see the official website at www.rudemechs.com. In the July/August 2010 issue of *American Theatre* Eliza Bent praises the Rude Mechs’ production of *The Method Gun* which was featured in the 2010 Humana Festival for its “rigor and precision” (Bent 49). See “Collective Dramaturgy: A Co-Consideration of the Dramaturgical Role in Collaborative Creation” (*Theatre Topics*, 2003) by founding members Kirk Lynn and Shawn Sides for a discussion of the Rude Mechs’ collaborative approach to staging new work.

⁴⁹ For information on the Bass Concert Hall see http://texasperformingarts.org/venues/bass_concert_hall. For information on the Alley Theatre see www.alleytheatre.org.

theatre sought to “infest” the status quo yet subverted *and* reinforced normalizing discourses in the Texas capitol city of Austin.

2.4 Transgressing the Mainstream and the Alternative: *Race of the Ark Tattoo*, *Cab and Lena*, and *Mi Casa Es Su Teatro*

“If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense.
Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn't.
And contrary wise, what is, it wouldn't be.
And what it wouldn't be, it would.”— Lewis Carroll

As evocative as the notion of a theatre that *infests* the status quo is, how did this radical-rebel model work in practice? How does the push for radicality square with the need to have audiences attend, watch, and even enjoy work? Can a radical-rebel aesthetic impact the social or cultural structures outside the theater walls? To address these questions I shift now to a reading of two Frontera productions and the 2002 *Mi Casa Es Su Teatro* Festival. In Hancock’s *Race of the Ark Tattoo* (produced in the summer of 1998 as part of Frontera’s regular season) Frontera used rhetorical conventions of alternative theatre to transgress mainstream theatrical dramatic structures and reorder spectator/performer relationships. In *Cab and Lena* by Coleman and Jones (produced in the winter of 2000 as part of the inaugural Long Fringe Festival) Frontera employed rhetorical conventions associated with alternative theatre to transgress cultural and racial homogeneity and provide space for underrepresented African American queer voices.⁵⁰ *Mi Casa* performances avoided the mainstream/alternative theatre binary structure by employing rhetorical conventions

⁵⁰ In “Writing the History of An Alternative Theatre Company: Mythology and the Last Years of Joint Stock” (*Theatre Survey*, 2006), Sara Freeman argues that “alternative theatres make it their business to provide a space for “other” subject matter, modes of artistry, and identity groups.” She finds that histories of alternative theatre must avoid erasing the “contributions of women and minorities to such a project” (Freeman 51-52).

associated with other types of performance events (i.e., a sporting event, tea party, and circus) and therefore contribute differently to an analysis of radical-rebel theatre's transgressive potential.

2.4.1 TRANSGRESSING THE MAINSTREAM: RACE OF THE ARK TATTOO (1998)

Race of the Ark Tattoo marked my first production with Frontera. After collaborating with company members on summer classes for young adults, I joined *Race* as a marketing intern and sound board operator. The play itself opened to critical acclaim in 1998 in both Austin at Hyde Park Theatre (Frontera's home base) and New York City at P.S. 122 where it was produced by The Foundry.⁵¹ In a *CurtainUp* review of the Foundry production, Les Gutman describes the performance as one that transgresses theatrical conventions:

When you go to the theater often, as I do, you eventually understand, or at least start to accept, the basic conventions of the place. Then along comes a playwright like W. David Hancock, who changes the contract between a play and its audience. . . . [T]here are lots of people who break the rules But what Hancock does is something else yet, and he does it with purpose.
(Gutman)

Race of the Ark Tattoo uses rhetorical conventions (those that frame the performance event as theatre) and authenticating conventions (those that allow spectators to read ideological implications of the performance) to subvert a traditional narrative arc. Staged through an aesthetics of the grotesque, Frontera's production presented spectators with an overwhelmingly abundant amount of conflicting information that exceeded the limits of interpretation to reconfigure the audience's relationship to the performance.

⁵¹ For information on the Foundry see the website at www.thefoundrytheatre.org. For information on P.S. 122 see www.ps122.org.

Authenticating conventions in Frontera's production of *Race* invoked ideas associated with a flea market. The show itself was advertised as a combination garage sale and performance with notices posted in local arts and garage sale listings. Conceptualized as a going-out-of-business sale, Hyde Park Theatre was made to look like a condemned building. Boards placed over windows piqued the interest of the fire marshal and led passers-by to believe that Frontera had actually abandoned the premises. Throughout the run of the show spectators were greeted in front by proprietors hawking tables of trinkets set up to block the front door. My navy blue '86 Chevy Caprice was parked in the alley that runs alongside the building and packed with trash that patrons could purchase. Vendors prompted audience members toward the backstage entrance past old set pieces and costumes all up for grabs and into the theatre proper. In a review of the performance Michael Barnes described the interior of the building as "something like a shed or garage, the walls stripped, utility lights hanging from long wires" (Barnes, "Every").

Company and/or board members playing themselves manned all the outdoor stations. Inside, however, a "character" named Foster, performed by Frontera co-founder Jason Phelps, presided over the archive of rubble. Both the stage and house were littered with "paint-encrusted hinges, broken tiles, [and] clocks that looked as if they would never tell accurate time again" (Barnes, "Every"). Although organization was imperceptible, there was method to the madness. Production designer Andrea Lauer conceptualized the set as a series of grotesque installations. Every nook, cranny, and corner was heaped with meticulously arranged piles of junk that the script indicates, must include:

1. old tubes of oil paint
2. an old glass Vaseline jar
3. a metal pipe

4. a child's athletic sock
5. a dirty floor tile with a wavy pattern
6. a piece of foam rubber
7. the cover of a pornographic magazine covered in doodles
8. an ornate owl mask
9. fall leaves pressed between wax paper
10. an old bottle of beer with a picture of Noah's Ark on it
11. a small metal plate
12. a pamphlet about composting
13. a crocus corm
14. a jar filled with murky water and a plastic crayfish
15. a solid air freshener (Hancock 4)

There was a sign posted at one of the stations that read: "Flea Market Tonight! 7:30 pm (To be followed by lecture by Mr. P. Foster)" (Hancock 1). While awaiting the lecture spectators were encouraged to dig through Foster's archive, ask questions about an individual object's history, or purchase a piece to take home. This portion of the performance was unscripted and given the lack of conventional theatre technologies (i.e., stage lighting, sound, and the obviously empty light and sound booth) was meant to contextualize the event as a different type of dramatic experience.

Once all of the audience members had been guided inside, the backstage door was shut so that technicians could covertly set up speakers and microphones around the perimeter of the building before returning to the dressing room where we would "run" the show via hidden cameras and monitors. At this time Phelps-as-Foster asked spectators to take a seat either onstage or in the ruined house so as to begin the more formal "lecture" about the objects on view. He explained that the archive belonged to his deceased foster father, Mr. Phinney, Jr., who ran a resale shop out of his house and had marked each piece with a number that corresponds to a "storycard." Foster then proceeded to collect fifteen items (seemingly at random but always those listed above) to place in an ark. Throughout

the “lecture” Foster passed the ark around the room for inspection and invited spectators to draw individual objects from the ark as he would in turn share memories associated with the chosen item or read aloud from an object’s “storycard.” From this point on, the audience determined the order of the performance by pulling items from the ark. The script proscribes different directions for each chosen artifact.

child’s athletic sock

When an audience member selects the child’s athletic sock, Foster smells it.

Foster: Now there’s a forgotten odor.

Foster lets the audience member smell the sock. The sock emits a faint odor of gasoline.

The Smell of this sock reminds me of the time that a couple of fosters and I filled coke bottles with gasoline and went off into the woods behind Mr. Phinney’s garage. [...] I’m sorry. What number was that?

The audience member reads the tag that is taped to the sock.

Audience Member: Ninety-seven

Foster searches through the storybook for the correct storycard. This storycard is a black and white photo of a boy on a pony. A picture of a crocus is glued to one corner of the photo. Foster reads the back of the storycard.

#97

“Ancient races . . . often disguise their treasures before they bury them. This vestige may look like an ordinary sock, but perhaps it’s really a Bible or an ancient encyclopedia set.” Did you know that on some islands in Ireland, each family had a different knitted pattern in their sweaters? That’s so when a fisherman drowns, the police know what house to take the body to.
(Hancock 14-17)

In general, the performance lacked traditional dramatic sequencing and plotting. The order in which events unfolded depended for the most part on audience participation. As Austin critic Sarah Hepola notes, *Race of the Arc Tattoo* “confronts . . . expectations of a traditional narrative arc” (Hepola “*Race*”). *Race* purposefully refused audiences the type of spectatorial pleasure often derived from action, conflict, and resolution intentionally requiring spectators to play an overtly active role in the production of meaning. During

dress rehearsals and previews I took enjoyment in the unique participatory aspects of the performance. And while some patrons had an experience of *Race* that was close to mine (perhaps also finding the process provocative), others, however, seemed irritated or bored. Barnes reports that *Race* “created an escalating sense of unbalance . . . [d]espite an inherent irregularity and inevitable slow spots” (Barnes, “Every”). Hepola notes that “[f]ellow audience members drifted and their attention flagged . . . but that doesn't mean the play isn't quite good. It means that it isn't . . . easy” (Hepola, “*Race*”).

By forcing audience members to dig through Foster's archive in order to construct a narrative, spectators perhaps functioned in a role similar to that of a historian. Frontera's production of *Race of the Ark Tattoo* asked audiences to approach narrative via an archive in much the same way that historians approach their respective archives. While historians glean details about the past from forgotten and revered objects in order to write historical narratives, spectators had to dig through Mr. Phinney's forgotten treasures to assemble a narrative that explains Foster's past. The effect was not lost on Hepola who finds that “precious little is obvious” (Hepola, “*Race*”). Hepola's comments belie a type of frustration that is not uncommon to historians. When writing history, often, precious little *is* obvious.

In Frontera's production of *Race of the Ark Tattoo*, the technologies of theatre were not absent but used sparingly and non-traditionally to destabilize fixed readings of the archive. As spectators would learn sooner or later depending on the order of items chosen, Foster himself suffers from a condition that causes him to lose consciousness. During episodes of memory loss Mr. Phinney, Jr., (Foster's foster father) would usurp control of the show. Industrial hanging lights flashed subtly and speakers and microphones placed outside the building were turned on for random intervals—picking up neighborhood noises and

traces of scenes staged outside the space to signify the transition. Possessing Foster, Mr. Phinney would reveal details about items that contradicted previous information.

child's athletic sock [continued]

[...]

Foster becomes Mr. Phinney, Jr.

Mr. Phinney, Jr.: If I remember correctly, Tiny found this sock beneath my deck that day he was under there helping the fosters and me shore up a few of the footings. "It's not American Indian, though," he said. "People think that anytime you dig up a vestige around here, it's gotta be American Indian—but there were mysterious races haunting this town long before the American Indian arrived." Tiny says that in order to date a vestige you have to use carbon thirteen. "After you insert the carbon thirteen," he says, "you switch on the Geiger counter and listen for the ark tattoo." The ark tattoo [...] is a special sound that only occurs when two electrons get excited at exactly the same time. [...] Fostering was Maggie's calling. Early in our marriage we sponsored children in South America. [...] Anyway, this sock is just something I picked up at the Goodwill. That stain there must be anti-freeze or something.

Mr. Phinney, Jr. points to a bloodstain on the sock. [...]

I did hit a kid once. [...] Whenever a foster ran away. I'd just chuckle to myself. It was a shameful joy. [...] Most of my foster's just settled into the fissures. . . . Only a few of them were lucky enough to get loaded into my story ark. (Hancock 14-17)

"Memories," Gutman writes of the New York Production of *Race of the Ark Tattoo*, "are not fixed nor are they linear" (Gutman). As the performance emphasized, historical narratives—based on artifacts and memories—are not set in stone but constructed and deconstructed through interpretation and contradiction.

By using rhetorical conventions to announce the performance as alternative theatre, Frontera mobilized authenticating conventions in a way that transgressed traditional dramatic structure but also reified the mainstream/alternative theatre binary. Although Frontera invited audiences to read *Race* through the lens of a rummage sale, patrons did not doubt the theatricality of the event as was perhaps the case with the Foundry production. Rhetorical conventions framed the Foundry performance less as theatre and more as a

combination flea market and lecture. In a *Times* review of the New York run, D. J. R. Bruckner notes that following the show spectators debated the authenticity of the performance. Some audience members who attended the piece did not read “Foster” as a character and imagined that what they had witnessed was an actual lecture rather than scripted theatre. I do not believe that Frontera’s rendition of *Race* stirred similar concerns or that it intended to. For the most part, those in attendance were familiar with Frontera’s past productions and radical-rebel aesthetic. Frontera co-founder Jason Phelps (who played Foster) was certainly recognizable to frequent Austin theatregoers.⁵² Even patrons who rarely attend theatre or who come from outside the Austin theatre community would have acknowledged the production as theatre: the performance included a curtain call and playbills were distributed afterward. By appealing to the alternative/mainstream theatre binary Frontera asked spectators to specifically approach the performance as theatre but without the expectations that structure mainstream theatre spectator/performer interactions to reveal the active processes of theatrical spectatorship. Only in refusing to obscure the performance’s rhetorical status was Frontera able to challenge audiences to think critically about the discourses that govern mainstream dramatic forms. And while aesthetically transgressive theatrical practices like those utilized in Frontera’s production of *Race of the Ark Tattoo* influenced perception of the individual performance event, oppositional thrust outside of the theater walls is speculative at best.

⁵² In “It Was a Very Good Year” (*Austin Chronicle*, 1998) Robert Faires reports that in the year previous to *Race of the Ark Tattoo* Phelps “created two solo performance pieces of his very own, . . . worked with a New York performance company on a stylized movement project, . . . t[ook] a leading role in the highly anticipated local production of *Angels in America*, [and] spent a month in Woodstock collaborating with a New York composer on a series of improvisational sound pieces” (Faires, “It Was”).

2.4.2 TRANSGRESSING THE ALTERNATIVE: CAB AND LENA (2000)

Although also relying on rhetorical conventions of alternative theatre that preserve the mainstream/alternative theatre binary, *Cab and Lena* perhaps held greater potential to effect the sociopolitical landscape of Austin outside the micro-level of the theatrical performance. While Austin is known for its anti-hegemonic ethos, a closer look at the macro-level of production—the sociopolitical-historical circumstances surrounding *Cab and Lena*—reveals that the countercultural image Austin advertised in the nineties lacked difference. More politically transgressive than *Race of the Ark Tattoo*, *Cab and Lena* subverted the monolithic version of alternative the city packaged for consumption by providing space for underrepresented African American queer voices. Produced by Frontera and created and performed by Daniel Alexander Jones and Grisha Coleman in FronteraFest’s inaugural Long Fringe Festival in 2000, *Cab and Lena* ran in rep with 9 other performances at the Hideout Theatre in downtown Austin and alongside 11 other Long Fringe pieces which were performed at different venues across the city.⁵³ Out of the 20 Long Fringe performances in 2000, *Cab and Lena* was one of only three pieces with explicitly queer resonances and the only production that specifically addressed African American experiences.

⁵³ Shows listed in the “Long Fringe @ the Hideout” (*Austin Chronicle*, 2000) included: *Hole in the Bucket*, a solo performance that recounted a thirty-year love affair; *Scraps*, a split-bill shared by two Austin-based improv comics; *Evidence of Faith*, a two person performance art piece that explored the chakra system as a source of creative energy; *Mississippi On My Mind*, a dialogue that painted a picture of life in the Deep South; *Stories to be Told*, a socially conscious, Brechtian styled comedy; *Tell me About Emilia*, a drama about the effect one person’s life can have on others; *A Macbeth*, a one-hour adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*; *Curb Appeal*, a Frontera production that “draws parallels between . . . house hunting and dating”; and *Chokecherry*, a “chamber piece” written by Erik Ehn and performed by Bottom’s Dream of Los Angeles (“Long Fringe @ the Hideout”).

On the micro-level of the individual show, *Cab and Lena* relied on an unfinished aesthetic to highlight and interrogate themes of nostalgia and lost history. As Hepola notes in “Going Long: Scoping Out the Long Fringe of FronteraFest 2000” (*Austin Chronicle*, 2000), the production was a “self-professed ‘work-in-progress’” (Hepola, “Going”). Jones and Coleman (perceivably African American themselves) performed the title characters in drag. Jones played the part of Lena Horne, whereas Coleman was cast as Cab Calloway. A 1965 television studio provided the backdrop for the onstage action. However, the *mise-en-scène* was not interpreted literally but rendered through memory as a later electronic, unpaginated version of the script indicates:

Setting
Summer, 1965. Or so we imagine we remember. CBS Television Studio.
Burbank California. (Coleman and Jones)

Coleman-as-Calloway “in a dapper white suit and penciled-on mustache” was already onstage when Jones-as Horne entered, “every inch the diva, prowling around in a series of chiffon and satin dresses, jawing coyly and comfortably with the audience” (Hepola, “Going”). Traditional plotting elements were again absent from this Frontera production. Relying on bricolage, *Cab and Lena* was composed of “boisterous song and dance as well as playful banter and war stories culled from the careers of Calloway and Horne” (Hepola, “Going”). Focused less on biographical elements related to Calloway and Horne, however, and more on Jones’s and Coleman’s relationship to the material, *Cab and Lena* sought to inspire questions rather than provide answers. In interviews I conducted with Jones years after the performance, he described the training, workshop, and rehearsal phases of

production as a dialogic process grounded in questions.⁵⁴ Jones often begins creative development with “sociopolitical” questions that “haunt” him “for a good six months or a year” (Jones). After wrestling with these issues in private he “craft[s] beads of information . . . each one separate . . . [with] its own shape and own texture” (Jones). Collaboration for Jones is “what gets activated when [he] let[s] a set of questions or insight leave [his] own vision to dialogue with another person’s vision” (Jones). In *Cab and Lena* questions regarding the role African Americans have played in popular culture and the overt and subvert racism that seeks to erase these histories come to the fore.

As Venue Manager for the initial Long Fringe Festival, I was intimately familiar with the contexts that framed performances of *Cab and Lena*. The Hideout Theatre where the production took place was still undergoing renovation when the festival opened.⁵⁵ When I and other Frontera staff members entered the space a few days before the start of the festival on a very early and very cold January morning to begin load in, remnants of the structure’s past were painfully obvious.⁵⁶ The new tenants were still in the midst of gutting the facility and not nearly finished building the main stage. By the time the first patrons arrived, two makeshift performance spaces comprised the venue. Holes in the floorboard dotted the lobby. Dust resulting from construction covered the folding chairs and card tables placed throughout the foyer. Yellow “caution” tape steered audiences away from the more dangerous spots. Both electricity and heat were scarce. The building had not yet received

⁵⁴ I base information on the creative process of Daniel Alexander Jones, a co-creator of *Cab and Lena*, on a telephone interview I conducted with Jones on April 26, 2008.

⁵⁵ For information about the Hideout Theatre see www.hideouththeatre.com.

⁵⁶ In “Home for Heroes (and Others)” (*Austin Chronicle*, 2000) Phil West, reports that the “[t]he building, owned by a Houston family since before Texas was a state, ha[d] been a saloon, a dry cleaning shop, a men’s clothing store, and a pawn shop among other things” (West).

the electrical upgrade the grid required, and as a result actors, crewmembers, and spectators had to rely on two propane heaters. During the run of the show, downtown Austin too was still undergoing revitalization. Many of the savvy boutiques, bars, and restaurants that today line Congress Avenue (the main, north/south, downtown thoroughfare that runs straight to the capitol and divides East Downtown from West Downtown) were not yet in existence. Although unplanned, the dilapidated space and constant construction outside the theater walls contributed to the unfinished aesthetic sought by *Cab and Lena*.

If *Cab and Lena* seemed almost at home in the ruined venue and rough-around-the-edges downtown scene, the show itself with African American male and female actors performing in drag was not typical of the area. Although drag performances were common in Austin, for the most part they took place in gay and lesbian specific venues. At the time of production gay bars were hidden or geographically segregated from the straight bars that lined Sixth Street just around the corner from the Hideout. Even within gay and lesbian venues, African American and lesbian drag performers were in the minority. When I called Austin home (from 1995 until 2004) the city sported, celebrated, and marketed a countercultural image that lacked true diversity. Rather than multiplicity, Austin's alternative identity often relied on an easily marketable "Keep Austin Weird" umbrella. Although the "Keep Austin Weird" campaign began as an attempt to promote local business, it has since become a moneymaking slogan.⁵⁷ Bumper-stickers, t-shirts, hats, and koozies that read "Keep Austin Weird" were and still are purchased by both tourists and Austinites alike (myself included). Frontera's brand of alternative theatre while it does not challenge the alternative/mainstream theatre structure offers an alternative to Austin's alternative. In

⁵⁷ See the Keep Austin Weird website at <http://www.KeepAustinWeird.com>.

the interview I conducted with Jones he noted “that there was something Utopic about the way in which race and sexuality got negotiated in Frontera” (Jones). Frontera productions like *Cab and Lena* that staged intersections between race, gender, and history, relied on rhetorical conventions of alternative theatre to offer, in the words of Jones, “true diversity in representation” (Jones). Relegated to the fringes, however, even these more politically oriented performances which utilized transgressive theatrical practices common to alternative theatre lacked the oppositional thrust to infest Austin’s whitewashed version of alternative in a lasting or permanent way. According to the self-professed originators of the initial “Keep Austin Weird” grassroots movement to "counter Austin's descent into rampant commercialism and over-development," today the opposition “is winning out” (Keep Austin Weird).

2.4.3 A HOUSE OF A DIFFERENT COLOR: *MI CASA ES SU TEATRO* (2002)

Unlike *Race of the Ark Tattoo* and *Cab and Lena*, individual performances that comprise the *Mi Casa Es Su Teatro* 2002 day-long festival skirt the mainstream/alternative theatre binary by employing rhetorical conventions associated with other types of performance events (i.e., a relay, tea party, and circus). As its Spanish name suggests, *Mi Casa Es Su Teatro* (added four years after the inauguration of FronteraFest) features performances that take place in and are created around various homes as well as businesses, parks, and other locations outside of the theater walls. Although FronteraFest 2002 occurred several months after Frontera Productions officially closed its doors, to help ease transition Boone served as advisor for the first festival. Since 2002 FronteraFest has been co-produced by Hyde Park Theater and Austin Script Works. When I was living in Austin, press for *Mi Casa* was usually kept to a minimum. However, this did not stop living rooms, driveways,

outdoor decks, parking lots, and backyards from being packed with people. My partner Derek and I found transportation to and from the many performances that comprised *Mi Casa* 2002 tricky to navigate. In general, the sites where many of the events were located were not equipped to handle the amount of foot traffic or number of vehicles the festival generated. Often, performances were scheduled in a way that made it impossible or at least daunting to see every piece. In 2002 Derek and I took part in three different performances: riffs on a relay, a tea party, and a circus.⁵⁸ While *Mi Casa* asked spectators to negotiate discourses that separate public from private space, onstage from offstage, scripted from unscripted event, spectator from performer, art from entertainment, and highbrow from lowbrow, individual productions often reinforced the very boundaries they sought to test. Outside of a no-longer-accessible blog posting written by Skipper Chong Warson on February 11, 2002, just two days after *Mi Casa Es Su Teatro*, that briefly describes the Well Hung Jury relay and a few other pieces that took place that day, little to no other material artifacts document the experience. No programs, posters, reviews, critical summaries, or (to my knowledge) photographs exist. I have no ticket stubs reminding me of the times or locations of each individual performance as there were no physical tickets to sell. Neither Austin Script Works nor Hyde Park Theatre possesses archival evidence of the productions that took place that day. Yet, these performances continue to linger in my memory.

None of the familiar rhetorical conventions framed the *Mi Casa Es Su Teatro* 2002 opening performance orchestrated by Well Hung Jury as theatre. Many confused onlookers became spectators out of curiosity. Some paid to stay. Others left wondering what all the

⁵⁸ Of the productions that composed *Mi Casa* 2002, my partner Derek and I most notably missed a much talked about Chekov performance by Ratgirl, a notorious Austin-based performance artist known for making surprise appearances.

fuss was about. Even those of us in the know had a hard time making sense of the production. I suspect this is what made the performance so much fun. Derek and I joined the gathering crowd a few minutes late as we were babysitting a friend's toddler and hadn't anticipated the amount of attention a car seat and stroller required. Participants were split into multiple teams and moved from one store to another across the shopping center stopping at each to complete tasks that appear to have been devised to disrupt business. With no microphones, bullhorns, or other amplification devices, those organizing the event relied on audience members in the front to convey directions to those of us in the back in the manner of a schoolyard telephone game. Scores were tallied after each match. Well Hung Jury members served as team captains who guided the spectators through the relay and referees who decided the outcome of each race. Warson's blog entry (the only archival document of the performance) accurately describes the competition.

In each of [the] 12 or so stores, . . . teams . . . had a challenge to complete—for instance, in Mars Music the first team to get a Mars employee to play a Beatles song on any instrument won. No hitches at Jason's Deli. But then, we came to Pet Co. These two . . . employees . . . wouldn't even let the group of 30 or so people (audience and performers) into the store. [...] Though I wasn't able to complete the course—I had to leave half-way through—I was able to help Team A . . . win their GNC challenge to do the most push-ups. . . . [W]e had the GNC guy competing I swear he—the GNC guy—won, but the . . . judge called our team the winner. Some say thanks to me. I say I take it where I can get it. (Warson)

In its entirety, Warson's blog posting falls shy of 650 words. Although brief, one can get a feel for the experience as a whole through the sense of childlike fun Warson's tone belies and by focusing on the terms "challenge" and "hitches." Unlike more traditional theatre, the Well Hung Jury performance was open-ended, less structured, and did not involve clear designations between speakers (i.e., performers) and listeners (i.e., spectators). By utilizing rhetorical conventions associated with a sporting event, rather than those familiar to theatre,

Well Hung Jury mobilized authenticating conventions related to shopping which allowed me to read the production as a comment on consumerism where capitalism is a game played by winning and losing teams.

Although the archival cupboards are literally quite bare, Schechner's performance sequence provides me with several sites for contextualizing the ephemeral event that in and of themselves influenced my understanding of the performance.⁵⁹ While I was not privy to Well Hung Jury's training process and am not aware of any workshops or rehearsals that took place prior to the performance, I had seen other Well Hung Jury productions during previous Short Fringe Festivals. Based on past spectatorial experiences I knew that the guerilla improv troupe often relied on a model of ordered chaos to achieve unexpected results. Watching members of Well Hung Jury navigate unknown terrain and ask the same of audience members stirred in me both a sense of pleasure and uneasiness. This feeling was heightened by the events/contexts sustaining the public performance. In 2000 a *Mi Casa* piece that traveled from a porn shop to a car wash was interrupted by threats of arrest.⁶⁰ Placing the production within a history of *Mi Casa* performances raised the stakes of the Well Hung Jury relay. In line with past *Mi Casa* pieces, Well Hung Jury hadn't applied for permits or asked permission to invade the shopping center.

By descending on various stores unannounced Well Hung Jury tested the infrastructure of individual businesses and challenged concepts that characterize consumerism as a free market open to exchange. As Peggy Phelan reminds me, however,

⁵⁹ As I have previously noted, Richard Schechner argues that the performance sequence includes "training," "workshop," "rehearsal," "warm-up," "public performance," "event/contexts sustaining the public performance," "cooldown," "critical responses," "archives," and "memories" (Schechner, *Performance Studies* 225).

⁶⁰ For information on FronteraFest 2000 see "FronteraFest 2000" (*Austin Chronicle*, 2000) by Robert Faires.

excess which characterizes performance allows for a number of oppositional readings.⁶¹ *Mi Casa* is no exception. It is possible to see how the “hitches” of which Warson writes reinforced, rather than destabilized, normalizing discourses regarding economic and class divisions. In actuality, the Well Hung Jury tournament did not upset consumption in a way that affected profits. Rather, it presented minimum wage workers with new sets of obstacles to overcome in order to maintain employment. Working class individuals, not corporations, bore the brunt of the production. As Warson indicates, some of the store employees greeted our distractions with exuberance while others were perturbed. Many employees simply lacked the time to acquiesce to the performance’s honestly unreasonable requests. Others who possibly worked on commission could not afford to oblige as there were paying customers in need of assistance. The Well Hung Jury stunt drew a line between spectators with nine to five jobs that allow for weekend leisure-time and retail workers who are often denied the benefits of a two-day—Saturday and Sunday—weekend.

After enjoying the Well-Hung Jury relay despite “hitches,” Derek and I headed to an older cottage just west of the University of Texas campus. Finding the location was itself a daunting task. Tucked within an historic neighborhood that lacked obvious signage and with which neither Derek nor I were familiar, we relied upon the number of parked cars out front to point us toward the destination. Once inside, David Gunderson (an exceptionally tall, silver-haired author and performer) greeted us in drag as the character Iphigenia, an onstage persona that had made several appearances in past FronteraFest Short Fringe pieces. Rhetorical conventions framed this particular performance as a tea party. Familiar faces

⁶¹ See *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) in which Phelan defines performance as a type of representational practice that never means exactly what it intends and always conveys more—opening performance to oppositional interpretations (2).

pointed us toward a buffet table where we filled our glasses and plates. Once it was clear that all of the “guests” had arrived, Gunderson cum Iphigenia proceeded to instruct us on tea party etiquette. Throughout the tea party, technologies of theatre—primarily costume, character, gesture, and voice—were used to engender a camp aesthetic. As a practice of inversion, or perversion as Eve Sedgwick suggests in *Epistemology of the Closet* (155-156), camp transgresses hegemonic culture and sanctioned language. In a 2010 keynote speech delivered at UCLA during the Association for Theatre in Higher Education Women in Theatre Program and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Focus Group co-sponsored preconference, critic Sue-Ellen Case argued that camp provides space for an explicitly queer voice that stands in contrast to legitimate, hegemonic, or juridical languages.

In general, camp possesses potential to disrupt the status quo by rendering normative concepts from a queer perspective.⁶² Utilizing a camp aesthetic Gunderson’s lecture inverted high and low discourses. Gunderson’s Iphigenia was not meant to be understood as a representation of the feminine or the masculine but as a queer-carnavalesque hybrid. To embody the role of Iphigenia Gunderson wore an electric blue wig and other trappings not necessarily designed to signal femininity but something other than traditional masculinity. His speech acts were rendered through an obviously affected tone. When he spoke, he utilized a higher register than that which normally characterizes his voice. His physicality was grounded in artifice. Both Gunderson’s posture and movements—simultaneously graceful and stilted—seemed less organic and more mechanical or synthetic. Through the

⁶² See *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler for a reading of camp in opposition to those offered by Sedgwick and Case in which Butler places camp in the realm of parody and argues that “[p]arody by itself is not subversive” (Butler 176-177).

eyes of Iphigenia, tea party etiquette, a technology of the leisure class, got reconfigured as camp spectacle.

Gunderson's queer tea party, however, was perhaps no more inclusive than its highbrow cousin. While a traditional tea party privileges knowledge associated with the leisure class, Gunderson's queer tea party privileged knowledge associated with a certain kind of spectator. Those audience members who arrived already possessing a proficiency in the languages of performance in general and queer performance and queer culture specifically were in on Gunderson's joke, whereas those who were less familiar with the technologies of performance and queer performance/culture were left out in the cold. Within queer contexts the tea party took on specific meanings it might not have otherwise. As E. Patrick Johnson argues in *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (2008), the term tea evokes "spaces, places, events, sex acts, and types of dissident sexual agents" associated with gay culture"" (Johnson 17). "'Tea dances' . . . are . . . typically held in gay establishments on Sunday afternoons. 'Tea rooms' are public spaces such as bathrooms . . . that men frequent to engage in anonymous sex" (Johnson 17). On the one hand, the queer tea party transgressed tea party conventions which are most often associated with a heterosexual wealthy upper class and, on the other, reinforced discourses that construe performance an elitist—"in the know"—activity.

