

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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# Towards a Trans Theatre

SYLVAN OSWALD

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*Against a Trans Narrative*, a 2008 documentary by Jules Rosskam, dismantles the idea of a universal trans story since not everyone ‘knew from an early age’ that they were ‘trapped in the wrong body’.<sup>1</sup> Not only does that narrative fail to encompass a range of trans experience, or the impact transition has on individuals, relationships, families, and communities, but such universal stories regulate gender in time and space with even more vexing binaries (before/after; free/confined; stasis/change; right/wrong). Rosskam’s film combines interviews, staged scenes, and first-person confessionals, rendering its own form mutable, inter-, multi-, and, yes, trans-. Writing about his later film, *Thick Relations* (2012), Rosskam states: ‘I did not use a traditional three-act structure as a way of creating a dramatic tension, nor did I wrap up the film in a way that relieves tension with some personal, or political, triumph’.<sup>2</sup> Because the shape of traditional narratives leaves little space for unruly lives, Rosskam’s refusals may propose a kind of ‘Trans Form’, a term whose meaning I will explore throughout this chapter.

I originally thought of calling this piece ‘Against a Trans Theatre’, but that sounded like there was a Trans Theatre to refute.<sup>3</sup> I was not sure which theatre that would be: the theatre any trans person makes? What if a trans person makes theatre without any trans content? What about gender nonconforming, agender, and other nonbinary people? What about the theatre cis people make about trans people – does that get to be Trans Theatre too? I don’t want to add to the confusion. We know that the phrase, ‘women’s writing’, for instance, was always reductionist and paternalistic. And isn’t ‘queer theatre’ problematically vague? It could mean lesbian, gay, bi, pansexual, asexual, and that’s not even everyone, and not everyone likes the word queer, I panic. I can’t definitively state that Trans Theatre would fall under the umbrella of queer theatre, although that would be convenient. And I don’t want to limit the world’s understanding of the vast territory of transness to theatre made only by trans-identified people about trans-specific content.

Maybe a Trans Theatre is too small an idea. And, if that’s true, what should we be moving towards? This essay invites the reader to join my search for answers to that question. All those who enter here: you will find no definitions. To define Trans Theatre would be to ignore the political aims of many trans artists working today, especially if pronounced from this essay’s authoritative space (white, masculine-identified author, academic anthology, British publisher). Trans Theatre is no movement, it is no trend, it is no one specific thing, but it is, perhaps, a slate of considerations centring process, context, and form.

In this essay, I share my own path of inquiry as a trans playwright who has been writing trans roles since 2000 and who actively seeks anti-racist approaches to dramaturgy. It is written from both a US-American position and one that has focused on dramatic or language-based theatre. By bringing recent theatre history and performance theory together with queer-of-colour and trans art scholarship, I envision a space for ethical engagement with trans theatre artists and their work. Copious endnotes offer more than a syllabus worth of references on this understudied topic. In lieu of proclamations, the essay concludes with a series of prompts. Inspired by prominent trans artists, these prompts invite reflection, creation, advocacy, and generative failure. The dislocation echoed in the Latin origins for ‘trans-’ – meaning across from or beyond – may yield a lifelong experience of difference, on top of the differences one might already experience in a Euro-American pop capitalism saturated with images of white cis people. Every person of ‘majority’ experience must ask themselves if, safety permitting, they can be more honest about any dissonance they may feel, so as to make space for mutual understanding.

### CAN YOU RELATE?

‘Who would do a play if all we wanted was freedom?’ asks the playwright, Agnes Borinsky.<sup>4</sup> Borinsky describes a moment as a young artist when she realized that ‘making theatre and making society might be connected’. ‘What if “freedom” is not actually a helpful word?’ Borinsky continues, referring to an actor’s willingness to exchange personal choice for the obligation to execute lines and blocking. ‘What if “relationality” is more useful, more beautiful, more fun?’

The same could be said for the top-down chain of command to which most of us consent as we take part in theatre production. These power structures, which are constantly forming and dissolving, ensure efficient standardization across a diffuse nationwide field because job descriptions are largely consistent. There is beauty in submitting to this process. There is utility – even fun – in giving up autonomy for the sake of human connection. Borinsky reminds us that we do theatre to commune with others, not for ourselves alone. Commitment to working in relation is what elevates theatre-making to an art of world-building. But what happens when certain parties ignore their role in building a world? Or when ‘community’ goes undefined? ‘More beautiful’ falls by the wayside. Thinking about relationships and relationality unveils the positions of power structures as we perform within them – even positions of indifference.

We must address individual and institutional producers as world-builders in league with artists. Even if the event is an immersive performance, producers set the terms of engagement – they build teams and pay them. They unlock the doors, pay the bills and e-blast their lists. Any notion of a Trans Theatre begins and ends with a producer’s values. This is the work that producers themselves must take on.

