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## Destabilize (Achtung) Baby: performance text, phenomenon, and writing as a condition for radicalizing an historically bourgeois artform

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DESTABILIZE (ACHTUNG) BABY:  
performance text, phenomenon, and writing as a condition for  
radicalizing an historically bourgeois artform

Jeremy Kadetsky

May 2023

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Theatre & Performance  
Sarah Lawrence College

## **ABSTRACT**

The author seeks to define the preconditions for creating performance text that has the possibility to not only create exciting compelling performance; but also has the affordance to radically change the way in which dramatic theatre is produced. In creating their own dramaturgy, Jeremy Kadetsky draws inspiration from the post-structural linguistic writings of Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva; the queer theory espoused by Jack Halberstam and Sarah Ahmed; and the written and realized work of contemporary American playwrights Suzan-Lori Parks, Sibyl Kempson, and Agnes Borinsky. Ultimately, they find a working criteria for writing in a way that promotes fecundity, jouissance, and revolution that acknowledges the positive and negative violence of writing and language in the creative, social, and political spheres.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

What follows is an incomplete list of individuals who have been generous of spirit, material, and inspiration. Their influence has in some way marked everything I have done during my time in the graduate program, for which this document will stand—at times—in lieu. Sincere gratitude to Tei Blow, Lisa Clair, Marisa Conroy, Kim Ferguson, Jillian Jetton, Sibyl Kempson, Allen Lang, Cat Rodríguez—

And to RED, for all the tinkling of digits, stimulating of madness, and all that motherfucking vision.

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## INTRODUCTION: ZOO STATION

What follows in these pages is an inadequate attempt to capture something that will immediately be outmoded: the things of (pulsing, vital) interest to a particular artist working in a theatrical space at a given time in life. In English we have a pretty good word for this—dramaturgy—but one that doesn't quite entirely convey how ephemeral this paper is.

It is essentially a contradiction.

I am trying to capture a feeling of something—that is how I as the particular human that I am at this moment considers making work—in a form of writing that isn't terrifically temporary. A play is alive. A performance text is alive. An academic paper is dead before it is published, at least one written at the hands of this human. I am constantly in flux and evolution and the things that interest me today will be totally re-inflected tomorrow by a prism or a jagged edge of one translucent material or another or a new scar that announces itself rolling over my retina.

These pages must be seen by their author as an attempt to define the now of spring in the year twenty-twenty-three of the common era. The feeling that I have about making theatre as an artist who primarily identifies as being a playwright—a performance beckoner who brandishes the signifiers of signs—who is in the late stages of an MFA program, who must complete this text to satisfy the requirements of a program, while also making work within that program and without it, attempting to keep the creative ember going with the oncoming death of graduation, while being a human being in their mid-thirties navigating those complications, even as a fairly privileged human.

This will all leak together in the saturation of these pages.

And the theoretical and artistic references are a product of all this leaking. There is some rigor at work here, but it is internal to the author, not to the research, which is purposefully

mostly in its whimsy. This is the work of an expert of exactly one thing: what is striking me in the goo of this iteration of vernal me. When I read this back in two, three, four... weeks, months, years... I'll go "hunh. Oh yea, I was really into that, wasn't I? Weird!"

So, now that I have acknowledged the mild state of ridicule that exists within the 1-inch margins of this document, however whoever is reading it is receiving it. Let us dive in with a little statement of our terrain and its topography:



## CHAPTER ONE: A TEXT IS EVEN BETTER THAN THE REAL THING

The object of my inquiry is an artifact that I call a “performance text.” I use this phrase rather than “play” or “script”<sup>1</sup> because it is more precise to how I think about authoring text on the level of my personal idiosyncrasy and because it is more inclusive. With this term we can include not only stage plays but also dance scores, and not only a work of theatre where the script is essential but also a piece made with the addition of text through devising or another method. A performance text is a very specific piece of technology. For anyone who has made theatre at any level (from primary school to community spaces to commercial ones) its strangeness has been totally obscured. So, let’s tug on it a little and make it a stranger for a second so we can fully appreciate it.

A performance text has value both as a literary document (i.e., as “writing”) as it can be picked up and enjoyed even when not exploding into physical space (i.e., becoming a phenomenon) because its primary affordance is as a tool of communication. It is a written set of instructions given from one person to a group of people to make something.<sup>2</sup> It has strange conventions that many authors of these instructions value—stage directions, dialogue, parenthetical, character lists, act breaks, scene breaks—and some seek to do away with intentionally (and occasionally spitefully), or as a personal beseeching within the creation of the

---

<sup>1</sup> When I use my preferred term of “performance text” I am referring to what Richard Schechner would call a script, as discreet from a ‘text-as-text,’ which would consider the literary forebear of a performance as the text—in re: Elevator Repair Service’s Fitzgerald explosion *Gatz* and Nature Theatre of Oklahoma’s speech capture reperformance work, among others. (Jarcho 110).

<sup>2</sup> I do not have enough oxygen in the space of this project to talk about a reader of a text who will go no further in their involvement than to read and imagine. While the unspooling below focuses primarily on how a performance text communicates to the arduous folx who turn text into phenomenon, I do not intend to obscure that a reader of any stripe is positioned as a collaborator when engaging with a performance text, in whatever form it is received. I love a thrillingly readable performance text and can experience that as an event of making itself. As someone who has lived in many places, often far away from the kind of “Downtown” New York work of experimentation that I’m excited by and want to make, I’ve nourished myself off of the reading of and collaborating with the text in of itself.

written text. The conventions, whether abided by or abstained from, provide the makes of the performance machine with hints, clues, and explicit directions. This relationship is further complicated by the fact that the text can continue to change in response to the work of the building of the machine (we like to build lots of different kinds of machines out of these instructions and have different verbs for the assembly process depending on the machine—develop, read, rehearse, preview). Another complication is that the parts used to make the thing aren't standardized. Not a single one. Not the instruments of lighting, the physical containing space, the humans leading the project, the humans receiving the project, the bodies making the live action of the performance.

So the task of making theatre that originates with any kind of text is one of metamorphosis: a transformation from word to multi-dimensionality. As is the case with a cocooned transformation of any kind, things must change in that energetic process; however, the potential material for transformation is already imprinted. Erika Fischer-Lichte, the German academic and theatre researcher describes this process as the “a process of translation in which a switch is made from one sign system into another” (Fischer-Lichte 191). In her *Semiotics of Theater* (a juicy tome), Fischer-Lichte lays out an extensive and admirable system of how meaning is created in the theatrical space in the parlance of linguistics.<sup>3</sup> Responding to that context, I feel comfortable leaning pretty hard on the word “translation” and to consider it as one would in the context of the art of literary translation. In turning a piece of writing from one language to another, an uncountable number of decisions and interpretations must be made to turn one unit into another (“prestupleniya” to “crime” or “transgression,” depending upon your Dostoevsky translation of choice). And the unit isn't necessarily just the word or the sentence;

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<sup>3</sup> There is a lot to be mined here, but we're going to really be getting into the thick of how meaning is made in language shortly, so I'm going to limit the scope of inquiry to be as literal as possible.

there are so very many units in rhetoric that are accounted for in translation: sound, sense, rhythm, connotation, pun, humor, image, history, prosody, poetics.... In the theatre the act of translation is special because the language of a text is translated into so many other languages: light, sound, scenic, space, proximity, body, speech, material. As Fisch-Lichte notes, the “literary text” is the common point of departure for all collaborators involved but the result is a “polyphonic text.” (191). I would take this one step further and say that the act of turning a performance text into a performance isn’t just one of many voices, it is one of many voices expressing themselves not in different languages but through disparate media.

