

EMPATHY, ESTRANGEMENT, AND THEATRE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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May 2011

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Cornell University, 2011

In this dissertation, I argue that we can look to particular aspects of theatre and performance to help us engage in empathy that is respectful and dialogic, that seeks not to consume another's experience, but rather to engage it. As a work of theatre scholarship, this dissertation seeks to reframe the debate over whether or not theatre is the ideal site of empathy, and whether such empathy can motivate social change. Rather than arguing for or against empathy, I suggest that we must ask *what kind of empathy* best promotes social change and how the theatre can help us encourage that empathy. I advocate a model of empathy based on a sense of parity, dialogue, and non-linearity. Empathy, I argue, is not a state or a feeling with a stable goal ("understanding"), but rather a process. As such, it entails an affective and critical labor that requires us to meet the other as our equal and to entertain, imaginatively, his or her perspective on the world. Because the empathy I advocate takes the form of an exchange, it can take us in unexpected directions. It consists not in a linear progression toward understanding, but rather takes the shape of a conversation, twisting, turning, doubling back, and emerging in the moment of encounter. It is contingent and always incomplete—a process without end.

I identify a series of theatrical techniques that can help produce the kind of empathy described above: interruption, repetition, and rehearsal. These techniques are either compatible with or derived from Brechtian theory. Thus, the dissertation calls for a rethinking of the role of empathy in Brechtian dramaturgy. To make this argument, I analyze the history of empathy or *Einfühlung*, a term originating in German aesthetic theory and then adopted by psychology, psychoanalysis, and phenomenological philosophy, inspiring new definitions in each of these

disciplines. I argue that *Einfühlung* in Brecht's work would be better understood as identification or emotional contagion and suggest that, despite Brecht's protests to the contrary, there is not necessarily any conflict between empathy and a theatre of estrangement.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lindsay Cummings completed a B.A. in Theatre and an M.A. in Theatre History and Criticism at Ohio University, where she was a student in the Honors Tutorial College. Before matriculating at Cornell, she interned in the literary department at Actors Theatre of Louisville and worked as the Education Manager and Co-Intern Coordinator at Portland Stage Company in Portland, Maine. She hails from Gravel Switch, Kentucky.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the many people, organizations, and institutions who have made this work possible. The research that informs Chapter 2, “Repetitions: Empathy, Poverty, and Politics in Eastern Kentucky” was funded by a graduate student research grant from the American Studies Program at Cornell University. I received invaluable feedback on Chapter 3, “Rehearsals: Naomi Wallace and the Labor of Empathy,” from my dissertation writing group, funded by Cornell’s Society for the Humanities.

Parts of Chapter 2 appear in *Performance Research* 16.2 (2011), copyright Taylor & Francis, LTD. My thanks to the editors and peer readers of that edition, especially Marlis Schweitzer, for all of their wonderful feedback, which has also influenced the dissertation chapter.

Finally, I would like to thank all the people who have assisted my research, and who have heard or read parts of these chapters, offering insight and influence along the way. My thanks, especially, to Amy Villarejo, Sara Warner, and Philip Lorenz, who have provided invaluable guidance and feedback that has shaped my theoretical and methodological approach, and even my understanding of my own work. In doing my research on *RFK in EKY*, I received help and support from the wonderful people at Appalshop, most notably Carline Rubens and Elizabeth Barret. Elizabeth’s assistance has continued in the many months since I left Whitesburg, in the form of all-too-frequent email conversations in which I begged her help tracking down sources and contacts. I would also like to thank Anne Beggs, Shea Cummings, Sabine Haenni, Rachel Lewis, Diana Looser, Donna Miller, and Nick Salvato. They have given feedback and support in innumerable ways—from reading drafts to helping navigate bizarre institutional bureaucracy. Thanks finally to my family, for their support and unwavering confidence in me.

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INTRODUCTION

TOWARD A DYNAMIC, DIALOGIC EMPATHY

On June 13, 2009, I attended a matinee performance of Eugene Ionesco's *Exit the King* at the Ethel Barrymore theatre in New York. During intermission, an usher asked a man sitting in front of me what he thought of the character of the king, to which the man replied that he did not admire him. King Berenger refuses to die, to accept the inevitability of his own demise, even as his mind, body, and kingdom crumble around him. The usher responded, "But do you empathize with him?" His tone implied that *this* was the truly important question, the question to end all questions, the ultimate litmus test for theatrical engagement. The man answered, "Yes, I do. I have a daughter." By this, I can only suppose that he meant he would not want to leave her, and thus he could understand the king's strong desire to continue his life.

But, of course, the king in Ionesco's play does not wish to live for the sake of others. In fact, Berenger's desire to live is so strong that he would choose life even if this meant that everyone around him died, that the *world itself* died. He wants to live because he is afraid of death, of letting go, of giving up power, of losing himself. The man in the audience was engaging in empathy by analogy: I have a reason to want to live; therefore I can empathize with the king's reason to want to live, even if it is different from my own. But how conscious is he of the differences between these reasons? What are the implications of these differences? Many of us assume that we "should" feel empathy in the theatre, and thus, we duly feel it (or we feel whatever it is that we are calling empathy), mostly by making the only or best connections we can. Often, we do so without pausing for very long in the strangeness of the other, in the aspects that we cannot so easily fit into our own stories or sense of self. Those, we gloss over or brush

aside in our hurry to achieve empathy, to find the connections. But those differences are important, too.

Our pursuit of empathy is complicated by the fact that we use the word to mean many different things: compassion, pity, sympathy, identification, understanding. It is “a broad, somewhat slippery concept – one that has provoked considerable speculation, excitement, and confusion” (Eisenberg and Strayer 3). But, as the usher’s tone implies, whatever we mean by empathy, whether we feel it or not has come to be an important question, and not only in the theatre. Empathy is crucial to how we see ourselves as human beings, so much so that the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV* lists a lack of empathy as one of the criterion for narcissistic personality disorder (715). As a *New York Times* story from April 2009 suggests, our concern over the state of empathy in our society is evident in the recent proliferation of programs designed to teach empathy in public schools, an effort aimed at reducing bullying and increasing students’ problem solving, anger management, and cooperative skills (Hu).

In “The Limits of Empathy” (2007), psychoanalyst Warren S. Poland argues that we have overextended empathy as a concept by attributing too much to it. Regarding the history of the concept, he writes, “Empathy soon ballooned from being a form of perception into an explanation for all seasons. It has been seen lying at the heart of growth and development; its lack has been posited as the centerpiece of pathogenesis; and it has been put forward as the essence of what is mutative in the analytical process” (88). Poland was not the first to make this claim. As early as 1935, mere decades after the English term was coined, the prominent psychoanalyst Theodor Reik asserted that empathy had come to mean so much that it was

beginning to mean nothing (Pigman 237).¹ If this is so, then there has long been, and continues to be, much ado about nothing. In *The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust* (2004), Carolyn J. Dean addresses what she calls “the perceived precariousness of empathy,” or our sense that we are not able to empathize as much as we would like or should be able to do, and suggests that this lack should be approached not as a given, but as a particular cultural narrative about what we feel and how we *want* to feel (15). Empathy, Dean argues, has become our unattainable ideal, our perceived solution to the “numbness” we encounter in the face of mass atrocity (5). Stjepan G. Meštrović, meanwhile, approaches the issue from the opposite standpoint. Instead of arguing that we have or perceive ourselves as having too *little* empathy, Meštrović asserts that we have too *much*.² In *Postemotional Society* (1997), Meštrović argues that too many of us are “sensitive to all sides of every issue, including the point of view of the victimizer,” which leaves us “feeling confused and unable to translate indignation into action” (143). Our propensity to empathize, according to Meštrović, robs us our ability to take action. Empathy was certainly not “nothing” in the 2009 debates over the appointment of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court, a debate that revived President Obama’s 2007 statement that “We need somebody who’s got . . . the empathy to recognize what it’s like to be a young, teenaged mom; the empathy to understand what it’s like to be poor or African-American or gay or disabled or old” (qtd. in Murray). For conservatives, Obama’s statement implied a worrying form of discrimination—an emotional favoritism toward minorities.

¹ “Empathy” was coined by E. B. Titchener in 1909 as a translation of the German term *Einfühlung*. More on this genealogy can be found below.

² Meštrović actually uses “sympathy,” rather than “empathy.” I include him here because I think the phenomenon he’s describing—of recognizing multiple points of view—corresponds to the definition of empathy I will promote later in this chapter, although Meštrović seems to think that we cannot recognize multiple points of view without also adopting them as all equally valid. For Meštrović, emotions undermine our ability cognitive capacity. While I would agree that emotions play a role in decision making, I think he underestimates the human ability to synthesize, process, and weigh a range of factors—including emotional ones—to arrive at decisions. I also include him because his work is relevant to the larger cultural distress over what role empathy, sympathy, pity, and compassion play in the pursuit of social justice.

Perhaps we can disagree so strongly about empathy precisely because we attribute so much to it, to the point where “empathy” can stand for practically all that is right or wrong with society. It is for this reason that we need to think not about “empathy” as either good or bad, but about different kinds of empathy and different ways of *doing* empathy. In this dissertation, I propose that empathy is not a feeling we have (or do not have), but a process through which we engage another. That process may take many forms and directions, some of them problematic. The problems that might emerge through empathy are not only intimately associated with the theatre, but are, in many ways, at the core of theatre, including the claim that empathy leads us to passively accept another’s perspective. Theatre’s ability to help us consider another’s experience or point of view, to help us understand how others feel and even, perhaps, evoke that very feeling in us, has been viewed as both its greatest asset and its most dangerous quality. If theatre can instruct us in good behavior, as Aristotle, Horace, and countless others have argued, then it is just as adept in instructing us in bad behavior, and this is so precisely because theatre encourages us to consider many points of view, to imaginatively identify with or emotionally respond to many different characters, not all of them paragons of virtue. As Rousseau points out, we hate Phaedra and Medea less at the end of the play than at the beginning; theatre has taught us to see from their point of view, to understand them better and thus, possibly, to judge them less harshly (Rousseau 267).³ The problems of empathy do not end here. As the example at the beginning of this chapter suggests, empathy runs the risk of misattribution—projecting our own feelings or experiences onto the other or attempting to understand others through analogies that may not suffice. When the man in the audience of *Exit the King* turns to his own life to understand what he sees on stage, is he understanding the king or is he understanding himself? Other critiques of

³ For Rousseau, of course, this is a problem, as both women are without morals, according to him.

empathy suggest that it involves an assumption of access and a desire to consume the other's experience. Still others, like Meštrović and, in the theatre, Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal, criticize empathy as the uncritical adoption of others' viewpoints.

By considering and moving through these potential problems, I believe that empathy can still have value as a means for helping us consider how others experience the world and what we might learn from these differences. Empathy may assist in the work of social change, building understanding between individuals and communities that see themselves as enemies or who simply wish to understand one another better. It may promote intercultural understanding, and it may help us understand how the actions and policies of one country or community impact another, allowing us to work toward change that promotes benefits across a spectrum of groups, rather than benefiting one group at the expense of another. This does not mean, however, that empathy must lead us to feel the same as others, or to accept others' thoughts or feelings as "right." There are ways to build a "better" empathy, and the theatre is particularly suited to this project. This is not to say that all theatre creates good empathy; it does not. Nor is this to say that empathy should always be a goal of theatre, or even of theatre for social change. There is no "one way" to pursue social change or to engage people in the theatre. There are, however, numerous reasons why theatre is compatible with empathy. After all, theatre is a space where we frequently imagine ourselves into other times, places, and circumstances, and into other persons. I propose that we can look to particular aspects of theatre and performance to help us produce an empathy that is respectful and dialogic, that seeks not to consume or subsume another's experience, but to engage it.

Theatre is ideally suited to this challenge for two reasons. First, theatre exists in what Richard Schechner refers to as the "subjunctive mode" (*Between* 104). It is a space of play, of

pretend. In theatre, actors and audience alike accept a fictitious world *as fictitious*. The actor plays “as if” she is another person in another world. As much as we might find a performance “believable,” both audience and actors know that this is pretend. It is this ability imaginatively to entertain the experiences of others that can help us engage in empathy that does not lead to identification or projection. If we let our imaginations go, instead of looking for immediate parallels, then we can, perhaps, entertain the point of view of King Berenger. Second, theatre is always an exchange—between performers and audience, between performers and each other. Live theatre is not only a place where we must carefully gauge other’s reactions, but also a place where we respond to those reactions and *experience feedback on our response*. This exchange loop is quite different from reading a novel or watching a film, where our responses may alter as a result of our own changing experience of the text, but the text itself will never adjust its response in reaction *to our particular, individual response*. A novel may address us directly (“Reader, I married him”), and assume a dialogue in doing so, but a novel cannot insert a “hrumph” or a physical gesture to emphasize a point or respond playfully to the audience’s laughter. It cannot adjust the pace and tenor of a speech to reach a bored reader. In theatre, we change a line delivery in a split second in response to the *feeling* we have of a particular audience. Theatre is dynamic, shifting and taking shape in the moment, between all present.

This is the model of empathy that I want to promote in this dissertation: empathy that does not “arrive” at understanding, but rather is in constant process, responding and reacting to the other as actors respond to audience, audience responds to actors, and even as stage managers respond to minute shifts in pace and performance on stage and in the audience. Very few models of empathy, particularly those that have influenced our discourse in the theatre, account for this dynamism. Aesthetic models of empathy, such as those that I will discuss later in this chapter,

imagine emotion as moving uni-directionally from spectator to aesthetic object. Theorists like Brecht and Boal describe it as a similarly uni-directional movement going in reverse, from stage to spectator. The empathy I outline here does not describe the movement of thought or emotion from one subject to another, but rather a dialogue and exchange in which all parties are responsive to one another. This is what I mean when I use the phrase “intersubjective empathy”: an empathy in which all subjects meet as equals in an exchange, open to the possibility of new thoughts and feelings engendered by that exchange. If we are to write about empathy in the theatre, we need to conceive of an empathy that is as dynamic and multi-directional as the theatre itself. Finally, rather than projecting our own feelings or experiences, this empathy engages our imagination, encouraging us to ask, “what if . . .?” As an imaginative process, the empathy that I explore is both cognitive and affective, and as such differs from theories of empathy as innate or instinctual. Here, I draw on Karsten Stueber’s distinction between “basic” and “reenactive” empathy. Basic empathy, for Stueber, describes our generally innate ability to understand quickly that someone is angry, happy, or sad. He attributes this kind of empathy to the mirror neuron system, a set of neurons in the brain that fire whether we are performing an action or seeing it performed.⁴ Reenactive empathy, meanwhile, entails more than simply recognizing what someone is feeling; it involves imaginatively engaging the other so that we might understand *why* she feels that way and what she might do about it. When I use the term “empathy” in this dissertation, I am referring to an active, imaginative process that is informed by our immediate responses or recognition of another’s emotions, but not limited to those responses.

⁴ “Basic” empathy is not shared by some people with certain physical brain injuries and, according to some, certain disorders, like autism. This is because basic empathy is a biological and neurological phenomenon, and damage to certain parts of the brain or brains that simply work differently may not allow us to recognize and/or experience certain emotions. The mirror neuron system, and other discoveries from the field of cognitive neuroscience and their impact on our understanding of empathy, is discussed later in this chapter.

The techniques I explore are, in large part, either compatible with or derived from Brechtian theory. Thus, this project calls for a rethinking of the role of empathy in Brechtian dramaturgy. I build on dialectical readings of Brecht advocated by scholars like Darko Suvin, Alisa Solomon, and Elizabeth Wright, but whereas these theorists accept Brecht's conflation of empathy with identification, I do not. By tracing the genealogy of empathy through aesthetic theory, phenomenological philosophy, and psychology, I make the case that psychological models are more appropriate to theatre, as a live art form involving human interaction, than the aesthetic models that influenced Brecht's use of the term. Whereas aesthetic models suggest a passive engagement between a viewer and an art object, one that can lead all too easily into assumed identification, psychological models require us to consider empathy as a dynamic, open-ended exchange between people.

Searching for Origins: Sympathy and Fellow-Feeling

Today, "empathy" is most often used to describe how we understand others. We may use it to indicate that we feel what the other is feeling, or that we recognize his or her feeling without sharing it. Either way, we are referring to an encounter between living beings.⁵ Empathy, however, originated to describe the way a spectator engaged a work of art. Because it was quickly adopted to describe human interactions, and consequently linked to the discourse on sympathy and compassion that exploded in the 18th century, empathy's meaning and usage splintered rather quickly. Definitions and theories vary so much that it is possible to find radically divergent definitions within the same discipline and in the same time period.

It is similarly difficult to pinpoint the origin of "empathy." While most histories of the term begin in 1873, when Robert Vischer used the word *Einfühlung* ("to feel into") in his

⁵ The question of whether or not we can empathize with animals has been discussed for as long as empathy has existed as a term. It is not one that I attempt to answer in this dissertation, except to say that, as I argue later in the chapter, there are many different kinds of empathy, some of which may apply to human-animal interactions.

influential essay “On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics,” this, like most myths of origin, is misleading. As numerous scholars have established, Vischer’s concept of *Einfühlung* drew on ideas already widely discussed in German aesthetics, including the theoretical work of his own father, Friedrich Theodor Vischer.⁶ Even the word *Einfühlung* had precedents, particular the verb form *Hineinfühlen*.⁷ So we must go back earlier than 1873. But how far back? David A. Stewart traces the origins of empathetic thought to Plato and his privileging of shared knowledge (5). Karl F. Morrison begins his genealogy with Vedic theology in the second century C.E. and the notion that God is found in all things, and thus that we all share some part of the same divinity (3). Ernst K. Mundt cites the German Romantic poet Novalis (293).⁸ These different origin stories derive from different understandings of what empathy entails. Is it identification, a feeling of spiritual union, or a projection of the self into the world? The definition of empathy to which you subscribe will dictate the origin story you choose. I begin my genealogy, as most scholars do, in the 18th century, with the rise of the discourse on sympathy. I choose this point because sympathy seems the most direct predecessor or influence on the concept of empathy *as it came to be applied to human interactions*, and also because it is, to this day, frequently confused with empathy. Sympathy is particularly important

⁶ See, for example, Pigman, Mallgrave and Ikonomou, and Mundt. The Vischers’ theories, both father and son, will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

⁷ Which, according to Pigman, was coined by Herder in 1774. The prefix “hin” indicates a directional move away from the speaker. The directionality of empathy will be discussed further later in the chapter. Jahoda argues that *Einfühlung*, the noun, was used before Vischer, but I cannot corroborate this. What is clear is that variations of the word were in circulation before Vischer’s essay, which, if not responsible for coining *Einfühlung*, at the very least launched it into popular usage (Jahoda 153).

⁸ I cite these examples because all three writers call attention to these ideas as “roots” or “origins” of empathy. There are, however, numerous instances in which writers use the term “empathy” without historicizing it at all, suggesting, as it were, that the “concept” of empathy existed long before it had a name, or that it has gone by many names. For example, in “How I Feel Your Pain: Lessing’s *Mitleid*, Goethe’s *Anagnorisis*, and Fontane’s Quiet Sadism,” Fritz Breithaupt claims that “There is probably no German-writing author who has put as much hope in empathy or *Mitleid* as the ribbon of society as has Gotthold Ephraim Lessing” (403). Breithaupt completely ignores the fact that Lessing lived well before *Einfühlung* entered the German vocabulary. He treats *Mitleid*, which is usually translated as pity or compassion, as a synonym for empathy. This collapse of historically and disciplinarily distinct concepts and terms is characteristic of the discourse on empathy. It can also be found in Johannes Türk’s essay, “Interruptions: Scenes of Empathy from Aristotle to Proust,” in the same volume as Breithaupt.

to the theatre because it describes how we come to *feel what another feels*, or how observing another experiencing an emotion (real or performed) can produce that emotion in us. Well before the 18th century, theatre advocates and critics alike recognized the communicable nature of emotion. But whereas sympathy originated as term for understanding human relationships, empathy did not. It will be useful, therefore, to take the time to differentiate these concepts.

The 18th century witnessed widespread interest in the nature of the passions and human feeling, particularly in regard to the ways in which our passions forge bonds between us. As Norman S. Fiering explains, this discussion was characterized by a reaction against the position, commonly-held in the 17th century, that our passions were dangerous and our natures inherently self-serving, ideas advanced by thinkers like Hobbes, who argued that social bonds are cemented out of self-interest (Fiering 198). In response, philosophers like David Hume and Adam Smith began to promote an alternative theory of human sociality—one based on sympathy or “fellow-feeling,” the tendency to adopt the feelings of those around us. In his study of the relationship between sentiment and race relations in the 18th century, Amit S. Rai argues that the rise of interest in sympathy, particularly from these British and Scottish philosophers, is directly linked to the rise of the British Empire and the corresponding need to create new governing strategies and new concepts of citizenship. As a mechanism that marks the difference that it is meant to overcome (i.e. the difference between an observer and the object of his or her observation), sympathy taught members of an expanding empire both how to recognize themselves as part of that same empire and how to identify differences within that system of social organization. Rai writes,

As a mode of power, sympathy tied together subjects, families, communities, classes, nations, races, and colonies in a kind of acrobatics of identification and

differentiation. Sympathy, in other words, as a principle of sociality and cohesion. Moreover, as a form of subjectivity sympathy was instrumental in launching projects of marking off populations in need of benevolence, and thus of normalizing subjects into better citizens, in the home, for the nation, for the empire. Sympathy, then, as a mechanism of differentiation and normalization.

(xix)

As sympathy came to be understood as a “normal” human reaction (or at least the reaction of a “normal” or “civilized” European), it simultaneously signified a moral action through which a human could mirror the behavior of God toward his subjects. Sympathy thus became enmeshed with the twin imperial projects of Christianization and “civilization.” Only the civilized, Christian subject could sympathize, and, through that sympathy, could come to know, educate, and appropriate the “barbarian” and “savage” races of the world.

I want to turn, now, from the question of why sympathy arose as a key concept when it did to that of how it supposedly works, for as much as sympathy was deemed a “natural” reaction, it was also one clearly delimited by social norms. In *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1737), Hume writes, “No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than the propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own” (206). At first glance, it seems Hume is suggesting that sympathy works no matter how different the subjects may be. He goes on: “This is not only conspicuous in children, who implicitly embrace every opinion propos’d to them; but also in men of the greatest judgment and understanding, who find it very difficult to follow their own reason or inclination, in opposition to that of their friends and daily companions” (206). This propensity to adopt the feelings and

perspectives of others accounts for the tendency of people of the same nation to share characteristics and qualities. We are naturally disposed to think, feel, and act like those around us. But as a close reading of Hume reveals, this process is somewhat circular, as we are more likely to experience sympathy with those who we can identify as being similar to ourselves (Hume 207).

Hume's notion of sympathy relies on similarity, in part, because, according to his theory, ideas and feelings must *already be identified and understood* in order for us to sympathize with them. While feelings and ideas are, in Hume's analysis, communicable, this does not occur through a process of direct communication or, as we might say today, contagion. Instead, we rely on the appearance of the other. This appearance produces an idea in us which, through our imagination, creates an impression which in turn produces an emotion in us corresponding to that which we have observed. It is important to note Hume views the idea as *preceding* the feeling, leading Karsten R. Stueber to note that, "for Hume, the process of sympathy seems to be initiated only after we have already inferred that the person is in a mental state, particularly an emotion, based on our own observation of his behavior" (30). Sympathy, then, is not how we understand what another is feeling, but how we come to experience a version of that feeling in ourselves. Imagination is essential to the process Hume describes, so much so that it is often the *imagined* reaction, not the one we actually see, that prompts our sympathetic response. He writes, "sympathy . . . is nothing but the conversion of an idea into an impression by the force of imagination" (Hume 273). It is worth noting that, for Hume, imagination excites things, makes them bigger, and gives them more "force."⁹ Sympathy may also be influenced by "*general rules*"

⁹ Rousing the imagination becomes the work of the orator: "Nothing is more capable of infusing any passion into the mind, than eloquence, by which objects are represented in their strongest and most lively colours. We may of ourselves acknowledge, that such an object is valuable, and such another odious; but till an orator excites the

as to what kinds of emotional responses are merited by certain situations (Hume 241, emphasis in original). For instance, we might feel pity for a man who feels none for himself because we imagine how one would *generally* feel in such a situation. Thus, sympathy is often aroused through an imaginative *alteration* of what we see—a stimulating process that incites us to feeling which usually corresponds to the other’s feeling, but sometimes differs from it because of how our imagination, and social norms, impacts our response.

Smith concurs with Hume that sympathy leads to fellow-feeling. His description of how we arrive at that feeling, however, is somewhat different. Smith writes, “As we can have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation” (1). Like Hume, Smith describes this as an imaginative process, but adds to Hume’s analysis the clarification that what we are imagining *is always based on our own feelings*:

It is the impression of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, *we enter as it were into his body*, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensation, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (Smith 1-2, emphasis added)

For Smith, then, when we experience horror at another’s suffering, it is because we sense what we would suffer under the same circumstances, or, more specifically, *if we were the other*. The idea of moving into the other’s body to achieve emotional understanding will come up again in the discourse on empathy; it is important to note, here, that for Smith this is not so much a

imagination, and gives force to these ideas, they may have but a feeble influence either on the will or the affections” (Hume 273). We might similarly think of theatre as a means of giving “force” to ideas by rousing the imagination.

sharing of perspective as it is a replacing of other with self: “I consider what I should suffer if I was really you, and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters” (Smith 329). Although Smith views the circumstances that inspire an emotion as crucial to sympathy, he acknowledges that our responses to situations depend on our individual circumstances and personalities, and that our sympathetic imagination accounts for these differences. Nevertheless, his account of sympathy does raise questions about what happens when our feelings differ from what the other feels, because imagining the other’s emotions from the other’s point of view does not mean that we always accept his or her emotions as appropriate. He writes, “[I]f we consider all the different passions of human nature, we shall find that they are regarded as decent, or indecent, just in proportion as mankind are more or less disposed to sympathize with them” (Smith 21). We will not sympathize with one who grieves deeply over a minor misfortune because we judge his response to be inappropriate to his situation.

Not only does sympathy act as a barometer to “appropriate” human emotion, but it also modulates that emotion. Sympathy, for Smith, is a two-way exchange. We respond to whether or not others sympathize with us and begin to see our situation as others would see it, which has, in Smith’s view, a tendency to calm our passions and bring them to appropriate or decent levels. Because, according to Smith, the sympathizer *always* experiences a “weaker” version of the passion than the one originally feeling it, a position that differs from Hume’s, sympathy will invariably have the effect of reducing the scale of our response: “Society and conversation, therefore, are the most powerful remedies for restoring the mind to its tranquility, if, at any time, it has unfortunately lost it; as well as the best preservatives of that equal and happy temper, which is necessary to self-satisfaction and enjoyment” (Smith 17). Sympathy produces fellow-feeling not only through the imaginative act of putting ourselves in the other’s situation, but by

imagining how others see us and regulating our responses such that they might be more likely to engage us and share our feelings. The overall process of sympathy, then, might be better understood as one in which fellow-feeling is achieved through a continual monitoring of how our own feelings compare to those of our companions, and to social norms more generally. To return to Rai's argument regarding the political and social function of sympathy, we might say then that sympathy not only allows one to understand other races and cultures, but also serves as a means through which those races and cultures, by contact with Europeans, might be "civilized."

Hume and Smith both describe a close connection between sympathy and spectatorship. Hume writes that, pity, like sympathy, depends on our proximity (he uses the term "contiguity") to the object; it is, in fact, best to see it directly (239). Smith echoes this point in his examples:

When we see a stroke aimed and just ready to fall upon the leg or arm of another person, we naturally shrink and draw back our own leg or our own arm; and when it does fall, we feel it in some measure, and are hurt by it as well as the sufferer.

The mob, when they are gazing at a dancer on the slack rope, naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies, as they see him do, and as they feel that they themselves must do if in his situation. (2)

The idea that we must *witness* another's feeling in order to respond to it is one of the limits of sympathy, and the very place where theatre becomes important. Theatre can place before us passions and feelings and situations that we would not otherwise encounter in our daily lives, rendering immediate and impactful what would otherwise remain remote. For Smith emotions produced on the stage lose none of their power to move us: "Our joy for the deliverance of those heroes of tragedy and romance who interest us, is as sincere as our grief from their distress, and our fellow-feeling with their misery is not more real than that with their happiness" (3). This

view is also espoused by Diderot, who argued that both painting and theatre ought not aim to produce pleasure for the eyes, but to *move* us both emotionally and physically (i.e. moving us to tears) (Fried 79-80).

Writing in 1798, the playwright Joanna Baillie builds on these theories in the “Introductory Discourse” to her “Plays on the Passions.” Our natural curiosity to “behold man in every situation,” she argues, means that theatre can be used as a source for moral and emotional instruction (70). Baillie is particularly interested in teaching us to resist the influence of strong passions, a project she deems well suited to tragedy, where we can witness “the human mind under the dominion of . . . strong and fixed passion” (86). By observing how others are dominated by passion and participating, through sympathy, in this experience, we might learn how to avoid this outcome ourselves. Like Smith, Baillie believes that our sympathy excites in us the same emotion that we witness, but to a lesser degree. Theatre can thus arouse our passions in such a way that we are not overcome by them, but are instead able to reflect on how one ought to respond to such powerful emotion. If sympathy, for Smith, is the means by which we learn to feel appropriately, theatre, for Baillie, is the classroom.

For all of these theorists, sympathy depends on a sense of similarity between the observer and the one observed and produces at least some degree of shared feeling. This leads Stueber to argue that sympathy “contributes to the integration of the individual into a community, a group of people who think and feel similarly to other members and are concerned for each other” (31). This makes sense, considering that sympathy arose to offer an explanation for social organization based on something other than self-interest and to facilitate the governance of a diverse and widely spread-out empire. Stueber explains, “It was not knowledge of other minds, but concern for other minds and other persons that was the primary philosophical problem philosophers tried

to address with the notion of sympathy” (31). Sympathy allows us to participate in the lives of others, and consequently to see ourselves as part of a common humanity. Or, it did so for the white, European male, whose province it was to understand, and thus govern, an empire: “. . . sympathy renders the other an object of identification, and so the other seems to be knowable, accessible, and so appropriable” (Rai 59). One who could not sympathize was less than human:

By the mid-eighteenth century, the opinion that a person who is unmoved by the pains and joys of others is a kind of monster, an unnatural creation, and that God has given men and women inborn feelings of compassion, sympathy, and benevolence as a way of directly guiding mankind to virtue, this opinion became a virtual philosophical and psychological dogma. (Fiering 205)

Sympathy became a moral imperative, a notion that is not entirely gone today. But today it is more often empathy than sympathy that is seen as a marker of our humanity. The terms, although related, are not entirely synonymous.

From Spiritual Union to Cognitive Understanding: The Journey of a Word

While the concept of empathy emerged primarily to describe the relationship between a person and an art object, rather than the relationship between people, the possibility that it might apply to people was proposed quite early in its usage. Whatever its object, empathy, like sympathy, describes a participatory relationship that is generally one-sided, or that describes an uneven power relationship. Empathy also raises many of the same questions raised by sympathy, including the question of how much our own emotions and experiences contribute to our empathetic understanding. But empathy differs from sympathy in that it moved quickly away from the notion of identification or shared feeling to describe, instead, the process by which we come to understand how others experience the world. I trace this movement of empathy here in

order to explain how it is that we have arrived at such a debated definition today, and also to illustrate how empathy's movement from one discipline to another introduced not only new definitions, but also new problems, questions, and considerations.

Empathy emerged at a time when German aesthetic theory was divided primarily between two schools of thought, both drawing on Kant but in radically different ways. In the simplest of terms, formalists argued that aesthetic pleasure arose from our apprehension of harmonious forms, while sensualists argued that aesthetic pleasure arose through our emotional engagement with art objects.¹⁰ Advocating for the sensualist approach, Friedrich Theodor Vischer argued that “we define our relation to the world, at least in part, through the symbolic interjection of emotions into objective forms” (Mallgrave and Ikonomou 20). Thus, when Robert Vischer wrote “On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics,” he was building on his own father's aesthetic theories.¹¹ It is also worth noting that *Einfühlung* is only one of many words Vischer coins in the essay, in which he develops “a whole process of feeling one's way toward, onto, into, and out of the object of his interest,” all from the root *-föhlung*, meaning “feeling” (Mundt 291).¹² It is the concept of *Einföhlung*, however, which found a foothold and “radically altered the aesthetic discussion of an era” (Mallgrave and Ikonomou 22). It would also radically alter the field of psychology, as I will discuss later.

¹⁰ For more information on these aesthetic theories, see Mallgrave and Ikonomu, and Mundt.

¹¹ He was building on others' work as well. Diderot also wrote about the act of viewing a painting as one of physically entering (i.e. imaginatively projecting oneself into) the work of art, a process that he associated most with pastoral painting (Fried 125). For Diderot, the simplicity of the bucolic scene is what allows us to project ourselves into it in this way, while for Vischer, as I describe below, it is our sense of harmony with the natural world that promotes this response (Fried 131).

¹² “*Föhlung*” has a sensory aspect to it, which is important because the process Vischer describes is decidedly based in the body. The physical resonances of empathy are retained in early psychological texts, but tend to drop out of the discourse until their revival in cognitive neuroscience.

Drawing on his father's work, Vischer argues that *Einfühlung* is motivated by our “intuitive investment” in the world around us (90). This investment originates with a desire to share our emotional lives with our fellow human beings:

Feeling directed exclusively toward oneself is a dull, sterile emotion; it strives on its own accord to reach out beyond itself and yearns for a reciprocal feeling elsewhere. Only by considering our fellow beings do we ascend to a true emotional life. This natural love for my species is the only thing that makes it possible for me to project myself mentally; with it, I feel not only myself but at the same time the feelings of another being. (Vischer 103)

The similarities in this passage to the discourse on sympathy are clear: empathy extends from the “natural” love and interest we have in our “fellow beings.” As the essay progresses, however, Vischer shifts his focus away from other people to our relationship to nature and to non-living objects, including works of art. For Vischer, we are motivated to engage objects in much the same way that we engage people: “I can think my way into [an object], mediate its size with my own, stretch and expand, bend and confine myself to it” (Vischer 104). We do this, Vischer argues, out of “the pantheistic urge for union with the world” (109). As we think ourselves into objects, we are “magically transformed into this other,” a process that confirms our status as part of a larger whole (Vischer 104). Through *Einfühlung*, we experience that harmony or union; we experience a larger version of ourselves.

Vischer understands that this process can lead us to attribute our own feelings to objects, particularly to objects in nature, from which most of the examples in his essay derive. He writes, “We have a strange knack of confusing our own feeling with that of nature” (107). When we think of a winding road as languid or a mountain as rising, these feelings do not originate in the

objects. Rather, as Vernon Lee puts it, “the rising of which we are aware is going on in us” (62).¹³ But, as Vischer’s editors caution, to reduce his theory to one of simple emotional projection would be a mistake. They write that *Einfühlung* “denotes for Vischer a more radical and thoroughgoing transference of our personal ego, one in which our whole personality (consciously or unconsciously) merges with the object. In essence, we fill out the appearance with the content of our soul” (Mallgrave and Ikonomou 25). Empathy constitutes an expanding of the self into the object. Ernst K. Mundt characterizes aesthetic empathy as a participatory engagement between viewer and object, contrasting it to the more distanced, removed formalist approach (295-296). This notion of merger between viewer and object becomes a key criticism of empathy, particularly as it moved beyond aesthetic theory into the field of psychology.

As the examples above make clear, Vischer shifts throughout the essay from discussing empathy in relationship to works of visual art, animate and inanimate objects in nature, and people. On the one hand, the broad scope of his theory explains why it was so easily and quickly adopted by psychology. On the other hand, he does not account for any differences between these kinds of engagements. There seems to be no limit to empathy for Vischer. As long as we sense some kind of harmony with another—person, object, geographical feature, painting—we can empathize with it, expanding ourselves into its borders and sensing ourselves as part of the world beyond the boundaries of our own minds and bodies. That sense of harmony, of course, originates in us as an *urges* to connect and be connected. Empathy is not something we find but something we seek, an encounter motivated by our own desire, which perhaps explains why the sense of reciprocity Vischer imagines is the same whether he is describing empathy with a

¹³ In her early writing, Lee uses the term “sympathy” to describe this idea. She later adopts the term *Einfühlung*, translating it as empathy and crediting Titchener with the translation (Lee 66).

person or a painting: the sense of communion is found not in exchange with another, but within ourselves, whether the object of our empathy is animate or not.

Vischer's theories were adopted, among others, by the psychologist Theodor Lipps, whose work, more so than any other's, popularized *Einfühlung* as a psychological concept (Pigman 240). Like Vischer, Lipps believed that aesthetic pleasure was not found in a work of art itself, but rather arose out of one's engagement with a work of art, and as such Lipps initially adopted *Einfühlung* as an aesthetic concept explaining how we animate the world around us. He writes, "All such giving life to our surrounding realities comes about, and can come about, only inasmuch as we attribute to outer things our own feeling of force, our own feeling of striving or willing, our own activity and passiveness—Such an attribution brings outer things close to us, makes them more intimate and in so far more intelligible" (qtd. in Gladstein 40).¹⁴ What begins, then, as a means of "giving life" quickly becomes a way of *understanding* something. He later turned to the term because he sought a means to explain how we understand what others think and feel that did not rely on analogy. As George W. Pigman explicates, "We don't, for example, see our own expression when we are grieving, then see a similar expression on someone else's face and conclude that the person is grieving" (242). In other words, we do not think, "that is what I look like when I grieve, so she must be grieving." This led Lipps to suggest that *Einfühlung* could be understood as *inner* or mental imitation which we then read back into the other:

I see, for example, an expression [Gebärde]. Then this facial image, by means of an arrangement of my nature that is not further describable, awakens impulses to such movements that are suited to call just this expression into existence. These

¹⁴ Very little of Lipps' work has been translated into English, making it difficult to piece together his theory. I rely on translators and summaries made by previous readers of Lipps here, attempting to limit my analysis to points that seem to be undisputed among a majority of these writers.

movements in return are the natural expression [Äußerung] of an affective inner state, e.g. grief. This state and the movement impulses in question form a psychic unity. Accordingly, the movement impulses which are induced by the facial image of the other's expression [Gebärde], include the tendency to experience this affective state. This tendency realises itself when it can, i.e. when such an affective state has already been experienced by me and therefore belongs to my mental property and second when this affective state does not conflict with my own nature. Even in the case of this conflict the tendency to experience the affective state still remains. (qtd. in Pigman 242)

For Lipps, this theory of inner imitation explained how it is that we are able to understand the emotion in an expression or gesture.¹⁵ An expression itself is not angry or joyful or disgusted, but rather there is anger or joy or disgust found *in* that expression (Wispé 19). Lipps' theory of *Einfühlung* is a highly subjective, experiential one. The process is only "objective" or knowable in retrospect, when you step back from the experience to analyze it (Gladstein 41). This description of *Einfühlung* also introduces new complications and complexities. As Lauren Wispé points out, to take Vischer's term *Einfühlung* and describe it as inner imitation constitutes a rather "generous" interpretation (20). For one thing, what Vischer described as a projection and expansion of the self *into* the other is now described, by Lipps, as a process in which the other is first imitated *within* the self, and then that imitation is read back into the other, indicating something of a directional shift in empathy. In his attempt to explain the differences between

¹⁵ Lipps' theory is striking in that it seems to anticipate cognitive neuroscience and the discovery of mirror neurons. Mirror neurons are so called because, according to research conducted on monkeys, the same neurons fire in response to observing an action as undertaking that action, leading many cognitive neuroscientists to posit this automatic, inner-imitation as the basis for empathy. I discuss cognitive neuroscience and its impact on studies of empathy in more detail later the chapter

Lipps' use of *Einfühlung* and Vischer's, Gustav Jahoda goes so far as to argue that that Lipps understood empathy as basically the same as sympathy and chose to use *Einfühlung* only because it was the more prevalent term at the time he was writing (154, 158). This argument, however, disregards Lipps' initial adoption of *Einfühlung* as an aesthetic term which follows Vischer's theory rather directly. Whatever the case may be, Lipps used *Einfühlung*, and in doing so he introduced the term into the field of psychology, which would ultimately lead to further re-articulations of the concept.

Lipps' adoption of *Einfühlung* led directly to the English coinage "empathy," made by Edward Bradford Titchener in 1909. Following Lipps, Titchener argued that ideas are represented in our consciousness through a form of inner imitation. Titchener was a sensationist, subscribing to the theory that all cognition derives from sensory information. Thus, for Titchener, this inner imitation consisted in sensory imitation—sight, feeling, smell, etc.—which the observer feels and acts "in the mind's muscle" (21). Titchener initially viewed this not so much an act or process, but as an instant and instinctive occurrence: "I represent the meaning of affirmation, for instance, by the image of a little nick felt at the back of the neck,--an experience which, in sensation, is complicated by the pressures and pulls from the scalp and throat" (22). We "feel" the idea of affirmation through both the image of and the sensations associated with nodding our heads. For Titchener, then, our understanding of other's inner states is not something we read *on* them, but a sensational experience produced *within* us in response to the sensory information we receive from them. In his later work, he expanded the concept to encompass our imaginative capacity: "We have the natural tendency to feel ourselves into what we perceive or imagine. As we read about the forest, we may, as it were, *become* the explorer; we feel for ourselves the gloom, the silence, the humidity, the oppression, the sense of lurking

danger; everything is strange, but it is to us that strange experience has come” (qtd. in Wispé 22). He goes on to distinguish this experience from sympathy: “This tendency to feel oneself *into* a situation is called EMPATHY; -- on the analogy of sympathy, which is feeling *together with* another” (qtd. in Wispé 22). Titchener emphasizes that empathetic meaning derives from sensations, not “perceptions;” it is felt meaning (qtd. in Wispé 22).

As the statement quoted above makes clear, theorists were not unaware of the similarities between empathy and sympathy. Both concepts begin have to do with how we respond to others, how their affect is both understood and experienced by us. But whereas sympathy tends to move toward shared feeling, empathy—at least empathy as it was coming to be understood outside of aesthetic circles—does not. Even Vischer’s description of empathy does not suggest a process of sharing emotion with another, but rather a sense of accord or harmony on what is best described as spiritual. Even when Lipps and Titchener suggest that empathy produces feelings in us like those in the other, this is described as a temporary state which permits the empathizer to *understand* what the other feels. It is worth recalling, at this point, that the discourse on sympathy arose to assure white Europeans of their capacity to understand, care about, and civilize the peoples of the world, a project achieved through their “natural” capacity for fellow-feeling. In contrast, for the first psychologists to take up the idea of empathy, the primary question was not how we come to share feeling, but how we come to know what others think and feel in the first place. For many, the inference by analogy offered by theorists like Adam Smith was not satisfactory, leaving room for a new concept. Besides, sympathy leaves other questions unanswered, such as how we arrive at a concept of the self or Ego and of other Egos. Rüdiger Campe writes,

Einfühlung could function as a term at the origin of two of the most fundamental trends in twentieth century psychology and philosophy: First, empathy relates to the embodiment of the I that is able to perceive, understand, and act; and second, it underlines the circumstances that an Ego's perceiving, understanding or acting presupposes a world where other Egos do similar things. (357)

In other words, empathy arises as a means of understanding the distinct, individual, subjective experience of oneself and others at just that point when such questions become pressing. If sympathy was meant to knit together diverse communities into a common humanity in the age of empire, empathy is the means by which we understand others not as generally "human," but as individuals in the age of the bourgeoisie.

The question of individual subjectivity at the heart of psychological notions of *Einfühlung* mark is as a distinctly modern concept. Thus, "By about the first part of the twentieth century the idea of *Einfühlung*/empathy was – intellectually speaking – everywhere" (Wispé 24). This same shift to the individual was also evident in the theatre. In an essay from the early part of the nineteenth century, Hegel wrote that the domain of modern tragedy was no longer the moral and ethical forces which determined characters' courses of action, but "the inner experience of their heart and individual emotion, or the particular qualities of their personality" (543).

Characters throughout the rest of the century would continue to support this claim: it is the psychology of Hedda Gabler and Miss Julie that matters. Empathy is how we come to understand their "inner experience"—the primary focus of realism. Even as it marks individual experience as radically other, empathy assures us of our ability to access the other and to understand that which is outside our immediate experience. It thus confirms individual subjectivity even as it promises a means to transcend it.

At this point, tracking the genealogy of empathy becomes difficult because it splinters into three distinct but overlapping branches. Empathy continues to be an important concept in both aesthetics and psychology, and I will return to these disciplines later in the chapter. Before doing that, however, I want to turn to phenomenology and the work of Edmund Husserl in order to discuss how it is that empathy helps us understand others as perceiving, acting entities like ourselves. In *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (1913), Husserl introduces empathy to make a distinction between how we experience our own lived experience and how we experience that of others. While our own experience is *primordially* given—that is, perceived or given to consciousness through our own self-awareness—others’ experiences are not perceived in this way: “The other man and his physical life is indeed apprehended as ‘there in person’, and in union with his body, but, unlike the body, it is not given to our consciousness as primordial” (*Ideas* 52). Thus, while we have a primordial experience of the other’s *body*, her mind is not given to us in the same way; we experience it, instead, through empathy.

Unfortunately, nowhere in *Ideas* does Husserl describe how empathy actually works. He does develop this problem later, most elaborately in *Cartesian Meditations* (1931).¹⁶ In this text, Husserl engages empathy to defend phenomenology against accusations of solipsism. He claims, “That my own essence can be at all contrasted for me with something else, or that I (who am I) can become aware of someone else (who is not I but someone other than I) presupposes that *not all my own modes of consciousness are modes of self-consciousness*” (*Cartesian* 105, emphasis in original). Thus, for Husserl, the fact that we can understand others as conscious beings even though we cannot experience their consciousness is proof that our consciousness expands beyond

¹⁶ It is worth noting that *Cartesian Meditations*, and the expanded discussion on empathy contained within it, were published after Husserl’s student Edith Stein wrote her dissertation, *On the Problem of Empathy*, in which she attempts to explain in detail how empathy works phenomenologically.

the self. We build the “intersubjective world” through empathy with others, gathering, as it were, a range of perspectives to construct a shared sense of the world (*Ideas* 420).

Empathy consists, according to Husserl, of an “*analogizing apprehension*” of the other (*Cartesian* 111, emphasis in original). In other words, we see the other as analogous to ourselves—a thinking being with his or her own experience of the world, just as we each have our own experience of the world. This analogizing apprehension does not lead to the perception of the other as a duplicate of the self, but rather as another ego “such as I should be if I were there” (Husserl, *Cartesian* 119). Empathizing allows us to expand our knowledge and understanding of that which is foreign to us: “To me and those who share in my culture, an alien culture is accessible only by a kind of ‘experience of someone else’, a kind of ‘empathy’, by which we project ourselves into the alien cultural community and culture. This empathy also calls for intentional investigations” (Husserl, *Cartesian* 135). Still, his definition contains contradictions. On the one hand, he argues that we understand the world through “types” and that these types are what permit us to empathize with others. On the other hand, he argues that empathy helps us broaden our sense of “types.” Husserl does explain how the identification of “types,” in particular our use of our own body as the primary basis for analogical thinking, frames our subsequent understandings. This leads Rudolf A. Makkreel to charge that “My own apperceptual system as rooted in my body determines what is normal, and every departure for it is in some sense abnormal for Husserl” (209). And it should be remembered that the “other” one is feeling “into” must be understood in Husserl’s description as a phenomenologically constructed other, an other constituted “in me” (Husserl, *Cartesian* 149). Thus, empathy for Husserl seems, at times, to describe an interior mental process that involves little or no exchange with the other.