I have asked myself if it is time to leave the economy of ‘theatre’ for that of ‘performance’, or if I was now stressing about a false binary. In contrast to traditional narrative theatre (plot- or character-driven plays by playwrights, directed by directors, acted by actors, and produced and paid for by an in-house apparatus), the

label ‘performance’ is often granted to auteurs or ensembles who self-produce their work.<sup>5</sup> ‘Performance’ may imply a hybridity of form (for example, dance-theatre); a redefinition of roles (playwrights become writers not of plays but of text, actors are performers, directors are often creators); or ‘outsider’ perspectives (I think of *Split Britches* welcoming me from a cosy alternate dimension). I grew further confused when I noticed that the art world’s fervent embrace of performance began to include select theatre artists as well as choreographers. Playwright/director Richard Maxwell was getting gigs at the Guggenheim Museum. Special attention seemed to cluster around artists who used spectator participation as a necessary ingredient – casting them as makers, presenters, witnesses, or simply audience. Audience involvement is, of course, nothing new in theatre, nor is casting ‘civilians’.<sup>6</sup> But what struck me was the volume of work in this vein and its orientation away from art-as-object and towards art as a social interaction.

Borinsky’s ‘relationality’ aligns with the term ‘relational aesthetics’, established by the curator Nicholas Bourriaud. Bourriaud describes a range of cultural practices from the 1990s that function inside of ‘the sphere of interhuman relationships’, a major departure for a field historically fuelled by the products of individual genius.<sup>7</sup> Since its publication, Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* has been a touchstone for what has become an entire practice area known as socially engaged or social practice art and performance. It has also been the subject of controversy. The book’s most prominent critic has been Claire Bishop, whose critique centres on its vague parameters for relational work and for omitting consideration of the subject positions of those doing the relating.<sup>8</sup> While Bourriaud is inclined towards viewing participation as democratic, productive, and even utopian, Bishop calls for greater analysis of any relational work’s impact, warning that without a value system, there is no way to discuss whether the work is representing a new perspective or affirming a neoliberal ideology.<sup>9</sup> Even the debate around *Relational Aesthetics* can serve theatre by reminding us, as our own best critics do, that a work’s meaning derives not only from its form and content but also from its context. Where we locate Trans Theatre has a huge impact on how we receive it as a social practice.

Taylor Mac – whose pronoun is either he/him or judy (‘lowercase *sic*’)<sup>10</sup> – is an artist who has cannily moved between producing theatres and alternative presenting spaces, who has exploited both theatre and performance contexts, and who gleefully embraces queer and trans politics. Mac is a polymath whose roots in New York’s cabaret, drag, and burlesque scenes led to a residency with the New York institution, HERE, which presents and supports emerging artists and forms. HERE’s Artist Residency Program (HARP), steered by artistic director Kristin Marting, led to Mac’s breakout, five-hour spectacle, *The Lily’s Revenge* (2009), that took over the entire building, employed five directors, and a 40-person cast. Multiple projects later, Mac’s well-made play, *Hir*, about a household overturning gender norms, received its world premiere at San Francisco’s Magic Theatre (2014). *Hir* features a trans kid, Max, who is stuck in the middle of a dysfunctional and chaotic family. According to a critic writing about an Australian production, Mac ‘reminds us of theatre’s potential: to be a brilliant conduit that makes ideas alive and accessible. *Hir* doesn’t merely explore themes of gender fluidity, queer theory and the subversion of toxic masculinity [. . . but] places them in a family setting and detonates them’.<sup>11</sup>

Lest it seem that Mac's career had landed on an aesthetically traditional path, starting in 2010 the artist had begun to prepare one of the most ambitious projects the field has ever seen. His *A 24-Decade History of Popular Music* (2016) was remarkable in its scope and stands out for its extraordinarily broad reach. The cycle was presented at venues representing downtown and uptown, and nationwide at music halls and vintage movie palaces like Los Angeles's Ace Hotel. Mac and costume designer, Machine Dazzle, were joyously received by critics, and effectively decimated divisions between the arts. Here was an extraordinarily queer, politically radical, extra-large art extravaganza. Mac couldn't have done it without institutions, and they certainly wouldn't have done it without Judy. Perhaps one of Mac's most important achievements in *24-Decade* was setting up an environment that didn't just bathe spectators in liberal pieties but engaged them in a complex reckoning for a complete 24 hours. Through 240 songs, critic Wesley Morris writes: 'We were asked to be racists and homophobes. And act like they would act, to feel how hate feels. But also, in Mr. Mac's way, to feel love and experience the shedding of shame'.<sup>12</sup> Mac's work employs negative empathy by harnessing an audience's formal expectations (of a well-made play or of a big queer spectacle) and confronting them with perhaps unwelcome contradictions (that even 'queer' can oppress in *Hir*, and, in *24-Decade*, like it or not, we can all tap into hate).

Quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, Mac says: 'Identity politics is just not interesting enough to me. That doesn't mean my identity isn't declared or referenced. I'm queer, but the work is not about queerness. It's always there, but it's not the point'.<sup>13</sup> If Mac identifies as queer, what place does Judy have in the Trans Theatre I refuse to define? What role does identifying as queer, but not as explicitly trans, play in Mac's ability to bridge high and low forms, and big and small venues? Is being queer what inspires and permits that freedom of movement? Is it whiteness? Is it an affluent ticket-buying fan base? All of the above? If, as Bishop says, we cannot ignore context, we cannot ignore the structures that contribute to Mac's success. This is the trap of 'enough', the dangerous propensity to define a person as trans enough – or not trans enough – that I want to avoid. At the same time, I cannot discount Judy's towering contribution to expanding the audience for politically radical drag, for gender-fluid performers, and for immersing audiences in temporary utopias.