This dance of actualizing the possibility of a text is best when the reaction of its component parts is exothermic; that is, the reaction of the author meeting collaborators working in intermediality creates energy.<sup>4</sup> This is a value judgment, I realize. I stand behind it. In defining and diagnosing the dramaturgy I want to practice in my own work, I will gladly make them and the artists whose work I discuss in the space below I would argue work according to this model that I will continue to define. In being so prejudiced I will also speak to the incredible pitfalls of being one who authors performance text and hopes to achieve such an effect in their work. This is especially marked and important to consider as one who is white, is weaving the basis for performance using the problematic textile of the English language, was assigned-male-at-birth and persists in, generally, being male-presenting.

In writing, I create a power structure in which I am at the top. As Fischer-Lichte notes, through all these voices communing and making meaning out of the possibility baked into a text, the drama’s literary text “has a special significance, and it consequently occupies a privileged

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<sup>4</sup> The irony of course is that this meeting is necessarily endothermic when considering resources in the late-stage Capitalistic period of my late-stage MFA’dom, but I choose to operate in a beautiful vacuum of artmaking outside of commerce in the space of these pages.

position.” It is generally understood that “the theatrical text is a performance of the literary text” and therefore has an unerring precedence (191).

How, then, do I continue?

I want to make exothermic work. I want the language I construct to lead to a community-led fecund machine of many disparate, brilliant parts where each participant not only comes to the table with chutzpah, but has the space to be audacious and blow my blueprint the-fuck-up.

How, then, do I practice writing?

The answer to me lies in the construction of the performance text. Whatever the content of the piece, how it is structured and communicated through the medium of printed language. In my role as an author of performance text I attempt to decenter myself and undermine the privileged position of the text, while also acknowledging that what I write is very specific and very important to me. While we parade through thickets of theory with the reprieve of exciting dramatic works, please keep this in mind (I know my own strategy, which reveal in pieces here and there—a writer is a writer, even when the prompt is one outside of their wheelhouse).

Since I am concerned primarily with the scaffolding of a dramatic piece, I am going to spend a lot of time talking about the form and technology of a script by way of example; I will spend very little time talking about the content of a given play, except when it intersects directly with the nature of its form on the page. Within that purview, my inquiry is even more narrowly focused on the text within a script that is not dialogue.<sup>5</sup> This can include a written litany: stage directions, parentheticals, all matters of front matter, explanatory notes of any kind. A script

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<sup>5</sup> I am positive there is a compelling argument to be made that the nature of language in dialogue can also have some of the affordances of the non-dialogic text that I’m concerned with here. I am equally positive that I am not the best person to make it (and I am unsure whether a writer would be the best theater maker to pen it). I will cursorily touch upon this vector in the below discussion of Suzan-Lori Parks—cursorily.

communicates not only through language but also through the vehicle of the language, which means that the formatting is also informative in this discussion: font choice, changes in font, changes in letter size, orientation of text on the page, organization of written information.

Equally important is a total absence of text: blank spaces on the page.

Hopefully now I have articulated clearly the terrain of inquiry—the performance text and the non-dialogic (i.e., mutable) communications within it—and the reason I am spending so much energy considering this often literally over-looked and marginalized acreage (this project is trending endothermic...). Let me now state a developed-but-still-very-much-in-progress draft of an intentional dramaturgy of performance text writing——

As a theatre artist, my efforts to fully appreciate the impact of the choices that I make in a text are guided by:

1. Thoroughly understanding the specific kind of communicative tool that is a performance text and the authority it holds over collaborators
2. Considering ways to undermine that authority through the construction of my texts
3. Appreciating that my writing will given life by a team of individuals—and underscoring that phrase “giving life”
4. Interrogating all choices I make on the page not insofar as they will affect the finished product of the fully-realized phenomenon of a performance for which my writing forms the basis; but also
5. How all decisions on the page affect the community that will make the piece; how will my choices impact a collaborator’s access needs, affirmation of identity,

comfort, work/life balance, as well as their ability to access to their own fecund creativity in our work together

6. In what ways can I integrate care into my work through the marginal text of the primary one?

My aim in the pages that follow is to test and hone this nascent criteria of making my own work by looking granularly into the parts that make up the technology of the performance text and engaging with specific examples. I may be addressing some of these question directly or indirectly, but ultimately the goal is a gathering of data to build an intention into my personal dramaturgy and the attending poetics and politics I want to reverberate in my performance texts. This occasionally discursive way of working will involve close readings of particular elements of theory to appreciate how the written technology of a script works, ideas of embodiment and phenomenology that interface with how performance-based work is realized from the page through a community, and examining very small moments and choices in the work of three playwrights.

I will look at three plays to evaluate how the technology of the written text functions as it could, can, or indeed was executed in a full production: Suzan-Lori Parks's text for *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (as published by Sameul French in 2016) and the play's 1990 production directed by Beth Schachter at BACA Downtown, Sibyl Kempson's text for *Ich, Kürbisgeist* (as published by 53rd State Press in 2012) and the 2013 New York Live Arts iteration directed by Paul Lazar and Annie-B Parson (produced by Big Dance Theater); and Agnes Borinsky's *The Trees* (as drafted by the author in the rehearsal script current at the of opening) and the 2023 production at Playwrights Horizons directed by Tina Satter.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The ideal way of doing this work is to compare the production script with the iteration of the text coming directly out of it, as I am fortunate enough to do with *The Trees*. I'll ask for some degree of your humor in working from published texts and productions that have gaps between them and are formatted for publication (Sibyl's text quite

My analysis of these texts will be strange in many ways: I am including images of the text as formatted in the version available to me and—when possible—including images of the production I experienced (live or in recording) that correspond to specific ideas or moments that I am apply some pressure to in the interest of the pursuit of this work. I will not be engaging significantly with the content unless it relates directly to the idea of the text-as-technology and how the choices on the page affect the radical affordances of the performance they portend.

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beautifully; Suzan-Lori Parks' rather cynically), rather than production. Still, I would say there's some good fruit to chew through on these heavily grafted trees.

## **CHAPTER TWO: ULTRAVIOLENCE**

### **(LIGHT MY WAY THROUGH PRICKING THEORY)**

As we explored through Fischer-Lichte's formulations, a performance text is a piece of technology that seeks to communicate in a very specific way. As such, a performance text is a media that both functions like the conventionally written word and a way that is entirely different. Its purpose is to communicate. I think that it is often overlooked that a performance text communicates through multiple media (a.k.a., intermedially) and uses literary language in concert with a more discursive cousin. As such, I would argue that "a script's" technology of language serves not only as a way of sharing information but also of making meaning. Language is one technology that binds together many others that exist in the medium of a performance text that is used to serve many functions that include: instructing performers what they will say; indicating the proximity of bodies on stage, both alive and not; providing a literal blueprint of construction; providing a figurate "vibe" sense of design; indicating non-negotiable... I could go on. The architecture of a script holds the affordance of literature but also art that functions outside of language. Goodness, a writer can choose to include non-text media into their scripts via hyperlink or embedded files. I have already harangued that all these choices mean something but I want to take a step back to discuss how language makes meaning and how that meaning impacts those choices and their impact on everyone involved in the machine of theatrical production (however rudimentary or analogue or radical or conservative or commercial or "downtown-y" it might be). In an effort to get at this without getting totally overwhelmed by all the thickets and moths that can come with walking into this territory—especially as one who is



by no means an expert—I will be brief, circumspect, and specific in evoking the complicated business of meaning making through the use of language and the technology of writing.

Systems of communication create meaning through the relationship between what is meant by that communication and the tool being used to carry that meaning. In high semiotics this is the distinction between the signifier and the signified.<sup>7</sup> Writing is a specific form of communication that has a function of making meaning that is distinct from spoken language, gesture, or glyphic/image-based visual systems.