After Gunderson's lecture on etiquette, Derek and I chatted with friends before making arrangements to follow others to the final performance. Our last stop that day, *Throw-Up*, promised an experience in sharp contrast to the one before it. Finding the *casa* where the piece was staged proved to be much easier as *Throw-Up* spilled into the neighborhood. Using rhetorical conventions associated with that of a circus, this event

moved us from the refined world of tea parties to the bacchanalian world of the fraternity party. Authenticating conventions for *Throw-Up* deployed notions related to a frat party or house party. The performance itself could have been inspired by the onscreen antics of *Animal House* or *Jack Ass: The Movie*. The whole block teemed with street performers of a renaissance fair meets clubkid nature.⁶³ While daredevil moves included fire-eating and sword swallowing, staged pranks pushed the limits of socially accepted behavior. Warson in his blog posting briefly describes one of the pranks delivered via camera feed wherein the performers tied up their roommate and "went through her underwear drawer" (Warson).

The audience for *Throw-Up* was perhaps three or four times the size of that which attended other *Mi Casa* performances throughout the day. Ultimately, however, it was hard to tell who was there to watch and who was part of the action. Some "spectators" took to the streets to perform a cycling stunt or perhaps a flag-dance between beers. Eventually, sideshow "spectators" and more formal spectators were ushered into one of several small rooms inside the house. There, we watched performers in our respective rooms stage pranks (like the one Warson describes), kitchen knife juggling routines, and slight-of-hand camera tricks. Television monitors mounted to walls in each room allowed us to keep an eye on video feeds of performers engaged in similar activities in adjacent rooms. Performers bounced between rooms, the front yard, and roof-top where cameras picked up antics including a roof diving act that relied on the smoke-and-mirror effects typical of a filmed magic show. Although engendering a carnival-like feel, *Throw-Up*, loosely conceived of as a lowbrow frat party, was no more or less politically efficacious than the more selective frat

⁶³ Throughout the nineties clubkid culture thrived in Austin. For a discussion of Austin's clubkid scene during this period see "Dancing with the Club Kids" (*The Austin Chronicle*, 1995) by Marc Savlov.

parties which regularly occur on or around the UT campus. As Warson's description of the panty raid sequence implies, *Throw-Up* was certainly no less misogynistic than a sanctioned college frat party. And while *Throw-Up* was ostensibly less elite than frat membership, the performance catered to a subcultural community that was perhaps equally exclusive. Upon completion *Throw-Up* turned into what is traditionally the *Mi Casa piece de la resistance*: a keg party proper.

While *Mi Casa* leaves few material traces, ephemeral experiences related to the various phases of performance—particularly event/contexts sustaining the public performance, cooldown, and critical response—are exponentially multiplied.⁶⁴ In general, *Mi Casa* fosters a sense of community and familiarity among its audience members that sets it apart from more traditional two or three act performances. Scripts (when utilized) are often kept loose and I would wager usually amount to little more than an outline. Arrival and departure is at least as much a part of the show as the performance proper. In *Utopia and Performance* (2005) Jill Dolan argues that theatre in general offers possibilities for transformation by providing groups of spectators with opportunities for forging connections before, after, and sometimes during the show at intermission or other points (Dolan, *Utopia* 17-20). *Mi Casa*, which lasts much longer than traditional theatrical events, includes several chances for these and similar types of interactions. Because beverages and snacks are provided at most of the shows, it is common to see people milling around, sipping and eating, or discussing the previous performance or their expectations for the next one. In some instances, food becomes integral to the production as was the case in the tea party, making the type of social interaction that accompanies public eating central to the

⁶⁴ For a list of the phases of performance see Richard Schechner's *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (225).

experience. It would also not be out of place to find friends, acquaintances, and strangers who have met at an initial show carpooling to the next or taking a quick time-out to grab a bite to eat before continuing along mutual or separate ways only to meet up again at the final party to compare notes or just enjoy each others company in the not-too-cold, not-too-hot February evening.

For the most part, *Mi Casa* is an insider text. While it is not solely intended for an audience of theatre and performance practitioners, it often assumes that spectators possess a certain amount of fluency in the rhetoric's of performance in general and in a range of alternative/nontraditional performance related rhetorical conventions more specifically. It relies on the technologies of theatre to serve up unexpected experiences. To this extent, *Mi Casa* is grounded in both familiarity and surprise. By devising and deploying a unique set of rules for interpreting theatrical reality or for defining/navigating audience-performer interactions, the technologies of theatre that *Mi Casa* assumes are familiar to spectators are used in surprising or unanticipated ways. Shifting from parking lot to car, from car to home, back to car and to another home throughout the day becomes a mentally and physically exhilarating and exhausting task. Continually having to negotiate differences between private space and public space, onstage and offstage, scripted events and unscripted events, spectator and performer, art and entertainment, highbrow and lowbrow begins to wear down the lines that separate each term or idea from its assumed opposite and highlights the various ways in which the two terms or ideas mutually define or construct each other. However, where deterioration leads is another story. Next, I challenge the possibilities of sustaining a grassroots DIY theatrical model grounded in the type of boundary-blurring transgressive practice of inversion typical of *Mi Casa* and question the potential of transgressive radical-

rebel alternative theatre practices to “infest” the status quo in the local and regional contexts of Austin.

2.6 Suspect Impact: The Critical Limits of a Transgressive Radical-Rebel Approach

“We are always paid for our suspicion
by finding what we suspect.”— Henry David Thoreau

While fragmentation provides the motive for much of the work featured in FronteraFest and *Mi Casa*, it also accounts for the lack of oppositional thrust. Often seen by only a small number of spectators and overlooked by critics, DIY performances that compose FronteraFest have a limited impact. Although individual productions like those that comprised *Mi Casa* 2002 utilize a type of transgressive boundary blurring practice of inversion advocated by Stallybrass and White in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, there are few resources available to sustain the performance beyond the confines of the ephemeral event.⁶⁵ Many artistic relationships are forged for the sole purpose of participating in FronteraFest. Other artistic groups form, dissolve, and reform with new and returning members between yearly festivals. The varying contexts of production and disparate ideologies represented by performances that make up FronteraFest frustrate an analysis of the festival as a whole. Considering that FronteraFest is one of many festivals hosted by alternative theatres like Frontera across the US increases the need for

⁶⁵ As I argue in the previous chapter, transgression for Stallybrass and White involves a subversive practice that blurs boundaries between high and low discourses across various symbolic domains which contribute to the social construction of culture and identity. Transgression according to Stallybrass and White works both vertically on the high/low axis and horizontally across the four symbolic domains (i.e., psychic forms, the human body, geographic space, and social order) to reveal the ways in which the individual and collective domains derive meaning from each other to destabilize the status quo (Stallybrass and White 1-26).

documentation and critical analysis. The sheer number of nationally unnoticed but often locally important performances that rely on a type of transgressive radical-rebel DIY performance practice to subvert the status quo by revealing the very boundaries that structure concepts of theatre and culture which occur within the contexts of the alternative theatre festival format in any given year should be warrant enough to demand critical consideration. Placing radical-rebel performances like those that took place in FronteraFest and *Mi Casa* under the overarching rubric of RAT facilitates a reading of the broader implications and impact of the type of transgressive alternative theatre practices that seek to infest the mainstream. Although such framework ignores the individual geographic and temporal specificities of production, it honors ideological contexts as RAT is organized around a number of conflicting discourses.

Expanding rhizomatically—multiplying like rats—Radical Alternative Theatre crossed lines, reordered psychic space, and pushed material and symbolic limits beyond conceptual barriers on several artistic and socio-political fronts. From the east to the west coast and in-between acts of transgression abounded in the name of RAT.⁶⁶ As a rhizomatic model, RAT remained in a constant state of becoming for over a decade. Organized around dissensus or a “unified disunity,” the rhizomatic structure, according to

⁶⁶ As detailed in the summary of the “First Annual Rat Conference” archived on the RAT Conference website (see www.ratconference.com/iowacon.htm), the following 15 theaters formed the core of the initial conference: The Living Theatre (New York, NY), Thieves Theatre (Brooklyn, NY), Woolly Mammoth Theatre (Washington DC), Seven Stages (Atlanta, GA), Hillsborough Moving Company (Tampa, FL), Sledgehammer Theatre and Theater E (San Diego, CA), Bottom’s Dream (Los Angeles, CA), Annex Theatre, Seattle, WA), Frontera, Salvage Vanguard, The Public Domain, and Physical Plant (Austin, TX), Undermain Theater (Dallas, TX) and Ten Thousand Things (Minneapolis, MN). As such, Austin based alternative theatre companies composed more than a fifth of those listed in the core group (“First Annual Rat Conference”).

Félix Guattari, negates a stabilized reading or fixed identity (Guattari 15).⁶⁷ Characterized by constant open-endedness and continual reinvention, rhizomatic systems can initiate a type of snowball effect that continually and infinitely reorders lines within and between various discourses. By situating Frontera alongside its local, national, and international radical-rebel cohorts it is possible to imagine a model of alternative theatre that isn't capital "A" alternative but is in a constant state of becoming alternative. And while transgression may initially proliferate like rats, endurance is suspect.

Fragmentation is both the birthplace and the deathbed of the RAT. Within a capitalist market the type of anarchic, dis-organizational, anti-monetary, anti-big-business model espoused by RAT is difficult to sustain at best. Eventually, both RAT and Frontera succumbed to the socio-economic-historical circumstances that complicate longevity. During the first RAT conference, Mark Lutwak of Rain City Projects in Seattle raised concerns regarding the struggles even more established alternative theatre companies face: "Generally they [alternative theatres] hit about 5 years and they go under—they burn out—or they find a way to institutionalize themselves" (qtd. in DeDanan). At the second to last conference held in San Francisco in 2003 RAT participants as a whole began questioning the endurance of the Radical Alternative Theatre structure. Long time RAT Gabriele Schafer of Thieves Theatre in Brooklyn argued, "I want RAT to stay what it is—scrappy, grassroots, anarchic, unbureaucratized, unowned. And yet, when I see what a little money can do, I also get these urges to raise funds so that we can optimize attendance and resources" (qtd. in S. D.). In 2003 Ehn confirmed that he would continue to research ways for achieving "his original vision of a hostelry, while still 'remaining open to revivifying

⁶⁷ See *The Three Ecologies* (2000) by Félix Guattari for an example of Guattari's work following his collaborations with Gilles Deleuze.

possibilities of anarchy” (qtd in S.D.). The rat in general has a limited lifespan—in the wild less than a year, in the theatre perhaps ten at most.⁶⁸

While the transgressive radical-rebel alternative theatres of the nineties sought to infest notions of the mainstream, within the local and regional contexts of Austin, they reflected and solidified an anti-hegemonic subculture that became the status quo. Throughout the late twentieth and into the twenty-first century, radical-rebel alternative theatre in Austin was less the exception and more the rule—mirroring the transgressive subcultural spirit the city marketed as an overarching cultural identity.⁶⁹ While the radical-rebel populist aesthetic catered to an antiestablishment, anti-commercial hybridized crowd, it was less than egalitarian. The type of transgressive DIY practices of inversion utilized in *Mi Casa* and by Austin’s radical-rebel alternative theatres were as exclusive as they were inclusive, often assuming that spectators arrived with a high level of fluency in the rhetorics of performance and in a range of alternative/nontraditional performance related rhetorical conventions.

Salvage Vanguard, one of Austin’s premiere radical-rebel theatre companies still in operation today, exemplified the way in which alternative theatres in Austin resisted the consumer model of theatre associated with larger institutionalized regional and commercial organizations while capitalizing on Austin’s mainstream brand of transgression at the end of the twentieth century. Established just two years after Frontera in 1994, Salvage Vanguard has also influenced the landscape of Austin Theatre. Under the artistic direction of co-founder Jason Neulander from 1994 to 2008 Salvage Vanguard played an instrumental role in the organization of the Austin RAT conference in 1996. In “Rattling our Stage” Faïres

⁶⁸ See the *Rat Behavior and Biology* website published by animal behavior specialist Anne Hanson at www.ratbehavior.org/rats.html.

⁶⁹ See “Austin Power and Light” (*Austin Chronicle*, 2006) and “Rattling Our Stages” (*Austin Chronicle*, 1998) by Faïres for a list of the many Austin based radical-rebel theatres.

describes the company's works as "[w]eird, witty, and irreverent . . . productions of swollen excitement and bizarre grotesque fantasy." In an email interview I conducted with Neulander he expressed his goal to "push the envelope of what theatre can be" (Neulander). Currently under the artistic direction of Jenny Larson, Salvage Vanguard (in the vein of Frontera) seeks to provide "[a] hub for Austin artists, audiences, and arts organizations" while "create[ing] and present[ing] transformative, high-quality artistic experiences that foster experimentation and conversation" ("About Salvage Vanguard Theater").⁷⁰ When Salvage Vanguard first arrived in Austin, they immediately garnered attention from critics and audiences with their notoriously popular/despised bumper sticker that read, "I hate theater." Similar to the "Keep Austin Weird" product line, Salvage's "I hate theater" motto both represented and marketed the type of anti-hegemonic ethos with which the company and the city sought to align itself. In a move that perhaps exemplifies changes that have occurred in Austin and Austin's alternative theatre scene since the turn of the millennium, Salvage exchanged its "I hate theater" motto for the new slogan "prepare for impact" during a benefit held at the then Austin mayor's house in 2004.⁷¹ In 2006 Salvage Vanguard abandoned its nomadic roots to open a performance venue located on Austin's Eastside. Today, a number of small theatre companies operate performance and rehearsal spaces in East Austin. Many of these have both contributed to and fought gentrification which has

⁷⁰ For Salvage Vanguard's full mission, see the website at www.salvagevanguard.org/. See also "Drive, He Said" (*Austin Chronicle*, 2006) by Wayne Alan Brenner for a history of Salvage Vanguard through 2006 and "Salvage Vanguard Theatre: The Rebel Sets Down Roots" (*Austin Chronicle*, 2001) by Robert Faires for a summary of Salvage Vanguard's work leading to the opening of their Eastside home.

⁷¹ See "The SVT 10th Anniversary Birthday Bash" housed on the Salvage Vanguard website for information regarding the event held at the Mayor's house and the change in slogan.

occurred in East Austin over the past ten years.⁷² By default, arts organizations that maintain residence in Austin's Eastside neighborhood are implicated in the complex racial and economic discourses that surround topics of gentrification. Arts on Real, managed by Naughty Austin, was the first theatre venue in East Austin not associated with the rebel theatre scene.⁷³ As an LGBT identified company, Naughty Austin participates in a market of transgression and the reflection and solidification of a gay subcultural identity in ways that Austin's rebel theatres do not. In the following chapter I focus on Naughty Austin's production of *Making Porn* to take a closer look at relationships between the market, transgression, and impact.

⁷² For a discussion of Austin's Eastside in relation to the Austin Arts scene prior to more recent gentrification see "Art's Eastside Origins: The East End" (*Austin Chronicle*, 1995) by Mike Clark-Madison.

⁷³ See the Arts on Real Myspace profile at www.myspace.com/artsonrealtheatre.

Chapter 3. A Market of Transgression: Naughty Austin, Ronnie Larsen's *Making Porn*, and Queer Erotic Performance

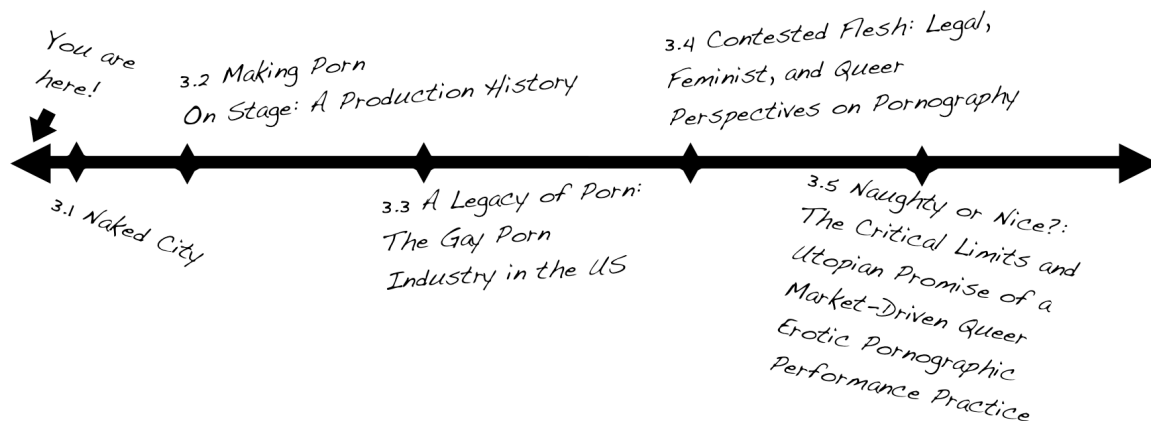


Figure 3. Schematic Diagram: Chapter 3

3.1 Naked City

"If God doesn't destroy Hollywood Boulevard, he owes Sodom and Gomorrah an apology." — Jay Leno

In an article published in the April 4, 2000, edition of the *Austin Chronicle*, local arts writer Ada Calhoun asks, "What is it about this town and public nudity?" Calhoun's question is prompted more generally by "[t]he spirit of *au natural*" that prevails in Austin and specifically by a long list of Austin theatre productions featuring the naked form (Calhoun). "Whether it's excursions to Hippie Hollow [Austin's nude lakefront beach], frat-boy streaking hijinks, clothing-optional apartment complexes, the abundance of strip clubs, or punk escapades," Calhoun writes, "Austinites do an awful lot of stripping down to the altogether." Calhoun suggests that if readers scan the *Austin Chronicle* weekly theatre listings they will often find "at least one 'Warning: Nudity' proviso" (Calhoun). After arguing that naked bodies onstage "can get laughs, make an audience nervous, turn people

on, turn people off, provoke and reveal assumptions about power and sexuality, humanity and death,” Calhoun offers profiles of theatre companies and performers in Austin that were notorious for nudity (Calhoun). Interviews Calhoun conducted with some male artists belie sexist and heterosexist notions.⁷⁴ On the one hand, Calhoun’s essay points to the ways in which the naked form became almost passé on stage in Austin at the turn of the millennium. On the other, it reveals apprehensions regarding the queer gaze and the eroticization of the naked male body within local and regional contexts. Community-based gay niche theatre companies like Naughty Austin often sought to stage tensions surrounding the politics of queer nudity and queer desire in South Texas during the period. While gay men perhaps found a greater level of acceptance in Austin than was available elsewhere in the Lone Star State throughout the last decade of the twentieth century and first decade of the twenty-first century, depictions of gay, lesbian, and queer erotic desires were still considered taboo. Naughty Austin transgressed social norms by presenting plays like Ronnie Larsen’s *Making Porn* that portray gay and queer male bodies engaged in explicitly erotic activity. In the previous chapter I have focused on the transgressive potential and critical limits of radical-rebel theatre in Austin, I now shift to an examination of the way in which queer nude sexualized bodies both counter and reproduce normalizing discourses and discourses of domination in Naughty Austin’s production of *Making Porn* within the Texas capital city.

Centered around the gay male pornographic film industry, past productions of *Making Porn* (Naughty Austin’s included) have employed exploitative practices and

⁷⁴ Ada Calhoun reports that naked comedy performer Andy Cobb finds male nudity in performance funny, whereas female nudity is “kinda dirty” (qtd. in Calhoun). Calhoun also notes that Morgan Knicely, a member of the Rude Mechanicals and co-founder of the Off Center who employed nudity in performance-art style pieces, “insists that for a man, it’s easier not to be eroticized” (qtd. in Calhoun).

commercial conventions associated with gay pornography to attract and titillate spectators. Although critics have frequently denounced the play as prurient fluff, Naughty Austin's production relied on the rhetoric's of gay pornography to provide a springboard for collective action and highlight the ways in which bodies serve as sites of knowledge involved in the construction and deconstruction of identity. Placing the script within the context of a history of the gay pornographic film industry and in relation to critical debates surrounding gay pornography casts *Making Porn* in a new but not unproblematic light. In this chapter I focus on *Making Porn*'s career on US stages more generally and Naughty Austin's 2002 production more specifically to investigate the ways in which overtly commercial, exploitative performance practices can also serve a positively transgressive, political and identity-affirming function within local and regional culture. I begin by providing an overview of the play's plot and sketching the historical details surrounding initial and subsequent productions. Because *Making Porn* relies on rhetorical and authenticating conventions associated with gay pornographic films, I next turn to the roots of the industry in the US to contend that gay porn operates and develops both as a money-making endeavor and as an expression of queer freedom/power. *Making Porn* stages this present day/historical tension. Following, I examine legal, feminist, and queer perspectives on pornography to consider whether or not gay porn is a hopelessly compromised capitalist/misogynist venture or can serve as a source of transgressive affirmation. Finally, I challenge general black and white assumptions made about the critical limits or utopian promise of a transgressive, commercially-based, market-driven queer pornographic erotic performance practice and specifically interrogate Anthony Julius's assertion that "[c]apitalism has at last dissolved the opposition between system and transgression" (201).

3.2 *Making Porn On Stage: A Production History*

"There is more enterprise in walking naked." — W.B. Yeats

Penned by Ronnie Larsen in 1995, *Making Porn* is set in San Francisco in the 1980s. The plot revolves around six people who work in the gay porn industry.⁷⁵ Some are veteran pornographers, while others find a career in gay porn throughout the course of the play. With the exception of Linda (the only female character in the piece), roles are rendered archetypally as gay stereotypes. Arthur Mack, a butch, hard-to-get-along-with gay porn director, speaks in commands and has little tolerance for the overly effeminate porn performers. Jamie, Arthur's meek, mild-mannered partner and gofer, handles all of the costuming and scheduling responsibilities of production but has been worn down by Arthur's verbal and emotional abuse. Ricky, an optimistic and idealistic college student, dreams of becoming the next gay porn sensation. Ray Tanner, a jaded has-been porn performer, moonlights as a male escort and erotic dancer to make ends meet. Jack Hawk, a straight-identified, unemployed, classically trained actor, can only find work in the gay porn film industry. Linda, Jack's wife-turned-manager-turned-gay-porn-entrepreneur, pushes Jack further into the business against his wishes once she discovers his secret career in gay porn.

The first half of the play shows the characters filming a new gay porn movie entitled *Cops*. Complications arise when the director's lover, Jamie, falls for the newly hired Ricky and straight-Jack's wife, Linda, finds out about her husband's starring role. In the second act the plot takes a tragic turn when Ricky is diagnosed with AIDS. Although Larsen has

⁷⁵ Ronnie Larsen initially titled *Making Porn* "*Six People Making Porn*" during writing and developmental phases. He eventually shortened the name to *Making Porn* because he thought it sounded better and would carry more impact. (Larsen, "Pt. 1 Edited").

said that he did not intend the first act to be grounded in comedy and the second to be grounded in tragedy (Larsen “Pt. 1 Edited”), that is how *Making Porn* reads and plays in performance. Some critics find the juxtaposition of tragedy and comedy disjointed while others see it as a nod to the social and historical circumstances surrounding the period in which the action is set. Responding to the 1997 production in Chicago, Andrew Patner notes in the *Chicago Sun-Times* that Larsen's play “is mostly light and comic, even tender . . . [and] turns serious with the advent of AIDS.” In opposition, Mike Steele reports in regards to the 1998 Minneapolis production in the *Star Tribune* that *Making Porn* “is fun most of the way through . . . [but] begins taking itself seriously, bringing up . . . AIDS . . . and . . . simply grinding the play to a halt.”

Making Porn was inspired by a forty-hour interview Larsen conducted with an unnamed gay porn star.⁷⁶ Larsen has said that the porn star's description of the gay adult film industry paralleled his own experiences in the theatre industry. “What people don't realize,” Larsen protests, is that “*Making Porn* is the story of my life in the theatre” (Larsen, “Pt. 1 *Making*”). Problems the porn star had encountered working in gay porn were similar to those Larsen struggled with when working on a play: “actors not showing up,” “unscrupulous producers and directors,” “scheduling problems,” “hoping the project makes money,” “fighting with people,” and “the drama of it all” (Larsen, “Pt. 1 *Making*”). Larsen sees himself in most of the characters but specifically Jack, the out of work classical actor (Larsen, “Pt. 1 *Making*”). Just as “Jack ends up making porno movies,” Larsen “ended up

⁷⁶ In Podcasts posted on Larsen's website Larsen is reluctant to reveal the name of the porn star (see Larsen, “Pt. 1 *Making*”). In the *Chicago Tribune* review of the initial 1995 production Lawrence Bommer writes that the play was “[b]ased on talks Larsen had with San Francisco erotic film star Scott O'Hara” (Bommer). Scott O'Hara played the role of Arthur Mack, the gay porn film director, in a run in San Francisco (Larsen, “Pt. 1 *Making Porn*”).

doing plays about pornography" (Larsen, "Pt. 1 *Making*"). According to Larsen, the set for *Making Porn* should be "more reflective of what it's like . . . working in the theatre than it is being on a video shoot" (Larsen, "Pt. 1 *Making*"). "The play has never been about video equipment and . . . filming" Larsen argues. "They don't rehearse porno scenes" in the gay adult film industry, according to Larsen, but "in the play they rehearse porno scenes" (Larsen, "Pt. 1 *Making*").

Although Larsen intended the gay pornographic film industry to serve as a metaphor for the process of making theatre, the analogy has gone mostly unnoticed by critics. Reviewers tend to focus instead on the flesh factor. Responding to the 1998 performance of *Making Porn* in Denver, Thom Wise writes in the *Rocky Mountain News* that those who attend a production will witness "as much bare flesh as you'll find in a locker room" (Wise). The script itself utilizes tropes familiar to gay pornography (i.e., stock porn characters, full frontal nudity, foreplay, simulated sex, dream-like erotic fantasy sequences, candid discussion of sexual acts, erotic garb, and sex toys). The film within the play involves scenes typical of the genre. Obligatory sex transpires both on and off the fictional soundstage. Within the world of the gay porn movie *Cops* there are the typical couplings and orgies between police officers, plumbers, and self-professed straight men who engage in all-male sexual activity while their girlfriends are out of the house. Between shoots Ray Tanner (the jaded, veteran porn star) performs a solo masturbation act, while Ricky (the young idealistic newcomer) gets it on with the gay porn producer's lover, Jamie.

Making Porn premiered in Chicago at the Theatre Building in July 1995. Directed by Larsen, the initial production was funded on a shoestring budget. Performers received a mere "50 dollars a piece for the entire run," and a black and white "poster was done at

Kinkos for 11 cents a copy” (Larsen, “*Making Porn: Show*”). The actor cast in the lead Jack Hawk role was so uncomfortable being naked onstage that Larsen was forced to block the piece in a way that kept the actor’s genitals partially hidden from view. Before long, Larsen noticed that spectators began returning for repeat performances “sit[ting] at different angles in the theatre [to] try and see his dick” (Larsen, “Pt. 1 *Making*”). Although *Making Porn* opened and played to sold-out houses for six weeks in Chicago, critics unanimously panned the production (Larsen, “*Making Porn: Show*”). Larsen recalls spectators “howling with hysterics on opening night” and then receiving “horrible, horrible reviews” the following week (Larsen, “Pt. 1 *Making*”). Lawrence Bommer’s review, published in the Chicago Tribune on July 15, 1995, epitomizes the play’s initial critical reception:

It's hard to say what or whom "*Making Porn*" is about, much less care for the consequences. [...] Frustratingly, Larsen's stereotypical characters make themselves up as they go. [...] [B]oredom is a constant co-star Unavoidable given this territory, Larsen's staging features selective nudity and explicit language. What might have been avoided is the failure to push "*Making Porn*" beyond its teasing title. (Bommer)

Larsen avoided repeat reviews of subsequent productions of *Making Porn* which followed in San Francisco and then Los Angeles by denying critics access to the show (Larsen, “Pt. 1 *Making*”).

According to Larsen, *Making Porn* hit its stride in Los Angeles following the Chicago and San Francisco production where it was almost immediately embraced by the gay adult film industry (Larsen, “Pt. 1 *Making*”). In both San Francisco and Los Angeles *Making Porn* opened with Larsen in the role of Arthur Mack, the director and producer of the fictional movie-within-the-play *Cops* (Larsen, “*Making Porn: Show*”). After “three or four months in Los Angeles” Larsen began meeting porn stars who inevitably saw themselves in the characters (Larsen, “Pt. 1 *Making*”). Although gay adult film performer

Scott O'Hara replaced Larsen during the San Francisco run, the gimmick of casting real life porn stars to portray the fictional porn star characters Ray Tanner (the jaded veteran gay porn performer) and Jack Hawk (the straight-identified, classically trained gay porn actor) began in Los Angeles (Larsen, "Pt. 1 *Making*"). While critics have often denounced *Making Porn* as a cheap vehicle for putting porn stars on stage, Larsen argues that this was not his original intention.⁷⁷ "It only happened . . . after . . . the play was up and running—after Chicago—that . . . porn stars . . . started to appear in [*Making Porn*]" (Larsen, "Pt. 1 *Making*"). Blue Blake and JT Sloan were the first to join the Los Angeles cast (Larsen, "Pt. 1 *Making*"). Rex Chandler, Ryan Idol, Chris Steele and a handful of others have followed in their footsteps. By the time producer Caryn Horowitz made the decision to open the play Off-Broadway rotating porn stars in and out of the production "was a big gimmick" (Larsen, "Pt. 1 *Making*").

Following a financially successful and well received Los Angeles run, *Making Porn* opened in New York at the Actors Playhouse in May 1996. Larsen continued as director and performer in the role of Arthur Mack. *Making Porn* played Off-Broadway for over a year but received mixed reviews. Like most critics, Stephen Holden writing in the *New York Times* in 1996 in regards to the Off-Broadway production notes that *Making Porn* "uses sex

⁷⁷ Annabel McGilvray writing in the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* in regards to the 1999 production in Sydney, Australia accuses the cast of being "more memorable for its physical tone than acting prowess." Responding to the 2000 production in Philadelphia, Douglas J. Keating of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* notes that "[o]ne point the play proves with amusing clarity is that men are cast in porn films because . . . well, let's just say that acting is not their long suit. The featured performers in this production, Blake Harper and Jason Branch, have starred in many porn films, and what they show onstage bears out that point." In *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (2000), John Clum places *Making Porn* in the category of contemporary gay plays "whose principal function is to serve as a pre-text for guys taking their clothes off" (xiii). In regards to the 1999 production in Sydney, Australia, Ian Phipps of *The Sunday Telegraph* testifies, "lots of nudity, . . . [t]hat's what audiences will go to see and they won't be disappointed."

as a lure” (Holden). Holden goes on to write, however, that “[a]lthough crude, unfocused, and stridently acted, it has a street-level exuberance that keeps things from getting dull” (Holden). In 1997 Greg Evans of *Variety* also finds that the Off-Broadway success was due in no small part to the “marketing value of full frontal flesh” (Evans). In an interview with Evans, Horowitz remarked, “Nudity helps sell a show, I’ll be the first to admit that” (qtd. in Evans). Evans reports that the New York production of *Making Porn* “was “[f]inanced at a meager \$50,000, . . . recouped its capitalization after just four weeks, and . . . routinely grossed anywhere from \$15,000 to \$40,000 a week” (Evans).