If we extend Agnes Borinsky's idea to say that anyone who makes or watches theatre does so for the labour of relating, and that this labour is foundational to society, then we must not define inclusion by identity alone, or as a slot in a season, but as a way of life. We must extend our sphere of awareness all the way to society's boundaries, and to anyone we might find perched on its edges. Out there, at the vanishing point of inclusion, even the notion of a Trans Theatre feels too isolationist, too tunnel-visioned. To create it, would we need to exclude people or artworks from it? Exclusion seems absurd as an organizing principle. Yet rejecting the idea of a Trans Theatre seems short-sighted – like a missed opportunity. Or worse, it invites catastrophe – like asking an industry to regulate itself. How can I be against a Trans Theatre? I want everything to be trans. Ariel Goldberg, in their monograph on the idea of Queer Art, writes 'Anytime the utterance "queer art" appears as a proclamation of something stable, it is a mirage. Definition is the press release talking'.<sup>14</sup>

## A RECENT HISTORY OF TRANS VISIBILITY IN US THEATRE (2015–2019)

Equitable representation has rightly become a mission in some quarters of the US arts and entertainment industries. In the realm of institutional theatre, change has been glacial for most minoritized groups, and reparative actions have been slow to materialize. Communities have rallied on social media and in person to alert organizations to their own blind spots. For instance, the group organizing #WeSeeYouWAT generated significant momentum in 2020 by laying out demands that white American Theatre dismantle white supremacy in the field.<sup>15</sup>

In recent trans-specific history, the national trans community spoke out against the casting of cis artist-led New York Off-Broadway productions like the musical, *Southern Comfort*, by Dan Collins and Julianne Wick Davis (The Public Theater, 2016).<sup>16</sup> The community also balked at the play, *Charm*, by Philip Dawkins (MCC Theater, New York, 2017) which, along with *Southern Comfort*, was cited for the author's lack of lived trans experience.<sup>17</sup> While these authors responded with evidence of their efforts to research the texts, only Dawkins hired a trans director, Will Davis. Subsequent works by cis writers, Jordan Harrison (*Log Cabin*, Playwrights Horizons, 2018) and Miranda Rose Hall (*Plot Points in Our Sexual Development*, LCT3, 2018), both helmed by cis directors, fielded no public resistance around casting or staffing. Yet actors I spoke to in the trans community privately expressed concern over the sensationalizing or exposure-by-explanation of trans characters' bodies by Harrison and Hall respectively. Responses from theatres have ricocheted from denial, to business-driven excuses, to town hall-style dialogues, to silence. 'I would love to see . . . cis writers writing about trans experience responsibly', playwright MJ Kaufman said in a 2017 *New York Times* roundtable hosted by Alexis Soloski: 'theatres would rather produce work about us, not by us right now', they add, before concluding, 'We should get to tell our own stories first'.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, prize-granters and theatres founded to support women have had their own tricky paths to walk. One hopeful outcome came in 2017, when Lisa McNulty, WP Theater producing artistic director, and her board renamed the company (known since 1978 as The Women's Project), and expanded its mission to include the support of not just female theatre artists but those who are 'women+'. Without elaborating on that plus sign, WP has moved towards including trans artists with its Trans Lab, instigated by Kaufman. Elsewhere, The Kilroys' List, created by writers, dramaturgs, and literary managers, curates an annual collection of plays by women and trans writers to challenge the oft-heard defence by artistic directors that the plays just aren't out there. New York's Musical Theater Factory (MTF), founded by Shakina Nayfack, has held monthly Representation Roundtables for affinity groups including women and trans creators. Off-off Broadway venue, The Brick Theater in Brooklyn, has hosted a Trans Theater Festival annually since 2016.<sup>19</sup>

This recent discourse in the professional theatre reflects broadened and imperfect public awareness of trans people in popular culture thanks to out trans celebrities like Chaz Bono, Janet Mock, The Wachowskis, LaVerne Cox, and Caitlyn Jenner; films like *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *TransAmerica* (2005) and *The Danish Girl* (2015), which feature trans people played by cis people, and *Tangerine* (2015) which features

trans people playing themselves; TV shows featuring limited-arc characters like *The L Word* (Season 3, 2006) and *The Fosters* (2016), and series regulars on *Orange is the New Black* (2013), *Transparent* (2016), *Billions* (2016), and *Pose* (2018). On Netflix's *The Politician* (2019), a trans actor was cast in a non-trans role: a development trans activists have long hoped to see.

Trans theatre artists are also working in the wake of a rich queer theatre history, albeit one that has not always seen them. Queer Theatre's history, well-told elsewhere, has been most welcoming to camp, drag, and cross-dressing, forms that can posit gender as something one 'puts on' (and, presumably, takes off), rather than who one is.<sup>20</sup> These techniques have been essential for a community that has had to balance celebration with loss and liberation with assimilation. Camp, drag, and cross-dressing merge well with a straight, largely white theatre eager for diversity as entertainment, and for events that begin, end, and exist outside of daily life. When Queer Theatre centres on sexuality, it may be an entirely cis affair.