Jacques Derrida—sometime enfant terrible, occasional crusty academic, post-structural zaddy, and noted lover of the Film Forum banana bread—wrote and lectured extensively on the topic of writing as a communication system. Derrida’s work in his most notable volumes of the 1970s, *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology*, specifically took aim at functions of language in the Western canon and how the language used in a given text—its form—impacted how one necessarily receives its content. In Derrida’s thinking, writing is a kind of meta-communicative tools, as it makes meaning by and through itself: “writing thus *comprehends* language” as it functions not as a signifier of a sign but as a ‘signifier of a signifier’” (*Grammatology* 7). I take this to mean that writing is in part distinct because a given lexical unit—say the word “automobile—”is already representational in a way that an image—a photograph of a 1994 Dodge Dart, say—or even a fragment of spoken language is not. This means that when we speak of or participate in ‘writing,’ we “designate not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription [i.e., the shape of a letter], but also the totality of what makes it possible; and also, beyond the signifying face, the signified face itself”

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<sup>7</sup> Is this an adequate definition, no; can I live with this, yes! I’ve drafted this section seven different ways in my head and three on the page and this back-of-the-napkin/scribbled-on-a-worn-out-bar-top version is the one that seems to fit best for this given context. There will be plenty of heady post-structural mention below, just very-much tailored to the issue at hand.

(9). I find it helpful to take this incredibly abstract concept and abut it with another idea that Derrida uses to further his definition of writing.

Derrida makes a distinction between a book and the text housed within it in order to draw out the influence of tradition, precedent, and—this is very much Jeremy’s word—toxicity of the authoritarian communication system that is writing. Derrida speaks of “text” as the literal form and content of language that is recorded; when he talks of “a book” he means the greater context of that text. Were you an undergraduate English major, as I sort of was, you can relate this to the difference in data one finds through the close-reading of a passage and discussion of grand symbolic ideas in a piece of literature. Derrida actually qualifies this two terms in moral value: the text being a form of “good writing,” writing that is “always comprehended;” a book being a form of “bad writing,” whose essence is to create a false totality, stasis, and control (18).

When considering that a book is static, while a text is dynamic we can begin to see both that a book is an oppressive force to language and that writing has a destabilizing affordance. The former is the case for Derrida because every act of writing carries with it the very first act of writing and all the changes in language from that moment to the current one. However, Derrida holds space for how good writing—writing at the level of “the text”—is destructive. This is how Derrida uses his writing and is one reason one can surmise that his way of engaging with the arts became associated with the, perhaps imprecise, calling card of “deconstructionism.” He continues, quite evocatively, that to write text in a way that destroys the book “denudes the surface of the text. That necessary violence” standing as a response to all of the violence done previously by the language that allowed for it to be created and flourish (18).

Derrida is writing about the violence of the creation “the books,”<sup>8</sup> which were necessary (one could say) to get civilization to a place of modernity (to standardize language as a form of communication, say). Therefore whatever is signified by a given sign (word, image, concept) is never exclusively contemporary, it is always harkening back to something out of step and time because the signified is not a signifier in of itself. The intermediary of the sign is needed to be understood and this carries with it the history of trying to signify such a thing. This is an approximate definition of what Derrida calls “*the trace*.” As Derrida writes “Western tradition had to organize itself” and recorded language was one lasting and powerful way of doing so (18). The violence is necessary now to destabilize the things about that order that are no longer serving not only this tradition but the society that has grown out of its syntactic soil. The *trace* of this history of violence is inescapable and yet by creating text that is aware of it and working directly in conflict with it one can reveal something and indeed make something new.

This means that to write at all is an exercise in working within a harmful system. This also means that to write is an evergreen opportunity to take something on and proceed radically. Writing can both support or explode systems; it can both reinforce and undermine ways of being in the world; it can both trivialize and reify marginal and center-justified identities; it can both impose authorial will and promote a radical breaking of this process. All of these affordances dovetail for me as a writer of performance text and interface directly with the Fischer-Lichte’s examination of the theatrical text. The way of viewing such a text is very much in line with Derrida’s “book,” and a way of undermining that authoritarian, hierarchical view of text is very much aligned with Derrida’s “text.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I will irresponsibly apply a little pressure to a translated term and note the resonance with “The Book” as a descriptor of the Christian Bible.

<sup>9</sup> Were I to ever write the marginal content of a musical I might then insist—only somewhat facetiously—that I am the author of “the text,” rather than “the book.”

The Franco-Bulgarian linguist, philosopher, and literary critic Julia Kristeva considers the use of language and rhetoric in a fashion in similar terms. I was delighted to come upon Kristeva's work while doing some background research into linguistic concepts relevant to the considerations of this text for two primary reasons. For one, it was nice to welcome a femme into a discussion which can feel a little—as much as I love the Derridas, Lacans, and Chomskys—on the order of cis men “truth telling.” For another, Kristeva's work is directly aimed at exploding linguistic systems so as to affect social change, which Derrida's discursive abstraction does not (it serves more to note the issue, undermine it, and leave it there).

In her 1974 landmark work *Revolution in Poetic Language*, first translated into English in 1984, Kristeva provides an anatomy of how literary language functions and does so with an agenda: revolution. The aim of Kristen's work in this text is to “gain access to what is repressed in the social mechanism: the generating of significance” (Kristeva 13). She holds that by interrogating the process of how significance is created—the “unceasing operation of the drives toward, in, and through language”—and considering the “practice” of creating significance through writing one can achieve “jouissance and revolution” (17). I will spend a good deal of the rest of the space of this container unpacking this postulation of a signification practice and the building of intentionality into how one makes meaning and its impact upon not only that work but the world that surrounds it. As such, I will be considering Kristeva's foundational idea surrounding prosody insofar as it aligns with the language in and around a performance text.

Kristeva's work is steeped in psychoanalysis, traditions of storytelling and myth, and feminism (as it was reverberating at the moment in history in which she was writing), which I have not the space to engage with nor appreciate to the degree that I would want to in order to write about with any kind of authority. Therefore, for the purpose of my own argument, I am

going to focus on this idea of a practice of creating significance and apply it to the writing of performance text. With this new phrase in mind, we can think about my bullet-pointed list above as principles for such a practice and—maybe more emphatically—necessary restrictions. Many of these features to focus on how language has this revolutionary function. This is an addendum we might ret-con in would be this idea of “jouissance,” an ecstatic, relieving joy that hits on levels visceral, intellectual are all in-between that runs akin to orgasm. I am smitten with incorporating this aiming at joy and just how refreshing and undermining that can be in making art within capitalist systems (even those operated under a “non-profit” umbrella). As we consider the practice of significance making and its affordance in making change to the well-worn space of theatrical practice, I want to use this post-structuralist lens to look at the role of the self (i.e., the author, the playwright, the text-maker) and what the language they—or, more poignantly I, Jeremy—can employ in their work to engage with and move beyond said self in an artistic practice.

### CHAPTER THREE: TRYIN' TO THROW YOUR ARMS AROUND AN ABSENCE

The playwright, performer, theatre maker, and scholar Julia Jarcho examines the work of contemporary American playwrights through the lens of the post-structural tradition of Kristeva and Derrida in her 2017 volume *Writing and the Modern Stage: Theater beyond Drama*. Jarcho uses these ideas to lay out a form of dramaturgy that predominates theatre that excites and provokes her and seems particularly representative of the contemporary moment. Her analysis of these writers and the effects of their work is inspired by the Derridean take on the friction between representation and embodied in performance (not pictured here).<sup>10</sup> She calls this phenomenon “negative theatrics” because work that exhibits this trait draws the audience’s attention to what is not present in the representations of existence on stage (Jarcho 12). Jarcho writes that this is a function of engaging with the specific meaning-making functions of art that is performed: “[r]epresentation in the Derridean sense *undoes the actual* by making its dependence upon what *is not here*” (Jarcho 7).