In her dissertation *On the Problem of Empathy* (1916), Husserl's student Edith Stein attempts to address some of the critiques leveled against empathy. She begins by outlining what empathy *is not*. She argues that empathy does not consist of putting yourself in the other's place and projecting your emotions onto the other, objecting that this creates an "assumption" which might prove useful in place of empathy if empathy fails (14). Stein further asserts that empathy does not consist of a feeling of oneness or complete identification between the empathizer and the one with whom she empathizes, although she admits that it can lead there (18). Nor does empathy consist of emotional contagion because, for Stein, empathy is a cognitive process and emotional contagion can occur without "the comprehension of the foreign feeling concerned" (23).¹⁷

What empathy *does* entail for Stein is a bit harder to define. We might say that it involves an experience of the other's feeling *as* the other's, not as your own, as well as the cognitive apprehension of that feeling. She writes,

While I am living in the other's joy, I do not feel primordial joy. It does not issue live from my 'I.' Neither does it have the character of once having lived like remembered joy. But still much less is it merely fantasized without actual life. This other subject is primordial although I do not experience it as primordial. In my non-primordial experience I feel, as it were, led by a primordial one not experienced by me but still there, manifesting itself in my non-primordial experience. (11)

Thus, for Stein, there is always a distinction between one's own feelings and those of the other, feelings that seem, in the passage above, not only to originate from a different place but also to

¹⁷ It is significant, I think, that this careful defense of individual perspective comes from a woman. Stein is attempting to describe an empathy that does not consume or displace the other. Much of her theorization also seeks to address the problems that came with transferring an aesthetic process to a psychological one.

have qualitative differences from our own. We are, furthermore, “led” by these feelings—the experience of the other. Here and elsewhere in the dissertation Stein endeavors to refute those who charge empathy as being aggressive, imposing feelings on the other. For Stein, the projection involved in empathy does not crowd out the other, but helps us to understand the world from the other’s perspective, allowing us to experience multiple orientations to the world at the same time.¹⁸ This process, in turn, allows us to perceive how others perceive us, something Stein calls “reiterated empathy” (89). Our concept of ourselves is thus built through our ability to reflect empathetically on how others see us. But unlike Adam Smith’s theorization of sympathy, Stein does enlist reiterated empathy in a project of normalization. She suggests, rather, that it a means by which we may understand ourselves better. Like Husserl, Stein argues that empathy relies on an understanding of “types,” but she notes that this can lead to mistakes, and that the broadest type we can rely on for our empathetic understanding is “the value experiencing subject” (115). Finally, for Stein, empathy provides a route to understanding foreign experience and values, but also to identifying the limits of our own experience: “When we empathetically run into ranges of value closed to us, we become conscious of our own deficiencies and disvalue. Every comprehension of different persons can become the basis for an understanding of value” (Stein 116). Stated differently, every comprehension of different persons can become the basis for an understanding of the self.

Thus, in the space of a few short decades, empathy or *Einfühlung* had gone from describing an urge to spiritual union with the world to a kind of automatic inner imitation to a cognitive process of projecting (or, we might say, imagining) one’s way into another so that we might perceive the world from that other’s point of view. And while usages tend to differ from

¹⁸ For Smith, we all have our own “zero point of orientation,” which cannot be disassociated from our physical bodies. When we empathize, we project ourselves into the other’s zero point of orientation, but without ever losing our own (Smith 61).

field to field, and even within disciplines, all of these different aspects of empathy are still current in the discourse today, along with numerous others, producing endless disagreements and confusions. Many of the different usages lead to directly antithetical claims. For instance, aesthetic theorist Wilhelm Worringer argues that empathy only occurs when we experience a sense of comfort in relationship to the object of our empathy: “the precondition for the urge to empathy is a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomenon of the external world” (15). Worringer contrasts empathy to abstraction in art, which he claims derives from the fear of space that originates from man’s beginning to walk upright, a fear overcome by “habituation and intellection reflection” which eventually leads to a sense of “friendly confidence with the appearance of the outer world” (16, 17). In other words, Worringer associates empathy with a kind of mastering of the world—something we can experience only after gaining confidence in ourselves and our environment. If empathy is attainable only under these conditions, how can it help us understand that which is foreign, that over which we have no mastery, as phenomenologists and psychologists claim empathy does? We might simply say that one discipline’s understanding of the term ought not to be applied to another discipline, and there is certainly merit to that argument, particular when it comes to the need to differentiate between empathy with an aesthetic object and empathy with a living being. But empathy has always been a word that crossed disciplinary boundaries, dragging concepts with it and blurring them in the process. To attempt to erect strict disciplinary distinctions now would be to dismiss the role that cross-disciplinary usage has played in the history and development of empathy as a concept.

What I propose, instead, is that we accept that there are many different types of empathy and many problems attendant to these various types. Or, stated another way, empathy is a process, an act of engagement, as such can take many different forms and directions, some of

which may be undesirable, unpredictable, or antithetical to projects for social change or social justice. Understanding empathy this way means that we are faced with the task of how to *do* empathy well: without projecting our own emotions onto the other, relying on analogy, or slipping into identification, and with an openness and willingness to listen to and respond to the other. In the next section, I explore further the implications of understanding empathy as a process. I also begin to expand on theories of empathy from psychological and, to a limited extent, psychoanalytic theory, because I believe that we need seriously to consider how these theories might inform empathy in the theatre. While all disciplines in which empathy has emerged have considered it as a way of understanding others, only psychology has devoted considerable thought to the ways in which engaging in empathy involves an *exchange*. Theorists like Vischer, Lipps, Worringer, and Husserl theorize empathy without considering how it feels to be empathized with, or how our empathy may change us. Of the theorists discussed so far, only Stein considers empathy as more than, simply, a means of gathering information and knowledge about others; she admits that this information may also give us cause to reflect on our own behavior, knowledge, and orientation to the world. But even her theorization of empathy, with its careful respect for the alterity of the other, does not take up the question of what it feels like to be part of an empathetic exchange. Her description of empathy, like so many others, remains abstract, theoretical. It is in the field of psychology that we find a discussion of empathy as a real, live human encounter and, as such, as a messy process. Here is where theatre and empathy intersect—in the messiness of human encounter. In the following section, I explore some of the complications and contradictions that may occur in this kind of empathy.

Empathy: A Muddled Term to Define a Muddled Process?

As the usage of empathy has proliferated, particularly in the field of psychology, so, too, have its definitions. Disagreements have arisen over whether empathy is cognitive or affective, automatic or conscious, identificatory or not. Developmental psychologist Martin L. Hoffman defines empathy as “an affective response more appropriate to someone else’s situation than to one’s own” (48). For Hoffman, who identifies four different “levels” of empathy, empathy is a primarily involuntary response to others that only involves self-other distinction at certain levels. For psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, on the other hand, empathy requires conscious thought, as, for instance, when we consider life from the perspective of someone who is extremely tall:

Only when we think ourselves into his place, only when we, by vicarious introspection, begin to feel his unusual size as if it were our own and thus revive inner experiences in which we had been unusual or conspicuous, only then begins there for us an appreciation of the meaning that the unusual size may have for this person and only then have we observed a psychological fact. (461)

Just how “factual” our perceptions gained through empathy are is certainly open for debate.

David A. Stewart emphasizes the need to check your response with the other, defining empathy as “deliberate identification with another, promoting one’s knowledge of the other as well as of oneself in striving to understand what is now foreign but which one may imagine, curbed by the other’s responses, to be something similar to one’s own experiences” (12). For Stewart, empathy “is grounded in feeling, presupposes goodwill, and strives for mutual understanding” (12).

Warren S. Poland, meanwhile, takes issue with then tendency to attribute care and goodwill to empathy: “. . . converting empathy from a form of perceiving into an interpersonal posture of warmth and goodness denies the many ways empathic perception can be used hatefully. The con man, the demagogue, the exploiter, and the sadist all function best when their empathic skills are

sharp” (89). One thing is clear: Even within disciplinary boundaries, empathy means many different things to many different people.

As I suggest above, empathy’s changing definitions are not entirely the result of haphazard and irresponsible misappropriations of a term. They are, to a certain extent, the result of context. As empathy moved from describing a relationship between a spectator and an aesthetic object to describing a relationship between two people, new questions and problems emerged. It is one thing to project my feelings into an image and quite another to do so to a human being. And yet countless theorists have found empathy useful to describe *something* having to do with how we engage and encounter one another—whether that something is how we understand others or how and why others’ experiences produce affective responses in us. How empathy functions often depends on the perspective of the one theorizing it. For developmental psychologists, empathy is viewed as crucial to how children learn to consider the needs and perspectives of others. To clinical psychologists, empathy is the key to the client-therapist relationship. And for many, “empathy” acts as a kind of placeholder, a word that fills in for a process that remains mysterious and unexplainable. As Robert L. Katz writes, empathy “suggests a somewhat odd and elusive skill, a divinatory art, a sixth sense, an instinctive and primitive form of penetrating to the core of another person” (1). Empathy’s critics claim that it is an illusion, causing us to *think* we understand others. But if this is so, how do we account for the countless acts of what folk psychologists call “mind reading”—everyday acts of understanding and predicting the behavior of others? When I understand that someone is upset, am I merely interpreting physical cues? Why does the other’s affective state seem so often to produce both physical and emotional resonances within me? Are these resonances part of how I understand or

not? Is this a biological response, related to fight or flight behavior or group formation, or a form of felt meaning?¹⁹ Could it not be all of these things and more?

I argue that empathy persists as a concept, albeit a confused one, because we still have to account, in some way, for the affective and cognitive interplay in how we engage and understand others. Perhaps empathy is such a muddled term because this is not a clear-cut process, reducible to a set of “stages” or phases, definable in a progressive and linear manner. Human engagement is messy, and we need a messy concept to help us theorize that process. Gail S. Reed proposes a similar argument in her essay on the use of “empathy” in psychoanalytic discourse. Reed notes that, even within the discipline of psychoanalysis, confusion over the definition of empathy has become so great that it “risks removing the term from useful dialogue” (8). She outlines some of these antithetical descriptions and definitions: Empathy is seen as, variously, active and passive, rational and mystical, intrusive/penetrating and caring/receptive. Rather than argue for one of these definitions, Reed suggests that antithetical definitions persist because these antitheses are reflective of the analyst’s work. She writes, “*the meaning most faithful to the analyst’s experience of the clinical process (of which empathy is a central part) involves a synthesis of opposites*” (20, emphasis in original). In this case, “synthesis” she explains, does not mean blending of these opposites, but rather their co-presence: “I mean that the term ‘empathy’ has come to signify both active and passive components of the analyst’s work experience and that these two components need to be explicitly acknowledged and recognized to prevent equivocation, misunderstanding, and ambiguity” (20). Thus, when psychoanalysts engage in empathy, they are being both intrusive and respectful, to varying degrees, in varying ways, at

¹⁹ Robert Plutchik argues that there is an evolutionary basis for empathy, suggesting that our ability to communicate emotional experience leads to stronger group bonds and thus increased chances of individual survival (41). He also identifies the bond between mother and infant as a kind of empathy produced for evolutionary purposes (Plutchik 43). This idea that empathy originates in the mother/infant bond contributes to later theories about the gendered nature of empathy.

different moments. To reduce empathy to either of these sets of antithetical concepts is to ignore the fact that psychoanalysis itself contains these very antitheses within it.

Reed's point can, I think, be applied to non-psychoanalytic empathetic situations. Like many in the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis, Reed understands empathy not as a state, but *as a process*, one that is perpetually evolving, and which may take us in divergent and contradictory directions. This does not mean that we ought to accept any and every definition of empathy. To do so would lead to serious confusion, beyond the confusion already produced by the term. Nor does it mean that the various criticisms leveled against empathy, such as its potential to be intrusive, ought to be accepted as part of what is "natural" to empathy. There are legitimate traps and pitfalls associated with empathy, such as resorting to inference by analogy, and we have to be aware of these if we are to make use of empathy in a responsible way. What I am proposing is that we work toward a definition of empathy that takes seriously the concerns of those who find empathy problematic, and that acknowledges that empathy, as a process, entails an exchange between two or more people that is continually changing. For a further exploration of what this might mean for us in the theatre, I turn to the work of the American psychologist, Carl Rogers.

One of the key aspects of Rogers' work is the notion of empathy not only as a process, but also as an exchange: a dialogue between clinician and client. This notion of exchange has, I think, been missing too often from theorization of empathy in the theatre. In the theatre, we empathize, when we empathize, with characters. These are fictional constructs, to be sure, but they are brought to life by real people, people who invest them with particular meaning, who are not ciphers, but rather living beings whose live, creative, imaginative impulses are deeply bound to the characters we see on stage. How an actor brings a character to life will greatly influence

how audience members may feel about that character, what they think of him. Actors are, themselves, often engaging in an empathetic process, imagining their way into characters. Theatre happens, to paraphrase Peter Brook, when actors and audience occupy the same space. It happens between people. Until we account for the human factor in empathy, we have not fully explained or understood what empathy might mean or do in the theatre.

Rogers' understanding of empathy as an exchange developed out of his promotion of client-centered therapy. According to Rogers, the client (Rogers' term for the patient) was the expert of his or her own experience, and thus therapy should be directed by the client, with the aid and support of a therapist. Rogers' theories were influenced by the work of Otto Rank and Jessie Taft. Rank argued that patients needed to act of their own "will-to-health" in order to improve. He also promoted the idea that it was the therapeutic experience itself, not the patient's past, that was truly important. Taft similarly prized the therapeutic experience, advocating the idea of "relationship therapy," which emphasized the need to accept and understand the patient, rather than analyzing or interpreting him (Gladstein 52-53). Rogers expands on these ideas, arguing that it was not the job of the therapist to be an "expert," but rather to help promote self-directed change in the client brought about through the therapists' acceptance and understanding. When the client feels accepted by the therapist, Rogers argues, she is then able to accept herself and to face aspects of herself that she had previously denied. In a 1959 essay, Rogers promotes empathy as a means for accomplishing this task. He defines empathy as follows: "The state of empathy, or being empathic, is to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy, and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto, as if one were the other person, but without ever losing the 'as if' condition" ("A Theory" 210). The "as if" condition is important to Rogers because empathy is other-directed.

Roger's concept of empathy as a tool for promoting growth behavior is not necessarily relevant to the theatre, although I will discuss it in chapter 2. Here, I want to focus on his concept of empathy as a condition in which we entertain the other's perspective "as if" we were that other, and his revised definition, from 1975, of empathy as a process rather than a state ("Empathic" 4). I begin with the latter. The empathetic process, for Rogers, helps clarify "felt meaning," allowing both the therapist and the client to better understand how feelings mean and which feelings accompany which experiences. Because felt meaning changes, empathy, too, must be dynamic, open, and responsive. Rogers offers the following, expanded definition, which I quote at length because it is important to the idea of empathy I develop in the rest of the dissertation:

[Empathy] means entertaining the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person . . . It means temporarily living in his/her life, moving about in it delicately without making judgments, sensing meanings of which he/she is scarcely aware, but not trying to uncover feelings of which the person is totally unaware, since this would be too threatening. It includes communicating your sensings of his/her world as you look with fresh and unfrightened eyes at elements of which the individual is fearful. It means frequently checking with him/her as to the accuracy of your sensings, and being guided by the responses you receive. You are a confident companion to the person in his/her inner world. By pointing to the possible meanings in the flow of his/her experiencing you help the person to focus on this

useful type of referent, to experience the meanings more fully, and to move forward in the experiencing. (“Empathic” 4)

There is much to say about this definition, most importantly, that it is complicated. Empathy, for Rogers, is not a one-step process or a series of clearly definable stages. It is a give and take, a manner of perceiving and then checking that perception against the client’s own understanding of his or her experience, and then engaging again, sensitive to changes in the other. It is careful, involving an awareness that engaging another person in this way can be intrusive and potentially harmful. It is non-judgmental. And it is communicative, reflecting one’s own understanding back to the other for her to consider and gauge. This empathy is admittedly uneven, as the therapist has more of it than the client and uses that empathy to “guide” the client. For this reason and others, empathy as described by Rogers is a starting point for the kind of theatrical empathy I want to explore, but not the ultimate goal. Audience members are not clinicians, guiding and diagnosing the character (although the latter happens all too often).

What I want to adopt from Rogers is the notion that empathy involves a kind of “flow,” a continual dialogue or exchange between two or more parties as they attempt to understand themselves and each other, as they consider, imaginatively, the other’s perspective and check that imagined condition against the other’s responses. In this process, we must also check to see that our empathy is not intrusive or unwanted. What I am pursuing here is an empathy that not only respects the other, but approaches the other with a sense of equity. Like Rogers’ clinician, the empathizer cannot assume expertise of the other, but must rather seek understanding through dialogue. This process may involve many twists and turns, moments of failure, and redirections. It is, moreover, an imaginative process. We do not think that, just because we imagine how the other experiences his or her situation, we are like the other or even that imagining is the same as

knowing. Our empathy produces hypotheses, sensations, and resonances that we must verify through communication; it is not a replacement for communication.

The definition that I am building here attempts to address some of the many critiques that have been leveled against empathy. I have alluded to several of these critiques already. I turn now to a more thorough discussion of these potential problems and how they relate to empathy in the theatre.

The Problem(s) of Empathy

The fact that Stein titled her study “On the Problem of Empathy” is telling. Empathy has created as many questions and problems as answers. The main critiques of empathy can be summarized as follows: 1) Empathy consists not of understanding the other, but of projecting your own emotions and perceptions onto the other; 2) Empathy implies a relationship in which the empathizer has greater power or control than the one with whom she empathizes; 3) Empathy requires a sense of similarity or familiarity to function well; 4) Empathy creates a false sense of understanding; and 5) Empathy consists of passively adopting the other’s viewpoint.

The first three critiques emerge from empathy’s aesthetic roots. The philosopher Charles Edward Gauss, for instance, cites mostly the aesthetic history of empathy when he makes the claim that “Empathy is the idea that the vital properties which we experience in or attribute to any person or object outside ourselves are the projections of our own feelings and thoughts” (85). In this process, only the experience of the empathizer matters: “Empathy gives the subject all the activity which it denies, or at least reduces to a minimum, in the object” (Gauss 88). This makes sense if one is concerned specifically and exclusively with aesthetic empathy, which describes the viewer’s engagement with an aesthetic object. But we have to make a distinction, I think, between aesthetic empathy and intersubjective empathy. It is true that, if we go back to Lipps,

his account of empathy does suggest an activity or response that occurs in the mind and body of the empathizer that we then attribute to the other. But even Lipps understood empathy as an engagement with another understood *as other*: “Empathy understands the other as other before it redefines the movements and occurrences according to one’s own experiences and, by doing so, as those of another who, as the other, is similar to oneself” (Campe 358). For Lipps, as for Adam Smith, we have to base this engagement on our own experiences and memories. But almost as soon as empathy moved from aesthetics to intersubjective encounters, the question of cognition arose. While Lipps views empathy as instinctive, instantaneous, Stein and other who have advocated a more cognitive approach to empathy disagree. Stein uses cognition, in a sense, to combat the other-erasing potential of empathy. My point here is not to say that Stein has “solved” the problems of projection and identification, but to note that, as soon as empathy shifts to an engagement between people, the nature of the discourse also changes. To charge that “empathy” in its broadest sense is guilty of projection requires us to ignore the existence of these different discourses.

The second “problem” on the list, the idea that empathy suggests a position of power, derives from both early aesthetic understandings of the term and contemporary cultural critiques from writers like Lauren Berlant, who see empathy as bound up with the politicization of affect. When we empathize, we assure ourselves that we are among those who feel “rightly.” As discussed above, Worringer suggests, in his work on aesthetics, that empathy reflects a feeling of confidence in and harmony with one’s environment. For both Vischer and Worringer, empathy is incompatible with feelings of discord or discomfort; it is self-affirming. Even when empathy led

to a “loss” of self in the work of art, this loss was a controlled, protected one.²⁰ As Juliet Koss argues, “While never explicitly described, the empathic viewer was implicitly a man of property [and education] whose identity was destabilized within the confines of a relatively private realm, carefully circumscribed by the laws of decorum and propriety” (144). Once empathy becomes a question of understanding the other and, especially, once it begins to be associated with altruistic behavior, it begins to take the form of a comfortable, well-positioned person peering into the trials and suffering of another. Is empathy possible, however, when one feels uncomfortable, or even threatened? Stueber argues that we encounter “imaginative resistance” when we attempt to empathize with thoughts or feelings that threaten our own sense of ourselves or the world (213).²¹ In an essay on refugee performance in Canada, for instance, performance scholar Julie Salverson recounts how audiences seemed unwilling to engage refugee testimonies after viewing a film that seemed to position them (the audience) as oppressors. Unable or unwilling to see themselves in this way, the audience failed to empathize. Salverson argues that we need to be able to empathize when our identity or position in the world is put at risk, but her account illustrates the difficulty of achieving this end. This problem leads to the related critique that, rather than engaging us with the other, empathy can lead us to enjoy our own empathetic capacity, much as Fiering described happening with compassion. Berlant makes this argument when she associates empathy with what she calls “sentimental publics,” publics formed around a sense of shared feeling. These publics can work against the very political aims they espouse: “the

²⁰ Worringer ultimately argues that there is a self-alienating impulse in empathy. We lose ourselves in the work of art. But this can only happen when we are first assured of our place in the world. Thus, comfort becomes a prerequisite for discomfort and alienation.

²¹ As noted earlier, Stueber’s concept of empathy is re-enactive, which involves imagining the other in the other’s situation, taking culture and environment into account but includes, for Stueber, imagining the other’s beliefs and actions as plausibly your own, if you were in the same situation. It is at this stage in the process that imaginative resistance may occur. As I discuss later, there are many who believe that we do not have to accept the other’s reasons or actions as potentially our own in order to successfully engage in empathy. I think Stueber is right, however, that we can encounter a problem when we feel that we would simply never respond in the same way as the other has done. Chapter one, “Interruptions,” addresses in greater detail the discomfort that empathy may produce.

ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a passive and vaguely civic-minded idea of compassion” (Berlant, *Complaint* 41). It is worth noting that empathy, for Berlant, is always identificatory, erasing difference in its emotional quest to produce bonds through shared feeling. But this sense of identification is also always predicated on the empathizer’s position of comfort. He or she experiences suffering *through another*, and through the ability to empathize asserts a sense of affectively-constructed community with that other: “sentimental culture entails a proximate alternative community of individuals sanctified by recognizing the authority of true feeling—authentic, virtuous, compassionate—at the core of a just world” (*Complaint* 34-35).

As Berlant’s critique indicates, empathy is often charged with reinforcing our beliefs and eliding difference. Practically every theorist of empathy from Husserl to Hoffman notes that empathy works best when we are able to identify similarities between ourselves and those with whom we are empathizing. This relates to Vischer’s notion that empathy is the result of a feeling of harmony with the world around us, and is confirmed by psychological studies into the nature of interpersonal empathy. Katz writes that we empathize best “with those who are familiar to us or whose life situation is most similar to our own” (7). Hoffman asserts that this does not mean that we *cannot* empathize with those dissimilar to us: “there is research evidence that observers are more empathic to victims who are familiar and similar to themselves than to victims who are different, although, I hasten to add, they are usually empathic to victims who are different—just less so” (67). Kohut also believes that our empathy with those who are dissimilar to us is less reliable (467). Stewart goes so far as to suggest that we ought to actively seek similarities as the basis for empathy, using our imagination to identify “the action or trait in my own life nearest to the one in you which is dark and unknown” to supplement this process when shared experience

is lacking (8). The potential problem here is that, in the process of seeking similarities, we may fail to fully acknowledge or consider that which is dissimilar.

Just as empathy may lead us to focus on the familiar, it may also produce a false sense of understanding, as well as the arrogant assumption that the experiences of others are readily available to us. Doris Sommer explores this problem in her book *Proceed with Caution, when Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* (1999). Sommer analyzes, in particular, a reading practice that “doesn’t pause, but approaches, explores, interprets, freely associates, understands, empathizes, and assimilates,” all without accounting adequately for how positionality and experience impact understanding (9). For Sommer, a reader can assume too much familiarity through empathy, believing that they have intimate access to the experiences of others. Empathy, furthermore, drives us to consume or conquer the other’s experience, making it our own: “. . . empathy is that egocentric energy that drives one subject to impersonate another, the calamitous dismissal of politics by feeling” (Sommer 22). For Sommer, the act of imaginatively engaging or recreating the other’s experience is a way to own it, denying the uniqueness of the other’s experience. Not only is this conceited, it is foolhardy, since, in Sommer’s view, minority writers often resist our efforts to achieve unwarranted intimacy. Poland makes a similar point in regard to clinical practice: “One person never truly know what another feels” (89). Whereas, for Sommer, these misunderstandings arise from an arrogant and consumptive desire to “have” the other’s experience, for Poland these same mistakes can result from the seemingly benign notion of empathy as “all-accepting sweetness.” “This misuse of empathy,” Poland writes, “sidesteps the observer’s need for the uncomfortable work of self-analysis. One paradoxical result is an undermining of the patient’s separateness and uniqueness” (88). Thus, whether the intent is aggressive or nurturing, empathy can lead to mistaken assumptions of understanding. These

assumptions, furthermore, may be produced without the empathizer questioning his or her motives or behaviors. In daily life, clinical practice, reading, and, I would argue, theatre spectatorship, we have been taught to assume that empathy is the ideal and the goal, and as such we have not been trained to analyze or reflect on our empathetic engagements. Like Sommer's hasty reader, we rush to "achieve" empathy without heeding warnings that our understanding is flawed or our empathy unwelcome. Attending to own motives and desires, as well as how our engagement is received, is crucial to producing strong, dialogic, and respectful empathy.

Before I outline what this empathy would entail and how we might achieve it, I have to address the final critique of empathy outlined above: Empathy consists of passively adopting the other's viewpoint. This theory of empathy posits an entirely different directionality than that described by Vischer. Instead of emotion moving *from* the spectator into the aesthetic object, the reverse occurs. This account of empathy is primarily associated with Bertolt Brecht.

Brecht on Empathy

From the early stages of his formulation of the theory of epic theatre, Brecht viewed empathy as problem. He also made a clear distinction between empathy as a mode of spectatorial engagement and emotions more generally. In 1927, in "The Epic Theatre and its Difficulties," he wrote that in the epic theatre, "Instead of sharing experience the spectator must come to grips with things. At the same time it would be quite wrong to try and deny emotions to this kind of theatre" (23).²² John Willet's note on the meaning of *Einfühlung* in Brecht's work is helpful. He describes it as "the process by which the audience is made to identify itself with the character on the stage and actually feel his emotions" (Willet, footnote in Brecht 16). In his early writing, Brecht focused on this issue of identification and how it thwarted critical thinking. He writes,

²² Unless otherwise noted, all Brecht quotations are from *Brecht on Theatre*.

“Our dramatic form is based on the spectator’s ability to be carried along, identify himself, feel empathy and understand” (25). Empathy facilitates agreement and accord with the dramatic action, making it seem perfectly natural and thus inevitable. The dramatic or empathizing spectator is “in the thick of it, shares the experience,” while the spectator of the epic theatre “stands outside, studies” (37).²³ Brecht’s critique of empathy accompanies his critique of the principle of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or the “integrated work of art,” which combined music, poetry, theatre, and visual art. For Brecht, this method risked producing a sense of artistic unity that fused all aspects of the theatre together, creating the illusion that what is is and cannot be otherwise (Brecht 37). Because empathy draws the spectator *into* the drama, she becomes a part of this illusion:

The process of fusion extends to the spectator, who gets thrown into the melting pot too and becomes a passive (suffering) part of the total work of art. Witchcraft of this sort must of course be fought against. Whatever is intended to produce hypnosis, is likely to induce sordid intoxication, or creates a fog, has got to be given up. (Brecht 38)

Empathy, then, is associated not with an active identification, but with a passive adoption of the other’s viewpoint. Brecht’s sense that empathy leads to a fusion between the spectator and the characters on stage is certainly reminiscent of Vischer’s idea of a “pantheistic urge for union with the world” (109). But whereas Vischer sees this as a spiritual sense of harmony, Brecht sees it as dangerous witchcraft designed to seduce us into complacency.²⁴ It is hardly surprising that

²³ The idea that empathy describes an engaged spectatorship has its origins in aesthetic theory. For an analysis of how empathy contrasted to the “detached” mode of viewing advocated by formalists, see Mundt, “Three Aspects of German Aesthetic Theory.”

²⁴ Augusto Boal adopts Brecht’s critique of empathy, focusing in particular on how identification with the character deprives the spectator of the will to act: “the spectator assumes a passive attitude and delegates the power of action to the character. Since the character resembles us (as Aristotle indicated), we live *vicariously* all his stage

Brecht, a champion of rational, scientific thought, should reject any connotations of spiritual mysticism such as those associated with Vischer's notion of empathy.

Still, Brecht's use of the term *Einfühlung* is idiosyncratic, and consequently deserves careful attention. When we say that Brecht rejects empathy in the epic theatre, we have to clear about what type of empathy he is rejecting. As I have established, for Brecht, empathy or *Einfühlung* consists of identification, emotional contagion, and passivity. Moreover, it is not an act of projection, but of reception. Brecht's use of the term, I argue, results from taking a word that was popular at the time he was writing and applying it to a particular phenomenon he associated with Aristotelian theatre—the tendency to see oneself as potentially subject to the fate of the protagonist, thus having one's feelings aroused so that they might be purged, along with one's will to action.²⁵

For Brecht, the Aristotelian or “dramatic” theatre is designed to produce a “static” view of the world, training its audience to accept the world “as it is” (Brecht 79). It does this by uniting the audience in mass feeling, robbing them of their individual critical capacities and seducing them into accepting the version of the world they see on stage. Brecht's understanding of Aristotelian theatre is not without precedent. August Wilhelm von Schlegel, for instance, wrote in the early part of the 19th century, that “[T]he theatrical, as well as every other poetical illusion, is a waking dream, to which we voluntarily surrender ourselves” (509). All of the separate parts of a work of art “are . . . subservient to one common aim, namely, to produce a joint impression on the mind” (Schlegel 508). What theorists like Schlegel saw as evidence of

experiences. Without acting, we feel that we are acting. We love and hate when the character loves and hates” (*Theatre* 34).

²⁵ Johannes Türk similarly views Aristotle as a theorist of empathy, but Türk makes this connection because he defines empathy as synonymous with pity, compassion, and identification. While Brecht does see empathy as identificatory, he does not link it so closely with pity and compassion, which describe feeling for the suffering of others. See Türk, “Interruption: Scenes of Empathy from Aristotle to Proust.” I offer a more in-depth analysis of his arguments in Chapter 1.

theatre's worthwhile capacity to educate, "transport" and impress an audience with a particular idea, Brecht, writing in during the rise of fascism and global capitalism, saw as the means of manipulating the populace to act against their own best interests. Epic theatre, in contrast, "does not make the hero the victim of an inevitable fate, nor does it wish to make the spectator the victim, so to speak, of a hypnotic experience in the theatre" (78).

Whether or not Brecht's critique of Aristotle is legitimate is, to a certain extent, not the point. Every age has had their own interpretation of Aristotle, one that reflects the interests and concerns of that age. I will note, however, that Aristotle did believe that the impact of tragedy, at least, hinged on a certain level of identification between the audience and the protagonist. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle writes that feeling fear automatically leads to pity and describes pity as "a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, or moreover to befall us soon" (1396). Thus, pity and fear, the emotions Aristotle associated with tragedy in the *Poetics*, are felt when we can legitimately see ourselves as potentially suffering the same fate as the other.

Brecht merges this idea with the long-held belief that theatre produces the same emotions in the spectator as in the character. In his *Letter to d'Alembert* (1758), for example, Rousseau argues that theatre arouses the passions and causes spectators to identify with the characters, thus becoming more like them. The idea that the passions, virtues, and vices that are aroused on stage are infectious has motivated both praise and condemnations of theatre over the ages, from Augustine's claim that the passion of Roman spectacle invades the spectator to Francois Hédelin, Abbot of Aubignac's assertion that theatre is an ideal cite for moral instruction because spectators "never go from the theatre without carrying along with them the idea of the persons

represented” (239). Theatre’s ability to transmit emotions and ideas to us is both its promise and its threat. Brecht views it as a threat, but for a very different reason than the majority of those who have preceded him in this claim, whose arguments focused rather on the fact that theatre was equally good at promoting vice as virtue. As Baillie writes, “The theatre is a school in which much good or evil may be learned” (104). For Brecht, the problem is not that theatre may entice us to evil, but that identification and empathy distract (or, we might say, subsume) the spectator, causing him to accept the fiction of life presented on the stage.

This was particularly important in the moment in which Brecht was writing and working. As the theatre scholar Martin Esslin explains, German theatre of the 1920s “oscillates between emotional uplift and after-dinner entertainment” (111). It was not a socially-critical theatre, but rather one designed to make spectators feel good. Here, again, a long-established benefit of the theatre takes on new meaning in the first half of the twentieth century. Theorists have for centuries celebrated theatre (or defended it) on the grounds that it offered pleasant diversion from the toils of life. Only a few short decades before Brecht began writing, Romain Rolland called for a people’s theatre that would serve as a physical and moral rest for the workingman, a place where his energy could be revived before another day’s work (Rolland 103). But even here, in the early call for a worker’s theatre—of, by, and for the people—we find both a romanticizing and a patronizing of the worker, for Rolland claimed that “the people are like a woman: they are not actuated by reason alone, but rather by instinct and passion, and these must be nourished and directed” (16). Even a theatre designed to “share the people’s struggles” is one designed to instruct them, to prompt them to particular action by motivating particular emotions. It is not difficult to understand why Brecht saw danger in any form of theatre that sought to produce a shared response on the part of the audience.

While there was a worker's theatre movement in Germany, led by Erwin Piscator, the primary forms of entertainment found in the Weimar era functioned to maintain the illusion of a fulfilling bourgeois life. In *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany* (1930), Siegfried Kracauer writes that film and theatre provided an escape from the everyday drudgery of monotonous office work: "almost all the industry's products serve to legitimate the existing order, by concealing both its abuses and its foundations. They, too, drug the populace with the pseudo-glamour of counterfeit social heights, just as hypnotists use glittering objects to put their subjects to sleep" (Kracauer 94). For Brecht, writing in this environment, empathy and identification were not moral problems leading us potentially to vice, as they had been for Rousseau and others, but political ones leading us to inaction.

The social situation accounts for Brecht's rejection of identification and the relinquishment of spectatorial control, but not for his use of *Einfühlung* to describe these processes. Juliet Koss offers an explanation, arguing that, by the time Brecht was writing, *Einfühlung* had begun to be associated with femininity and passivity in German aesthetics. Since Vischer, *Einfühlung* had been associated with nature, a view also espoused by Worringer. In 1908, Karl Scheffler published *Die Frau und die Kunst*, in which he argued that women's art was characterized by empathy, naturalism, and imitation. Women were depicted as passive copyists of nature, not creators of original thought or work, and thus empathy was associated not only with nature and the feminine, but also with mimetic art (or mimetic, i.e. Aristotelian, theatre) (Koss 150). Brecht was likely aware of this current of thought, as evidenced by the fact that he not only associates empathy with passivity, but often characterizes it as a feminizing position in which the spectator is penetrated by the emotions and ideas represented on stage.

Koss further argues that Brecht's theory of the *Verfremdungseffekt* also reflects Worringer's influence. For Worringer, both empathy and abstraction in art eventually lead to a kind of self-estrangement in which we exist, for a moment, outside ourselves: "The empathetic spectator, letting down his emotional guard, permits himself to dissolve into the work of art. Such a process of absorption, Worringer maintained, entailed a loss of self that was felt as estrangement, not comfort" (Koss 148). I find this aspect of her argument less persuasive, since Brecht viewed the loss of self in empathy as problematic. While I would agree that the *Verfremdungseffekt* does produce estrangement from the self,²⁶ and certainly spectatorial discomfort,²⁷ this process does not entail absorption in the work of art for Brecht. Quite the opposite; it entails a separation from representation, at least to the extent that one can ever exist outside representation. As Michael Fried has argued, absorption is associated in the history of art with an anti-theatrical position, a process by which the "theatricality" of looking is overcome either by the fact that the persons represented (for Diderot, the focus of Fried's study, this might be in a painting or a play) are so absorbed in their own world that they ignore the spectator, or by the spectator's absorption into the work of art itself. Both conditions are cited as problematic by Brecht, who strives for a theatre that acknowledges the spectator's presence and resists allowing him or her to feel drawn into the work of art. I would argue that what Brecht *does* take from Worringer, or from the discourse on empathy more generally, is the idea that empathy originates out of a sense of comfort and familiarity. Recall that, for Worringer, "the precondition for the urge to empathy is a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomenon of the external world" (15). When we feel at home in the world, we are more likely to engage in empathy. Or, turning the statement around, empathy is not predicated on or

²⁶ See Chapter 3, "Rehearsals: Naomi Wallace and Labor of Empathy."

²⁷ See Chapter 1, "Interruptions: Estranging Empathy."

accompanied by an urge to question the world or our concept of it; it assures us of what we already know and feel. Whereas for Worringer even this feeling ultimately leads us to self-estrangement, for Brecht estrangement must be introduced to counteract this comfortable viewing position.

In summary, when we claim that Brecht rejects empathy in the theatre, we have to be careful to stipulate what he meant by empathy, since it differs so markedly from other definitions of the word, particularly definitions current today, which are more characteristic of the discourse in 20th century psychology than 19th century German aesthetics. If we understand empathy as the process by which we gain insight into characters' emotions and points of view, then, as Bruce A. McConachie writes, "It is clear that Brecht understood and even welcomed this kind of response from spectators, but he did not call it empathy" ("Cognitive Approach" 16). For Brecht, empathy consisted of emotional identification *without thought*. Brecht did not reject emotion in the theatre. Nor did he believe that emotion could not accompany thought. He believed, rather, that one particular kind of emotional engagement—empathy—thwarted thought. His elaboration on the role of emotion in the theatre is perhaps best expressed in *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, which were written between 1939 and 1942, although they were never completed. Brecht later claimed that his theories in the *Short Organum* summarized the work of *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, but there is much included in the *Dialogues* that does not appear in the *Organum*, including extensive discussion on the place of emotions in Brecht's theatre.

In *Dialogues*, the Philosopher, Brecht's mouthpiece, explains the role of emotion in the type of theatre (or theatre) he is proposing.²⁸ He says,

²⁸ The spelling change is suggested in the text as a means of distinguishing the Philosopher's theatre from the Aristotelian theatre (Brecht, *Messingkauf* 16).

All the premonitions, expectation, sympathies we bring to our real-life dealings with people should be aroused here too. The audience shouldn't see characters that are simply people who do their own particular deed; i.e. prepare their own entries, but *human beings: shifting raw material, unformed and undefined, that can surprise them*. It's only when confronted by such characters that they will practise true thinking; that is to say thinking that is conditioned by self-interest, and *introduced and accompanied by feelings*, a kind of thinking that displays every state of awareness, clarity, and effectiveness.

(Brecht, *Messingkauf* 54, emphasis added)

Thinking is characterized here as compatible with feeling. Later in the *Dialogues*, the Philosopher asks, "Why should I want to knock out the whole realm of guessing, dreaming, and feeling? People do tackle social problems in these ways. Guessing and knowing aren't opposites. Guessing can lead to knowledge, knowledge to guessing . . . *One thinks feelings and one feels thoughtfully*" (92, emphasis added). The problem for the Philosopher/Brecht arises when guessing, dreaming, and feeling fail to lead to knowing, planning, and thinking. This prompts him to claim,

Neither the public nor the actor must be stopped from taking part emotionally; the representation of emotions must not be hampered, nor must the actor's emotions be frustrated. Only one out of many possible sources of emotion needs to be left unused, or at least treated as a subsidiary source – empathy.

(Brecht, *Messingkauf* 57)

Repeatedly, Brecht makes clear that it is empathy, not emotion, that is the enemy of thinking. But remember, empathy, to Brecht, consists in identification with the hero, in *accepting* the hero's actions and emotions as one's own, as natural, and as inevitable.

If empathy is to occur in the theatre, Brecht argues, it should do so only when it operates within a dialectic, serving as a counterpoint to estrangement. In an appendix to the *Dialogues*, Brecht writes, "The contradiction between empathy and detachment is made stronger and becomes an element of the performance" (*Messingkauf* 102). He also wrote about the need to preserve detachment when observing emotions on stage:

We are sorrowful, but at the same time we are people observing a sorrow – our own – almost as if it were detached from us, in other words like people who aren't sorrowful, because nobody else could observe it so detachedly. In this way we aren't wholly dissolved in sorrow; something solid still remains in us.

(Brecht, *Messingkauf* 47)

If empathy were to be used, it "would have to be interrupted and only take place at specific junctures, or else be very weak and mixed in with other more forceful operations" (Brecht, *Messingkauf* 56). Empathy can never be allowed to take over or stand alone.

In her book *Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation* (1989), Elizabeth Wright analyzes the role empathy plays in the *Verfremdungseffekt*. Because emotions are evoked in epic theatre in order to encourage critical thinking, "The empathy that the Brechtian actor solicits will thus not be an end in itself, but a means to an end" (Wright 27). Empathy, Wright argues, functions as a "lure" in the epic theatre, inviting audience members to become invested in the character and her situation so that they will be provoked to action once their understanding of the situation has been alienated. For Wright, the *Verfremdungseffekt* operates dialectically, "catching the audience

out in their moments of emotional investment. Without involving the audience in contradictory feeling it would hardly be possible to galvanize them into any kind of productive thinking” (Wright 80). This last statement seems to move away from Brecht in that feelings or emotions are situated dialectically to one another, rather than emotion and thought existing in a dialectic relationship, as is usually the case in dialectical analyses of Brecht.

Consider, for example, the analyses made by Darko Suvin and Alisa Solomon. In *To Brecht and Beyond* (1984), Suvin argues that the effect of Brechtian theatre is achieved by soliciting the spectator to approach the events by a combination of empathy and distance: empathy in so far as the *dramatis personae* represents suffering human beings enmeshed in inhuman circumstances; and distance in so far as a person’s destiny is exclusively other people and their organizations, so that each person is co-responsible for the inhumanity of the circumstances. (63-64)

Solomon similarly argues that characters like Shen Teh/Shui Ta in *The Good Person of Szechwan* provoke a host of conflicting feelings which in turn “ignites our dialectical attention, making us at once more empathetic and more critical” (“Materialist Girl” 79).

These scholars, writing in the 1980s and 1990s, are part of a larger trend to “reclaim” the role of emotion in Brechtian theatre, counteracting the impact of writers like Walter Benjamin and Martin Esslin, who characterized epic theatre as devoid of emotion. Benjamin, for example, emphasized Brecht’s rejection of Aristotelian catharsis and described the non-empathetic actor as one exhibiting little affect: “the actor’s task in the epic theater is to demonstrate through his acting that he is cool and relaxed. He too has hardly any use for empathy” (153). Esslin, meanwhile, argues that Brecht’s theatre rejected all emotions except “socially useful” ones like indignation and anger, or allowed them to be experienced only “at a further remove” (209). In a

psychological reading of Brecht, Esslin argues that this rejection of emotion betrays a fear of “the dark, irrational call of subconscious compulsions” (221). Brecht’s theatre works, Esslin suggests, because for all his attempts to eradicate or suppress emotion, his plays had a “deep emotional impact on the audience” (210). Esslin’s account, beyond providing a dubious psychological diagnosis, almost has the effect of turning Brecht into a latter-day Stoic, guarding against the corrupting influence of the passions. It has taken decades of scholarship to correct the sense that emotion occurs in Brecht’s theatre *in spite of* the author’s intentions. Today, it is generally accepted that emotions play a role in Brechtian theatre. Empathy, however, is still often seen as a problem. Writing in 2006, Darren R. Gobert cites empathy as “the one emotion . . . for which Brecht never abandoned his contempt” (24). And in a 2007 article in *Theatre Journal*, J. Chris Westgate calls “the empathy-driven reception of commercial theatre . . . the bane of Brecht’s epic theatre” (34).²⁹

I want to build on the work of Wright, Suvin, and Solomon to argue that there *is* a role for empathy in Brechtian theatre. I am using the term “Brechtian theatre” in its broadest sense—to describe all theatre that, like Brecht’s, aims at producing social change by encouraging the audience to see the social world as constructed, and thus as changeable. But I also want to offer some amendments to these writers’ theories. Wright and Solomon both accept empathy as part of a Brechtian dialectic, but in doing so they seem, at least in part, to accept Brecht’s conflation of empathy with identification, even if they assert a place for this response within a Brechtian theatre. Wright, for instance, argues that “Contrary to popular belief, *Verfremdung* does not do away with identification but examines it critically” (19). In the essay cited above, Solomon seems to define empathy as a kind of intimacy with and concern for the character, an emotionally

²⁹ Westgate makes the assumption that epic theatre, with its socialist message, is inherently non-commercial. For an analysis of the commercial appeal of Brechtian theatre, see Anne Beggs, “Brecht and the Culture Industry: Political Theatre on Broadway and the West End, 1960-1965.”

engaged spectatorship set against a more distanced critical position. I find this description promising, and it informs my own view of empathy in Brechtian theatre. But in a later essay, one that is decidedly less positive about the role of empathy, Solomon takes a more identificatory view of empathy and, like Brecht, describes it as taking control of the spectator: “The nature of this empathy is complicated. It yanks us so thoroughly into the vengeful heart of the victim that we abandon the principle of a separate rule of law. It seems to depend on an equal measure of disengagement, but of a strangely uncritical kind: In sum, a warped or inside-out Brechtianism” (“Irony” 8). This empathy, in an argument that echoes Fiering’s, is limited and limiting, drawing lines around its “proper” objects and closing others out of our circle of concern: “We are glutted on sentimental empathy for the proper victims, while relieved of mustering any shred of empathy for the criminal and despised” (Solomon, “Irony” 9). In this later article, Solomon suggests that even the experience of what Brecht described as the “double aspect” of an emotion, when we both feel the emotion but also recognize ourselves feeling it, may not lead us to a greater critical understanding; we enjoy our empathy without asking why we feel it for some and not others (Brecht 271). Suvin’s understanding of empathy, meanwhile, seems to have more to do with pity, compassion, or sympathy than identification. We feel *for* the characters because they suffer.³⁰

All of these types of emotional engagement merit analysis, but should they all be called empathy? When we use one word to describe identification, understanding, emotional projection, compassion, pity, and sympathy, we lose track of the specificity of the affective encounter we are trying to understand. Empathy was first applied to interpersonal interactions to describe how it is that we come to understand others’ experience of the world, and I think we would do well to attempt to hold on to this thread of its history, even as we allow for variation in *how* this might

³⁰ Sympathy, like empathy, has different meanings. While Hume and Smith define it as fellow-feeling, it also came to be associated with “feeling for” others, expressing care and concern for their situation and an urge to alleviate their suffering, making sympathy synonymous with compassion or pity.

happen. I propose that we understand empathy as the process of imagining the other in the other's situation, allowing his or her affect to resonate with you, and using this affective and imaginative knowledge to help you begin to understand the other. This process involves no pity, and does not confuse the self with the other. Understood in this way, empathy is entirely compatible with Brecht's theories.