Trans identity is not an event. Trans identity does not end. It is the trans experience of infinite time that troubles the inclusion of the 'T' in the LGB acronym.<sup>21</sup> It is gender, not sexuality, that causes trans people to face risks in public due to gender policing that cis gays and lesbians may not – for instance, in using public bathrooms or identification, to name only two that can lead quickly to legal battles, violence, or worse. For the purposes of this essay, I want to acknowledge that while I borrow from queer histories and ideas, applying them to Trans Theatre is only a partial solution.

## INSTITUTIONS AND INDEPENDENCE

While theatre institutions may pride themselves on being 'LGBTQ+ friendly', the infrastructure needed to welcome trans people is often lacking. Trans belonging in theatre requires an expansion of talent pools, audience outreach, education on language, and updating signage of gendered spaces like bathrooms and dressing rooms. Artistically, it means an end to unconsidered 'cross-gender casting', and to cis actors playing trans roles. It means thinking about trans artists playing both trans and cis roles, and ensuring that a trans cast member is never responsible for educating a team. Yet perhaps the greatest challenge will be for overworked theatre leaders to find their own ways to acknowledge that they have privilege and access that others do not; to acknowledge that they have power.

It is worth noting that all of the theatres named above, save Musical Theatre Factory, are run by white cis people (as of 2020). It is not such a leap to wonder whether the theatre's overwhelming whiteness and endemic 'white ignorance' with regards to race, might inform the 'cis ignorance' that categorizes programming choices. The playwright Casey Llewellyn applies philosopher Charles Mills's phrase to the field of American theatre with regards to race, calling for concrete, personal action: 'People with dominance or privilege in certain respects must work to understand the realities that people who are subject to that dominance and don't have that privilege are constantly navigating'.<sup>22</sup> To uphold a position of innocence in this matter, Llewellyn writes, is 'to defend an absence in ourselves'. When a group of trans theatre artists met in a forum hosted by US theatre-makers' blog *Howlround* at the playwright-centred organization, New Dramatists, in 2015, a participant

noted that all of the organizers (Kaufman, P. Carl, and myself) are white transmasculine people (then) employed by or working within major institutions (The Public Emerging Writers' Group, Howlround/Arts Emerson, and UCLA respectively). I appreciated this reminder of my privilege at the same time as I recall repressing an impulse to defend myself. With my 'white fragility' reaction, I heard an effort towards dialogue as a personal insult, and not what it was: an important observation about how privilege operates, even among marginalized groups.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to administrative hurdles, trans theatre-makers face aesthetic ones. Some trans artists not only defy what we think we know of gender through self-presentation or in the characters we write, but, like filmmaker Jules Rosskam, resist formal conventions as well. I have observed that trans representations deemed 'producible' by mainstream theatres lean into the binary, sensationalize trans bodies, and often reinscribe narratives of struggle (coming-out stories, violence). By 'producible', I mean profitable, relatively speaking. The profit-motive is also a comfort-motive. There is comfort in the familiar, which, for theatre, means dramatic structures we intuitively recognize.

Historically, white Western dramatic theatre is a theatre of show and tell, of recognition and reversal, of change and consequence.<sup>24</sup> Long before Freud established the mechanisms of psychological repression, we had Aristotle's *anagnorisis*, or recognition. The physics of drama turned on the idea of making known or knowing again, effectively (or, for Theatre of the Oppressed founder, Augusto Boal, 'coercively') dramatizing for audiences the high price to be paid for breaking the laws of the nascent democracy.<sup>25</sup> With such a foundation, Western drama was well-prepared, once housed in electrified darkened theatres, to pathologize repressed desires or truths held in private. This dynamic of repression makes it all too easy to place otherness at the service of the status quo. In this position, otherness becomes a catalyst or a secret, the ignition or exposure of which, through crisis, reveals some 'truth', and unleashes a satisfying catharsis for an audience. Conventional dramaturgy purges the irritant otherness to extrude a pearl, 'a new order', or, we might say, a new known. The closer a writer hews to this standard, the more marketable their play becomes. How, with such a financially advantageous legacy, can anyone step outside this exploitative system?

By affirming taxonomies and trauma through play choices, theatres limit exposure to trans life and what trans theatre artists themselves may say about their trans lives. Worse, trans artists may be asked to educate or consult without pay as a favour to an artist (friend) or institution (potential employer). This favour may be presented as an 'opportunity', refusals or critiques of which may be received with resentment and may jeopardize future employment. Theatre artists who create beyond the bounds of institutional acceptability will likely be producing themselves.

Yet it may be short-sighted to forgo institutions completely. Is there not a great value in fighting for theatre that centres our empathy on the historically underrepresented? Wouldn't it be a quicker path to equitable compensation to work through already-funded institutions rather than, as a cash-strapped artist, adding fundraising to the labour you are not paid to do? But to whom are we offering these representations? And what to make of statistics, in an era of increased media representation, that violence against trans people is only increasing?<sup>26</sup>

Trans artists must navigate the charged landscape between the visible and the invisible while engaging with institutions who may not know the difference. One of the many potent outcomes of the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 is the slow dawning that, while incredibly important, empathy is not enough to make change. The pity and fear (the white tears?) of catharsis have little impact on systemic oppressions. Only discomfort, only curiosity, and only meaningful actions will do. To what, then, should trans theatre artists and our allies aspire?