For Jeremy’s purposes, Jarcho’s work is useful as a referent because she dedicates a lot of space to analyzing how writers working in this way embody language in their performance texts. Jarcho also points out that this embodiment of language in performance through the medium of the text draws attention to something akin to Kristeva’s concept of signification practice. As Jarcho writes, citing the performance studies academic Cormac Power, “the spatial, temporal, corporeal, and intersubjective dimensions of theater [...] exposes the [theatrical] present as ‘a *function* of signification,’ or in poststructuralist terms, as a presence effect.” (Jarcho 7).

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<sup>10</sup> Derrida’s take—a deconstructionist riff on Antonin Artaud as seen in the essay “‘The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation’” collected in *Writing and Difference*—is exciting and relevant to another engagement with writing as the basis for performance, specifically as it relates to how the semiotics of performance. This is not this paper, so I am very thoughtfully eliding direct engagement with it.

Furthermore, Jarcho is interested in how “theatrical writing [functions] as a technology” with the affordance to represent the gaps in representation endemic to the theatrical medium (Jarcho 12).

We will have to have to set aside the incredible juice contained in the fibers of this fruit that Jarcho has so carefully grown—a shame indeed!—but I have a specific aim so I will now set a lot of this context aside to share Jarcho’s analysis of Suzan-Lori Parks as a writer of performance text integrating some of my own observations. We will both be looking specifically at Park’s 1990 play *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* as realized at BACA Downtown in a production directed by Beth Schachter with scenic design by Sharon Sprague.

Jarcho begins her analysis of Parks’s work in this piece by identifying how central the writing of the work is to its embodiment as performance. For Jarcho, “Parks occupies a particular position [as a writer] within the traditional division of theatrical labor, and she is insisting on the central importance of that position” and that insistence is central in the text and its work (Jarcho 135). This brings to the fore the question of who is at the center of the theatrical machine and what it produces and how the possibilities in a text impact then. A rephrase of my own pursuit might then be “a new dramaturgy replete with, among other things, strategies for a writer to decenter themselves in the modes of theatrical production.” While I might be discussing how a writer might (and, perhaps, “must”) do this decentering, it is useful to see how Parks asserts herself in her work as she uses many of the strategies one might consider to decenter oneself to center herself.<sup>11</sup> Many of these strategies for each way of constructing a script have echoes in the other.

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<sup>11</sup> There are forty-seven reasons that SLP would want to center herself in her work in this way and I begrudge her for exactly none of them. I am writing about a very specific dramaturgy aimed at a very specific thing and in order to define that thing I am working through her way of doing things. That’s all. Just an example—and a very powerful one. I admire Parks’s writing (and the writing of many other individuals that might aim for something a little more authoritarian in their texts) intensely and have since I first discovered it as a spring-y undergraduate. The point here is not to drag—I’ll do a little pointed dragging in the next chapter.

There are only twenty-six stage directions in the text of *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, of which four are prescribed pauses. Of the other twenty-two all are sound cues, which are simple variations on those I have itemized below:

“A bell sounds twice” (Parks 7)

“A bell sounds once” (7)

“A bell sounds three times” (21)

“A bell sounds four times” (21)

This kind of sparseness has several effects both in experiencing it as a reader and how it manifested in the 1990 production, which I viewed a recording of in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. On the page, I’m intrigued by this decision to use the verb “to sound” to describe how the bell functions sonically. Approaching this text as someone who occasionally does sound design—I’ve described myself to a friend and collaborator as a “perfectly adequate sound designer”—I would mark that Parks did not choose the verb “to ring,” which would be the one I associate with a bell. In this respect, Parks is decentering herself in this design element, indeed in all design elements, as it is up to a collaborator how they interpret this choice. There is a sense of a challenge and an invitation that I really appreciate in this. I will also note that there is some element of an author exercising control in the way that this non-dialogic text works.

As Jarcho points out in the context of her own analysis, Parks is a writer who is interested very much in spoken language and wants to center that language in the way that it makes meaning. Jarcho writes that *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* is “a model for rethinking the ‘primacy of the text’ as a theatrical construction” in a different way than I am asking of myself. Parks’s work in this piece is exemplary of a “writing that emphatically



embraces embodied performance” to such a degree that the writing itself is a performance (Jarcho 165). In other words, the primary performance that will come through the text—and it’s important to note here that we’re talking scholarship here, not Suzan-Lori’s personal feelings on her composition of this piece—is the performance of the author. I take this as a way of looking at the embodied performance of instrumental music composed by a single individual for an entire orchestra to play.

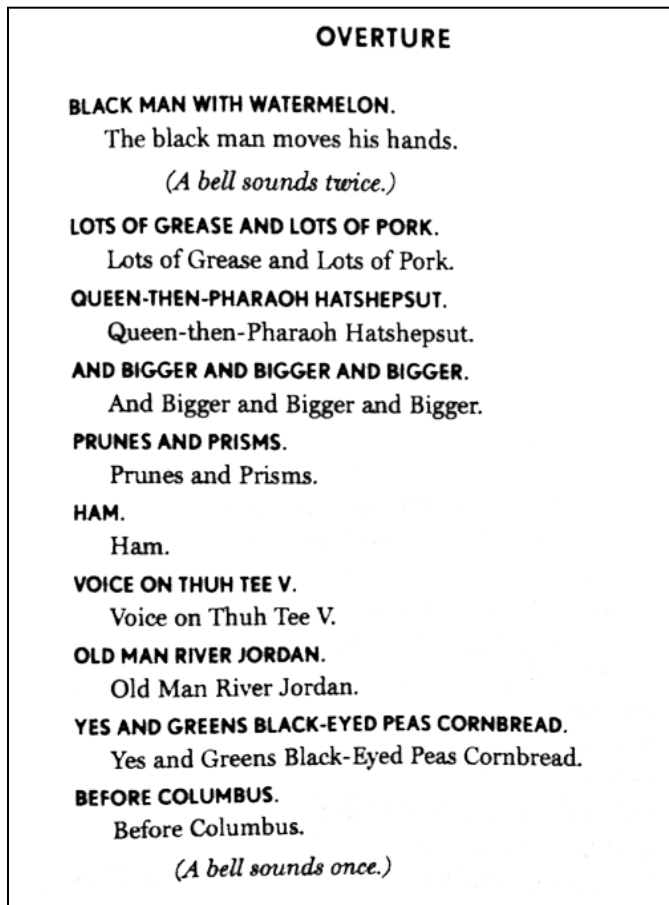


Fig 1. Parks, Suzan-Lori. “*The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World:*

Published Script Image.” Samuel French, 2016.

I point this out to celebrate Parks as an incredible musician of the linguistic that can score and share that with performers; I also do so to mark that being sparse or ambiguous does not necessarily stimulate the way of working for which I’m spinning around multi-disciplinary to

define an intentional dramaturgy. Being sparse in the details of design elements is a kind of exertion of control: yes these twenty-two sound cues with the evocative verb choice is an abstract suggestion but that choice was seemingly made because the spoken language and the performance of its writing is so paramount. As a result of this choice being made, there is a request to designers that their artistry must orbit the performance of the verbal score and that its primary function is to support it. And this is evident in the piece itself, where Schechter arranges the actors on stage based on the melodies of the language.