Backed by Horowitz, two road companies performed *Making Porn* in most major US cities and a few international markets throughout the late nineties (Evans).⁷⁸ Return engagements in San Francisco were met with both good and bad responses.⁷⁹ Although critics denounced the world premier of *Making Porn* in Chicago, subsequent stagings in The Windy City involving real life porn stars received some favorable comments.⁸⁰ Runs in Phoenix, Denver, and Minneapolis garnered (by my account) more negative than positive criticism. Responding to the 1997 production in Phoenix, Robrt L. Pela writing for the *Phoenix New Times* records actor and “former Phoenician” Christopher Wynn’s complaints

⁷⁸ In a 1998 interview with Michael Grossberg of the *Columbus Dispatch* in Columbus, OH, Larsen claimed that approximately 30 productions of *Making Porn* had played in 20 US cities. At that time shows had also been scheduled for Sydney, Toronto, and London (qtd. in Grossberg).

⁷⁹ See Dennis Harvey for a review of the 1996 San Francisco production and Steven Winn for information regarding the 2000 production in relation to other queer theatre offerings in San Francisco.

⁸⁰ See Andrew Patner who, in regards to the 1997 Chicago production, argues in the *Chicago Sun-Times* that *Making Porn* is “a real improvement . . . over tedious commercial gay fare.” See also Lewis Lazare’s “Theatre in The Gay 90s” published in the May 22, 1997, issue of the *Chicago Reader* for information on *Making Porn* in relation to other queer theatre offerings in Chicago.

about *Making Porn*: “how come [gay] plays are sold to [gay audiences] with the promise of 10 swinging dicks onstage at every performance” (qtd. in Pela). Pela goes on to report that the Phoenix tour “is playing to packed houses” but that the “overall look of the piece is shoddy” (Pela). Horowitz responded to such criticism by arguing that *Making Porn* “isn't high art. . . . It's a fun play that's making a killing everywhere. . . . Everyone wants to see naked boys, especially gay men” (qtd. in Pela). Although crass, Horowitz's comments seem to hold truth. Despite scathing criticisms, *Making Porn* continued to build momentum and garner profits throughout the late 1990s.

While still promoting national and international tours of *Making Porn*, Horowitz and Larsen began licensing the script to community-based theatres beginning in 1998. Act Out, a community-based theatre company located in Columbus, Ohio, opened the first independent production of the play on November 5, 1998 (Grossberg). Although local critics continue to comment on what Doug Hoehn writing in *Columbus Alive* in response to the 1998 Columbus production refers to as the “NAWLIN factor” in *Making Porn* (“Non-Actors Who Look Incredible Naked”), community-based productions seem to receive more gracious reviews than road tours. Often, licensed productions of *Making Porn* employ a mix of local and professional actors. Naughty Austin's independent production of the play which was staged at Hyde Park Theatre in the summer of 2002 cast gay porn heavy weights Ryan Idol and Chris Steele in lead roles as Jack Hawk and Ray Tanner and company members in other parts.⁸¹

⁸¹ See Chris Steele's website at www.chris-steele.com for a list of production credits and a history of Steele's work in the gay porn industry. See “Idol Dreams of Life After Porn” by Edward Guthmann for information on Idol's career and an interview with Idol.

Formed in Austin in 1997 under the creative direction of local actor and playwright Blake Yelavich, Naughty Austin began as a late night cabaret series in the vein of Forbidden Broadway.⁸² Capitalizing on Austin's ever-growing theatre scene, Naughty Austin performed send-ups and spoofs of local productions. In a short history detailing Naughty Austin's origins, Robert Faires reminds readers that Blake Yelavich and friends got their start by "poking fun at everyone on local stages" (Faires, "With"). Faires describes numbers wherein Naughty Austin "teased . . . actors for their eagerness to show skin, caricatured that year's cabaret trend as 'one step removed from karaoke,' and imagined . . . [an] extravagantly lighted *Rockin' Christmas Party* at the Paramount [Austin's oldest theatre and at the time the only presenting union house] as sucking all the power from Congress Avenue [i.e., downtown Austin]" (Faires, "With"). Although the late night performances were not geared toward a gay audience, Yelavich utilized a type of camp aesthetic often associated with both gay theatre and the late night cabaret genre.

After garnering some success and recognition with four different concert parodies, Naughty Austin began producing more traditional gay plays.⁸³ All were performed at local venues throughout town and most were penned by Yelavich himself.⁸⁴ According to local critic Sarah Breckmeir, "Yelavich credits his partner, four time award winning actor Kirk Addison, and loyal company member with unyielding support for his ambition" (Breckmeir, "Naughty Austin"). Although most of Naughty Austin's productions received positive feedback, *Making Porn* (which ran during the summer of 2002) marked the company's first

⁸² See the Forbidden Broadway website at www.forbiddenbroadway.com for information on the series.

⁸³ See Naughty Austin's website at www.naughtyaustin.com for information regarding the company and a full production history.

⁸⁴ See "Previous Shows" on the Naughty Austin website for information regarding past productions.

major hit. In an interview with Breckmeir, Addison noted that *Making Porn* was “the largest audience attended show ever produced at Hyde Park Theatre” (qtd. in Breckmeir, “Naughty Austin”). Michael Barnes reports in the *Austin American Statesman* that “Naughty Austin walked away [from *Making Porn*] with a \$17,000 profit, an unheard-of amount in the world of warehouse theatre” (Barnes, “How to”). Yelavich and Addison ultimately used proceeds generated from ticket sales to help fund Arts on Real, a not-for-profit arts organization that runs a warehouse venue on Austin’s Eastside and at the time of this writing serves as Naughty Austin’s home-base. Like the previous Off-Broadway and touring productions, Naughty Austin’s rendition of *Making Porn* employed exploitative practices and commercial conventions associated with gay pornography to cash in on the gay niche audiences’ penchant for bare flesh and erotic narratives. Because it is decidedly through rhetorical and authenticating conventions of gay pornographic films that audiences make sense of Naughty Austin’s production of *Making Porn*, in the following section I look to the roots of the industry in the US to argue that gay porn operates and develops both as a money-making endeavor and as an expression of queer freedom/power.

3.3 A Legacy of Porn: The Gay Porn Industry in the US

“Man’s naked form belongs to no particular moment in history.” — Auguste Rodin

Although depictions of erotic same sex imagery persist in various forms throughout history, the commercial gay porn industry as it exists in the US today developed in the fifties, sixties, and seventies as both a commercial venture and a radical, queer-identity-affirming transgressive art practice. Efforts to locate the origins of gay pornography prove, on the one hand, reductive and provide, on the other, insight into tensions that characterize

gay porn as a low, exploitative—even sleazy—art form. The popular historical narrative written about the evolution of gay porn as an aesthetic practice often links contemporary commercial gay pornography to homoerotic art found throughout the ages. Adrian Gillan, of GaydarNation.com divides the history of gay pornography in the west into five distinct periods: Classical, Neoclassical, Victorian, Modern, and Post-Stonewall. The classical period includes homoerotic images found on Greek vases; the neoclassical period, pieces by Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo; The Victorian period, homoerotic painters; the Modern period, physique and Athletic photos; and Post-Stonewall period, explicitly sexual depictions (Gillan). Gillan’s history of gay porn destabilizes distinctions between high art and low art (e.g., Renaissance sculpture and commercial gay pornography) and offers a tacit argument against censorship by equating gay pornography with highly valued art objects of the past. Yet, it also erases distinctions between the various aesthetic practices and ignores the contexts—historical, economic, and cultural circumstances—in which the artworks themselves were produced.

Since such a comprehensive history of gay male pornography is beyond the scope of this chapter, I turn to three specific sites of pornography that illustrate the complex relationship between commercial and aesthetic development. I look to physique photography to illustrate the ways in which queer erotic desires subverted the heteronormative intentions of the genre early on and with the founding of the Athletic Models Guild (AMG) in 1945 and distribution of muscle magazines in the 1950s led to a business model that served as the cradle for the commercial gay porn industry in the US. I then turn to an examination of early stag films to offer evidence that queer erotic narratives popped up in an aesthetically experimental yet explicitly exploitative and commercial cinematic contexts even in the first

half of the twentieth century. And finally, I offer an overview of *Boys in the Sand*—the first widely popular, nationally distributed, publicly shown hardcore pornographic film, gay or straight—to argue that *Boys in the Sand* epitomizes the competing artistic and commercial aspirations of the contemporary gay porn industry in the US.

Physique photography appeared as a genre alongside the development of the camera in the mid-nineteenth century. While the primary goal was to exhibit physical form and acuity, the physique photos were easily adapted for more prurient purposes (Burger 6). Photographers quickly found that subjects could be photographed in the nude and that placing ink-blot or drawings of fig leaves over genitalia afterward allowed one to avoid legal repercussions. Purveyors could then remove the ink stains to reveal genitals hidden beneath. Such practice remained popular throughout the twentieth century until legal and cultural changes in the US rendered it obsolete (Burger 6).⁸⁵

Los Angeles native Bob Mizer receives credit for turning physique photos and the ink-blot technique into a viable commercial gay pornographic venture that continued to evade censorship throughout the mid-twentieth century with the founding of AMG and the publication of *Physique Pictorial*, the premiere muscle magazine.⁸⁶ An amateur photographer and filmmaker who grew up just outside of Hollywood, Mizer did little more than capitalize on the already popular medium of physique photography. Mizer began AMG

⁸⁵ For a history of the “beefcake” genre of physique photography of the mid-twentieth century and a commentary on the ways in which gay identified photographers and gay identified purveyors subverted censorship throughout the period see an interview with Brandon Matheson included in episode 206 of the *Sexplorations* series produced by here! (*Sexplorations* ep. 206).

⁸⁶ The film *Beefcake* directed by Thom Fitzgerald and based in part on the book of the same name by Valentine Hooven serves as a good source for information on Mizer and the development of AMG and *Physique Pictorial*. For a brief discussion of Mizer’s work within the contexts of the gay porn industry as it exists in the US today see *Bigger Than Life* by Jeffery Escoffier’s (16-20) and *One Handed Histories* by John Burger (7-8).

as a cooperative for the many out-of-work handsome young men that subsidized their dreams of stardom by posing for artists and photographers. In practical terms, AMG gave Mizer easier access to the type of athletic, chiseled, and uninhibited performers he wanted to photograph. Mizer shot and eventually filmed the young men himself in various homoerotic scenarios. Like many physique photographers of the period, Mizer sold his photos via mail-order through ads placed in the back of mainstream men's magazines. Such practices became more difficult once the US postal service began threatening the magazines with legal retribution if they couldn't ensure the purity of the advertisements (Hooven 24-30).

In an effort to remain in business after mainstream magazines refused to publish mail order ads for physique photography, Mizer and several other photographers pulled resources in 1951 to publish *Physique Pictorial*. *Physique Pictorial* consisted entirely of physique photographs and drawings and was initially sold at a newsstand located on the corner of a favorite Hollywood cruise spot. After a successful and lucrative test run in Los Angeles, the magazine began appearing on shelves throughout the country. Unlike other men's magazines, *Physique Pictorial* did not feature articles. The pages consisted of little more than erotic and provocative images of men. Text found alongside the photos included the names of the models, their sizes, details about the shoot, instructions for ordering direct mail samples, and other coded information (Hooven 30-46). However, even this ostensibly innocent transgressive picture-taking venture took on the seedier, exploitative connotations often associated with gay pornography as the true nature of Mizer's relationship with the models remains unclear. Some sources argue that Mizer truly intended AMG to be an organization engaged in the promotion of nude male models for artistic purposes. Others suggest that Mizer's interests were more sexually manipulative in nature. While Mizer

evaded charges of obscenity throughout his career, coded text contained alongside photos published in *Physique Pictorial* eventually raised the suspicions of the LAPD Vice Squad. In the late sixties Mizer was arrested for running a prostitution ring and (although it remains unconfirmed) appears to have served time in prison in 1968 (Escoffier 20).

Although AMG and *Physique Pictorial* provide evidence of a burgeoning gay porn commercial industry in the US during the mid-twentieth century, Mizer's work also contributed to the aesthetic development of gay pornography. Mizer's photographs in general and the *Physique Pictorial* publication more specifically helped establish an artistic lexicon on which the gay porn industry continues to rely. Solo shots depicted the male body as an object of desire, whereas group photos offered a more overtly homoerotic narrative. Many of the scenarios and character types captured by Mizer's camera have become the bread and butter of gay commercial pornography. And while Mizer did not invent these fantasies *ex nihilo*, the muscle studs, leather-men, sailors, wrestlers, cowboys, barbarians, and roman warriors that graced the pages of his magazine played heavily in gay erotic narratives and performed gay pornography throughout the twentieth century. Yelavich mined both the type of iconography and erotic narratives found in Mizer's work in staging Naughty Austin's rendition of *Making Porn*.

Unlike physique photography, stag films depicted hardcore sexual activity grounded more explicitly in exploitative and commercial practices. Although the term "stag film" is sometimes used to refer to any type of pornographic movie, pioneer historian of gay pornography Tom Waugh finds that historically the title specifically applies to sexually explicit reels from the early twentieth century through the seventies—gay and straight—that were intended for an all-male audience and secretly distributed commercially for private use

(qtd. in Burger 7). Often, stag films were screened at underground all-male stag parties. The DVD collection of French stag films *The Good Old Naughty Days* claims that some were off-set erotic artistic experiments made by early cinematographers and screen actors and that stag films in general were shown in brothels where “[t]eenage boys were first brought to these secret screenings by their Uncles, often on Sundays after mass, to start their initiation into manhood” (Reilhac). In an interview, Waugh notes that “from the very beginning of the twentieth century . . . stag films being produced mostly in Europe include[d] a very specific homoerotic component” (qtd. in *Sexplorations* ep. 108).⁸⁷ In the early stag films I reviewed, sexual activity involving two or more women either with or without the presence of a man was not rare. In *L’atelier Faiminette* (1921) three seamstresses punish a fourth by lifting her dress and spanking her bare bottom. Not long afterward, two of the women leave the group to embark on more intimate activities. After undressing each other, the women engage in oral sex before being interrupted by a man who appears to be a type of authority figure. At first he seems to disapprove of the two female lovers. Shaking his fists in the air he scolds them until they eventually pull him toward the bed and unfasten his trousers. Other stag films depicting female-to-female sexual scenarios take place in convents, kitchens, and massage parlors. *Devoirs de Vacances* (1920) includes one of the more shockingly exploitative scenes wherein a nun-character forces a dog to lick her vagina and then a male visitor’s penis.⁸⁸ In all the films included in the *The Good Ol’ Naughty Days* collection female performers seem to take little sexual pleasure in the depicted acts outside of a type of giddiness. Male participants appear to use their female

⁸⁷ See the short documentary “Reel Pleasure: Homoerotic Film Pioneers” which is included in episode 108 of the *Sexplorations* series produced by here! for an interview with Waugh.

⁸⁸ Both *L’atelier Faiminette* and *Devoirs de Vacances* are included in *The Good Ol’ Naughty Days* collection of stage films compiled and edited by Michel Reilhac

counterparts not as equals involved in the pursuit of sexual pleasure but for personal, sexual gratification. By and large, women are objectified and only men seem to reach orgasm.

Although lesbian sexual activity remained a staple of stag films, it did not take long for gay male sexual intercourse to “creep” into the frame (Burger 7). According to John Burger, *Le Menage Moderne Du Madame Butterfly* (1925) was one of the earliest stag films to feature anal sex between two men (Burger 7). In *Madame Butterfly* an overly anxious sailor who comes seeking sexual pleasure at a brothel is tricked into having anal intercourse with an androgynous doorman.⁸⁹ For the most part, however, homosexual activity in early stag films did not depict any sort of radical affirmation of queer identities. Rather, they perpetuated the all-too-common homophobic tropes involving punishment and victimization (Burger 7).⁹⁰ Interestingly, none of the individuals involved in the creation of the early stag films receive credit. While anonymity was due in part to the fact that production and distribution were illegal in the US during the period, it perhaps also attests to the exploitative nature of the product. *Making Porn* does not shy away from these more explicitly exploitative characteristics of pornography. Within the play gay porn director and producer Arthur Mack pays little attention to the needs of the porn performers—often manipulating contracts and tricking adult film actors into situations with which they are not completely comfortable.

⁸⁹ *Madame Butterfly* can also be found in the collection *The Good Ol’ Naughty Days* by Michel Reilhac.

⁹⁰ The only exception I have found to this scenario occurs in *Téa Teme* (1925) where two men engaged in an orgy with two women pair off to enjoy what one might read as an almost loving, gracious moment of oral sex. *Téa Teme* is also included in the collection *The Good Ol’ Naughty Days* by Michel Reilhac.

Wakefield Poole's *Boys in the Sand* (1971) is recognized for being the first hardcore porn film—gay or straight—to credit performers and crewmembers.⁹¹ Directed by Poole, a one-time stage choreographer, *Boys in the Sand* predated *Deep Throat* (the straight porn film that ushered in the era of “porn chic”) by one year.⁹² Premiering at the 55th Street Playhouse in New York City, *Boys in the Sand* was advertised in the *New York Times* alongside “legitimate” movies, garnered good and bad reviews from mainstream publications like *Vanity Fair* magazine, and made the top-fifty box office sales list several weeks on end (qtd. in “Godfathers of Porn”). According to Poole, the project itself began as an experiment to create a gay porn film that was emotionally wrought, aesthetically appealing, *and* sexually exciting (qtd. in “Godfathers of Porn”). Set on Fire Island, *Boys in the Sand* is divided into three vignettes. Each possesses a Romantic quality. Shot without synchronized sound, the musical underscore Poole added during the editing process enhances the erotic, dreamlike feel of the piece. In the first segment a naked Adonis figure emerges from the sea to engage in sexual activity with a nude sunbather. In the second loop a lonely single man orders a magical tablet from the back of a circular that when thrown into the backyard pool conjures a male lover. In the third and final scenario a horny resident masturbates with a black dildo while fantasizing about an African American electrician whom he spies working on a telephone pole outside of his home. Each scene in *Boys in the Sand* begins with arousal and ends with ejaculation. Although Poole did not invent this structure, by and large

⁹¹ Here and throughout my research is based on filmed interviews with Poole and commentaries provided by Poole in the *Wakefield Poole Collection 1971-1986*. See also *Bigger Than Life* by Jeffery Escoffier (95-101) and *One Handed Histories* by John Burger (16) for a short history of *Boys in the Sand*.

⁹² See the documentary *Inside Deep Throat* (2005) by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato for a history of *Deep Throat* and introduction to early developments in the straight pornographic film industry.

commercially produced gay porn films (even those with a more traditional overarching plot) continue to conform to the narrative of the male orgasm—stringing together a series of sexual encounters marked by the arousal/climax sequence.

Although Poole himself saw *Boys in the Sand* as an erotic art piece, profits the film garnered proved the commercial viability of gay pornography. Several East and West coast studios quickly turned Poole's cinematic experiment into a business model. In *Bigger Than Life: The History of Gay Porn Cinema from Beefcake to Hardcore* (2009), Jeffery Escoffier argues that movie theaters on the East and West coasts began screening pornographic films (both gay and straight) in an effort to recoup lost revenue that resulted from the 1948 Supreme Court decision which “forced the major Hollywood studios to divest their theatre chains” (Escoffier 49). By the late sixties mainstream movie ticket sales had dropped 80% in the United States. The need for movie houses to attract patrons and establish a new audience base coupled with relaxed production code standards led to the commercial public exhibition of pornography. Commercially produced gay soft-core pornographic films were being shown in theaters throughout the sixties (Escoffier 47-50). The success of *Boys in the Sand* paved the way for the commercial distribution and public exhibition of hardcore gay pornography. The promise of profits alongside cultural, political, and legal changes and technological advancements (i.e., VHS) led to the solidification of gay porn as an industry in the US in the mid- to late seventies. Although the medium of gay pornography continues to evolve, scenarios, narratives, and character types established early on provide the framework through which the industry still functions today. Currently, there exist those in the industry who, like Poole, see gay pornography as a transgressive, identity-affirming aesthetic

practice.⁹³ And yet there are others in the business with more exploitative designs who seek to capitalize on queer erotic desire.⁹⁴ *Making Porn* stages this present day/historical tension. Likewise, some critics defend gay porn while others remain skeptical of it. In the following section I examine legal, feminist, and queer perspectives on pornography to consider whether or not gay porn is a hopelessly compromised capitalist/misogynist venture or if the medium can serve as a source of transgressive affirmation.

3.4 Contested Flesh: Legal, Feminist, and Queer Perspectives on Pornography

“Pornography is the theory, rape the practice.” — Robin Morgan

Critics of porn come from both the political right and political left. Legal debates regarding the status of pornography often center on charges of obscenity and issues of free speech. While there have been a number of local and regional trials related to obscenity, two Supreme Court rulings are of notable concern to the gay porn industry in the US: *Roth v. The United States* (1957) and *Miller v. California* (1973). In each, the Supreme Court ultimately ruled that obscenity is not protected as free speech under the First Amendment. Although *Roth v. The United States* upheld the conviction of the lower courts, it allowed for differentiations between depictions of sex and obscenity and defined obscenity as that which is “utterly without redeeming social importance” (*Roth v. US*; qtd. in Lane xvi). Previous to

⁹³ See the documentary *Shooting Porn* (1997) by Ronnie Larsen for a more positive review of the artistic achievements of the gay porn industry.

⁹⁴ See the documentary *Everything You Wanted to Know About Gay Porn Stars But Were Afraid to Ask* (2010) by John Roecker for a closer look at the underbelly of the gay porn industry.

the 1957 ruling, obscenity had been more strictly identified by the courts.⁹⁵ In the first three decades of the twentieth century the Hicklin test (established by the 1868 English case *Regina v. Hicklin*) allowed justices to classify obscene material as that which seeks “to deprave or corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences ” (qtd. in Senat). In 1933 the US District Court ruling in *The United States v. One Book Called “Ulysses”* redefined obscenity as that which “tend[s] to stir the sex impulses or to lead to sexually impure and lustful thoughts” (*The US v. One Book Called “Ulysses”*; qtd. in Senat).

On the one hand, *Roth v. The United States* (1957) provided pornographers with an argument in defense of their work. On the other, it offered a less than black and white definition of obscenity that left the genre in a precarious position. Under the obscenity test established by the 1957 Supreme Court decision, pornographers sought to claim literary, artistic, and scientific merit to prove the social importance of their products. Physique photography and some stag videos could be packaged as anatomical, biological, and instructional studies. Plotting and narrative became crucial elements in soft-core pornography as it provided pornographers with literary and artistic defenses. *Making Porn* spoofs the obligatory narratives and tired plot lines that characterized gay porn in the seventies and eighties and still play a large role in contemporary gay porn films.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ For a brief history of changes in obscenity laws in the US see the reference guide “An Overview of How Courts Have Defined Obscenity” written by Joey Senat for the University of North Carolina.

⁹⁶ Some contemporary gay porn films self-consciously utilize trite scenarios and well-worn narratives as they deconstruct or comment on the genre in aesthetically subversive or subtextual ways. Chi Chi La Rue and Bruce LaBruce are specifically known for their innovative productions. For information on Chi Chi La Rue see www.c1r.com/chichilarue. For information on Bruce LaBruce see www.brucealabruce.com.

In *Miller v. California*, sixteen years after *Roth v. The United States*, the Supreme Court offered a three-pronged test that still today allows individual communities the right to decide for themselves what does or does not constitute obscenity:

- (a) whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards' would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest;
- (b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state; and (c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. (*Miller v. California*; qtd in Lane xvii)

Although the 1972 decision provides some clarity, it leaves the commercial gay porn industry in the US open to attacks grounded in anti-gay and homophobic rhetoric.

“Contemporary community standards,” according to the Supreme Court, are locally, not nationally, established (Senat). What one community may find objectionable or obscene another may think acceptable or even mundane. While *Making Porn* has played in many cities throughout the US without legal repercussions, police interrupted a 2005 production in St. Louis on grounds of obscenity. Nancy Larson reporting for St. Louis’s *Vital Voice Newspaper* writes that “[i]t is unclear whether the nudity in ‘*Making Porn*’ or its gay-themed subject matter was the catalyst for this action” (Larson).

If the courts have served as a juridical platform for contesting the legal status of pornography, then the media and the academy provide arenas for heated feminist debates. Often, feminist arguments for and against pornography revolve around issues of equality and free speech. Anti-porn feminists hold that the genre perpetuates violence towards women. In a much quoted essay “Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape” (1974), child actress turned feminist activist Robin Morgan writes that “[p]ornography is the theory, rape the practice” (qtd. in Loftus ix). Like Morgan, Catherine Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin, two of the more vocal opponents of the porn industry, claim that pornography—gay and

straight—endorses violence against women.⁹⁷ Both MacKinnon and Dworkin garnered focus from the popular press in 1984 and 1985 when an ordinance they co-wrote “that outlawed or attached civil penalties to all pornography” was adopted by Indianapolis and then overturned a year later by the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals (Dworkin, Ronald 298). Dworkin, however, first achieved media attention in the mid-Seventies when she sided with *Deep Throat* star Linda “Lovelace” Marchiano who claimed that “every time someone watches [*Deep Throat*], they are watching [her] being raped” (qtd. in Dworkin, *Pornography* xvi).⁹⁸ In “Equality and Free Speech” (originally published in *Only Words* in 1993 and reprinted in 2006 in *Prostitution and Pornography*) Mackinnon argues that the current statute on obscenity is complicit with the oppression of women because it relies on community standards to regulate what is and is not obscene. According to Mackinnon, the distribution of pornography has already influenced and continues to influence community opinions about obscenity in ways that blind individuals to the realities of pornography. “The more pornography there is,” Mackinnon argues, “the more it sets de facto community standards, conforming views of what is acceptable to what is arousing” (92). Like her colleague Andrea Dworkin, Mackinnon insists that pornography is not an issue of free speech but the perpetuation of inequality (Mackinnon 92).

Dworkin (an ex-pornographic model and one-time prostitute) became synonymous with the anti-porn feminist movement in the seventies and eighties. Pornography, Dworkin

⁹⁷ See Dworkin’s Introduction to the second edition of *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (xiii-xl). See also *Woman Hating* for a sample of Dworkin’s early work. See Mackinnon’s essay “Equality and Speech” excerpted from her book *Only Words* (1993) and included in the collection *Prostitution and Pornography* edited by Jessica Spector.

⁹⁸ See *Inside Deep Throat* by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato for a collection of public appearances and interviews with Dworkin and Marchiano.

argues, is “a system of dominance and submission” (Dworkin, *Pornography* xxxviii).⁹⁹ More than theoretical violence toward women, pornography represents material, institutionalized violence according to Dworkin. “The man's ejaculation is real,” Dworkin writes; “The woman on whom his semen is spread . . . is real” (Dworkin, *Pornography* xxxviii). Dworkin literally views the fight against pornography as a matter of life and death. Pornography as characterized by Dworkin puts women’s lives at risk. Pornographic depictions, Dworkin argues, demean and de-humanize female participants and teach men to objectify and dominate women. Women who are complicit in pornography, according to Dworkin, have been acculturated by pervasive systems of male power (Dworkin, *Pornography* 203-224). For Dworkin even pornography without women (as is the case in gay male pornography) “incarnates male supremacy” (Dworkin, *Pornography* xxxviii). According to Dworkin, viewers of either gay or straight pornography derive pleasure “from the visual reminder of male superiority” (Dworkin, *Pornography* 45). On the one hand, Dworkin configures passive male partners in gay pornography as stand-ins for women. On the other, she sees the sheer absence of women in gay pornography as evidence of male supremacy (Dworkin, *Pornography* 44-45). The erect penis itself represents male power for Dworkin regardless of narrative and/or material contexts. Whether the scenario involves a mix of men and women, two or more men, or a single man—whether the penis is thrust into a vagina, a mouth, an anus, or a fist—pornographic depictions, Dworkin argues, stage patriarchal power over women (Dworkin, *Pornography* 23). Dworkin’s estimation of gay porn has been met with much criticism. However, before turning to Dworkin’s critics I want to briefly gloss feminist pro-porn stances.

⁹⁹ See the Andrea Dworkin online library at www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/ for biographical information on Dworkin.

Feminists who take a stance on pornography in opposition to Dworkin and Mackinnon represent a range of opinions. Some denounce pornography as a cheap or base product but do not seek censorship while others cautiously champion the genre as a source of political power. In “Freedom, Equality, Pornography” (2006), Joshua Cohen does not deny that some types of pornography depict and perpetrate violence against women. Rather, he takes issue with Mackinnon’s argument that the government should place restrictions on the types of speech that perpetuate inequality. For Cohen regulating speech on grounds of inequality becomes a slippery slope. Cohen is also reticent to draw strict lines between pornography and effect. He suggests that the burden of proof needed in order for pornography to be found guilty of the crimes for which it has been accused is too great. Cohen appeals to the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force (FACT) contending that alternate readings of pornographic texts cast reasonable doubt on legal culpability: “[pornography] serves some social functions which benefit women. . . . [I]t magnifies the misogyny present in the culture. . . . [T]he existence of pornography has served to flout conventional mores. . . . Pornography carries many messages other than woman-hating” (qtd. in Cohen 285). Rather than lobbying for changes in the law, Cohen advocates social activism that “attack[s] the injustice of inequality and subordination” (295).

Unlike Cohen, Luara Kipnis does not doubt the effects of pornography. However, neither does she side with Dworkin or Mackinnon. Rather, Kipnis situates herself on the opposite end of the spectrum. In “Desire and Disgust” (2006) Kipnis sketches a pro-porn defense of *Hustler* magazine arguing that the genre of porn distributed by *Hustler* offers a positively transgressive, empowering critique of mainstream discourse (Kipnis 311). Kipnis situates *Hustler* in opposition to more tasteful magazines like *Playboy* and *Penthouse*

contending that “*Hustler*’s quite Rabelaisian exaggeration of everything improper [...] can’t fail to raise certain political questions” regarding the body and systems of domination (Kipnis 317-319). Kipnis suggests that the type of low, sleazy, base pornography depicted in *Hustler* is less about the inequality of women and more about divisions of class (Kipnis 320-29). Kipnis admits that *Hustler* (and by association the genre of pornography sold in the magazine) is not without its political problems. She maintains, however, that “[t]reating images of staged sex or violence as equivalent to real sex or violence . . . will clearly restrict political expression and narrow the forms of political discourse” (Kipnis 335).