## NOT-KNOWING

Dramatic theatre's narrative-based economy requires playwrights, directors, and marketers to shepherd both company and audience towards the 'triumph' of understanding, to borrow Jules Rosskam's word. But these demands – for message, clarity, and hospitality – create what Mac Wellman bemoaned, in 1984, as 'The Theater of Good Intentions'.<sup>27</sup> Wellman, perhaps marking his own shift between poetry and playwriting, rankled at the unwelcome news that his characters should be 'well-rounded' so they could 'make sense'. He championed 'non-Euclidean' characters of unknowable geometries, and a counter-logic of 'affective fantasy' as in the early works of Sam Shepard (which also inspired Taylor Mac's *Hir*). When I do live in theatre, I vote Wellman. I am for the unapologetic dramaturgy of the non-Euclidean play, plays that decline to explain themselves or to provide a soft landing. When I have attempted to shape my own plays to be more producible, I have felt that I have submerged my own truth. So it has been a relief to 'come out' not just as trans but as a writer of the in-between.

My own most recent work is a theatrical essay, titled *Trainers* (2020), which I wrote in an attempt to explore the idea of failure – of the state, of musculature pushed to its limits, and of an artist who avoids activism (See *Figure 4.10*). The text has virtually no stage directions, looks like a prose poem on the page, and reads more like a memoir of a difficult year than a play dramatizing those events. Our guide is an unnamed, ungendered speaker whose tale of infatuation with a queer revolutionary owes much to Montaigne's nonlinearity, and his blurring of public and private. The simultaneously essayistic and performative shape of *Trainers* shares the speaker's ambivalence with their own form. I called it a theatrical essay alluding to the formal translations we enact whenever we stage something, and whenever we meet another body with our own.<sup>28</sup>

Hans-Thies Lehmann's concept of 'postdramatic theatre' describes alternate or avant-garde dramaturgies that eschew narrative storytelling and the individual authorship of written scripts, for theatre driven by design, directorial vision, say, or ensemble-creation.<sup>29</sup> There are no traditional plays or playwrights here, only makers: the Gertrude Steins, John Cages, Robert Wilsons, and Wooster Groups who build texts without story and music without notes, who write by drawing or by weaving media together. As extended by composer-director Heiner Goebbels, this type of work offers an 'aesthetic of absence', by leaving out elements of theatre (plot, language) or reorienting our expectations entirely.<sup>30</sup> This formal abstention makes space for new kinds of relations. Audiences are compelled to find our own way through.





FIGURE 4.10: Nando Messias in *Trainers* by Sylvan Oswald (Gate Theatre, London, 2020), directed by Hester Chillingworth and designed by Naomi Kuyck-Cohen and Josh Gadsby. Photo by Alex Harvey-Brown.

What would be the impact of the absence of character? Or of gender identity? Released from mimesis, one could more easily avoid using transness and trans characters as levers of exposition or crisis. Theatre-makers might locate crisis elsewhere, redefine it, or eliminate it entirely. Either choice opens up thrilling potential for new ways of understanding ourselves. In *Trainers*, I wondered if designing the form I needed, the theatrical essay, could offer resonance with the text's post-gender landscape. Lehmann's translator, Karen Jürs-Munby, notes that 'performance has the power to question and destabilize the spectator's construction of identity and the "other" – *more so than realist mimetic drama, which remains caught in representation and thus often reproduces prevailing ideologies*'.<sup>31</sup>

As a result, many playwrights who seek to confront traditional theatre audiences about 'prevailing ideologies' tend to explode a melodrama or rupture a well-made play. Plays like Jackie Sibblie's Drury's *Fairview* (2018), Young Jean Lee's *Songs of the Dragons Flying To Heaven* (2006), *The Shipment* (2008), and *Straight White Men* (2014), and Branden Jacobs-Jenkin's *Neighbors* (2010), *Appropriate* (2014), and *An Octoroon* (2014) are key examples. *An Octoroon*, cannily, describes rather than dramatizes a literal explosion. See also: Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) in which a hotel room is obliterated to shock theatre audiences into confronting their neglect of

humanitarian crises. These plays employ tactics descended from historical avant-garde theatre techniques (interruption, metatheatricity) that, in a testament to their timeliness, open doors to both another kind of performance and to another kind of audience. This work is both more relational and more real than the so-called realism it breaks.

In 2017, *ASAP/Journal* published a special issue on ‘Queer Form’ (2017), which its editors describe as ‘the range of formal, aesthetic, and sensuous strategies that make difference a little *less* knowable, visible, and digestible’.<sup>32</sup> They write that ‘the desire to know the content of a work – in laypersons’ terms, what it is “about” – frequently functions as a way to avoid a more intimate engagement with difference, particularly when this difference is racialized’. The editors see the tyranny of about-ness as a way to limit Black, Indigenous, and artists of colour to exactly that: ‘all content and no form’. This statement resonates with my take on what my field considers ‘viable’ trans plays: those that explain themselves or present a cathartic or step-by-step sequence of trans experience. The expectation of racialized about-ness, the editors write,

is very much of a piece with the history of the visual objectification, hierarchization, and categorization of racialized peoples that functioned as a signal method of colonial modernity. Such a focus demands, once again, that minoritarian subjects and their artistic productions yield, to the observer, the truth of their own difference.<sup>33</sup>

From this perspective, about-ness is a kind of dominance.