This orientation of the spoken word in the piece is also evident in the scenography. As I received it on the video recording, Shea Sprague's scenic design for the 1990 production is a series of levels and zones to be inhabited by the evocatively-named "Figures"<sup>12</sup> as embodied by the cast. There is a platform center stage for the primary players; there is a nook stage right; there is a multi-level facade with a neoclassical sensibility that is used to give discreet space to figures to perform in. As the language progresses and the story of *The Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* unspools, the performers shift through these zones. There are choices made in the dressing of the set but those are all—I would argue—a direct product of the quality of the language, details provided in the dialogic text, and the naming of the figures. The way that an audience receives what is spoken—the way the language sounds—is impacted by the proximity of the performers in these different spaces to us and to each other but the scenic (and in Jarcho's reading of the play, Sprague would be incredibly successful in this) really supports the musicians playing Parks's score through the vessel of their bodies. There isn't room for play and discovery in my experience of it (though I did adore the hollowed out CRT Television flanked by an

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<sup>12</sup> And would that I had space for the incredible epic poem that is this figures list, which is the basis for a dramatic exploration in of itself. I will give a little bit of space to share Julia Jarcho's wonderful observation "'The Figures' listed at the beginning of *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* have names that mark, more aggressively than those in any other Parks play, how writing sets up shop admits aporias or recesses of character" (Jarcho 151)

incandescent lighting strument with colored gels). The impact of that language is primary, which is Suzan-Lori Parks's dramaturgy. It is also very much her play. This piece is serving" book" more than "text," which is perfectly fine and can indeed create wonderful, important work. It is also a valuable counterexample to the way that I am working to construct my intentional dramturgy. So I learn from these choices and consider again how I want to embark upon the denuding and community building and my relationship with the receivers of my performance texts.

**CHAPTER FOUR: WHO'S GONNA RIDE YOUR WILD HORSES OF APOCALYPSE  
(AND WILL IT OR WILL IT NOT BE JACQUES DERRIDA, JULIA KRISTEVA, JACK  
HALBERSTAM, AND SARA AHMED IN HIGHLY FASHIONABLE LEWKS)**

In his 1971 essay “Signature Event Context,” Derrida speaks about written language as a communication system, taking time to analyze the relationship between the writer (“the addresser”) and the recipient of the writing (“the addressee”). Much like in my own argument, Derrida sets a criteria for how this relationship should strive to work and in doing so sets some boundaries. Derrida states emphatically that “writing that is not structurally readable—iterable—beyond the death of the addressee would not be writing” (“Signature Event Context” 7). In other words, the writing needs to be aware of its audience and should not require further explanation from the writer in order to be understood. This does not necessarily, at least for Jeremy’s purposes, mean that the write must be entirely scrutable and fully comprehensible within any gaps for the addressee to fill in. Rather, what I take from this somewhat hot take is that the possibility of understanding, appreciating, and engaging with the text must not be predicated on having supplemental conversation with the author. This seems invariably relevant to the craft of playwriting.... Derrida put it that “all writing must, therefore, [be] capable of functioning in the radical absence of every empirically determined receiver” (8). Therefore Derrida agrees with me that the author can be helpful in realizing the data and metadata of their text through production, but their presence should not be essential. And let me clearly state: yes, I am dragging how the estates of dead playwrights function in the ghostly authoritarianism of dead writers (L’Chaim to you families Miller, Beckett, et al.). Derrida eventually echoes my own sentiment in his essay, if perhaps with slightly less invective: “to write is to produce a mark that

will constitute a sort of machine [...] which my future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder in its functioning, offering things and itself to her read and to be rewritten” (8). If the instructions can’t be mined from what exists in manifest text or subtext, they don’t exist and this isn’t writing. Instead, your text is an artifact. A word-based sculpture from an antiquated time that no longer has any affordance, radical or otherwise.

While a script must be able to be appreciated based solely on the information enclosed within it, I certainly do not mean to imply that a performance text requires overwrought explanation. As evidenced in Suzan-Lori Parks’s text of *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, an incredible amount of information can be gleaned by an addressee from very little. There are many way to provide all relevant information to someone engaging with the writing without being prescriptive, domineering, expository, or providing a simply silly amount of granular specificity; and this holds true whether that addressee is a member of the creative team realizing an interaction of a piece or a reader engaging with the literary document, or an audience member engaging with the text indirectly through watching a production or experiencing the piece in some other embodied form. There is a way of creating an impression, a tone, a vocabulary, and indeed a whole stinking world through rhetoric (I am a big fan of being lyrical), rhythm, narrative voice, formatting, and—sometimes most audaciously—by leaving some spaces empty (on the page, in some story details, in design possibilities).

We’ve also seen that this need for writing to be appreciated in-and-of-itself does not necessarily mean that it fits with the parameters of my own dramaturgy of the text. How then does one build the practice of signification in their text ensuring the text has all the information available but also decentering the self and celebrating the other in the production process? What trees shall we denude and how will we go about stripping that bark? How do we consider the

impact of the violent traces of the language in which we are working? What violence must be done on, through, and within the text and how do we enact in a way that is radical in its care and its invitation for collaboration and community making? In both the Derrida and the Kristeva, I think we have some clues and to talk about how these things might function in the page and the affordance they had to be radical, but for clues as to how to manifest that liberatory function I see some guidance in two ideas: those of understanding and orientation.

Jack Halberstam engages with the former in their evergreen *The Queer Art of Failure*. In the introduction to this work, the academic and prodigious writer on Queerness and society examines a stratified or hierarchical theory of cultural production. Halberstam is looking specifically at broader cultural insofar as they are restrictive and othering and how those systems continue to perpetuate work of the same value. In their estimation work that is evident of this—a genus of work we might link with the Derridean “book”—places its audience and artists working in their wake in a well-traced path “precisely about staying in well-lit territories and about knowing exactly which way to go before you set out” (Halberstam 6).<sup>13</sup> There are ways of building language in a text—including traditional formatting and the embodied performance of language Jarcho notes in Parks’s work—that tell its addressee the exact path. Halberstam, drawing on low theory, proposes an opposite that I will call a dramaturgy aimed at cultivating iterative states of not-knowing: “the goal is to lose one’s way, and indeed to be prepared to lose more than one’s way” (8).

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<sup>13</sup> I’m speaking specifically in these pages about the writer, but I am also very aware that there are implications for working in this way that go well beyond a text and its instigator and have to do with money, interfacing with institutions, political challenges, and even personal safety. I want to mark those but also choose to live in optimism (itself an unlit territory in my own disposition) that when working in a community one can overcome these challenges. To operate in the tried-and-true, in this fearful sense of scarcity is not only unhelpful; it is toxic and promotes a stasis that is not helpful for artists nor their art (let alone their aforementioned livelihood and safety).

Halberstam's tease of losing more than one's way speaks to the striving for revolution and jouissance that I am aiming for in my work. Aiming to get lost—indeed, striving for failure—functions on many levels: the personal, that of a production, the political. There is an opportunity in getting lost in the creative process to discover something that one might not ever have considered. This is in large part why I choose to write for performance, rather than a more semiotically restrictive field such as the novel, where the relationship between addresser and addressee is delimited. Living within the mode of theatrical production is a persistent opportunity for discovery (which can also be terrifically scary). Setting that fear, which I have felt many a time, aside, I am excited by Halberstam's idea that by making work the is endemically aimed at a getting lost, “we might go with the thicket of subjugated knowledge, threatening always to overwhelm the cultivation and pruning of the intellect with mad plant life” (9). Fecundity and jouissance and liberatory signification practices!

In order to cultivate an environment that functions in with this liberatory affordance, a writer needs to consider how an individual is oriented within a space, whether that be a textual one or a physical one. Sara Ahmed's project in *Queer Phenomenology*, published in 2006, is to use the established tenets of the philosophical investigation into phenomena and apply it to a way of knowing and being that deviates from the norm. Her work of establishing new bounds of phenomenology to do so appears to be very much in sync with my dramaturgical project. This is especially marked for me as one's decision on the page—the choices I've spent so very much time exploring the implications of—impact a performance's teleological end: manifestation in space—writing becoming a phenomenon that exists in space. As Ahmed defines it, phenomenology is a discipline of study that “emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the

role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds” (Ahmed 2). This sounds very much like a certain kind of practice of playwriting, broader theatre making, and signification. As Ahmed writes, “[i]t matters how we arrive at the places we do” (2).