Toward a Useful Empathy

Defining empathy as a process, rather than as a feeling or state, means understanding that empathy is dynamic, and that it might move in a number of different directions. Like Reed, I believe it is important to admit some flexibility in any definition of empathy, but not so much that we are left with a term that ceases to be useful. Thus, I limit my use of empathy to describe the process by which we attempt to understand what another is thinking and feeling. Empathy does not consist in sharing the other's feeling, as in the case of sympathy. Nor is it confined to feeling for another's suffering, as in the case of pity and compassion. We can empathize with joy, embarrassment, grief, confusion, or delight. As a process, empathy may lead to sympathy, pity, compassion, and identification, but it is not constituted by these feelings. Similarly, empathy is neither inherently good nor bad, but may produce good or bad results, perhaps simultaneously, and depending on how the process develops.

I will to outline, now, the definition of empathy I use throughout this dissertation. I draw primarily on psychological sources, because I am interested in exploring interpersonal empathy, and the questions and problems associated with interpersonal empathy have been considered most thoroughly in the field of psychology. I also draw on the work of contemporary moral philosophers, who tend to rely on psychology for their understanding of the term. My definition is both cognitive and affective because I believe that our understanding of and reaction to others

is always predicated on both cognition and affect, and also because I want to make a distinction between “basic” or “instinctive” empathy and “imaginative” empathy. Finally, understanding empathy as a process allows room for collaboration and interaction in empathy, and if we are going to understand others, we have to engage them. Empathy may occur without this engagement, but it is not ideal, and what I am outlining here is what I believe we should be striving for in our theatrical encounters.

My understanding of empathy is influenced by Stein’s work, not only because she insists that empathy is a cognitive process (I would say that it *includes* cognition), but because her description of empathy preserves the otherness of the other. She also understands that empathy can go wrong, producing mistaken impressions and interpretations. Stein’s empathizer is fallible, and the empathy she describes is not magical or instinctive, but active and critical. Neither is empathy an “all-seeing” process. Through empathy with another, she writes,

I am given a level of his person and a range of values in principle experienceable by him. This, in turn, meaningfully motivates the expectation of future possible volitions and actions. Accordingly, a single action and also a single bodily expression, such as a look or a laugh, can give me a glimpse into the kernel of the person. (109)

Empathy gives us a “glimpse” into a person; we perceive values that he might “in principle” experience. The incompleteness of our understanding is clear. Empathy is an important tool for Stein, but we should not overestimate our powers of perception.

I want to suggest that what we “project” in empathy need not be our own experience, but our imagination. Here, I am following Martha C. Nussbaum, who defines empathy as “an imaginative reconstruction of another person’s experience, without any particular evaluation of

that experience” (302).³¹ As an imaginative process, empathy can be wrong. We have to attend carefully to all of the clues available to us to produce the best imaginative recreation possible, one that always maintains an awareness of “one’s own *qualitative difference* from the sufferer” (Nussbaum 328, emphasis in original). This is important for Nussbaum because different people experience things differently, and without this awareness, we might inadvertently attribute our own reactions to another. Nussbaum draws her definition from psychological and psychoanalytic sources, noting that this “twofold attention” is particularly important in clinical settings (328). As Rogers pointed out, if we lose the “as if” sense of empathy, then we moved from empathy into identification (“A Theory” 211).

I disagree with Nussbaum, however, in her estimation that this process is “like the mental preparation of a skilled (Method) actor” (327). My issue with this contention is that it undermines her claim that empathy maintains a qualitative difference between the empathizer and the one with whom she empathizes. Method acting usually involves two processes that complicate this sense of difference: the “magic if” and the use of affective memory. The “magic if” asks actors to explore how *they* would act if they were in their characters’ circumstances.³² The use of affective memory similarly calls upon actors to explore their own emotional pasts and bring those emotions to bear in their performances. In both cases, the actor uses herself—her own reactions, memories, and emotions—to create her character. This process assumes that we can all find emotional equivalents in our lives to help us comprehend every situation. It is like the man who empathizes with the King Berenger by turning to his own love of his daughter,

³¹ Empathy, in other words, is non-judgmental. Judgment may follow empathy, but it is not a part of empathy. Nussbaum uses this to argue that empathy itself is not sufficient for achieving social change, since, without a judgment that suffering is unjust, we are not motivated to action. I want to emphasize, however, that at least some suspension of judgment is important. Without it, we may choose to disengage empathy before we can fully explore the other.

³² Note that this is different from Rogers’ concept of the “as if,” in which the therapist attempts to consider the other’s experience *from the other’s point of view*.

ignoring the king's egocentrism. As Stein cautions, this kind of inference by analogy certainly happens, and it is not always dangerous. But it isn't ideal. Daniel C. Bateson explains,

Recollection of our own or other's reactions in similar situations, as well as imagining ourselves in the need situation, often provides information that facilitates adopting a needy person's perspective. There are, however, limits to this facilitation. We may get so wrapped up in reminiscences or in our own possible reactions to the situation that we fail to consider the specific way the situation is affecting the person in need. (83)

Bateson argues that, instead, empathy entails "adopting the perspective of the person in need" (83).³³ Poland similarly asserts that empathy is only valid "when founded on a profound respect for otherness, the full respect of the observing person for the singularity and particularity of the other" (93). Besides, many actors will tell you that there are some feelings and experiences so foreign to them that the "magic if" and affective memory do not always work. Instead, they have to take a leap, to accept a radical difference and find a way to accommodate it in their minds and bodies. *This* is what empathy requires: imagining the other in the other's circumstances, no matter how foreign that person and those circumstances might be. It also means, as Nussbaum herself admits, that we must accept that "empathy may be inaccurate" (328).

The only way to deal with the potential inaccuracies produced through empathy is by checking your understanding of the other *with that other*. As Stueber notes, "interpretation based on empathy is not self-verifying," but must be rigorously tested in through continued observation, engagement, and analysis (206). According to Stewart, we know empathy is working when both parties involved feel that they are communicating and understanding each

³³ In Batson's account, empathy is always focused on someone in need. I disagree, but find his point about adopting the other's perspective helpful.

other (151). For this to work, both parties have to willing to change their minds, to revise their thoughts and feelings based on exchange with the other (Stewart 138). This means that empathy involves more than an examination of the other. Poland writes, “Understanding another demands relentless self-analysis if one’s empathizing imagination is to *approach* valid perception” (88). Empathy requires an examination of the self and a willingness to acknowledge mistaken impressions and interpretations.

In order for empathy to work, I believe we have to be willing to reserve our judgment *to the value or legitimacy of the other’s position*, at least for a time. Rogers argues that “true empathy is always free of any evaluative or diagnostic quality” (“Empathic” 7). This does not mean that the process is entirely judgment free. We use our judgment to decide to engage in empathy and to assess whether or not our empathy is working. By at least temporarily attempting to reserve ethical or moral judgment of the other, however, we learn to entertain the other’s perspective without immediately moving to apply our own value system to it and without rushing to consider how the other’s perspective impacts us. We will, more than likely, eventually have to consider these things, but only when we feel that we understand the other’s perspective well enough to begin to critique it. This means, in addition, that we can seriously engage and consider the other’s perspective without having to approve of, agree with, or adopt that perspective. This point is argued by John Deigh, a scholar of moral philosophy who draws on developmental psychology to distinguish levels of empathy and proposes that “mature” empathy “brings one to see another’s purposes as worthwhile, [but] does necessarily lead one to favor those purposes over other purposes, one’s own, in particular, that one also regards as worthwhile” (178-179). We can value how another thinks and feels without having to think or feel the same way. Temporarily withholding judgment helps us do this. As James Marcia suggests, “Empathy

essentially requires an attitude or stance of openness to another's experience" (83). To be open, we have temporarily to suspend our judgment.

While empathy does not necessarily involve emotionally or critically supporting the other, it does mark a degree of care and respect. Theatre scholar David Krasner argues that without caring, empathy takes place in a void, and cannot lead to positive social outcomes ("Empathy and Theater" 271). But caring, I think, is required even before we arrive at the question of what results empathy might produce. As Rogers states, "It is impossible accurately to sense the perceptual world of another unless you value that person and his world – unless you in some sense care" ("Empathic" 7). I would argue that this care does not necessarily involve supporting the other's aims or agreeing with them, but rather it requires that we accept the other as someone to be respected and engaged. We have to care enough to take the time to empathize, to open ourselves to the other. This sense of care is often over-read as evidence of empathy's "pro-social" or altruistic dimension, but, as Eisenberg and Strayer write, "the relationship between empathy and prosocial behavior is neither direct nor inevitable. Many factors must be considered when one is attempting to predict a relation between the two" (11). Empathy does not necessarily lead to social action. Neither, for that matter, does care.

What I am describing here is an active, imaginative empathy. This differs from the theories of those like Lipps and others who view empathy as innate, instinctual, and instantaneous. I do not disagree that there is something in us that responds instinctively to the moods, emotions, and actions of others. As noted before, I think it is helpful to make a distinction between "basic" empathy and "reenactive" empathy. I am borrowing terminology here from Stueber, although there are others who make similar distinctions. Katz, for instance, differentiates "simple" empathy from a more cognitive process:

What distinguishes simple empathy from the more sophisticated process of empathic understanding is the combination of subjective and critical processes.

As a refined scientific technique, used by social scientists and by members of the helping professions, empathy calls for a pendulum-like action, alternating between subjective involvement and objective detachment. (26-27)

Rather than subscribe to Katz's hierarchy between "simple" and "sophisticated" forms of empathy, I prefer to use Stueber's distinction between two qualitatively different kinds of empathy. Basic empathy describes our generally innate ability to understand quickly that someone is angry, happy, or sad. He attributes this kind of empathy to the mirror neuron system, which is addressed in greater detail below. Reenactive empathy, meanwhile, involves understanding others as complex agents, as "authors of their actions who act for reasons and not merely because of internal events inside them—mental or otherwise" (Stueber 161). Reenactive empathy involves seeing others as rational, thinking beings like ourselves. When I use the term "empathy" in this dissertation, I am referring to an active, imaginative process that is informed by our immediate emotional responses.

This process, therefore, is both cognitive and affective, or, more accurately, it marks the imbricated nature of thinking and feeling. This position cuts at the heart of a longstanding debate over the term. Gerald A. Gladstein succinctly summarizes the two main positions: "we can define it as either (1) a cognitive process of understand what another person is thinking or feeling, or (2) an affective process of taking on the feelings of another person" (38). He neglects, however, a third possibility, in which empathy produces cognitive understanding in concert with an affective response to the other that may or may not correspond to what the other is feeling. Following the cognitive school, Rutgers philosophy professor Alvin Goldman defines empathy

as the process of imaginatively adopting the other's position, including her beliefs, history, and desire, in order to understand the other (21). UC Berkley Professor of Bioethics and Medical Humanities Jodi Halpern, meanwhile, finds a strictly cognitive definition problematic, suggesting that, in the medical profession at least, it exacerbates a tendency to favor emotional detachment. Halpern argues that "the function of empathy is not merely to label emotional states, but to recognize what it feels like to experience something" (671). This does not necessarily mean that physicians must have a vicarious experience of the other's feeling, but that they need to allow that feeling to "resonate" with them (Halpern 671).

I am attracted to Halpern's notion of "resonation." In the process of imagining the other's experience, we imagine his or her emotions, as well as experiencing those emotions before us. This does not mean that we necessarily experience the same emotion as the one with whom we are empathizing, but that we allow her emotions to impact us, and we gather information from that impact, reflecting on what we are feeling and why we are feeling it, even as we reflect on the other's emotional experience. Emotion and critical thinking are co-present. What I am describing here is not a clearly demarcated dialogue between affect and cognition, such as the one described by Hume in which the idea produces the feeling, or even the reverse, but rather a process in which thinking and feeling are always mutually informing, where, to quote Brecht again, "one thinks feelings and one feels thoughtfully" (*Messingkauf* 92).

Finally, the empathetic process I am describing is dynamic because it involves a two-way exchange between people who are, themselves, in process. As Katz writes, "the client with whom we empathize is far from static" (25). This empathy, then, is fundamentally different from empathy with an aesthetic object: "our clinical objects are living people, and feeling one's way into a text or painting lacks the vital back and forth flow that arises when two living people

interact” (Poland 90). But, of course, I am not writing about a clinical setting, but about theatre. I chose to draw on psychology and psychoanalysis, rather than on aesthetic theory, because theatre is a living, dynamic art form. It involves an exchange between people. In fact, it involves multiple exchanges. The actors engage one another as well as the audience, and the audience’s responses inform the performance. As in a clinical setting, “Emotional traffic goes two ways” (Poland 90). If we are to write about empathy in the theatre, we need to conceive of an empathy that is as dynamic and multi-directional as the theatre itself.

Yet theatre is also very different from a clinical setting, or even from empathetic engagements we make undertake in our everyday lives. Characters are not “real” people, and audiences are generally not permitted to interrupt the play to verify the accuracy of their empathetic understanding. Understanding empathy as a dialogic process also means attending to how this dialogue might be inhibited in the theatre. As much as theatre may pose problems for a multi-directional, fluid empathy, it can also aid this process. Before I elaborate on how this can happen, I have one final point to make about what it means to understand empathy as a process and an exchange.

If we are to open ourselves to the other in the way that I am describing, entertaining the other’s difference and critically examining ourselves in the process, we must also be open to how this process might change us. Here, especially, I want to consider what empathy has in common with a Brechtian theatre practice. To do this, I turn to poststructuralist and postmodern readings of Brecht. The first and most influential of these comes from Barthes, who argues, in “Brecht and Discourse” (1975), that Brecht’s theatre accomplishes an “un-sticking” of language—a separation of sign from referent. The shock of the *Verfremdungseffekt* comes, Barthes argues, from the recognition of the reproduction of language, that fact that language consists of a

constant making and remaking (214). Later postmodern readings will expand this argument beyond language. Wright, for instance, argues that “Brecht’s utopian wish was to produce an audience who would rejoice at the contradictions of a necessarily estranged world – the uncanniness of a world in flux, the constant shifting of figure and ground and dialectical movement” (52). For critics like Wright, the Brechtian dialect is a never-ending process in which we continually estrange reproduction. To this, though, I would add Fredric Jameson’s contention that the Brechtian dialectic consists not in “the distinction between two kinds of static knowledge . . . rather he had in mind very specifically the difference between production – construction as activity – and reception – or, in other words, contemplation as consumption” (61). Thus, what is contrasted for Jameson is not thought and feeling or even two different kinds of thought, but passive reception and active production. He goes on to argue that Brecht’s theatre consists of what Jameson is tempted to call an ethics of production, a championing of the process of being and creating (Jameson 47). Rather than passive receivers of knowledge, we must be makers of it. Because the *Verfremdungseffekt* exposes the constructed nature of reality, it also reveals the self as a construct:

I think that Brecht’s positions are better read not as a refusal of identification, but, rather, as the consequences to be drawn from the fact that such a thing never existed in the first place. In that case, ‘third-person acting’, in the quoting of a character’s expressions of feeling and emotion, is the result of a radical absence of self, or at least the coming to terms with the realization that what we call our ‘self’ is itself an object for consciousness, not our consciousness itself.

(Jameson 53)

That which we learn to produce, via Brechtian dialects, is not just the social world but our very selves, a possibility that can only come once we see the self as a construct of consciousness.

The only factor that Jameson leaves out of his analysis is the role of sociality in Brecht's work. Jameson treats the Brechtian dialectic as something undertaken by or within an individual. But the world, for Brecht, is socially constructed. And thus, I would argue, so is the self. As he writes in the *Short Organum*, "the smallest social unit is not one human being, but two human beings. In life, too, we mutually construct one another" (Brecht 196).³⁴ This is where empathy becomes important. Just as Brechtian theatre may require us to risk our sense of self, so, too, might empathy. By asking us to imagine experiences radically foreign to us, empathy challenges us to entertain thoughts that may threaten our very sense of self. In both Brechtian dialectics and empathy we have to accept ourselves as part of a social unit, constituted in and through other beings. And human relationships are, after all, at the very heart of Brecht's concern: "The main subject of the drama must be relationships between one man and another as they exist today, and that is what I'm primarily concerned to investigate and find means of expression for" (Brecht 67). Brecht, of course, is interested in the how factors like class structure our relationships. But affect plays a role in this structuring as well. To what extent are we willing to see the other as a value experiencing human being whose needs, feelings, and perspectives are as worthy as my own? To understand the full range of human relationships requires that we explore everything from economics to empathy. In the process, we have to be willing to radically rethink what we think we know about the world and ourselves.

Empathy in the Theatre

³⁴ This is my adaptation of Anne Beggs' translation, not Willett's. Beggs suggests the following, which I have simplified for reading ease: "For the smallest social unit is not a human being, but rather two human beings. And in life as well, we construct ourselves mutually" (personal communication with the author, 8 Aug. 2010).

In her introduction to *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities* (1993), Anna Deavere Smith proposes a theory of acting that consists not of the actor bringing his or her emotions and experience to bear on the character. Instead, Smith claims, “The spirit of acting is the *travel* from the self to the other” (xxvi). “To me,” she writes, “the search for character is constantly in motion. It is a quest that moves back and forth between the self and the other” (xxvii). This idea of motion is useful to the theory of empathy I want to explore. Empathy is not a single feeling or a static experience. It is constantly changing throughout the course of a play or performance, or when two people engage each other empathetically in their daily lives. As our understandings and responses change, and as we change, the way we understand one another changes, too. Empathy, like Smith’s search for character, is a dialogue between self and other.

How do we achieve this kind of empathy in the theatre, an environment where, the vast majority of the time, the audience is expected to sit and react in silence? How do we promote empathy that is non-identificatory, non-judgmental, and self-reflexive? How do we avoid potentially problems like projecting our own experience onto the other or relying on analogy to achieve empathy? In short, how do we ensure that empathy, when it occurs in the theatre, is intersubjective and dialogic? In the following chapters, I explore theatrical techniques that can aid us in this project. These techniques approach empathy not as an emotional state to be achieved, but as a process to be developed and explored. While I turn to theatre and performance to identify these techniques they are, I believe, useful beyond the theatrical context. What theatre, as a practice, offers to our understanding of empathy is a sense of activity, play, and exchange. Empathy, like performance, is something we *do* in the moment, and as such we must be flexible and responsive enough to allow it to take us to unexpected places. We must engage,

moreover, in the *work* of empathy—work that is self-reflective, challenging, and at times uncomfortable and scary. As in performance, we do not know what will happen from one moment to the next. When we surrender to this process—not in a passive way but in an engaged, critical, emotional, and exploratory way—we invite new possibilities into our world.

In Chapter 1, “Interruptions: Estranging Empathy,” I explore how, rather than curtailing empathy, moments of theatrical interruption can encourage a more critically aware empathy. In this chapter, I draw on the Brechtian notion that interruption can produce critical seeing, exploring moments of interruption in Gregory Burke’s *Black Watch* and in two inter-cultural theatre performances: a collaboration between the Appalachian Roadside Theater and the Bronx Latino/a theatre Teatro Pregones, and a workshop production called *BOP: The North Star* that I attended in Ithaca, NY, in fall 2009. Whereas Brechtian interruption is usually seen as a means of disengaging the spectator’s empathy, I argue that moments of interruption in these performances function to produce a more critical, historicized, and self-reflexive empathy. I explore a Brechtian dialect in which empathy is not a position to be rejected, but a process to be continually revised.

This chapter also explores what it feels like *to be empathized with*. None of the characters in these plays accept empathy as a simple gesture of goodwill. They suggest, instead, that empathetic engagement may be proffered for the empathizer’s benefit, so that she or he may get a vicarious thrill from hearing harrowing tales of war, or in order to quickly erase or brush over decades of racial discrimination. These characters remind us that our empathy, as audience members in the theatre, has a complex relationship to the “real people” for whom these characters may stand in. This is particularly true in *Black Watch*, a play based on the lives of real Scottish soldiers. When a character interrupts our empathy, she reminds us not only to consider

our motives in empathizing, but also what it means to empathize here and now, in the theatre, and how theatrical empathy may relate to relationships outside the theatre. These interruptions form a kind of a dialogue, forcing us to check and recheck our empathy.

In Chapter 2, “Repetitions: Empathy, Poverty, and Politics in Eastern Kentucky,” I discuss the role of repetition in structuring empathetic response. In this chapter, I draw on performance studies scholarship to explore how repetitions must be embodied by social actors, and it is *how* they undertake the repetition that determines whether or not empathy will result. I analyze two different repetitions of John F. Kennedy’s 1968 tour of Eastern Kentucky—a 2004 community-based re-enactment directed by John Malpede, and John Edwards’ 2007 “Road to One America” tour. I argue, ultimately, that empathy is not an “effect” that can be reproduced by simply reviving memories or repeating signs. As a form of engagement, empathy has to be *done* to be meaningful. In both 1968 and in 2004, Appalachians gathered to engage in debates about the economic, social, and political issues facing the region. The empathy that emerged from these discussions, then, was based not on a quick assumption of understanding, but on real dialogue. Moreover, the 2004 performance endeavored not only to recreate the events of 1968, but also to explore the present moment through a historical lens. Through discussions, panels, and roundtables, *RFK in EKY* sought to build dialogue and understanding, a process that also engaged participants in empathy. Thus, empathy emerges not out of the desire to express empathy, but out of a willingness to engage, collaborate, and listen. If we to understand empathy as a performance, it must be a performance that emphasizes the *doing* of performance, not the repetition or the showing.

This chapter also addresses the power dynamics of empathy. Our national narratives have long depicted Appalachians as hapless and helpless sufferers who must be saved from their

poverty and ignorance. For their part, most Appalachians reject any attempts to turn them into objects to be pitied, rather than subjects to be engaged. For empathy to function in these conditions, there has to be a way to overcome the initial suspicion that all outsiders are seeking to exploit the region and its people—either for their precious coal or their equally marketable “hard-times” stories. In the case of Robert F. Kennedy, the personal losses he had suffered are what helped him connect to the people. He was revealed as vulnerable, someone who could understand hardship, whose power was not absolute. Kentuckians felt that they had something to give him: their empathy. This, in turn, allowed them to accept his empathy, and to engage him as a possible collaborator in the process of social change. Without this sense of reciprocity, Kennedy would likely have been just another politician, coming to make promises that would never be kept. The empathy that has lasting impact in the way that Kennedy’s visit impacted the people of Kentucky is one in which both sides feel that they have something to offer the other, in which neither is placed at a disadvantage, and in which opening to the other does carry the risk that that openness will expose one to possible exploitation.

Finally, in “Naomi Wallace and the Dramaturgy of Rehearsal,” I propose that we can look to acting theory and rehearsal techniques to learn *how* to engage in empathy that is dynamic, dialogic, and open to the other. I analyze Wallace’s use of pedagogical rehearsals in her plays *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* (1998) and *In the Heart of America* (1994). In these plays, we see characters engaged in the work of rehearsal—exchanging ideas, negotiating and analyzing potential outcomes, role-playing, and perspective-taking. This critical and affective work, I argue, is the work of rehearsal, a space in which we explore possibilities and open ourselves to the other. This is also the work of empathy. This work, I ultimately argue, leaves us

vulnerable to the other. As pedagogical tools, Wallace's plays help us accept that vulnerability as part of what it means to be a social creature.

This chapter proposes a re-thinking of Brechtian feminism. The rehearsals that I explore blend the techniques of Brecht, Stanislavski, and Augusto Boal. In these moments, empathy does not serve as a contrast to critical analysis so much it is *another means of analyzing and understanding a situation*. Whereas Brechtian feminist criticism has focused mostly on the issue of critical seeing—viewing gender as constructed—I argue that Wallace's work suggests a different kind of feminist theatre drawing from Brecht: one in which we must imagine how others feel and allow that feeling to resonate in us. This kind of theatre moves not toward the Brechtian “shock” of realization, but rather approaches understanding as a something like a wave, an ebb and flow of thought feeling and felt thoughts through which we attempt to make sense of our world.

All of these techniques—interruptions, repetitions, and rehearsals—can help us approach empathy in a way that is contingent and dialogic. They keep empathy from “ending” in a satisfied sense of our own emotional capacity or our ability to understand and focus our attention, instead, on the ongoing work of empathy and the need for self-evaluation in that process. Thus, theatre, as a living art form undertaken being human beings, can help us understand empathy as an activity, an undertaking, and an exchange. What I am suggesting goes beyond the popular notion that theatre expands our empathy by helping us *imagine* the lives of others. What I am proposing, instead, is that the work of theatre can help us understand the work of empathy.

A Word about Cognitive Neuroscience

Any discussion we have about empathy today must at least consider recent discoveries in the field of cognitive neuroscience, which has contributed greatly to our understanding of the biological basis for how to relate to and understand others, particularly through growing understanding of the mirror neuron system. Mirror neurons are neurons that fire whether the subject is performing an action or seeing it performed (Gallese and Lakoff 458). In other words, there is a neural congruence between doing and seeing, and also between self and other. Amy Cook explains that “Mirror neurons are thought to be responsible for action understanding, intention, emotional attunement, communication, joint action, and imitation” (590). The idea that we imitate, in our brains, the actions of others, has led to the argument that mirror neurons are the basis of empathy, a notion that has been taken up by a number of theatre scholars, including Rhonda Blair, Bruce McConachie, and Cook. But there is still much we do not know about mirror neurons, and limiting our understanding of empathy to a neural process would, at this point, be beyond speculative. As I have suggested before, mirror neurons may prove an explanation for “basic” empathy, but the empathy that I am exploring in this dissertation is different. Theatre is not simply a place that we feel or recognize feelings, but a space where we make sense of feelings, ideas, and concepts. Biology and brain chemistry are important parts of what happens in the theatre, but they are not the whole story.

There are, admittedly, physical limitations to what some people can feel, and no amount of theatrical empathy can overcome that. If, for instance, we are unable to experience a particular emotion because of damage to the brain, we will also be unable to recognize that emotion in others, even if we understand, intellectually, the idea and existence of such an emotion (Damasio, *Feeling* 65-66). This does not suggest that we are unable to experience new emotions; we are, provided that there is no brain damage involved. But it does reveal the intimate link

between our own experience and that of others, and this extends beyond emotion to action. Cognitive neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese writes “The recent brain-imaging experiment on communicative actions shows that only stimuli consistent with or closely related to the observer’s behavioral repertoire are effective in activating the mirror neuron system for action” (49-50). Thus, we have to have some sense of familiarity with what we are observing for mirror neurons to activate. These emotional and physical responses, moreover, are linked in the brain: “the sensorimotor system appears to support the reconstruction of what it would feel like to be in a particular emotion, by means of simulation of the related body state” (Gallese 50). Mirror neurons thus not only signal *what* the other is doing; they allow us to embody that doing, as it were, in our mind.

This has led some to suggest that mirror neurons present the same old self/other confusion that has long been at the heart of critiques over empathy, but the brain does recognize difference, both in the types of actions observed and in who is performing that action. While approximately 30% of mirror neurons are “strictly congruent,” firing “when the action seen is exactly the same as the action performed,” the remaining 70% are broadly congruent, firing when the action seen is similar to the action performed (Gallese and Lakoff 462). Moreover, neurons do not active in exactly the same way for the self and others. Brain imaging studies show similar, overlapping, but not entirely identical areas of the brain lighting up when individuals imagine themselves in a situation and when they imagine another in that situation (Decety and Jackson 56). Antonio R. Damasio characterizes the brain’s experience of another’s actions as the “as-if-loop”: “the body-sensing areas constitute a sort of theater where not only the ‘actual’ body states can be ‘performed,’ but varied assortments of ‘false’ body states can be enacted as well, for example, as-if-body-states, filtered body states, and so on” (*Looking* 118).

The theatrical metaphor is telling: Damasio is calling attention to the *doing* of theatre that is also an imitative, imagined doing. Theatre scholars have similarly made much of the mimetic nature of mirror neurons: “The brain stimulates action in order to understand action; it learns by imitating it” (Cook 590).

But what, precisely, does the brain learn by imitating? Most children will stick their tongue to cold metal, even after watching their friends’ tongues get stuck. Clearly, some lessons require personal experience. What does the brain learn by watching Lady Macbeth descend into madness, or Didi and Gogo wait? For some, the mirror neurons are evidence of a biological basis for empathy, confirming the belief that empathy is an essential human quality. For others, cognitive neuroscience is a starting point for understanding empathy, not an explanation of it. Stueber, for instance, argues that mirror neuron system may explain how we *recognize* what others feel, but it cannot account for how we come to understand how the other experiences his or her situation. This is what leads him to distinguish between the “basic” empathy of the mirror neuron system and cognitive or “reenactive” empathy. Moreover, cognitive studies, thus far, do not seem to be able to account for why some people are better at reading emotions than others in cases where neural damage is *not* a factor. Many psychologists argue that you can learn to be a better empathizer, which would not be possible if empathy were a purely instinctual process. Batson’s review of behavioral studies of empathy, for example, reveals that *how* we view a situation matters. Subjects instructed to imagine how the other felt about his or her situation experienced greater empathy than those instructed simply to observe the situation, suggesting that our frame of mind and our consciously selected point of focus impact our empathy (120-21). Fritz Breithaupt, meanwhile, argues that culture determines who and what we give our empathetic attention to: “. . . we live in a world with a lot of empathetic noise and a lot of firing

of mirror neurons. Hence, it may be the *limiting* of the sympathetic brain reactions that allows for full empathy. This is where culture . . . comes it” (402). For Breithaupt, culture acts as a filter for the mirror neuron system.

Cognitive neuroscience research has also complicated, rather than quieted, debates over the association of empathy with gender. Schulte-Rüther et al. conducted a brain imaging study that suggests “that females recruit areas containing mirror neurons to a higher degree than males during both SELF- and OTHER-related processing in empathic face-to-face interactions” (393). Their study further suggested that women experienced greater mirror neuron activation than men when perspective-taking. Reading this study alongside one that showed that men experienced lower mirror neuron activation when observing subjects in pain who they perceived as behaving unfairly, Schulte-Rüther et al. conclude that women may rely on more emotional responses to others, while men rely on more cognitive responses (402). Thus, women are more likely to have a strong emotional response to the other, while men may moderate this response, particularly when they have made a cognitive judgment that the other’s suffering is deserved. These findings, however, are still controversial. The Schulte-Rüther et al. study relies on older, fMRI technology, rather than on more advanced neuroimaging techniques, and, as the authors point out, “evidence for gender difference in the hMNS [human mirror neuron system] is rare” (400). Furthermore, the studies raise questions about the impact of cognition on mirror neurons. Are men simply “inherently” more cognitive, or do these studies indicate that we can impact how our mirror neurons react via cognitive processes? Do women simply learn to empathize differently? This is, clearly, an area requiring further study.

To avoid mirror neurons becoming the new “explanation for all seasons,” we must be critical about how we apply these findings. I tend to agree with Stueber that mirror neurons help

us understand a *particular kind* of empathy. But the empathy I am interested in here is not simply automatic. I am interested in theatre that does not seek to rouse our emotions, but to help us understand those emotions critically and historically. I am interested in a theatre that calls on us to do more than say, “I see what you are feeling.” The theatrical projects that I describe in the following chapters engage the audience through a variety of techniques, encouraging and empathy that takes the sensory and affective information experienced by the brain and body and subjects it to critical inquiry, producing new emotions that are, in turn critically examined. If we are going to advocate empathy as a tool for social change, then this, I argue, is the kind of empathy that we should be advocating. I am suggesting that we explore an empathy that is not about the comfortable identification of similarities but rather potentially uncomfortable, estranging recognitions. After all, to embrace the absurdity of *Exit the King* requires that we face the king’s extraordinary will to live, not rationalize it away with familiar explanations from our own lives. Whether the result of the performance is, ultimately, to acknowledge that we share the characters’ feelings depends on the play, the situation, and the person watching. But this is not, strictly speaking, the goal of empathy. Empathy describes a process of encounter. Where that encounter takes us depends on how willing we are to engage in this process without knowing what the outcome will be.

CHAPTER 1

INTERRUPTIONS: ESTRANGING EMPATHY

Cammy: What do you want tay know?

Writer: What it was like in Iraq.

Cammy: What it was fucking like?

Stewarty: Go tay Baghdad if you want tay ken what it's like.

-- Gregory Burke, *Black Watch*

Like the Writer in the epigraph, most audience members attending the National Theatre of Scotland's *Black Watch* have come, at least in part, to find out “what it was like” for members of the Scottish regiment during their time in Iraq. This play, based on interviews with former Black Watch members, promises a kind of intimacy and access not available through more “impersonal” media accounts. In other words, it promises an opportunity to empathize. But our curiosity, like the Writer's, is rebuked. *Black Watch* is replete with cautionary reminders that what we are seeing is never the whole story, and that our interest may be exploitative. Yet the play persists in *attempting* to communicate these soldiers' experiences, first building empathy and then interrupting it, then building it again. As audience members, we are constantly bumping up against our inability to know the very thing that we have come to the theatre to learn—what it was like for the soldiers on the ground. In the process, we are prompted to consider why we want to know these things and what it feels like to be on the receiving end of our empathetic curiosity. *Black Watch* interrupts empathy to build a better empathy. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which interruptions highlight issues or moments that may require special attention. I want to suggest that we see these interruptions and breaks as vitally important spaces to be experienced, analyzed, and felt. Rather than ending empathy, these moments might instead be understood as constitutive of a different *kind* of empathy, one not predicated on a sense of total access to the other or instantaneous understanding. An empathy that accommodates interruptions may be

discontinuous, fractured, and marked by gaps. In moments of interruption, we may have to attend to how our empathy impacts others and to why they may want or need to reject us, or some part of our history or ideology. These moments may challenge us to consider what it feels like to be on the other end of the empathic exchange, which in turn calls on us to analyze ourselves in the situation and to see the gap that interrupts our empathy as historically and socially constructed, not as a universal limit between any two human beings, thereby eliminating the convenient excuse, “Well, there are some things that simply cannot be shared. That’s just how it is.” In other words, interruptions do not so much cancel empathy as estrange it for our analysis.

What I am suggesting entails a rethinking of the relationship between empathy and interruption as described by Brecht. Typically, the distancing and interruption created in a Brechtian performance are understood as a means of preventing empathy. The act of interruption—in the form of an alienating *gestus*, a plot-announcing placard, or a use of the “not . . . but”—severs the bond between spectator and character, putting, as it were, quotation marks around the character and her actions so that they might be analyzed.³⁵ Regarding epic theatre, Brecht states, “The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequence) by means of a simple empathy with the characters in a play” (71). In this chapter, however, I propose that rather than understanding interruption as an alternative or end to empathy, thus creating a mutually exclusive set of binary conditions, we consider the possibility that gaps and interruptions may constitute an important part of empathy—at least, of an empathy that that never slides into easy identification. I am suggesting, in other words, that we consider the existence of a mode of empathy that seeks not always to close gaps, but to acknowledge them. I see these gaps as communicative moments,

³⁵ Brecht draws frequently on the idea of quotation, suggesting, in “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting,” that the Chinese actor “limits himself from the start to simply quoting the character played” (94).

places where the recipient of empathy “talks back,” as it were, by marking a misunderstanding or misstep on the part of the empathizer, just as the character Stewarty does in the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter: “Go tay Baghdad if you want to ken what it’s like” (Burke, *Black Watch* 7). Empathy may be interrupted when, like the Writer in *Black Watch*, the empathizer oversimplifies the subject of empathy, assuming that understanding will be easy. Or it may be interrupted when the recipient of empathy wants to remind the empathizer of historical injustices that cannot be remedied by a mere instant of empathetic understanding, as occurs in plays like *Betsy* and *BOP: The North Star*, both discussed later in this chapter. Interruptions may remind us that empathy is only one way in which we engage others, not the whole of that engagement. The gaps created by interruption may mark the need for further dialogue, action, or reparation; they may even mark that which can never be repaired, but which must nonetheless be acknowledged. None of these circumstances render empathy inherently or necessarily invaluable or inappropriate. Rather, they speak to the complex nature of both interpersonal relationship and social change.

Empathy and the Closing of Gaps, or What Interruption Interrupts

I am certainly not the first to call for interruption to empathy. Those who have made this call in the past, however, have tended, like Brecht, to see interruption as a means of curtailing empathy. It is worth noting that these same theorists who see interruption as means of cancelling empathy have a tendency to understand empathy as a project of identification in which the lines between self and other are blurred. As discussed in the introduction, this notion of empathy can be traced to its origins in aesthetic theory and Robert Vischer’s argument that empathy was motivated by “the pantheistic urge for union with the world” (109). Empathy arose, according to this theory, out of a sense of harmony or similarity between self and object or self and other, a

harmony that inspires the desire for union. This desire for union is, of course, predicated on a sense of disunion. We cannot join that which is already whole. In *"I am You": The Hermeneutics of Empathy in Western Literature, Theology, and Art* (1988), Karl F. Morrison writes, "Closure always begins with a gap, or a need" (354). Empathy, according to Morrison, is motivated by the empathizer's recognition of distance between self and other and the desire to overcome that distance. While theorists like Vischer and Morrison locate this urge to union in love, compassion, and a sense of harmonic accord others, like Charles Edward Gauss and Doris Sommer, link it to the desire to dominate, master, and consume. The history of empathy as a concept is thus also the history of a disagreement as to what motivates our desire to close the gap between ourselves and others and what effects result from our attempts to do so.

Vischer and Morrison both adhere to the notion that empathy is either predicated on or creates a sense of sameness, union, or identification between self and other, whether that other is an aesthetic object or an individual. Theirs, of course, is not the only understanding of empathy, but it is a significant one, particularly because of Vischer's status, deserved or not, as the coiner of the term *Einfühlung*. Even if we do not agree with Vischer that empathy necessarily leads to a sense of union in which the differences between self and other are somehow overcome, we are likely to understand empathy as a means of "bridging" difference, a metaphor that evokes the gap that empathy is meant to "close." It is conventionally understood as a tool for crossing any number of divides—ideological, historical, racial, sexual, ethnic, etc. It brings that which is distant near. Or at least it is supposed to do so.

This quality of erasing gaps is central to Brecht's critique of empathy, who associated empathy with a theatrical style in which all aspects of performance are bound together in such a way as to defy any effort to consider or analyze them separately. Music, emotion, script, and

characterization all merge into a single, seemingly natural whole which defies our ability to conceive of alternative actions or behaviors. This type of theatre promotes a “fusion” which “extends to the spectator, who gets thrown into the melting pot too and becomes a passive (suffering) part of the total work of art” (Brecht 38). Brecht’s concern over empathy in the theatre stemmed, therefore, from empathy’s tendency to promote a sense of union, between both character and actor and spectator and character. He critiqued the theatrical style that relied on “the spectator’s ability to be carried along, identify himself, feel empathy and understand” (25). Empathy is linked to a theatre that reassures us of our ability to comprehend, that grants the sensation of easy access by affirming, rather than challenging, our world view. What we see on stage is so seamlessly stitched together that its constructedness is rendered invisible. Epic theatre was designed to interrupt the seeming cohesion of theatrical narrative, to probe its gaps and fissures. In “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,” Brecht called for a new style of playwriting that structurally intervenes in conventional narrative flow:

[T]his way of subordinating everything to a single idea, this passion for propelling the spectator down a single track where he can look neither right nor left, up nor down, is something that the new school of play-writing must reject. Footnotes, and the habit of turning back in order to check a point, need to be introduced into play-writing too. (44)

Instead of a theatre in which all images appeared timeless, natural, and universal, Brecht called for a theatre that drew attention to *how* its narrative was constructed—the social, historical, and ideological forces that produced its meaning. He aimed to show the seams in meaning making.

It is this interruption of perceived unities and “truths” that has made Brecht such a popular figure among poststructuralist writers. Elizabeth Wright explains, “In terms of

poststructuralist theory the famous estrangement effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*), the gestic style, the appeal to the spectator, may be seen as symbolic devices designed to disrupt the imaginary unity between producer and text, actor and role, and spectator and stage” (2). In his essay “Brecht on Discourse,” one of the earliest texts to promote a poststructuralist understanding of Brecht, Roland Barthes argues that Brechtian theatre reveals discontinuities in meaning; it “detaches the sign from its effect” (Barthes 213). To Barthes, Brechtian dramaturgy functions as a kind of unsticking of discourse, a rupturing of the bonds of meaning that simultaneously renders those bonds visible to the spectator. Like other poststructuralist readers of Brecht, Barthes champions epic theatre’s ability to probe the gaps and fissures in meaning-making systems. Althusser, in fact, translated *Verfremdungseffekt* as “an effort of *displacement* or *separation*” (qtd. in Carney 16). The idea of displacement is similarly evoked by Walter Benjamin, who identifies interruption as the primary structuring device of epic theatre. He writes, “[T]he truly important thing [in epic theatre] is to discover the conditions of life. (One might say just as well: to alienate [*verfremden*] them.) This discovery (alienation) of conditions takes place through the interruption of happenings” (Benjamin 150). Like quotation, interruption disrupts narrative, lifting a theatrical moment out of the flow of narrative so that we might pause to consider it from different angles and perspectives. By calling attention to the spectator’s role as interpreter and offering the audience alternatives to the action on stage, Brechtian interruption “remind[s] us that representations are not given but produced” (Wright 19). Or, as Fredric Jameson puts it, the *Verfremdungseffekt* takes the illusion of wholeness and breaks it back up into its constituent parts, demanding our attention to the whys and wherefores of how the whole was constructed to begin with: “What history has solidified into an illusion of stability and substantiality can now be

dissolved again, and reconstructed, replaced, improved, ‘*umfunktioniert*’” (47). The *Verfremdungseffekt* severs links, interrupts unities, and creates gaps.

Understood in Brechtian terms, then, empathy and interruption are incompatible because empathy is depicted as totalizing state. Empathy involves identification, which for Brecht consists of more than the recognition of similarities. It involves the complete adoption of the character’s viewpoint, a process he refers to in *The Messingkauf Dialogues* as the audience “borrow[ing] its heart from one of the characters” (Brecht 27). As his reference to the heart implies, this identification is an emotional one, not an intellectual one. In “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting,” he refers to this identification as “emotional infection” (Brecht 94). Empathy entails *feeling* in accord or agreement with a character, rather than critically recognizing similarities between the character and oneself.

Brecht is not the only theorist to propose interruption or something like it as a remedy to empathy. In his essay “Interruptions: Scenes of Empathy from Aristotle to Proust,” Johannes Türk argues that it is the “‘interruption’ of empathetic dynamics – and not their celebration – [that] has been defined as the ethical task of literature” (448). His example is illuminating because, like Brecht, Türk understands empathy as identification. He also makes no distinction between empathy, pity, and compassion. Rather than dismiss his arguments as unhelpful because of his lack of terminological specificity, however, it is useful to consider, just as with Brecht, exactly what it is that Türk finds problematic about the constellation of things he groups under the term “empathy,” and how he views interruption as a solution to those problems.

For Türk, as for Brecht, empathy consists of an emotional response, and interruption serves to regulate that emotion. His first example, as the title of the essay suggests, comes from Aristotle’s notion of *catharsis*. Reading *Art of Rhetoric* alongside the *Poetics*, Türk notes that,

for Aristotle, pity and fear are linked emotions that depend on a degree of identification: “we only pity if others experience what we fear for ourselves or for someone close to us” (450). Catharsis functions by purging these emotions, brought about through identification. He writes, “Narrative thus intervenes in the economy of pity and fear that both rely on identification and, with regard to the assumed flow, it effectuates an interruption or syncope, significantly lowering the energetic level of emotionality” (Türk 451). Catharsis, then, serves as an interruption that helps regulate our emotional responses, warding against potential excess, a task that Türk defines as “ethical.” He turns next to 18th century Germany and the work of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who argues that catharsis (and thus, for Türk, empathy) functions not by purging our emotions, but by transforming them, helping us feel the right feelings in the right way at the right time. In his analysis of the novellas of Heinrich von Kleist, Türk argues that “empathy is . . . unreliable and maintains no necessary relationship to moral values whatsoever” (459). Empathy may be dissimulated, and it may be used by our enemies against us. Literature here offers us a cautionary tale: “Its ethical task seems to be to contain the powers of empathy and circumscribe their immanent critique” (466). Finally, Türk turns to Proust and another example of misplaced empathy—a character in *A la recherche du temps perdu* who feels only for abstracted, distant persons, and never for those who suffer right before her: in this case a kitchen maid undergoing a difficult childbirth. All of this feeling, Türk argues, comes to nothing and constitutes a mere matter of habit. It is only the detached, unemotional figure of the surgeon who seems truly able to address the laboring woman in her time of need. The doctor’s interrupted empathy, Türk argues, is where “empathy truly begins” (469). Thus, the ethical empathy for Proust is an objective, unemotional state, an empathy without empathy, as it were.

Türk's aim is not in promoting a particular ethics *vis à vis* empathy, but rather in tracking the ways in which literature appears, throughout history, to be caught up in a pedagogy of empathy. Still, this pedagogy, as he understands it, tends to be one of either limiting empathy (as Türk defines it) or warning us of its unreliability. On the one hand, this line of argumentation is remarkable for the way in which it deviates from the more commonly held notion that literature has historically been involved in promoting identification and empathy. On the other hand, the examples Türk chooses are instructive for the way in which he interprets each of these examples *as having to do with empathy*. In other words, what is it that he picks out as a scene of empathy, and what problems does he associate with empathy? All of his examples have to do either with *feeling too much* or with *feeling inappropriately or unadvisedly*. Literature becomes the corrective to excessive and misapplied emotions. Like Brecht, Türk sees empathy and identification as emotional, and, as a direct result of their emotionality, deeply fallible. It is only in the interruption that we can check our emotions, critically assess the scenario, and, possibly, learn to feel in more appropriate ways. Empathy carries you away. Interruption corrects this problem.

In spite of what theorists like Brecht and Türk believe, empathy need not be an identificatory, totalizing experience, an overwhelming wave of blinding, uncritical emotion. As discussed in the introduction, I am interested in exploring empathy that is both cognitive and affective, that involves the imaginative recreation of the other's experience, respecting always that this imaginative process is fallible, and that there is no way for us to have direct access to the other's thoughts and feelings. We must, instead, imagine, interpret, and seek to understand by continually checking our responses with the other and adjusting our process when we learn that we err. Empathy approached in this way is not a wave that sweeps us away, but a conversation,

an ebb and flow in which thought and feeling are in constant dialogue. It involves reflection, and it can accommodate gaps. It is a process. As such, an interruption may not put an end to empathy. Instead, it may mark a moment, holding it up for special reflection. This is not simply a matter of critical response checking or correcting emotion. Interruptions can come in the form of sudden changes in our affective response. They may create the space to work through a critical/affective shift. They may function as part of the dialogue of empathy, rather than its end.