Preeminent gay porn historian Thomas Waugh represents a critical middle ground between anti-porn feminists and those queer scholars who more aggressively attack Dworkin’s assessment of gay pornography or offer a problematically utopian reading of gay porn. In the essay “Men’s Pornography” (originally published in 1985 but rewritten for the 1995 collection *Out in Culture*), Waugh provides detailed charts comparing gay and straight porn in terms of production, exhibition, consumption, depicted sexual practices, narrative formulae, ideological essences, and political contexts (Waugh 315-324). Waugh argues that the fight for gay rights has involved the reclamation of literal and metaphorical spaces within mainstream culture. Gay porn, according to Waugh, indexes and participates in the gay movement’s struggle for space. Waugh contends that gay rights movements began by reclaiming private space then by fighting for space located on the cultural fringe. Today, gay rights groups seek space within the mainstream public. “Our claim to our . . . pornography,” Waugh writes, “is part of all three” (313). Waugh also points out that gay male movements have sought a reclamation of space because that is what men acculturated by systems of patriarchy have come to expect as a birth-right. Women have historically

been denied similar rights and conditioned to accept limited access to mainstream publics (Waugh 313-314). While Waugh does not buy Dworkin's argument that penetrated or submissive male sexual partners stand in for women in gay porn, he does find that the industry "profits from and aspires to the institutionalized presence of patriarchal power built on the absence/silence of women, and is thus, complicit in the oppression of women" (Waugh 314). Narratives found in gay porn and the material conditions surrounding the production and distribution of gay pornography have been influenced by oppression and discrimination encountered during battles for queer space (Waugh 313). "Our pornography," Waugh concludes, "is shaped both by the oppression [we have encountered]. . . and by our conditioning as men in patriarchy" (Waugh 314).

While anti-porn critics see pornography and gay pornography as a hopelessly compromised transgressive performance practice that threatens the very fabric of equality and democracy, several pro-porn defenders also find pornography and gay pornography to be contentious. Neither Kohen, Kipnis, or Waugh fully endorses pornography. A number of queer porn scholars, however, view gay pornography in a more positive (if not problematically utopian) light that can be usefully applied to an analysis of Naughty Austin's *Making Porn*. Some write directly in response to Dworkin's assessment of gay porn while others offer optimistic readings of specific films, the genre, and/or the industry. In "Pornography" (2000) Leslie Green refers to Dworkin's argument against gay porn as the "honorary woman thesis" and suggests that it places gay sex within a heteronormative framework where "there is always someone who plays the role that patriarchal sexuality assigns to *women*, the role of receptivity, passivity, subordinate, etc" (Green 33). Julian Marlowe offers a similar critique of Dworkin's thesis. In "Thinking Outside the Box"

(2006) Marlowe finds that Dworkin “suggests that gay men strive to mimic heterosexuals when we have sex and that a man cannot be both sexually submissive . . . and masculine at the same time” (Marlowe 355-356).

While I too am frustrated with Dworkin’s reading of gay pornography, I find that Marlowe misses Dworkin’s larger point. Dworkin does not deny that men in gay porn can be simultaneously submissive and masculine. To the contrary she finds that men in gay porn even when taking a more passive role or switching between roles are always also referents of masculine power and patriarchal supremacy. While both Marlowe and Green are quick to find fault with Dworkin’s “Honorary Woman Thesis” they do not, in my mind, adequately rebut her reading of the erect male thrusting penis as always already a symbol of male dominance when presented within the contexts of patriarchal cultures. Peggy Phelan’s understanding of performance as a representational practice that never means exactly what it intends perhaps offers steadier grounds for refuting Dworkin’s claim. As I note in a previous chapter, performance for Phelan is characterized by excess. The erect male penis in performed pornography, which perhaps always signifies more than erotic desire, allows Dworkin to read the male penis as a symbol of patriarchy even in gay pornography. Dworkin’s interpretation, however, although well-founded, cannot account for all readings implied by the type of symbolic excess associated with the naked male body or erect penis in queer erotic pornographic performance as exemplified by the statement from the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force quoted above. Explicitly sexual depictions involving the gay male body can signify patriarchal power, on the one-hand, and are open to alternative readings, on the other. Exploring these divergent interpretations provides a context for

understanding the positively transgressive potential and critical limits of the type of queer erotic pornographic theatrical practice employed by Naughty Austin.

Many queer pro-gay porn scholars have offered different accounts of the naked sexualized male body in gay pornography that stand in opposition to Dworkin's. In the hugely influential essay "Male Gay Porn Coming to Terms" (1985), Richard Dyer argues that gay porn possesses the pedagogical potential to "reeducate desire" (Dyer). Explicitly sexual depictions in gay pornography can teach gay men about gay sex according to Dyer. While some videos offer less than ideal lessons, others provide an identity affirming view of gay male eroticism that contradicts messages gay men receive from mainstream media often portraying gay sex through a homophobic or heterosexist lens (Dyer, "Male"). Building on Dyer's argument, Leslie Green contends that gay pornography teaches men more specifically how to be "objects of male desire" (Green 48). According to Green, healthy sexual identities are characterized by an ability to desire and in turn be desired. Green argues that in patriarchal cultures men are taught to desire but are often unable to see themselves as objects of desire, whereas the opposite is true for women. "For some," Green writes, "objectivity [i.e., the ability to be desired] comes easily, subjectivity [i.e., the ability to desire] must be won. For others, including gay men, subjectivity is fairly secure; it is objectivity that feels precarious and fragile" (Green 48). While some gay pornographic depictions provide gay men with identity affirming lessons that show a balance of sexual subjectivity and objectivity, even a half hazard review of contemporary online gay pornography reveals a fallacy in Green's argument. The seemingly ever-increasing number of gay pornographic websites involving supposedly straight-identified non-professional performers who are paid to engage in erotic acts with and for gay men and gay male

spectators shows that not all gay pornographies (or even most gay pornographies) contribute to a reeducation of desire in the way Green imagines.¹⁰⁰ Like Green, John Burger in *One-Handed Histories: the Eroto-Politics of Gay Male Video Pornography* (1995) also picks up on Dyer's argument, praising gay pornography for its ability to validate gay sexualities and document "erotic trends" (Burger 21). However, more in line with Dyer than Green, Burger recognizes gay pornography's need "to evolve further, to become more political in more overt and aggressive ways" (Burger 86). Relying on commercialization to drive production, gay porn perhaps lacks the impetus to transcend the current market. Even a simple online search reveals that contemporary gay pornography has failed to provide an aggressively political and activist platform in the way Burger and Dyer hope. Although not without its own baggage, *Making Porn* fulfills Dyer and Burger's call for gay pornography to do more. In the following section I offer a reading of Naughty Austin's production of *Making Porn* that challenges general black and white assumptions made about the critical limits or utopian promise of a transgressive commercially-based market-driven queer pornographic erotic performance practice and interrogates Anthony Julius's assertion that "[c]apitalism has at last dissolved the opposition between system and transgression" (Julius 201).

¹⁰⁰ For an example of the type of abundant and easily available online gay pornographic genres utilizing such tropes see *Broke Straight Boys* at www.brokestraightboys.com, *Broke College Boys* at www.brokecollegeboys.com, *Nude Frat House* at www.nudefrathouse.com, *Nude Amateur Boys* at www.nudeamateurboys.com, and *Straight Fraternity* at www.straightfraternity.com.

3.5 Naughty or Nice?: The Critical Limits and Utopian Promise of a Market-Driven Queer Erotic Pornographic Performance Practice

“Gay porn makes straight porn seem like an everyday, Family Channel friend.” — Sam Mcabee

On the one hand, *Making Porn* profits from the exploitation of gay identity and erotic desire. On the other, it exhibits (like a symptom) the ties that gay identity already has to capitalist economies. In the influential essay “Capitalism and Gay Identity” (1993), John D’Emilio argues that homosexual identities emerged as a direct result of capitalism. Industrialization, according to D’Emilio, afforded the leisure time necessary for homosexuality to develop as an identity. Alexandra Chasin similarly contends in *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (2000) that gay identity is itself connected to capitalism and consumption. For Chasin it is primarily through the market that gay men solidify their identity and achieve entry into gay communities (Chasin 24).

Gay pornography and gay theatre can be viewed as one of many commodities gay men access to signify solidarity. As several theatre reviewers have noted, *Making Porn* is an insider text meant for a specifically gay demographic.¹⁰¹ While spectators do not have to be avid readers of gay porn in order to decipher the play, the script itself assumes that patrons arrive at the theatre already possessing a certain amount of fluency in gay pornography. As Sharif Mowlabocus argues in *Gay Men and the Pornification of Everyday Life* (2007), “[p]ornography is written into the code of gay men’s everyday lives” (61). The language of gay pornography has become the language of “‘metropolitan’ gay culture”¹⁰² (Mowlabocus

¹⁰¹ Responding to the 1998 production in Minneapolis, Mike Steele of the *Star Tribune* calls the play “a niche hit . . . a gay show directed at a gay audience.”

¹⁰² For Sharif Mowlabocus metropolitan “refers to the most stable, socially recognized, politically assimilated and economically productive expression of homosexuality in the West today” (62).

62). In a 1995 study of Tom of Finland's drawings, Nayland Blake finds that body types depicted in Finland's pornographic images are central to gay culture (Blake 344). John Mercer in "Homosexual Prototypes: Repetition and the Construction of the Generic in the Iconography of Gay Pornography" (2003) goes even further arguing that Finland's characters and subsequent evolutions have become a primary means through which gay men define themselves and their desires (Mercer 288). For better or worse the gay porn industry has been made a not-so-strange bedfellow to gay Identity and gay Community.

To be fluent in a gay subculture is to a certain extent to be fluent in commercial gay pornography—a maxim that was not lost on Yelavich or the Naughty Austin *Making Porn* production team. Although I was living in Austin throughout the run of the show, I did not attend the performance. At the time, I shared the sentiments of many theatre reviewers throughout the US who have dismissed *Making Porn* as prurient fluff. I became interested in *Making Porn* only after seeing the impact the Naughty Austin production had on local and regional gay communities. I have since acquired a videotape of the show and conducted interviews with Naughty Austin company members. I am also familiar with the circumstances (both cultural and economic) surrounding the run.

Naughty Austin's production of *Making Porn* (directed by Blake Yelavich) participated in a market of transgression, on the one hand, by employing commercial, exploitative conventions associated with the business of gay porn and, on the other, staged present day/historical tensions surrounding the gay pornographic industry. Commercial gay porn performers Ryan Idol and Chris Steele shared top billing in Naughty Austin's *Making*

Porn.¹⁰³ On the Naughty Austin website Yelavich writes: “Don't ask us HOW we did it. . . . TWO of the biggest names in the industry were paired for this superstar comedy! LIVE AND IN PERSON!” (“*Making Porn*”).¹⁰⁴ Throughout the run of Naughty Austin’s *Making Porn*, Idol and Steele participated in frequent public appearances to help promote the show and increase ticket sales. During public appearances and onstage in the Naughty Austin production Idol and Steele drew on their real life porn personas to sell *Making Porn*. Within the commercial gay porn industry Idol identifies as a heterosexual “gay-for-pay” porn star, whereas Steele is known as a muscular, leather daddy type.¹⁰⁵ Naughty Austin’s *Making Porn* poster featuring Steele wearing boots and chains (fig. 4) draws on iconography associated with the leather daddy character. In a blurb announcing the Naughty Austin performance of *Making Porn* published in *EXPOSÉ Austin*, Steele admits to “playing a part similar to the fantasy of Chris Steele” and Yelavich notes that “the guys will offer plenty of eye candy” (qtd. in Crabtree, “‘*Making Porn*’ Coming”).

Naughty Austin’s production of *Making Porn* held true to Yelavich’s promise of flesh. Idol, Steele, and other *Making Porn* cast members frequently paraded about the stage naked or nearly naked while engaging in real acts of masturbation and simulated sex. In a

¹⁰³ For information on Naughty Austin’s production of *Making Porn* see the following reviews: “Theatre Going” (*InSite Austin Magazine*, 2002) by Sandra Beckmeir, “‘*Making Porn*’ Offers Stellar Comedy Drama Lubed with Stars, Taboo Nudity and Life Twists” (*Ambush Magazine*, 2002) by Eric Crabtree and “*Making Porn*: Good Cop, Bad Cop” (*Austin Chronicle*, 2002) by Rob Curran.

¹⁰⁴ See www.naughtyaustin.com/MakingPorn/Making.html.

¹⁰⁵ For information on Chris Steele see Steele’s biography on the blog *Al’s Gay Porn Stars* at www.alsgaypornstars.com/csteele.html (“Gay Porn Star Chris Steele”). See also Chris Steele’s personal commercial gay porn website at www.chris-steele.com. For information on Ryan Idol’s commercial gay porn career see Richard Dyer’s essay “Idol Thoughts: Orgasm and Self-Reflexivity in Gay Pornography” (1994). See also www.ryanidol.com.



Figure 4. Poster for Naughty Austin's Production of *Making Porn* featuring Chris Steele (*Making Porn* Poster). Image provided by and printed with permission from Blake Yelavich (see Appendix A).

review of the production published in *Ambush Magazine*, Eric Crabtree confirms that “Ryan, Chris, and Jody [the Naughty Austin company member who played the wanna-be porn star character Ricky] are either partially nude or shown in full frontal nudity” (Crabtree, “‘*Making Porn*’ Offers”). Crabtree goes on to write that the “great nudity scenes are given to . . . Chris Steele as he is ‘hard’” (Crabtree, “‘*Making Porn*’ Offers”). In a moment in the play referred to as “Ray’s Jack Off Show” the character Ray (portrayed by Steele in the Naughty Austin production) “removes his robe, . . . face[s] upstage and begins to jack off” (Larsen and Yelavich 10). According to Naughty Austin company member and *Making Porn* performer Bryan Schneider, it was not uncommon for Steele to ignore the stage directions provided in the script and turn downstage during the scene allowing audiences to glimpse his erect penis as a testament of arousal (Schneider).

Although Naughty Austin’s *Making Porn* engaged in transgressive, exploitative practices associated with gay pornography, the production also staged tensions surrounding the industry. To be certain, Yelavich did not render the business of gay pornography in *Making Porn* through rose-colored glasses. Rather, as Eric Crabtree writes, Naughty Austin offered audiences a “foray into that dark edgy side of porn” (Crabtree, “‘*Making Porn*’ Offers”). In the script the character Arthur Mack, (the gay porn producer and director of the fictional film-within-the- play *Cops*) serves as a symbol of gay porn’s underbelly. Throughout *Making Porn* Arthur openly and repeatedly exploits the gay porn performers in *Cops* for fame and profit without remorse. He refuses to pay the adult film actors reasonable salaries and tricks them into signing contracts that deny them power over the distribution and circulation of their images. In the second act spectators are made explicitly aware of Arthur’s lack of concern for the actors as he tries to convince them to perform “bare-back”

(i.e., without a condom) even in the face of AIDS. In the Naughty Austin production Arthur represented the epitome of patriarchal power and abuse. Local actor Greg Kelly portrayed the character as a butch, testosterone-overdosed military man whom local theatre reviewer Rob Curran notes only “speaks in the form of orders” (Curran). In the *InSite Austin Magazine* review of the play, Sandra Beckmeir describes Mack as a “greed-driven director” and goes on to write that she often found the action surrounding the abuse of porn stars and the exploitative nature of the industry “too compelling” to see humor in the performance (Beckmeir, “Theatre”). Curran was similarly struck by the darker elements in the Naughty Austin performance. Curran left the theatre pondering the debate that characterizes the development and operation of gay porn as both a money-making endeavor and an artistic expression of queer freedom/power: “Is pornography . . . [a] shocking and courageous route for creative people? Or is it . . . a trap laid by cruel mercenaries like Arthur for aspiring artists?” (Curran).

Naughty Austin’s production of *Making Porn* tempered exploitative performance practices with critical questions regarding the ethical dimensions of the gay porn industry. Yelavich used gay porn performers, nudity, and erotic staging to sell tickets and titillate spectators and then left patrons with questions regarding the moral implications of pornography as a business. And although Yelavich’s choice allowed Naughty Austin to defend *Making Porn* as something more than prurient fluff, it does not offer evidence that *Making Porn* served a positively transgressive political and identity affirming function. While I cannot be certain that it was explicitly Yelavich’s intent, within local and regional contexts Naughty Austin’s production of *Making Porn* did more than inspire audiences to

take a critical look at the material circumstances surrounding the gay porn industry.¹⁰⁶ By relying on the rhetorical and authenticating conventions of commercial gay pornography and the technologies of theatre Naughty Austin's rendition of *Making Porn* highlighted the ways in which bodies serve as sites of knowledge involved in the construction and deconstruction of identity and provided a springboard for collective action within the city of Austin.

Like the genre upon which the play is based, Naughty Austin's *Making Porn* facilitated what Richard Dyer refers to as the reeducation of desire. As I have previously noted, Dyer argues that gay male pornographic depictions of an explicitly sexual nature can teach gay men about gay sex. Through the presentation of real and simulated acts of gay sex, Naughty Austin's *Making Porn* served a similar pedagogical function. In "Idol Thoughts: Orgasm and Self-Reflexivity in Gay Pornography" (1994) Dyer goes on to propose that "what makes watching a porn video exciting is the fact that you are watching some people making a porn video." Dyer argues that pornography is essentially not about fictitious characters having sex but about "well-known professional sex performers . . . on a set with cameras and crew around them" (Dyer, "Idol" 49-50). Watching real people engage in sexual practices—experimenting with sexual roles, sexuality, and erotic desire—supersedes the rhetorical conventions of performance that fictionalize pornography, becoming for Dyer in and of itself a source of spectatorial pleasure. By casting Ryan Idol and Chris Steele in lead roles, Yelavich's staging of *Making Porn* was similarly less about watching the characters in the play and more about watching familiar naked bodies engage

¹⁰⁶ In the *InSite Austin Magazine* review of *Making Porn*, Sarah Beckmeir reports that Yelavich's intent in producing *Making Porn* was to help legitimize "adult Off-Broadway comedies" in the Texas State Capitol: "We hoped this show would put up one more step toward a legitimacy of theater in this town. Albeit a certain KIND of theater, but popular theater just the same" (qtd. in Beckmeir, "Theatre").

in live pornographic activities onstage. The Naughty Austin production of *Making Porn* was perhaps moreover uniquely poised pedagogically because it removed some of the cinematic obstacles that normally separate spectator from performer in filmed pornography. In commercially produced gay porn movies multiple takes, camera angles, and editing can mask queer desire and stand in for an actor's inability to convincingly convey erotic excitement. Steele and Idol had to perform sans camera in the Austin production of *Making Porn*, relying solely on their bodies and physical abilities to produce same-sex erotic narratives. Although Yealvich cast Steele and Idol as a way to help legitimize "adult Off-Broadway comedies" in the Texas State Capitol (qtd. in Beckmeir, "Theatre"), such a choice also served to elevate the critical and pedagogical functions of *Making Porn*.

Steele's performance in particular demonstrated an acute awareness of the conventions and pedagogical implications of theatre and pornography. As Steele himself admitted, he consciously drew on the porn fantasy of Chris Steele in his portrayal of Ray, the veteran, burnt-out porn star (Crabtree, "'*Making Porn*' Coming"). With the exception of Ray, there was no difference between the way the characters in Naughty Austin's *Making Porn* acted on or off the fictional film set. For the most part, their mannerisms remained consistent throughout the piece whether or not they were interacting with other characters on a day-to-day basis or shooting scenes for the fictional porn film *Cops*. In contrast, Ray (played by Steele) switched codes— alternating between a higher pitched voice and more effeminate gestures when he was off film and a deeper register and purposefully hyper-masculine mannerisms when he was in front of the fictional camera. At once, Steele's performance signified that pornography and the sexual identities promulgated by gay porn

are rooted in fiction and fantasy.¹⁰⁷ Steele's choices also pointed to the performative nature of pornography, erotic desire, and sexuality. Moreover, Steele's characterization highlighted the role performance plays in the construction of identity and, perhaps most importantly, reflected the ways in which gay men have historically used performance to navigate culturally constructed standards of gender to pass as "straight" or subvert heteronormative notions of masculinity.

Although character and acting were especially employed effectively in *Making Porn*, the Naughty Austin production further took advantage of the technologies of live performance by offering spectators multiple and prolonged opportunities for interacting with sexually explicit texts in ways pornographic films cannot. While public appearances featuring Idol and Steele were explicitly scheduled to promote the Naughty Austin production, they also allowed gay-identified Austinites an opportunity to engage in sexual narratives outside the confines of the theater walls free of charge. At book and video signings fans acted with exuberance upon meeting Steele and Idol (Schneider). Both welcomed photos and posed with members of Austin's gay community (fig. 5). Idol and Steele also took part in Austin's first gay pride parade (fig. 6). While these types of fan/star interactions are not uncommon in the film industry, they do not regularly occur within the contexts of community-based theatre. On the one hand, they served to further situate *Making Porn* within commercial conventions. On the other, they offered members of

¹⁰⁷ In the world of gay pornography and gay subculture there exist a continuum of identity sub categories that further signify beyond same sex desire one's erotic preferences: "bottom" (i.e., the penetrated partner during anal sex), top, (i.e., the penetrating partner), "switch" (ie., versatile top and bottom), "trade" or "gay for pay" (straight identified man who engages in sexual activity with gay identified men), "power bottom" (aggressive bottom), etc. See *The New Joy of Gay Sex* (1993) by Charles Silverstein and Felice Picano for a glossary of terms relevant to gay men.



Figure 5. Photo taken at a public appearance to promote Naughty Austin's production of *Making Porn* featuring Chris Steele and an anonymous fan. Image provided by and printed with permission from Blake Yelavich (see Appendix A) and archived on the Naughty Austin website ("Making Porn").



Figure 6. The cast of Naughty Austin in Austin's first gay pride parade. Image provided by and printed with permission from Blake Yelavich (see Appendix A) and archived on the Naughty Austin website ("Pride Parade Pictures!").

Austin's gay community an opportunity to interact more intimately with erotic fantasies and sexual narratives. Idol and Steele's guest appearance in Austin's gay pride parade also provided a springboard for collective action within the city of Austin. Their participation brought national attention to and increased involvement in what was an activist oriented, grass-roots event that stood in opposition to some of the larger, more commercial gay pride celebrations in Houston and elsewhere throughout the US.

While gay men have garnered an unprecedented level of visibility in the US within the last two decades, depictions of gay, lesbian, and queer sexual desire and sexual activity have largely remained taboo in popular culture. Naughty Austin transgressed social norms by placing the naked sexualized gay male body center stage in *Making Porn*. In "The Theatre of Sexual Initiation" (1992) John Preston argues that the public display of all male sexual/erotic activity is necessary to the health of gay culture and gay sexual identity. Public sexual performances, according to Preston, serve as a "coming out" ritual within gay communities (Preston 325). More than "exhibitionism or voyeurism," publicly witnessing and performing gay sexual activity affirms gay male sexual desire (Preston 324). Through explicitly sexual public performances, gay men embody a coming out narrative in celebration of a gay erotic identity. Gay-identified individuals also lay claim to public space through the public performance of sex.¹⁰⁸

If Phelan's understanding of the ontology of performance provides space for a reading of the erect penis in *Making Porn* and other genres of performed gay pornography that is more positive than Dworkin's, then Joseph Roach's concept of performance as an act of surrogation grounded in deficiency perhaps gestures toward the limits of a hopeful or

¹⁰⁸ My thinking is influenced by Waugh's argument that gay pornography participates in the reclamation of social space (Waugh 313).

utopic interpretation.¹⁰⁹ As I noted in a previous chapter performance for Roach never fully represents what it seeks to embody. As such, performed gay pornography offers an incomplete—if not inadequate—affirmation of gay male eroticism. Although relying on the physical and biological functions of sexual arousal and ejaculation to establish an illusion of erotic desire, gay pornographic performance utilizes rhetorical conventions of aesthetic performance (both symbolic time and place) fictionalizing to lesser and greater extents a gay erotic identity that reductively revolves around physical sexual gratification and perhaps even exploitation. Viewed within the contexts of a market transgression, the erect penis in gay pornography—less a symbol of patriarchal power or queer erotic affirmation—is literally reduced to nothing more or less than a commodity. And while contemporary gay pornography has for the most part failed to resist commodification, Naughty Austin's production of *Making Porn* reveals both the possibilities and impossibilities of a transgressive commercially-based, market-driven queer erotic pornographic performance practice.

Commercial pornography represents a type of public sexual performance that has positively and negatively influenced the way North American gay men view themselves within erotic, social, and historical contexts. Steeped in a capitalist market, gay pornography produces and reflects a gay subcultural identity that is problematically affirmative at best and democratically destructive or violently oppressive at worst. Naughty Austin's *Making Porn* achieved legibility through the gay pornographic market in a way that both countered and reproduced normalizing discourses and discourses of domination in local and regional culture, suggesting that the relationship between transgression and capitalism is

¹⁰⁹ See *Cities of the Dead* (1996) by Joseph Roach for an explanation of surrogation.

not as cut and dried as Anthony Julius imagines in his 2002 study *Transgressions: The Offenses of Art* (201). In “Practicing Cultural Disruption” (1992), Jill Dolan argues that the aesthetic representation of gay and lesbian sexual activity “is the most transgressive act at this historical moment” and the surest path to cultural disruption (Dolan, “Practicing” 272). For Dolan the aesthetic exhibition of queer sex acts configures queer identity less as a state of being (i.e., I *am* gay) and more as a series of disparate erotic practices (i.e., I *do* gay, I act on gay desires, or I have gay sex)—going a long way to resist commodification (Dolan, “Practicing” 266-67).

Although gay men have achieved greater visibility in contemporary and popular culture, the public display of gay male pornography and gay male sexual activity continues to decline, attesting perhaps to the ultimate power of the capitalist market to foster that which feeds it and filter that which doesn't. *Making Porn* in general allows spectators an opportunity to interact with other spectators who, like themselves, view male nudity in performance not as a punch line as Andy Cobb suggests in his interview with Ada Calhoun but as a source of queer affirmation. Naughty Austin's production of *Making Porn* ultimately served a positively transgressive function in local and regional culture by affirming gay identity less as a state of being and more as the practice of queer erotic desire. Relying, then, on explicitly commercial conventions associated with a gay pornographic market of transgression, the Naughty Austin performances disrupted local and regional culture by creating greater space within Austin for the expression of gay erotic identities rooted in dissident sexual practices. As Waugh cautions, however, the material, psychic, and symbolic domains to which gay men seek access perpetuate and profit from the disenfranchisement of women. Gay niche theatre in general and Naughty Austin's

production of *Making Porn* more specifically cuts both ways—advancing political possibilities of gay men while simultaneously profiting from the exclusion of other minority groups. And while I have pointed toward the ways in which the critical limits or utopian promise of a transgressive queer erotic performance practice promotes and contradicts an ethics of tolerance and inclusiveness, a more thorough consideration of the ethical implications of transgression has been beyond the scope of this chapter. Following, I look to performances staged in Baton Rouge post-Hurricane Katrina to more formally explore relationships between transgressive theatrical practices, ethics, and impact.

Chapter 4. An Ethics of Transgression: Swine Palace Productions, Hurricane Katrina, and Nontraditional Casting

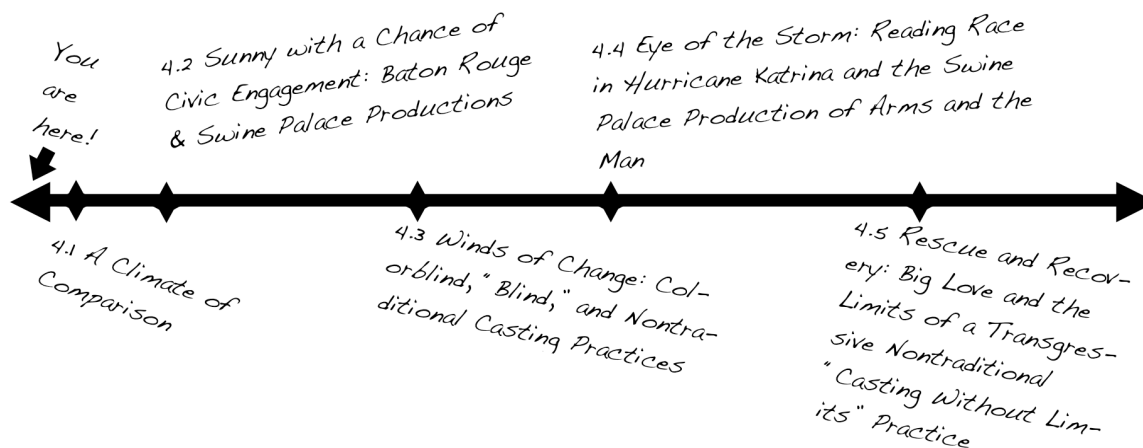


Figure 4. Schematic Diagram: Chapter 4

4.1 A Climate of Comparison

"Until justice is blind to color, until education is unaware of race, until opportunity is unconcerned with the color of men's skins, emancipation will be a proclamation but not a fact." — Lyndon B. Johnson

In previous chapters I have surveyed extant and defunct theatre companies located in Austin to explore the (im)possibilities of transgressive theatrical practices. I looked to Frontera to understand how radical-rebel alternative theatre's transgressive critique of "normalcy" can in fact strengthen regimes of the normal in local and regional culture. I considered Naughty Austin to underscore the ways in which commercial exploitative queer erotic pornographic performance practices might also serve a positively transgressive, political and identity-affirming function locally and regionally. Now I turn to transgression as it plays out in Baton Rouge's only equity theatre company, Swine Palace. To frame this discussion I want to juxtapose two currently recent but very different publications. The first

is an essay by Richard Schechner included in the November 2010 issue of *American Theatre* which hails the potentials of nontraditional casting.¹¹⁰ The other is a study of Old South Baton Rouge (a historically African American neighborhood in Baton Rouge) written by Peter Munro Hendry and Jay D. Edwards and printed by the University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press in 2009. Topics of race play a significant role in both Schechner's essay and Hendry and Edwards's monograph. In "Casting Without Limits" (*American Theatre*, 2010) Schechner places racial identity alongside other identity categories (e.g., gender, sexuality, age, etc.) to argue for an approach to casting that can serve as a new type of transgressive performance practice. In *Old South Baton Rouge: The Roots of Hope* Hendry and Edwards focus on the social and material conditions that define and construct racial identity—specifically African American and Creolized identities in Baton Rouge—to promote tolerance and inclusivity within local and regional culture.

Although Schechner's argument is best understood in relation to ongoing discourses regarding the politics of nontraditional casting (the history of which I will unpack more thoroughly in this chapter), in short, he asks theatre practitioners to consider the possibilities of "blind" casting. "[B]ind casting' would be a new kind of avant-garde," according to Schechner, where an actor's gender, race, age, body type, ethnicity, and sexuality would not factor into the assignment of roles (26-28). Throughout the essay Schechner cites historical instances of cross-gender performance, focuses on critical arguments for and against cross-gender casting, and rails against the conventions of realism that currently render cross-

¹¹⁰ Although "Casting Without Limits" appeared in the November 2010 issue of *American Theatre*, Schechner is no stranger to the topic of nontraditional casting. His contributions to debates regarding the ethical implications of "blind" and colorblind casting span several decades. See "Race Free, Gender Free, Body-Type Free, Age Free Casting" published in the spring 1989 issue of *TDR* for an earlier articulation of the arguments Schechner presents in "Casting Without Limits."

gender portrayals of characters difficult to imagine. While his underlying purpose is to “advocat[e] . . . for women to perform in any and all kinds of roles,” Schechner hopes his platform will more generally encourage spectators to see the ways in which “gender, race, age and body type” are made legible through performance and derive meaning from socio-historical circumstances (30). Hendry and Edward’s also see identity—specifically racial identity—through a lens of history. However, *Old South Baton Rouge: The Roots of Hope* finds race to be the primary historical factor in the construction of identity in Baton Rouge and South Louisiana (Hendry and Edwards 8). Hendry and Edwards do not use the language of performance to describe racial identity. Rather, they argue that racial identity in Baton Rouge and South Louisiana has been made legible through and derives meaning from culture and community. Hendry and Edwards see both culture and community as social constructions yet lament the lack of studies focused on African American cultures and communities in Louisiana outside of New Orleans (1-9). *Old South Baton Rouge* argues that the role African American culture has played in the history of Baton Rouge and the formation of a larger Baton Rouge identity has been largely ignored in regional political and civic discourse and overlooked by cultural studies scholars locally and nationally (1-22). Whereas Schechner promotes across-the-board “blind” casting, Hendry and Edwards suggest that a critique of culture and community in Louisiana and Baton Rouge cannot turn a blind eye to race if it is to claim historical integrity and promote tolerance and inclusiveness by participating in the advancement of local and regional rights for disenfranchised groups. While there have been a number of popular and scholarly publications post-Katrina that take a critical look at factors of race in South Louisiana, those too primarily focus on New Orleans. “No legacy of scholarship,” Hendry and Edwards

write, “stands for what in the post-Katrina era has become the largest city in the State—Baton Rouge” (1).