In her introduction to *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed starts from the initial point of philosophical investigation, similar to the starting point of my own process: the author’s writing table. In the act of her journey outward from the table outward, Ahmed examines her own experience in working outward from the page in creating a new philosophy of things. Ahmed considers her orientation to this space of creation, while also considering how one coming at the work from a place of deviance affects their relationship to it, which feels highly “text-y.” This thought experiment is an analysis of how Ahmed as a writer is oriented with both the world at their writing table and the work of her precursors in her field. Ahmed finds in this relationship an important starting point of her project: “[o]rientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we direct our energy and attention toward” (3). In Ahmed’s conception of creating a queer phenomenology, very much a Kristevan project of signification practice, one would engage with objects that are “‘less proximate’ or even those that deviate or are deviant” (3). The intention of this “getting lost” within an existing discipline, in Ahmed’s thinking, will yield an entirely new way of looking at existence and objects—bodies and ways of thinking to celebrate.

This idea pervades Ahmed's construction of her text on the same level that I'm talking about performance text. The writing is personal, based not only on her journey as a philosophy to coming to write this book and create this new lens of phenomenology but her journey to queerness and her sense of being an “other.” To this end, one could easily say that Ahmed is positing her text as a performance (might my project be the same?). She does so by bringing the



author's work surface “to the ‘front’ of the writing [...] By bringing what is ‘behind’ to the front, we might queer phenomenology by creating a new angle, in part by reading for the angle of the writing, in the ‘what’ that appears” (4). The stakes in this project are high for her personally and for the community she wishes to bring into the conversation through a disciplined approach to cutting a large slice in the pie of her field (or, perhaps, the baking of a new pie). Ahmed writes “[r]isking departure from the straight and the narrow makes news futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer” (20).

Ahmed evokes the concept of “desire lines,” a term used in landscape architecture as a way of thinking about her pursuit. Desire lines are “unofficial paths, those marks left on the ground that show everyday comings and goings, where people deviate from the paths they are supposed to follow” (19). Bringing desire lines to the fore of conversation and our awareness of the world around us “can even help generate alternative lines, which cross the ground in unexpected ways” (19–20).

This is my project: to write in such a way that whomever engages with my performance text must find new ways of orienting themselves to the text, drawing on their own want of travel and creation within the architecture I have created through the highly intentional use of the English language.

Ahmed traces the impact of this reorientation both in terms of her own writing process and the philosophy that it will engender. The affordance of this process—of taking note of these desire lines and appreciating the marginal individuals who come into relief when examining the world in this way—is social and political and has the potential to be revolutionary. Ahmed ponders “to live out a politics of disorientation might be to sustain wonder about the very forms of social gathering” (24). Ahmed is serving *jouissance* and *jouissance* that can be applied to our

conversation both in terms of the content of the actual work—which all of the writers I reference below are very much concerned with and successful at doing—but also the process of collaborating and making work with individuals and institutions. Ahmed’s performance of getting lost and her tracing of each and every path taken and moment in decision of doing so is an extraordinarily helpful framework in coding my new dramaturgy. This vein will continue through to my work in looking at the texts of more contemporary playwrights. It also leads back into Halberstam’s analysis of getting lost and new ways of making knowledge and the political impact of working in that way.

There is a way in which a performance text can promote this kind of perdu temps/reorientation time, as I have discussed (apparently, at some length). I take as the base for my dramaturgy-in-crysalis the ability for a collaborator to clearly appreciate a piece of text and the necessary understanding that this has an impact on the entire system of operations that follows. As I hinted at before, the conditions for a text being understandable are not the same as a text having crystalline clarity. As I am arguing here, by way of Jack and Sara, there is a way to be both totally understandable (and require no intervention from the writer), while also sowing seeds for mystery, searching, discovery (lather, rinse, repeat). A fulcrum for stoking desire lines seems to be that of knowledge (of the text, of the world it creates, of how that world impacts the community needed to realize it). How can a text be understandable (vital for me and Derrida) without being completely legible?

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam quotes James C Scott’s 1999 volume *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* for his analysis of legibility in cultural product, which Scott links to manipulation. As Halberstam restates in their own terms “illegibility may in fact be one way of escaping” political

manipulation (Halberstam 10). There is then a radical affordance in being easily understandable without being easily understood.

Shooting for this mark in the final product of the art in its fullest expression, but also in the intermediary space between text in product is a tenable, repeatable, and challenging way to get to that moving-target-of-a-sweetspot that I'm on about. Halberstam puts this in terms of pedagogy in stating "We may, ultimately, want more undisciplined knowledge, more questions and fewer answers" (10). Raising questions is a strategy—not in the sense of "what does this mean" but in the sense of "how can I possibly do this? There is a lot of discussion in creative room about the questions a piece is asking and the questions one has about a piece, but they always feel context based to me. Not that these questions aren't incredibly valuable; but there seems to be a lack of questions in the actual performance text as it expresses itself. The kinds of questions I'm thinking of aren't, "oy vey—how are we going to do this?" but more of a "how can this look?" and a "What does this image mean? Is it literal?" ooo and a "How can we give three-dimensional representation to this sentence, this word, this way of capturing language on a page?"

## CHAPTER FIVE: BEAUTIFUL, LYRICAL ACROBATS

The work of Sibyl Kempson presents an ecstatic entry point into considering the relationship between being understandable and legible. Sibyl<sup>14</sup> is highly conscious about her work being both rooted in language and the basis for embodiment and performance. The language surrounding Sibyl's work is peculiar and specific. In the bio on her company's website she is described as "making her own performances" (Seven Daughters). Sibyl's texts—highly complex, very literary documents—nevertheless decenter the writer in a way that another highly language-conscious writer like Suzan-Lori Parks's does. I would argue that this distinction, at least as it exists on the page, is as much a product of the legibility of Sibyl's texts, as her identity as a "maker."

In her play *Ich, Kürbisgeist*, Sibyl pushes understanding to the margin and creates a Germa-scandinavian-adjacent nonce language. This language pervades not only the dialogue but the unattributed text (text which is as much a kind of tonal hue as it is "stage direction"). Here is an example of this unattributed text: "*the echoe af der wee tiny, tinywee scraams brings us back to the ooldstre and the gurl, and some af der anothres who wir aroond at der tyme af der filcher*" (Kempson 9). As an exercise, I'll do a quick translation of this into contemporary, conversational American English: "the echo of the wee tiny, tiny screams, brings us back to one character and another character and some of the other, who whirr around at the time after a thief." So, there is some scrutable meaning to be found here, but the finding of it al diminishes the original text. The violence I imposed on Sibyl's text to get this meaning obfuscates many other things living in that sentence. These include the nature and rhythm of the text, its tone and old-world gothic vibrance,

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<sup>14</sup> In addition to being an admirer of Sibyl Kempson, I am also one of her students (and occasional exchanger of digital epistles that always seem to arrive when I most need them). As a result, it feels ridiculous to refer to her by her surname. So, I'll be going with "Sibyl."

and also robs it of some sense. The translated version also makes little sense outside of the content of the original language. Having done the violence of translation, we're still left adrift and bereft.<sup>15</sup>

Sibyl's work is slippery in any kind of literalness. The example of my translation of her text—akin to what Fischer-Lichte links to a fundamental aspect of the metamorphosis of text into performance—is one example. I will also note that it is difficult to write critically about her work due to this fungibility. The language itself resists one clear meaning—even if one is conversant in saxon parlance (as I am) and the greater language of the technology of Sibyl's script resists reduction to the level of analysis and critical engagement. Her plays are characterized by their slipperiness, the protean shapes they create, and by their resistance to clear interpretation.