To understand empathy in this way, we have to reject a significant amount of binary thinking, not the least of which is the perceived incompatibility between empathy and poststructuralist analysis. The recent proliferation of interest in empathy has been interpreted by some scholars as a response to poststructuralism, a swing of the pendulum away from modes of critical thought perceived as distancing or rupturing toward more affectively oriented responses. Juliet Koss describes empathy as “seemingly a kinder, gentler model of aesthetic response” motivated by a desire not to deconstruct or take sides: “Like the recent ‘return to beauty,’ the resurgence of empathy would seem to signal a backlash against the oppositional aesthetics of recent decades—a distancing from the rigorous intellectualism of poststructuralist discourse and the allegiances of identity politics” (139). While the idea of poststructuralism described here is problematic, it is representative of how some people have understood the poststructuralist project. Jill Dolan expresses her part in this so-called “backlash” when she defends sentimentality in general, and empathy in particular, in the introduction to *Utopia in Performance* (2005):

I know I risk sentimentality with this work; I know I risk emptying even further overused signs like ‘peace’ or ‘love.’ Yet I find myself wanting to take back these words, to refill them, to ground them not in naïveté or troubling innocence, but in

concrete, material conditions that give rise to empathy (and more) for others. How can we use sentimentality as something positive instead of abandoning it? (23)

The idea that these modes of response must be reclaimed and defended from accusations of naïveté suggests that they have previously been dismissed as uncritical and anti-intellectual. If poststructuralism is “distancing” and “intellectual,” then empathy is close and emotional, warm, caring, and accepting. If, according to poststructuralist discourse, the “other” is radically “other,” empathy suggests that the “other” is available—whether through shared emotion or the imaginative recreation of another’s situation.³⁶ In this schema, poststructuralism is characterized by distance and interruption, while empathy closes gaps, creating a sense of union, oneness, and identity, rendering the two modes of response fundamentally incompatible.

This perceived incompatibility, however, is founded on a number of problematic assumptions. First, it relies on the notion that empathy, conceived of as a primarily *emotional* response, is somehow therefore neither dangerous nor potentially violent. As I will demonstrate below, however, empathy is not necessarily a “kinder, gentler model of aesthetic response.” It can, instead, be experienced as a violation. Like any interpretive approach, it invites its own set of risks and benefits. Second, this sense of incompatibility relies on a notion of poststructuralism as “cold,” unemotional, or impersonal. One need only read a text such as Derrida’s *Mémoires: for Paul de Man* (1986) to see that poststructuralist analysis can be deeply motivated by and engaged with affect. Finally, the assumption that empathy is incompatible with estrangement

³⁶ In reference to the absolute alterity of the other, I am thinking of the work of Emmanuel Levinas and his influence on poststructuralist scholars like Derrida and Judith Butler. In his work on the encounter with the face of the Other, Levinas argues that the Other always remains “infinitely foreign” (194). He writes, “The presentation of the face, expression, does not disclose an inward world previously closed, adding thus a new region to comprehend or to take over” (212). Language, as a system of signification that does not *reflect* meaning but rather produces it, is thus incapable of disclosing the other to us fully. And yet, for Levinas, it is the very otherness of the Other that constitutes us as subjects. We are beings formed in and through our encounters with the Other. This, for Levinas, is the status of the human community: a community founded in the need to present ourselves before and respond to others who will always remain separate from us.

specifically and poststructuralism more generally derives from the assumption that limits, fissures, and interruptions constitute instances of empathy's failure. This is the assumption I want to challenge in this chapter. I contend that interruptions may in some cases lead to a stronger, more critical, more complex and reflective empathy. By estranging our empathy, interruptions may mark places where further discussion and negotiation may be required, where wrongs may yet need to be righted, or where we simply have to agree to disagree. Interruptions may force us to consider the effects of our empathy, and to undertake the challenging task of engaging others *without* being able to say, "I understand." To begin, though, I want to return to the first assumption I challenged: that empathy is a "kinder, gentler" mode of response. In the following section, I consider what it *feels* like to "be understood."

Feeling Understood

Since the post-World War II period and the work of American psychologist Carl Rogers, who advocated empathy as part of what he called "client-centered" therapy, empathy has been seen as a crucial means not only of understanding the client in clinical psychology, but also of helping that client feel *better* about him or herself—more secure as a person. Rogers' work should be understood in context with the post-war "boom" in the field of clinical psychology, a boom motivated, in part, by the fact that psychiatrists found themselves overwhelmed by the needs of returning veterans, creating a space for psychologists. This need was felt strongly after the war because, for the first time, the American populace was beginning to accept mental illness as something that might impact anyone, and as a result more soldiers than in previous wars were likely to report problems and seek help (Gambone 40). Two of the primary institutions promoting the entry of psychologists into clinical work were the Veterans Administration and the University of Chicago Counseling Center, run by Rogers, who also happened to have strong ties

to the VA (Moss 42). During this same period, both psychoanalysts and psychologists began to focus more and more on individualized treatment, a trend seen particularly in the popularity of humanism within psychology. Humanism calls for an understanding of the “whole person,” a subjective, individualized approach to therapy that understands each person as experiencing his or her life in a unique way.³⁷ Empathy was significant to the humanist school because it offered a means for helping the clinician better understand the client’s subjective experience of his or her life. Rogers describes empathy as “entering the private perceptual world of the other,” a non-judgmental process that involves frequently checking in with the other person to determine the accuracy of one’s perceptions (“Empathic” 4). He explains that by making the client feel understood, valued, and cared for as an individual, empathy can actually promote growth behavior (“Empathic” 8). “Empathy,” Rogers writes, “gives that needed confirmation that one does exist as a separate, valued person with an identity” (“Empathic” 7). Psychologist Robert L. Katz concurs, asserting that “We enjoy the satisfaction of being understood and accepted . . . for the particular kind of person we are” (7-8). When we do not feel understood or empathized with, we may experience a sense of rejection (Katz 8). For both Rogers and Katz, empathy from others is crucial to our sense of personhood.

The effects of feeling understood, however, are not always positive. Rogers, for instance, cautions that the counseling psychologist must not try “to uncover feelings of which the person is totally unaware, since this would be too threatening” (4). Thus, in psychological cases, the

³⁷ Scholars and historians of psychology tend to pinpoint, as the motivation behind the rise of humanism, an increased sense of disillusionment with science and technology, a sense of alienation in modern life, and a desire to resist the conformism of the 1950s. Humanist psychology, with its tendency to value the experiences of the individual over social norms, is often associated with the rising counterculture and the “me generation.” There is an unresolved tension in this narrative of humanism: on the one hand, it suggests that it arose out of a collective sense that there is something wrong with the culture, but it offers as a “solution” more exploration of the individual, not the culture that seems to have provoked the “problem.” In other words, humanism may mark the existence of structural social problems, but it does not offer a means for addressing those problems, choosing at once to perceive psychological problems as culturally produced *and* uniquely individualized.

patient has to be the leader, the one to begin to identify and name feelings with help from the therapist. Rogers is concerned with the psychologist's potential to recognize feelings that the client is not yet ready to accept or confront, but empathy might prove a threat even without this potentially psychologically damaging circumstance, which does indicate a lingering sense of the clinician's authority over the other's experience. Still, Rogers' cautions inspire questions for the theatre, where it is often difficult, if not impossible, to check the accuracy of your empathy. And who would even judge this accuracy—the actor, who, after all, is not the character? As Karsten Stueber notes, “interpretation based on empathy is not self-verifying,” but must be rigorously tested in life (206). Does the generally fictional nature of theatre mean that anything we feel or think through empathy is “right” because it is part of our subjective response to a work of art? We may be, as Brecht feared, left too much to our own devices in the theatre, allowed to imagine our particular understanding as “right.” And, of course, we might be wrong. In that event, our empathy might be just as damaging for a person's sense of selfhood as a lack of empathy. After all, when someone tells me she “understands,” but it is clear that she does not, I can experience feelings of anger, frustration, and even fear that I am doomed to remain alone in my experience, unable to make connections. Empathy can, moreover, simply be feigned, superficial, dismissive, or even controlling.

This last quality, of control or domination, is intimately connected to the various and conflicting ways in which empathy is understood as a gendered activity or response. As an act of projecting oneself into the other and penetrating their interiority, empathy is often characterized as a masculine form of domination, a privileged activity that reinforces patriarchal authority. The gendering of empathy, however, shifted somewhat in the late 1800s, such that it was not longer seen as an act of penetration, but rather a kind of feminized *reception*. This is the view held by

Brecht, who claiming, regarding the merits of his method of acting, “Nobody gets raped by the individual he portrays” (93). Instead of penetrating, the empathizer is penetrated. Empathy continues to be feminized, today, but in a slightly different way. Women are frequently understood to be “better” empathizers than men, a “skill” that often results in women putting others’ needs before their own.³⁸ Empathy, like nurturing, becomes another form of “women’s work,” labor that they are, supposedly, biologically designed to perform. Whether empathy is depicted as an act of penetration or reception matters little; in a patriarchal world, it can be used in either way to contribute to the oppression of women, and thus any attempt to enlist empathy as a feminist tool must address the various ways in which it might work against this very project.

In her performance piece “A Certain Level of Denial,” Karen Finley suggests that empathy can work against feminism by actually undermining emotional knowledge. In this piece, the character Woman discusses the history of gender oppression with the character Man, a psychiatrist. Man attempts to steer the conversation away from social, cultural, and historical issues, pressing Woman to characterize her frustration and oppression as personal, a matter of her own feelings and psychology. Woman fights back by suggesting that this mode of personalization and psychologization is just another way to obscure systematic gendered oppression. When he says, “So you *feel as if* you’ve never existed in history,” she responds, “Please don’t look at me with your perverted sense of understanding. Please don’t talk to me with your pathetic overshadowed sensitivity, because you make me more determined than ever that there is nothing worse than a liberal shrink” (126-128, emphasis added). Here, “recognizing” emotions (and at the same time dismissing them as a form of critical knowledge) functions to obscure the material conditions that have produced that emotion. When feeling and emotion are

³⁸ As discussed in the introduction, the studies that support these claims have no way of determining whether the responses they measure are determined by biology, culture, or some combination of the two.

not treated as legitimate forms of knowledge, empathy can become yet another tool of oppression, suggesting that it is our emotional responses to the systems that govern our world, not those systems themselves, that are the problem. As a gendered encounter, empathy is represented here as a masculine tool, a way of “understanding” that attempts to manipulate how the other experiences her own life, rather than the other way around. Empathy becomes a carefully devised way of *not seeing, not understanding*, leaving the one experiencing that empathy angry and, potentially, more alone than she was before the “empathetic” encounter.

Considerations of what it feels like to *be empathized with* are fairly rare outside of psychological texts. When they do appear, it is telling that they often present empathy as an unwanted form of engagement, much as the moment described above. In her study of the fiction of Jean Rhys, Christina Stead, and Doris Lessing, literary scholar Judith Kegan Gardiner explores the possibility that empathy can take the form of domination, but not in the way that critics like Charles Edward Gauss have maintained. Gauss suggests that empathy dominates through the *erasure* of the other: “‘empathic understanding’ refers to our deliberate attempts to identify ourselves with another, accounting for his actions by our own immediate experience of our motivations and attitudes in similar circumstances as we remember and imagine them” (85). In other words, what we call empathy is merely the attribution of our thoughts and feelings to the other, a critique shared by many.³⁹ Gardiner, on the other hand, suggests that empathy might dominate through *exposure*. In her analysis of the relationship between two characters in Lessing’s story “The Trinket Box,” Gardiner writes, “The narrator dislikes being understood by

³⁹ This idea goes back to the notion of empathy as a projection of the self, or one’s own responses to an aesthetic object, into the object itself. Mikhail Bakhtin writes, for instance, describes empathy this way: “[W]e ascribe . . . those qualities which express our own attitude toward the object *to* that object itself as its own qualities” (81). Vernon Lee’s account of how this happens reveals how little particularity we give to the object before us: “[W]hat we are transferring . . . from ourselves to the looked at shape of the mountain, is not merely the thought of the rising which is really being done by us at that moment, but the thought and emotion, the *idea of rising as such* which had been accumulated in our mind long before we ever came into the presence of that particular mountain” (65).

this peripheral woman as though understanding is a kind of domination. The old lady's ability to empathize without asking for a return threatens the narrator" (87). What might seem at first like an demonstration of affection or love—the expression of empathy without asking for anything in return—becomes a kind of emotional blackmail, a subtle manipulation which the narrator experiences as “covert dominance” (Gardiner 87). The fact that this empathy cannot be repaid only makes the situation worse; the narrator is forced to endure emotional exposure and debt without the ability to subvert the power dynamic. Feeling understood, in this case, means feeling one's privacy invaded. It means feeling constantly at a disadvantage—assaulted by understanding.

Gardiner goes on to associate this feeling of being dominated by empathy with the feeling of a child dominated by her mother, part of her overall argument that empathy is associated with women, specifically mothers. Her work engages the feminist discourse on mothering from the 1980s, a discourse aimed at “recovering” the figure of the mother, which included, in part, combating the notion that what makes women “good” mothers—nurturing, empathy, etc.—could also make them “bad” mothers, mothers who suffocate their children and control them through overbearing emotional engagement, a fear expressed in texts like Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers* (1942). While I disagree with her larger project of gendering empathy, I find her analysis of Lessing's fiction provocative because it focuses, in this instance, not on the feelings of the empathizer, but on those of the one with whom the empathizer empathizes.⁴⁰ This almost never

⁴⁰ My quarrel with Gardiner's analysis is that she does not reject the “maternal” model, but uses it instead to suggest that the path toward better, more ethical empathy comes through better “mothering” (understood metaphorically). For Gardiner, this entails a willingness to be fluid, to change, and to be changed by others—all ideas I find useful (see Chapter 3). While I understand the historical reasons that likely influenced Gardiner's choice to retain the maternal metaphor, I also find it deeply problematic, reinforcing the cultural stereotype that women are more empathetic than men, and that motherhood is an essentially empathetic state. Moreover, Gardiner's choice of a familial metaphor reinforces the very hierarchy between empathizer and the recipient of empathy that she wishes to undo. Even Gardiner's ideal, “ethical” mother is an authority figure, if a particularly nurturing one. What I am pursuing is an empathy built on parity and understanding.

occurs in literary or philosophical studies of empathy, and while it does occur in psychological studies (as referenced above), even these texts still tend to focus on the empathizer, since they are generally oriented toward instructing practitioners and clinicians on the merits and methods of empathic engagement. James Marcia is one of the few to take a cautionary tone, remarking, “It should be remembered that empathy can be experienced as a kind of invasion or penetration—being understood by another can be painful” (99).

I want to draw a connection between the feminist aims of Finley and Gardiner’s texts and the ways in which they both call attention to the recipient of empathy. What does it feel like to be empathized with? The lack of attention to this end of the empathic exchange is apparent from the lack of a term to represent this figure. An “empathizer” is one who feels empathy *for or with another*. The one for whom this empathy is felt remains nameless, un-representable in language as anything but “other,” or, in clinical terms, the “client.” As Susan L. Feagin notes, empathy is “asymmetrical” (95). I want to suggest that a feminist approach to empathy calls attention to this asymmetry as a means of undoing it, reminding us that empathy involves *more than one person*. Feminist empathy is empathy that seeks parity. This does not mean that it demands total access and unlimited understanding. Both of the examples cited above remind us that this is not only impossible, but also potentially undesirable. Parity requires us to respect boundaries and limits, including those imposed by the one with whom we seek to empathize.

While there are extensive discussions in the literature on empathy attending to the limits we may place on our empathy with others, there is almost no attention devoted to when, how, or why we may wish to prevent others from empathizing *with us*. In his book *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences* (2006), for instance, Stueber characterizes empathy as a kind of simulation or imaginative reenactment of another’s

experience, but notes the existence of what he calls “imaginative resistance.” Imaginative resistance occurs when we cannot understand how someone who strikes us as otherwise “normal” or “rational” could behave in a certain way (Stueber 213). When we cannot see the other’s reasons as our reasons, empathy fails.⁴¹ To seriously entertain the other’s reasons as our own in such situations would, according to Stueber, threaten our very identity, our sense of self and well-being. I cannot “go there” because to go there would be to threaten the very “I” that engages in empathetic simulation. Theodor Lipps described a similar situation that he referred to as “negative *Einfühlung*,” in which the affect of the other is apprehended and imitated, but rejected, usually because the other is behaving in a way that might harm the empathizer (Jahoda 158). Martin L. Hoffman, meanwhile, argues that our empathy may decrease if the victim is seen as a bad or immoral person; our ability to experience empathy is linked to our sense of justice (56). Many scholars cite the Holocaust as the prime example of an event which limits empathic engagement. In her study on the subject, Carolyn J. Dean notes how difficult it is for us to empathize with individual experiences of atrocity. We tend, instead, to engage in a more distanced, generalized empathy that is non-distinct—i.e. a response to so-called “human” suffering which erases the particularity of individual or even group experience (74-74).

We protect ourselves by refusing to empathize. We avoid confronting uncomfortable feelings, upsetting our sense of right and wrong, or risking our own sense of self. But what of those who refuse our empathy, who reject our attempts to engage, or at least call attention to the moments when that engagement is insufficient or unwelcome? We in the theatre have, perhaps, been overlooking this question for too long, assuming that the empathy that occurs in the theatre

⁴¹ Stueber is using a model of empathy as simulation, taken from cognitive neuroscience. The instance described above relies on the “I” test: i.e. would I behave the same way? Not all theorists agree that we have to answer “yes” to this question to experience empathy, a position I also share. As I note below, arguments like Stueber’s are part of a large body of critical work focused on the position of the empathizer and on the need to feel safe and secure in order to empathize.

is fundamentally different from that which occurs in a clinical setting. There is, after all, no “real” person to experience empathy as violation or domination in the theatre, and thus no one to reject that empathy. And if empathy can feel like a violation, a threat, or an act of domination, it stands to reason that it might be rejected. Doris Sommer explores this possibility in *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* (1999), in which she depicts the relationship between minority author and majority reader as a struggle over empathy. Readers from cultural majorities, Sommer argues, empathize when they approach minority writing in order to conquer minority experience, claiming understanding so that they can assert that there is nothing beyond their ken or purview. “Why should distance be marked?” Sommer asks. “Shouldn’t limits be overcome through empathy and learning? Because overcoming them makes the writer ultimately redundant” (x). We empathize, Sommer suggests, in order to consume the other’s experience and make it our own. Texts by minority writers might then reject the reader’s empathy out of a desire to maintain a sense of difference, refusing the empathizer’s attempt to establish unjustified familiarity and intimacy. Sommer, like Finley and Gardiner, turns our attention back to the figure experiencing empathy, and Sommer’s analysis works, at least in part, to return a sense of agency to that figure. She understands the minority writer as the one who constructs the boundaries for empathetic engagement, announcing limits to warn the over-eager reader that her desire to understand may not be matched with a desire to be understood.

Theatre is often understood as the vehicle *par excellence* for empathy. It places a character’s story before us, live and in the moment, creating the proximity that Hume, Smith, Hoffman and so many others have declared crucial to eliciting a significant and powerful affective response—whether pity, sympathy, compassion, or empathy. And, to paraphrase Sommer, why *not* empathize with these characters? They are, after all, fictional beings, unlikely

to experience our empathy as invasive or appropriative. But if we engage in uncritical empathy with fictional characters, allowing ourselves to believe in the infallibility of our empathetic capacity, do we not risk doing the same in life? Moreover, there are many forms of theatre, particularly political theatre, theatre for social change, community-based theatre, and documentary theatre, in which the characters are either real people playing “themselves” or *represent real people*, often disenfranchised or oppressed people. When theatre of this sort elicits or produces empathy, it does so not in the name of empathy as a general human capacity (and whether or not empathy is a defining characteristic of humanity is certainly open for debate), but rather as a tool to create greater understanding of and investment in a particular person or group of people. Under these circumstances, it is incredibly important for us to consider how our empathy might impact the one with whom we empathize. Interruptions can help do this, as well as marking places where a single theatrical encounter cannot create understanding or repair damaged relationships through a few moments or hours of empathy, places where we may need to engage “real” people in further dialogue.

While the literature on empathy is full of references to limits, the idea that we can only go “so far,” these limits tend to be treated either as ontological facts to be accepted or as obstacles to be overcome. Katz writes, for example,

The empathic researcher is aware of the fact that even his methods may not lead to the fullest appreciation of the inner feelings of another person. His efforts fall short because some depths and nuances of human experience remain permanently out of the reach of either his intellect or his feelings. (20)

Text upon text instructs upon how to be a better empathizer, how to role-play and imaginatively engage the other in order to close these remaining gaps. But neither alternative—accepting the gaps as given or attempting to overcome them—actually attends to the gap itself, to the reasons why these fissures emerge when and where they do. In what follows, I explore a range of interruptions and the possibility that these interruptions do not necessarily reject or cut off empathy, but rather estrange it in a Brechtian sense, rendering it available for greater analysis. To do this, I discuss two different instances of interruption to empathy. In the first instance, interruptions remind us that our empathy may be greedy, presumptuous, and self-serving, challenging us to consider *why* we seek to empathize and what we hope to gain from the experience. In particular, this type of interruption calls into question the aims of theatre based on testimony and first-hand experience—theatre that, by its very nature, raises complicated questions about empathy. When we empathize in these plays, we are potentially empathizing not with a fictional character, but with a living human being who has agreed to share some part of his or her story with us, but who is absent in the moment of theatrical encounter. In the final section of the chapter, I analyze performances that interrupt empathy in order to call attention to specific historical and cultural differences. These performances defy the desire to make easy connections that rush too quickly to heal the wounds of racial antagonism. In these instances, interruptions remind us that we cannot simply erase or repair historical wrongs through empathy; instead, we have to try to acknowledge divisions and conflicts even as we come together in empathy. In all of these examples, empathy is presented as a potentially tool for both social and individual healing. These are not performances of fictionalized characters in fictionalized settings; these characters represent real people, both individuals and groups, whose stories are

shared on the stage in the hope of reaching some *real* understanding, one with repercussions beyond the walls of the theatre.

Interrupting our Desires: Empathy in Testimonial-Based Theatre

As Gregory Burke's *Black Watch* states, the play's primary purpose is "to know . . . what it was like for you. For the soldiers. On the ground" (Burke, *Black Watch* 7). The play shifts back and forth between scenes in Iraq and scenes in a Fife pub in which former regiment members recount their experiences of the war.⁴² Woven into the play is the story of the deaths of three Black Watch members. While no names are given, the details make it clear that the story is that of Sgt. Stuart Gray, Pte. Scott McArdle, and Pte. Paul Lowe who, along with their Iraqi interpreter, were killed by suicide bomber on 4 Nov. 2004 (Humphrys 74). In spite of this aim of communicating a "realistic" or "authentic" experience, however, *Black Watch* is replete with cautionary reminders that what we are seeing is never the whole story. In a sense, *Black Watch* manages to suggest a kind of emotional authenticity even as it reminds us about the incompleteness of what it can achieve; truth and mediation are not held as mutually exclusive, and our ability to empathize is not predicated on the need for total access to the characters in the drama. In *Black Watch*, the audience is always bumping up against our inability to know the very thing that we have come to the theatre to learn—what it was like for the soldiers on the ground. We are forced to consider why we want to know these things and what it feels like to be on the other end of our empathy and curiosity.

The very idea that we need to know what it is like for soldiers "on the ground" reflects a larger trend in our cultural attitudes towards war, a trend whose history is entwined with the embrace of empathy as a crucial tool in the field of psychology. As noted above, empathy

⁴² All performance references are based on my viewing of the play at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn, New York on November 21, 2009.

became popular, in U.S. psychology, in the post-World War II period, when mental health professionals sought new tools for dealing with “shell shock” or combat stress fatigue. As it became increasingly clear that veterans could not simply put their experiences “behind them,” it simultaneously became necessary to be able to talk about and address those experiences. The drawn-out conflicts in Korea and Vietnam kept these issues in the foreground, leading to the new clinical diagnosis, “Post Traumatic Stress Disorder” or PTSD. As the late twentieth century saw not only the continuation of war, but also global conflicts rendered increasingly more immediate to the international community through satellite television and the internet, people in the western world have increasingly developed the sense that what happens in war is somehow beyond the comprehension of those who have not shared similar experiences *and yet deeply important for us to attempt to understand*. This sentiment is evoked by the “trauma” in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder—the idea that there is something unrepresentable about what soldiers, victims of genocide, and others who have lived through mass violence have experienced. And yet we attempt to represent it. Through techniques like “embedded reporting,” we try to get closer to the experience that we are told we cannot access. It is no accident that documentary theatre has experienced a resurgence in age of the internet and reality television. We are a culture obsessed with exposure, confession, and unlimited access to the lives of others, whether those others are celebrities or soldiers. But as much as we crave access, we are also savvy to the media’s limitations in providing it, including its ability to distance that which it exposes. At a time when first-hand accounts and on-the-ground reporting proliferate, when we are “closer” to events around the world, we may yet feel that this overwhelming volume of images accessed through electronic screens is no “closer” than it ever was. This is a conceit adopted by a great deal of

documentary theatre, including *Black Watch*, which mocks embedded reporting in a way that suggests that it is the play, not the newspapers, where we can find the *real* true stories of the war.

Black Watch is the result of an assignment given to Burke by Vicky Featherstone, Artistic Director of the newly-created National Theatre of Scotland. In 2004, it was announced that the Black Watch Regiment would no longer maintain its regimental status, but, as a result of army reorganization, would become a battalion within the newly-formed Royal Regiment of Scotland. Featherstone asked Burke to “follow the story,” a process that was quickly becoming standard procedure for the nascent company, which has “about ten assignments a year where we ask playwrights and artists to follow something – anything from huge stories to fleeting moments – not needing to know where they will end” (Featherstone xvi). As the oldest Highland Regiment, the Black Watch had a long and famed history. Burke writes that it is “As much a part of the social history of Scotland as mining, shipbuilding or fishing” (*Black Watch* viii). The Regiment’s presence in the Iraq War was particularly contentious not only because of the general disapproval for the war in the UK, but also because the loss of regimental status was announced while the Black Watch was deployed, which many considered a slap in the face. The deployment itself, intended to support the U.S. assault on Fallujah, was already drawing fire as a political move on the part of the Blair government to come to the aid of the George W. Bush administration, which, shortly before the 2004 elections, reportedly did not want to risk public opinion by supplying more U.S. troops to the cause.

The National Theatre of Scotland undertook to tell the story of the Black Watch using what Director John Tiffany identifies as a particularly Scottish form of theatre, drawing on “narration, song, movement, stand-up comedy, film, politics and, above all, an urgent need to

connect with its audience” (Tiffany xi).⁴³ Movement, music, and multi-media sequences were developed alongside the text, resulting in a play that blends dance, physicality, song, film projection, and dialogue. Tiffany’s original intent was to rely, for the text of the play, primarily on the stories and interview material that Burke was collecting from Black Watch members who had returned from the war, resulting in a documentary-style piece. He explains,

I told Greg *not* to go away and write a fictional drama set in Iraq, but that instead we should try and tell the ‘real’ stories of the soldiers in their own words. This led to Greg interviewing a group of Black Watch lads in a Fife pub over a couple of months (thanks to our researcher Sophie Johnston), all of whom had just left the regiment. (Tiffany xii).

This meant that rehearsals began more or less without a script. As Tiffany explains it, “Luckily Greg had been secretly writing some fictional scenes set in Dogwood [the Black Watch camp in Iraq] and these made a powerful contrast with the pub interviews” (xii). Tiffany and Burke mixed fictive scenes with material from the interviews. How “word for word” the scenes based on interviews are is unclear. I think we should assume that Burke has taken as free a hand with them as with his wholly imagined scenes in Iraq. Steven Hoggett directed the movement

⁴³ Tiffany’s statement is reflective of the belief, held by David Hutchison and others, that Scottish theatre, as a specific national art form, developed largely out of the musical hall tradition. Music halls and variety entertainment were enormously popular in Scotland, and remained so well into the 1950s, long after they had waned in other parts of the UK (Smith 254). Femi Folornso argues that, to this day, “In nearly every Scottish play, recognisable bits and pieces of music-hall aesthetics can be found” (176). We might also understand Tiffany’s comment as placing *Black Watch* within a genealogy of Scottish theatre that includes the group 7:84. 7:84 was a theatre collective formed in the early 1970s. It “took its name from a statistic in the *Economist* which claimed that 7 per cent of the population of Britain owned 84 per cent of the wealth” (Mackenney 65). The group is best known for their first play, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973), which used the form of the traditional Scottish ceilidh (a gathering involving poems, ballads, and popular songs) to explore the relationship between modern exploitation of Scotland’s oil and the exploitation of Highland crafting communities (Mackenney 65). Like *Black Watch*, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* was developed through a workshop process. What Tiffany is referring to, I think, is more than just a theatrical style influenced by variety show aesthetics; it is also one that draws on a national theatrical trend of collaborative work that integrates popular and traditional forms into the dramatic structure and that is motivated by a desire to engage the audience in a vital dialogue.

sequences, and Davey Anderson arranged and directed the music, based on traditional regimental songs.⁴⁴ The play was a runaway hit at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, where it premiered in 2006. Owen Humphrys wrote that it “has a depth of human knowledge and fellow feeling that makes it both real and contemporary” (75). Charlotte Higgins reported in *The Guardian* that it was “the play, above all others, for which 2006 will surely be remembered” (25). After Edinburgh, the play toured the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, before returning to Scotland and then London.

The play was originally subtitled “An Unofficial Biography of a Regiment,” and its not-quite-documentary status is generally lauded by reviewers, who seem, in general, to have wearied of the genre. Johann Hari of *The Independent* notes that,

for a moment it seems like *Black Watch* will turn out to be yet another turgid work of docu-theatre, passively recounting their stories. But, instead, it takes their words and machine-guns them into an expressive, hellish stress-dream that takes its audience as close to the raw terror the troops feel in Iraq as any of us wants to go.

When the play returned for a second run at St. Anne’s Warehouse in Brooklyn, Adam Green echoed Hari’s sense that the play has more life (and, let us be clear, by that he means a certain aggressive masculinity) than your typical, sedate documentary play:

This is no mere docudrama or smug evening of, as Tiffany puts it, ‘slightly woolly, liberal pieties.’ Filled with song, dance, stage effects, and video—not to mention savage humor, electric ensemble acting, and language that would make David Mamet’s teeth curl—*Black Watch* is some kind of masterpiece.” Tiffany

⁴⁴ The not-quite-documentary style of the play and the blending of dialogue, movement, song, and video have prompted a host of comparisons to Joan Littlewood’s *Oh What a Lovely War*.

himself seems to echo this opinion, commenting that he finds a lot of verbatim theatre “very dry emotionally. (qtd.in Cavendish)

Nevertheless, the play’s reliance on the stories of “real” soldiers is also a selling point. David Smith, who calls the piece a “raw, rough, thrilling piece of reportage,” celebrates Burke’s choice to let the soldiers “speak in their own words.” Mark Fisher similarly lauds Burke for “giv[ing] voice to a strand of working-class experience usually lost in the maelstrom of debate between peaceniks and warmongers” (38). Overwhelmingly, reviews find the play respectful of the soldiers it treats, not sentimentalizing them nor villainizing them, an effect that seems to derive, at least in part, from the interviews that provide the basis for much of the text.

These reviews indicate more than a critical weariness of a particular theatrical form. They tell us something about the kind of empathy critics want to experience in the theatre. These critics want a visceral, affective experience—one that is also distinguished, at least in these reviews, by a physicality that is coded as particularly masculine. Documentary theatre, these reviewers pronounce, is too “dry,” too moralizing, too pious. *Black Watch* manages to draw on the legitimacy of documentary while providing an entirely different kind of critical and affective experience—one that is “thrilling.” It makes your teeth curl (or, at least, Green thinks it does). It impacts you *physically*. As Charles Spencer writes, “this show makes you think hard as well as giving a visceral sensation of what it feels like to serve under fire in a desert war” (29). These reviews are all tinged with the sense that to be either emotional or intellectual alone, without accompanying *action*, is not masculine, and also not interesting. While I do not think that these reviewers are entirely wrong about what makes *Black Watch* engaging, as a work of theatre, I think we have to be careful about celebrating the play on the merits of its masculinity—a masculinity, in particular, that is linked to violence and to culturally inadequate means for

dealing with the repercussions of that violence. There is nothing good—either for the soldiers or the people of Iraq—about the violence these men have seen, experienced, and perpetrated. Not only do these reviewers risk perpetuating the idea that all soldiers are men and that masculinity is “active” while femininity is “passive,” but they also risk leading us to problematic interpretation of the play, such that we might be tempted to commend its violence rather than question it.

The other complication to empathy in *Black Watch* derives from its semi-documentary status. When one empathizes at a performance of a documentary or verbatim play, one is potentially empathizing not with a character, but with the “real” person whose words are being performed. At least, it may *feel* that way. Of course, the mediation between this person and the audience is significant, and the exchange that is happening in the theatre might be better understood as one between actor, as both vehicle and interpreter for the one whose words she speaks, and audience. The person whose words are spoken on stage cannot at this point choose to withdraw from the dialogue, to introduce new obstacles to empathy, or to invite a deeper engagement. And this is an important point which returns to the question of how we experience another’s empathy. Empathy is experienced differently by the two people involved. In psychological or psychoanalytic settings, or even in our daily lives, a person may invite our empathy by initiating a dialogue or sharing clues about their affective and cognitive state. This invitation to engage may be revoked if I abuse the process or get it horribly wrong. In the theatre, however, characters generally do not have the luxury of disengaging or rebuking me if they do not like how I respond or if they experience my empathy as a violation. In verbatim theatre this “character” represents a real person who has chosen to share her story, to let her words invite empathic exchanges that she herself will never experience. Still, the genre’s claims of authenticity allow it to suggest that by empathizing with its “characters” we are empathizing with

their “real,” but nevertheless absent counterparts. Although not a verbatim play, the characters in *Black Watch* are based on real people, and we are continually reminded of this fact. Not only that, but our interest in them and our eventual reactions to their stories are a pressing concern for the men in the play, thereby calling our attention to the ethical issues inherent in its form.

The characters in *Black Watch* are conscious of the fact that their lives are being made into a play. At least, this is the case in the pub scenes, which take place in the “now” of the dramatic story. Scenes in Iraq are set in the past, depicting events to which the soldiers being interviewed refer back. In the pub scenes, the playwright appears as a character, calling attention to the process of interviewing and collecting the stories that make up the play. The writer character is never directly named (although a female research assistant who never appears in the play is named), appearing in the program and the printed text only under the heading “Writer.” The play “explains” its origins to us in the second scene, which also establishes the ethical issues associated in telling the story. As the actors create a pool hall setting, Cammy, one of the former soldiers, addresses the audience: “So where does it all begin? See, what happened was, this tasty researcher lassie phoned us up ay. She got my name out ay the fucking paper. She phones us up ay and says she’s a fucking researcher, a fucking researcher for what? The fucking theatre. Wants tay find out about Iraq. Will I talk tay her?” (Burke, *Black Watch* 4). A comic scene follows in which the men assembled await a hot female researcher, only to be disappointed when the male “Writer” shows up. Once the men are sure that there is actually no woman coming, the Writer has to offer to pay for their drinks to keep them from walking out.⁴⁵ But the scene is not simply comedy. It establishes early the divide between the Writer and his subjects. As David

⁴⁵ Tiffany reports that what happens in the play does not exactly match what actually occurred. Burke was the first to attempt to make contact, but no one would talk to him, so they sent in researcher Sophie Johnston, for whom the men showed up. The next week, when the men returned expecting Johnston, they got Burke instead (reported in *The Observer* 13 April 2008).

Smith writes, Burke depicts himself as “a nervous interviewer who . . . asks naive but obvious questions outsider’s questions about their experiences.” His difference from them is marked linguistically; while the soldiers’ speeches are all represented in phonetically reproduced Scottish dialect, the Writer speaks the Queen’s English. He is older than the men he has come to interview, and his preppy argyle print vest stands out amid the former soldiers’ casual, sporty attire, a difference in appearance that may be what motivates one soldier to describe the Writer as a “poof” (Burke, *Black Watch* 5). Not only are we meant to recognize the “foreignness” of the writer to his subjects, but we are also meant to see the problem inherent in the assumption that he—or anyone—is equipped to understand and communicate their story to the public, and that what we are seeing now, in the theatre, is filtered through this awkward, mis-stepping figure. The character named Stewarty, who emerges as the play’s voice against easy assumptions of empathy, challenges the Writer, as quoted at the opening of this chapter: “Go tay fucking Baghdad if you want tay ken what it’s like” (Burke, *Black Watch* 7). He suggests that what the Writer has come to learn can be obtained only through experience. Our expectations, like the Writer’s, are interrupted. To dissuade us from taking this caution as a challenge to overcome, the play reiterates the interruption repeatedly, and in a variety of ways.

In the pub scenes, we also see how difficult it is to solicit information from the soldiers. Burke includes long passages in which the Writer asks questions and the former soldiers respond. These passages highlight how much the Writer has to work to get his subjects to address the issues he is interested in pursuing. The men’s responses are often one-word answers: succinct, frequently sarcastic, sometimes reticent (which Smith, who has served twice as an embedded reporter with the British Army, characterizes as very authentic). These are not fully-formed stories waiting to pour forth at the first invitation. There are no long, confessional

monologues like the ones we find in other documentary and verbatim plays like *The Laramie Project*, *Fires in the Mirror*, and *Talking to Terrorists*.⁴⁶ These men have to be coaxed to talk. Because the Writer is interviewing many people at once, we get a sense of unstructured dialogue and disagreement, reminding us that, even when dealing with a tightly-knit community—one that Burke describes in the introduction as a “tribe”—feelings, thoughts, and points of view differ radically (Burke, *Black Watch* viii). There is no single experience of the Iraq War but many, some of them conflicting.

The men in the play are aware that there is a public appetite for war stories, and that they may be served up to satisfy that appetite. Again, it is Stewarty who voices concerns, expressing the fear that he will be made into a spectacle or fetish for others’ enjoyment: “You want tay get off on folk having tay kill cunts. . . . They’re only fucking interested if they think they’re gonnyay get some fucking dirt on you.” When Cammy responds, with a shrug, “Well, that’s what the public wants,” the Writer admits, “Usually” (Burke, *Black Watch* 60). There are no platitudes assuring the men that this play will be different, and as we sit in the audience, we may be asking ourselves, “Is this what we want as well?”. Our motives for empathizing are directly challenged.

In spite of Cammy’s nonchalance, the soldiers in *Black Watch*, as if channeling Brecht, refuse to offer themselves or their stories for easy empathic engagement. In *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, Brecht writes, referring to himself in the third person, “His actors weren’t waiters who must serve up the meat and have their private, personal feelings treated as gross importunities. They were servants neither of the writer nor of the audience” (71). The same could be said of the Black Watch soldiers as they are presented in the play. Lurking throughout *Black*

⁴⁶ Which is not to say that the people represented in these plays necessarily presented their stories in this way. They may, instead, be the result of editing which produces the effect of a fully-formed, coherent narrative. For a further discussion of the manipulation of narrative and individual voice in documentary theatre, see Jay Baglia and Elissa Foster’s, “Performing the ‘Really’ Real: Cultural Criticism, Representation, and Commodification in *The Laramie Project*,” in the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* (Spring 2006): 127-45.

Watch is the caution that, if we came to get a vicarious thrill over the horrors of war, we are going to be disappointed or, at the very least, we will not be allowed to enjoy these stories without being reminded of our invasive desires, our potentially self-serving interest in the private feelings of others.

Black Watch is not content simply to challenge our motives for empathy. The play goes on to imply that there are limits to what we understand through empathy. Empathy is thus both limited and ethically suspect. And yet, to simply walk away from these men's experiences may be even worse than to attempt to empathize. The only respectful response, the play suggests, lies somewhere between easy empathy and no empathy at all. If the Writer wants to know what it is like to kill someone, Stewarty charges, "Then we can go out and find some cunts and kick them tae death" (Burke, *Black Watch* 61). When his mates explain Stewarty's behavior as the result of depression, the Writer tries to empathize: "I understand." To this, Cammy replies frankly, "You dinnay. *Beat.* But dinnay worry about it" (Burke, *Black Watch* 61). But in spite of Cammy's comment, and in spite of the fact that Stewarty seems sure that no one can understand, he nevertheless wants to tell his story, presumably because he hopes someone might eventually "get" it. Or perhaps he just wants a record of his experience to exist. After leaving the pub to cool off, he returns and recounts how, after his arm was broken in combat, he re-broke it himself, again and again. "Write that down," he says, urging that a record of his pain be kept and communicated to others. Then, as quickly as he has invested in the project of sharing his experience and, perhaps, achieving some empathy through the process, he veers again to skepticism, pain, and anger. He turns, suddenly grabbing the Writer's arm and twisting it: "Write it down way a broken arm though. If he wants tae ken about Iraq, he has tae feel some pain?" (Burke, *Black Watch* 65). If he hoped that saying the words out loud would make him feel

understood, or would somehow lessen the pain, it seems that this hope was un-warranted. As Stewarty vacillates between reaching out for connection and lashing out in violence, we are tossed back and forth, invited to empathize then rejected in what Sommer would call a “constant maneuvering between engagement and estrangement” (88).

Should we, as Cammy suggests, simply not worry about our lack of understanding? Rather than taking a simple stand—“pro” empathy or “con”—*Black Watch* suggests that empathy is a project and process. If we simply accept that we do not understand, then how are we to engage someone like Stewarty, who seems to feel that the only way to communicate or alleviate his pain is to inflict it on others or on himself? Violence and pain ignored frequently begets more violence and pain. While I do not believe that we have to completely understand what someone like Stewarty has suffered in order to engage him, I do think that we have to be willing to listen, otherwise, by not worrying about our lack of understanding, we could slip all too easily into not engaging others, leaving them feeling isolated. We would be engaging in the emotional equivalent of what performance studies scholar Dwight Conquergood calls the Skeptic’s Cop-Out, his term for ethnographically motivated performances that refuse to admit any possibility of inter-cultural understanding. Conquergood derides this stance as both essentialist and imperialist, noting that “It is a fact of life of being a member of a minority or disenfranchised subculture that one must and can learn how to perform cultural scripts and play roles that do not arise out of one’s own culture” (142). The burden of understanding, likewise, should be equally shared. While Conquergood’s interest lies in promoting intercultural dialogue, I believe his arguments can be applied to many situations. There is a fine line between acknowledging that we cannot fully understand, but nevertheless engaging the other, and

disengaging out of a sense that understanding is futile and, often, frustrating, especially if we approach our engagement with the expectation or desire to understand *fully*.

It is this gray space between access and dismissal, understanding and confusion, which *Black Watch* explores. How are we to empathize, the play challenges us, especially given that the soldiers share so little, and when they are so willing to interrupt our empathy by questioning both our efficacy and our motives? Green writes that the play “captures their [the soldiers] inability, or refusal, to articulate emotions, which gives the proceedings an admirable lack of easy sentiment.” According to Burke and Tiffany, it was extremely hard to get the men to speak about their emotions. Burke, who has family members in the military, was actually surprised they got the men to say as much as they did, attributing the openness to the confessional nature of our time. Still, Burke admits, “We had to imagine how they would be in private, how they would talk to each other. . . . We were articulating a lot of emotional silent moments” (qtd. in Healy). Rather than imagine what the men *might* be feeling and creating fictional dialogue accordingly, the movement pieces devised by Hoggett, of the physical theatre company Frantic Assembly, became central to communicating the emotional life that did not always come through in the interviews. It is one of these movement sequences, called “Blueyes,” that communicates what is, to my mind, one of the play’s most powerful articulations of the limits of empathetic understanding. While I agree with Burke’s explanation that the scene is meant to address the emotions about which soldiers seldom speak, the scene seemed, to me, to retain a sense of privacy about those emotions, admitting their presence without invading too much into the silence that the soldiers have chosen for themselves.

The sequence was one of the first that Hoggett and the men of the acting company developed, and they did so in only one session (Cavendish).⁴⁷ It appears in the script only as a brief stage direction. One by one, beginning with Stewarty, the soldiers come in and receive an airmail letter, or “blueye,” which they each open and read in silence, letting the letter drop to the floor: “Stewarty creates a subconscious sign-language which expresses the content of his letter. One by one the soldiers enter, take the bundle of letters and, finding the one addressed to them, repeat the process for themselves” (Burke, *Black Watch* 39). When I saw the production, the scene was performed in dim, bluish light, to instrumental musical accompaniment. What was most remarkable about the “sign language” that the men used was that, while some signs were “readable”—arms held as if cradling a baby or fingers tracing the outline of a heart—others conveyed no immediately-accessible reference or meaning, although they were clearly deeply personal. Each actor repeated his sign or movement over and over in an inwardly-directed manner. No one made eye contact with other actors or audience members; they were, as Euan Ferguson of *The Observer* writes, “each lost in a silent private world.”

Watching this scene, I had the sense of witnessing something deeply personal and intimate—something that would have been inappropriate for me to witness if it had not been for the fact that the content of the letters and each soldier’s response to them was, in large part, withheld from me. Charles Spencer of the *Daily Telegraph*, one of the play’s few detractors, describes the scene this way: “the strange sign-language, hand-jive routines the soldiers indulge in while reading air mail letters from home are downright embarrassing as well as mystifying.”

⁴⁷ It is rare for something developed in the early stages of workshop to remain in its complete form in the final production. Moments that survive the constant devising and revising of the workshop process do so because they are particularly powerful and because they communicate something that is central to the overall story. Because these moments are formulated early and “last” throughout the process, it is likely that they play a part in shaping the overall story, and it helping the company articulate central ideas and concerns in the work. I do not want to place too much importance on this single moment, but I do want to call attention to the kind of artistic serendipity in which the earliest discoveries are sometimes among the most important, helping to guide the overall process.

What exactly is embarrassing? If it is the raw display of emotion that upsets Spencer, then how is it also mystifying? Or is it, perhaps, the display of emotion which is, at the same time, withheld from us, that places Spencer in such a clearly uncomfortable position? We are not accustomed, particularly in plays that are meant to provide access to a particular community, to a theatre style that overtly refuses to communicate. I experienced the overwhelming sense of being cautioned that there were things too personal to share. The limit placed on empathy, in this instance, was not an ontological one, but an elected one; the soldiers had chosen a degree of silence, and the artistic team respected that silence in a way that simultaneously revealed this limit to us. Thus, while the scene conveyed the enormous importance of letters from home, it did not trespass on the private nature of those letters, reminding us instead that no matter how much we might think we understand about the experience of war, there is much that we are not hearing—that we may in fact have no right to hear.⁴⁸

I do not claim that everyone experienced the play, as I did, as a meditation on the limits and interruptions of empathy. Ben Brantley declared that it “took you inside the soldiers’ heads with an empathic force.” Sarah Hemming, meanwhile, directly addresses the paradoxical effect that calling attention to the playwriting process may have: “by drawing attention to the limits of the dramatisation, Burke and Tiffany paradoxically make that dramatisation keener and deeper.” We may feel assured that, because the play’s creators care about their mediating influence, they are somehow well equipped to negate that influence. But an equal number of reviews note (and

⁴⁸ Sara Warner has suggested that, perhaps, this scene refers to the inadequacy of language to communicate certain things. While I certainly agree that this is a part of what is happening in this scene, there is something about the way that it was played—with each actor focused so much inside himself—that I cannot help but feel that communicating incommunicability to the audience is, at best, secondary here. The moment felt so intensely private to me that, under other circumstances, I might have categorized it as a type of “masturbatory” moment—serving the emotional needs of the actors rather than any storytelling function. Given the play’s consideration about the limits of communicating experience, however, I find the moment better read in that context.

laud) the play's lack of sentimentality. Mal Vincent, writing for *The Virginian-Pilot* in Norfolk, VA, describes the play as producing what might be called a kind of Brechtian critical distance:

I can't say that 'Black Watch' is either powerful or heart-wrenching in the expected terms of typical war drama. It is, though, a unique example of how theatre can be used to challenge and even threaten an audience. Although we are kept at a distance as onlookers, we are quite amazed by what we see.