Interviewed for the collection, *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, artist Juliana Huxtable speaks of these dangers as they relate to the art market and to herself as a trans woman of colour: ‘visibility is being used to sabotage actual engagement with real questions of structural negligence and discrimination and violence’.<sup>34</sup> Huxtable sets forth a value I hope that theatres will centre: learning about others without occupying their space or denying the violence they have experienced and still experience today. The dire need for this awareness moves *Trap Door*’s editors to build on the metaphors embedded in their title. To both create opportunity for trans artists of colour and to protect them, the editors’ curatorial approach calls for resistance to ‘resolution’ in art and criticism, and to ‘the canonization of trans art’.<sup>35</sup> In refusing new knowns, the anthology provides a respite from capitalism. As Amin, Musser, and Pérez put it, using a broader term, ‘Queer form is about other ways of understanding relationships to power and relationships to being’.<sup>36</sup>

Relating, relations, and relationality, then, must continue to be subject to analysis in all arts and arts criticism, with an emphasis on *how* instead of *what*. Christina León calls for an ethical stance, for opacity over ‘truth’, and ‘the poetic vision of imagination over the colonial project of knowing’.<sup>37</sup> In these ideas she follows Martinican poet and writer, Édouard Glissant, whose text, *Poetics of Relation* (1990), declares opacity a human right. Folding León’s work into their issue, the *ASAP/Journal* ‘Queer Form’ editors propose an ethic of not-knowing as a path out of ignorance. To experience Queer Form, here, means to sit with what is present and to assume that this presence is coherent to itself. It is the observer who must reconsider, detangle, or abandon taxonomies.<sup>38</sup> This is a purgation of insufficient language and a foundation for ‘Trans Form’.

## FORMS OF LISTENING

That ‘Trans Form’ might exist before language, or despite it, feels right to me given my personal experience of feeling trans before knowing its vocabulary. Words on a bathroom sign or a season flyer can feel like lip service if not part of a deeper engagement that honours this not-knowing, along with ‘the value of indirection, opacity, and withholding’.<sup>39</sup> But can a language-driven art form like dramatic theatre make space for opacity? Should audiences of language-based theatre expect to understand once they have paid to sit in a closed room for an hour or more? How much could that expectation be challenged?

Dancer and choreographer niv Acosta writes about his disappointment with the dance community’s self-awareness of its exclusionary practices, calling for greater accountability at every level, from artists to administrators.<sup>40</sup> Taking up Acosta’s imperative, and in response to legal scholar Dean Spade who reminds us that trans identities, unlike sexual orientations, are often lived in tension with administrative structures,<sup>41</sup> the following provocations apply to both artistic and administrative labour in the theatre or its adjacent forms, including academia. In lieu of a conclusion to this essay, these are prompts informed by trans artists whose work reminds us that inspiration for transforming the US theatre field lies just beyond it. I invite you to explore new territories of space, time, desire, representation, and visibility as practices of empathy, advocacy, and inclusion.

Please start by using the format most comfortable for you and continue by using a format you have never tried before. Consider video, song, writing, drawing and more.

1. Tell the story of your space from the space’s point of view. Consider its history, its geography, its social context, its patrons, even those who remain outside. (Who are they?)
2. When have you felt aware of tensions over ownership of a space? If you have ever felt like you entered a space where you did not belong, describe the experience. If you have ever felt like your presence destabilized or defiled a space, describe the experience.
3. Create an event that happens at a time of day that theatre ‘never’ occurs.
4. Create a self-portrait in any medium using documentary and fictional elements, incorporating aspects of your internet usage.
5. When do you aspire to have a different body or bodies? Describe your aspiration. Are there any mythical or fictional figures who correspond to your current body? Your aspirational body? The tension between the two?
6. When does your body change? What does that look or feel like? Depict your body in the midst of changing.
7. When do you experience time differently than other people? Create a situation for the audience to experience time differently. Expand time. Contract time.
8. Present one or more trans artists’ work to the public. Offer that work thorough contextualization so that your audience (and team) can become more aware of the work’s significance.
9. Take trans artists’ work on the road to other venues.<sup>42</sup>

These prompts are exercises in trans form and content. They probe into physical and temporal awareness: architectures both public and private. They ask the user to contemplate aspects of trans experience that may resonate with anyone who has a body, even if one has never felt a dissonance between the gender they were assigned at birth and the gender they feel themselves to be. Use them and expand upon them. Theatre scholars, you too have a role to play by offering close readings of my fellow US-based trans and nonbinary theatre artists' work. What Trans Forms are emerging? We need descriptions, as poet and academic Trace Peterson writes of a group of Trans Poets, of the 'range of different solutions to the dilemma of having to forge one's own relationship to a literary context that doesn't know how to readily incorporate one as an author'.<sup>43</sup> Begin with our TransGrandmother, Kate Bornstein, and continue (alphabetically) with Jess Barbagallo, Becca Blackwell, Agnes Borinsky, Mashuq Mushtaq Deen, Ty Defoe, Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi, Haruna Lee, MJ Kaufman, Basil Kreimendahl, Azure Osborne-Lee, Scott Turner-Schofield, Kit Yan, and myself.