The reason for being for the performance text of *Ich, Kürbisgeist* is to be illegible and, in resisting an easy transfer of knowledge, it points at something different, broader, and entirely more mysterious. To engage with the text is to be totally disoriented and experience an amazing amount of data. And also to be sort of delighted by whatever clarity is found. The prompt is clear: as the text's addressee we are navigating a language that cannot be fully legible and therefore are charting different ways of understanding. In traversing the landscape of the text, I draw desire lines based on the things that bring the joy of clarity, or provoke an unexpected laugh or moment of reflection, or feeling of sorrow. The text is also highly un-prescriptive: the non-dialogic text bears no mark of the imperative. A designer is not parsing why the verb “to sound” is used to describe how a bell works sonically, they are absorbing the primary and meta worlds created in the space of the text; a director is also adrift and looking for marks of orientation—it's desire lines up and down the specifically formatted page.

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<sup>15</sup> I'll note here that Sibyl uses reverse translation as a writing tool (i.e., write a phrase in english, translate it into Armenian, translate it back into English).

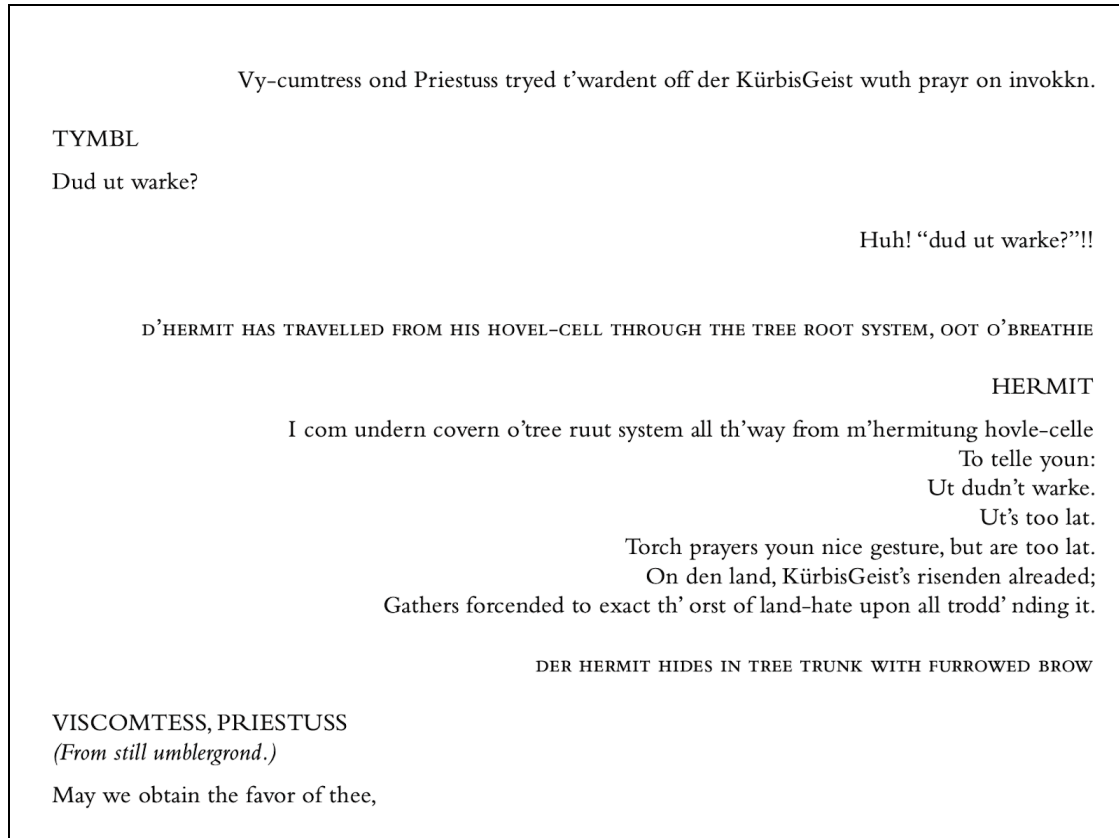


Fig. 2. Kempson, Sibyl. *Ich, Kürbisgeist*. Published Script Image." 53rd State Press, 2012.

In her introduction to the version of the text gorgeously published by 53rd State Press in 2012 (Fig. 2), the playwright, theatre maker, and publisher Karinne Keithly Syers describes the language in similar terms to the ones used by Halberstam and Ahmed in the previous chapter: “the words are something more like a spectral and mischievously erroneous map of the non-Romance roots of our words” (Keithly Syers vi). Keithly Syers doubles-down on the natural exploration imagery, linking the engagement with the text with cave-diving: “like all good spelunking into the deep time of words, [the language of the text] turns up irresolvable and a-logical convergences between things that have in our time been settled as discrete and unrelated, like the yawning hurt that herds and hurts.” (vi)

The 2013 Big Dance Theatre production at New York Live Arts makes this exploration of a map concrete in the way that Paul Lazar and Annie-B Parson, working with scenic designer Joanne Howard, orient the audience to the performance. Spectators are plopped down in a central location on chairs with a swiveling base. There is a playing space analogous to a “living room” directly in front of them, which is where the action begins. Directly opposite that space (and behind the audience) is another playing space, a pumpkin patch. And somewhere in the middle of the two, house left-ish, is a Victorian-looking hallway that gives Ouija board vibes. Through the position of performers in these various spaces and attention-moving elements like the raising and lowering of lights, the audience is invited to explore the space, just as much as the performers do throughout their embodiment of the performing task.

Sibyl further resisters legibility in the formatting of the text (Fig. 2), which features dialogue divided into columns of different margins with variably justified text. Sometimes dialogue spills out from its column, other times it is strictly restrained therein. The text itself seems to have an agency and be engaging in a kind of performance as it lives on the page. As Keithly Syers observed when formatting the text for publication, “it rebelled on the page, balked against reformatting, would not erase its directions for how it wanted to occupy the room.” (vii). I think Keithly Syers observations in readying the text for publication are also manifest in the way in which the text announces itself on stage in the Big Dance Theatre production.

The Big Dance production utilizes every element of the theatrical machine available to navigate the terrain of the *Ich Kürbisgeist* language. The piece features gestural movement, the aforementioned explosion of space, exuberantly designed costume, video, a robust atmospheric sound design, shadow puppetry, and real pumpkins. The image in Fig. 3—as best I can tell—is how Big Dance realized the selection of text in Fig. 2. Two columns of text in a language created

for the purpose solely of capturing this harvest haunting invited this level of theatrical invention and did so without specifically beseeching any of the elements displayed here. It is inferred that there would be performers and suggestion of gloriously ambiguous sonic and visual elements and yet in being perpetually disoriented and shirking legibility came this fecundity. There are surely many many many many other ways to have realized this text. In some a minimalist approach, in others something spectral on the level of backlight and hand puppets, in another maybe there is only one performer telling a story. All of these are completely legitimate and based in the reality of the text and its construction. All of it a result of all of the dramaturgical elements of writing and phenomenology that I have laid out above.



Fig. 3. Douglas, Ian. "Ich, Kürbisgeist Production Photo." 2013.

While Sibyl created a new language to produce this effect in her performance text, Agnes Borinsky is able to achieve similar results utilizing different tools. This is a product of her



strategy in creating a text and also tinted with her ultimate focus on family and community in her work. *The Trees* itself takes inspiration from another text, a Jewish Midrash, that asks questions of whether a tree is a person (this text is spoken by Saul, a rabbi, in the fourth act). The piece itself asks a question more akin to what happens when we take root and create a community the way we want to. This is done literally for David and Sheila, who root into the ground and become trees after just a few opening minutes of the piece.