Ferguson writes, "You warm to the characters, sympathise with their plight, but you don't necessarily like them much." Michael Billington of *The Guardian* similarly reflects that "Burke neither sentimentalises the soldiers nor ignores the lunacy of the war." These wildly mixed results suggest to me a play that both offers avenues for empathy and interrupts those avenues. Some theatre-goers intent on empathizing may, like Brantely, find a way to do so. Calling attention to the mediated nature of dramatic representation is in no way a foolproof device for limiting empathy or promoting critical viewing. But *Black Watch*, by including contentious discussions about the desires that motivate the drama and the pitfalls associated with those desires, does this better than most plays. This is in large part because Burke never includes references to his mediating influence as a way of dismissing potential critiques.⁴⁹ He has confessed that,

⁴⁹ As, I would argue, Moises Kaufman does in *The Laramie Project* and Doug Wright does in *I Am My Own Wife*. Consider, for example, the way that Wright follows his own proclamation of doubt in his abilities with an "answer" from his subject that suggests it is she, not he, who has ultimately guided the editing process. The "Doug" character, a stand-in for Wright, says, "I'm curating her now, and I don't have the faintest idea what to edit and what to preserve" (Wright 76). Only a few lines later, Charlotte, the person he is "curating" seems to advise him of the need to keep the potentially damaging aspects of her life in the play: "A missing balustrade, a broken spindle. These things, they are proof of its history. And so you must leave it" (Wright 77). Wright thus assures us that he is conscious of the ethical issues bound up in his work, and that he has addressed these issues by following the ethos of his subject. But, of course, it is Wright's editing that gives us this ethos at the crucial moment, in a way that we are most likely to read Charlotte's words as a metaphor for her life rather than what they literally are—a commentary on antique furniture.

As a writer I have always had a nagging doubt about the material that makes up the text of *Black Watch*. That the appropriation of the soldiers' stories was in some way morally questionable. That any story about this disastrous war, about the suffering of our soldiers, and the impossible position that they've been placed in, is in some way a form of exploitation.

(“How we became the toast of New York”)

Rather than reassuring us that we are not engaged in a form of emotional exploitation, and that our desire to empathize is laudatory and welcomed, *Black Watch* leaves its audience, like its author, questioning. It opens avenues for empathy and, just as often, interrupts those avenues. The end result is a performance that suggests that empathy may be linked to emotional fetishization and exploitation. It may also be an important tool for engaging (if not fully understanding) the pain that soldiers like Stewart experience. But whatever it is, empathy is not simple, complete, or uncomplicated.

Lingering in the Gaps: Empathy in Intercultural Performance

As the case of Stewart in *Black Watch* suggests, empathy is often understood not only as a project of understanding, but of *healing through understanding*. In *Black Watch* this potential for healing is largely one-sided, not to mention less than successful. In the final section of this chapter, I discuss empathy in performances in which two or more communities or cultures directly confront and engage one another in the attempt to heal rifts created through a lack of understanding or past wrongs. Under these circumstances, empathy is meant to impact both parties equally.

I am calling these performances “intercultural” because they are designed to bring together groups who have identified themselves as distinct from one another. My use of the term

differs somewhat from more its more common usage. “Intercultural” usually refers to engagements between people from different nations, ethnicities, and linguistic backgrounds—encounters to which we often refer today as “transnational.” As theatre scholar Rustom Bharucha reminds us, intercultural encounters have often amounted to enforced acts of “exchange” in which Westerners have pillaged Eastern cultures for their artistic and religious traditions (46). The power dynamics between East and West have made genuine exchange nearly impossible. In contrast, in the examples that follow I discuss exchanges between sub-cultures or communities within a larger culture of the United States: African-American, Latino, white American, Appalachian, and so forth. These encounters are deeply influenced by the ways in which each group is situated in the social and cultural hierarchies of the U.S. In this sense, the performances I analyze might also be considered examples of what Bharucha calls “intracultural” performance. With this term, Bharucha focuses on the importance of localized cultures and traditions within a larger society, highlighting how much variety we can find within a culture. In spite of the intra-national and, in many ways, intracultural nature of the performances I explore here, and in spite of the political and social connotations that have accrued around the term “intercultural, I prefer the term to “intracultural” in this case if only because the “inter” of “intercultural” emphasizes the idea of exchange and dialogue that I want to highlight. Bharucha’s own examples of intracultural performance consist of the same play performed in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. He explores how each of these cities, and its culture, contain different social and performative traditions that lead to different productions of the same play. These performances interrogate the local, highlighting differences within Indian culture when placed in comparison to one another, but they do not *enact* an encounter or exchange between these different sub-cultures of Indian society. Because I am most interested in what happens when two, diverse communities take the

stage together in order to explore their relationship, I wish to keep the sense of meeting and exchange evoked by “inter,” although in this case “intercultural” might also be thought of as “intercommunity” or “intersubcultural.”

Like *Black Watch*, the characters in these plays act as surrogates for real people—in this case, the members of the communities who are brought together in and through the performance in question. While these performances are often designed to encourage or performatively evoke a sense of harmony and reconciliation between the cultural, racial, or community groups involved, I am interested in the moments when harmony fails. If, when empathy is interrupted in documentary performance, it may call attention to the *emotional impact* of our engagement, when it is interrupted in intercultural performance it may call attention to unresolved social issues, highlighting the need for further discussion or action. Or, these moments may provoke us to see the project of healing past wrongs in a new way, creating space for a history that need not be forgotten or forgiven, but may instead be acknowledged as a part of our relationship to one another.

Intercultural or intercommunity performance has gained a great deal of momentum in recent decades. In the United States, these performances are often the result of collaborations between community-based or grassroots theatre companies, which arose in the wake of the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s. As community-based theatre scholar Jan Cohen-Cruz writes,

Artists with activist agendas sought new strategies for using their work for social purposes, and they increasingly explored ways of engaging people beyond spectatorship. One of the insights that grew out of the radical theatre movement of the 1960s and 1970s is that people get more out of making art than watching it.

These artists turned their attention to community and local issues. Companies like Roadside Theater in Appalachia and Junebug Productions in New Orleans, for instance, invested their time in developing local voices and adapting the stories of their respective performance traditions and oral cultures to the stage. Other companies, like Cornerstone Theatre, now based in Los Angeles, focused on bringing professional artists into communities without their own theatres, living in a community for a time to develop and perform a play to suit that particular locale. In recent years, these same companies have turned more and more often to engagement not with one community, but with multiple communities, using techniques learned over years of working closely within their own communities to engage and dialogue with other groups. These techniques include active listening, collaborative creation, and democratic decision making.

These intercultural projects spring from the belief that art can help us recognize, respect, and engage our differences, and ultimately build bridges between communities. Cohen-Cruz cites performer Robbie McCauley: “McCauley believes that listening and speaking together is a way to understand racial and cultural ‘others’ without the familiar pitfalls—‘like who’s right and who’s wrong, and self-censorship around charged issues, and having rules like don’t blame anyone when we have to, and like we’re all equal when we’re not’” (70). Practitioners of community-based theatre, particularly inter-racial projects, emphasize the need for engaged, active listening, and for “taking in the other as equally important as oneself” (Cohen-Cruz 86). The artistic process of creating and performing theatre together is seen as a means of bridging cultural gaps and connecting and strengthening divided communities. Bruce McConachie argues that part of the popularity of community-based performance is its emotional effect. It makes us feel like a *part* of something. It creates a “we,” which, of course, entails drawing new

boundaries: “The images generated in a grassroots show provide a structure of feeling that induces the audience to divide an ethical ‘us’ from an immoral ‘them’ and then to examine who ‘we’ are” (McConachie, “Local Acts” 42). Often, the “we” created in grassroots or community-based theatre is a new “we,” one that unites previously fractured communities. Theatre has been used, for example, as a tool to promote reconciliation in the wake of violence. Writing about the use of theatre after the genocide in Rwanda, Ananda Breed explains,

The role of the arts in the context of grassroots associations can be to mend or remake the world according to a new moral order, fostering a new sense of moral community. After hearing the trauma experienced by perpetrators as well as the survivors, the community began to see them [perpetrators] as individuals who also suffered from grief for the crimes they committed, rather seeing them solely as killers. (2)

Seeing one another in new ways and identifying points of commonality forges a previously unimagined sense of unity.

Another way of stating this is to say that many intercultural performances promote empathy. Dwayne Edwards, an organizer for the social organizing group Project South, explains,

For those who are not experiencing a particular form of injustice, art can be used as a way to provide them with empathy and understanding. It helps people focus on the similarities of their struggles while providing a pathway toward understanding of their differences. Art puts people on the same page concerning their different oppression. It also facilitates their taking the everyday moments of their lives and applying this knowledge to a global perspective of many of the issues that are impacting people around the world. (qtd. in Lovelace)

Edwards' comments reflect a number of common problems associated with empathy. If empathy focuses on our similarities, then it may reinforce sameness rather than exploring and expanding understanding of difference. We use our own knowledge and experience—the “everyday moments” of our lives—to understand others. Edwards goes on: “Art takes the complicated, and through re-creation, simplifies it to provide a pathway toward understanding, empathy, and theory. . . . It unites people around perspectives that have historically divided them” (qtd. in Lovelace). Here, Edwards lands on one of the questions I am pursuing in this chapter, although he is asking it in a different way. In order to unite people, must our stories be simplified? Must empathy smooth over the bumps and nuances of difference? Must it close the gaps of divisive pasts? Does the road to understanding have to be level and straight?⁵⁰

Dudley Cocke of Roadside Theater offers a slightly different perspective, one in which empathy consists not so much in identifying our similarities as in respecting our differences. For Cocke, arts organizations offer the ideal tools for helping us explore diversity both nationally and internationally. In a 2007 essay about the need for artists to work with other cultures, promoting understanding in order to foster peace, Cocke writes,

It is clearly in our national interest to end cultural isolationism and replace it with a federal policy that secures the role of the not-for-profit arts in international exchange and links that exchange to a domestic arts policy that values our own

⁵⁰ Diana Taylor explores a similar question in her chapter on witnessing 9/11, in *The Archive and the Repertoire*. She explores the ways in which the U.S. government attempted to contain the events of 9/11 by fitting them into a tragic narrative, with clear protagonists and antagonists, heroes and victims. Taylor writes, “Tragedy cuts catastrophe down to size. It orders events into comprehensible scenarios” (261). What is lost in this project of containment in the service of comprehension? These structures of understanding may be imposed or encouraged by outside forces, like the state, or they may be ones that we seek to apply to situations and to people in our own hurry to comprehend, a subject Karen Finley explores in her own artistic response to 9/11, *Make Love*. Describing the tourists who came to New York after the towers fell, she says, “They had the story.” In other words, they were able to construct a simple narrative about what happened, something that the people who lived through it may have found impossible. When we attempt empathy, we have to be careful not to let “having the story” blind us to nuances and complexities that do not fit easily into familiar scenarios.

national diversity. In this way, there will be the framework for the arts at home and abroad to develop common goals. These goals should include broadening and deepening public participation in artistic expression; telling the stories the commercial cultural industries don't tell; supporting communities' efforts to achieve justice; and celebrating diversity as a positive social value. In their pursuit of meaning, relevance, and beauty, the arts have a capacity to do all of these things and more in a manner that builds bridges of empathy and understanding across the boundaries that separate people and the borders that divide regions and nations.

For Cocke, empathy builds bridges not by highlighting sameness, but by celebrating pluralism, diverse voices, and seldom-heard stories. Cocke asserts that identity politics need not lead to balkanization, but can instead serve as the basis for stronger empathy: "It is the path . . . if pursued in the right way, to understanding the other, to empathy, to a kind of unification based on continuing examination and dialogue. Because until people feel that they are fairly represented it's very hard to pay attention to someone else."⁵¹ Cocke's vision is echoed by Erika Fischer-Lichte in her essay "Interculturalism in Contemporary Theatre," in which she writes, "The idea underlying the intercultural trend in theatre across the world today is that the path of permanent mediation between cultures . . . will gradually lead to the creation of a world culture in which different cultures not only take part, but also respect the unique characteristics of each culture and allow each culture its authority" (38).

The question of how to approach cultural differences—both in the development and rehearsal process and in performance—are ones that artists who work on these projects negotiate

⁵¹ Personal communication with author, 1/22/10.

every day. In her book on Cornerstone Theatre, Sonja Kuftinec discusses how the company strove not to present a stable, unified vision of the communities in which they worked, but rather to address the heterogeneity of each locale. Nevertheless, each performance ended with an image of a unified community, often through a big, show-stopping song involving all members of the cast, which one company member derisively referred to as “a big group hug” (Reiffel qtd. in Kuftinec 69). When it is more important to highlight differences, and when is it important to produce images of unity, of a community that may not yet exist, but which is performatively evoked or created in the theatrical event? And how many differences can be respectfully and adequately represented in an intercultural or inter-community performance? As much as any project may wish to emphasize a diversity of voices, theatre and performance events are finite, and not all perspectives make the final cut. Cohen-Cruz discusses this challenge in reference to the Dell’Arte Players’ Dentalium Project, which addressed a local controversy over the construction of a Native American casino in Rancheria, California. Dell’Arte hoped to promote community dialogue on the subject, but the project was criticized locally for not including the Native American perspective, prompting yet another performance to rectify the omission (Cohen-Cruz, *Local Acts* 116).

How can intercultural performance achieve the kind of outcome that Cocke describes, promoting empathy and understanding while respecting difference? Let me take the question a step further. How can intercultural performance not only respect difference, but also grapple with the ramifications of difference? In the final section of this chapter, I examine moments in intercultural performance in which empathy is interrupted, and the interruption is allowed to persist. Rather than bridging the gap, healing the wound of the interruption, the cultural encounter must go on in the face of the gap.

I argue above that moments like these can force the audience to reflect critically on their own empathy, examining what they hope to gain by access to another's experience and how their empathy might affect the other. To be effective in this way, the interruption must be marked, made palpable. If empathy is simply denied from the start, we may not feel the smart of rejection. We may not care that our engagement is rebuked and respond, instead, with disinterest, or with the assumption that there is nothing to be gained through engagement, that where we are not wanted we are also not responsible. To avoid this outcome, empathy must be estranged, subjected to dialectical analysis. We have to experience both empathy and the moment when empathy is rejected or challenged. As Sommer puts it, we must feel the both slap and the embrace (163). I am arguing, in other words, not simply for the importance of empathy *as part of a Brechtian dialectic*, but, more specifically, for *the importance of dialectics to empathy itself*. Wright says of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, "without involving the audience in contradictory feelings it would hardly be possible to galvanize them into any kind of productive thinking" (80). Similarly, empathy itself must be the subject to contradictory feelings *and* critical analysis, an engagement that is never accepted as given, but is instead fraught, tenuous, and shifting. As soon as think that we have "arrived" at understanding, we cease the complex work of imagining how the other feels, thinking critically about their response, allowing it to resonate in us, and contemplating our own part in that encounter. When we do so, we have stopped engaging the other. Empathy happens *in the moment*, and as such it is subject to constant reappraisal and change.

Experiencing the interruption of empathy is thus crucial. But this prompts the question, what is the nature of the interruption—its shape, duration, and feel? Sommer imagines the rejection of empathy as a kind of slap in the face, not unlike the "shock" that Brecht described as

necessary to estrangement. A slap and a shock are sharp, quick experiences; they jolt us out of complacency. But such a shock may also provoke a reactionary response, prompting us to recover our sense of normalcy, to create new narratives that explain away our experience, to protect ourselves by rejecting the other in return, or to reestablish the broken empathetic connection. If the interruption creates the space for us to respond critically to what we have just experienced, however, we may linger in the questions it poses, or the discomfort or uncertainty it introduces. Interruptions, after all, are not simply structural devices. Interruptions mark a limit that is specific rather than general. We would do well to attend not just to the instance of interruption, but to where and why it occurred. And to explore these details, we may need to linger in the space created by the interruption.

In the Teatro Pregones and Roadside Theater collaboration *Betsy*, the title character, a Latina jazz singer from the Bronx, is visited by the spirits of her Appalachian ancestors. As Betsy learns about her Scots-Irish heritage, both she and the audience undertake a journey that reveals unexpected connections between these two diverse communities. Pregones and Roadside are community-based theatres based in the Bronx and Appalachia, respectively. The companies have worked together for approximately twelve years, collaborating, previously, with Junebug Productions on *Promise of a Love Song*, a musical play developed over four years of exchange. The Roadside website describes *Promise* this way: “A cast of twelve musicians and actors from the three companies meet on stage to discover how rhythms, music, movement and stories illuminate the strengths, struggles, similarities, and differences of three peoples – African American, Puerto Rican, and Appalachian.” *Betsy* is similar in that it relies heavily on music from both cultures, but whereas *Promise* tells three separate stories—one from each culture—

Betsy is more integrated, both textually and thematically, allowing the characters to directly engage one another in dialogue.

Roadside and Pregones participate in joint-productions of this kind to build empathy between communities. Cocke explains that when they work together, the companies are “looking at the barriers of race, class, and stereotypes” and how these barriers prevent empathy.⁵² Cocke argues that under-represented audiences do not come to the theatre with the liberal impulse to empathize as a way of consuming otherness. This kind of empathy is the purview of the wealthy, white audience that makes up the majority of ticket-buyers in American regional theatres. He describes his own encounter with such an audience: “They were there feeling confident about their identity. They were there not with the weight of racism or classism or stereotypes on their back. In a way they didn’t have chips on their shoulder, but they were enveloped in a kind of unconscious hubris.” Audience members who are not confident in their identity or in how they are represented in mainstream media, however, do not come to the theatre with this intent to consume or absorb another’s experience.⁵³ As Cocke explains, audiences for grassroots theatre come first and foremost to see how *they* are represented. If and only if they are comfortable with this representation can they get “exited” about cultural others. Consequently, a productive intercultural exchange begins with a respectful and nuanced portrayal of all cultures involved.

Thus, while *Betsy* is full of moments of cultural “connection,” these moments are accompanied by reminders that inter-cultural exchange is about more than facile acceptance. In one early scene, Betsy’s Appalachian mother learns correct Spanish pronunciation from the man that will be Betsy’s father. A romantic union is coupled with a pedagogical moment. In a later scene, Betsy haltingly follows the spirit of her mother in a dance from the Scots-Irish tradition,

⁵² Personal communication with author, 1/22/10.

⁵³ Cocke describes a mode of theatre spectatorship not unlike the mode of reading described by Doris Sommer.

slowing become more adept at the unfamiliar footwork.⁵⁴ The genealogy that Betsy discovers in the play is only one small part of understanding her past. She must familiarize herself, as well, with the cadences of the Appalachian dialect and the songs of the mountains, just as her mother before her learned about Betsy's father's culture.

Even as the play marks respect for the traditions and histories of both cultures, it also posits that we are not as different as we think; Betsy, after all, is learning of her own, forgotten bi-cultural heritage. The play hints that we are all more hybridized than we tend to think, and that our common history must be recognized. In the final musical number, the Appalachian song "I Am Alone Again" is overlaid with "¿Y Tu Abuela Dónde Está?" ("And your grandmother, where is she?"). The songs come together "in a fusion of rhythms," a musical metaphor for the cultural blending of Betsy's past and a symbolic representation of how dissonance can transform into harmony. Finally, Betsy names all her ancestors from both sides, then turns to the audience and asks, "Y tu abuela dónde está?" (Short et al 34). Like Betsy, the play implies, we may all come from diverse backgrounds and inter-cultural encounters. Ethnic and racial histories are long and complex, and memory is short. As an intercultural performance, *Betsy* prompts its diverse audiences in the Bronx and in Appalachia to consider that they may be more connected than they know—that we are *all* more connected than we know—and that understanding our own past may be the path to understanding others.

Before we reach this moment, however, the path to harmony is interrupted by the discovery that one of Betsy's ancestors fought for the Confederate Army. This information not only comes as a shock to Betsy, it upsets her ability to connect with her ancestors, to engage emotionally and cognitively in their lives. Where are the limits of understanding, and when are

⁵⁴ All staging references based on a performance I saw at Teatro Pregones on November 22, 2009.

we enticed to “understand” something inappropriate? The moment begins with Ron Short, who plays one of Betsy’s ancestors, singing a Rebel marching song, which Cocke explains has a curious tendency to draw in the audience: “It’s fun watching that moment in, say, the South Bronx, because people know that it’s racist, but it’s also somewhat infectious, and you see people kind of getting into it. And then of course, the Betsy character calls him out on it. . . . So it becomes an argument at that moment about empathy.”⁵⁵ The audience is first seduced by the charm and vitality of the character and then wrenched out of their enjoyment by a reminder of the historical stakes involved. To Betsy, joining the Confederacy makes no sense, especially considering the social status of early Scots-Irish immigrants: “The Confederate Army? Last I heard they liked slaves. Didn’t it mean anything to Eli that his own grandmother Elizabeth had been practically a slave!” (Short et al 23). To the Spirit’s response, “No, you don’t understand. Eli didn’t own slaves. Mountain folk were too poor to own slaves,” Betsy simply replies, “Yeah, right (*Walking past Spirit*)...a ese perro con ese hueso,” which loosely translates to “whatever, I don’t believe you,” or, more colorfully, “bullshit” (Short et al 23). The walk away is decisive, and the moment lingers. The actress playing Betsy makes it clear in her body language and her tone of voice that she does not accept the Spirit’s explanation, and that she is not able to understand or empathize with this part of her heritage. Her switch to Spanish also marks her disengagement, as well as her rejection of the Spirit’s explanation. They have come to an impasse. Betsy and the Spirit have utterly different perspectives on the issue. The Spirit’s explanation echoes that of Betsy’s ancestor, who explains his decision as an expression of independence, or what is often referred to as “the mountain spirit”: “I don’t need nobody / Tellin’ me what to do / You don’t bother me / And I won’t bother you” (Short et al 22). But,

⁵⁵ Cocke, personal communication with author, 1/22/10

exercising what Stueber would call “imaginative resistance,” Betsy refuses to see her ancestor’s reasons as her own (213). In doing so, she implicitly challenges the logic that being left alone means leaving others alone. We all participate in systems of power, domination, and oppression through our very non-participation. There is no moment of forgiveness or acceptance. The rift remains, even as the history lesson continues.

The inclusion of this moment is strategic. In a play that is overwhelmingly focused on the merits of inter-cultural encounter and understanding, this momentary rupture reminds the audience that there is a reason why Betsy has “lost” this part of her history. In spite of the Spirit’s protests, it soon becomes clear that, slave owners or not, Betsy’s ancestor’s did not see themselves in solidarity with other oppressed minorities. When Betsy’s mother falls in love with Pedro García, her father responds with anger and contempt:

First you take up with a damn nigger and now you tell us you are going to have his baby. How in God’s name are we supposed to be ‘happy for you?’ If I could get my hands on that son-of-a-bitch, I’d choke him ‘till he turned white, then maybe you wouldn’t care so much for him since you seem determined to do exactly the opposite of what we want you to do. (Short et al 31)

In spite of its overall message of harmony, the play does not attempt to gloss over the pain and divisiveness of racial prejudice. Instead, it challenges us to confront that history, to make a place for it in the larger project of inter-cultural exchange and healing. Recovering her past does not mean that Betsy has to accept or agree with all aspects of that past, or even to offer the conciliatory gesture of claiming to understand. Rather than explaining away these moments or offering false reconciliation or forgiveness, they are left simply to *be*, to exist as part of what it means to encounter another culture or to investigate the past. Betsy refuses to see certain issues

from her ancestors' perspective, but she does not walk away from them—or her past—completely.

Cocke notes that this kind of disagreement is common when doing intercultural theatre. He cites, for instance, the fact that after more than 20 years of collaboration with the African American company Junebug Productions, they still cannot resolve questions of race and class, and their ongoing disagreements are reflected in the plays they produce. In their collaboration *Junebug Jack*, for instance, “We could not end at a formula for ‘we are all the same and now happy.’ . . . We never got there. We would have liked to. Who wouldn’t?” The play ends without a clear resolution or sense of unity. Cocke explains, “People might have had insight in the course of the play and it’s even possible for someone to have had some cathartic moments, but it would not have been the typical way of the catharsis and then the resolution. There is no resolution” (personal communication). Instead, the conversation continues—in the audience, between the companies, anywhere it can. Roadside makes this a part of their practice; after performances of *Junebug Jack*, they engaged the audience in “story circles” intended to elicit local and personal stories on the play’s themes.

The interruption of empathy in *Betsy* reminds us that coming together is not as simple as singing a song or performing a dance together, although these ritual and pedagogical performances do help. Acceptance does not happen instantly. Forgiveness is not automatic, and perhaps it should not be so. As important as it is for us to understand and accept one another, it is similarly important for us to maintain historical awareness and recognize our own experiential knowledge of the world. In *Betsy*, this history remains palpable in the *felt* moments when empathy is interrupted. These moments, furthermore, expose the illogic of racial prejudice. Just as the “black Irish” were viewed as a “dirty breed” and discriminated against, so too are Latin

American immigrants of later generations (8). The play explores not only a shared history of oppression, but the fact that the oppressed group of one era becomes the oppressors of another. Recovering historical perspective means not only identifying what we share, but also how we have harmed each other. The interruption of empathy in *Betsy* challenges us to live for a moment in the contradictions of history, and to consider how it impacts us today.

These contradictions may also mark an empathy that cannot be explained, one that consists *not* in sharing emotions or cognitively imagining other's experience, but in accepting the other without such connection or understanding, lingering, as it were, in the undefined space that empathy is intended to close. This is not empathy that ignores history, seeking instead to connect via "universality," but instead empathy that manages to exist in spite of an acute awareness of a history of wrongs. This kind of empathy can be found in *BOP: The North Star*, an inter-racial performance created and directed by Emilie Blum Stark-Menneg, based on poems by Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon.

Van Clief-Stefanon, an African-American poet and a self-described "Southern belle," address in her work the cultural complexities of life in the South, as well as what it means to be a black, Southern, queer writer living and working in the predominantly white community of Ithaca, NY. *BOP: The North Star* uses Van Clief-Stefanon's poems as text and inspiration, combining them with banjo music, dance, and multi-media presentations. Presented in a workshop performance in Ithaca, NY, Oct. 25-27, 2009, *BOP: The North Start* included a cast of four female performers, two white and two black, as well as three white musicians. The show was developed through improvisations and exercises in which performers and musicians, both black and white, not only had to consider instances of African-American experience through Van Clief-Stefanon's words, but also to analyze their own relationship to these experiences. Who *can*

be a Southern belle and why? What does it mean to be an “Ann,” a name used by black people to describe a white woman or a black woman who acts white—and who among this particular group of performers might fit these descriptions? Where does identity exist? The musicians also stretched their experience, drawing on the banjo’s African-American roots to create new sounds and engaging in the workshop process with the actors. The project called on all participants to work beyond their comfort zones and to confront sensitive issues. Workshop participants described the process as intense, scary, difficult, and ultimately rewarding. Actor Kellie Ryan wrote that she felt “truly grateful for the conversation and deepening relationship with the cast that has taken place because of the context of Race and Identity in the show” (*BOP: The North Star* program).

Stark-Menneg describes the project as an experiment in “radical empathy.”⁵⁶ As described by Stark-Menneg, “radical empathy” entails a kind of empathetic daring—a willingness to attempt to engage another’s experience, and even to represent that experience, when you are aware that you may have no right to do so, that you may be over-reaching. Rather than forging into this project blindly, assuming competence, knowledge, and the ability to intimately engage another’s experience, radical empathy calls on us to continually ask, “Do I have a right? What are the implications of undertaking this empathy? How does it affect me, my fellow performers, and the audience?” Stark-Menneg’s radical empathy thus involves some of the issues I have been highlighting in this chapter, including the understanding that empathy is an act with potential implications and repercussions that extend beyond the empathizer. *BOP: The North Star* foregrounds these issues and questions by breaking up the voice of one African American poet and expressing it in and through the bodies of four inter-racial actors and three

⁵⁶ Personal conversation Aug. 2009.

musicians. Each woman, for instance, plays the Southern belle, donning an enormous dress of red, white, and blue, reflecting the relationship between race, nationalism, slavery, war, and the female image. Watching each woman “become” a belle by stepping into the dress (and all of the history and weight of representation that comes with this identity) and seeing each woman inhabit that role differently shatters the stereotype and offers, instead, a multiplicity of ways in which one might be a belle. Each woman “owns” that experience differently; comfort of representation is not assumed. Actors step out of character to reveal their concerns; characters drop assumed accents to let us know that race and ethnicity are a performance. Identity and experience are evoked in the play as a kind of black hole, “the crushing need / for form” and the confusing project of finding that form (Van Clief-Stefanon 47).

Empathy, as it is imagined in *BOP: The North Star*, calls on us not to turn away, even in the face of great wrongs and seemingly impossible divisions. It works instead in the moments of interruption and rupture, as in the scene based on the poem “Song for Bill,” which tells the story of an African American woman has come to stay with her adopted, white Appalachian family for a funeral. While there, her adopted brother confronts her with a fact from his past, which the speaker of the poem recounts as follows:

. . . Your eyes

free of dare or apology, you tell me yourself

how the Klan came recruiting in

your Appalachian youth, the arguments

they made and how you considered them before

refusing. After the service, you find me and
look hard into my face to say *We need you in this family*.
How can love like this exist? I refuse
not to see it clearly. (Van Clief-Stefanon, “BOP” program)

Laid out on the page, the interruptions are clearly visible, marking the distance between the speaker of the poem and the one speaking to her. This is not a story that flows easily. We are forced to linger on Bill’s consideration of the Klan’s invitation, left hanging on the word “before,” experiencing the gap between the possibility of acceptance and the final resolution of “refusing.” Then, the speaker offers her own refusal not to see this love clearly, but only after the line break causes us to linger on the word “refuses.” We wonder—for a pause, a breath, an interval—what is refused: the brother or the love? Even when these questions are answered, we are left with more. What does it mean to “see this love clearly”? The poem seems to suggest that this entails working around these gaps—not ignoring them, but seeing instead a love that is all the stronger and more significant because it can accept such divisions. Bill does not offer this information about his past with any apology, nor with any sense of aggression. He simply offers it. Now it is there, a distance, a separation between them. The love the poem demands that we see, the love that is remarkable, is not the one that exists *in spite of* these gaps, but the one that exists because of them.

Van Clief-Stefanon did not want this poem included in the play precisely because it spoke of something unexplainable, unrepresentable. For Stark-Menneg, this is exactly why it needed to be included.⁵⁷ Perhaps just as this man needs his adopted black sister in the family, we need to confront, on occasion, instances of empathy and love that seem impossible. Empathy is

⁵⁷ Their conversation about these poems was communicated to me by Stark-Menneg in a personal conversation, and in the post-show discussion of the performance I saw.

supposed to be about understanding the other—seeing him, in metaphorical terms.⁵⁸ Van Clief-Stefanon’s poem asks us what exactly we are seeing. Can we make sense of it? Must we? In the performance, the poem was enacted as a dialogue between two performers, one white and one black. It was an emotionally heavy scene, full of pauses and silences, in much the same way that the poem is filled with gaps. Like *Betsy*, it offered no moment of reconciliation—no hug, no expression of understanding or forgiveness. Instead, it presented two people, standing face to face, seeing each other. There can be no “We need you in this family” without first the confession of considering the Klan’s offer, no way of dealing with the gulf between these people without first acknowledging that gulf.

The poems that inspired *BOP: The North Star* come primarily from Van Clief-Stefanon’s collection titled *[Open Interval]*. In mathematics, an open interval is an interval that does not contain its endpoints. The performance, like the title of the book, explores the gap, the space, the distance—between black and white, you and me, identity and non-identity, existence and nothingness. These are unmeasurable distances. Like the open interval, we do not know their endpoints, their boundaries. Rather than seeking to close or define the interval, collapsing or fixing difference, *BOP: The North Star* takes the gap as a given that must be felt and explored. To express what we share we have to express what we do not. To empathize, we have to work with the interruptions, accepting their existence and understanding them as part of the history of racial injustice—part of our own histories.

Conclusion

⁵⁸ For a discussion on the philosophical history linking sight to recognition and understanding, see Kelly Oliver’s *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*. Oliver challenges the idea that vision is a sense that operates across an empty space, thus marking the distance between two subjects, and suggests instead that we understand vision, like our other senses, as tactile. Oliver’s argument is of interest here because she wants to rethink the gap between people not as an empty space, but as full, and as one that both subjects share.

Scholars have, in large part, successfully corrected the mistaken notion that Brecht rejected all emotion in epic theatre. But empathy still remains, for most, the enemy of estrangement. Consider, for example, Brecht's own assertion in *The Messingkauf Dialogues*: "Neither the public nor the actor must be stopped from taking part emotionally; the representation of emotions must not be hampered, nor must the actor's use of emotions be frustrated. Only one out of many possible sources of emotion needs to be left unused, or at least treated as a subsidiary source – empathy" (173). Of course, Brecht wrote a great many things about empathy in the course of his life, many of them contradictory. Around 1951, he wrote that empathy alone should not be used to inspire audiences to imitate heroes on stage, but must be accompanied by "understanding" (because, for Brecht, empathy involved no critical understanding) (247). In 1953, he described empathy as part of a dialectical response:

Suppose a sister is mourning her brother's departure for the war; and it is the peasant war: he is a peasant, off to join the peasants. Are we to surrender to her sorrow completely? Or not at all? We must be able to surrender to her sorrow and at the same time not to. Our actual emotion will come from recognizing and feeling the incident's double aspect. (271)

These later revisions of his theory were part of his attempt to conform to the aesthetic of socialist realism. But his suspicions remain evident. Empathy includes no critical or cognitive understanding; it is safe only in its "double" aspect, in which we experience another's sorrow but are also separate from it.

In the introduction, I argued that empathy and cognition are not necessarily separate. In this chapter, I have suggested that empathy is not only compatible with a theatre of estrangement, but that empathy itself benefits from estrangement. Certainly, the performances I

have discussed above would not all be described as “Brechtian” theatre in the narrowest sense of the term. That is not my point. I mean only to suggest that empathy is not always the enemy of a theatrical project aimed at unsettling our aesthetic, cognitive, and emotional responses. I would argue, moreover, that all of the performances I have described fit Brecht’s qualification for epic theatre: “People’s activity must simultaneously be so and be capable of being different” (71). And it is in the moments when we are forced to confront our empathy but not necessarily to abandon it completely, lingering in the interruption, that this is so. It is precisely our empathy that is estranged by these plays, but not in a way that completely ends our empathetic engagement. We are forced to ask, “Why do I want to empathize?” or “How can I empathize when I refuse to accept your position?” We feel Stewart reject the Writer and, by extension, our own attention, and ask what drew us into the theatre in the first place. We watch Betsy walk away from her ancestor in anger and disbelief, and wonder what reconciliation would entail under these circumstances. We linger for a moment in the gap between refusal and acceptance, understanding that for these characters to accept one another means first that they, and perhaps we, must acknowledge this gap, not overcome it. In the process, we confront our relationship to the characters and the people they represent. We confront our own relationship to histories of racial injustice. Rather than suggesting that the solution to these questions is to abandon the project of empathy, the performances I have discussed above all suggest that empathy remains an important method of engaging others, provided we do not allow ourselves to slip into “easy” empathy—assuming we understand, assuming our overtures are wanted, and rushing to heal past wrongs that may yet need to be addressed. Empathy’s interruptions challenge us to engage others *even when we cannot understand*, to make room in our dialogue for gaps and fissures. We are asked, in these performances, not to rush through these moments in our hurry to reach the next

instance of connection, but rather to experience being with another without the assurance that doing so will grant us access, provide healing, forge a bond, or otherwise achieve a definitive result.

CHAPTER 2

REPETITIONS: EMPATHY, POVERTY, AND POLITICS IN EASTERN KENTUCKY

On February 13 and 14, 1968, Senator Robert F. Kennedy traveled to eastern Kentucky to conduct field hearings of the Senate Subcommittee on Manpower, Employment and Poverty. These hearings were intended to garner information on how the War on Poverty legislation was impacting the Appalachian region. While in Kentucky, Kennedy also visited a one-room schoolhouse, a strip mine, local community centers, and private homes.

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In 2004, community-based performance artist John Malpede collaborated with Appalshop in a 3-day reenactment of Kennedy's visit called *RFK in EKY: The Robert F. Kennedy Performance Project*. Appalshop is non-profit, multi-disciplinary arts organization located in Whitesburg, KY (*Appalshop*). Established in 1969 through the War on Poverty, Appalshop was intended to prepare young people for media jobs outside the region. Participants soon decided, however, that they would prefer to use their new skills to serve their own community, and have been doing so ever since. Malpede is the founder of the Los Angeles Poverty Department, or LAPD, a performance group composed of homeless and formerly homeless people.⁵⁹ LAPD is best known for its 2001 production, *Agents and Assets*, in which the group re-created U.S. House of Representatives hearings on charges that the CIA was complicit in drug trafficking in Los Angeles. In this recreation, the people most affected by the drug trade performed the roles of politicians and government officials, effectively closing the gap between policy makers and

⁵⁹ The acronym "LAPD" is, of course, a direct reference to the well-known acronym for the Los Angeles Police Department. The name points to the ways in which the Los Angeles Poverty Department works in direct opposition to the long and problematic relationship between the Los Angeles Police and the city's poor and minority communities. Instead of a hierarchical relationship of force, the Los Angeles Poverty Department places authority in the hands of the homeless and the marginalized.

those whose lives are impacted by social policies.⁶⁰ Malpede adopted this same method for *RFK in EKY*. Local people played all the parts, from Kennedy and his entourage to the community members who testified at the field hearings. In addition to reenacting Kennedy's visit, *RFK in EKY* featured speeches by former Kennedy aides and local activists, a roundtable conversation on the current state of poverty in Kentucky, a meeting with a local strip mine owner, and pancake breakfasts and styling parties, where community members could share a meal while getting decked out in 1960s garb. The goal of the project, like that of the War on Poverty legislation, was "maximum feasible participation" ("RFK in EKY," Press Release 3). Everyone in the community was invited to share a memory, to send in photos or other memorabilia from Kennedy's visit, to play a role in the reenactments, or to join in as an audience member.



In the summer of 2007, John Edwards embarked on the "Road to One America Tour," a self-conscious act of political citation in which Edwards re-traced Kennedy's trail through Kentucky. In Floyd County, Edwards spoke on the steps of the same courthouse where Kennedy spoke in 1968. Like Kennedy before him, Edwards insisted that he had come to "listen." He discussed the region's need for jobs and promised that, if elected president, he would bring the people of Appalachia out of their isolation and political marginalization: "We see you. We hear you. We are with you. And we will not forget you" (Edwards).



⁶⁰ For more information on "Agents and Assets," see Victoria Looseleaf, "LAPD Deploys 'Agents and Assets,'" *LADowntownNews.com* (8 Jan. 2001) and John Malpede, "Los Angeles Poverty Department: *Agents and Assets*" in *Art, Dialogue, Action, and Activism: Case Studies from Animating Democracy*, edited by Pam Korza and Barbara Schaffer Bacon (2005).

In this chapter, I discuss the role of empathy and repetition in political performances, using the three events described above as my framework. Many national politicians have visited Appalachia, an area long impacted by poverty, out-migration, and the effects of absentee ownership in the coal mining industry. Kennedy, although the most memorable of these figures, was not the first. Since President Johnson declared the War on Poverty from a front porch in Martin County, Kentucky, in April 1964, eastern Kentucky in particular has become a popular backdrop for staging political messages about economic disparity in our country. Richard Nixon, Ted Kennedy, Bill Clinton, Paul Wellstone, Jesse Jackson, and John Edwards have all included Kentucky in their so-called “poverty tours.” But of all of these men, it is Bobby Kennedy who is remembered in Kentucky. Undoubtedly, this has much to do with the celebrity and the tragedy of the Kennedy family. Kennedy was assassinated less than four months after he visited Kentucky, crushing the hope that he brought to many people there. But it is not the sudden loss alone that stands out in people’s memories.

Kentuckians remember Bobby Kennedy because they felt a sense of intimacy with him. Somehow, he fit in at the one-room schoolhouse and the strip mine. As resident Lois Hill puts it, it felt like Kennedy “was one of us.” The hope he brought to the region resulted not just from his political attention, but from the way he seemed truly to care, to *see* Kentuckians, and to understand their predicament as the result of structural inequity, rather than laziness or ignorance. Steve Caywood, who accompanied Kennedy on part of his tour, recollects how much it impacted him that Kennedy realized that people did not keep old cars in their yards because they liked to live with junk, but because they were using the cars for parts. Caywood explains, “He understood the problem.” The people of Kentucky experienced empathy from Kennedy—following Carl Roger’s definition of empathy, outlined in the previous chapter, as providing

“that needed confirmation that one does exist as a separate, valued person with an identity” (“Empathic” 7). Kennedy offered Kentuckians respect and understanding.

When politicians retrace Kennedy’s route through Kentucky, they are attempting to repeat more than a political event. They seek to revive the empathy that Kennedy inspired and to recapture the celebrity and magic that clings to the Kennedy name and image. Performance, as an act of repetition, serves to bring the past into the present, to revive what was—or what we think or wish the past to be have been. As Richard Schechner states, performance “offers to both individuals and groups the chance to rebecome what they once were—or even, and most often, to rebecome what they never were but wish to have been or wish to become” (Schechner, *Between* 38). Performance is thus a site ripe for the exploration and revival of unfulfilled promises. And if nothing else, the Kennedy name is loaded with the weight of such unfulfilled promises. If we can revive some of the *feeling* and energy associated with Kennedy, we seem to think, then perhaps we can achieve the social changes that seemed possible when Kennedy was alive.

As Lauren Berlant has pithily argued, however, “the repetition of empathetic events does not in itself create change” (*Female Complaint* 166). Nor, we could argue, does the repetition of empathetic events necessarily create empathy. This is true, in part, because repetition is never exact, and thus the results will always vary. But, as I argue in this chapter, it is not the instability of repetition alone that challenges the efficacy of repeated empathy. I suggest, in fact, that the problem with most political repetitions of Kennedy’s trip is the very fact that *they attempt to revive the empathy that Kentuckians felt for him*, focusing too much on the results of Kennedy’s trip and not enough on what it took to achieve those results. In this chapter, I explore what we can discover when we repeat *not* to achieve a particular end, but simply to see what we can understand and experience through the repetition itself. I argue, ultimately, that it is only a

repetition that focuses on the doing that allows empathy to emerge because empathy, like performance and like repetition, is not an effect but an action. It is, ironically, the *RFK in EKY* event, which did not have empathy as one of its stated goals, which fostered an empathy most similar to that associated with Kennedy. As I demonstrate, it is only when we stop trying to produce empathy and get down to the business of engaging with one another, exploring our relationship to the past and to each other through the tools of performance, that we might achieve a worthwhile empathy.

Repetition

Repetition is an integral part of performance. In her introduction to *The Ends of Performance*, Peggy Phelan writes, “Part of what performance knows is the impossibility of maintaining the distinction between temporal tenses, between absolute singular beginning and ending, between living and dying” (8). Performance defies the idea that events or actions are discrete, suggesting instead that our actions are always re-inventions or repetitions of previous actions. This is because performance consists of what Richard Schechner calls “twice-behaved” or “restored behavior”: “physical or verbal actions that are not-for-the-first time, prepared, or rehearsed” (*Performance Studies* 22). To perform is to do again something that has already been done, and as such it is always about our relationship to the past—how we understand it, re-live it, or remake it in the present.

Performance studies scholars have drawn on the work of poststructural theorists like Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler to argue that the acts of repetition which constitute performance are never exact or complete. Each iteration introduces change, particularly through differences in the context of the performative moment. Derrida develops this idea in regard to language in his essay “Signature, Event, Context,” in which he argues that for a word or a sign to

function as a form of communication, it must be iterable, able to be divorced from its original context. For this to occur, it must operate within a system of meaning that allows us to interpret it despite this change in context. Even as this system ensures meaning, it carries within it the possibility of a change in meaning:

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the usual sense of this opposition), as a small or large unity, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolute nonsaturable fashion. This does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring. (Derrida, "Signature" 320)

The infinite possibilities in which a word might be cited suggests, to Derrida, that meaning is never as stable or simple as we like to think it is.

Derrida uses this point to offer a critique of J. L. Austin's theory of linguistic performativity. In *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), Austin defines a performative utterance as one that does not describe an action, but rather undertakes or *does* what it says. For example, the words "I call this meeting to order" are not a description of an action, but the action itself. The statement performs the action. Austin notes that performative utterances are all susceptible to various "illnesses" and "infelicities," chief among these that the context must be appropriate for their use. If the one uttering the words does not possess the proper authority to call a meeting to order, if the required quorum is not present, or if some other necessary condition is not met, the performative utterance will fail. For this reason, performatives uttered on stage are always infelicitous, according to Austin. The priest does not marry the actors because he is himself an actor, not a priest, and the words are spoken on stage, not in a church or city hall. The words can

be cited, but the context voids their power. Derrida takes up this point, noting that it is the very iterability of the phrases Austin discusses that gives them performative power. If they could not be cited, repeated over and over, there would be no convention guaranteeing their ability to perform.⁶¹ Citation is for Derrida the very condition of language, and as such language is conditioned both on its ability to be repeated and on the ways in which that repetition is always subject to potential failure and change.

This possibility of change within a system of meaning is the locus of hope in Butler's analysis of the performativity of gender. In *Gender Trouble* (1999), Butler argues that gender is produced performatively, "that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (33). Unlike Austin's performative utterances, which consist of discreet speech acts, gender consists of a never-ending performance of behaviors: "As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*" (Butler, *Trouble* 178). And it is here, in repetition, its ability to be cited, that we can locate both gender's authority and the possibility for subverting that authority. Butler argues that we can repeat or cite gender in ways that reveals its constructed nature, using drag, parody, and other gender "performances" to highlight the always already performative nature of gender.⁶²

Performance studies scholars have taken these theories and applied them beyond linguistics and gender, pointing out how deeply our lives and cultures depend upon repetition. In

⁶¹ It is, of course, convention, too, that grants the priest and not the actor the power to marry.

⁶² Butler's switch from a basically linguistic understanding of performativity to a more theatrical one has caused a great deal of confusion and critique, and Butler herself has devoted quite a bit of ink to clarifying what she intended by her turn to the theatrical. The central problem with her argument about the overturning of gender performativity through performance is that it suddenly assumes an agent who can repeat gender, rather than a subject constituted *through* the repetition of gender. Without going into detail here, I will simply point out that, as Derrida's essay suggests, the line between performativity and theatricality has always been a contentious one, with easy slippage across this porous boundary. Butler's point, that gender works as a system of meaning that can be deconstructed and re-assembled in different ways, holds. If something can be cited, then it can be cited in a way that takes it out of its former context.

his work on social dramas and rituals, the anthropologist Victor Turner has explored how rituals rely on the ceremonial repetition of specific acts. And yet, Turner himself points out that rituals are also sites of constant change: “To perform a ritual the same way twice is to kill it, for the ritual grows as we grow, its life recapitulates the course of ours” (*Anthropology* 148). Each ritual is an instance of repetition with difference. Schechner draws on this idea to argue that the “restored behavior” that makes up performance may be altered either in its execution or its context. He writes,

Restored behavior is living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film. These strips of behavior can be arranged or reconstructed; they are independent of the causal systems (social, psychological, technological) that brought them into existence. They have a life of their own. The original ‘truth’ or ‘source’ of the behavior may be lost, ignored, or contradicted—even with this truth or source is apparently being honored and observed. (*Between* 36)

Even if a performance attempts to restore behavior exactly, it will fail: “It is not possible to ‘get back to’ what was. . . . [P]erformers’ bodies are different, audiences are different, performative contexts are different” (Schechner, *Between* 51). “Thus,” writes Schechner, “ironically, performances resist that which produces them” (*Performance Studies* 23). Repetition resists repetition.