Baton Rouge and Louisiana State University played a central role in post-Katrina rescue and recovery operations in Louisiana. The number of displaced African Americans that sought refuge in Baton Rouge and at Louisiana State University following Hurricane Katrina highlighted historical/present day racial tensions that plague Louisiana’s capital city—putting notions of tolerance and inclusiveness to the test. The Louisiana State University Department of Theatre and Swine Palace (the professional repertory theatre company associated with LSU) offered audiences a platform for considering the tragedy surrounding Katrina through productions centered on themes of refuge that spoke to the refugee/host experience in Baton Rouge. Transgressive nontraditional casting practices employed in post-Katrina stagings of *Arms and the Man* by George Bernard Shaw and *Big Love* by Charles Mee situated performances squarely within the contexts of discourses on race, tolerance, and inclusiveness. In this chapter I focus on Swine Palace in general and two of the performances that took place in Baton Rouge at Louisiana State University immediately following the hurricane—*Arms and the Man* and *Big Love*—to investigate how transgressive nontraditional casting practices facilitate and fail an ethics of tolerance and inclusiveness within local and regional culture. I begin by providing an overview of Baton Rouge and theatre at LSU before Katrina to contend that Swine Palace served an important pedagogical and civic function within Louisiana’s capital city through transgressive theatrical practices that included nontraditional casting which opened dialogues centered on issues of ideology, inclusivity, and tolerance within local and regional contexts. Following, I move on to a history of debates surrounding transgressive practices of nontraditional

casting to argue that the “casting without limits” approach Schechner advocates differs from other types of “blind” casting as it seeks to defamiliarize or even queer identity through a pointed resistance to realism. Next, I consider the effects Katrina had on LSU and the Swine Palace 2005-2006 season as well as local and personal responses to the crises which surrounded the storm to point out that within the racial environment of post-Katrina Baton Rouge the type of transgressive nontraditional colorblind casting practice employed alongside conventions of realism in the Swine Palace production of *Arms and Man* aligned themes of refuge already prevalent in the script with overly simplistic discourse on race perpetuated by the mass media following the storm—demonstrating the embarrassing results of pretending spectators are race-blind when they clearly aren’t. Finally, I look to *Big Love* to challenge the critical limits of a transgressive “casting without limits” practice and (re)consider Foucault’s assertion that transgression “must be detached from its questionable association to ethics” (446).

Part 4.2 Sunny with a Chance of Civic Engagement: Baton Rouge and Swine Palace Productions

“Busted flat in Baton Rouge, waitin’ fer a train,
When I’s feelin’ near as faded as my jeans”— Performed by Janis Joplin

While Baton Rouge serves as Louisiana’s capital city, it has historically been overshadowed by its downstream neighbor—New Orleans.¹¹¹ Hendry and Edwards find that “the popular image of Baton Rouge has been that of a utilitarian and rather pedestrian working capital city, a university town, a petrochemical center, [and] a place . . . with more

¹¹¹ See “Flash!; N.O. Discovers Culture Beyond its City Limits” (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge 1994) written by Anne Price for a look at the Baton Rouge/New Orleans rivalry and an overview of arts and cultural opportunities in Baton Rouge during the nineties.

sprawl than center” (1). Although I was only slightly aware of it at the time of my arrival in the summer of 2004, a number of civic- and community-based organizations were actively working to change the city’s reputation. As I noted in a previous chapter, Baton Rouge sent the “Austin 6” to Austin in 2003 to bring back plans for raising Baton Rouge’s prestige as a progressive cultural hub. Sponsored by the Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce, the research trip was meant to explore reasons why Austin’s image was one of “speed and attitude,” whereas Baton Rouge was considered “stagnant” (A6). Efforts to invigorate Baton Rouge’s cultural standing in the state began long before the new millennium, however.¹¹² In line with trends across the US, civic and independent organizations in Baton Rouge were researching ways to increase the city’s cultural capital throughout the late twentieth century.¹¹³ In 1993 then Baton Rouge Mayor Tom Ed McHugh formed a committee composed of 32 leaders to take stock of Baton Rouge’s cultural assets (Create Baton Rouge 1). The committee launched the Community Cultural Initiative (CCI), “an independent community project developed in partnership with the East Baton Rouge Parish, The Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge, and The National Endowment for the Arts,” in May of 1995 (Create Baton Rouge 1). Quantitative and qualitative studies CCI conducted over a 14-month period found that Baton Rouge did not “offer cultural opportunities equally to all segments of the population” (Create Baton Rouge

¹¹² See “Capital City is States’ Cultural Center” printed in the “Promotions” section of *The Advocate* in 1994 for an example of the ways in which Baton Rouge tried to rebrand itself as the epicenter of arts and culture in Louisiana at the end of the twentieth century.

¹¹³ In *Cultural Planning: An Urban Renaissance?* Graeme Evans argues that post-industrialism and increased globalization led many cities in the late twentieth century to expand and promote cultural industries in order to generate economic growth and increase media attention (1-3). Even cities that had not previously been considered cultural hot spots began “to transform their image and appeal and thereby qualify as *cultural capitals* for the first time” (3).

45). In 1996 CCI unveiled *Create Baton Rouge*—a five-year plan for increasing the diversity and creative potential for arts and cultural development in the Greater Baton Rouge Area. *Create Baton Rouge* pointed to Swine Palace as a model theatre and performing arts organization in the region (qtd. in Community Cultural Initiative 48).¹¹⁴

Founded in 1992 by then Artistic Director Barry Kyle, Swine Palace began as an independent not-for-profit professional Equity repertory theatre company in residence at Louisiana State University.¹¹⁵ Kyle, a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), modeled Swine Palace on RSC but “with a distinctive Louisiana twist” (qtd. in Price, “Kushner”). Throughout his tenure as Artistic Director, Kyle insisted that Swine Palace engage in a notion of local and regional community.¹¹⁶ By staging classics with a specifically Louisiana flavor; by adapting and developing new plays by Louisiana-based authors; by organizing statewide tours of Swine Palace productions; and by employing a mix of nationally renowned professionals, local talent, and LSU theatre students, Kyle created a “place-based” theatre rooted in South Louisiana. In “How Theatre Saved America, Part 1”

¹¹⁴ Other than Swine Palace, *Create Baton Rouge* lists four theatre companies in operation in Baton Rouge at the time of publication: Baton Rouge Little Theatre, Cabaret Theatre, Community Chorus and Playhouse, and Playmakers (9). When my partner Derek and I relocated to Baton Rouge in 2004 only Baton Rouge Little Theatre (www.brllt.org), Playmakers (www.playmakers.net) and Swine Palace (www.swinepalace.org) were still in existence. The Hopkins Black Box (www.lsu.edu/hbb), a venue programmed and managed by the Communication Studies Performance Studies Area at LSU, was most notably left off the *Create Baton Rouge* roster.

¹¹⁵ For a History of Swine Palace see the Swine Palace website at www.swinepalace.org. See also “Swine Palace: Public Support Needed for Professional Equity Theater to Continue to Make Gains” (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 1995) by Anne Price. For a list of past Swine Palace performances see the LSU Theatre Department website at www.theatre.lsu.edu/Productions/SPHistory.html.

¹¹⁶ See “Almost Home: Swine Palace Productions Opening Another Season as Construction of Reilly Theatre Approaches” (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 1997) and “Kushner Work, Gambling Piece on Swine Palace Fall Season” (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 1997) by Anne Price for a discussion of Kyle’s goals and intentions for Swine Palace’s development.

(*American Theatre*, 2008) Theresa Eyring (the current Executive Director of Theatre Communications Group—the national service organization for American theatre) argues that place-based theatres differentiate themselves from other producing organization through work with local artists and in their service to local communities (Eyring 8). Kyle’s move to mark Baton Rouge—a city which has historically been viewed as a rather pedestrian, petrochemical, industrial center—as a place where theatre not only matters but can participate in local, regional, and community discourse was in and of itself a transgressive maneuver. As Anne Price notes in “Flash!; N.O. Discovers Culture Beyond Its City Limits” (Baton Rouge, *The Advocate*, 1994), the very existence of Swine Palace in Baton Rouge and the then burgeoning company’s success came as a shock to the capital city’s downstream neighbor New Orleans. Swine Palace’s original productions and re-envisioned classics did not only garner regional attention, however. The mix of a highbrow RSC impetus with a lowbrow, popular regional agricultural twist signified prominently by the *Swine* namesake quickly sparked national interest.¹¹⁷ Five years after Swine Place’s inauguration, Kyle made plans to offer a staging of Louisianan-native Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* with Kushner in attendance and began work on an original musical that would detail the history and controversies surrounding the legal status, economic pros and cons, and cultural significance of gambling in South Louisiana (Price, “Almost”; Price, “Kushner”). Kyle’s popular, regionally-minded lowbrow-blended-with-highbrow brand of transgression extended beyond show selection, however. In the spring of 2000 Swine Palace secured a performance venue that would further signify and facilitate transgression.

¹¹⁷ See “Swine Palace Receiving National Attention” (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 1995) by Anne Price.

Initially, Swine Palace performed productions on the LSU Theatre Department's main Shaver Theatre stage (Price, "Swine Palace Receiving"). In its eighth year, however, Swine Palace moved into one of the "original 21 buildings on campus," a livestock judging pavilion that sits in the shadows of Tiger Stadium. Renamed the Reilly Theatre in honor of an \$800,000 donation made by the children of Dede and Kevin Reilly to help fund much needed renovations ("\$800,000 Pledged"), the historic building was turned into a warehouse performance venue with 500 seats, a 110 foot by 65 foot flexible stage, and state of the art sound and lighting equipment (Kimbrough 157). Although significant changes were made to the facility, plans were "designed to maintain the architectural integrity of its earthy origins as one of the oldest buildings on LSU's campus" ("History, Mission, Vision"). Maintaining the architectural integrity of the livestock judging pavilion's agricultural past allowed the Reilly Theatre to echo the transgressive lowbrow-highbrow blended vision Kyle had for Swine Palace. Moreover, the preservation of the expansive barnlike space and large stage floor that was characteristic of the facility's historical function permitted a number of transgressive nonrealistic and nontraditional approaches to staging which I will address in more detail in following discussions of Swine Palace's production of *The Laramie Project* (2004) by Moisés Kaufman and The LSU Theatre Department's post-Katrina performance of *Big Love* (2005) by Charles Mee—both of which were directed by founding SITI company member, Leon Ingulsrud.¹¹⁸

In December 2000 (approximately one year after the Reilly Theatre opened its doors to the public) Kyle was asked to resign as artistic director due to financial struggles that required LSU to restructure relationships between Swine Palace and the Department of

¹¹⁸ For information regarding the SITI company see the SITI website at www.siti.org.

Theatre (Price, “Swine Palace’s”). Then newly hired Department of Theatre Chair Michael Tick was tasked by then College of Music and Performing Arts Dean Ron Ross with the job of “implementing a full and complete integration of LSU and Swine Palace . . . to assure the future of Swine Palace” (qtd. in Price “Swine Palace’s”). Following Kyle’s resignation, Tick stepped in as Executive Producer and Interim Artistic Director of Swine Palace Productions. Tick’s plans for the company included the hiring of “[f]our new staff members, a managing director, facilities coordinator, development coordinator, and marketing and public relations director . . . with LSU and Swine Palace sharing funds” (Price “Swine Palace’s”). While Swine Palace has undergone recent restructuring due to budget cuts and faculty vacancies, Kristin Sosnowsky, who joined the Swine Palace team in the summer of 2001, remains as Managing Director and at the time of this writing serves as Interim Department of Theatre Chair.¹¹⁹

Since its inception, Swine Palace has served an important pedagogical and civic function in Baton Rouge.¹²⁰ Although Swine Palace saw many changes in the new millennium—a new venue, additional staff members, and a revamped organizational structure—the company remained committed to its Baton Rouge and Louisiana roots. Its original mission and vision statement names Swine Palace “as a social change agent capable of galvanizing Louisianans around the notion of tolerance and inclusiveness” (“History,

¹¹⁹ See the LSU Theatre Department website at www.theatre.lsu.edu/Facultysosnowsky.html for information on Kristin Sosnowsky. See also “Sosnowsky, Judy Will Take New Posts with LSU Theatre, Swine Palace” written by LSU Media Relations (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 2010).

¹²⁰ Throughout the past decade Swine Palace has received local and regional awards not related to artistic merit but for community service and outreach efforts: the Louisiana Governor's Arts Award for Outstanding Large Arts Organization (2006) and a YWCA Racial Justice Award (2006) "given to an individual, organization or business for exceptional or creative contributions to the elimination of racism" (“History and Accomplishments”).

Mission, Vision”).¹²¹ Swine Palace’s most recent mission continues to be in line with its earlier goals, placing dual emphasis on “provid[ing] South Louisiana with high quality, professional productions of . . . plays exploring issues of social equity while also serving as a training ground for students in Louisiana State University's M.F.A. Professional Actor and Technical/Design Training Programs” (“Mission,” *Swine Palace*). As a professional “place-based” theatre, Swine Palace has historically catered to local communities and participated in regional discourse. As a training program, Swine Palace has also had to meet educational demands. The combined focus placed on education and community-minded productions has afforded Swine Palace a unique position within local and regional culture. Under the direction of Tick and Sosnowsky, however, Swine Palace focused less on staging classical and contemporary spectacles with a transgressive, highbrow-lowbrow blended regional popular Louisiana flair and more on providing performances that could serve as a platform for community discussion and educate spectators about social and political topics pertinent to South Louisiana. Although Tick noted in an interview with J.D. Ventura of the Baton Rouge *Advocate* in 2006 that Swine Palace could not afford “to do something more edgy . . . and risk driving off patrons” (qtd. in Ventura, “Building”), transgressive theatrical practices employed in Swine Palace productions have opened dialogues centered on issues of ideology, inclusivity, and tolerance within local and regional contexts.

The first Swine Palace season programmed by Tick included a production of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* that pushed the envelope of what Baton Rouge patrons expected from this classic US text by taking an aesthetically transgressive nontraditional approach to casting and staging. Directed by Leon Ingulsrud in the 2002 spring semester,

¹²¹ This version of the mission and vision statement, once published on the Swine Palace website, is no longer available.

Salesman—conceptualized in a post-9/11 climate as an epic American tragedy—utilized a forty-person chorus of salesmen performed by undergraduate theatre majors.¹²² Although Tick refused (perhaps rightly so) to claim any sort of uniformly “edgy” label for *Swine Palace* in his interview with Ventura, he praised Ingulsrud for his unique perspective on *Salesman* which utilized practices grounded in Suzuki training, gesture work, and Viewpoints technique (Price, “Director”).¹²³ As *Salesman* transpired prior to my arrival in Baton Rouge, I did not attend the production. However, two reviews of the performance agree that expressive nonrealistic movements and cross-gender and intergenerational casting confound expectations of traditional characterization—but that the convention works. In a review published in *Theatre Journal*, Andrew Kimbrough notices that the performers who played Willy and Linda “were similar in age to the rest of the cast” and that “the choice of casting women in the roles of Bernard and Charlie . . . illumined aspects of Miller’s subtext” (Kimbrough 157). Kimbrough goes on to argue that “Ingulsrud’s approach to staging . . . fostered a tangible sense of empathy for the characters” (Kimbrough 157). Local theatre critic Laurie Anderson’s review of *Salesman* (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 2002) confirms Kimbrough’s reading. Anderson writes that “Ingulsrud challenges his audience to suspend its disbelief time and again” (Anderson, “Innovative”). She continues, contending that the

¹²² See “Director Takes *Death* in Another Direction” (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 2002) by Anne Price, “Innovative ‘*Death of a Salesman*’” (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 2002) by Laurie Anderson, and “*Death of a Salesman*” (*Theatre Journal*, 2003) by Andrew Kimbrough for information regarding Ingulsrud’s staging of *Death of a Salesman*.

¹²³ *The Viewpoints Book* (2005) by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau identifies nine Viewpoints. Whereas the first four deal with principles of time (Tempo, Duration, Kinesthetic Response, and Repetition), the latter five deal with principles of space: Shape, Gesture, Architecture, Spatial Relationship, and Topography (Bogart and Landau 8-11). For information regarding Viewpoints and SITi Company training methods see also “SITI: Why We Train/ A Conversation Between Anne Bogart and the SITi Company” (2002) edited by Will Bond.

staging choices emphasized the feeling of “pain experienced by Loman and his family” (Anderson “Innovative”). Based on responses offered by Kimbrough and Anderson, it would not be dubious to assume that the transgressive, nontraditional assignment of roles in *Salesman* helped Ingulsrud highlight discourses related to both age and gender, which are central to themes found in Miller’s script. It is also not a stretch to argue that that expressive movements employed in blocking which transgressed conventions of poetic realism that privilege characters’ psychologies allowed spectators an opportunity to witness external manifestation of internal character struggles in a way that sparked personal/private considerations of themes found in *Salesman* related to gender, age, and the American Dream. Not until the following year would Swine Palace implement a type of outreach component that would provide space for spectators to publicly consider the implications of performance and, thus, secure a greater possibility for productions to achieve critical impact outside the theater walls.

In a socially and politically transgressive maneuver, Tick and Sosnowsky opened the 2002-2003 Swine Palace season in the fall semester with the company’s first all-African American production: *Fences* by August Wilson.¹²⁴ While *Fences* was well received, the production more importantly encouraged frank discussion of issues of racial inequality in Baton Rouge. Sosnowsky worked to emphasize resonances *Fences* might have for Baton Rouge audiences by organizing “three dialogues on race . . . during the run of the play” and working with a “community task force” to reach disenfranchised populations in the region

¹²⁴ See “Building Fences” (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 2002) by Anne Price and “Swine Palace’s ‘Fences’ Echoes Themes of Classic Salesman” (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge 2002) by Laurie Anderson for information about the production.

(Price, “Building”).¹²⁵ Audiences were encouraged to attend events that framed the production of *Fences* free of charge whether or not they had seen the performance (Price, “Building”). In an interview with Anne Price (a local arts reporter for *The Advocate*), Sosnowsky expressed her hopes that Swine Palace would continue to ground future shows in community outreach initiatives (qtd. in Price, “Building”). Swine Palace followed *Fences* with two other Wilson scripts staged in subsequent seasons: *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (2003) and *King Hedley II* (2007).¹²⁶ While performances of *Fences*, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, and *King Hedley* did not employ a type of nontraditional casting or staging similar to that which characterized Ingulsrud’s production of *Salesman*, the Wilson productions were socially and politically transgressive within local and regional contexts. In a city like Baton Rouge where there continues to be a lack of critical attention paid to issues of race but where race arguably serves as the primary factor in the construction of identity and community (Hendry and Edwards 1-9), the mere presentation of plays focused on racial identity transgressed social and political norms. Creating space for in-depth consideration and frank discussion of topics the Wilson performances raised increased the critical impact of transgression. In the 2003-2004 season following *Fences*, a politically, socially, and aesthetically transgressive performance of Moisés Kaufman’s *The Laramie Project* staged by Ingulsrud utilized the type of outreach component that framed performances of Wilson’s plays and magnified the impact of transgression to help Swine Palace fulfill its mission to

¹²⁵ The community task force was composed of individuals associated with LSU, the Chamber of Commerce, the YWCA, and local businesses (Price, “Building”).

¹²⁶ See “‘*Ma Rainey*’” (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 2003) by Anne Price, “Swine Palace Handles ‘*Ma Rainey*’ With Skill Respect” (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 2003) by Laurie Anderson, “Director Says *Hedley II* One of Wilson’s Best” (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 2007) by George Morris, and “‘*Hedley*’ a Beautiful Tragedy” (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 2007) by John Boyd for information regarding the two Swine Palace productions.

“galvaniz[e] Louisianans around the notion of tolerance and inclusiveness” (“History, Mission, Vision”).

Created in response to the events that occurred in Laramie, Wyoming leading to and following the death of Matthew Shepard in 1998, *The Laramie Project* (penned by Moisés Kaufman and the members of Tectonic Theatre Project in 2000) utilizes a docudrama or ethnographic framework.¹²⁷ As Kaufman describes in the introduction to the script, *The Laramie Project* resulted from more than 200 interviews conducted by members of Tectonic Theatre with Laramie residents throughout a year and a half period (Kaufman, *Laramie* viii). Kaufman and head writer Leigh Fandakowski then edited the material into a format wherein Tectonic performers portrayed themselves, other members of the Tectonic research team, and Laramie residents (Kaufman, *Laramie* vii). Following a series of workshops, *The Laramie Project* opened at The Ricketson Theatre in Denver on February 19, 2000, and then moved to The Union Square Theatre in New York City on May 18, 2000 (Kaufman, *Laramie* ix-x). Michael Janofsky in a *New York Times* review of the Tectonic production reminds audiences that *Laramie* is an aesthetic retelling of what the Tectonic actors learned and experienced when they visited the town and spoke with its residents (Janofsky, “A Death”). Since the Tectonic opening, a number of theatre organizations have tackled the play, including professional companies, university programs, and high school thespian clubs. In “A Play has a Second Life as a Stage for Discussion” (*New York Times*, 2002)

¹²⁷ For information regarding *The Laramie Project* see Allen Ellenzweig's review of *The Laramie Project* by Moisés Kaufman (*Gay and Lesbian Review*, 2000), Michael Janofsky's "Turning a Murder Case into a Theatrical Event" (*New York Times*, 2000), Kraus Krandall's "Reality TV Comes to the Stage" (*Lambda Book Report*, 2002), and Jesse McKinley's "Bringing the High Drama of Real Life to the Stage" (*New York Times*, 2004). See also, "Town in a Mirror" by Don Shewey and "Into the West" by Moisés Kaufman published in the May/June 2000 issue of *American Theatre*.

Don Shewey notes that *The Laramie Project* became the second most produced script in the US during the 2001-2002 season. Shewey contends that *Laramie's* ability to inspire dialogue and serve as a "catalyst" for community discussion accounts for much of its popularity (Shewey, "A Play").

The fact that the Swine Palace performers were twice removed from the characters they portrayed in *Laramie* posed problems for Ingulsrud, which he determined to solve by making the piece about Baton Rouge.¹²⁸ Ingulsrud did not literally set *Laramie* in Baton Rouge or Louisiana, however. Rather, he relied on transgressive nontraditional casting choices and an aesthetically transgressive antirealistic Brechtian approach to blocking grounded in gesture work, Suzuki training, and Viewpoints technique to remind Swine Palace audiences that the performers were not, themselves, the Tectonic interviewers or the *Laramie* interviewees but intermediaries—Baton Rouge residents, Louisiana State University students—relaying information Kaufman and the Tectonic team gathered. Staged in the round with audiences on all four sides, a painting of the state of Wyoming extending across the vast open Reilly floor with an abstracted city grid in one corner served to locate the play within the theatricalized *mise-en-scene* of *Laramie*. Yet, large rows of atrium-style windows stretching across the East and West walls of the venue, left bare, allowing glimpses of the late-setting summer sun, reminded audiences that the action unfolded in real time in Baton Rouge. Prior to the performance proper the cast of ten actors entered through the central vomitorium and encircled the perimeter of the stage. Standing outside the map each performer announced his/her actual name followed by a question or issue he/she found relative to *The Laramie Project*. Performer Tara McMullen asked, "Is it

¹²⁸ See "The Laramie Project" (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 2004) by Anne Price for information regarding Ingulsrud's approach to the production.

possible to love the sinner and hate the sin?" (qtd. in Ingulsrud, *Laramie*). After voicing personal concerns, the actors removed their shoes and tossed them onto the painted stage floor. By the time the first lines of the script were spoken, the map contained ten pairs of shoes which remained throughout the performance.

The shoe gesture, central to Ingulsrud's concept of *Laramie*, further localized the narrative of the piece. On the one hand, the ritual removal of shoes conjured personal, emotional responses—invoking foreign customs, images of travel, and a manner of respect. On the other, it served a more practical purpose. Once barefoot the Swine Palace actors could channel the many voices—Tectonic and townsfolk—that inhabit the play regardless of incongruities in age, gender, and skin color between the actors and the characters. Seeing the physical shoes also provided a constant reminder that performers could not entirely relinquish their own subjectivity. The questions they brought to the piece before beginning the play proper hung in the air just as the shoes littered the floor. The convention worked for local critic Laurie Anderson who writes that “[c]ast members portrayed multiple characters, changing gender, sexual preference and race as easily as they might don hats in a format that sounds as though it would be difficult to follow, but wasn't” (Anderson, “*Laramie*”).

As Ingulsrud notes in the Swine Palace program for *The Laramie Project*, the script does not reveal answers but “allows us to catch glimpses of ourselves and see the questions [the play asks] in more sublime terms” (Ingulsrud, “Director’s”). In an interview with Anne Price, Ingulsrud stated that he was most concerned with questions the play asks about the ways in which people with drastically differing beliefs and ideologies learn to live together (qtd. in Price “*The Laramie*”). Antihomophobic themes of tolerance inherent in the *Laramie*

text were in and of themselves socially and politically transgressive in a conservative city such as Baton Rouge. Combining the politically and socially transgressive impetus of *Laramie* with aesthetically transgressive staging and casting practices which simultaneously blurred and highlighted notions of gender, racial, ethnic, and regional identity allowed Swine Palace to use the production as a springboard for opening public dialogues centered on issues of ideology, inclusivity, and tolerance in local and regional contexts. Post-performance talkbacks featuring panels of community leaders facilitated frank expression of often-contradictory viewpoints. Handouts and lobby displays educated spectators about the realities of discrimination in Louisiana's capital city. A large "graffiti board" placed outside the entrance to the theatre allowed spectators to share immediate responses to the performance. And a public blog and chat group provided opportunities for ongoing, in-depth discussion.

Community-minded events programmed around socially, politically, and/or aesthetically transgressive productions (like those that framed performances of *Laramie* and *Fences*) under the direction of Tick and Sosnowsky amplified critical impact—increasing the important pedagogical and civic function of Swine Palace in Baton Rouge prior to Hurricane Katrina. Another documentary-style drama *The Exonerated* written by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen in 2002 which was directed by Tick and produced in the Swine Palace season following *Laramie* in the spring of 2005 encouraged audiences to examine issues of race in relation to Louisiana's penal system and laws regarding capital punishment.¹²⁹ Events and lobby installations sustaining performances of *The Exonerated*

¹²⁹ See "The Exonerated a Study of Values" (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 2005) by Anne Price, "'Exonerated' Talks (a Lot) on Injustice" (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 2005) by J. D. Ventura, and "Panel to Discuss Issues Raised by the Play 'The Exonerated'" (*The Advocate*,

included panel discussions composed of leaders from local legal, political, and religious groups; talks with exonerated inmates; and an accurate life-sized model of a Death Row prison cell on display in the Reilly Theatre lobby. The intrinsic connections Swine Palace forged with local populations through outreach efforts which framed and interrogated transgressive performances left the company uniquely poised to respond to the crises which accompanied Hurricane Katrina. Following, I gloss the history of debates surrounding transgressive practices of nontraditional casting to contend that the “casting without limits” approach Schechner advocates differs from other types of “blind” casting as it seeks to defamiliarize or even queer identity through a pointed resistance to realism. I then transition to a consideration of the effects Katrina had on LSU and the Swine Palace 2005-2006 season as well as local and personal responses to the hurricane to argue that within the racial environment of post-Katrina Baton Rouge the type of transgressive nontraditional colorblind casting practice utilized in the Swine Palace production of *Arms and Man* demonstrated the embarrassing results of pretending spectators are race-blind when they clearly aren’t.

4.3 Cross Winds: Colorblind, “Blind,” and Nontraditional Casting Practices

"It is the framework which changes with each new technology and not just the picture within the frame." — Marshall McLuhan

The practice of colorblind, “blind,” and nontraditional casting has a long and harried past in the US—although the gist of the debate is perhaps well known. While it is possible

Baton Rouge, 2005) by Chuck Hustmyre for information on the production. See also, ““They accused me of bein’ a homosexual”: Playing Kerry Cook in *The Exonerated*” by Derek Mudd for an examination of the ways in which a realistic approach to acting in the Swine Palace production of *The Exonerated* undermined larger themes related to social justice and identity in the Swine Palace production of the play.

to locate examples of cross-gender and cross-racial casting in performance genres that stretch across time, the practice of nontraditional casting as it can be understood today emerged alongside civil rights movements and discourses regarding desegregation in the mid-twentieth century.¹³⁰ In “Practicing a Theory/ Theorizing a Practice: An Introduction to Shakespearean Colorblind Casting” (2006), Ayanna Thompson argues that the fight to desegregate theatres led by the Dramatists Guild and Actors Equity Union in the 1940s placed notions of colorblind casting in the spotlight (Thompson 4).¹³¹ However, she locates the origins of contemporary nontraditional casting as a “systematic practice” in Joseph Papp’s New York Shakespeare festival in the 1950s (Thompson 1). A push to break from presentational styles of Shakespearean performance in favor of a more realistic aesthetic led Papp to incorporate multiple ethnicities and ethnic dialects early on in his productions. In an effort to make Shakespeare more relevant to modern audiences, Papp felt it necessary for the onstage world to reflect the multi-racial and multi-ethnic milieu of mid-century New York (Thompson 1-5). Colorblind casting, Papp argued, would bring issues of race and racism to the fore (qtd. in Thompson 4). In an era of segregation, colorblind casting as it was

¹³⁰ In “Casting Without Limits” Schechner discusses the “centuries-old” tradition of cross gender “[b]reeches’ and ‘travesty” performances to illustrate the ways in which they differ from his concept of “blind” casting by reproducing heterosexist norms (28-29). See Ayanna Thompson’s essay “Practicing a Theory/ Theorizing a Practice: An Introduction to Shakespearean Colorblind Casting” (2006) for a history of colorblind casting that includes discussion of minstrelsy and black/white-faced performances. See also “Ira Aldridge, Shakespeare, and Color-Conscious Performances in Nineteenth-Century Europe” (2006) by Krystyna Courtney for a discussion of how race played out on the pre-twentieth-century global stage. For an example of the ways in which black theatre movements and companies struggled to define themselves in the mid- to late twentieth century outside of white hegemonic theatrical institutions that practiced or refused to practice nontraditional colorblind casting see *Black Theatre: Present Condition* (1981) by Woodie King, Jr.