The text of *The Trees* has elements of its primary image and theme in the language used to construct it. These elements of the text and Borinsky's work at large saw satisfaction in the Playwrights Horizons/Page 73 co-production, directed by Tina Satter. The text of Borinsky's play looks more like what we imagine a play to look like on the page than Sibyl's, but features an undermining quality to the elements predicated by that format. The opening stage direction of the piece evokes a mood, rather than a space and speaks specifically to a feeling, rather than something readily embodied by a person or a piece of furniture in a performance:

When you are drunk sometimes and with someone you love and have known for a long time you can maybe once in a while get to a place where you move in your body impulsively, decadently, and feel full and simple and clear. There is no decision-making, only doing, That's where we start (Borinsky 4).

The quality of this text is a welcoming into a space of mind. The text's addressee is at a gathering and within a moment where they feel comfortable enough to exist without concern of judgment. This place of freedom, flow—of being appreciated as yourself by those around you and by yourself—is “where we start.” It welcomes a collaborator into the space with a radical leveling: everyone working to create this thing is a part of a community and need not be self conscious.

Let's make art and a space in which to do so and be impulsive and decadent and do do do! This is a beseeching of jouissance in the content of the writing and its intention at the top of the text.

Who:	<u>The Family</u>
	SHEILA, 35, Black, David's sister
	DAVID, 37, white, Sheila's brother
	GRANDMOTHER, their grandmother, old, Polish
	EZRA, 7
	<u>Their Familiars</u>
	CHARLOTTE, 35
	JARED, 34
	NORMAN, 64
	SAUL, 36
	<u>The Twinks</u>
	JULIAN, 19
	TAVISH, 20
	<u>The Businesspeople</u>
	TERRY
	<u>The Shul Sisterhood</u>
	SHERYL

Fig 4. Borinsky, Agnes. "The Trees: Rehearsal Script Image"

Borinsky is a writer who appreciates "the book," the dangers of legibility, and the violence done by the method we use to write. As she wrote in an Instagram post near the end of *The Trees* run at Playwrights, "[l]anguage has been an architecture of falsehood, domination, and control. So we duck, we dodge, we don't stay still" (@ugly\_things 2023, March 9). There are traces of Halberstam and Ahmed in this utterance and a deep appreciation for what it means to ask people to make something based on your typings. She continues, "[b]ecoming a landowner in language is a dead end, a trap. We have to be squatters. We keep our lipstick, our estrogen, and our underwear in a bag by our pillow. We are gone in the morning, with our sunglasses and our iced coffee." (Ibid). This manifests in the text with the kind of extra-dialogic matter like the stage direction above and invocations of "a certain amount of magic" (Borinsky 32). This incantatory

way of writing presents designers with an opportunity to create something unexpected and unexplainable, but only up to the point that they want—it is “a certain amount,” after all.



Fig. 5. Playwrights Horizons. “The Trees: Production Photo,” 2023.

Borinsky is spare in what she asks for in terms of the literal look of the space, in which the place unfolds. She tells us that the setting is “Somewhere in Connecticut” and that the play takes place “Now, or Soon” (2). She offers that there is a “house” at “the top of a hill,” neither of which are provided with additional description (4). When an object enters the space, it is remarked upon. That is the sum total of what and where we are that is offered. The focus of the piece is not where we are or what it looks like, but another aspect of the text: the people and the community that grows around them. In this way, Borinsky’s work is also distinct from Jarcho’s reading of Suzan-Lori Parks. The author and their performance is decentered with the individuals populating the play being given space. Parker Lutz’s scenic design supports this intention in the text and honors the sparseness of the scenic description by providing a blank slate. The set features levels, distinct zonal playing spaces, and large columns with rounded corners that

function both as presentation columns (as in an ancient performance space) and trees in “the field” (127), which is the closest Agnes comes to defining the space where a community is formed around the human trees.

There is also very limited information provided in the text regarding the appearance of the characters. The character list (Fig. 4) scores high on the jouissance scale and provides some level of detail, particularly regarding David, Sheila, and Grandmother. The information provided was very much observed in the casting of these roles and used as grist by the actors interpreting those roles. Otherwise there is literally nothing, aside from Julian being described as “like 19 and skinny” (17). There is a illegibility at play in center individuals in a community while also providing very little about how these people present (twinks have an implied presentation, sure, but there’s a lot to unpack there and a lot of space to do so). Enver Chakartash’s costumes revel in this illegible space. They are colorful and idiosyncratic in design and in tailoring to each character. They highlight different moments in evolution of the individuals and the community at large while also literally highlighting the performers. The costuming make the individuals the focal point, just as Borinsky’s text serves to in its technological strategy.

The text of *The Trees* highlights the people in the play so as to bring attention to the people that make the play. In an Instagram post celebrating the end of the run at Playwrights in March of 2023, Agnes acknowledges the “groups of humans I’ve gotten to hang out and make a play with” and thanks them by way of talking about her own thinking as an artist (@ugly\_things 2023, March 23). The thanks itself is a performance and an underscoring of the thinking behind her dramaturgy, which Borinsky—accidentally evoking so much of the material in the thirty-six pages of Kadetsky that comes before this quotation—describes as “putting objects & places here

because they're maybe like the black dots on the sheet music. Marking the invisible something that happens in time" (Ibid).

## **CONCLUSION: JOUISSANCE IS BLINDNESS**

The perspective that Agnes Borinsky offers to the writing-of-performance-text to show-closing pipeline encapsulates many of the disparate elements that I have tried to draw together. The way that her text is constructed is directly linked to how she considers the community that sprouts around her work and she brought her own strategies for that magic trick with her to the writing table. Each writer does this. We will always have different perspectives on how to utilize the technology of script and what the goals in using this tool of communication are. Each project will be different and have its own set of contingencies and demands that exist in service to that particular piece.

What I hope to have to done in these pages—both to satisfy, in part, the tenets of my degree and with a quixotic hope of capturing a vocation in bound leaf—is to have set a foundational criteria for myself and to share with whatever theatre makers I happen to run into. Or perhaps, less concretely (literally, concretely), have sown a patch of land. The work of a given project will promote different growths in that field. Sometime they will be fecund like in the work of Sibyl Kempson, sometime they will be sparse as in that of Agnes Borinsky, sometimes they will be little granules of sand like in the most recent play I have a half-decent draft of.

I will till this patch of land as best I can for myself and collaborators and audience and also my peers, who I wish to advocate for in their own writing and prospects. I will take the work of the patch seriously, but I will endeavor to be playful and patient in the growing. Taking the work less seriously is a way of writing that will both promote the underlying conditions I consider essential to creating performance text and lead to a production model that is aiming at

showings and expressions of joy (even in trial there is joy), rather than the stress of precise re-manufacture.

So, playwrights—to borrow from Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure*—let’s “[p]rivilege the naïve or nonsensical (stupidity)” and prioritize “the non sensible or conceptual over sense-making structures that are often embedded in a common notion of ethics” (12). To operate in this way is a bulwark against the pressures of making ephemeral art.

So Jeremy—and whatever playwrights wanna come along for the ride:

Let’s be stupid and fuck-up and travel where we want to go in the landscape of the text, the space, the form.

Let’s lay the possibility for the world we want to inhabit in the texts we write and see them realized in small, poorly-ventilated ways.

Let’s queer Aristotle and not privilege the impossible probability but, rather, shoot for the impossible impossibility and enjoy the endothermic jouissance of such brazenchutzpah.

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