Trans Theatre will ask us to examine our expectations of form. Trans Theatre may not announce itself. It might not be confined to artists or content, but include an entire producing apparatus, production context, or power structure.<sup>44</sup> Trans Theatre is sceptical of inclusion without meaningful relationships. Trans Theatre deserves supportive processes. It will move in and out of institutions. It will move in and out of narrative and abstraction. I am grateful for the concept of the 'trap door' as a metaphor for trans experience as 'a third term', referring to 'not entrances or exits but secret passageways that take you someplace else, often someplace as yet unknown'.<sup>45</sup> You may let go of the map. Trans Theatre's pronoun might be *infinity*.

## NOTES

1. Jules Rosskam (dir), *Against a Trans Narrative*, DV video, 2008.
2. Jules Rosskam, 'Porous Cels', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): 586.
3. This essay was written prior to the publication of *The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays*, in which the editors grapple with many of the same questions in this paragraph (Leanna Keyes, Lindsey Mantoan, and Angela Farr Schiller, 'Introduction: In a Trans Time and Space' in Keyes, Mantoan, and Schiller [eds], *The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays* [London and New York: Methuen Drama, 2021], 1–2).
4. Agnes Borinsky, 'Behind the Seams: *Of Government*', *TheatreForum* 53 (2018: 61–63).
5. In New York, performance is what we'd find programmed at The Kitchen, New York Live Arts, and sometimes BAM. Artists working in performance may be curated into the festival circuit by way of Under the Radar, Austin's Fusebox Festival or TBA at Oregon's Portland Institute for Contemporary Art.
6. Andy Horwitz, 'On Social Practice and Performance', 28 August 2012 (accessed 2 January 2020): <https://www.culturebot.org/2012/08/14008/on-social-practice-and-performance/>.
7. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Preses du réel, 2002), 103. Bourriaud goes on to say that relational work uses 'time as raw material', prioritizing structures in time over 'the production of material things'.

8. Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October* 110 (2004): 70.
9. For a useful summary and assessment of Bishop's take on social practice, see Jen Harvie, 'Democracy and Neoliberalism in Art's Social Turn and Roger Hiorns's Seizure', *Performance Research* 16, no. 2 (2011: 113–123).
10. Charles McNulty, 'Taylor Mac on gay history, "Hamilton" and his epic 24-hour extravaganza at the Ace', *Los Angeles Times*, 14 March 2018 (accessed 2 January 2020): <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-taylor-mac-los-angeles-20180314-story.html>.
11. Kate Hennessey, 'Taylor Mac's *Hir* is more than a comedy about gender. It proves the potential of theatre,' *Guardian*, 5 September 2017 (accessed 14 April 2021): <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/sep/05/taylor-macs-hir-is-more-than-a-comedy-about-gender-it-proves-the-potential-of-theatre>.
12. Wesley Morris, 'Taylor Mac's 24-Hour Concert Was One of the Great Experiences of My Life', *The New York Times*, 10 October 2016 (accessed 2 January 2020): <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/11/theater/review-taylor-macs-24-hour-concert-was-one-of-the-great-experiences-of-my-life.html>.
13. McNulty, 'Taylor Mac on gay history'.
14. Ariel Goldberg, *The Estrangement Principle* (Brooklyn: Nightboat Books, 2016), 226.
15. Following the killing of George Floyd by police in 2020, an upswing of awareness coursed through American Theatre in response to the nationwide Black Lives Matter protests. There is now far more awareness of white supremacy as an endemic national condition that includes our field. Theatres like New York's Soho Rep have broadened their leadership structures, and regional theatres like Woolly Mammoth have replaced founding artistic directors with leaders of colour.
16. Shakina Nayfack, 'My Response to the Southern Comfort Casting Controversy', 8 March 2016 (accessed 18 December 2019): <http://www.shakina.nyc/blog-2/2016/3/24/my-response-to-the-southern-comfort-casting-controversy>.
17. Private email exchanges with the author.
18. Alexis Soloski, 'We Should Get to Tell Our Own Stories', *New York Times*, 13 November 2016, AR8.
19. A group of trans theatre artists who convened in 2015 (discussed below) have begun creating guidelines for best practices. At the time of writing, this document is still in process.
20. Queer theatre histories and criticism that have been formative to me include: *Queer Theatre* by Stefan Brecht (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978); *The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater*, edited by Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla (New York: NYU Press, 2002); and *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance*, edited by Sue-Ellen Case (New York: Routledge, 1996). One might read this essay's citations as a response in the form of a speculative bibliography for a Trans Theatre.
21. For more on the 'T', see David Getsy in conversation with William J. Simmons, 'Appearing Differently: Abstraction's Transgender and Queer Capacities', in Christiane Erharter, Dietmar Schwärzler, Ruby Sircar and Hans Scheirl (eds), *Pink Labour on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 45–46.