¹³¹ Actor’s Equity is the labor union for professional theatre actors and stage managers, whereas the Dramatist guild represents professional playwrights lyricists, composers, and librettists. For information regarding Actors’ Equity see the website at www.actorsequity.org. For information on the Dramatists Guild visit www.dramatistsguild.com.

practiced by the New York Shakespeare festival perhaps promoted tolerance and equality by transgressing socially sanctioned structures which sought to maintain separation between black and white cultures. Critics of the type of nontraditional casting employed by Papp do not necessarily endorse such a reading, however. Yet, before moving into the often-sticky terrain of arguments for and against nontraditional, colorblind, and “blind” casting, I want sketch a loose definition of these key terms.

While neither nontraditional, colorblind, nor “blind” casting describe universally employed practices, I understand colorblind casting to be most obviously related to concepts of skin color, ethnicity, and racial identity; “blind” casting to be a referent to the assignment of roles against any number of identity categories, including gender, age, body-type, ethnicity, and race; and nontraditional casting to be an overarching category of disparate transgressive casting practices which encompasses colorblind and “blind” casting as well as other types of “open” casting not yet realized. Each term, however, carries in its own right historical and discursive connotations that (while often overlapping) should not be overlooked or exorcised for purposes of clarity. As Thompson demonstrates, colorblind casting grew out of mid-twentieth-century discourses connected to desegregation and the civil rights movements. Thompson goes on to argue that “[c]olorblind casting sought to create an environment in which actors were judged not on their ‘personhood’ or their ‘own face’ but on their talent” (Thompson 6). As Thompson sees it, the various competing strains of colorblind casting practices which have developed since the 1950s can be divided into three major camps. The first camp casts the best actors in any role regardless of incongruities in skin color between the actor and the character—challenging spectators to ignore the identity of the actor and see only character (Thompson 6). Taking Arthur

Miller's script *Death of Salesman* as an example, colorblind casting of this type might mean that an African American actor could be cast as Willy Loman, whereas Loman's wife, Linda, might be portrayed by a Native American actress and his two sons, Biff and Happy, by Caucasian and Asian American actors respectively. The responsibility of "blindness" is passed on to spectators who are expected to ignore the multi-racial dynamics of the ensemble to see Miller's characters as he originally intended. Admitting that spectators cannot completely divorce racial identity as it is presented within the contexts of performance from the socio-political circumstances outside the theater walls, the second colorblind camp casts the best actors in the best roles providing the racial identity of the actor does not distract audiences from making sense of the onstage world (Thompson 6-7). In this scenario the Loman family might be cast as all-African American, all-Native American, or all-Asian American so as not to disrupt a traditional reading of kinship. Spectators would be encouraged to look past any historical incongruities the performers' racial identities might raise to focus on a more universal notion of the family unit—all be it one defined by genetic, scientific discourses. In the third camp performers are cast against racial type to make a socio-political statement. As such, neither performers nor spectators are expected to be race-blind. Either of the aforementioned casting examples of *Death of a Salesman* might also be acceptable under this third colorblind rubric. However, rather than asking spectators to overlook race or draw universal conclusions, audiences are expected to read the racial identity of the actor in conflation with or alongside that of the character to decipher socio-political comments related to race or racism.¹³² Thompson concedes that

¹³² To best illustrate Thompson's point, I have provided extreme examples for the three colorblind casting camps. In practice, it is more likely for non-white actors to be cast in secondary roles or as minor characters (Thompson 8-11). See "Non-Traditional Casting

colorblind casting of this sort most often receives a label of nontraditional casting and allows for many and varied possibilities that transgress the original intentions of the text or political, social, and cultural structures which maintain the status quo.

While concepts of nontraditional casting share origins and encompass practices associated with colorblind casting, nontraditional casting as a historical movement can be viewed in connection with discourses on multiculturalism that gained cache in the eighties and nineties. Nontraditional casting received wider media and political attention with the formation of the Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP) in May of 1986.¹³³ Composed of practitioners and scholars from across the field of performance, NTCP (a not-for-profit advocacy organization funded in part by public and private grants and stage and media organizations) sought to address the lack of diversity in the industries of theatre, television, and film. From 1992 until 1996 NTCP published *New Traditions*, a newsletter which offered first-hand perspectives on nontraditional casting practices from industry professionals including actors, playwrights, directors, and producers.¹³⁴ In 2006 NTCP officially changed its name to the Alliance for the Inclusion in the Arts (Gordon).¹³⁵ To date, Alliance/NTCP has led several national and regional conferences on nontraditional casting. While the organization's understanding of nontraditional casting has evolved since

Update: Multicultural Casting Providing Opportunity for Minority Actors While Stimulating Innovative Productions" (*TDR* 1991) by Roger Shultz for more practical, even-handed examples of colorblind casting practices.

¹³³ See "Holding Back: The Theatre's Resistance to Non Traditional Casting" (*TDR* 1989) by Harry Newman for an overview of the NTCP. See Sharon Jensen's summary of NTCP on the National Endowment for the Arts website at www.nea.gov/resources/accessibility/ntcp.html.

¹³⁴ To access the *New Traditions* see "Looking Back: An Archive of *New Traditions*' Forum Commentaries" housed at www.inclusioninthearts.org/compendium/compendiumframe.html.

¹³⁵ For Information regarding the Alliance for the Inclusion in the Arts' current mission and projects see www.inclusioninthearts.org.

1986, the original definition NTCP offered of nontraditional casting is perhaps most in line with Thompson's second category of colorblind casting. Taking a cue from Actors Equity, NTCP originally defined nontraditional casting "as the casting of ethnic and female performers in roles where race, ethnicity or gender are not germane to the character's or play's development," later adding to its list performers with disabilities (Newman 24). NTCP did not insist that practitioners turn a blind eye to the actor's identity but asked producers, directors, casting agents, *et al.* to recognize and combat the cultural forces which limit the roles available to women, non-whites, and disabled actors in mainstream performance genres (Newman 28-35). Taking more than a theoretical stance on casting, NTCP has provided commercial and not-for-profit organizations with a number of resources to help create a truly diverse, multicultural performance industry in the US (Newman 25).

While NTCP sought to promote tolerance and inclusiveness through notions of nontraditional casting, even performance practitioners sympathetic to the organization's multicultural aims have raised concerns about the pitfalls of a noncritical approach to multiculturalism in the theatre.¹³⁶ In the "Dilemma of Multiculturalism in the Theatre" (*TDR*, 1994), Ethel Pitts Walker contends that regional and university theatres often utilize nontraditional "blind" casting practices for the sake of funding, diversifying their audience base, or paying lip service to "political correctness" (Walker 7). She argues that serious dialogues centered on identity and the aesthetic aims of the individual production must accompany a program of nontraditional casting if it is to truly promote tolerance and

¹³⁶ See "My Own Private Shakespeare; or, Am I Deluding Myself" (2006) by Antonio Ocampo-Guzman and Ayanna Thompson's interview with Timothy Douglas "In the Blood, William Shakespeare, August Wilson, and a Black Director" (2006) for insight into the types of problems theatre practitioners face and questions they must confront when employing critically grounded multicultural nontraditional casting practices in production.

inclusivity. According to Walker, a lack of time and resources often impede such a project. Woody King Jr. likewise suggests that nontraditional casting demands time, effort, and hard work if the practice is to be one grounded in notions of equality. In *The Impact of Race: Theatre and Culture* (2003), King argues that “minority artists must be made to feel comfortable with their own identity before they can create the identity of non-minority characters” (69). Dana Williams offers a more pointed critique of multiculturalism on the stage in the introduction to *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics* (2004), arguing that nontraditional casting “emerge[d] out of an initiative by cultural imperialists who, rather than adopt a real multicultural agenda, which would have included mounting more plays by multicultural artists, instead, made a concession to impose a multicultural cast on a white standard” (Williams 3). Although it perhaps goes without saying, nontraditional or “blind” casting when it is viewed within a framework of multiculturalism is a one-way street that seeks to open non-minority roles to minority actors and not the other way around.¹³⁷ As such, casting a male actor in a traditionally-assigned female role would not be representative of a type of multicultural nontraditional casting practice. Debates sparked in 1990 by the decision to cast Caucasian actor Jonathon Price in the Cameron Mackintosh produced Broadway musical *Miss Saigon* by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boubil pointedly illustrated the ethically-minded double-bind inherent in the multiculturalist approach to nontraditional casting.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ See “Power and Problems of Performance Across Ethnic Lines: An Alternative Approach to Nontraditional Casting” (*TDR*, 2000) by William H. Sun for arguments regarding when, where, and how a type of multicultural nontraditional two-way practice of casting might promote notions of tolerance and inclusiveness.

¹³⁸ For information regarding the *Miss Saigon* controversy see Jack Viertel’s interview with David Henry Hwang “Fun with Race and the Media” and David Henry Hwang’s

Schechner's essay "Race Free, Gender Free, Body-Type Free, Age Free Casting" published in the spring 1989 issue of *TDR* signifies a departure from the multiculturalist stance on nontraditional casting. Although Schechner's concept of "blind" casting seeks to provide more opportunities for minority actors, he markedly draws on a nonessentialist understanding of identity that has been used to promote a humanist nontraditional casting practice (Sun 86). The humanist perspective sees identity through a framework of relativism where gender, racial, or ethnic identity is less a historical or material fact and more a conscious choice wherein individuals are able to switch codes to signify various subject positions (Sun 86). A nontraditional casting practice grounded in an ethos of humanism argues that any performer can perform any role as all identity positions are the result of conscious choices, implying a universal idea of a common human experience that collapses difference. In the foreword to *Colorblind Shakespeare* (2006), Ania Loomba warns, however, that "[b]lindness to difference is often blindness to inequality" (xvi). Taken together, the multicultural and humanist approach to nontraditional casting allows for a multitude of more transgressive and less transgressive casting practices that can be described using the three types of camps Thompson identifies for colorblind casting. Under a rubric of nontraditional casting it is possible to imagine a production of *Death of a Salesman* that utilizes an all-female, all-black, all-Hispanic, or all-blind ensemble, asking spectators to overlook the gender, racial, ethnic or disabled identity of the performers; one where female, black, Hispanic or blind actors are cast in minor roles normally reserved for white, able-bodied male performers where certain aspects of identity are "not germane to the character's or play's development;" or one that utilizes cross-gender (as was the case in Ingulsrud's

documentary-style play *Yellow Face* both published in the April 2008 issue of *American Theatre*.

production), cross-racial, cross-ethnic, or cross-ability casting strategically to make a socio-political statement.

Within a practical working context, however, humanist and nontraditional casting strategies are not quite so easily reconcilable. Notably, the humanist ‘blind’ casting framework fails to resonate with multicultural concepts of nontraditional casting articulated by the NTCP or the theatrical and cinematic labor unions as their understanding of nontraditional casting rests squarely on the assumption that racial, gender, and ethnic identity are not subjective but more or less fixed. Many of those critics who denounce multicultural nontraditional casting practices, however, do not necessarily promote the humanist argument either. August Wilson was perhaps the most famous and vocal critic of both the multiculturalist and humanist approach to nontraditional casting. In the now famous August Wilson and Robert Brustein debates which played out in the pages of *American Theatre* magazine and culminated in a formal meeting moderated by Anna Deavere Smith at Town Hall in New York City on January 27, 1997, Brustein and Wilson came to represent opposite sides of the same modernist coin.¹³⁹ While Brustein advanced a concept of a completely integrated American Theatre that appealed less to multiculturalism and more to universal colorblind notions of humanity, Wilson fought for a black theatre movement, arguing that race is a fixed category which implies an authentic black experience in opposition to a universal colorblind human condition.¹⁴⁰ Throughout the period, Wilson

¹³⁹ I draw on Alisa Solomon’s criticism of the Wilson/Brustein debates, wherein Solomon writes: “They’re both stuck in a monolithic modernism. Both hold faith in a capital-T Truth out there waiting to be uncovered. And both see themselves engaged in the noble pursuit of pulling back the veil” (qtd. in Nunns).

¹⁴⁰ See “The Ground on Which I Stand” by August Wilson published in the September, 1996 issue of *American Theatre*. See also “August Wilson Responds” by August Wilson in the October 1996 issue of *American Theatre* and Dana Williams’s introduction to *August Wilson*

stood his ground, contending that multiculturalism impedes the black theatre movement and that race as a historical and biological fact is the most important aspect of identity. In “Just ‘Cause (or Just Cause): On August Wilson’s Case for a Black Theatre” (2004), John Valery White sees the Brustein/Wilson clash as one characterized by separation versus assimilation where Wilson represents the former and Brustein the latter (White, John Valery 63-64). Although White supports Wilson’s cause, he finds Wilson’s rhetoric to be problematic as Wilson “suggests that blackness binds black Americans in a deep, rich, and authentic way but never expresses what constitutes the content of that shared experience” (White, John Valery 72). As one might suspect, Schechner also takes issue with Wilson’s assessment of “blind” casting. In “Plowing August Wilson’s Ground” published in the December, 1996 issue of *American Theatre*, Schechner contends that there are times when race should matter and times when race should not matter. Schechner agrees with Wilson on the point that “there is no such thing as colorblind casting” as spectators will always see what they want to see (Schechner, “Plowing”). However, Schechner maintains that practitioners should continue to cast against type (Schechner, “Plowing”). “An actor is her race,” Schechner writes, “but she is also more and different than her race” (Schechner, “Plowing”).

The “blind” casting rubric Schechner offers in “Casting Without Limits” published in the November 2010 issue of *American Theatre* does not necessarily deviate from his earlier framework. Rather, the theoretical underpinnings and critical contexts in which Schechner voices his argument have shifted more than the actual practice. “Casting Without

and *Black Aesthetics* (2004) pages 1-36. For information regarding Brustein’s stance see “Subsidized Separatism” by Robert Brustein published in the October 1996 issue of *American Theatre* and “Race, Art and Inclusion” by Robert Brustein published in the November 1996 issue of *American Theatre*. For a catalogue of the Wilson/Brustein debates and information regarding the Town Hall meeting see “Wilson, Brustein, and the Press” by Stephen Nunn published in the March 1997 issue of *American Theatre*.

Limits” notably focuses less on proving the flexibility of identity. In line with more recent discourse on identity and strains of queer theory, Schechner forgoes a concept of identity that sees identity formation as a purely relative experience which allows one to switch codes as easily as one might become a redhead or a blonde. Schechner seeks instead to promote an antirealistic theatrical aesthetic that can reveal the ways in which identity has been historically and culturally performed and constructed. Schechner also does not fault to a universal understanding of a shared human identity. “Blind” casting as Schechner imagines it “would drive a wedge between actor and character, encouraging spectators and performers to critically examine interacting performance texts rather than assuming a simple-minded identification of the performer with the role” (30). As I indicated at the start of this chapter, a nontraditional “casting without limits” practice represents “a new kind of avant-garde” for Schechner capable of “encoding its own social and aesthetic comment” outside of and against realism (Schechner “Casting” 26).

In “(Re)Visions of Race: Contemporary Race Theory and the Cultural Politics of Racial Crossover in Documentary Theatre” (*Theatre Journal* 2000), Dorinne Kondo advances a critically grounded transgressive cross-racial approach to performance which can serve as an example of the type of nontraditional casting practice Schechner promotes in “Casting Without Limits.” Drawing on contemporary race theory, Kondo looks to performances staged by Anna Deavere Smith and Culture Clash that transgress racial boundaries, revealing the material and social conditions of racial identity without promoting a humanist or multicultural agenda. Kondo finds that Smith and Culture Clash do not structure racial identity in performance through a humanist lens of relativity and universality or a framework of multicultural imperialism but as boundary-oriented phenomena. Kondo

specifically reads Anna Deveare Smith's bodily-grounded practice that relies on vocal and physical gesture work (rather than an emotionally-psychoanalytically derived process often associated with realism) as one which "dessentializes race while holding on to the awareness that race remains a powerful social force" (Kondo 97). Nontraditional casting grounded in a similarly antirealistic body-based technique would not promote relativism or universal humanism as it does not necessarily ask performance practitioners or spectators to turn a blind eye toward identity or collapse difference but welcomes contradictions between the identity of the actor and that of the character. A systematic practice of "casting without limits" as it is offered by Schechner transgresses the boundaries of identity through antirealistic theatrical conventions grounded in Brechtian-style voice and gesture work to destabilize illusions which fuse the actor's identity with that of the character and vice versa, encouraging a dialogic, rather than monolithic, reading of identity in performance. Utilized alongside other transgressive, nontraditional approaches to staging, a nontraditional "casting without limits" practice possesses potential to have a critical/defamiliarizing effect that doesn't ask audiences to ignore the identity of the character or the performer but notice it all the more.

Surveying the terrain of nontraditional casting practices covered thus far, I have contextualized colorblind casting in relation to civil rights movements in the mid-century; provided a historical framework for understanding nontraditional casting alongside multiculturalism; explored a type of humanist approach to nontraditional casting; described the often overlapping practices of "blind" casting as falling into three camps; glossed criticism of colorblind, "blind," and nontraditional casting practices; and gestured toward a transgressive practice of "casting without limits" that has a critical/defamiliarizing effect.

By pointing toward the multiple, overlapping socio-cultural-historical discourses and performative gestures which render identity knowable as such, “casting without limits” queers identity through a purposeful resistance to realism. As I outlined in a previous chapter, although the term queer is often associated with gay and lesbian the two are not synonymous. Whereas gay and lesbian have become markers of a stabilized identity rooted in homosexual desire, *queer* refuses stable categories and normalizing narratives of identity (Jagose 1-6). Just as transgression itself is a double-edged sword that reinforces the very boundaries it seeks to test, the practice of queering plays more formally with some identity markers while foregoing and fixing others. A transgressive practice of nontraditional casting which seeks to queer identity both tests and reinforces the boundaries of identity in ways that facilitate and fail an ethics of tolerance and inclusiveness within local and regional culture. While there exists feminist and queer criticism that calls nontraditional casting practices into question, such scholarship is less often written in direct response to the NTCP or the specifically humanist notion of “blind” casting.¹⁴¹ More often than not, arguments against a nontraditional or “blind” approach to casting address issues related to racial identity as opposed to gender or other factors of identity—testifying, perhaps, to the important role discourses of race continue to occupy within US culture despite mainstream media claims of a post-racial society. I shift now to a reading of race in post-Katrina Baton Rouge and the Swine Palace production of *Arms and Man* to argue that a transgressive practice of nontraditional casting employed alongside conventions of realism aligned themes

¹⁴¹ For an example of feminist/queer criticism that addresses issues of cross-gender casting see “Fe/male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp” (1992) by Kate Davy where in Davy presents an argument regarding the practice of casting women in male roles suggesting that male impersonation within a heterosexual context tends to replicate patriarchal or male-centric discourses (232-234).

of refuge already prevalent in the script with overly simplistic discourse on race perpetuated by the mass media following the storm.

PART 4.4 Eye of the Storm: Reading Race in Hurricane Katrina and the Swine Palace Production of *Arms and the Man*

" . . . but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply . . . " — Edna St. Vincent Millay

Louisiana State University and Baton Rouge in general played a central role in post-Katrina rescue and recovery operations in Louisiana. Upon realizing the extent of the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, the failure of the levees in New Orleans, and inadequate federal responses, Baton Rouge quickly established itself as "the refugee center and staging ground for rescue and rebuilding" (Dyer et al.). LSU played a major part in these operations. The Pete Maravich Assembly Center (PMAC), located on the Louisiana State University campus, quickly transformed into "the largest acute-care field hospital ever created in U.S. history" ("LSU Is Site of Largest Acute-Care Filed Hospital in US History"). More than 2,000 LSU faculty, staff, and students and 1,700 doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals from across the U.S. volunteered to assist those in need of attention ("LSU Is Site of Largest Acute-Care Filed Hospital in US History"). As of Tuesday September 6, 2005 (less than ten days after Katrina struck New Orleans), over 6,000 patients had been treated at the PMAC ("LSU Is Site of Largest Acute-Care Filed Hospital in US History"). The University's efforts to provide aid for those affected by the storm extended well beyond health care, however. The wide variety of initiatives sponsored by individual colleges, departments, and university organizations included stewardship of lost animals, food and clothing drives, and childcare. The University also reopened registration for close

to 2,000 students displaced by the hurricane (“LSU Is Site of Largest Acute-Care Filed Hospital in US History”). I volunteered to teach an Introduction to Drama class added after the storm to accommodate the influx of new undergrads. In accordance with departmental policies, I required my students to see all Swine Palace and LSU theatre mainstage productions.

Given Swine Palace’s strong regional ties, it is not surprising that the company felt a need to respond to events surrounding Hurricane Katrina by offering audiences theatrical productions as a platform for processing the tragedy. Prior to the hurricane, Swine Palace planned to open the 2005-2006 season with *Big Love* by Charles Mee. Ingulsrud was slated to direct the production with a cast of MFA students and professional SITI actors. *Tobacco Road* by Jack Kirkland and *She Stoops to Conquer* by Oliver Goldsmith were scheduled for the spring semester. *Arms and the Man* written by George Bernard Shaw and directed by Jane Brody was to be performed as part of the LSU Theatre Department mainstage season as a showcase for the MFA in Acting students and was already in rehearsal when Katrina hit shore. Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (also in rehearsals during Hurricane Katrina) was to be the first LSU Theatre Department mainstage undergraduate production of the semester. Due to financial strains placed on the University and Swine Palace as a result of Katrina, the SITI Company production of *Big Love* was cancelled and replaced by the all-student production of *Arms and the Man* in the Swine Palace season.¹⁴² *Tobacco Road* also fell victim to budget cuts. The decision to remove *Tobacco Road* from the Swine Palace season was not

¹⁴² See a letter written from Micael Tick to the Tennessee Williams’s Foundation included as an appendix in *The Role of Tennessee Williams in Tennessee Williams in Quarter Time Adapted by John Dennis: A Production Thesis in Acting* by Derek Mudd for information regarding the financial predicament hurricane Katrina posed to the Swine Palace 2005-2006 season (Mudd, *The Role* 44-45).

based solely on financial circumstances, however. Tick and Sosnowsky expressed misgivings about staging a show like *Tobacco Road* which focuses on rural impoverishment during the Great Depression when there were so many newly impoverished families in Louisiana following Hurricane Katrina. Replacing *Tobacco Road* on the season lineup was *Tennessee Williams in Quarter Time*, an original adaptation created and staged by then head of the MFA in Acting program John Dennis in the 2006 spring semester as a post-Katrina ode to New Orleans that sought to employ displaced actors and LSU alumni affected by the hurricane.¹⁴³ Only *She Stoops to Conquer* and *The Tempest* continued as planned. After *Big Love* playwright Charles Mee agreed to waive royalty fees, a non-professional production of *Big Love* directed by Ingulsrud was rescheduled as the final LSU Theatre Department mainstage show of the fall 2005 semester. Although *Big Love* would no longer feature SITI company members and was not part of the Swine Palace season, performances took place on the Reilly Theater stage. I served as the dramaturg for *Big Love* both before and after the hurricane and eventually stepped into the role of Piero in absence of a SITI performer.

While *Arms and the Man* and *Big Love* seemed worlds away from Louisiana prior to Katrina, re-reading the scripts in preparation for the Introduction to Drama class I volunteered to teach after the storm it was hard for me to divorce the events in the texts from then current events in Baton Rouge. As I explain below, themes found in *Arms and the Man* and *Big Love* related to refuge were highlighted by the tragedy of the hurricane. The vast

¹⁴³ *Tennessee Williams in Quarter Time* included selections from Tennessee Williams's plays, poems, letters, and memoirs. For more information about the circumstances surrounding the production see *The Role of Tennessee Williams in Tennessee Williams in Quarter Time Adapted by John Dennis: A Production Thesis in Acting* by Derek Mudd. For reviews of the production see "Slices of Tennessee" (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 2006) by J. D. Ventura and "Pearls Before Swine Palace Audience" (*The Times-Picayune*, New Orleans, 2006) by David Cuthbert.

number of displaced New Orleanians and South Louisianans forced to take refuge in the state's capital city post-Katrina foregrounded discourses related to the self and the other, neighbor and stranger within local culture. News reports confirmed what Baton Rouge residents already suspected based on increased traffic and empty grocery store shelves—that the population in the city had doubled almost overnight from 350,000 to 700,000 residents (Moses). Individual responses to the incursion covered a spectrum of emotions ranging from hospitality to hostility. While many in Baton Rouge volunteered to help displaced Katrina victims others sought to protect scarce resources or outright denied aid. Just days after the storm, The Consuming Fire Fellowship began handing out pamphlets which argued that “God . . . [u]s[ed] Katrina as an instrument of judgment . . . by sending divine retribution to a city apparently without conscience” and suggested that participation in recovery was sinful (Consuming Fire Fellowship).

Derrida’s conception of hospitality provides a framework for understanding local responses to Hurricane Katrina “refugees” and themes of refuge which run through *Arms and the Man* and *Big Love*. The act of hospitality, according to Derrida, belies hostility. Hospitality, Derrida argues, ultimately “fold[s] the foreign other into the internal laws of the host,” demanding that the guests accept hospitality on the host’s terms (7). This seemingly innocuous act positions guests (i.e., Katrina refugees who sought shelter in Baton Rouge following the storm) as subordinate to the host (i.e., Baton Rouge residents) and denies guests/refugees individual or independent subjectivity. Jenny Moses, a resident of Baton Rouge writing for the *Washington Post*, finds post-Katrina host/refugee relationships in Louisiana’s capital city to be characterized less by religious tensions and more by racial and economic differences. According to Moses, Katrina highlighted feelings in Baton Rouge

that “our whole society is splitting in two, and, at least among people of property, that all those poor (mainly black) people want our (mainly white) stuff.” Kanye West’s controversial impromptu speech delivered during NBC’s live concert fundraiser for Hurricane Katrina on September 2, 2005, ensured that national as well as local narratives surrounding the storm and recovery would center on issues of race: “*I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says, ‘They’re looting.’ You see a white family, it says, ‘They’re looking for food.’ And, you know, it’s been five days [waiting for federal help] because most of the people are black*” (qtd. in Moraes).¹⁴⁴ Transgressive nontraditional colorblind casting choices which placed African American actors in the role of the refugee and white actors in the role of the host in the Swine Palace productions of *Arms and the Man* mirrored the way in which host/refugee dynamics were construed for better or worse in local and regional culture and by the national media following Hurricane Katrina.

Intended by Shaw as a commentary on war and marriage and billed as “An Anti-romantic Comedy,” *Arms and the Man* (1894) juxtaposes romantic and realistic notions of love and battle. Set in 1885 after a Serbo-Bulgarian war, the main plot of the play follows four star-crossed lovers: Raina Petkoff (the daughter of a wealthy Bulgarian family), Louka (the family’s foreign servant), Sergius (a war hero who is betrothed to Raina), and Captain Bluntschli, (a foreign mercenary soldier who fought in the Serbian Army). Throughout the

¹⁴⁴ Kanye West’s impromptu speech delivered during NBC’s live concert fundraiser for Hurricane Katrina can be accessed via a YouTube search for “Kanye West Katrina.” For information regarding West’s remarks see “Kanye West’s Torrent of Criticism, Live on NBC” (*The Washington Post*, 2005) by Lisa Moraes, “Kanye West Defends Anti-Bush Comments” (*People.com*, 2005) by Marla Lehner, and “Bush Calls Kanye West’s Katrina Rant ‘Most Disgusting Moment’ of Presidency” (*MTV.com*, 2010) by Jayson Rodriguez.

course of action, Raina falls out of love with Sergius and in love with Bluntschli, while Sergius woos Louka behind Raina's back.

Directed by then head of the LSU undergraduate theatre program Jane Brody, the Swine Palace production of *Arms and the Man* (mounted less than two months after Hurricane Katrina) tried to speak to the tragedy of the storm by focusing on themes of refuge prevalent in the script. Although Brody initially conceptualized the piece as a comment on war prior to Katrina, her reading of the play was heavily influenced by the macro-, socio-political level of production following the hurricane. In an interview with Anne Price, Brody notes that in *Arms and the Man* the character Bluntschli "seeks refuge [from war] in the home of a wealthy young girl" (qtd. in Price, "Play's"). Raina first meets Bluntschli when he is forced to hide in her bedroom to avoid being captured by the opposing army. Brody imagined that the act of refuge depicted in *Arms and the Man* would particularly resonate with Baton Rouge spectators post-Katrina. "Prior to Katrina, running and seeking refuge was not a big issue," Brody argues. "After Katrina, we now have evacuees who have seen a side of life that is so real, so authentic" (qtd. in Price, "Play's"). The resonances were not lost on local theatre critic J.D. Ventura who writes that "the themes Shaw explores are timeless and more relevant than ever, especially now, as ordinary people struggle to understand natural disaster and war" (Ventura, "'Arms'").

Employing an ethically minded, yet problematic, colorblind nontraditional approach to casting in the Swine Palace production of *Arms and The Man*, Brody placed African American MFA in Acting student Reuben Mitchell in the part of Bluntschli opposite a mostly white ensemble—transgressing the way in which roles had been traditionally or historically assigned in the play. Although Brody meant to challenge audiences to see

“talent” rather than skin color, dialogue in the script highlighted, not muted, race as an active signifier. Almost immediately after Raina discovers Bluntschli hiding in her room Bluntschli confesses to Raina that he believes it better to carry chocolates rather than ammunition into battle. His secret prompts her to deridingly respond, “Oh you are a very poor soldier: a chocolate cream soldier” (Shaw 36). Beguiled by Bluntschli, Raina eventually cooks up a plan that will allow him to evade his captors and continue on his way. Before Bluntschli leaves, however, Raina slips a photo into his pocket with an inscription scribbled on the back that reads: “Raina, to her Chocolate Cream Soldier, a Souvenir” (Shaw 152). When Bluntschli returns days later to thank Raina for her help, taken by surprise she exclaims, “Oh! The chocolate cream soldier!” (Shaw 94), then out of embarrassment conjures a story about a chocolate cream soldier she made earlier in the day that was supposed to top the evening’s dessert but was ruined by one of the servants (Shaw 96). Hoping Bluntschli bought the lie, Raina asks, “I hope you didn’t think that you were the chocolate cream soldier, Captain Bluntschli” (Shaw 96).

References made to the “chocolate cream soldier” throughout the play seemed to purposefully situate the Swine Palace Production of *Arms and the Man* in relation to discourses on race. Within a racialized context, Raina’s quick cover-up and almost apology for referring to Bluntschli as the “chocolate cream soldier” offered evidence that she thought her utterance might be inappropriate under the circumstances. The fact that Ray Nagan, the Katrina-time mayor of New Orleans, came under attack a few months after the close of the Swine Palace production of *Arms and the Man* for referring to the city as “chocolate” because of its large population of African Americans confirmed the racially charged

connotations the “chocolate cream soldier” moniker might have suggested.¹⁴⁵ Issues of race were further compounded in Brody’s staging of the play as the only other black MFA in Acting student and member of the Swine Palace *Arms and the Man* ensemble, Kesha Bullard, portrayed the role of Louka, a foreign servant who at the hand of Sergius suffers constant derision. While Raina continues to condescend to Bluntschli, Sergius physically abuses Louka. Throughout the course of the play, Louka bears the brunt of Sergius’s torture in order to secure his hand in marriage.