Restored behavior is not the only way that performance studies scholars understand repetition, but it shares with other theories of repetition a focus on how cultural and social patterns of behavior are perpetuated through enactment. Joseph Roach, for example, has developed the idea of *surrogation* to explain how culture reproduces and re-creates itself. Surrogation occurs when a gap or loss in the social order produces the need to find a

replacement, as a new king must take the place of the previous one, ensuring continuity. Here, as with all instances of repetition, the surrogate is never an exact replica of the one she or he replaces: “The intended substitute either cannot fulfill expectations, creating a deficit, or actually exceeds them, creating a surplus” (Roach, *Cities* 2). Because of the problems inherent in this process, surrogation “requires public enactments of forgetting” (Roach 3). We must collectively overlook the ways in which repetition fails, engaging in acts of selective memory. Diana Taylor, meanwhile, utilizes what she refers to as the *repertoire* to describe way in which culture and knowledge are transmitted through embodied practice. Taylor focuses on the way in which the transmission of culture cannot occur through the archive of written texts and material objects alone, but, crucially, also requires the action and participation of social actors.

In all of these theories, repetition’s ability to resist itself creates both the promise and problem of performance. On the one hand, repetition ensures the perpetuation of cultures and traditions. It is conservative in nature, ensuring continuity and risking, as it does so, the perpetuation of social hierarchies and problems. On the other hand, each repetition introduces change, guaranteeing that that which is repeated is never an exact replica of what came before. Phelan, who takes performance’s resistance to repetition to the extreme, has famously claimed that “Performance in a strict ontological sense is nonreproductive” (*Unmarked* 148). Because it can never be reproduced *exactly*, performance, in Phelan’s view, is able to elude power structures and systems of signification that would render meaning static.

Rather than focusing on the inherent inability of performance to repeat with utter faithfulness, I am interested in exploring *why* some repetitions are more successful than others, particularly when it comes to performances of empathy. To do this, I turn to another concept developed by Taylor—scenarios. Scenarios, according to Taylor, are “meaning-making

paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes” (28). Scenarios are repeated both through our actions and our interpretations of those actions. As Taylor writes, “The scenario structures our understanding” (28). It shapes how we approach a situation, either as an actor in it or a critic of it. Scenarios are transmitted and repeated, but like any repetition, they introduce change, working “through reactivation rather than duplication” (Taylor 32). We might think of a scenario as being *put into play*, with all of the different resonances that phrase suggests. A scenario is something like a script or text, but one that we perform anew, and in that performance there will always be a certain degree of “play”—in the sense of spontaneous response, improvisation, and freedom to move. Because scenarios “deal with the embodiment of the social actors” involved, they invite us to question not only how the scenario structures our seeing (including how it interpellates subjects within the scenario), but also how the structure is *experienced* and *enacted* (Taylor 29). What kinds of affective exchanges characterize this structure and how might we re-structure them? How are bodies situated through this scenario? What desires and needs compel its repetition and which resist it? What lived experience does the scenario foreclose, and what does it facilitate?

Following Taylor, I argue that we understand the people of Kentucky through a particular scenario associated with poverty. Because it has been repeated, it has gained the force of authority and—like any performative—attempts to obscure itself as the structure that shapes our seeing. According to this scenario, eastern Kentuckians are poor, forgotten people living in a “remote” land, left out of the American Dream. This scenario establishes the people of Appalachia as outsiders and as victims. When politicians and journalists travel to Appalachia, they are frequently engaged in the reactivation of this scenario, “exposing” poverty and injustice to an “audience” that is meant to respond with horror, indignation, pity, and empathy. In this

scenario Appalachian poverty is viewed not as a product of mainstream American culture, particularly capitalism, but rather as an anomaly. This scenario, to be sure, obscures economic realities in a way that forestalls real change. But this is only one of many effects. In the following sections, I demonstrate that the ways in which the empathy evoked by this scenario can have a negative effect on Appalachians, causing them to feel as if their problems are only worthy of attention if they can be sensationalized. Rather than increasing a sense of understanding between Appalachians and those outside the region, this scenario of “exposing” poverty works to further the sense of Appalachian otherness.

Scenarios do not reenact themselves. We reactivate them. We perform them. Repetition, like performance, is a doing. We can repeat mindfully and with purpose, as a shaman might repeat a ritual. Or we can repeat without any awareness that we doing so, following social conventions unreflectively. We may attempt to repeat faithfully, as a dancer may execute choreography, or we may be deliberately unfaithful, as in parody. But our discussion of repetition focuses on its ends, its goals and effects, and on the excesses or deficiencies a particular repetition may produce. Too often, I think, we pass over the experience, the doing, of the repetition itself. And as Taylor reminds us, repetitions are undertaken by social actors. They are lived and experienced in ways that not only *change* enactment, but also provide critical knowledge.

The Spectacle of Poverty: The Politics of Representation in Appalachia

Appalachia has long held a special place in the national imagination. Ronald D Eller writes,

For more than a century, Appalachia has provided a challenge to modern conceptions of the American dream. It has appeared as a place of cultural

backwardness in a nation of progressive values, a region of poverty in an affluent society, and a rural landscape in an increasingly urban nation. We *know* Appalachia exists because we need it to exist in order to define what we are not. It is the ‘other America’ because the very idea of Appalachia convinces us of the righteousness of our own lives. (3)

Appalachia fascinates us, Eller suggests, because it defies our national narrative of progress. It is a “problem” region; one that we want to see as exceptional, rather than as paradigmatic of the failures of capitalism.⁶³ It lags “behind” the rest of the nation, according to this narrative, not because of the capitalist system that has contributed to the rape of the land, a crippling lack of economic diversity, and a huge gap between the highest and lowest paid workers in the region, but because it is too far *removed* from the nation’s capitalist economy. As Eller puts it, “Attainment of the good life, we assume, is dependent upon the continued expansion of markets, transportation and communication networks, mass culture, urban centers, and consumer demand” (5). Thus, politicians have often used Appalachia as a backdrop to make their rallying cries against poverty and to announce new policies and programs to aid the nation’s poor, bringing them in line with the rest of the nation. In the 1960s, Appalachia attracted scores of young volunteers through projects like VISTA, the Appalachian Volunteers, and the Alice Lloyd Community Reserves. It has also attracted plenty of what local historian Loyal Jones calls “high-

⁶³ Appalachia, as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission (established in 1965), encompasses a 205,000 square mile region extending from northern Mississippi to southern New York and including all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states. In the year of the ARC’s founding, one in three Appalachians was classified as living in poverty (“The Appalachian Region”). While poverty rates have decreased significantly in subsequent years, the region is still home to pockets of severe economic depression, including Martin, Clay, Owsley, and Knox Counties, which are among the thirty most impoverished counties in the U.S., with poverty rates exceeding 37% in all cases, according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates for 2009 (*U.S. Census Bureau*).

minded up-lifters”: people who come to the region sure that they know what Appalachians need to improve their lot in life.⁶⁴

While sociologists, ethnomusicologists, and others have long traveled to the southern mountains to research the culture of the Scots-Irish people that moved into the region starting as early as late 18th century, by the mid-20th century, the main thrust of the interest in Appalachia pertained to the region’s persistent poverty. In 1962, Kentucky historian and lawyer Harry M. Caudill published *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area*. Generally understood as the foundational text in what would become the field of Appalachian Studies, Caudill’s book presented a comprehensive history of the region. Rather than blaming the Appalachian people for their economic deprivation, Caudill revealed the social and historical forces behind Appalachian poverty, detailing, in particular, the problem of absentee ownership in the timber and mining industries, as well as the environmental devastation caused by these industries and the economic instability created by near total reliance on the coal industry in particular. Caudill’s book inspired renewed interest in Appalachia, coming, as it did, on the heels of the post-war boom. Journalists descended on the region, asking why it was that a prosperous nation could not end poverty within its own borders. Television programs like Charles Kuralt’s “Christmas in Appalachia,” which aired on CBS in 1964, exposed harsh living condition in the region, inspiring social and political interest in the plight of Appalachian people. Such depictions of the region, however, often made a spectacle of poverty, dehumanizing the very people they were trying to help and turning Appalachian’s problems into national entertainment. Caudill is reported to have remarked that “while the mountains of North Carolina had the Biltmore, and

⁶⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all citations of Loyal Jones, Dee Davis, Nell Fields, Robert Salyer, and John Malpede refer to personal interviews with the author.

West Virginia had the Greenbrier, poverty was eastern Kentucky's most popular tourist attraction" (Reece 180).

As a result of this scenario, which repeatedly casts them as ignorant hillbillies living lives of abject desperation, many Appalachians have become distrustful of outsiders, rendering real discourse difficult. Appalshop filmmaker Elizabeth Barret explores this quandary in her documentary film *Stranger with a Camera* (2000). *Stranger* recounts the story of Hugh O'Connor, a Canadian filmmaker murdered in Letcher County, Kentucky, in 1967 by local landowner Hobart Ison. O'Connor and his crew, who were travelling the U.S. compiling footage for a series examining Americans being exploited or otherwise left out of the "American Dream," had stopped at a rental house owned by Ison to photograph the resident, a miner just home from work, still covered in coal dust. The man had granted the crew permission to film him, but as they were filming Ison drove up wielding a gun and shouted at the crew to leave his property. They complied, but as they were hauling their gear back to the car, Ison fired several times, killing O'Connor. He claims to have done so because he believed that the film crew aimed to make fun of him and the people of region, exploiting their poverty for personal and economic gain. Many members of the community rallied behind Ison, celebrating him as a hero. His trial had to be moved to another county, but even the change of venue resulted in a hung jury. Rather than stand trial again, Ison accepted a plea bargain. He was free after only a year in prison.

How do you expose people's poverty without demeaning them in the process? As a native of the region and a filmmaker herself, Barret finds that the O'Connor incident illustrates many of the ethical questions associated with representing Appalachia. In voiceover, she discusses her own feelings about the incident and the issues it raises, conceding that many of the strangers who have arrived with cameras do not help the region. While some sought to use the

images they collected to help precipitate social change, “others mined the images the way the companies had mined the coal” (Barret). Films that focus on deprivation, rather than on people, Barret finds insulting. At the same time, Barret does not condone what Ison did, arguing the ties that bind a community are not always positive ones and citing the suspicion of all outsiders as an example. What Barret’s film reveals, through its careful consideration of this historical event, is that, unfortunately, Appalachian people’s suspicions are not completely unfounded. This does not mean that every stranger with a camera is out to exploit the region, but it does mean that those who want to engage the area and discuss its problems face understandable resistance from people who have, too often, been exploited.

The most recent example of this, occurring only a few months before I did my own field research in the region, is Diane Sawyer’s special report on Appalachia, “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains,” airing on ABC on Feb. 10, 2009. Although the program won Sawyer a Peabody and a Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award (more on the irony of that later), it was poorly received by people in the region. For one thing, Sawyer’s exposé focused largely on how little the region had progressed since Kennedy’s visit in 1968, a point which many locals contest strongly.⁶⁵ To Appalachians, the program simply reinforced stereotypes of poverty, “hillbilly” ignorance, and incest, perpetuating the notion that these problems are somehow inherent to the region. As local journalist Courtney Tennill puts it, “Drug abuse, economic pitfalls, incest, teenage pregnancy and illiteracy were not branded in the hills of Appalachia – and I’d dye my hair purple if Sawyer could find me one town or city in this country that doesn’t deal with any of these things.” Appalachians do not deny that they have problems, but neither do they want to be seen as synonymous with their problems, especially when doing so feels like

⁶⁵ They have good reason. While 223 out of the region’s 420 counties were considered economically distressed in 1965, by 2010 this number has dropped to 82 (“The Appalachian Region”).

blatant exploitation: “Reporters like Sawyer come in looking for extremes because they get ratings. And it worked this time; 10.9 million viewers tuned in Friday night, the highest ratings for 20/20 since 2004. Coincidence? Hardly” (Tennill). Jones brought up the Sawyer program in my interview with him, commenting that he was “disappointed” in Sawyer for not coming back to the region to address the criticisms leveled against her by Appalachians. Instead, she responded by talking about the positive outcomes of the program, highlighting her role in a long line of people who have set out to “save” Appalachia from itself.

I want to illuminate, here, the way in which a particular affective response is assumed or called for when the scenario of “exposing” Appalachian poverty is activated. When reporters, artists, and writers turn their attention to Appalachia with the aim of representing the suffering of the people, they are calling on those same people to exhibit despair, sadness, and desperation—feelings that may run counter to how Appalachian people characterize their own lives. This is not to say that Appalachians do not recognize their hardship. When I think of Appalachians’ emotional attitude toward life’s many difficulties, I am brought to mind of the non-progressive melodies of mountain songs in the Locrian mode: “The melody line, unable to resolve itself or come home, can’t stop” (Harvey 127). The repetitive structure of these songs resists the swell of sentiment through musical climax, moving instead with an almost unbearable and haunting lack of variety, a few notes in a short musical phrase that returns and returns and returns: “a Möbius strip of sound” (Harvey 137). The rhythm of these songs communicates that hardship is ongoing and must be faced with steadfastness, the drone of the melody insinuating continuity but not monotony (Harvey 153). These songs are pedagogies of survival, full of feeling but devoid of sentiment.

Nevertheless, the media searches for images of pain and abjection, images ostensibly designed to *move* us, provoking emotion in order to motivate social action. I take up Berlant's caution, outlined in "The Subject of True Feeling," that displays of subaltern pain may actually serve to support the very state power that has produced that pain. She writes, "national sentimentality is too often a defensive response by people who identify with privilege yet fear they will be exposed as immoral by their tacit sanction of a particular structural violence that benefits them" ("Subject" 153). Subaltern pain, she argues, is not considered *universal*, as the privileged do not experience it, but it is nevertheless considered "universally *intelligible*," allowing us to arrogantly assume that we understand how others experience their situation (Berlant, "Subject" 144). Our ability to understand and feel for others' pain thus marks us as "just"—part of the solution, not the problem. In order for this to happen, we must have narratives of subaltern pain that we can recognize and understand, narratives that conform to familiar scenarios. When we ask people to perform their suffering, however, we have to consider that they may experience it in ways that are not immediately recognizable to us, and that our desire for certain sentimental narratives may run counter to their own understanding and experience. Moreover, representations that call attention to the despair of the Appalachian people, but which also fail to show them "properly" enacting that despair, paradoxically have the effect of critiquing the people as being too ignorant to recognize their own poverty, when in fact they may simply experience it differently than we expect, or they may wish to avoid performing despair and thus reinforcing their status as "other" and "victim." When people refuse to conform to the scenario, to enact suffering the way it is expected, the result may be the sense that these people must be rescued from themselves, educated in their own suffering before they can be rehabilitated or saved. Jones calls this the "high and mighty know-it-all liberalism" of those who

think they have the all the answers to the region's problems. Consequently, the scenario designed to promote an outside audience's empathy with Appalachian suffering may actually make Appalachians feel *less* understood. It is this empathetic disconnect that I want to explore further.

Feeling for Appalachia: Whose Empathy is it Anyway?

When we see images of children huddled around pot-bellied stoves in one-room schoolhouses or playing in the mud left in the deep gashes to the earth created by the tracks of logging and mining trucks, we are meant to feel compassion for their suffering. We are meant to empathize with their plight. "These people are Americans," these images say to us. "And yet look at how they live. They are like you and me, so they should be able to live like you and me."

Berlant has frequently criticized the way that appeals to empathy have become almost requisite as tools for achieving political and social change. She writes,

The metacultural ideal of liberal empathy is so embedded in the horizon of ethico-political fantasy that alternative models—for example, those that do not track justice in terms of subjective measures—can seem inhuman, hollow, and irrelevant to the ways people experience optimism and powerlessness in ordinary life. (*Female Complaint* 55)

We have come to expect that causes like those of the people of Appalachia or the starving children we hear about on the television late at night be communicated to us in ways that appeal to our empathy. To do otherwise would strike us as harsh or unfeeling. We are thus conditioned not only to *have* a certain emotional response, but to expect that we will be asked to produce such a response when confronted with issues of social injustice. The effect of all of this empathy, Berlant contends, is to erase our differences. We feel the same, so we must be the same, as happens, for instance, when the audience of a play experiences a shared emotional response:

“*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* translates the racially, economically, and sexually incommensurate audience into a shared mass of empathetic feeling” (Berlant, *Female Complaint* 51). Crucial differences are sacrificed to affective identification.

Berlant’s critique of empathy has much in common with Brecht’s. Empathy, to her, compels audiences to abandon their independent critical capacities and surrender to “the force of congealed mass feeling” (Berlant, *Female Complaint* 54). This statement recalls Brecht’s claims in “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,” cited in the introduction, in which Brecht decries forms of theatre in which the spectator “gets thrown into the melting pot . . . and becomes a passive (suffering) part of the total work of art” (38). Not only is feeling (through empathy) here imagined as an aggressive attack on individuality and a means through which social and historical differences are erased, but it is also viewed as a trap—a place where the spectator gets “stuck,” unable to extricate him or herself through alternative interpretive responses. Through empathy, we are habituated to “feel right,” Berlant contends, riffing on Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Female Complaint* 64).⁶⁶

For both Berlant and Brecht, feeling is thick, powerful, viscous. It has substance. Brecht attempts to undermine this substance with accusations of witchcraft, implying that there is something illusory, or at the very least suspect, about the very tangible way that we experience emotion. Whether the fog is the result of witchcraft or not, there it is, enveloping us. Empathy is thus demonized for the way that it fixes us in place—dictating a particular response and holding us captive in that response, shaping the landscape of our interpretation. When we empathize, we become passive, and thus susceptible to absorbing and condoning whatever political messages accompany the narrative that has produced our empathetic response. And because empathy has

⁶⁶ Who was, knowingly or not, riffing on Aristotle. See footnote 76 below.

been deemed the most appropriate way to respond to instances of social injustice, we are primed for manipulation through our empathetic conditioning. To take the critique to its logical end, we are a populace ready and waiting to be told what to think and feel through our very desire to respond appropriately to the suffering of others.

This leads me to two arguments. First, when we empathize with the suffering of Appalachian people, we are at risk of affirming, rather than condemning, the very social systems that have created the problems in Appalachia to begin with. This argument follows directly from the cautions leveled against empathy by Brecht and Berlant, particularly Berlant's argument that political movements based on sentimentality or feeling are always already working against themselves, moderating the very change they advocate because they are characterized by "the fear of too much change, and the adjustments and adaptations endemic to that fear that seek to minimize in advance potentially destabilizing eruptions" (*Female Complaint* 147). Thus, as Eller suggests, the typical narrative associated with Appalachia's problems obscures the role of capitalism such that the solution to capitalism's damaging effects becomes, paradoxically, more capitalism. The second argument requires us to think not just about the empathy of an outside audience, but the empathy of social actors. It also requires us to imagine other ways in which empathy might function. What if empathy is not entirely passive? What if we found a way to promote empathetic engagement that awakens our critical capacity, rather than miring it in (uncritical) emotion—an empathy that defies the assumption of a binary between intellect and emotion, an empathy that allows us to move and develop and think? My second argument is that one way to avoid the dangers inherent in using empathy as a political tool is to reorient our focus away from the acts and feelings of the "outside" audience—the ones supposedly responsible for initiating social change—and to attend to empathy from the perspective of those at the center of

the social issue in question. In other words, what happens when we think not about our empathy for Appalachians, but about the empathy that Appalachians experience within and for their own community? I argue that, in spite of his status as an outsider, Kennedy's visit to Kentucky raised these very questions. Repetitions of Kennedy's visit have failed largely because they ignored these questions, forgetting that empathy is an act of engagement and focusing instead on the more familiar scenario in which empathy is provoked *for* Appalachians, rather than with them.

Robert F. Kennedy and the Magnetism of Empathy

In a chapter about the problems of using empathy as a political tool, I begin with an instance of political empathy that seems—at least on some level—to have “worked.” Nell Fields, project coordinator for *RFK in EKY*, said this to me regarding her own adolescent experience of Kennedy's visit: “Empathy is not one of those things you can substitute. You either have it or you don't.” Kennedy had it—or, at least, it felt this way to the people of Kentucky, and when it comes to empathy, the proof is in the feeling. What made Kennedy different from the Charles Kuralt of the world? Why did he connect with the people of eastern Kentucky in a way that so many other politicians and journalists and social workers have failed to do? And what would it take to repeat his encounter with Kentuckians?

Like all Kennedys, RFK's empathetic quality derives in large part from what Joseph Roach calls “It.” According to Roach, “It” is that magnetic, charismatic quality that emanates from one who embodies a particular set of contradictions: “strength *and* vulnerability, innocence *and* experience . . . singularity *and* typicality” (*It* 8). As a powerful political family whose tragedies have always been public, the Kennedys embody this paradox perfectly. They appear to us both extraordinary and, in their losses, extremely ordinary. Those who have “It” also possess a “strangely empathic presence” (Roach, *It* 34). These individuals—from performers to

politicians—are both available for us to empathize with and demonstrate the capacity to empathize with us. What Roach seems to mean by “empathy” is the ability to make us feel important, recognized, *seen*. “It” “gives us back the Image of our Mind” (Pope qtd. in Roach, *It* 12). In other words, it gives us back to ourselves as we wish to be seen. Roach cites, for example, Charles II’s ability to “convince any interlocutor that his or her ideas or qualities interested him more than anyone else’s,” and Princess Diana’s capacity to recognize who in a room needed her the most, and to respond by making them feel as if she, too, needed them (*It* 31, 171). This empathy is reciprocal. It allows you to bask in the glow both of being noticed and of returning the favor.

Roach’s description of empathy is not unlike the definition offered by Rogers in the previous chapter. Rogers argues that “a finely tuned understanding by another individual gives the recipient his personhood” (Rogers, “Empathic” 7). For Rogers, then, empathy is not so much “shared feeling” as recognition: the idea that when we sense that another truly understands what we think and feel not only are those thoughts and feelings validated but we *ourselves* are validated. While Rogers viewed empathy as a means of promoting the client’s investment in and estimation of him or herself, Roach reminds us that the one who provides empathy can also become a source of attachment, a star whose gravitational pull holds us in its orbit. It feels good to be seen, and it feels good to be able to return the favor. The very public nature of the tragedies suffered by the Kennedy family has rendered them particularly available for our empathetic engagement. They seem to need our emotional support as much as we need theirs. As documentary filmmaker Robert Salyer explains, Kentuckians felt empathy for Kennedy because “the people who live here understand what it means to fall and to not succeed.” As remote as RFK may have been to the people of Kentucky, they still felt that they knew him and understood

him, feelings which placed them closer to political power that was otherwise inaccessible: “He’s Robert to history but Bobby to the people who lived [when he visited]” (Fields). Without this sense of affective reciprocity and equity, the recipients of political empathy could be left feeling powerless—forced into an economy of compassion and concern in which they can only receive, never give. Because they were able to share their problems with Kennedy without putting themselves at an emotional disadvantage, Appalachians also felt included in political discourse.

When Kennedy traveled to Kentucky in 1968, his “It” quality helped inspire a sense of empathetic exchange with the residents of the state. His death just four months later cemented his iconic status in local memory by shattering the hope that had attached to his person. Without Kennedy, how would the potential future that he had helped them envision come to pass? His death, for many, took with it political optimism:

It is as though the dead-too-soon personae represent a hole in the historical fabric through which the hierarchies of violence and alterity that we associate with the lawlessness of the law might, finally, *not* be reproduced. In their estrangement from sovereign normativity they might represent something like a lost revolutionary wrinkle in time, as the articulation of the sacred *against* the political, here seen not as sovereign but as fallen law.

(Berlant, *Female Complaint* 164)

The loss of such figures is the loss of a promise of an end to repetition, a lost rupture. Without them, we are condemned to repeat whatever political and social cycles currently dominate our worlds. Although Berlant is referring to public figures outside of political life, able to evoke hope for political change through their non-association with the status quo, Robert Kennedy seems somehow to have managed to avoid the tarnish that political office leaves on public

figures—probably because his brother’s death marked RFK with the same lost potential for change (and thus the same promise for renewal) that would come to mark the younger brother. Ironically, the attempt to retrieve the political moment lost through RFK’s death has been enacted through perpetual repetitions—repetitions which only serve to confirm the loss because with each renewed promise that goes unfulfilled, the original lost promise is reified as that which is irretrievable. Every politician who re-traces Kennedy’s steps through Kentucky only to return to politics-as-usual once safely back in Washington, D.C. serves to affirm the idea that it was Kennedy and Kennedy alone who could break the cycle of poverty and political neglect in Appalachia.

I want to step back, for a moment, from Berlant and Roach to say a few things about Kennedy’s visit that are not fully explainable through their respective theoretical approaches. Both Berlant and Roach are writing, for the most part, about our collective responses to public figures to whom we *feel* intimately connected in spite of our having no real connection to them. The intimate publics that Berlant theorizes are formed through readership or participation in mass culture. “It” is a quality of celebrities, politicians, and kings. But the people of Kentucky did have an encounter with Kennedy. Certainly, their memories have been affected by his assassination and by the mass cultural investment in the Kennedy family as American icons. But there is still a real encounter between individuals to be accounted for in this history. When John Malpede began the *RFK in EKY* project, his first step was to collect these stories: to turn to the people of the region and ask them what they remembered about Kennedy’s visit.

Lucielle Ollinger, who was a child when Kennedy visited, remembers that Kennedy came into her home to speak to her father, but couldn’t wake him because he was drunk. Ollinger recalls that Kennedy handled the situation with the comment, “He’s having a bad day.” She says,

“I thought that was so cool. You know, because he knew exactly what was wrong.” He knew, but politely refused to call attention to the man’s condition. Lawrence Baldrige remembers Kennedy’s eyes: “His eyes were, as I recall, extremely, extremely sad looking, troubled almost.” Anne Caudill asserts that people loved Kennedy for his family, to be sure, but also because “he took an interest. He came here. He went up on the strip mine. He went into the coal camps. He talked to people. He asked the right questions.” Donald H. Goble remembers Kennedy as “a very friendly, cordial person” who took his time with the people he met. Anna Laura Craft, who was a teenager when she drove Kennedy around Whitesburg with her father, says,

I can remember he asked me personal questions. He cared. ‘Tell me about you,’ he wanted to know. What I was doing. What did I plan to do with my life? What did I see as the needs of this area, as a young person. And that was important, you know, for a 19-year-old to talk with someone on that level who cared what young people thought.

It didn’t hurt, Craft notes, that he was handsome, with hair “like a copper penny.” Delmar Draughn remarks that “Robert was a friendly feller. He was easy to talk to and he smiled all the time.” Some people remember that his shoes were scuffed and muddy from walking the dirt roads and marveled at how down to earth he was. Others remembered his shoes as perfectly shined, a reflection of how put-together he was. Fields notes that people were impressed either way, and proposes that, perhaps, Kennedy had two pairs of shoes and was savvy enough to know which to wear in any given crowd. It is more likely, I think, that, out of affection for him, people found his appearance “appropriate” whether he was, at the time, muddy or not. Over and over again, people reiterate that Kennedy listened, taking their problems, concerns, and points of view seriously.

On the one hand, these recollections support the Kennedy “It” factor. He is remembered as both smiling and sad, slightly scuffed and perfectly polished—a walking contradiction that invites our admiration as well as our affection. Another thing these memories have in common is the sense that Kennedy was a good guy. But there is another dimension to these stories. In addition to their personal encounters with Kennedy, Kentuckians also had a *political* encounter with him—one aided, but not entirely subsumed by, the empathy generated through these meetings. As University of Kentucky Writer-in-Residence Erik Reece explains, Appalachians took Kennedy’s visit at face value in a way that the rest of the country did not:

Though Kennedy had not yet announced his candidacy for president, many, including Johnson, thought it was inevitable, and not a few considered the visit to eastern Kentucky mere grandstanding, political theater meant to show up LBJ. But people here don’t remember it that way. Robert Kennedy was good-looking and charismatic, and seemed truly to care that many Appalachian children were starving. Rarely do coalfield residents speak of Johnson’s first visit forty years ago, but almost everyone who was alive then has a story about when RFK came to town. (180-181)

The state and national newspapers depicted Kennedy’s Kentucky tour as a preamble to a preordained campaign. The Louisville *Courier-Journal* wrote that the visit “had all the flavor and trappings of a candidate’s campaign swing through a district” (Greider). The *New York Times* reported that “Kennedy was cheered everywhere as if he were a candidate rather than the chairman of a one-man fact-gathering Senate subcommittee” (Franklin). *The Washington Post* sardonically commented that “Sen. Robert F. Kennedy (D.N.Y.) discovered eastern Kentucky today and it was almost like the circus had hit town” (Harwood). In spite of the media portrayal,

however, Kentuckians experienced the event much differently. Baldridge says, “We had heard that he was primarily out for himself. That he was very much trying to do his own thing. And he was very aggressive in terms of getting power. The media portrayed him that way. I didn’t find him that way. I thought he was very caring and really loved the mountain people.” The way most Kentuckians saw it, Kennedy came have an honest conversation about living conditions in the region; he was *followed* by a media circus more intent on telling the story of his as-yet unannounced presidential campaign than reporting on the substance of the hearings Kennedy was holding.⁶⁷

I contend that it was not Kennedy’s celebrity or reputation alone that communicated sincerity to the Appalachian people. Kennedy stands out because he deviated from the typical scenario of “exposing” Appalachian poverty, a scenario that depicted Appalachians as ignorant, broken people without the will or ability to improve their situation. For one thing, Kennedy eschewed the “culture of poverty” rhetoric that tended to dominate contemporary discourse, including Johnson’s War on Poverty. The idea of “culture of poverty” was advanced by the anthropologist Oscar Lewis in the late 1950s to explain why some areas experience persistent poverty across generations. According to Lewis, poverty perpetuated itself by creating feelings of despair and fatalism that make it difficult to break the cycle. While Lewis applied his theory only to the developing world, policy analysts and sociologists like Michael Harrington adopted the theory to describe poverty in the U.S. In his widely-read book *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (1962), Harrington writes that, “poverty twists and deforms the spirit” (2). He goes on, “The American poor are pessimistic and defeated, and they are victimized by mental

⁶⁷ In his speech kicking off *RFK in EKY*, Peter Edelman recounts that he and the rest of Kennedy’s team were actually un-prepared for the volume of media coverage they received. In fact, there were so many journalists following Kennedy through eastern Kentucky that they kept having to wait for the caravan of cars to catch up. By the end of the first day, they were running two hours behind schedule which, Edelman reports, displeased Kennedy as much as the journalists who kept missing out on the photo ops.

suffering to a degree unknown in Suburbia” (2).⁶⁸ While Harrington acknowledged that poverty in the U.S. went hand in hand with a lack of education, broken families, and a scarcity of jobs that pay well, he did not explain whether these were the cause of poverty or the result of the “pessimism” he describes at the opening of the book. Harrington’s was more an emotional appeal for people to pay attention to the problem of poverty than an incisive analysis of poverty’s causes. As Frank Stricker argues, “Harrington was the Charles Dickens, not the Karl Marx, of this moment in antipoverty history” (46). Furthermore, in his effort to make people care about the plight of the impoverished, Harrington worked hard to make sure that no reader might feel somehow at fault, a technique that ultimately laid the “blame” for poverty on the impoverished (Stricker 46).

Harrington’s approach to poverty was adopted enthusiastically by the Johnson administration, which wanted a War on Poverty, but did not want to commit to large-scale job creation or massive public works projects. Nor did Johnson want to drastically increase welfare programs, insisting that the War on Poverty was “a hand up, not a hand-out” (qtd. in Gillette xiii). Thus, most War on Poverty programs consisted not of job creation, but of adult education and work-study, including programs teaching the poor proper interview skills. The idea was to attack the *culture* of poverty, rather than its economic roots. In Appalachia, groups like the Appalachian Volunteers worked against poverty by painting schools, based on the logic that what was needed was not so much economic resources as a face-lift that would inspire pride and optimism.

⁶⁸ It is worth noting the geography of poverty in Harrington’s analysis. Poverty is “off the beaten track,” relegated to inner cities and rural areas (3). Of course, we have to ask, off whose beaten track? For some, the remote valleys and dark alleyways that Harrington evokes as “other” are the sites of everyday life. Here, as throughout the book, Harrington addresses a middle-class, suburban reader, one he assumes has no direct experience with or exposure to poverty. It is precisely this mode of “explaining” poverty to the “mainstream” that I want to challenge throughout this chapter.

From the outset, Kennedy and others, including the head of War on Poverty programs, Sargent Shriver, pressured the Johnson administration to more extreme measures, arguing for job creation and bigger spending on welfare and assistance programs. This was, of course, only one aspect of the larger rivalry between the RFK and Johnson, but it is central to why Kennedy is remembered differently in Kentucky than Johnson is. Not only did Kennedy push for stronger antipoverty measures, but he also rejected the administration's "culture of poverty" rhetoric, insisting that programs aimed at changing attitudes alone were simply not sufficient (not to mention paternalistic). Rather than going to impoverished people and telling them what they should think and do to change their situation, Kennedy went to people and listened. He frequently cited the "maximum feasible participation" phrase from the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, a phrase that was not explained in the legislation and that caused considerable debate and conservative backlash. Did this mean that the poor were to run War on Poverty programs or simply have a voice? What were the limits and parameters of participation? These questions were usually resolved by ignoring the issue entirely. Kennedy refused to do so, and developed the Senate Subcommittee Field Hearings on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty in part to highlight the programs' successes and ensure further funding, but also to hear from people—to encourage participation not only in the programs themselves, but also in the political discussion surrounding those programs.⁶⁹ Kennedy's aide Peter Edelman explains that Kennedy liked to hear what others had to say: "One of his many attractive paradoxes was his capacity to listen. Here was a high-energy man who wanted to get things done without red tape or dithering . . . [but] who could listen very intently when he thought someone had something worthwhile to say" (*Searching* 66).

⁶⁹ In addition to the hearings in Kentucky, Kennedy conducted hearings in Mississippi, New Mexico, and California.

Kentuckians *felt* like Kennedy listened because, in point of fact, he did. The field hearings conducted by Kennedy in Vortex and Fleming-Neon, Kentucky, entailed extensive, in-depth explorations of the region's social and political problems. Kennedy heard testimony from more than two dozen local politicians, educators, nurses, housewives, and coal miners. These witnesses spoke on issues such as problematic mining practices, the exorbitant price of food stamps, and the lack of quality roads and schools. One of the most striking aspects of the hearings is the frankness with which people spoke, both about their personal situations and about the political corruption and negligence they encountered at the local, state, and federal levels. At Fleming-Neon, John Tiller of the Community Action Program spoke in sweeping terms of the problems faced by the people of eastern Kentucky:

We have had Committee hearings like this before. Nothing has ever came of it. Our area is not feeling the Welfare Program with all the billions that have been poured into it; you go from house to house and find one penny's evidence of it [sic]. All these things are needed. Our area is feeding the war machine.

[APPLAUSE]

That's what we can tell our boys. They are being told -- in being shot on killed. They can't take the genteel route of draft dodging by getting out of college because they don't have the money or they don't qualify for the National Guard because they have no influence.

(“U.S. S. Subcommittee Hearing at Neon, Kentucky”)

Kennedy's response is strikingly level and honest, communicating his desire to implement change but also the real obstacles to doing so:

I can't come and tell you all these problems will disappear. You have told

us quite clearly in your testimony what some of the difficulties are. We have a war in Southeast Asia and Vietnam that has taken our resources. Some of that money should be coming down here in Eastern Kentucky to be used to find jobs for the people. Beyond that I think we could do much more than we are doing in this country; I don't think it's acceptable, as I said before, with the great amount of wealth this country has, we still have people, who have no jobs and people who don't have food; and clothes to wear, and people that want to work don't have the jobs to go to, I think that is unacceptable. I never would have come here and promised all the problems will disappear but we are focusing attention on what needs to be done. We are hearing from people like yourself who will give us suggestions on what needs to be done. We will work from there, and I would hope the state and the County and the people here would work on it.

(“U.S. S. Subcommittee Hearing at Neon, Kentucky”)

Over and over again during his visit, Kennedy emphasized that change would not be immediate and that it would take the full cooperation of all levels of government, as well as the people involved. At no point did he promise more than he could give. He let people speak their minds and responded with honesty and, often, humor, joking after Tiller’s testimony, “I’m glad you are not in the state of New York and would ever run against me.” When people shared details about their wages and the difficulties they faced paying their bills and feeding their families, he asked respectful and forthright questions about the facts of their situation. When people detailed social problems, he asked them what solutions they recommended, or whether they thought a certain solution would work or not. Reflecting on the hearings, *RFK in EKY* dramaturg Michael Hunt says, “there was an honorable truth that was discussed in 1968 between

this arguably great man and the people who put the tour together and the people who came and were the true heroes for testifying. Whether you agree with them or not, they spoke what they truly believed.” Baldrige concurs, stating, “When Kennedy came here he was bringing us into the [political] process” (“Alice Lloyd”). People were given the chance to speak freely and honestly, and they felt that Kennedy was listening not because it made him look good for the cameras, but because he wanted to hear what they had to say.

This dialogue extended beyond the official Field Committee hearings. Everywhere he went, Kennedy asked the people of the region to tell him about their lives, their needs, and what they thought could be done to improve the area. He is remembered for asking sensitive and difficult questions about issues that local people generally avoided. For instance, while visiting the all-black Liberty Street in Hazard, Kentucky, he approached a group of white and African American women and inquired as to the nature of their relationships: “He wanted to sit down and talk to them all, right there hunkered down on a doorstep, talking with these ladies. Talkin’ straightforwardly, as candidly as possible about race relations on Liberty Street in Hazard. He just wanted to know all about it” (Caywood). Not only did his seemingly genuine interest in their lives inspire people to have hope in the political process, but he also inspired many locals to take action in their own region.

Dee Davis, director of the Center for Rural Strategies in Whitesburg, Kentucky, was just a teenager when Kennedy visited. He joined a group of friends to go see Kennedy when he was visiting Liberty Street. Davis recalls how being there with Kennedy made him look at his own town with new eyes: “All of a sudden I saw the whole idea of poverty in a different way, because you begin to reflect on it not as part of your community or these individuals, but how they are going to be perceived by broader audiences who will share in this.” For Davis, this motivated

him to pursue a career of social action and community organizing. Fields, also a teenager in 1968, was similarly inspired with an appreciation for the Appalachian people and a desire to serve her community, taking away from Kennedy's visit the message that "There's nothing flawed with the people." Kennedy helped her see her own community as one with potential, agency, and the ability to motivate change on its own behalf. Kennedy seems to have been able to expose poverty without making a spectacle of it, presenting it not as a locus for pity, blame, or shame, but as a problem to be collectively solved. His empathy promoted agency and responsibility in a way that so many other explorations of the region have not.

To be sure, Kennedy's empathetic magnetism contributed to the success of the dialogue that occurred during his visit. Without the feelings of respect and understanding that Kennedy inspired, the people of Appalachia would not have been as open with him as they were. And without the accompanying political conversation, empathy alone has little to no effect. In 1968, difficult conversation converged with empathetic understanding to produce a politically and affectively resonant moment: one that inspired hope as well as real political action. The hearings, for instance, added significantly to the mounting political pressure to reform how food stamps were administered.⁷⁰ And people like Davis and Fields were inspired to embark on lives of social activism.

Attempts to re-create Kennedy's trip have, largely, failed, mostly due to the fact that one or more factors in the constellation of factors that made Kennedy's visit such a success were missing. Some repetitions may have evoked empathy but failed to provoke real conversation or action. Others worked in reverse, failing to capture Kennedy's empathy and charisma, but

⁷⁰ For a complete history of the food stamp program in the U.S., see Ronald F. King, *Budgeting Entitlements: The Politics of Food Stamps*, Washington, D.C., Georgetown UP, 2000.

grappling nevertheless with the region's social issues.⁷¹ I turn now to a performance that opened new possibilities for engagement, conversation, and empathy, recovering something from Kennedy's visit that no political repetition has achieved.

RFK in EKY: Performance, Community, and the Legacy of the "Poverty Tour"

The problem with most political repetitions of Kennedy's tour begins with language. Davis explains,

Nobody says, 'I'm impoverished. I live in poverty. My life is full of privation.' They "I'm poor. I'm a working person." And, you know, whenever you turn to the French term, it's always to create a euphemism, and it's said *about* people by others . . . [in] an analytical way that makes people who are being looked at feel small.

"Poverty," Davis contends, is a term of abstraction. It creates distance between the one using the term and one it describes. The various politicians who have made "poverty tours" through Appalachia, then, have begun by marking their distance from the very people they come to connect with, making empathy nearly impossible. The designation "poverty tour" announces the people using it as outsiders, strangers with cameras come to put the region on display for their own political gain.⁷²

So when John Malpede and his wife Henriette Brouwers first began talking with Appalshop about the possibility of a community-wide re-enactment of the Kennedy tour, one the first issues that came up was language. Davis recalls that, although early discussions used the

⁷¹ Davis argues that Sen. Paul Wellstone's trip was very politically efficacious, although it drew almost no national media attention and is seldom discussed in the region. Wellstone did not have Kennedy's celebrity factor. Thus, while he became a successful advocate for Appalachia, he did little to extend the discussion to the nation as a whole.

⁷² While I am not certain of the exact origins of the phrase "poverty tour," I can attest to the fact that it was used by national media to describe RFK's visit to Appalachia in 1968, and it has become commonplace since then.

“poverty tour” term popularized by the media, the language surrounding the project quickly changed: “I think John [and Henriette], by being so close to the people in the community, they began to viscerally understand. You talk about things that are real and you don’t talk about things in abstractions about the people who are in the room with you.” It was things like this—the ability to respond to the community in nuanced and respectful ways—that won over locals like Davis: “I was impressed by the straightforward, hard work, being close to the community approach.”

In fact, it was listening to the community that led Malpede to chose the *RFK in EKY* project. In 2000, Malpede attended an artists’ gathering at the American Festival Project, a now-defunct branch of Appalshop designed to promote collaboration and exchange between community-based arts groups. It was there that he began conversing with people from Appalshop about the possibility of working together. Several options for collaboration were considered, including Kennedy’s 1968 visit. After talking with people from the region and hearing how much they had to say about Kennedy, it became apparent to Malpede that the Kennedy project was the way to go. He spent several months in the fall of 2001 traveling around eastern Kentucky, stopping in each town and asking people if they lived there when Kennedy visited and what they remembered. Appalshop filmmaker and project participant Robert Salyer recalls accompanying Malpede on his visit to Vortex, a town that Salyer describes as “six houses on a road.” At the very first house they visited, the people living there had been there when Kennedy came, and they had a story to tell. This happened over and over. People were thrilled to finally be able to share their stories, to contribute to the archive of community and public history. Ronnie Blair said, “I’ve sat on these tapes and these pictures all these years. And suddenly you came up

with this project. I am thankful you did, because finally they can be used for something other than to pass around at family gatherings.”

The volume of personal memory contributed by the community shaped the project in important ways. Whereas the LAPD production *Agents and Assets* had been a straightforward reenactment, drawing its text from the congressional hearings alone, Malpede quickly saw that *RFK in EKY* called for a different approach. Personal memory became part of the project. Community members were invited to share their stories, photos, and other mementoes from Kennedy’s visit. These were used to create installations and discussions throughout the reenactment. People read letters from Kennedy or spoke about their memories of his visit. The one-room schoolhouse Kennedy visited was re-created with photos of the students from 1968 and Valentines made by local schoolchildren in 2004 (Kennedy’s visit occurred in mid-February). Not only did this give the community a sense of creative influence and ownership in the project, but it also produced a more complicated representation of history. People’s memories differed—as in the case of Kennedy’s shoes. At no point did *RFK in EKY* attempt to “sort out” which memories were accurate and which were not. Memory itself became a site of debate and interrogation in the project.

Characteristic of Malpede’s style as a director, *RFK in EKY* offered multiple points of entry and multiple layers for interpretation. The title of the project itself suggests a kind of objective, journalistic approach that gives balanced attention to both Kennedy and Kentucky. As the straightforward title suggests, this recreation is not trying to evoke emotions or promote a particular position. In casting the project no attempt was made to find persons that looked or sounded like the historical figures they would portray. Malpede has stated that in his performances he is “not looking to collapse or disappear the performer into the character”; it is

important, instead, to maintain an awareness of the presence of *both* figures at the same time in order to think about how those figures—actor and character—relate to one another (“Artist’s Statement”). When local lawyer Jack Faust worried that he would make a better Ted Kennedy than a Robert Kennedy, Malpede assured him that physical similarity was not the point of the project (Dao E12). He wanted Faust to look and sound like Faust. Similarly, Peter Edelman was played by an African-American man. And although participants—including those simply following the reenactment as audience members—were all invited to costume themselves in 1960s fashions, the organizers did not try to costume everyone “down to the last button,” allowing instead for a visual blending of past and present. In a Brechtian way, Malpede wanted the audience to experience the historical moment through the lens of the present—to view them comparatively, and to analyze how we got from there to here.

Beyond maintaining this dual perspective, Malpede does little to guide interpretations and responses to the performances he directs. His goal, he says, is to open up different ways of engaging without trying to focus the response in any particular way. The success of this technique is evident from the range of responses and recollections communicated by the projects’ participants. For many people, the event did evoke strong nostalgia for past, nostalgia which was often connected to the Kennedy mystique, but which was sometimes more local and personal. Loyal Jones was moved by watching Anne Caudill speak her late husband’s words—a response based on his own relationship to Anne and Harry Caudill. Other responses were emotional, but not really about Kennedy at all. Actor Frank Taylor said that the reenactment felt “more like a family reunion would feel, where people would sit around and tell stories . . . [there was] a collective familiarity” (“Neon Days”). Ron Daley, meanwhile, was swept up in his memories of the past, experiencing a “flood of emotions” and feeling it easy to “forget that this

was a re-creation.” All the same, when reflecting on the reenactment in a filmed interview afterwards, Daley also made connections between the divisive nature of political discourse in 1968 and that of 2004, and felt that the reenactment served as a “slap in the face” to be more civically active, even though he already considered himself a passionate and active person. Marie Cirillo similarly saw the performance as a political wake up call: “The fact is that lots of Americans are working hard to keep America a democracy. Lots more people, in their indifference, become a source of discouragement to civic minded citizens. Think about it. This is what the September 8-12 reenactment was all about” (1).⁷³ For Cirillo, the event revived a sense of political activism that she finds lacking today.