22. Casey Llewellyn, 'Position: White Ignorance', *The Racial Imaginary*, The Whiteness Issue (2017), (accessed 13 December 2019): <https://theracialimaginary.org/issue/the-whiteness-issue/casey-llewellyn/>.
23. While the observation yielded no immediate changes in that moment, it sparked a breakout session about how those with access can reach back. It is not a huge leap to wonder whether those of us white transmasculine folks with access failed the group by not taking on the labour of completing this list of practices.
24. Elsewhere I have discussed how narrative-based dramatic theatre is synonymous with mimetic representation. See Sylvan Oswald, 'Cut Piece', 2015 (accessed 13 December 2019): <http://www.3holepress.org/cutpiece>.
25. Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), 36–39.
26. Human Rights Campaign, 'A National Epidemic: Fatal Anti-Transgender Violence in America in 2018' (accessed 18 December 2019): <https://www.hrc.org/resources/a-national-epidemic-fatal-anti-transgender-violence-in-america-in-2018>.
27. Mac Wellman, 'The Theater of Good Intentions', *Performing Arts Journal* 8, no. 3 (1984: 59–70).
28. Sylvan Oswald, *Trainers* (London: Oberon Books, 2020).
29. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (New York: Routledge, 2006).
30. Heiner Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence*, trans. by David Roesner and Christina M. Lagao (New York: Routledge, 2015).
31. Karen Jürs-Munby, 'Introduction' in Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 5. My emphasis.
32. Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser and Roy Pérez, 'Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social', *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2, Special Issue on Queer Form (2017): 235.
33. Amin, Musser and Pérez, 'Queer Form', 235.
34. Che Gossett and Juliana Huxtable, 'Existing in the World: Blackness at the edge of trans visibility' in Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Burton (eds), *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 34.
35. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Burton, 'Known unknowns: an introduction to Trap Door' in Gossett, Stanley, and Burton (eds), *Trap Door*, xvii and xviii.
36. Amin, Musser and Pérez, 'Queer Form', 233.
37. Christina León, 'Curious Entanglements: Opacity and Ethical Relation in Latina/o Aesthetics', in Perry Zurn and Arjun Shankar (eds), *Curiosity Studies: A New Ecology of Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 183.
38. See David J. Getsy, 'Ten Theses on Queer Abstraction' in Jared Ledesma (ed.), *Queer Abstraction*, exh. cat. (Des Moines: Des Moines Art Center, 2019), 65–75.
39. Amin, Musser and Pérez, 'Queer Form', 235.

40. niv Acosta, 'Thoughts From', *Movement Research Performance Journal* 42 (Spring 2013): 6. This reference is drawn from Doran George, 'Negotiating the Spectacle in Transgender Performances of Alexis Arquette, Zackary Drucker, DavEnd, niv Acosta, and Tobaron Waxman', *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos. 1–2 (2014: 273–279).
41. Dean Spade, 'Mutilating Gender' in Susan Stryker and Peter Whittle (eds), *Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 315–331. A sample of such challenges includes carrying or changing identification that may not match one's gender presentation, dealing with local courts and federal offices for the legal processes for name changes, and medical gatekeepers who need to sign off on services and/or procedures.
42. Prompts #1–2 are inspired by the film, *Wildness* (dir. Wu Tsang, 2012), which tells the story of a family-owned bar in the MacArthur park section of Los Angeles called the Silver Platter, that once catered to a transfeminine community. Excerpts from the screenplay and other works are available in Wu Tsang, *Not In My Language* (Düsseldorf: Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 2015).
- Prompts # 3–4 are inspired by Juliana Huxtable who addresses race, gender, sexuality, history, and politics in her texts, photography, images, and performances. These prompts were triggered by Gossett and Huxtable, 'Existing in the World', 39–55.
- Prompts #5–7 are inspired by Cassils, a genderqueer performance artist whose medium is their body. Cassils employs photography, film, performance, and sculpture in making performances that involve such gestures as saving their urine for 200 days to comment on transgender bathroom restrictions. Maurya Wickstrom positions Cassils amongst a group of artists whose work resides at 'the edge of time', in Wickstrom, *Fiery Temporalities in Theatre and Performance: the initiation of history* (London: Methuen Drama, 2019), 199.
- Prompts #8–9 are inspired by Chris E. Vargas, an interdisciplinary artist whose work in film and video looks at ways that queer and trans people navigate popular culture. Vargas is also the Executive Director and founder of the Museum of Trans Hirstory and Art (MoTHA), through which he has helmed projects such as Trans Hirstory in 99 Objects.
43. Trace Peterson, 'Becoming a Trans Poet', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no 4 (2014): 537.
44. Between completing this essay in 2021 and the volume's printing, New York-based producer George Strus has launched the Breaking the Binary Festival (<https://www.btb-nyc.com/>), a week of play readings and a final night of fifteen monologues with entirely Trans, nonbinary, and 2-Spirit+ creative teams who were paid a living wage (I was commissioned to write one of the monologues). Additionally, my own play, *Pony* (2011), which requires a cast spanning the transmasculine spectrum, was revived in 2022.
45. Gossett, Stanley and Burton, 'Known unknowns', xxiii.