Against a backdrop of realism, the practice of nontraditional colorblind casting employed in Swine Palace’s *Arms and the Man* functioned as the main theatricalized choice making it all the more notable *as* a choice. In a review of the production J.D. Ventura praises the realistic approach to staging, drawing attention to the ways in which the various technologies of theatre were used to engender an illusionistic reading of the performance. Acting and technical elements in the Swine Palace production combined, according to Ventura, rendering “comedic intensity of the story . . . stronger by the successful development of the more serious dramatic themes” (Ventura, “*Arms*”). Ventura specifically notes that Anna Richardson in the role of Raina “adeptly showed Raina’s internal struggle, perfectly delivering a naive girl’s transformation from childish idealism to wise womanhood” (Ventura, “*Arms*”). Reuben Mitchell’s characterization of Blunsthli garnered similar praise from Ventura who argues that Mitchell’s “jaded soldier, schooled in the realities of war, seemed perfectly balanced, at once both worldly and weary” (Ventura,

¹⁴⁵ A transcript of Ray Nagan’s “chocolate city” speech can be found on the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* website at www.nola.com/news/t-p/frontpage/index.ssf?/news/t-p/stories/011706_nagin_transcript.html. See “Nagan Apologizes for 'Chocolate' City Comments” (2006) published on CNN.com at www.cnn.com/2006/US/01/17/nagin.city/for a summary of the controversy surrounding Nagan’s remarks.

“*Arms*”). Throughout the review, Ventura devotes considerable attention to the way in which the actors employ various dialects to sustain a realistic reading of character, lauding those performers who used believable accents and faulting those who did not. Ventura finds that Kesha Bullard as Louka spoke with an “impeccable cockney accent” and that “James Reiser’s Russian accent . . . rocked” (Ventura, “*Arms*”). In contrast, Ventura chides Ron Reeder in the role of Major Petkoff, Raina’s father, as he “didn’t attempt a British accent” which confused Ventura I am led to assume because it interrupted the type of suspension of disbelief associated with conventions of realism. The lights (designed by Heather Gilbert), the costumes (designed by Ginger Robertson), the sound (designed by Eun-Jin Cho) and the set (designed by Nels Anderson) further supported a realistic reading of Swine Palace’s *Arms and the Man*. Ventura finds that “Brody’s attention to detail was evident” in regards to the technical elements (Ventura, “*Arms*”). The box-set (which Ventura describes as “luscious”) evenly divided the Reilly Theatre’s 110 foot by 65 foot stage floor into onstage and offstage and along with period specific costumes (that were also extravagantly lush) served, perhaps above all else, as the most obvious signs of realism.

If authenticating and rhetorical conventions meant to situate the Swine Palace production of *Arms and the Man* within the contexts of a realistic, illusionistic, tradition of theatre, then the ideological implications prompted spectators to read the performance within the contexts of the macro-level of production alongside racial discourses surrounding host/refugee dynamics in Baton Rouge following Hurricane Katrina. In the script the refugee characters—most notably Blunstchli but also Louka—must conform to the standards of the Petkoffs in order to obtain acceptance. Transgressive casting practices employed by Brody placed perceivably African American foreigners in the role of the refugee and a white

affluent family in the role of the host in the Swine Palace production of *Arms and the Man*. Placing Brody's colorblind assignment of roles within a multicultural framework of nontraditional casting is problematic as the racial identity of the characters becomes exceedingly relevant to the development of themes in the play within the post-Katrina racialized environment of Baton Rouge. Notably, the performance did not include the type of pre or post show discussion that might have more formally framed or addressed racial dynamics implicit in Brody's staging. I imagine, on the one-hand, that such outreach efforts would have been difficult to navigate given the performance's temporal proximity to Katrina. On the other, I see the lack of critical attention paid to constructions of race in the Swine Palace production of *Arms* as complicit in the type of overly simplistic discourses on race perpetuated by the mass media following the hurricane. In "Finding and Framing Katrina: The Social Construction of Disaster" (2006), Havidán Rodríguez and Russell Dynes argue that "television constructed the frame of meaning to which audiences and decision-makers came to understand Katrina" and that the overarching narrative was one informed primarily by Hollywood disaster movies (Rodriguez and Dynes). Understood as such, it is perhaps not surprising that celebrities, reporters, politicians, and even regional and local community leaders offered easily recyclable sound-bites focused more on issues of skin color and less on the analysis of the complex web of historical, economic, environmental, and political circumstances which contribute to the social construction of racism in South Louisiana, paving the way for the type of large scale tragedy caused by the hurricane. An article posted on CBSNews.com on September 3, 2005, written by Sean Alfano lists several now-familiar statements which characterize post-Katrina rescue and recovery operations as a black and white black versus white problem. New Orleans City

Councilman Olivier Thomas's remark that "people are too afraid of black people to go in and save them" perhaps epitomizes the type of easily quotable, oversimplified post-Katrina discourse on race (qtd. in Alfano). Although I do not argue with the validity of such statements or deny that the events surrounding Katrina warranted emotional appeal, I am concerned with the way in which they supplanted critical analysis of racism in South Louisiana following the storm.

While New Orleans was and continues to be characterized by economic disparity and connections between economic disparity and race have a long history in the city, images which circulated in the press showing black suffering bodies seemed to sensationalize, rather than explain, longstanding unequal power dynamics. As is perhaps the case with any type of photo-documentation of suffering, pictures of black Katrina victims erased individual suffering, offering, instead, a fictionalized, generic experience of suffering caused by the storm.¹⁴⁶ In the case of Katrina, generic suffering quickly became associated with the New Orleanian African American poor, as economic circumstances kept many from evacuating the city prior to the hurricane's landfall.¹⁴⁷ Nil Gilman in "What Katrina Teaches about the Meaning of Racism" (2006) contends that Katrina exposed "the abiding divide in American

¹⁴⁶ In *On Photography* (1973) Susan Sontag contends that in general the act of photographing tragic events fictionalizes suffering (22-24). Although she later takes issue with this argument in her post-9/11 writing *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Sontag maintains that an ethical approach to the photography of suffering is one that respects the uniqueness of the individual's suffering (104-112). "It is intolerable," Sontag writes, "to have one's own suffering twinned with anybody else's" (Sontag, *Regarding* 113).

¹⁴⁷ In "Toxic Soup Redux: Why Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice Matter after Katrina" (2006) Julie Sze argues that the long history of environmental racism in the Gulf Coast region led to the catastrophe in New Orleans which prevented poor communities of color from leaving the city. Sze understands environmental racism to be a confluence of social policies and historical circumstances which have relegated minority groups (e.g., the poor, the black, the elderly, and the infirmed) to the least desirable geographic areas, often those that are most vulnerable to pollution, flooding, etc. and lack easy access to reliable public transportation.

thinking about race and racism.” Gilman suggests that discourses on race circulated by the media following Katrina belie a misunderstanding of racism in the popular imagination. He finds that concepts of racism that prevailed following the storm often associated racism with racial prejudice. According to Gilman, equating racism with bigotry or racial prejudice configures racism less as “a social condition” and more as “something that exists *in the minds of ‘racists.’*” Gilman points out that conceptualizing racism as a psychological problem rather than a social problem “fails to address the fact that *racial discrimination takes place not merely through intentional (though perhaps unselfconscious) interactions between individuals, but also as a result of deep social and institutional practices and habits.*” Racism, then, not only occurs within the contexts of social and cultural interactions between individuals and groups but is also engrained in and reinforced by cultural institutions and social structures. Refusing to critically examine the ways in which cultural institutions and social structures promote racial inequality reproduces normalizing discourses and discourses of domination in local and regional culture.

If Brody’s staging of *Arms and the Man* meant to speak to the refugee experience or events in South Louisiana following Hurricane Katrina, then the performance lacked the critical, pedagogical bite associated with previous Swine Palace productions—ultimately missing an opportunity to act as an agent of social change. Not unlike the situation in Baton Rouge, Reuben Mitchel’s Bluntschli as refugee was forced to seek aid from strangers. Transgressive nontraditional colorblind casting practices employed in the production alongside conventions of realism and references made throughout the play to the “chocolate cream soldier” highlighted race as an active signifier, further aligning themes of refuge already prevalent in the script with discourses on race that surfaced locally and nationally

following the storm.¹⁴⁸ The lack of critical attention paid to constructions of race onstage (one where a black disempowered other is saved by a white affluent host) allowed the performance to echo overly simplistic racial discourses perpetuated by the mass media—demonstrating the embarrassing results of pretending spectators are race-blind when they clearly aren't. Viewed alongside arguments against a critically unexamined transgressive multicultural practice of nontraditional casting often employed by college and regional place-based theatres across the US, it is possible to see how the Swine Palace production of *Arms and the Man* failed to promote an ethics of tolerance and inclusivity by imposing a multicultural cast on a white standard, replicating cultural imperialism and promoting discourses of domination in local and regional culture.

PART 4.5 Rescue and Recovery: *Big Love* and the Limits of a Transgressive Nontraditional “Casting Without Limits” Practice

"The wind shows us how close
to the edge we are." — Joan Didion

In contrast to *Arms and the Man*, *Big Love* did not utilize an aesthetic grounded in realism. Rather, director Leon Ingulsrud employed a type of nontraditional casting practice within the contexts of an antirealistic approach to staging that transgressed realistic notions of actor and character to encourage spectators to see—and then see past—race. And while Ingulsrud's use of nontraditional casting practices helped drive a wedge between actor and character, I am not sure that it led to the type of consideration of identity in the way Schechner imagines. Placing the LSU post-Katrina staging of *Big Love* within the historical

¹⁴⁸ In “The Violence of ‘We’: Politicizing Identification” (1992) Elin Diamond cautions against a wholesale dismissal of realism in relation to activism and political power, arguing that realism is capable of inspiring “transformation” (397).

contexts of production and Schechner's "blind" casting framework allows me to trace the critical limits of a nontraditional "casting without limits" approach to staging and (re)consider Foucault's assertion that transgression "must be detached from its questionable association to ethics" (Foucault, *Preface* 446).

Written by Charles Mee as a loose adaptation of Aeschylus's *The Suppliant Women*, *Big Love* (2000) revolves around 50 sisters represented by a triad of characters—Thyona, Olympia, and Lydia—who flee their country of origin in order to avoid arranged marriages to 50 brothers also represented by a triad of characters—Constantine, Oed, and Nikos. Upon their accidental arrival in Italy, Thyona, Olympia, and Lydia seek refuge in the house of a wealthy Italian family headed by the character Piero. When Constantine, Oed, and Nikos arrive to claim their brides, Piero decides that helping the women will put him and his family in too great a risk. Rather than protecting the refugee women, Piero offers to host the wedding. Although not without protests, Thyona, Olympia, and Lydia eventually succumb to Piero's proposition but forge a secret pact to murder their respective grooms following the ceremony. When all but Lydia follow through with the plan, Thyona denounces Lydia as a traitor to their cause. Piero's mother, Bella, holds trial, forgiving the sisters for their crimes and chiding Piero for his lack of hospitality.

Staged in the Reilly as an LSU Theatre Department production during the fall 2005 semester following Katrina, themes of refuge inherent in the script were highlighted by events which took place in South Louisiana prior to production. In an interview with Anne Price, Ingulsrud notes that "the themes in the play are so much more poignant" following the hurricane (qtd. in Price "'*Big*'"). He goes on to argue that the script revolves around "the dilemma of hospitality versus personal safety, and that's a crisis many here [in Baton

Rogue] are facing” (qtd. in Price, “*Big*”). While Ingulsrud did not seek to draw direct correlations between the play and the hurricane by setting the piece in South Louisiana or by invoking a specifically Louisiana or New Orleans flavor, resonances nonetheless bled through. In the script, the character Lydia—one of the refugee sisters who has tried to escape her arranged marriage to Nikos by seeking asylum from Piero in Italy—tries to explain her misgivings about marriage by describing a dream she had that with in the contexts of post-Katrina Baton Rouge recalled ruptured levees and search and rescue efforts in New Orleans that were still occurring during the run of the play: “The walls of the pond collapsed and it drained out and 1500 fish died, and everyone was looking for survivors” (Mee, *Big*). The fact that I had to step in at the last minute to perform the role of Piero (the character in the play who questions his responsibility to the female refugees) further shades my understanding of the performance.

THYONA. This is a crisis.

PIERO. And yet . . . [y]ou know, I am not the Red Cross. . . . I can't take in every refugee who comes into my garden. . . . [T]he next thing I know I would have a refugee camp here in my home. . . . [W]hy would I do this?

LYDIA. Because it's right.

PIERO. I understand it may be right, but one doesn't always go around doing what's right. I've never heard of such a thing. The world is a complicated place. (Mee, *Big*)

Like other actors in the LSU production of *Big Love*, I too as Piero was cast against type—specifically in terms of ethnicity and age. Piero, a wealthy Italian man and the eldest of thirteen fully grown children, is exceeded in age within the context of *Big Love* only by his mother, Bella, the Italian Matriarch of the family who was portrayed by Tara McMullen, another white graduate student in her twenties. Kesha Bullard (the MFA in Acting student of color who portrayed the character Louka in *Arms and the Man*) played Thyona alongside two perceivably Caucasian actors cast in the role of Thyona's sisters. Reuben Mitchell (the

African American MFA in Acting student who portrayed the character Bluntschli in *Arms*) played Oed alongside two white actors cast in the role of Oed's brothers. In a casting note included on the website that houses *Big Love* and other plays, Charles Mee (a self-professed "old crippled white guy") insists that directors of his work assign roles against type.¹⁴⁹ "Directors should go very far out of their way," Mee writes, "to avoid creating the bizarre, artificial world of all intact white people, a world that no longer exists where I live" (Mee, "Casting"). Mee prefaces his casting advice, however, by stating that his plays are not about race or disability and that the individual identity of the actor should not become the subject of the production.

My plays don't take race and disability as their subject matter. [...] But I want my plays to be the way my own life is: race and disability exist. . . . But issues of race and disability do not always consume the lives of people of color or people in wheel chairs. In my plays, as in life itself, the female romantic lead can be played by a woman in a wheel chair. The male romantic lead can be played by an Indian man. And that is not the subject of the play. (Mee "Note")

To what extent does Mee's edict, which asks directors to see the identity of the actor and then see past the identity of the actor, serve as a type of blindness to difference that becomes blindness to inequality? While nontraditional casting choices utilized in *Arms and the Man* placed only African American actors in the role of the refugee and white actors in the role of the host, those employed by Ingulsrud in *Big Love* placed both actors of color and perceivably Caucasian actors in the role of the refugee and white actors in the role of the host. Unlike *Arms and the Man*, however, none of the characters in *Big Love*—Thyona, Olympia, Lydia, or Piero—were rendered as surrogates for post-Katrina refugees or hosts.

¹⁴⁹ See the (Re) Making Project website maintained by Charles Mee at www.panix.com/userdirs/meejr/indexf.html and "A Note on Casting" at www.panix.com/userdirs/meejr/html/cast.html.

Although the relationship between Piero and the three sisters mirrored the crises of conscience felt by citizens of Baton Rouge, distance created by a physical and vocal gestural mask provided spectators with a platform for considering the host/refugee relationship as opposed to a vicarious experience of host/refugee dynamics. As a founding member of the SITI Company and one-time member of Suzuki's Company of Toga in Japan, Ingulsrud's approach to performance was again one grounded in Suzuki and Viewpoints training. Whereas Suzuki encourages physical precision through the development of core muscles, the nine Viewpoints provide a framework for thinking spatially and temporally about performance, character, and character relationships. While neither Suzuki- nor Viewpoints-based training carries prescriptions for performance, both encourage a physically based outside-to-inside approach to acting that has been characterized in opposition to more pervasive Western practices in realism that preach an emotionally based inside-to-outside technique.¹⁵⁰ In the case of the LSU Theatre Department's production of *Big Love*, Suzuki and Viewpoints training led to the creation of gestural vocabularies meant to signify character and distance the audience from the action. While *Big Love* is set in Italy, actors did not attempt to employ a dialect to sustain a realistic reading of character in performance as was the case in *Arms and the Man*. Although some performers—specifically Tara McMullen who played Bella, the matriarch of the Italian family, and Ron Reeder who played Giuliano, Piero's nephew—were prompted by Ingulsrud to sporadically employ an Italian accent, such speech acts were intended to further disrupt realistic or naturalistic associations between character and actor.

¹⁵⁰ See *The Viewpoints Book* (1995) by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau.

Whereas *Arms and the Man* utilized a box set to engender a realistic reading of the performance, *Big Love* made use of the entire 7,150 square feet of playing space to allow for large-scale physical gestures that could serve as a metaphor for emotional internal conflict. In his interview with Price, Ingulsrud warns that “[c]ast members may throw things, including pots and pans and eggs” (qtd. in Price “*Big*”). In general, scenic design for *Big Love* was sparse and, lacking a traditional single designer, consisted of a hodge-podge of old borrowed gymnasium tumbling mats, a bathtub, and installations composed of prop and scene shop scraps lifted from past LSU Theatre Department and Swine Palace shows. Costumes (co-designed by Polly Boersig and Rana Webber) were likewise simple and used strategically to emphasize character archetypes while allowing for a rigorously physical approach to performance. All actors in the play went barefoot to further highlight the purposefully unfinished look of the production but also allow performers an ability to move freely on the large gymnasium tumbling mats, signifying the importance of physical gestural work in relation to the development of character and story over an illusionistic or realistic portrayal.

The effect was not lost on J.D. Ventura who provides the only review of the production. Ventura describes the play itself “as more of a premise than a plot” and goes on to argue that “[i]t’s merely a rough outline to chaotically explore a multitude of disparate themes” (Ventura, “*Big Love*” 1C). As is perhaps not surprising given his wholesale promotion of realism in *Arms and the Man*, Ventura finds fault with nonrealistic approaches to character and staging in *Big Love*. “[T]raditionalists bewarned [*sic*],” Ventura cautions. “But for those not frightened by such defiance of convention surrendering to the spectacle can be liberating” (Ventura, “*Big Love*” 1C). Ventura specifically disapproves of the “pot

and pan throwing freak out and body-slamming cathartic conniption fit” (about which Ingulsrud cautioned spectators in his interview with Price), interpreting both moments (I am led to assume) as emotional outbursts grounded in cause and effect motives rather than as external, physicalized metaphors of internal emotional struggles (Ventura, “*Big Love*” 2C).

The physically based nontraditional approach Ingulsrud encouraged in the LSU production of *Big Love* was perhaps most effective in the staging of the climactic wedding scene wherein the fifty brides attempt to murder the fifty grooms following the ceremony. While Ingulsrud did not cast fifty brides or fifty grooms and the script does not necessarily call for such a large ensemble (yet it does leave the possibility open), spectators are to assume that in addition to Thyona, Olympia, Lydia, Oed, Nikos, and Constantine there exists forty-seven other refugee brides and forty-seven other usurping groomsmen. In blocking the scene, Ingulsrud had the three brides (Thyona, Olympia, and Lydia) assume a prominent place on the tumbling mats in preparation for the wedding and events that would follow as three white bridal dresses descended from the grid, and Macy Gray’s song *Sexual Revolution* began to play over the speakers. The three refugee brides stepped into their respective gowns and were quickly joined by Oed, Constantine, and Nikos—still to the opening of Gray’s track, characterized by string instruments and softly sung vocals. At the point in the song where the music turns from a ballad-like hymn to a beat-driven dance piece and Gray announces, “this is my sexual revolution,” the performers indicated through gesture-work that they no longer represented Thyona, Olympia, Lydia, Oed, Nikos, and Constantine but six of the other unnamed brides and grooms. The three unnamed brides simultaneously murdered the three unnamed grooms using very specific “video game-like”

violent gestures.¹⁵¹ Once all of the grooms had fallen lifelessly onto the mat, the brides switched places with each other and signified again through gesture-work that they now represented three different unnamed brides. The grooms rose from the stage floor and likewise indicated that they now represented three different unnamed grooms. Each bride again murdered her respective groom, using different but also specific video game-like violent gestures. The sequence repeated and continued, always in a fast-paced chaotic but controlled fashion for close to three and half minutes, until spectators had witnessed more than fifty deaths. The scene sought to refuse a universal reading of character and identity as Ingulsrud's intent was that each bride and each groom should possess a discreetly unique identity and that each couple should have a discreetly unique relationship.

Through Brechtian-style gesture-work and a body-based approach to acting, the six performers came to represent more than 100 characters each with separate identities. Such a process allowed the LSU production of *Big Love* to point to the ways in which identity is constructed in and through performance yet muted race and highlighted gender as an active signifier. Like the previous production of *Arms and the Man*, the LSU Department of Theatre's *Big Love* also lacked a post-show discussion component. Although I cannot offer an account of all or even a majority of audience reactions, spectators I spoke to after the show were provoked by the host/refugee relationships presented onstage—having taken in strangers themselves or deciding that like Piero opening their homes to strangers was too great a risk—but made no mention of race. While Ingulsrud did not employ cross-gender casting in *Big Love* (as was the case in previous productions he staged for Swine Palace,

¹⁵¹ The LSU Theatre Department Production of *Big Love* warned spectators that the performance contained “nudity, video game-like violence, and adult situations” (*Big Love* Poster).

including *Death of a Salesman* and *The Laramie Project*), cross-racial casting encouraged a defamiliarization between actor and character that allowed spectators to see race and then see past race to focus on gender.

The practice of casting without limits as Schechner understands it is transgressive in that it possesses the capability to expose the boundaries through which identity is constructed. In the case of *Big Love* “casting without limits” did not necessarily reveal the social, material, and historical boundaries which construct notions of identity but the limits of a transgressive casting practice. As Hendry and Edwards argue in *Old South Baton Rouge: The Roots of Hope*, racial identity in Baton Rouge is characterized by hybridity (10). Finding myself cast against type in terms of ethnicity, age, and perhaps even sexuality, I approached the character of Piero not through realistic acting techniques but a critical process of defamiliarization that was meant to inspire a dialogic, hybridized reading of identity in performance. I was encouraged by Ingulsrud to create a vocal and physical gestural mask that could point to the character of Piero without necessarily forcing me to stand in for Piero. While such an approach to acting denies an oversimplification of the performer with the role, I do not expect that spectators saw past my perceivably white, eastern European face to imagine an Italian mask or even a Slovakian-Italian hybrid. Distance created by the type of aesthetic Ingulsrud employed in *Big Love* grounded in a transgressive nontraditional approach to casting, character, and staging facilitated a reading of gender identity in relation to the social, material and historical boundaries which construct notions of identity even as it denied a similar reading of other identity factors, including (but not limited to) ethnic and racial identity. Had a black actor been cast in the role of Piero a different reading of character and identity would have certainly emerged—

perhaps even one related to notions of creolization. Creolization according to Hendry and Edwards is a process of hybridization that “destabilizes the traditional binary (black and white) view of race” and as a practice of culture blending has historically provided minority communities in Baton Rouge and South Louisiana with tools for transgressing dominant structures and subverting discourses of domination (10-11). However, I imagine that even a creolized character mask would have created a critical defamiliarizing effect in *Big Love* that would have served to highlight the way in which *gender* identity is constructed in and through performance—as that is perhaps Mee’s intent.

Transgressive nontraditional casting practices both facilitate and fail an ethics of tolerance in inclusiveness in local and regional cultures. Such an approach to staging also reveals which identity markers are most significant to the construction of individual and cultural identity in the US and which do not equally represent normative limits. Whereas critics of nontraditional casting tend to focus on problems which arise in production in relation to racial and gender identity, casting against age seems to go unnoticed, possibly because it does not hold the same material and symbolic significance. While many community-based, college, professional, and amateur productions employ nontraditional casting out of necessity, others involve a more purposeful assignment of roles against type to make specific socio-political statements, promote multiculturalism, or create critical distance between the performer and the character—the spectator and the text. Regardless of usage or intent, nontraditional casting increases performance opportunities for minority actors. However, it is sometimes at the expense of tolerance and inclusivity. An unexamined practice of nontraditional casting risks replicating normalizing discourses and discourses of domination in local and regional culture—as was the case in *Arms and the Man*. Yet, even a

more critically grounded practice of “casting without limits” cannot necessarily topple systems of domination or abolish normalizing discourses. Although transgression, according to Stallybrass and White, seeks to undo the “discursive hierarchies” involved in the construction of identity, it is not, they argue, in and of itself politically progressive. Transgression—and by extension a transgressive casting practice—cannot by itself destroy the material and symbolic boundaries which order identity. As Ania Loomba contends, “casting alone cannot change the meaning of ‘color’ and identity on stage” (xvi). While it is naïve to expect a transgressive nontraditional “casting without limits” approach to undo identity, it can encourage spectators and practitioners to interrogate normative boundaries and normalizing discourses surrounding notions of identity. Casting two white siblings alongside a third perceivably African American sibling in *Big Love* perhaps challenged spectators to confront traditional, conservative notions of a family unit even though it did not contest or reveal the social and historical discourses surrounding race and racism or become the primary subject of the play.

Theatre in general as a cultural product and producer of culture provides a critical pedagogical function. Transgressive theatrical practices in service of critical pedagogy can, to borrow Henry Giroux’s words, expand “the possibilities of a democratic politics, the dynamics of resistance, and the capacities of social agency” (Giroux 60). Socially, politically, and aesthetically transgressive performance practices fall victim to the bounds of transgression, on the one hand, and exploit the pedagogical possibilities of transgression, on the other. As they reveal and conceal, reflect and produce, counter and promote normalizing discourses and discourses of domination in local and regional culture, transgressive theatrical practices cannot be detached from ethics. And while transgression as a structuring

concept does not, as Foucault argues, “seek to oppose one thing to another” (Foucault, *Preface*), transgressive alternative theatre, queer erotic performance, and nontraditional casting practices have—within the material and historical contexts of production—provided theatre practitioners with tools for staging resistance. In the following chapter I return to the challenge Wallace initiates to determine if sparks generated in local and regional culture by transgressive theatrical practices have made a light to see by for all of us.

Chapter 5. The Arc of Transgression: Conclusions, Questions, and an Epilogue

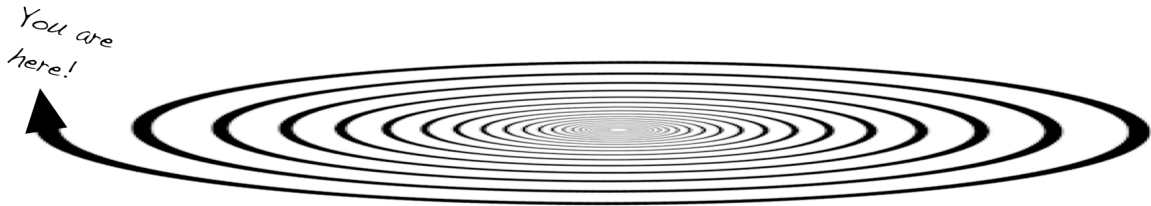


Figure 5. Schematic Diagram: Chapter 5

"You can blow out a candle
But you can't blow out a fire.
Once the flames begin to catch,
The Wind will blow it higher." — Peter Gabriel

I began my consideration of the (im)possibilities of theatre and transgression by referencing Naomi Wallace's call to action published in the November 2008 issue of *American Theatre*. "Let us transgress together," Wallace writes, "and by this heat, by the sparks that are generated, make a light to see by for all of us" (102). Building on the work of bell hooks, Wallace calls for a pedagogy of playwriting that encourages playwrights to engage in a type of "self transgression" in pursuit of "critical awareness" (Wallace qtd. in 100). Transgression for Wallace, via hooks, is a boundary-oriented phenomenon connected to identity. Teaching to transgress according to hooks is a radical pedagogical "practice of freedom" that asks students to step outside their own lived experiences to question the status quo (hooks 1-12). Wallace champions the type of transgression hooks advocates because of its ability to offer playwrights and practitioners tools for testing the limits of individual and cultural identity in the service of freedom. Historically, however, acts of transgression have led to the expansion *and* suppression of democratic rights. As I argued in the first chapter,

even a cursory look into the past proves that acts of transgression have been carried out in the name of freedom as well as oppression (e.g., The Boston Tea Party, Rosa Parks and the Civil Rights Bus Boycott, Stonewall Riots, Indian Removal Act, the Attack on Fort Sumter, The Holocaust). To interrogate the type of leftist/pluralist ethic Wallace's appeal implies, I have looked to a specific lineage of critical thinking on transgression represented by Bataille, Foucault, and Stallybrass and White. Taken together, Bataille's concept of transgression which suggests a type of violent interrogation of the limit that simultaneously reifies the limit, Foucault's idea of transgression which involves a revelation of limits that signifies difference, and Stallybrass and White's idea of transgression which gestures toward subversive practices that solidify and reorder cultural identity by blurring the limits structuring hierarchical discourse, have facilitated my examination of the type of aesthetically and politically transgressive theatrical practices that push toward a more plural and radical concept of democracy.

Notably, Bataille, Foucault, and Stallybrass and White argue that transgression occupies a prominent place in the history of Western culture and contemporary thought. For Bataille an encounter with limits and a desire to transgress limits drives life (Bataille 38-39). Transgression intertwines with the erotic and forms the core of human experience, according to Bataille, as the need to continually test limits results from the absolute limit represented by death (40-48). While Foucault's concept of transgression differs from that of Bataille, Foucault finds in the roots of Bataille's work a promising future for transgression—one "in which the interrogation of the limit replaces the search for totality" (Foucault, "Preface" 455). For Foucault a philosophy of transgression can serve a post-structuralist framework by replacing Hegelian dialectical thought characterized by contradiction and synthesis

(Foucault, “Preface” 455). Although the fruit of transgression for Foucault rests merely in the interrogation of limits (where meaning is derived from the simultaneous juxtaposition of the limit and the taboo that transgresses it), Stallybrass and White find transgression to be implicit in the formation of cultural identity (Stallybrass and White 200). Stallybrass and White seek to situate transgression within a framework of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque and symbolic inversion theories, contending that throughout history hierarchy inversion has countered bourgeois hegemonic discourse (201). More recent post-millennial studies grounded in transgression by Anthony Julius and Chris Jenks also find transgression to be an important and timely topic. Both Julius and Jenks argue that discourses surrounding notions of transgressivity have structured concepts of modernity and postmodernity.

In *(Im)possibilities of Theatre and Transgression* I have claimed space for the discipline of theatre to participate in critical discourses on transgression. What does or does not constitute an act of transgression varies geographically and temporally. Although a popular understanding of transgression might best be described as the crossing of a line, a boundary, or a commandment, transgression accrues significance when the line being crossed represents a normative limit. From theft to incest, cross-dressing to terrorism, pornography to murder, and beyond, a seemingly limitless number of limits render disparate actions, behaviors, and cultural products transgressive in the contemporary United States. My study has not sought to engage in the vast and perhaps ever-expanding repertoire of transgressivity but, taking a cue from Wallace, has focused on the type of aesthetically, socially, and politically transgressive theatrical practices that seek to interrogate and challenge boundaries related to individual and cultural identity—pushing toward a more

plural and radical concept of democracy—and are endemic to present day US theatres located on the cultural fringe.