Other participants found themselves negotiating the different perspectives—historical and current—created by the project. High school student and performer Brian Gover was highly aware of the dual presence of performer and actor, marveling at how the performance introduced him to his neighbors in new ways: “You get to see their acting side and their real-life side, so you see a part of them that they wouldn’t normally have and that kind of brings out a new part of them that you wouldn’t normally see on an everyday basis.” Jim Webb, who covered the events for Appalshop’s radio station, explained the event this way: “Well, it is a little bit about a war, and it’s a little bit about Vietnam, it’s a little bit about Iraq and it’s a little bit about what’s happening right now in America, and what’s happening in America and Appalachia in 1968” (“Neon Days”). After hearing Kennedy’s conversation with the students of Alice Lloyd College, in which he discussed his position on the Vietnam War, Linda Frye Burnham said, “I just keep

⁷³ The only cynical response to the project that I have encountered comes from French journalist and theatre critic Frédéric Martel, who writes, “By undertaking a reenactment of Kennedy’s visit, *RFK in EKY* demonstrated theater’s power of deconstruction. In spite of the strong feeling Kennedy and his tour can evoke, the theatre made apparent the profound pointlessness of this type of political campaign stop. It is really no more than a media-hungry construction that, several decades later, the theater can openly expose” (84-85). As was the case with Kennedy’s visit in 1968, however, what is apparent to Martel seems to be far from apparent to the people of Kentucky.

thinking, this is the speech I want to hear from John Kerry” (“Alice Lloyd College Panel”). Other participants, like Ginny Norris, were struck by the substantive conversations on issues like segregation, social programming, and war that occurred during the course of the event in both formal and informal ways (“Neon Days”). For these participants, the project created a historical framework through which to discuss contemporary issues.

For Malpede, the main purpose of the project was to put a historical mirror up to the present moment. Peter Edelman, who worked as Kennedy’s aid and accompanied him in 1968, and who also participated in *RFK in EKY*, made a similar connection at a roundtable discussion following the reenactment of Kennedy’s speech at Alice Lloyd College: “In recreating the events of 1968, we really are talking about the future. We can only speak intelligently about the future if we understand the past” (“Alice Lloyd College Panel”). Present issues and future possibilities were explored in historical context. The discussion of Vietnam in the reenactment inspired discussion on the current war in Iraq, parallels that, to Faust, were “almost eerie” (qtd. in Dao E12). Fields notes that whereas the discussion in 1968 had focused mainly on hunger, food stamps, and free and reduced school meals, in 2004 people considered how these problems had largely been solved, but in ways that have led to other problems such as obesity and poor dietary habits. Throughout the event, Edelman talking about the growing gap between the richest and poorest in our nation, asserting that the reason “we keep spending and we can’t seem to reduce the rate on poverty is because the economy has fallen apart so badly for people at the bottom” (Edelman, “Opening speech”). Other events, like a roundtable discussion on the current state of Head Start in eastern Kentucky, dealt directly with the legacy of the War on Poverty. Head Start is one of the few remaining social program created by the War on Poverty legislation still in effect in eastern Kentucky. Head Start teachers in 2004 talked about how the program was

changing such that decisions were no longer being made at the local level, something that had always been critical to Head Start and other War on Poverty programs—part of the controversial “maximum feasible participation” clause.

This framing, aimed at stimulating discussion, marked *RFK in EKY* as different from most historical theatrical re-creations:

Unlike just about every ‘historical recreation’ I’m aware of, this project is not about recreating a battle, or any other kind of violence. It’s about ideas. The force of ideas and about the history of ideas. It’s about the problems confronting the region then and now. And ultimately it’s about the level of political dialogue then and now. (Malpede, “Artist’s Statement”)

Reflecting back on the event later, Malpede notes that some of the best discussions were those that took place informally: “The time spent traveling from sight to sight, was used by audience members to share rides and conversations, and to meet new people by riding in a different car, and to have discussions about what they’d witnessed with each new group” (“Final Artistic Statement”). And the conversations did not end when the project concluded. In one example of the project’s lasting impact, *RFK* staff members united with local Head Start teachers to form a group called EKY Speaks, designed to address the impact of Oxycontin and methamphetamine abuse on the region’s youngest members. In 2006, EKY Speaks developed a short performance, *Oxy Girl*, to address these issues (“Post-Project Community Activities”).

For participants like Davis, the reliance on historical material insured both interpretive freedom and critical engagement. He explains,

What local people said in 1968 is what they were saying again, so I think in a way [*RFK in EKY*] was by definition honest, and I think that in the end was a winning

strategy. It encouraged a more thoughtful approach because it was already in the context of what happened historically. Then, in the conversations afterwards like the one I participated in, you had a starting point, right? You begin with the same antecedent knowledge, then you move from there: “Well, this is a disappointment; we wish this could have happened; this was the benefit nobody talks about.”

Jones similarly felt that the historical context kept the project from dictating a particular response. Revisiting history to see what we can learn from is “not preaching” (Jones). Salyer, meanwhile, was impressed with the level of confidence that this approach invested in its audience:

It wasn’t about just simplifying or dumbing something down. We just put it out there, as complex as it was, and trusted that people involved and the audience would get it, and people did. And not only that, but the community added so much to it that was unexpected that it made it so much richer than we could have planned.

By trusting his audience, Malpede demonstrated his respect for them.

While, as I have argued, *RFK in EKY*’s aim was to incite conversation about local issues, it was also a performance event which asked people to enact their own history. Children played their parents. High school students in 2004 performed the roles of student from 1968 who came to the hearings to protest the flooding of Kingdom Come Creek, learning what it felt like, for a moment, to be an activist. And while personal recollections were an important part of the event, all of the re-enactments called on people to play someone other than themselves, requiring community members to imagine themselves into another time and another perspective. This active imaging led many participants to think not just about their characters and how they were

impacted by poverty, hunger, or any other number of social issues, but about their own relationship to those issues. By performing the past—and, in particular, by performing the political process that influences your current social situation—you learn not only the facts of history, but also where you fit into that history. Malpede applies this same theory to his work with the LAPD: “The creative process of ‘Agents and Assets’ merges experiential knowledge with contextual information, allowing both performers and audience a deeper understanding of the social and political forces that shape their lives” (“RFK in EKY” Project Description). While playing a local woman listening to Kennedy speak in the Fleming-Neon high school gymnasium, Louise Smith had the sense of being two people: “the character and the actor who is playing the part.” “Democracy,” Smith writes,

is precluded [sic] in the notion that we as a people can hold multiple realities together in the same hand, that we can embrace multiple perspectives and distinctive points of view. Watching *RFK in EKY*, I was aware that I was challenged to embody the very notion of democracy in its most fundamental form. I was the woman from the past, in my imagination layered onto the women in the present that looked back on her experience of those years. My mind was analyzing the performance at the same time it was swept away into a hope for the future of the past that I knew had become this present I was standing in.

In one moment, Smith is grappling with two points of view on the same event—with the affective experience of being “in the moment” and the reflective, critical one of looking back on that moment with all the knowledge of the present. Speaking about another LAPD performance, Malpede states, “The important thing is to keep things as confused as possible. Art is about messing up the categories so you can catch people by surprise and expand their awareness” (qtd.

in Anawalt). Similarly, *RFK in EKY* led people to sort out complex layers of representation and performance from the point of view of both audience member and participant.

Performing in the project challenged some participants to rethink their political perspective. Judy Jennings, the Director of the Kentucky Foundation for Women, came to the project seeking a strong feminist role to play and was surprised to find that role in her own Appalachian ancestors. She writes, “I am sorry to say that it did not occur to me that the persons with feminist leanings would be the local women But they were” (Jennings). This realization led Jennings to rethink her approach to feminism, pondering whether or not “some women and some issues got ‘lost’ in the urban-based feminism focusing on the work place.” Through a combination of historical analysis and the embodied, affective knowledge provided by performance, *RFK in EKY* prompted participants to think about themselves in relation to larger social, historical, and political forces.

In her book *Local Acts*, performance scholar Jan Cohen-Cruz writes that “Community-based performance is as much about building community as it is about expressing it” (100). Shannon M. Turner, a student of Directing and Public Dialogue at Virginia Tech, wrote similarly of *RFK in EKY* that “the project was more than ‘community-based art making.’ It was truly an experience in ‘art-based community making.’” What Cohen-Cruz and Turner describe is a concept of community and belonging based not on geography or ethnicity or even shared belief, but on participation and engagement. This engagement began well before the actual performance took place. In the cast and crew talkback, Fields marveled at how responsive the community had been to requests for mementoes, supplies, and assistance (“Neon Days”). *RFK in EKY* took a group of artists, local politicians and activists, and eastern Kentucky residents and formed them into a community—a group of people with differing backgrounds and opinions who chose to

spend several days together (or years, if you take planning into account) engaged in a common pursuit: one which challenged them to think about history, politics, the kind of community they were, and the kind of community they wanted to be. Kennedy may have been the historical and affective focal point of the event, but in some ways, *RFK in EKY* was not about Kennedy at all, but about the community. Kennedy's trip provided a frame, saying, in effect, "let's all think ourselves into this same moment in history, a moment when a different kind of 'we' seemed possible—a 'we' created by respect for each and every person and recognition of each individual's capacity to assess his or her own social condition and how it ought best be addressed." Structuring the event around the affectively-charged figure of Kennedy allowed participants to feel the hope and excitement of that possible past and challenged them into conversation about how they might revive that hope—how they might rebecome that which they never were but wished they might be.

Still, I caution against reading *RFK in EKY* simply as a utopian performative or even as a means of producing *communitas*.⁷⁴ To be sure, it was an emotionally-charged event that brought the community together and invested in the hope and promise of democracy—a promise enacted by the very collaborative nature of the project itself. Salyer, who is about my age, notes that before participating in the project, he "didn't really get the *Kennedy* thing," but after the reenactment he felt that he did:

It's all of this unfulfilled potential. The family sort of represented for the people here the unfulfilled potential of this area. They could relate. Okay, Kennedy had all these ideas, but then he was killed. And Kentucky, well, if we had only figured

⁷⁴ Jill Dolan defines utopian performative as theatrical moments that enact utopic ideals, allowing us to experience radical democracy, hope, or intersubjectivity, if only for that moment (5). (For a more in-depth discussion of utopian performatives, see the next chapter). *Communitas* is a term used by Victor Turner to describe a state of social relations, usually achieved through ritual, in which social hierarchies and boundaries dissolve, producing a basically undifferentiated community of equals. See "Liminality and Communitas" in *The Performance Studies Reader*.

out another economy besides coal, then maybe we would be better off. There's this empathy for the Kennedys because the people who live here understand what it means to fall and to not succeed.

Malpede, on the other hand, says that the project was not about identification and empathy, but about our relationship to history and, especially, to the political process. Does the experience of empathy, then, make this event a failure? Does it slip too far into the affective realm, taking us away from the critical engagement with history that Malpede desires?

The short answer is no, for multiple reasons. First, to restrict empathy as a possible means of engaging the event would have conflicted with Malpede's desire to allow people to engage freely. He may want to provoke critical thinking, and he uses a variety of techniques—including unlikely casting and numerous “contextualizing events” on the state of Appalachia today—to encourage such thinking, but Malpede's working style is democratic in both his creation process and his performance aesthetic (*RFK in EKY/Art and Democracy*). What you have to contribute, you contribute. How you respond, you respond. This leads me to my second point about the nature of empathy in *RFK in EKY*: As with Kennedy's visit, the empathy that emerged out of the reenactment did so because people felt respected and heard. They were treated as participants and equals, not as an audience or electorate to be manipulated. Given the history of representation in the region, this is no small thing. Thus, the empathy that Appalachians felt in *RFK in EKY* was, in many ways, not just an act of emotional bonding, but a means of taking back political discourse, reclaiming their history and the way that they have been represented, exploited, and sensationalized. By speaking the words of their friends, neighbors, and ancestors, the participants in *RFK in EKY* reminded themselves and others that empathy—empathy that matters, anyway—comes not from outpourings of emotion in response to images of suffering,

but through difficult discourse. As emotional as it was, for instance, for Phyllis Buckner to play her own recently deceased mother in the reenactment (she even wore her mother's dress), her emotional response was accompanied by a critical one: "By them [Malpede and Appalshop] doing this, it has shown that eastern Kentucky has moved up some, but it needs to continue to grow. We need more stuff here. Just like they wanted in '68. We still want it." The project allowed Buckner to stand in her mother's shoes, reclaiming a piece of her own history even as she thought critically about the present. The emotional engagement strengthened the critical one.

As Fields said, you can't fake empathy, and neither can you fake respect, engagement, and collaboration. One of the first things that Malpede and Brouwers did right was that they moved to Kentucky for the duration of the project. They did not sweep in with an artistic vision, a camera, or a script. They settled down and got to know people. Then, they built a performance that drew both from the official historical record and from the community's memories. Salyer points out that this approach—of just listening to what people have to say—is also what worked for Kennedy, and it is the guiding philosophy behind Appalshop's work: "The way you get that story is you let people speak for themselves. And that's the big difference. Those hearings—they're this document. It's on the record. These people said that. And I think that was really important for people to know—that what I'm saying is not just going to be lost." You did not even have to have a story to be a part of the project. Local people donated clothes for the reenactment, and local hairstylists styled participants' hair during the pancake breakfasts that kicked off each day. A flier sent out to the community asked people to participate as actors, technicians, logistics wizzes, classic car buffs, documenters, and writers. There was a role for everyone who wanted to be involved. Hunt says that one of the project's aims was to show "what people in Eastern Kentucky can do, which means what people anywhere can do" (qtd. in Ferrell

25). It seems to have worked. More than 1,000 people are estimated to have been involved in some level of planning or performance (Ferrell 25). Although this number does include some community-based and site-specific performance artists from outside the region who worked on the project or attended the performance, the vast majority were eastern Kentucky locals. During the talkback, numerous participants commented on how amazed they were by the scale of the project and by what they, as a group, had accomplished.

Without this sense of ownership and accomplishment, the empathy inspired in *RFK in EKY* might have been politically empty—a feeling that comforts us for a time, assuring us that, if nothing else, at least we “feel right” about things. We know what a just world should feel like, so *we* must be good, even if the world is not. This kind of empathy is likely to pass through us like a wave, perhaps leaving a slightly nostalgic residue, the vague trace of a wish that the world had turned out differently, if only Kennedy had lived. Such feelings do nothing to help the people of Appalachia, who still feel that they are not seen or heard by the rest of the nation. In spite of its Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award, programs like Diane Sawyer’s do not help, perpetuating, instead, the sense that the region’s problems are only worth our attention when they can be sensationalized for television ratings. Real conversation and real political action are lacking.

What made *RFK in EKY* so different from programs like Sawyer’s or Kuralt’s, or any politician since Kennedy who has journeyed to Kentucky to talk about poverty, was not only the level of conversation it invited, but also the fact that, like other community-based performances, it was of, by, and *for* the people of Kentucky. Richard Owen Geer defines this kind of performance as follows:

A community performing its own culture for its own ends is community performance. This type of performance, according to England’s John McGrath,

can accomplish several things: enrich cultural identity, amplify marginal voices, attack cultural homogeneity, increase community self-determination, and challenge dominant power structures.

RFK in EKY, I think, did all of these things. But by performing for each other, and not for a national audience, *RFK in EKY* also allowed the people of eastern Kentucky to do something else. They were able to engage in and to experience empathy *without* performing their hardships for an outside audience. They were, in effect, able to re-focus the scenario through which their relationship to the nation has been understood, establishing themselves as social actors rather than as pawns and victims. Thus, the empathy experienced during the reenactment may have consisted of a neighbor's empathy for her neighbor, a child's empathy for a parent, or a community's empathy for itself. As a magnetic empathetic figure, Kennedy helped mobilize this empathy, but he was not necessarily the object or source of all empathy in the project. Salyer comments that, through the reenactment, he was struck by how "even in this big circus, this huge media event, this huge political event, [Kennedy] was able to connect with people in a really intimate way. Because of that, I think, the performance had that element in it too. People were connecting in an intimate way during the circus of this reenactment." And, since Kennedy was performed by a local man in *RFK in EKY*, even his empathy for Appalachians became, in a way, a mutual empathy—a chance for a community to look at itself with respect, caring, and critical understanding.

The community bonding that occurred derived not simply from celebrating the community, but also from taking a hard look at the problems and issues that persist in Appalachia. Davis remarks, "What John and Henriette did was that they invited us into a critical conversation about our own place and our own history that has persistently been very difficult

for us to come to terms with.” Malpede asserts that the project “engendered conversations without our having to pull teeth” (qtd. in Dao E12). The issues were all there, part of the history being re-performed: jobs, nutrition, health care, war. All that it took to start a new conversation was to repeat an old one: “A woman was rehearsing a scene in which she plays a nurse concerned about hunger when she suddenly exclaimed, ‘But this still goes on today!’” (Dao E12). *RFK in EKY* allowed people to make their own connections, discoveries, and emotional attachments, without the worry that delving into these issues would place them in the national spotlight in a negative way or force them to enact victimization. It allowed them to reclaim political discourse, representation, and even empathy.

John Edwards: Recycling Political Emotion?

Repetitions of Kennedy’s trip did not end with *RFK in EKY*. In the long run-up to the 2008 presidential election, Democrats, striving for ways to excite a cynical electorate and to motivate their own party on par with the ways in which the Republicans had mobilized the conservative base, turned repeatedly to the Kennedy legacy for guidance. John and Robert were quoted with even more frequency than they usually are. Ted was courted for his endorsement. Echoes of the 1960s reverberated as candidates declared the need for public service and community action. John Edwards engaged in the most overt act of political citation by conducting his own “poverty tour.” Not only did his “Road to One America” tour re-trace Kennedy’s 1968 route through Kentucky, but it also included visits to Marks, Mississippi, and Memphis, Tennessee, sites from Martin Luther King Jr.’s Poor People’s march from that same legendary year.⁷⁵ Like any performance, the campaign rehearsed past performances—forging a

⁷⁵ The name of the tour also evokes the title of Harrington’s book, *The Other America*.

“new” road for the nation by carefully following a road already traveled by the most popular political and social figures of recent history.

Edwards, like the other Democratic candidates, was attempting to reach into the past and revive a political feeling that we had not experienced in this nation in some time: a sense of hope, of solidarity, of a responsibility to look out for the needs of the many, rather than the few. These are not just political *ideas*; they are feelings—about what is right and just, about who we are as a nation, about what constitutes a “good life” and how we will provide that life for our citizens. And in 2008, for many liberals (in the process of re-branding themselves “progressives”), these were feelings that we seemed to have lost. Negativity was winning. People were responding to messages of fear and hate. There was a clear sense, politically, that the Republicans knew how to use emotions in their favor while Democrats did not. What better solution than to turn to something that has worked in the past?

How do you motivate feeling that is “lost”? Attempts like Edwards’, which relied so clearly on the legacy of past political heroes, are in some ways examples of what Stjepan G. Meštrović has dubbed the “postemotional society.” Postemotional society, Meštrović argues, draws on and recycles “dead” emotions (feelings from the past, rather than what is immediately at hand). This is not because there is no emotion in postemotional society; in fact, Meštrović argues that there is quite a lot of it, but that the emotions produced by Western society today are in large part divorced from our current circumstances. They are, instead, “bite-size, pre-packaged, rationally manufactured emotions – a ‘happy meal’ of emotions – that are consumed by the masses” (Meštrović xi). We feel, Meštrović argues, more as a matter of public performance (Meštrović uses the term “display”) than because we experience authentic feeling.

I should say at the outset that I find Meštrović's theory deeply problematic, but not without certain useful elements. Meštrović is invested in nostalgia for an idealized past when "good" and "bad" were easily distinguishable categories to which we could respond with the "appropriate" emotions. He locates the source of our current emotional confusion as an excess of sympathy. On both of these counts, I find him simply wrong. On the other hand, Meštrović's idea of the "recycling" of emotion suggests to me a corollary to the ways in which scenarios "reactivate" ideas, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. As we search for ways to make meaning, we reach for the narrative affective structures that seem to "fit." Or, as happens with political campaigns, these scenarios and emotions are offered to us, ready-made packages of meaning delivered for our consumption.

For Meštrović, the postemotional society is the result of a widespread inability to feel clearly about situations. Drawing on David Riesman's theory of other-directed persons, Meštrović argues that we have grown so accustomed to seeing all sides of a situation that we are no longer able to rely on our emotions to guide us toward morally or ethically sound positions. He writes,

Other-directed types are prone to ambivalence because they are sensitive to all sides of every issue, including the point of view of the victimizer. This is especially true if the victimizers come across on the television screen as charming and sincere. The result of this sensitivity is that other-directed postemotional types are left feeling confused and unable to translate indignation into action. The result of this inability to act decisively is that the senseless death of innocents, even when it is widely known, goes unpunished. (143)

According to Meštrović, we are so dependent on others to provide our emotional cues that we have become passive victims of emotional indecision. So we draw upon the past, recycling old emotions in an attempt to solve our current confusion. In place of over-analysis, we opt for no analysis, for emotions without meaning or relevance to our lives.

The problems here are numerous. First, how are we to determine what constitutes an “authentic” emotion and what does not? Just because a particular feeling is produced by mass culture, does that make it less “real”? When were feelings not culturally produced and managed?⁷⁶ While I agree that many people today are in search of an “authentic” emotional experience—implying that they sense something inauthentic about their current emotional experience—I do not necessarily agree that this feeling is widespread or that there is such a thing as an “authentic” emotion that can be differentiated from a culturally produced emotion. Furthermore, by attributing all inaction to emotional confusion and too much sympathy (which, given how he uses the term, might be better understood as empathy), Meštrović dismisses other reasons for not acting: financial reasons, selfish reasons, the general difficulty of motivating people to take action, especially concerning those outside our immediate social sphere. He thinks that clear feeling, uncomplicated by over-rationalization or emotional manipulation by which we are made to feel for the victimizer, is what is missing from the world today.⁷⁷ If only we had it

⁷⁶ Aristotle argues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that citizens must be “habituated to feel,” and in particular to feel pleasure and pain “rightly” in order to insure virtue and morality. Passions in and of themselves are not virtuous for Aristotle. What matters is how and when we feel them: “For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue” (958).

⁷⁷ He is, in particular, distressed over the loss of indignation—not fury or rage or sorrow or grief, but indignation—which suggests to me that what Meštrović is really nostalgic for is the ability to feel and express moral outrage. Thus, sympathy (or empathy) becomes the core of the problem because it forces us to engage all parties, an option that almost nearly disallows moral outrage (at least, if you understand sympathy and empathy the way Meštrović does, as a manipulative process by which we come to feel fellow-feeling in spite of ourselves). In Meštrović’s examples, there are clear aggressors and victims, and the sympathizer is being “had” through emotional

back, we would be able to act. Finally, Meštrović critiques “dead” emotions brought up from the past even as he engages in his own nostalgia for a (imagined) past when children were innocent, bad guys were simply bad, and moral indignation allowed us to act without second-guessing. I do not entirely miss this world, which only ever existed as a social construction anyway, as much as I may dislike what he calls the “McDonalidization” of emotions—the management of how we feel that keeps the world operating smoothly. There is a difference between consuming emotions as commodities because we are accustomed to consuming everything in that way and the very real, potential ethical complications that may result from empathy, a difference Meštrović refuses to recognize.⁷⁸

As noted above, where I find Meštrović’s theory useful is in regard to the way that emotions may be recycled in political discourse as a way of shaping how we understand or respond to a candidate and his or her “vision” for the nation. The “recycling” and rehearsing of emotions that Meštrović decries seems particular popular in political campaigns, where emotions are always part of a performance designed to produce very specific responses. And the recycling that occurs in political campaigns often obscures historical context. For instance, our first African-American president positions himself as a modern-day Lincoln, citing the man who deftly championed radical change by citing the words and beliefs of a group of dead, white men who had created a slave nation. Meštrović is right, I suspect, to say that when we are confused emotionally or when we are scared by the implications of what we face, “dead” emotions can be comforting guides; the past is a reassuring refuge.

manipulation. And surely this happens. But does this mean there is no place or use for seeing multiple perspectives? Meštrović wants a world where good and evil are uncomplicated concepts.

⁷⁸ It is worth noting that Meštrović published his book in 1997, before the events of September 11, 2001, which introduced, at least in the United States, a renewed sense of emotional and moral clarity, one that points to the dangers of “returning” to the world that Meštrović misses so much. Certainty of feeling and moral rightness can be as dangerous, if not much more dangerous, than uncertainty—as evidenced by both the actions of Islamic fundamentalists and the U.S. government in respond to the attacks of 9/11.

The problem with dead emotions is not that they are dead and gone (can an emotion die?), but that they are disconnected from present circumstances. I argue that, in Edwards' case, he was the very source of this disconnect. When Edwards went to Kentucky, he was attempting to revive two things: the national discourse on poverty, and the hope and political excitement that surrounded the Kennedys. He endeavored to replicate the affective resonances of Kennedy's trip by repeatedly insisting that he had not come to campaign but to "listen." But he failed to create that sense of intimacy and empathy that Kentuckians experienced from Kennedy. I want to suggest that he failed, in part, because he attempted to revive empathy without taking the time to engage people in a way that would actually *produce* empathy. Edwards did not give the people of Appalachia his full attention. It was divided, instead, between Appalachia and the wider national audience. Finally, because he was engaged in a political campaign, Edwards' offered the people of the region a vision of change that did not include them as participants, and thus an empathy that did not engage them as equals or as partners. As a result, Edwards' "Road to One America" tour reveals how the recycling of emotions can fail. Using Meštrović's notion of emotions as consumable products, we might say the people of Appalachia were hesitant to "buy into" what Edwards was selling. Empathy, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, is a *process*, not a product. It cannot be exchanged. It must be done.

Edwards' campaign manager, David Bonier, explained that the purpose of the "Road to One America" tour was both to call attention to and to humanize the 37 million Americans living in poverty. "They are not just statistics," He told reporters. "They are human beings with hopes and aspirations" (Bonier qtd. in Taylor). The notion of "putting a face" on a social ill is, of course, intimately linked to the project of empathy. It relies on the idea that we must consider the individual affected by the social ill, understanding him or her as a person like ourselves. This

comment is indicative of the kind of empathy Edwards sought to create—empathy *of* mainstream American *for* those living in poverty. The campaign publicity explained, “The tour is intended to shine a light on places and people struggling with poverty and highlight solutions to restore economic fairness building on the principles of work, opportunity, and families” (“Building One America”). Thus, while he told the people of Kentucky that he was there to listen *to* them, he told the nation that he was there to expose them, another stranger with a camera come to illuminate the shadowy world of poverty.⁷⁹ Local journalist Homer Marcum put it this way: “John Edwards is making news this week by focusing on ‘poverty.’ The subject’s being treated by the media hoard who follow him as if poverty is a disease, or worse, a self-indulgent habit like smoking, waiting for someone like John Edwards to announce a cure.” As Marcum’s comment indicates, Kentuckians were not viewed, at least by the national media, as partners in the effort to end poverty.

The solutions Edwards offered and the issues he highlighted further reminded both the Kentucky audience and the wider audience of the country that Edwards was engaged in a national campaign, and thus that the particular problems of Appalachia were not necessarily at the forefront of his concerns. While he talked about guaranteed sick days for all workers and other labor protections, the people of eastern Kentucky worried about the fact that the only new industry they seem able to attract is the prison industry, in part because there are no major interstates in the region, making it difficult to access (and, in the minds of many, making it an ideal place to send convicts—out of public sight) (OneCarolinaGirl). Certainly, job protections matter to everyone, but the people of eastern Kentucky have particular concerns, which Edwards did not address. Every speech Edwards made had two audiences: the people of eastern Kentucky

⁷⁹ Recall the title of Sawyer’s program: “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains.”

and the rest of the nation. It is very hard to have intimate conversation when your comments are aimed at two different audiences, each with different needs and concerns. Kentucky journalists Jamie Lucke and Don McNay sensed the presence of this “other” audience by suggesting that Edwards’ discussion on poverty was targeted not at those already below the poverty line, but rather at the American middle class who, in 2007, was just beginning to feel the pressure of rising health insurance costs, exorbitant interest rates on their credit cards, and the danger of landing upside-down in the mortgages (“Comment on Kentucky”).

Interpreting Kentuckians’ responses to Edwards is, in many ways, a matter of reading an absence. For the most part, the Kentuckians with whom I have discussed his tour had little to say about it one way or the other. I have heard, more than once, the neutral comment, “It was good that he came.” Most Kentuckians want a broader national discourse on the problems in their region, and thus recognize any political attention as potentially helpful, although years of poverty tourism has taught them to be skeptical of any real changes as a result of these political drive-bys. In spite of his distaste for the “poverty tour” designation, Davis insists that it’s better for people to come with the wrong vocabulary than not to come at all. In a commentary for National Public Radio, he said, about the 2008 presidential primary campaign, that he wished all the candidates were coming to Kentucky: “These things matter. It is not about party; it’s about eyeballs. And there are sights that need seeing. . . . When the rest of the country never sees the broken families and children cut adrift from addiction, then a pharmaceutical company can get off with a fine and a pat on the rump for years of dumping pain drugs like OxyContin into these rural communities” (“In Rural Poverty Fight”). The problem with Edwards’ tour, Davis communicated to me in a separate interview, was that the national media who came with him paid no attention to these things, insisting, instead, on focusing on the candidate. Davis

remembers Edwards as being very moved by the people he met and the stories they told. He also recounts how, one after one, each reporter would take his or her turn riding with Edwards, and, one after one, they would ask about his \$400 haircut, about the cost of his house, about his wife's health. It wasn't until an intern from Appalshop took her turn interviewing Edwards that he was asked a single question about rural policy. If that is how the national media is going to operate, Davis asks, "How can you expect to have any honest discourse?" Davis recalls a conversation he had with Joe Biden's pollster, who told him that poverty was a "losing term" politically, a sure way to turn people off from your message.

In a sense, Edwards could not get out of his own way. He wanted to call national attention to poverty, and he used himself and his campaign to do so—and it worked, to a degree. There was a significant media presence on the "Road to One America" tour, but it was Edwards, not the towns or people he visited, that remained the focus of the media's attention. The issues he hoped to raise went largely ignored, and the sense of empathy he hoped to provoke seemed not to materialize, because Edwards was always directing his attention at two audiences: the national one and the local one. Because of this, the Edwards campaign provided subtle suggestions that the empathy Edwards was offering was not one of parity. Here, again, his status as candidate worked against his desire to build empathy and intimacy.

Campaigning is different from listening, and seeking votes is different from sitting down at the table and working together for political solutions. Ultimately, Edwards' tour promoted increased citizenship through political proxy. The poor would be heard *through* him. Whereas Kennedy has emphasized that solutions must come from all levels, from citizenry to government, Edwards argued that those in poverty "need somebody to speak for them" (NCDemAmy). Even his message of national unity relied on structural disparity. He assured the crowds gathered

around the steps of the Floyd County Courthouse, “We see you. We hear you. We are with you. And we will not forget you” (Edwards). Who is the “we” that hears the “you,” and how are we *with* you if there is any risk at all of us forgetting you? By performing himself as the one responsible for unity, for leading us on the road to “one” America, and for communicating the message of the underprivileged, Edwards depicted citizenship as a mere matter of electing the right representative. Edwards thus sought to assure rural and poverty-stricken communities that their needs and concerns as citizens would finally be recognized through the same representational democracy that had failed them for so long. Falling short of actually seeing and hearing the people of the region, he risked using them as props, set-dressing in his performance of political empathy, a critique made rather pointedly by an internet video satirizing Edwards’ campaign tour by depicting it as a rock concert tour featuring “1,800 miles of soul-crushing poverty” (“236.com”). Here, again, Edwards succeeded more in reactivating the scenario in which Appalachians are used as political props designed to provoke empathy that unites the majority of the nation, but still manages to leave out the very people for whom the feeling is motivated, than in building an empathetic connection between him and people of Kentucky. Empathy, of the sort that seems to have occurred in 1968, requires focused engagement between two parties who are willing, at least for a time, to put that engagement above all other concerns.

Repetition as Exploration

At the beginning of this chapter, I asked what we might discover if we focused not on the *ends* of repetition, but on the act and process of repeating itself, and how this shift of focus might impact the way we understand empathy in relationship to performance. What is the difference between a repetition aimed simply at reproducing an emotion and one that permits us to embody and relive the past in such a way that we change our relationship to it—physically, affectively,

and intellectually? Instead of presenting their past to the people of Appalachia, Malpede and Appalshop allowed the people most impacted by the history in question to undertake the repetition of that history and avoided as much as possible dictating their response. Political repetitions of Kennedy's visit, meanwhile, are generally intent on reproducing an *effect*—that peculiar mix of empathy, nostalgia, hope, magic, tragedy, intimacy, and inaccessibility that defines "It." But empathy is not an effect; it is a process. If you aim for empathy, focusing only on the end result, then you are likely to ignore the very process through which empathy occurs. Kentuckians have been told for long enough how they should feel about their situation, how they should perform that feeling for an outside audience, and how others should feel about their circumstances in return. They have no interest in perpetuating stale stereotypes or performing their suffering so that a nation may be induced to care, but they do have an interest in addressing their problems and engaging people—both from within and beyond the region—in real discussion about what those problems are and how to go about solving them. By creating multiple points of entry, multiple layers of meaning, and multiple ways of participating, *RFK in EKY* allowed the people of eastern Kentucky the chance to situate themselves within a new scenario and to learn from that experience. No longer responsive to the desires and expectations of an outside audience, Kentuckians were able to take back their place in political discourse. And this, not ardent displays of feeling in rousing campaign speeches, produced a useful empathy.

The other thing that made *RFK in EKY* different from political reenactments of Kennedy's tour was that it was in no way trying to revive Kennedy in the form of a new political figure. Kennedy is dead, and *RFK in EKY* accepted that basic fact in a way that the political repetitions of Kennedy's tour have not. The various politicians who have followed Kennedy's trail have, in effect, been auditioning for the role of surrogate, trying to fill a vacancy made

particularly powerful because we have decided that this vacancy has precluded certain social changes.⁸⁰ If only we could fill it; if only we could right the diverted course of history, we would put ourselves back on track to become what we were always meant to be. But, although there was a man playing Kennedy in *RFK in EKY*, at no point was Jack Faust trying to be the “new” Kennedy. This was not repetition as surrogation, but as exploration. The community, faced with the knowledge that Kennedy would not come again in any guise, was able to have the conversation that needed to occur among *themselves*. No political savior required.

Berlant is correct that empathy, in and of itself, does nothing. But how we attempt to produce empathy can matter a great deal. Empathy that grows out of participation, engagement, and questioning might do a lot—because there has been participation, engagement, and questioning. And this kind of empathy, built on mutual exploration and dynamic social conversation, is not likely to take the form of an emotional sludge that mires you in one place. There is no “right” way to feel about *RFK in EKY*, the history it recounts, or today’s corollaries—or, if there are “right” ways to feel, the performance does not tell us what they are. That is, if anything, a topic for community conversation. The way to create this kind of empathy is not to try to produce a particular emotional or critical response. Neither is it to attempt to reinvigorate a lost political icon or to recycle emotions to win elections. Rather, the way to create empathy is to engage one another honestly in the shared exploration of an issue. *RFK in EKY* suggests that rather than thinking of empathy as a tool of the theatre, a effect we create to motivate social change, we might think of it as a activity concomitant to a collaborative creative process—a process that is democratic, complex, dialogic, affective, and critical. I develop this

⁸⁰ As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Roach develops the concept of surrogation in *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (1996).

idea, of how we might look to the process of theatre making for models of empathetic engagement, in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

REHEARSALS: NAOMI WALLACE AND THE LABOR OF EMPATHY

In Naomi Wallace's play *In the Heart of America* (1994), set during the first Gulf War, the character Remzi poses this question to Craver, his fellow soldier and soon-to-be lover: "Let's say I'm lying over there, dead as can be, and then you see it's me, from a distance. But you still have to walk over to my body to check it out. So, how would you walk?" (Wallace 88) In this scene, the first scene in the play between the two men, Remzi is asking Craver to define their relationship. He is also asking Craver to travel the distance between them, a distance delineated by race and class—Remzi is Palestinian-American and Craver is self-described "White Trash" from Kentucky. It is a distance, furthermore, created by the military ban on same-sex relationships. In what follows, the two men improvise, revise, and negotiate the most appropriate physical representation of their relationship. The result of their efforts is a walk which evokes the crossing of these multiple boundaries.

Remzi's question is a call for critical analysis. What is the space between us, and what does it mean? It is also a call for affective engagement. How Craver might walk depends not only on their social circumstances, but also on how he feels toward Remzi. Craver, however, does not answer these questions alone. Significantly, what follows Remzi's question is not an answer, but a dialogue. To "arrive" at a final walk, the two men undertake many journeys, trying out different emotions and attitudes toward one another and toward the situation in which they imagine themselves. In the process, they exchange roles, imagining themselves into the other, contemplating how he might feel and behave. They build on one other's ideas, ask questions, and offer one another critical commentary. These multiple journeys from self to other and back again challenge models of empathy in which affect moves—or seems to move—from one body to

another and from a clear origin to a clear destination, crowding out other ways of thinking and feeling in the process. The scene between Remzi and Craver suggests, instead, a multi-directional empathy built through revision, collaboration, and negotiation. The characters *rehearse* their way to empathy.

In this chapter, I argue that Wallace's plays call our attention to the actor's *work* in rehearsal—work that is both affective and cognitive. In rehearsal, we practice feeling and responding differently—letting our responses derive from unfamiliar circumstances and exploring the perspective of a character who might be quite different from ourselves. As I argue below, rehearsing, as it is presented in the context of Wallace's plays, requires estranging *and* empathizing, reasoning *and* feeling. Her plays also explore how the work of rehearsal can aid us in the process of what I call getting “beside ourselves,” a state in which we understand the self as vulnerable, socially-constructed, and changeable. Here, I draw on two different notions of how we might be “beside ourselves”: the affective sense of being undone by love for another or grief over the loss of that other and a sense suggesting critical distance, stepping “outside” of ourselves to assume an analytical perspective on our actions and situation. In both instances, what we experience when “beside ourselves” may change us. The empathy achieved under these circumstances will be equally changeable, subject to constant negotiation—an empathy, in other words, that consists not in “arriving” at understanding, but in an ongoing labor that requires continual engagement with an other.

By focusing on the actor's labor, I am also calling for a revised consideration of the relationship between empathy and estrangement in feminist performance. A great deal of feminist scholarship on Brecht has focused on his notion of complex seeing—viewing the world historically and dialectically (Brecht 44). This notion is central to the work of Sue-Ellen Case

and Janelle Reinelt, to Alisa Solomon's *Re-Dressing the Cannon* (1997), and to Elin Diamond's *Unmaking Mimesis* (1997). Solomon argues that Brecht's theatre "demands that we perceive things as they are and, at the same time, as other than they are" (74). Diamond pursues specifically how critical seeing impacts the representation of gender, writing:

the female performer, unlike her filmic counterpart, connotes not 'to-be-looked-at-ness' – the perfect fetish – but rather 'looking-at-being-looked-at-ness' or even just 'looking-ness.' . . . this Brechtian-feminist body is paradoxically available for *both* analysis and identification, paradoxically within representation while refusing its fixity. (52)

These arguments privilege the act of viewing and the negotiation of representation that occurs between a performer and a spectator. Without negating any of these lessons, I would suggest that there is much more that we can learn from a Brechtian feminist theatre—particularly from the practice of *doing* such theatre—especially when it is practiced in conjunctions with empathetic methods of acting. What does it feel like to estrange our world? How might critical seeing be aided by imagining the other's point of view or embodying new behaviors? One of the lessons of feminism has been the need to acknowledge forms of labor that have historically gone unrecognized. What I am proposing, then, is a Brechtian feminist theatre that acknowledges the imbricated labor of mind and body, affect and intellect. These forms of labor, I argue, are the work of the actor.

As the scene cited at the opening of the chapter indicates, Wallace foregrounds the process of theatre-making by structuring play-acting, games, and rehearsals into the narrative of her plays. These moments do not simply reveal the constructed nature of representation, as a Brechtian feminist reading of her work like those discussed above might contend, but also

explore more broadly how the games and collaborations that we undertake in theatrical rehearsals might serve as tools for pursuing social change. Characters in Wallace's plays frequently engage in imaginative scenarios that serve as rehearsals for the future. In *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* (1999), Pace Creagan and Dalton Chance "practice" running across a railroad trestle to beat an oncoming train. On one level, these scenes resemble a child's game of "let's pretend." On another level, they are attempts to revise the past and to create an as-yet undetermined future. They are a way for characters to work out what it means to live in the world and what it would take to change that world. The audience witnesses characters in the act of empathizing and observing, testing and re-testing, and pausing for critical analysis, all in the pursuit of a more equitable and just world. By making rehearsal integral to how her characters confront their problems, Wallace reveals how the work of social change might resemble the work of an actor in rehearsal. This work demands a complex blending of affective and cognitive acting methodologies—appropriate given that the changes these characters seek are both material and affective. They want jobs that pay, but they also want to *feel* at home in the world, accepted and supported in spite of their economic status, gender, or sexual orientation. Structural changes alone would not suffice, nor would increased tolerance. Wallace thus suggests that neither doing nor feeling alone can produce social change. Rather, we must embrace the complex interplay between affect and action. Consequently, her characters do not simply *perform a gestus*; they *build* it, and they do so together. They do not engage in uncritical empathic attachments or identifications; they enter tentatively into affective relationships, sensing boundaries, exploring limits, and deliberating over the results of their endeavors. If we are to use theatre as means of creating social change, these plays suggest, then we must understand it not as the passing moment when we are, according to Brecht, shocked into a new awareness of the social world, or

even, in Jill Dolan's sense, affectively engaged in a moment of utopian possibility.⁸¹ We must, instead, understand theatre as labor, as process, as *rehearsal*. Empathy is part of this labor—significant not as a passing feeling but as something we *do* in collaboration with others.

It is crucial that the labor of empathy be a labor of equals. For empathy to work, it cannot be based in hierarchies. It is important to note, however, that a lack of hierarchy does not imply sameness between subjects. As Remzi and Craver explore the space “between” them, they explore their social differences, in particular, how their respective statuses as minority subjects may be both similar and different in ways that are more qualitative than quantitative. Stated otherwise, whatever may exist “between” them, they are, as subjects, “beside” one another. In *Touching Feeling*, Eve Kosofsky Segwick suggests that “beside” moves us away from the hierarchies and teleologies implied by prepositions like “beneath” and “beyond.” Her definition of “beside” suggests a positionality open to both affective and critical relationships: “*Beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations” (Segwick 8). These terms suggest difference and distance (ex. “differentiating”), but also impact and effect (ex. “repelling” and “attracting”). I am interested in this notion of “besideness” because it implies the space needed for critical observation without losing the sense that what we observe may nevertheless also affect us, and we it. In acting

⁸¹ I am referring to Dolan's concept of the utopian performative, theatrical moments that “perform” or enact utopian ideals. Dolan writes that “The very present-tenseness of performance lets audiences imagine utopia not as some idea of future perfection that might never arrive, but as brief enactments of the possibilities of a process that starts now, in this moment at the theater” (17). For Dolan, this moment of affective engagement helps propel us toward the better future, meaning that utopian performatives are rehearsals for that future. She writes, “These moments, then, are cousins to the ideas of Brazilian radical performance theorist Augusto Boal as well as to Brecht, in that they provoke affective rehearsals for revolution” (7). What I want to propose, here and throughout this essay, is that using rehearsal in this way, to refer to an act meant to be repeated in the future, obscures the labor necessary to produce that act. Do we happen upon these moments accidentally? Are they available to us because we already know what the world ought to be? I contend that the answer is “no.” We have to work at the future, building it through trial and error.

terms, we might think of the Brechtian actor as one who stands “beside” her character, maintaining her separate identity and attitude while holding the character apart from the self for analysis. As he writes in “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting,” “the artist observes himself,” rendering this act of observation and analysis visible to the audience in the process (Brecht 92). For both Segwick and Brecht, to be “beside” is not simply to establish distance, but also relationship.

To be “beside oneself” also evokes the idea of being affectively undone, a condition that Judith Butler associates with the sociality of bodily life. In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler argues that our bodies are constituted by and through others—not just through the norms that enable our recognition as social subjects, but also through our mutual vulnerability. She cites love, grief, rage, and susceptibility to the violence of others as examples of the sociality of being: “that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves, for one another” (22). We are constituted and changed by our interactions and relations with others. “Let’s face it,” she writes, “We’re undone by each other. . . . [O]ne is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel” (Butler 19). When I use the term “beside oneself,” then, I am also referring to a sense that the “self” is always contingent upon others, a sense that we have, in a way, *always* been beside ourselves.

Theatrical rehearsals like those in Wallace’s plays offer the ideal conditions for exploring what it means to be “beside” ourselves in all of the ways outlined above. In these rehearsals, characters play different “versions” of themselves, bracketing off the rehearsing self for analysis or empathetically engaging another person’s point of view. These rehearsals are also social encounters in which one character is changed through his or her interactions with another. New worlds and identities are not built alone in these plays, but with and through others. Thus it is in

the affective and analytical state of rehearsal, where the self is actively under construction, that we might find the conditions for social change.

Rehearsal: Acting “As If”

Etymologically, “to rehearse” originally meant to repeat—to say or do something said or done previously, an act of quotation, citation, or repetition, a meaning retained in the French *répéter*. Around the end of the 16th century, however, the English word acquired a new dimension in its meaning, referring to an act of preparation—doing or saying something that will be done or said again *in the future* (“Rehearsal”). Like the much-theorized “performance,” rehearsal is thus a revision of the past and a proposal for the future. But whereas performance, at least in a great deal of performance studies scholarship, emphasizes the aspect of “doing,” rehearsal retains its somewhat more liminal status as experimentation and exploration, its future-oriented nature reminding us that this is one possibility of many, a proposition rather than a declarative statement about what is or will be.⁸² Richard Schechner has suggested that rehearsal is subjunctive (“as if”), while performance is indicative (“is”) (*Between* 104). Performance *does* while rehearsal *proposes, explores, pretends, simulates, and hypothesizes*. As an exploratory process, rehearsal often requires us to question that which seems “normal” or “natural” in life. Workshops and rehearsals are liminoid processes in which “strips of behavior” are broken down

⁸² The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* lists as its first definition of performance, “The accomplishment or carrying out of something commanded or undertaken; the doing of an action or operation” (“Performance”). This use of the word dates from at least 1487. The idea of performance as the instance of presenting a work of art dates from somewhat later, around 1611, and clearly draws on the earlier definition’s emphasis on “doing”: “The action of performing a play, piece of music, ceremony, etc.; execution, interpretation” (“Performance”). The idea of performance as involving falsehood, acting, or deception creeps into later definitions, dating from at least the late 17th century and leading up to the 19th century usage of “performance” to indicate such occurrences as “a fuss, a scene,” and thus a specifically theatrical (and, by extension, false) scenario (“Performance”). The emergence in the 1980s and 1990s of the discipline of performance studies shifted the discussion from the more historically recent idea of performance as a falsification or exaggeration of reality back to the earlier definition of performance as a doing. This does not mean that questions about artificiality or theatricality disappear; the questions, however, become different. Performance studies allows us to consider that everything we say and do can be construed as a performance of sorts, which deeply troubles notions of surface and interior, origin and copy, real and artificial.

and reassembled in new and different ways, a process that Schechner refers to as “re/membering” the past—disassembling it and putting it back together in a way that it may never have existed before (*Between* 48). Thus, while rehearsal may be a process in which, as Anne Bogart has suggested, “an actor searches for shapes that can be repeated,” Schechner reminds us that each repetition displaces the one before (Bogart 42). “Soon,” Schechner writes, “reference back to the original—if there was an original—is irrelevant” (52). We might think of rehearsal as the search for what works—for what we can use and remake from the past that we might apply toward the future.