Through an examination of alternative theatre, queer erotic performance, and nontraditional casting in Austin and Baton Rouge, I have argued that transgressive theatrical practices both counter and reproduce normalizing discourses and discourses of domination in local and regional culture. In chapter 2, I contended that the brand of alternative theatre performed by the now defunct Austin-based company Frontera encouraged spectators and participants to think critically about the “alternative” and the “mainstream” while simultaneously drawing on and contributing to concepts that preserve the alternative/mainstream theatre binary. Difficult-to-sustain transgressive do-it-yourself grassroots performance practices associated with radical-rebel alternative theatre often maintained the status quo by reinforcing the very boundaries they sought to challenge. While Austin's radical-rebel theatres resisted the consumer model of theatre associated with larger institutionalized regional and commercial organizations, they capitalized on the spirit of transgression Austin marketed as an identity during the nineties. In chapter 3, I shifted to an examination of Naughty Austin, an LGBTQ focused theatre company located in Austin that employed transgressive exploitative practices and commercial conventions associated with gay pornography in the performance of queer erotic narratives to attract and titillate spectators but also provide a springboard for collective action and highlight the ways in which bodies serve as sites of knowledge involved in the construction and deconstruction of identity. I placed the Naughty Austin production of Ronnie Larsens's play *Making Porn* within the context of a history of the gay pornographic film industry in the US to contend that gay porn operates and develops both as a money-making endeavor and as an expression

of queer freedom/power and that *Making Porn* staged this present day/historical tension. While Naughty Austin's production of *Making Porn*, on the one hand, served a positively transgressive, political and identity-affirming function within local and regional culture through explicitly sexual public performances that celebrated a gay erotic identity; on the other, it participated in a compromised capitalist/misogynist market of transgression that profits from the exclusion and oppression of women. In chapter 4, I moved from an examination of theatre in Austin, the Texas State capital, to an exploration of Swine Palace, the only Equity theatre company located in the capital city of Louisiana, Baton Rouge, to argue that transgressive nontraditional casting practices both facilitate and fail an ethics of tolerance and inclusiveness in local and regional culture. Unlike Frontera and Naughty Austin, Swine Palace has not identified as “edgy.” Yet, socially, politically, and aesthetically transgressive performance practices have helped Swine Palace serve an important pedagogical and civic function within Baton Rouge in a way that left the company uniquely poised to respond to the crises that followed Hurricane Katrina. Whereas transgressive nontraditional casting in *Arms and the Man* imposed a multicultural cast on a white standard (replicating cultural imperialism and promoting discourses of domination), those utilized in a production of *Big Love* demonstrated the critical limits of a transgressive nontraditional “casting without limits” approach to staging.

Although transgressive alternative theatre, queer erotic performance, and nontraditional casting have most certainly generated sparks in local and regional contexts, I do not imagine that they have made a light to see by for all of us. In this final chapter I look to a production I directed for the initial Outworks festival in 2006 to suggest that transgressive theatrical practices often accrue significance in relation to each other and rely

in part on processes of defamiliarization to achieve the type of impact Wallace champions. I suggest additional theatrical sites which might better reveal the promises and pitfalls of a critically defamiliarizing postmodern approach to performance. I then consider differences between that which spectators in Austin and Baton Rouge generally consider transgressive to argue that the status of transgression affects what transpires onstage as well as the critical impact of performance outside the theater walls. Placing Louisiana's capital city alongside Texas's capital city reveals important, if not unsettling, insights into relationships between theatre and transgression that require further examination. My dissertation provides a starting point and framework for addressing questions related to intersections between performance and transgression that are currently outside the scope of my study. In conclusion, I look to other studies related to theatre, performance, and transgression and revisit Foucault's "A Preface to Transgression" to articulate a trajectory for a future project that will investigate the ways in which transgression achieved significance through currencies of performance, participating in the construction and deconstruction of individual and cultural identity at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. I then end with an epilogue that performatively gestures toward the impact this dissertation has and will continue to have on my performance work.

To a large extent I have engaged in the *(Im)possibilities of Theatre and Transgression* with the goal of ensuring that my performance practices carry a critical punch by encouraging theatre makers and theatregoers to interrogate normative boundaries and normalizing discourses. Of the many various types of transgressive theatrical practices, I have dealt with three that seek to test the boundaries of identity by pushing them in more plural and radical directions through rhetorical and authenticating conventions of

performance. My focus on alternative theatre, queer erotic performance, and nontraditional casting has not been coincidental, however, as these practices continue to guide and inform my work in the theatre. Through participation in Outworks, the festival of LGBTQ themed new plays I developed at LSU during my time as a graduate student, I have had opportunities to experiment with all three. In general, I modeled Outworks on my previous experiences with DIY grassroots performance festivals like Fronterafest and *Mi Casa Es Su Teatro*. To borrow RAT founder Erik Ehn's words, Outworks encouraged an "everyone does everything" way of working.¹⁵² While I curated Outworks 2006 and Outworks 2007 and co-curated Outworks 2008, Outworks 2009, 2010, and 2011 have evolved under the guidance of others.

When I oversaw the festival, it included six to seven original plays that were chosen by a committee composed of undergraduate Theatre majors, MFA in Acting students, PhD theatre students, Theatre faculty members, and Outworks directors and performers. We distributed a nation-wide call for scripts six to eight months prior to production, receiving more than 250 submissions the first year and only slightly fewer the following two years. Outworks 2006 consisted of three bills, whereas 2007 and 2008 consisted of only two. "Bill A" and "Bill B" were each composed of three different ten- to thirty-minute plays. The third bill (only a part of the initial festival) featured a reading of a full-length musical. Each bill performed in rep throughout the week-long run and then back-to-back on the final Sunday. For Outworks 2006 the LSU Theatre Department provided the playwrights of the chosen pieces with funding for travel to Baton Rouge. In subsequent years playwrights have received monetary rewards in lieu of travel. While under my direction, Outworks utilized a

¹⁵² In "Up Front: A Gargle of Rats" (*Theater*, 1995), Ehn argues that RAT is built on a "everyone does everything" model of work.

system of casting that differed from other LSU productions in that we selected an ensemble of ten performers before choosing which plays to produce. Members of the ensemble often performed multiple roles in various pieces and when not utilized onstage worked backstage running lights and sound, moving set pieces, etc. As curator I too wore multiple hats.

During the first three Outworks seasons, I directed a production for the festival. A look at the first play I staged for Outworks, *Down Baby Down* by Dan Basila, can illustrate the ways in which all three practices—radical alternative theatre, queer erotic performance, and nontraditional casting—often derive meaning from and contribute to a reading of the production in and through each other, not as separate practices in the way suggested by the chapter structure I have chosen for *(Im)possibilities of Theatre and Transgression*.

The script for *Down Baby Down* features only two characters, Madhu and Jeremiah, a gay couple—one of whom is nine months pregnant—caught in a world void of traditional narrative and cause and effect. In a note that precedes the play, Basila describes the piece “as a refusal to engage the reductive and destructive dialogues surrounding the marriage of same sex couples and their capacity to rear children” (Basila 3). To this end, Basila renders the *mise-en-scène* in a “kaleidoscopic and messianic” manner that allows for every possibility and no possibilities to simultaneously exist in the same space, one where “all of time is compressed into a single night, a night when Madhu finds himself pregnant—or is an adopted baby arriving from Singapore?—nine months of gestation pass, and a (gay) baby is placed under the Christmas tree” (3). In such an environment, Jeremiah (Madhu’s partner) can in good faith make the claim that “we’ve been pregnant forever and never” (10). While the script itself queers ideas associated with birth, adoption, and the family unit, in order to further destabilize a reading of gay identity and gay eroticism we utilized a type of

nontraditional casting by enlisting four actors, two male student-performers for the roles of Madhu and Jeremiah and two-female student performers, one to represent the baby and another to voice the actions and feelings of the two male characters, alongside a movement-based, metaphorical approach to staging. Our production of *Down Baby Down* did not employ nudity or explicit sexual interactions. Rather, given the local cultural contexts we chose to represent conception through a simple kiss, which (transgressive in and of itself on the southern conservative LSU campus) received various responses ranging from disgust to empathy.¹⁵³ Different-sized sport balls signified phases of pregnancy. Throughout the performance, Madhu held a basketball and then an exercise ball in front of his stomach as if cradling his pregnant belly. At one point, Madhu threw the ball to Jeremiah. For a brief moment the two switched positions. Jeremiah bore the burden of carrying the child, giving Madhu a short reprieve. When Madhu finally birthed the baby— “[I]like a pop” (Basila 14)—a ballerina emerged from a trunk with shaky, colt-like legs.

In *Down Baby Down*, transgressive theatrical practices worked alongside each other to encourage a critical reading of same-sex desire in relation to a more traditional understanding of the nuclear family. The type of non-naturalistic aesthetic practices employed in staging further advanced the political aims of the text. Rendering processes of conception and childbirth through a theatrical lens opened concepts of the nuclear family to same sex-articulation, on the one hand, while suggesting more cynically, on the other, that the happy nuclear family is itself a theatricalized fantasy. Viewed through a framework of

¹⁵³ As many classes require students to see *Outworks*, several student-spectators that would not normally attend an LGBTQ focused festival could be found in the audience. In the past I have witnessed some students cover their eyes or even groan in disapproval at the sight of same sex interactions onstage, which have included simple caresses, more intimate kisses, full to partial nudity, and simulated intercourse.

cohesion rather than opposition, it is perhaps possible to see how transgressive theatrical practices which seek the type of impact Wallace champions rely in part on processes of defamiliarization to encourage a critical examination of the performance text. A more thorough look at the ways in which transgressive theatrical practices have achieved legibility in and through each other in relation to processes of defamiliarization, asking spectators and practitioners to interrogate normative boundaries and normalizing discourses, can provide further insight into the critical and pedagogical possibilities and impossibilities of theatre and transgression.

While process of defamiliarization are often associated with Bertolt Brecht's conceptualization of an alienating or distancing effect, transgressive theatrical practices do not necessarily or always alienate or distance the audience from the performance in the way that Brecht imagines.¹⁵⁴ Queer erotic pornographic performance practices possess potential to engender psycho-emotional-physical-sexual responses from patrons yet also encourage critical engagement through processes of defamiliarization that trouble divisions between distance and empathy. A look at Charles Mee's work in general and his collaborations with SITE more specifically might better reveal the promises and pitfalls of a critically defamiliarizing postmodern approach to performance grounded in a number of transgressive practices that build on and depart from Brecht's writings. Mee's belief that "[t]here is no such thing as an original play" has led him to "pillage the plays . . . of Euripides and Brecht and stuff out of Soap Opera Digest and the evening news and the internet" in ways that defy a traditional dramatic structure and process of scriptwriting ("About the (Re)making

¹⁵⁴ See "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect" for a concise explanation of the alienation effect in relation to processes of distancing and defamiliarization. See *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* edited and translated by John Willet for a more thorough grounding.

Project”).¹⁵⁵ The SITI company’s approach to staging grounded in Suzuki and Viewpoints training techniques further obfuscates a single or unified reading of narrative also undermining the authority of the play text.¹⁵⁶ Focus SITI places on “the teaching of [their] training techniques . . . to actors and theatre artists throughout the United States and the world” speaks directly to the pedagogical aims of the company’s transgressive theatrical practice (“Overview”). While the SITI company’s body-based anti-realistic aesthetic creates a type of distance onstage between character and performer, performance and text, I have found that it also engenders an emotional-physical response that defies traditional critical analysis. A study focused on transgression in relation to the SITI company and processes of defamiliarization and distance might more productively interrogate the critical limits and political potential of a Brechtian-based transgressive theatrical practice.

While a local and regional focus best serves a study of transgression (as transgression is a site-specific phenomenon which draws meaning from and contributes to local and regional culture, identity, and social norms), my concentration on performances located in Austin and Baton Rouge also serves a more practical purpose. Although I have lived outside of Austin and Baton Rouge, in general my performance practice and identity as a theatre practitioner has been formed and shaped in connection with these two capital cities. While Austin sports an image of “speed and attitude” by marketing a bohemian or alternative “Keep Austin Weird” subculture that on the surface celebrates transgression, Baton Rouge, a petrochemical center and working class capital city, has fought an image of stagnancy and sloth. What is or is not considered transgressive differs between the two

¹⁵⁵ Mee explains his approach to playwriting in a note titled “About the (Re)making Project” included on his website.

¹⁵⁶ See the “Overview” page on the SITI website under training for information regarding their pedagogy and methodology.

cities and affects what transpires onstage and the critical impact of performance outside the theater walls. As I note in chapter 3, public nudity was perhaps the status quo in the theatres of Austin. Seeing a naked body onstage in the Texas capital city was par for the course through the late nineties and into the twenty-first century. And while a number of spectators and practitioners were comfortable with nakedness, interviews Austin-based arts reporter Ada Calhoun conducted with local performers reveals apprehensions surrounding the queer gaze and the eroticization of the naked male body in performance (Calhoun). Naughty Austin's production of *Making Porn* was transgressive not because it involved nakedness but because it presented eroticized queer bodies engaged in sexual(ized) activities. In Baton Rouge, public nudity itself is a transgressive practice that breaks social and cultural norms.¹⁵⁷ Naughty Austin's production of *Making Porn* which in the local and regional contexts of Austin takes nudity as a typical practice and queer eroticization as an exception would read differently in Baton Rouge due to existing taboos in Louisiana's capital city regarding the naked body in performance.

If staged in Baton Rouge, I imagine Naughty Austin's production of *Making Porn* would reveal less the possibilities and more the impossibilities of transgression. Depending upon the circumstances of the individual production, nudity outside of a queer sexualized context could as a transgressive theatrical practice in Baton Rouge possess potential to critically impact spectators in a positively productive way. As an extreme instance of

¹⁵⁷ For an example of the way in which public nudity has remained taboo in Baton Rouge see "Photos Removed from Art Opening" (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 2009) by Sandy Davis, "Art Melt Removes Nude Art Before Friday Opening" (*225 Magazine*, Baton Rouge, 2009) and "Forum 35 Issues Official Apology" (*225 Magazine*, Baton Rouge) by Rebecca Breeden. For an example of the way in which nudity onstage has been received in Baton Rouge see "Rise to Challenge, *Metamorphoses* Production Tackles Tough Scenes" (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 2006) by Ed Cullen and "Swine Palace Reviving the Age of Aquarius" (*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge, 2008) by Robin Miller.

nudity, however, the queer eroticized naked male body might sensationalistically limit any positively transgressive, political, and/or identity-affirming function within local and regional culture. Yet, the reverse is also true. While nudity remains transgressive in Baton Rouge and can impact audiences in a manner that counters and reproduces normalizing discourses and discourses of domination regionally and locally, in Austin, nudity (as a standard theatrical practice which Calhoun finds to be more or less passé) perhaps lacks critical punch. Placing Louisiana's capital city alongside Texas's capital city reveals important, if not unsettling, insights into relationships between theatre and transgression that require further examination. To what extent do transgressive theatrical practices participate in processes of desensitization, requiring a growing repertoire of transgressivity to sustain critical impulses? What is the relationship between defamiliarization and desensitization? Are transgressive theatrical practices merely a reflection of a capitalist system that continually hungers for an ever-expanding menu to feed its proclivity for consumption? Is transgression a necessarily self-perpetuating or a self-defeating process where the transgression of a limit only creates more limits to be transgressed? I next look to other studies related to theatre, performance and transgression and then revisit Foucault's "A Preface to Transgression" to articulate a trajectory for a future research project that will investigate the ways in which transgression achieved significance through currencies of performance, participating in the construction and deconstruction of individual and cultural identity at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, before moving on to an epilogue that performatively demonstrates the impact this dissertation has and will continue to have on my performance work.

While *(Im)Possibilities of Theatre and Transgression* does not seek to answer all questions regarding the complex relationship between theatre and transgression, it does offer a starting-point and framework for staging future interrogations. Taken separately or together, chapters 2 through 4 can provide a springboard for launching a genealogical investigation into the types of transgressive theatrical practice each examines. Many historical and contemporary theatrical sites within and outside the US can further serve a study of theatre and transgression. In “Bodies at Play: A General Economy of Performance,” Dorothy Holland looks to competing naturalistic and presentational approaches to acting in the nineteenth century, performances staged by the Living Theatre, and two post-millennial all-female productions of Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew* and *Richard III* to argue that theatre has historically been associated with transgression (197-208). I suspect that widening the research to include cross-disciplinary practices of performance will further yield unique results. Chris Jenks, in a chapter entitled “Journey Into the End of Night” included in *Transgression* (2003), gestures toward the historical avant-garde as a transgressive performance tradition rich in revelations (135-160). Jenks primarily focuses on Surrealism, Dada, Pataphysics, and the Situationists, foregoing discussion of Symbolism, Expressionism, or Futurism. While I am skeptical of the way in which Jenks renders a history of the avant-garde as that which leads to and departs from Artaud as a central figure and is reticent to draw steadfast conclusions between the micro-level of production and the macro-level of the socio-political milieu of WWI and WWII, I agree with his reading of the potential of avant-garde movements to “test our mechanisms of boundary maintenance” (160). As a series of disparate but overlapping and boundary-blurring transgressive, art-, performance-, and literary-based approaches to aesthetic

production which emerged in the early twentieth century outside of the US, the historical avant-garde has left its mark on aesthetic practices grounded in transgression.

Writing in 1963 in “A Preface to Transgression,” Foucault expressed his hope for the critical prospect of transgression while suggesting that transgression had yet to find an avenue for critical expression:

[W]ithout any sense of the impropriety of “thoughtlessly adding to language a word that surpasses all words” or any clear sense that it places us at the limits of all possible languages—a singular experience is shaped: that of transgression. Perhaps one day [transgression] will seem as decisive for our culture, as much a part of its soil, as the experience of contradiction was an earlier time for dialectical thought. But in spite of so many scattered signs, the language in which transgression will find its space and the illumination of its being lies almost entirely in the future. (Foucault, “A Preface” 445)

The relationship between transgression and language, then, is an important one for Foucault.

On the one hand, the experience of transgression is beyond words (think *un petit mort*), revealing the limits of language. On the other, transgression, as a process which signifies meaning through difference, structures an experience of language. Foucault’s flash of lightning which pierces the night sky contributes to an understanding of light and dark. However, light and dark do not necessarily represent opposite sides of a coin for Foucault. Foucault does not imagine that difference is structured through opposition but through an ongoing process related to transgression. Lacking the language to describe complicated relationships between transgression and meaning, Foucault offers the image of a spiral, where meaning is continually negotiated and renegotiated through transgression. “[W]e must find a language for the transgressive,” Foucault ultimately argues, “which would be what dialectics was, in an earlier time, for contradiction” (449). Whereas Jenks is skeptical of Foucault’s project, seeing in it “the early traces of a post-modern manifesto” (Jenks 92),

I find in Foucault's work fertile ground for a future study of relationships between transgression and performance.

Although *(Im)Possibilities of Theatre and Transgression* has not endeavored to answer Foucault's call, it does offer a scaffold for arguing that transgression takes performance as a language for testing the limits of identity. In previous chapters I have suggested that transgressive theatrical practices have drawn on and contributed to local and regional understandings of identity in Austin and Baton Rouge. Throughout the nineties practices of transgression helped Austin's brand of alternative theatre achieve legibility, creating and reflecting a subculture in Austin that celebrated transgression. At the end of the twentieth century, radical-rebel theatre was less the exception and more the rule in Austin. Coopted by mainstream culture, Austin's radical-rebel subculture became the primary means through which the city has identified and marketed itself. As an LGBT focused theatre, Naughty Austin self-consciously creates and reflects a gay subculture in Austin. Relying on conventions associated with gay pornography, Naughty Austin has provided public space within the Texas capital city for the expression of a gay erotic identity rooted in dissident sexual practices. As the only Equity theatre in Baton Rouge, Swine Palace enjoys a level of legitimacy not shared by Frontera and Naughty Austin and therefore participates differently in local and regional discourses. The dual focus Swine Palace places on education and community-minded productions has allowed the company an opportunity to engage in transgressive theatrical practices in the service of a broader pedagogical mission. Although nontraditional casting practices employed purposefully and out of necessity by Swine Palace have not changed the meaning of identity onstage, they participate for better or worse in local and regional notions of identity. Looking to other sites of performance outside of

theatre will provide further insight into the ways in which transgression has become inextricably intertwined with performance to test and cement normative and dissident practices of identity.

An examination of trends in contemporary pop music in general and Lady Gaga's performance of identity in particular might be better poised to address questions related to performance and the voracious appetite of transgression. Having studied acting for at least six years before achieving pop music fame, Gaga demonstrates an acute awareness of the conventions of performance.¹⁵⁸ Gaga herself admits to going virtually unnoticed when she first started out in the music business performing in bars and clubs throughout New York under her given name, Stefani Germanotta (Stein and Michelson 1). It was not until she employed a sensibility associated with her alternate identity that she began receiving recognition. On the night Germanotta claims to have birthed her "Lady Gaga" persona, she was playing her usual set without much fanfare. Craving more attention, she removed her skirt and shirt and finished the performance in fish net stockings with all eyes on her (Stein and Michelson 1). Seemingly senseless acts of transgression meant to inspire shock and awe have continued to characterize Gaga's career. For the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards Gaga appeared in a dress made entirely of raw meat.¹⁵⁹ In interviews, Gaga has made the claim that her "whole life is a performance" and that she "ha[s] to up the ante everyday" (qtd. Stein and Michelson.) In an article written by Joshua David Stein and Noah Michelson published in the August 2009 issue of *Out* magazine, the authors note that Gaga is in complete control of her music and her image, serving "as dramaturge, choreographer, and

¹⁵⁸ My understanding of Lady Gaga and her career draws on an article written by Joshua David Stein and Noah Michelson published in the August 2009 issue of *Out* magazine.

¹⁵⁹ For photos and public responses to Gaga's raw meat outfit ranging from praise to disgust see "Lady Gaga's Meat Dress: Offensive Or Awesome?" in *The Huffington Post*.

star” (Stein and Michelson 2). Notably, Gaga sees herself as a “synthesis” of every prior avant-garde tradition (Stein and Michelson 1-3). Ann Powers of the *Los Angeles Times* affirms Gaga’s self-concept, referring to Gaga as “more like a collection of quotes than a singular performer” (qtd. in Stein and Michelson 3). According to Stein and Mitchell, Gaga “cannibalizes” her own work and identity as well as that of past artists “to feed” the “[fame] monster” (Stein and Michelson 2). While Gaga’s intent, Stein and Mitchell argue, is to get people to think, I am not sure what it is Gaga wants people to think about. After all, “[a]rt is a lie,” according to Gaga, and “every day [she] kills to make it true.”

Although somewhat ridiculous, Gaga’s comments and self-designed persona grounded in a performance of transgression perhaps confirms Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s fears regarding the current state of transgression. Writing in “Cultural-In-Extremis: Performing Against the Cultural Backdrop of the Mainstream Bizarre” (2004), Gómez-Peña argues that the type of oversexualized, sensationalistic, shocking images and narratives circulated by the mass media which have become a staple of US culture have stripped transgression of any radical political potential. While I do not wholeheartedly agree with Gómez-Peña’s contention that through oversaturation transgression has become nothing more than empty nomenclature (292-294), I am intrigued by the notion. Performance artists like Gómez-Peña who often rely on transgressive practices as a process of defamiliarization have certainly been left in the lurch when placed beside Gaga. As even an initial look at Gaga demonstrates, I have far from exhausted critical questions concerning the contentious relationship between performance and transgression. An examination of the type of widespread commercially and aesthetically produced performances that rely on concepts of transgression to achieve significance warrants further investigation. A study that maintains

focus on the sociopolitical macro-level of production can reveal insight into the ways in which transgression has been made legible through currencies of performance, participating in the construction, deconstruction, and solidification of hegemonic and anti-hegemonic notions of individual and cultural identity locally, regionally, *and* nationally.

Made visible through and fueled by performance, the cycle of transgression which has perhaps, as Gómez-Peña suggests, gained speed in the last twenty or so years continues to affect the current political and economic landscape in the US. And while performance may have become a language for the transgressive, writing about performance using the language of critical discourse will pose problems for historians of transgression. As Diana Taylor argues in the *Archive and the Repertoire*, performance as an embodied practice that derives meaning more from the repertoire and less from the archive resists documentation. Writing about performance ultimately does not stand in for performance. A critical examination of the ways in which transgression achieves legibility through performance that honors the medium of performance may itself transgress models of critical or academic scholarship. And while I am not certain where such a project will lead, I do not imagine it will march behind the torch Wallace raises. Igniting more of a wildfire than a light to see by for all of us, transgression as it has been realized and recycled through aesthetic and commercial art, media, and performance practices at the end of the twentieth- hurtling into the twenty-first-century United States, like the very nature of any wildfire, destroys that which lies in its path, on the one hand, while making way for new growth, on the other.

Session 13: Wormhole 56 C¹⁶⁰

There is the sound of someone pressing the play button on a handheld voice recorder followed by the soft screech of a cassette tape.

MALE VOICE

Session 13.

FEMALE VOICE

Agent 72.

MALE VOICE

And Agent 73.

FEMALE VOICE

Are you ready Joanna?

VOICE OF JOANNA

I . . .

MALE VOICE

There's nothing to worry about.

VOICE OF JOANNA

But where will I . . .

FEMALE VOICE

We will be able to hear you.

MALE VOICE

And you will be able to hear us.

FEMALE VOICE

For a time at least.

¹⁶⁰ I developed a previous version of *Session 13: Wormhole 56 C* as a Doctoral student in the Department of Theatre at Louisiana State University which was published by Austin Script Works in *Cricket Radio: 10 Short Plays for Broadcast* and has been performed live and recorded as a radio play. The earlier version is itself an adaptation of previous writings which were included in *Radio Warp: Destination*, a performance created by SlamInternational for the 2005 Howl Festival. Combining responses I received from colleagues, friends, and family members in regards to a questionnaire I distributed, I crafted various descriptions of wormholes that were then broadcast over a radio station in New York's East Village. *Session 13: Wormhole 56 C* has been rewritten and reprinted here with permission from Austin Script Works (see Appendix B).

MALE VOICE

Any more questions?

Silence.

MALE VOICE

Then we are ready to start.

FEMALE VOICE

10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

There is a mechanical sound, less a bell or a beep and more of a vacuum.

FEMALE VOICE

Joanna? (*Silence.*) Joanna, can you hear me?

VOICE OF JOANNA

Yes, yes I can hear you.

FEMALE VOICE

Good.

VOICE OF JOANNA

Where am I?

MALE VOICE

All clear!

There is the sound of an orgasm of perhaps chirping crickets.

VOICE OF JOANNA

It is thick, heavy, hot and cold, salty and sweet. Like olives roasting in the afternoon sun. I hear laughter, now howling, crickets singing. I'm falling. I'm falling in love—at least three thousand feet. I can't tell. I have an urge to buy cheap souvenirs—the kind sold in souvenir shops. I'm wet. It's raining. No. I am floating. I'm inside a snow globe or a bottle of water. (*Pause.*) Hello?

ECHO

Hello?

VOICE OF JOANNA

Hello?

ECHO

Hello?

Who's there? VOICE OF JOANNA

Who's there? ECHO

Who said that? VOICE OF JOANNA

Who said that? ECHO

Stop it. VOICE OF JOANNA

ECHO *laughs.*

This isn't funny. VOICE OF JOANNA

ECHO *laughs.*

Turn on the lights. VOICE OF JOANNA

Turn on the lights. ECHO

Turn on the fucking lights. VOICE OF JOANNA

Calm down Joanna. MALE VOICE

Find the light. FEMALE VOICE

Follow the light. MALE VOICE

What light. I can't see. I don't want to continue. VOICE OF JOANNA

You have to keep going. MALE VOICE

FEMALE VOICE

There's no other way out.

MALE VOICE

No emergency exits.

Again crickets or orgasm.

A NEW VOICE

What's on your mind?

VOICE OF JOANNA WHO IS NO LONGER JOANNA

I mean, I'm not supposed to talk about it but I guess it's fine right. Because what I say to you is in confidence right? It's just that my lawyer said not to discuss the situation but
. . . I guess it's on my mind. I mean, listen to me. I know this is what's on my mind. I just can't believe I stayed in this dumb fucking town for this crappy ass job and then I got fired. What a joke. What a fucking joke. What a dumb idea. I mean, it was a really dumb idea. But I was getting so good at it. I was getting really good. It was a tough job but it was an important job. Every one said I was getting good at it. It was hard. I mean, I really just translated. But it was still pretty tough work. Even just being in the emergency room listening to all of those stories. All of those cases. I know it doesn't make any sense, but it was harder for me to hear about what happened in Spanish. But now I don't work there. I couldn't handle it emotionally. That's what they said. Six month contract evaluation. "It's not working out. I don't feel like you're able to emotionally handle this type of work." Who the fuck can handle this—emotionally? I mean does any one get off on translating rape?

Again, the sound of chirping crickets or that of an orgasm..

VOICE OF JOANNA

Hello?

ECHO

Hello?

VOICE OF JOANNA

Where am I?

ECHO

Where am I?

VOICE OF JOANNA

Stop it.

ECHO laughs.

Calm down Joanna.	MALE VOICE
You're moving forward.	FEMALE VOICE
Or backward.	MALE VOICE
You're moving on.	FEMALE VOICE
What's next?	VOICE OF JOANNA
What's next?	ECHO
We'll just have to wait.	FEMALE VOICE
Have to wait?	VOICE OF JOANNA
Yes.	MALE VOICE
How long?	VOICE OF JOANNA
We don't know. It's different each time.	FEMALE VOICE
Different each wormhole.	MALE VOICE
And no other way out?	VOICE OF JOANNA
No.	FEMALE VOICE
No.	MALE VOICE

FEMALE VOICE

There's no other way out.

Silence.

Sounds of a cricket orgasm followed by a sharp click. The tape has come to an end or else someone has pressed "stop."

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Appendix A

Letter of Permission, Naughty Austin

April 11, 2011

To whom it may concern,

I, Blake Yelavich, served as Founder, Manager and Production Director for Naughty Austin Theatre Company and Arts On Real Theater, and I verify that I hold the rights to archival photos and images related to Naughty Austin's 2001 production of Ronnie Larsen's play *Making Porn*. I hereby grant Christopher Krejci permission to use the photos/images and related documents in his dissertation.

Please contact me if you should need further assistance or information.

Thank you,

Blake Yelavich
2700 Las Vegas Blvd South
#2808
Las Vegas, Nevada 89109
512-773-3366

Appendix B

Letter of Permission, Scriptworks



p.o. box 9787
austin, tx 78766
512-454-9727
www.scriptworks.org

Christopher Krejci
838 W. Grant St.
Baton Rouge, LA 70802

April 17, 2011

Dear Chris,

I want to assure you that you still own the copyright and all rights to your play *Session 13 Wormhole 56C*. We did not accrue any rights to the play through our publication of it.

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Christina J. Moore
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Member Representative
Aimée Gonzalez

Vita

Christopher Krejci was born and raised in Victoria, Texas. He later moved to Austin where he attended St. Edward's University, earning a bachelor's degree in theatre with an emphasis in acting in the spring of 1999. After a brief stint in New York, he returned to Austin to pursue a Master of Liberal Arts degree at St. Edward's University, which he achieved in the spring of 2004. While in Austin, he taught art, creative-drama, acting, and performance classes at Austin Musical Theatre and Elsass Academy Westlake. He also worked with VSA TX, leading multidisciplinary "Start with The Arts" workshops for children of all abilities. He joined the Department of Theatre at Louisiana State University as a Board of Regents Fellow in the fall of 2004. While at Louisiana State University he taught classes in Introduction to Acting, Introduction to Theatre, Introduction to Dramatic Literature, and Approaches to the Stage: Post-Stanislavski. He also created and curated Outworks, a festival of new lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer themed plays currently in its sixth season at LSU. He has presented research and participated in roundtable discussions at national and regional conferences. Within the Association for Theatre in Higher Education he has served as the Graduate Student Subcommittee Co-Chair, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Focus Group Representative, and the Mentorship Subcommittee Chair. He has taught acting and directing at Playmakers of Baton Rouge, where he sits on the Board of Directors. While working on his dissertation he has been teaching in the Zachary Community School District Talented Arts Program where he creates and implements an individualized theatre curriculum for approximately seventy students in primary and secondary grades.