Because of the amount of uncertainty inherent to them, rehearsals are both exciting and scary. No matter what theatrical form or style you are engaged in, rehearsal demands risk, openness, and vulnerability. Like any act of creation, it starts with great holes—the unknown—out of which you collectively build something. This requires participants to enter the process without having fixed too many of their ideas and assumptions—to work, as it were, as much from what they do not know as from what they do. Victoria Hart writes that in rehearsals, actors

are making contact with the material and must remain open to its mysteries. They must trust their instincts and their talent, and allow themselves to be present to the text as it plays itself out between them. As they begin to immerse themselves in their new life, they are working very personally, listening and responding, seeing what falls into place and what does not. (78)

The text of the play, assuming a rehearsal process that involves a text, is not the only material to which an actor must remain open. The other performers, the set, the costumes—all aspects of the theatrical experience—create an environment to which the actor must be attuned. In Viewpoints,

the acting system based on Anne Bogart's work, this radical openness as a rehearsal technique is called "Working Without Knowing." When Working Without Knowing,

the outcome is not predicted, yet a product emerges. This is accomplished through improvisation focused toward acknowledging what has been created. The actors work to become skilled observers using memory recall and repetition, while acting as full participants, refusing to predict or guide the end result. . . . They recognize the event as it appears, gradually developing the ability to hold several simultaneous focuses while continuing to be aware of what is transpiring.

(Overlie 209)

Working Without Knowing is thus something of a misnomer, as it requires the critical ability to remember and understand what is happening even while remaining emotionally, physically, and sensorially available and responsive to changing circumstances. It is a creative state in which we focus not on our individual capacity to create, but on how creation happens when we surrender to the unknown, becoming part of our social and physical environment.

This surrender is another example of how performance can render us "beside ourselves." Actors put themselves "out there" for others to "play off of," to respond to, or perhaps even to command (as occurs in clowning). Of course, the "you" that is "out there" is usually a character with an identity separate from your own, but the actor is never not on stage when the character is on stage, and thus the performing self is always vulnerable. Schechner argues that in performance, the performing subject shifts from "me, not me" to "not me, not not me," a process of displacement precipitated by the fact that performance is always a social act, an encounter between a performer and other performers, or a performer and the audience. Schechner writes, "A person performing recovers his [sic] own self only by going out of himself and meeting

others – by entering the social field” (*Between* 112). In other words, reception impacts the formation of the performing self, since we develop our performance in dialogue with our fellow performers and with the audience. This is true in rehearsal, too, where our fellow performers receive us, providing feedback in the form of their responses. The best moments in theatrical rehearsals are often the ones in which an actor is surprised by her own choices, finding something in herself that she has not premeditated and not experienced before. This occurs because rehearsals, improvisation, and theatrical play are designed to undo deeply ingrained patterns of behavior—not so that we can “become” someone else in the stereotypical image of Method acting, but so that we might be able to set foot, for a moment, in that space of “not me, not not me,” encountering a self that is clearly other and yet not other, a self that awakens us to affects, ideas, and embodiments that we might not have found if we did not first go “out” of ourselves.⁸³ This discovery may occur any time we engage in what Schechner calls “restored behavior,” or behavior that has been ritualized, reconstructed, and repeated. He writes, “restored behavior is ‘me behaving as if I were someone else,’ or ‘as I am told to do,’ or ‘as I have learned.’” This understanding that one’s actions are citations of earlier actions can lead to a sense of self-displacement: “I may experience being ‘beside myself,’ ‘not myself,’ or ‘taken over’ as in trance. The fact that there are multiple ‘me’s’ in every person is not a sign of derangement but the way things are” (Schechner, *Performance Studies* 28). Rehearsals, as social spaces in which we engage in repetition and restored behavior, continually challenge the line between “me” and “not me,” rendering us beside ourselves, open to other ways of being.

⁸³ “The Method” is the name given to the system of Stanislavski-inspired actor training developed by members of the Group Theatre, in particular, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner. As David Krasner explains, “The Method is an acting technique that stresses truthful behavior in imaginary circumstances” (“I Hate Strasber” 5). The term “Method” is often conflated with Stanislavski’s system. While it is derived from Stanislavski, the term is specific to the American system that developed out of Stanislavski’s work.

In what follows, I analyze two plays by Naomi Wallace, *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* and *In the Heart of America*, in order to explicate how Wallace's characters utilize the embodied, affective, and critical labor of rehearsal to understand and change their worlds. I am focusing on these plays, rather than on the concept of rehearsal in general, for two reasons. First, Wallace's plays provide a grounding point, a concrete text for reference. Second, Wallace's plays are unique in the way that they foreground rehearsal techniques *for an audience*. Wallace highlights the frequently hidden process of theatre-making, but unlike most postmodern approaches to meta-theatricality, she does so not to trouble boundaries between reality and illusion, but rather to suggest the ways in which the work of theatre is the same as the work of life or "reality." This difference is subtle but significant because it is grounded in both the material and affective realities of living—which is to say that social life is a construction in Wallace's plays, but it is one that nevertheless produces very real consequences on our minds and bodies. Rehearsals offer us the tools to explore ways of being that are more just, that support our minds and bodies rather than brutalizing them. I am focusing on these plays in particular because they offer the most explicit instances of rehearsal. Characters throughout Wallace's oeuvre play with and in their world, trying out different roles and ways of being. The rehearsals in these two plays are significant in that they both engage two actors (in both the theatrical and social sense) working collaboratively. They are different from one another, however, in that one rehearsal seeks a particular outcome while the other is open-ended. These qualities make the rehearsals presented in these two plays ideal for exploring the kind of empathy that has concerned me throughout this dissertation.

I read the rehearsal scenes in *Trestle* as dramatized versions of Brechtian *Lehrstücke* or Boal's Forum Theatre. For Brecht and Boal, these were performance events intended for the

instruction of participants rather than audience, but Wallace places them before an audience for pedagogical effect, allowing us to see how we might use these tools in our own lives. In these scenes, the characters grapple with the affective implications of estranging their world, taking turns challenging the boundaries of safety and familiarity that they each seek to maintain. In *Heart*, Craver and Remzi utilize rehearsals to construct an empathetically-informed *gestus* that not only expresses their social relationship, but brings that relationship into being, setting into motion a series of events that will ultimately change each man and his relationship to his social environment. As an element in their rehearsal, empathy is not something the characters feel, but something they *do* in collaboration with one another, and thus something that changes as the rehearsal develops. I draw on feminist performance theory to argue for the importance of attending to the labor of both empathy and estrangement, and how they might be imbricated. Finally, I argue that as much as these rehearsals represent the desire and the attempt to *make* change happen, they also bring the characters face to face with the limits of their own agency, the extent to which they must allow themselves to *be changed by* others, and the extent to which these changes require them to move into the unknown.

The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek: Learning to be Undone

The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek takes place in a Depression-era town, “outside a city . . . Somewhere in the U.S.” (Wallace 281).⁸⁴ The local factories and plants have closed, and the only sign of economic activity and mobility comes in the form of a train that rushes through town at the same time every day. As the protagonist, seventeen-year-old Pace Creagan, comments, “it’s going somewhere. And it doesn’t look back” (Wallace 327). Unlike the always “going” train, the characters in the play are trapped in this town, without jobs, without a future, and without the

⁸⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all Wallace quotations in this section are from *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*.

means to leave. In response to these bleak circumstances, Pace and her friend Brett have been playing chicken with the oncoming train, racing across the local trestle in an attempt to reach the other side before the train closes off their path. One day, Brett fell while running the trestle and was killed. Pace now enlists fifteen-year-old Dalton Chance as she rehearses to run the trestle again, seeking to recreate the past, but with a different outcome.

Pace has “a fascination with locomotion, with travel, with escape” (Stevens Abbitt 148). She is drawn to the train’s power. She studies the history of trains and even builds a model engine for school. But her engine breaks. The train’s power is not hers to have. Running the trestle represents a challenge to power that cannot be mastered, an act of defiance toward a five hundred and sixty-ton force that took the life of her friend and that passes her every day without looking back (Wallace 153-54). Kathleen Stewart’s assessment of trains as affectively powerful sites for disenfranchised subjects offers a way of understanding Pace’s ambivalence toward this aspect of her environment. In *Ordinary Affects* (2007), a book about the way affect circulates around particular places and objects, Stewart writes, “The train shapes a story of abjection mixed with vital hopes. . . . an intoxicated confidence that surges between life and a dream. It’s as if the train sparks weighted promises and threats and incites a reckless daydream of being included in the world” (116). By challenging the train, Pace challenges a society that would ignore her, passing her by without pause. Running the train is tantamount to a demand for recognition, a declaration that she does in fact *exist*. What is more, it seems that Pace represents at least the second generation to feel this way. Forty-one-year old Gin Chance, Dalton’s mother, speaks of the train with a wistful bitterness: “Huge, sweatin’, steamin’ oil spittin’ promises when I was a girl. Always taking someone away, never bringing someone back” (Wallace 293). The promise of the train, it seems, has long gone unfulfilled. Running the train becomes an obsession for

Pace, the only way to change herself and her circumstances, even though she cannot articulate exactly how this act will affect her: “I was going to be different. I don’t know in what way. That never mattered. But different somehow” (Wallace 317). Change in any form is preferable to the status quo.

Pace’s comment resonates with the Brechtian idea that we cannot know in advance where social change will take us. Brecht persistently refrained from solving social problems in his plays, arguing instead for a theatre that “leaves its spectators productively disposed even after the spectacle is over” (205). Thus, at the end of *Mother Courage*, “even if Courage learns nothing else at least the audience can, in my view, learn something by observing her” (Brecht 229). If all the problems of the play are solved, then there is nothing left for the spectator to do. The end of the play, for Brecht, is in many ways the beginning of the real work—the process of transformation that will (ideally) be undertaken by the spectator, one which offers us both the pleasure and the challenge of producing our very lives: “Let us hope that their theatre may allow them [the spectators] to enjoy as entertainment that terrible and never-ending labor which should ensure their maintenance, together with the terror of their unceasing transformation. Let them produce their own lives in the simplest way; for the simplest way of living is in art” (205). Thus, the work that Brecht proposes is open-ended. It is “terrible” expressly because we can never complete it and we can never anticipate the outcomes. Pace must similarly undertake her quest for transformation without a model to guide her and without any knowledge of how it will affect her.

What she can do, however, is rehearse. And for this she enlists the help and companionship of her friend, Dalton. Pace prepares Dalton to run the train by practicing with him in the dry creek bed below the trestle. When Pace and Dalton rehearse, they engage their

imaginations to produce a world other than the one they know, exploring the possibilities this might invite. Consider, for example, the following exchange, which is both an invitation to “pretend” and a pedagogical moment:

Pace: Let’s start here. On this tie.

Dalton: What tie? The track’s up there.

Pace: Imagine it, stupid. (Wallace 301)

The first lesson, then, is that the world does not have to be only what we see in front of us. But we also place limits on our imagination. When Dalton suggests starting at a different (also imaginary) railroad tie, Pace rejects the idea: “It’s tradition, okay. Besides, Brett made this X so let’s use it” (Wallace 301). Pace is tied emotionally to a way of doing; she wants to repeat this act faithfully to honor Brett, in spite of the fact that her primary purpose in rehearsing the event is to ensure a different outcome. She attempts to use the format of the past to make a new future, trying to find a way to succeed within the given structure. The moment is also an example of the Brechtian “not . . . but,” a technique in which the actor reveals that each action on stage is only one possibility out of many. Brecht writes,

When [the actor] appears on stage, besides what he is actually doing he will at all essential points discover, specify, imply what he is not doing; that is to say he will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible, that his acting allows the other possibilities to be inferred and only represents one out of the possible variants. (137)⁸⁵

The “not . . . but” alerts us to the existence of alternatives and provokes us to consider why one variant is chosen over others, as well as what ramifications result from this decision. In this

⁸⁵ The idea of the “not . . . but” is crucial to Elin Diamond’s feminist reading of Brecht, as outlined in *Unmaking Mimesis*. While I am drawing on her theories, there are ways in which I depart from her as well. Diamond’s work and its relationship to my reading of Wallace will be discussed later in the chapter.

scene, Wallace highlights the ways in which even our imaginations are bound by memories, alliances, desires, and attachments—our affective investments in the world. Pace rejects Dalton's alternative because of her investment in the very status quo she hopes to overturn.

Ultimately, Pace needs Dalton's help to break from the past. When we rehearse and play *together*, we challenge each other's rules, alliances, and affective bonds. Just as a child does in a game of "make believe" or an actor improvising, Dalton invents new circumstances, adding to and complicating Pace's imagined scenario. Pace must decide whether or not accept his contributions to their game. For example, although it is Pace who wants to prepare for potential obstacles by tripping Dalton (and thus recreating Brett's fall), it is Dalton, not Pace, who suggests not only that they might fail, but that one of them might ultimately have to leave the other behind to save him or herself:

Dalton: You drop me and run. You run for you life.

Pace: No. I don't leave you. I—

Dalton: You make it across. Just in time. Alone.

Pace: I drag you with me. (Wallace 303)

All theatrical improvisation games begin with the same rule: Always say yes. This means that whatever your partner does or says, go with it. The rule is intended to stretch our creative muscles by forcing us to avoid planning in advance. It requires us to be open to every new thing that might come our way. Pace breaks this rule because she is trying to control their play, and thus her life. As Gwendolyn N. Hale writes, "By re-enacting the moments of Brett's death, Pace enables herself to perhaps do and say the things she felt she ought to have done first [sic] time round" (157). But her attempts fail because she is not the only one rehearsing this moment. Dalton is there, too, introducing an uncontrollable factor into her attempts. Dalton reminds her

that she cannot determine what will happen to him, and thus cannot control what will happen to her *because of* what happens to him.⁸⁶ She may lose him. She may have to grieve for him as she has grieved for Brett. There is no rehearsal that will successfully avert the possibility of this trauma. Thus, as they rehearse running the train, Pace is forced to confront the unknown, the unpredictable, and the uncontrollable, in spite of the fact that her rehearsals are designed to preclude these very outcomes.

It is possible to read Pace's actions as attempts to access the traumatic event of Brett's death. She is certainly fixated on the event. Trauma theory would posit that this fixation results from her not having cognitively processed it, and thus her rehearsals and her need to run the trestle again may represent attempts to access repressed aspects of the traumatic event. Dominick LaCapra writes, "the memory lapses of trauma are conjoined with the tendency compulsively to repeat, relive, be possessed by, or act out traumatic scenes of the past" (10). But there are limits to this reading as well. Trauma theory tends to focus on individual psychic experience, in particular, how trauma creates a gap or rift, rendering the traumatic event unrepresentable or unspeakable for the one who has suffered it. But Wallace, like Brecht, is less interested in why something might be psychologically unrepresentable than in why something might be socially unrepresentable. In other words, if we focus too much on Pace's psychology, we may overlook

⁸⁶ In this respect, Pace and Dalton's rehearsals have the quality of children's play. Theories about the benefits of play have abounded in recent years as parents and child psychologists alike have decried what is perceived as a decrease in the amount of time that American children have to devote to play. Play is important, psychologists argue, not only because it develops creativity, but also because it is a means for children to gain mastery of their world and, when play involves others, to learn to negotiate the limits of their control. A clinical report from the American Academy of Pediatrics explains, "Play allows children to create and explore a world they can master, conquering their fears . . . Undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills" (Ginsburg 183). Thus, while play on the one hand increases a sense of mastery, when it involves others it also teaches us that our mastery is not complete. Think of what happens when one child joins another's "dinner party" with mud cakes and grass salad and turns it into a farm scene, declaring that both children are cows. The first child faces a choice: go along with the change, introduce a new dimension, or get upset and insist that he is not a cow, but rather a chef. These are not simply disagreements about what kind of game is preferred. When children play, they are constantly engaging their playmates' imaginary worlds and negotiating how those worlds impinge on their own.

the social conditions that compelled her and Brett to run the train in the first place. If we ignore poverty, unemployment, and social immobility, if we allow entire segments of the population to go unrecognized and unrepresented, what will be the outcome? As Wallace states, this play is about “what happens to our love, our desire, our lives, because of the historical moment we are caught in” (Interview, *Women Who Write Plays* 456). Focusing *only* on the traumatic effects of Brett’s death would make us complicit in the very situation that led to his death—the unwillingness to confront the material, social conditions of his life, which were so bleak that, his father explains, “I didn’t have anything to give him. So I hit him. I could give him that” (Wallace 335). On the other hand, Pace’s emotional and psychological state does also matter. Running the trestle is important to her, but not because she has repressed Brett’s death. Quite the opposite. She is acutely aware of it. She does not repeat compulsively, but consciously, deliberately, and with purpose, attempting to break the cycle that brought Brett to his end, although she does so by confining herself to the very scenario that brought about this death and will, eventually, kill her. What we can draw from trauma theory is a sense that Pace’s actions are an attempt to “work through” her memory of Brett, as LaCapra might say. Where Pace fails is in her inability to recognize that it is the scenario itself that guarantees failure. If the basic structure does not change, the outcome cannot change either. Likewise, without changes to the capitalist system, the socioeconomic status of this town cannot change.

Pace’s actions are a form of mourning, a means of confronting the loss she has suffered. Mourning is one of the states that Butler identifies as putting us “beside” ourselves. She writes that “one mourns when one accepts the fact that the loss one undergoes will be one that changes you, changes you possibly forever, and that mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation the full result of which you cannot know in advance” (18). Pace believes that

running the train will change her, but in fact she is already changing as she grieves for her friend. When we accept that losing another (or loving another) can change us in ways that are beyond our control and foreknowledge, we accept the sociality of our being. Pace does yet not accept this fully, attempting, instead, to control herself and her future so that she cannot lose Dalton the way she lost Brett. Dalton's challenges to her as they practice running the trestle remind Pace that she may lose herself no matter what—to death if she tries to save him, to grief if she does not. There is no way to avoid this except not to run the trestle, not to act, a possibility that Pace never entertains since not running the trestle would be tantamount to giving up hope. The only other option is not to care for Dalton. But she does care.

Pace's investment in Dalton emerges in her efforts to teach him a way of viewing the world that goes far beyond the confines of their games in the creek. As the older of the two, Pace acts as both the leader and the teacher in their relationship, taking it upon herself to show him what it means to grow up in a town with few resources and opportunities. When Dalton claims that he will escape by going to college, she challenges him to look at his shoes: "If your mom's putting you in shoes like that then you aren't going to college" (Wallace 289). She teaches him to historicize his surroundings, to ask "where a map came from, who fixed in the rivers, who'll take the wrong turn; or a door. Who cut the wood and hung it there? Why that width, that height? And who makes that decision? Who agreed to it and who didn't" (Wallace 309). Once he starts to see the world as a series of choices and decisions made by some people and not others, the possibilities that the world might be otherwise are suddenly apparent. In another example of the Brechtian "not . . . but," Dalton breaks a cup, turning it into a knife. The vast possibility introduced by this new way of seeing, however, terrifies him. Pace robs him of all sense of normalcy, especially when it comes to sexual intimacy. She continually frustrates Dalton's

attempts to establish a “traditional” boy-girl relationship with her, and when she does finally agree to kiss him, she insists on kissing the back of the knee. Dalton is enraged by the strangeness of the act, but Pace retorts, “You’re mad at me ‘cause you liked it” (Wallace 313). This may be true. Liking the way that Pace interacts with him and teaches him to question the world does not stop Dalton from being scared by it, too. The effect is as if the very boundaries of his self are coming apart. He says to Pace, “Every time we meet, afterwards, it’s like pieces of me. Keep falling off” (Wallace 327). If the world can be other, so, too, can he be. Dalton’s sense of psychic fragmentation is rendered palpable in the interrupted grammar of his sentence. Here and elsewhere, Dalton’s speech is interrupted by periods, ellipses, and hyphens. Just as his ability to interpret the world is coming apart, so too is his ability to construct a sentence, to conform to the received grammar of life.

The halting rhythm exhibited in the language in Wallace’s plays emerges on the body as well. Because her work is infrequently produced in the U.S., I have only had the opportunity to see one of her plays performed live, a production of *Things of Dry Hours* staged at the New York Theatre Workshop in 2009. While the play does not feature rehearsals in the same way that the plays I discuss in this chapter do, the characters in *Things* do explore their world in a similarly deliberate way. When the character Cali recreates a scene in which her employer sexually harassed her, she does so by acting the roles out, wearing a pair of shoes on her hands like puppets. The performances, both in this scene and throughout the play, were slow, deliberate, halting. Movement and action were not fluid, emerging from seemingly organic impulses. Rather, when a character moved, she or he did so with awareness—calling attention to the movement. As I will suggest later, Wallace’s plays calls for a blending of Brechtian and Stanislavskian technique. In performance, this emerges as actors *show* movement—to the

audience, to the other characters, and to themselves. But rather than offering action with comment, or with a sense they have arrived at their own understanding of what they show us, the actors in the play seemed to be pondering and analyzing their own movements and actions as much as we in the audience were, considering what it felt like to stand in a certain way or to speak a particular line. This kind of performance, I think, is also called for in *Trestle*, indicated by the interrupted flow of language, which signals an encounter with the world that is constantly being revised, analyzed, felt, and estranged.

In *Trestle*, this estrangement emerges through social encounters. Sean Carney argues that we cannot estrange the world for ourselves: “Both the *Verfremdungseffekt* and the *Unheimlich* are moments of estrangement that demand the intervention of another so that we might step outside of our ideological thinking and theorize about our thoughts from the perspective of another. In that sense they are both inherently social activities” (27). Pace helps estrange the world for Dalton. But no social relationship is uni-directional. Once she invites him into her life, she risks inviting other changes she did not anticipate, including Dalton’s challenges to her authority in their imaginative play. The lines between teacher and student are continually blurred as Pace and Dalton take turns instructing, challenging, and learning from one another. Ironically, although it is Pace who initially instructs Dalton in the techniques of estranged seeing, it is Dalton who truly embraces the implications of this estrangement. While Pace strives for change by rehearsing the same moment over and over, Dalton feels his world and his very sense of self fall apart simply because he *can* imagine other possibilities—endless alternative ways of seeing.

We might think of Pace and Dalton’s games and rehearsals as a kind of *Lehrstücke*, plays Brecht described as “meant not so much for the spectator as for those who were engaged in the performance. It was, so to speak, art for the producer, not art for the consumer” (*Brecht* 80). In

the *Lehrstücke*, which can be translated as both “teaching play” and “learning play,” performer and student are one, and acting becomes the means of both learning and teaching. Similarly, in Wallace’s plays, rehearsal provides characters with a space to explore, test theories, learn, share, and teach one another. Like Brechtian actors, Wallace’s characters are engaged in a process of discovery, analysis, and exploration.

Wallace departs from Brecht, however, in several important ways. First, and most obviously, this play *is* meant to be performed for an audience, and as such what the characters learn in the course of the play is only important insofar as it prompts a response in the audience. In a view that echoes Brecht, the playwright Maria Irene Fornes has explained, about the open-ended nature of her plays, “Some people complain that my work doesn’t offer solutions. But the reason for that is I feel that the characters don’t have to get out, it’s *you* who has to get out. Characters are not real people” (55, emphasis in original). Wallace’s characters model a process for pursuing social change, but not a definitive set of solutions. That is to be left to the audience. The next difference between Wallace’s work and the Brechtian *Lehrstücke* is that, whereas events are repeated in the *Lehrstücke* in order to render them available for analysis, the repetition of events in *Trestle* includes an exploratory dimension, allowing characters not simply to analyze options, but to try them out. Finally, the fear that accompanies the moment of estrangement does not necessarily compel change, as Brecht argues, but rather hinders it. I will address the issue of repetition first.

The *Lehrstücke* are written in a way that allows for the typical distance between Brechtian actor and character. *The Measures Taken*, for instance, is structured much like a Brechtian street scene. The Four Agitators reenact a series of events for the Control Chorus so that the chorus may evaluate the events. Each scene begins with a statement like, “We repeat the

discussion,” or “We will show you” (Brecht, *Measures* 9). These repetitions are intended *only* to render an event available for analysis—both by the performers, who would present their roles while they, as actors, remained at an emotional remove, and by any spectators. Brecht writes that, in the *Lehrstücke*, actions are set forth “so as to call for a critical approach, so that they would not be taken for granted by the spectator [or performers] and would arouse him to think; it became obvious to him which were right actions and which were wrong ones” (79). In Wallace’s play, in contrast, repetitions are exploratory—at least, from the point of view of the characters. Right and wrong actions can not be determined by simply *representing* what happened. Instead, Pace and Dalton rehearse the past in order to revise it, to question possible outcomes, to think and feel in new ways, to imagine and embody new actions. To experience the impact of this in full, Wallace’s characters must not only analyze their actions, but also experience them affectively, allowing the affective knowledge gained through these exploratory rehearsals to resonate inside them. Dalton *feels* fear at the prospect of running the train. Pace *feels* anger and fright at the prospect of losing Dalton. Embodiment is not simply a way of presenting an event for analysis; it is a way of coming to understand the event and to explore alternative responses and actions.

Consequently, Pace and Dalton’s rehearsals also resemble Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre, in which audience members—or “spect-actors,” as Boal calls them—are invited to step in for the actors, embodying solutions to social problems in order to explore what might work in a particular situation. Forum Theatre consists of vignettes depicting some form of oppression or social conflict. When a spect-actor wants to try a different approach to the problem from what she sees presented on stage, she replaces the original actor and performs her “solution.” Boal’s theories are based in the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, who argues that you cannot provide the

oppressed with solutions to their problems because to do so would risk oppressing them again, imposing one's own values and judgments on them. Instead, "The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption" (Freire 54). Freire further writes that the discovery of one's oppression "cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be a praxis" (*TO* 65). In other words, a complex understanding of one's situation must be both embodied and critical. Boal takes this argument one step further, suggesting that the solutions, too, must be embodied in order to be tested. He writes,

Anyone may propose any solution [in Forum Theatre], but it must be done on the stage, working, acting, doing things, and not from the comfort of his seat. Often a person is very revolutionary when in a public forum he envisages and advocates revolutionary and heroic acts; on the other hand, he often realizes that things are not so easy when he himself has to practice what he suggests. (*TO* 139)

Forum Theatre challenges us to put theory into practice and to discover where we might encounter problems along the way. And because Forum Theatre requires solutions to be played out, no spect-actor can dictate how the other person in the scene will react to his or her solution. Likewise, Pace cannot preordain Dalton's actions. Of course, Wallace's plays are performed for an audience who is not invited to participate in these rehearsals, and thus not able to experiment with and embody the various solutions proposed in the scene. This, I would suggest, is one of the reasons why social problems are never completely "solved" in a Wallace play. To do so would be, in the terms offered here, a form of oppression. Instead, Wallace presents a problem and method for exploring the problem, leaving "solutions" to social actors, rather than characters.

The other aspect of Forum Theatre I want to highlight here is its emphasis on *building* an as-yet-undetermined future. Boal famously calls theatre a “*rehearsal of revolution*,” explaining that whereas the bourgeois theatre presents a finished image of the world, “the proletariat and the oppressed classes do not know yet what their world will be like; consequently their theater will be the rehearsal, not the finished spectacle” (*TO* 141, 142, emphasis in original). Significantly, he understands rehearsal here not as rote repetition that prepares the proletariat for a pre-determined revolution, but as a space for exploration and discovery in which all involved are have an equal voice: “the people have the opportunity to try out all their ideas, to rehearse all the possibilities, and to verify them in practice, that is, in theatrical practice” (*TO* 141). Even if you do not choose to go on stage in a Forum Theatre session, you can participate in the discussion that follows, in which each “solution” is debated and analyzed. He writes, “Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, instead of just waiting for it” (Boal, *Games* 16). He adopts from Brecht the idea that theatre should reveal that the world could be other than it is and goes one step further, using theatre to help us enact what those other possibilities might be. While Wallace’s plays do not call on the audience to become performers themselves, her dramaturgy does highlight the importance of embodiment and rehearsal, suggesting that there is a limit to what we can learn while sitting comfortably in our seats.

Leaving behind the comfortable and the known is a frightening process, and here we find the other way in which Wallace diverges from Brecht. Once we see that a cup might be a knife, the possibilities are limitless but also terrifying, because suddenly we exist in a world in which everything we thought we knew is called into question. It is very difficult to act under these circumstances. As Dalton explains, Pace “made me—hesitate. In everything I did. I was.

Unsure.” (Wallace 310). Dalton resists this flood of uncertainty, blaming Pace for wrecking his chance to live a nice, “normal” life. He charges her: “You said you’d change me. You did, goddamn it. Now change me back” (Wallace 327). This is not possible, however, because Dalton cannot stop himself from seeing the world as Pace has revealed it to him. Brecht understood that estrangement brought with it a certain degree of fear. He described the moment of recognition as one accompanied by “terror” and often wrote about the *Verfremdungseffekt* as if it were a means of waking us up out of trance or breaking a spell—a realization that comes like a splash of cold water to the face. (Brecht 26). In *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, he argues that this shock is necessary; we do not learn when changes take place “too gradually” (Brecht 32). In “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction,” he writes, “What is ‘natural’ must have the force of what is ‘startling’” (Brecht 71). After the initial terror, however, Brecht tended to view the project precipitated by estrangement as a pleasurable one: “the theatre can let its spectators enjoy the particular ethic of their age, which springs from productivity. A theatre which converts the critical approach – i.e. our great productive method – into pleasure finds nothing in the ethical field which it must do and a great deal that it can” (Brecht, *Brecht* 187). The idea that theatre can “let” us enjoy our productivity hints at Brecht’s notion that the theatre has, up to this point, been hampering our intellectual and productive pleasure (I am tempted to say our “natural” pleasure, but Brecht seems aware of the potential essentialism of his claim, tempering it by the historically specific qualification, “of our age”). Elizabeth Wright argues that “Brecht’s utopian wish was to produce an audience who would rejoice at the contradictions of a necessarily estranged world – the uncanniness of a world in flux, the constant shifting of figure and ground in a dialectical movement” (52). Once the shock of estrangement wears off, we are to find pleasure in our newly discovered productive capacity.

In Wallace's plays, however, terror is not limited to the transient shock concurrent with the moment of estranged seeing. It is not an electric jolt that assures us of the necessity for change, but rather a persistent fear which has as much to do with a *lack* of knowing and lack of surety as with the terrifying recognition that one has, as Dalton puts it, bought into a "plan" that "never was ours" by investing one's time, labor, and dreams into a social system that promises a future it can never deliver (Wallace 323). Instead of acting as an impetus for change, Wallace reveals that the shock and fear that accompany estrangement might delay change, compelling us to take affective refuge in the known and familiar. This is precisely what Dalton does when, frustrated with Pace for shattering his sense of the world, he declines to run the trestle with her or even to act as her witness. Pace asks Dalton to watch her because "we can't watch ourselves. We can't remember ourselves. Not like we need to" (Wallace 337). In a declaration similar to Schechner's idea that the performing self is constituted in its reception, Pace needs Dalton to witness the change that she believes she will undergo in running the train. There is an aspect of this act that *she cannot complete alone*. But Dalton refuses to see, turning his back on her. His refusal causes Pace to slow down, fatally, halfway across the trestle. Without time either to beat the train or run back, Pace jumps to her death in the dry creek bed below. While Hale describes this outcome as "the ultimate end of hope," I find it significant that, in the end, Pace chooses not to let the train crush her as it crushed Brett, making her suicide a symbolic challenge to the social forces that have been bearing down on her for her entire life (Hale 156). She cannot beat it, but neither will she let it beat her. In a Brechtian sense, there are always alternatives, no matter how seemingly insignificant those alternatives may be.

By throwing herself into the creek bed, furthermore, Pace throws herself into the space in which she and Dalton attempted to imagine their way into a different future. It was in the creek

bed that they established a friendship that challenged the rules of the world in which they live, as well as their own emotional and physical boundaries. They did so through rehearsals like running the imaginary trestle, and also through their sexual encounters, such as when Pace kissed the back of Dalton's knee. These encounters, like the estranging seeing that Pace teaches Dalton, trouble Dalton's sense of normalcy and probe the boundaries between the two young people. They are also, significantly, instances when pleasure and fear mingle, when the promise of something new and wonderful helps mediate the terror of the unknown. Dalton says, "I could touch myself at night and I didn't know if it was her hand or mine. . . . I don't know but sometimes I put my hand. Inside myself" (Wallace 310). Here, again, Dalton's thoughts are interrupted, fragmented. The punctuation of the line estranges the content, introducing boundaries where Dalton claims there are none. These interruptions signal hesitance; Dalton is not completely over his fear of being undone, but he is, nevertheless, ready to remember both the challenges and the pleasures that Pace has introduced into his life.

The final scene of the play takes us back in time, before Pace's death, to a scene in which Pace and Dalton experience physical intimacy without touching. As he touches himself, she says, "You're touching me. I want you to touch me. It's going to happen. To both of us. Go on. Open your legs. . . . Can you feel me? I'm hard." (Wallace 341). Physical boundaries dissolve. Gender boundaries dissolve. They are "inside" each other—as thoughts, ideas, memories, and feelings—and as a result "beside" themselves, at once themselves and other than themselves. It is this final game, in which both Pace and Dalton fully abandon the "rules" and give themselves over to each other, that achieves the transformation and transportation that running the trestle could not fully provide. Pace says, "There. We're something else now. You see? We're in another place" (Wallace 342).

They get to that other place together. In the final moment of Pace's life, when she dives off the trestle, Dalton does turn to watch her. He is her witness, but what, exactly, is he witness to? Kelly Oliver describes witnessing as an intersubjective act that involves addressing oneself to others and responding to their address (15). She asserts that we must be willing to respond to that which we do not necessarily understand, writing,

To recognize others requires acknowledging that their experiences are real even though they may be incomprehensible to us; this means that we must recognize that not everything that is real is recognizable to us. . . . We are obligated to respond to what is beyond our comprehension, beyond recognition, because ethics is possible only beyond recognition. (106)

Consequently, to bear witness, for Oliver, entails accepting a world beyond our grasp. Like being "beside" one another, bearing witness is not an act of identification or even understanding; it is an expression of relationship, one that, as Sedgwick suggests, resists hierarchies and creates the opportunity for multiple paths of engagement. Bearing witness is not "speaking for," since to do so we would have to assume knowledge of experience foreign to our own. It consists, instead, in attending to those whose presence makes you a subject, and just as we witness them, they witness us.

What Pace demands from Dalton is nothing less than an act of witnessing to a self that is in process, contingent, unmade by her grief over Brett, changing as she attempts to change herself into something she cannot anticipate. To act as Pace's witness, Dalton must accept all of this contingency; he must accept the terror that Pace has introduced into his life. As he does so, he confronts his own status as "beside" himself—as vulnerable to the changes she has precipitated in him through her games, her friendship, her sexuality, her way of reading the

world, and, finally, her death. He must accept that he is transformed by her, both because he is affectively undone and because he has accepted a new way of viewing the world. Estranging the world thus calls for more than assuming a critical distance; it requires that we let others undo us and our world.

I am proposing that this particular form of estrangement, in which we are radically open to how others might change us, is an important part of producing a dialogic, collaborative empathy—one that is in process just as the subjects engaged in it are in process, and one that seeks not to fully understand, but to accept the other as being, potentially, “beyond recognition.” Throughout this dissertation, I have articulated a model of empathy that is respectful of the other, an empathy in which we acknowledge the limits of our empathetic capacity and do not attempt to achieve a particular affective response, but instead listen to and engage the other. I now want to consider the implications of opening ourselves to others in this way. What I hope to explore here is not an empathy in which the boundaries between self and other dissolve completely, but a process by which our empathy might help us acknowledge and explore the extent to which we are all socially constituted. To describe this empathy, I turn to another one of Wallace’s plays, *In the Heart of America*. Like *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, the characters of *In the Heart of America* open themselves to each other through rehearsals and are changed in the process. In this play, however, the rehearsals involve a distinctly empathetic dimension. This makes them evocative of Konstantin Stanislavski’s system of actor preparation, yet without sacrificing any of the Brechtian and Boalian aspects present in *Trestle*. Wallace thus reveals a way to *do* empathy that is influenced by a range of acting theories, and by affective, critical, and embodied techniques. In doing so, she explores an affinity between two theatre theorists who have long been understood as conceptual opposites.

Stanislavski, Brecht, and the Actor's Labor

The opposition between Stanislavski and Brecht is often represented as one between affect and cognition. Physical actions on stage, Stanislavski argues, are only “believable” when they are motivated by emotions, and these emotions must be truthful. Emotional mimicry is dismissed as empty and superficial. For the audience to believe, the actor must believe:

Everything on stage must be convincing for the actor himself, for his fellow actors and for the audience. Everything should inspire belief in the possible existence in real life of feelings analogous to the actor's own. Every moment on stage must be endorsed by belief in the truth of the feeling being experienced and in the truth of the action taking place. (Stanislavski 154)

To ensure this sense of emotional authenticity, Stanislavski devises a series of techniques and processes to help the actor achieve “true” emotions under imagined circumstances, including the famed concepts of emotional memory, given circumstances, and the magic “if.” Emotional memory calls on actors to access emotions from their own lives and experiences which apply to the character's situation and to draw on those feelings in performance. Given circumstances are the “givens” in a scene or a play—the time, place, season, and other facts, including choices made by the artistic team, that make up the world of the play. The magic “if” entails accepting the given circumstances as “real” and behaving “as if” it were so. Because we have not experienced or felt everything we might have to portray, it is also the job of the actor to study others, engaging sympathetically in their experiences to help expand our own emotional repertoire. These techniques are intended to help the actor *live* the role, such that “He [the actor] speaks not as the non-existing person, Hamlet, but in his own right, in the Given Circumstances” (Stanislavski 280). In Brechtian theatre, on the other hand, the actor does not empathize or

identify, but instead “hold[s] himself remote from the character portrayed,” maintaining his or her own emotions and ideas about that character (Brecht 93). For Brecht, the actor’s identification with his or her character is the cardinal sin of acting, leading to empathy between the audience and the character. In contrast, in the style of acting he advocated, “the actors . . . refrained from going over wholly into their role, remaining detached from the character they were playing and clearly inviting criticism of him” (Brecht 71).

As scholars and practitioners alike have noted, Stanislavski and Brecht are not as diametrically opposed as they have often been described. The sense of their radical difference derives in large part from confusion and misunderstanding about Stanislavski’s theories, including his concept of the merger of actor and role, a concept misunderstood and inflated by American interpretations of his work. Furthermore, in contrast to much early U.S. training based on his work, he viewed his concept of the through line and “supertask” (sometimes used to refer to the main objective of the play, sometimes to the actor’s primary objective within the play) as ultimately more important than the production of emotion (Scheeder 4). In “Brecht, Stanislavski, and the Art of Acting,” Jean Benedetti notes that Brecht’s initial rejection of Stanislavski’s “system” was based on limited, second-hand exposure via interpretations of Americans like Lee Strasberg, who focuses his work heavily on the issue of “true” emotion. Brecht eventually became interested in Stanislavski’s writings, particularly the idea that it was the actor’s job to serve the “supertask” (Benedetti 107). Brecht understood that he needed to make a more thorough study of Stanislavski’s as-yet-unpublished writings in order accurately to judge their usefulness. Late in his career, when living again in Germany and working in an environment in which Stanislavski was revered, he even published a short list titled “Some of the Things that can be Learnt from Stanislavski,” in which he managed to make Stanislavski’s emphasis on truth on

stage sound compatible with Brecht's own quest for the careful representation of social conditions and relationships: "Nothing that is not taken from the actor's observation, or confirmed by observation, is fit to be observed by the audience" (Brecht 236-37). It is accurate that both men prized observation as part of the actor's training, but for Stanislavski this had to do primarily with observing how people respond emotionally to their circumstances, while for Brecht it entailed a more critical task in which the actor formed opinions about the one she observed and the socio-political circumstances involved, opinions which could then be included in the actor's alienated representation of her character. While Brecht's attempts to find commonalities among the two theories were at least partially motivated by political necessity, other theorists have continued the effort. Michael Morley cites numerous similarities between Stanislavski and Brecht, summarizing that in both we find "the same rejection of the classical psychology of fixed character-types, of the 'in general'; the same breaking down of the text into concrete series of action; the same careful analysis of the characters' social and historical backgrounds" (197).⁸⁷ While these basic ideas are certainly similar, the two men applied them to very different ends—realism in the case of Stanislavski and the *Verfremdungseffekt* in the case of Brecht.

This difference in styles is also one between a system of acting and reception based in character psychology and one based in social and ideological critique, and this is, more so than a conflict between affect and cognition, is where the argument over empathy arises. In Stanislavski's system, the actor identifies or empathizes with her character, imagining what she

⁸⁷ In the last 15 years, a good deal of scholarship has been devoted to identifying points of comparison between Brecht and Stanislavski. Morley, for example, goes on to detail how Brecht's techniques for analyzing a script resemble Stanislavski's system of breaking a scene down into "bits" (or "beats"), and Duane Krause suggests that Brechtian *gestus* is not unlike Michael Chekhov's Stanislavski-influenced notion of a "psychological gesture." While this line of inquiry certainly has merit, I am not interested in finding points of similarity, but rather on analyzing how the systems might be mutually complementary, functioning together to produce a particular kind of affective and critical rehearsal process.

is thinking and feeling and “justifying” her actions by creating a plausible back-story and a psychological through-line.⁸⁸ The goal is a performance that strikes the audience as “believable,” socially and psychologically, producing the response, “Yes, of course this person would respond in this way. How true. How real.” In Brechtian theatre, the actor does not empathize or identify, but instead “hold[s] himself remote from the character portrayed,” maintaining his or her own emotions and ideas about that character and calling social assumptions and ideologies into question (Brecht 93). Here, the response should be “I’d never have thought it – That’s not the way – That’s extraordinary, hardly believable – It’s got to stop” (Brecht 71). While these summaries are reductive of both theorists, they do, nevertheless, point to some important differences, particularly the way that the two systems have been taught. An actor trained in Stanislavski’s system, at least in the U.S., tends to approach the play from the point of view of the character, putting herself in the character’s shoes and finding a way, within herself, to justify the character’s actions so that she can represent them as “truthful.” An actor using a Brechtian approach, meanwhile, will generally approach the character as a product of his or her social circumstances. Brecht believed that if the actor empathized with the character (meaning that he *shared* the character’s emotions or identified with the character) then the spectator would, too, thus hindering the spectator’s ability to view events on stage critically.

⁸⁸ Although Stanislavski does not use the term “empathy,” it is often associated with the style of acting he promotes. I would argue that empathy is a step in the process that Stanislavski describes, particularly the imaginative work of given circumstances and the magic “if.” Ultimately, however, Stanislavski’s process can lead to emotional projection (particularly via the use of emotional memory) and identification. This is particularly true in some of the American systems based on his work. Stella Adler, for instance, who was one of the early adopters and adaptors of Stanislavski’s work, describes the relationship between actor and character this way: “Define the difference between your behavior and the character’s, find all the justification of the character’s actions, and then go on from there to act *from yourself*, without thinking where your personal action ends and the character’s begins” (qtd. in Krasner, “I Hate Strasberg” 5, emphasis in original).

Following Brecht, many feminist theatre artists rejected Stanislavski's system as one that perpetuates extant ideologies and worldviews. Sue-Ellen Case famously argued that a female actor utilizing Stanislavski's system is forced to both represent and internalize misogyny:

The psychological construction of character, using techniques adapted from Stanislavski, places the female actor within the range of systems that have oppressed her very representation on stage. . . . In building such characters as Amanda in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, the female actor learns to be passive, weak and dependent on her sexual role, with a fragile inner life that reveals no sexual desire. (Case 122)

By demanding that women adopt their characters' emotions as their own in order to produce a believable performance, Stanislavski's system re-inscribes patriarchal social systems.⁸⁹ In other words, if we continue to accept what passes for "realism" on the stage as the one and only reality, then we are tacitly accepting and perpetuating a long history of misogyny, insidiously suggesting to the audience that this is the way it was and always will be. As Rhonda Blair succinctly summarizes, feminist critiques of Stanislavski center on its tendency to naturalize ideas like the "self," identity, social relations, and other constructions:

[Critics of Stanislavski's system] assert that it reifies a nonexistent "self" at the expense of ignoring socially conditioned aspects of identity; . . . that it is part of the humanist project of reductively universalizing about experience in order to erase difference; and that, along with realism, it is inherently patriarchal and misogynist. (179)

⁸⁹ This critique also extended to Stanislavski's concept of the "supertask." Some feminist performers felt that the linear nature of this notion was inherently masculine, and thus not representative of how women experience the world (Case 123).

Thus, the 1980s saw a widespread rejection of realism—and Stanislavski along with it—from feminist theatre artists.⁹⁰ As Janelle Reinelt argues, “Political theatre requires the ability to isolate and manifest certain ideas and relationships that make ideology visible” (150). Brechtian techniques made this possible. Others, like Anna Deavere Smith, have critiqued Stanislavski’s system for relying too much on the actor’s own life and experiences. Smith came to this realization as a teacher, watching young students attempt to portray characters whose life experiences were radically different from their own: “It became less and less interesting intellectually to bring the dramatic literature of the world into a classroom of people in their late teens and twenties, and to explore it within the framework of their lives. Aesthetically it seemed limited, because most of the times the characters all sounded the same” (Smith xxvi). She argued that this form of acting did not allow us to explore others sufficiently, since we turned always to ourselves, and linked this to an inability or unwillingness to empathize (Smith xxvii). Stanislavski’s system, according to these critiques, can only reinforce what we already think and feel about the world. For Brecht, this was true because the system relied on empathy, whereas Smith articulates the problem as a lack of empathy.

Part of the problem, as I have already argued in the Introduction and in Chapter 1, stems from a disagreement in the meaning of empathy. For Brecht, empathy consists of identification. It requires the actor to share the characters’ thoughts and feelings. Smith, on the other hand, draws from an understanding of empathy more like the one that I have been exploring throughout the dissertation—empathy as imaginatively engaging the world of the other, a process that understands the other as radically different from the self. Beginning from the self is, in Smith’s analysis, a *failure* of empathy. She writes, “The self-centered technique has taken the

⁹⁰ These rejections came mostly from materialist feminists.

bridge out of the process of creating character, it has taken metaphor out of acting. It has made the heart smaller, the spirit less gregarious, and the mind less apt to be able to hold on to contradictions or opposition” (xxix). The other problem, to which I have already alluded, results from the oversimplification of the role of emotion in Stanislavski’s system. As Blair explains, “a mistrustful attitude toward feeling and the biological body in general has been common in feminist theories of performance since the early 1980s” (177). This has happened, Blair argues, because many feminist scholars find that feeling is too easily essentialized and naturalized. Blair refutes this argument on two fronts, asserting, first, that this particular critique of Stanislavski overlooks the importance of action and embodiment in his work. She writes, “Stanislavsky’s thought reached its culmination with the method of active analysis—not, I note ‘emotional’ or ‘psychological’ analysis” (180).⁹¹ What this means, in practical terms, is that emotional memory becomes only one of several ways of generating emotion, and a less favored way at that. Emotions also emerge from physically acting the role or, as Blair puts it, “the actor puts her body where her mind needs to go” (181). This leads to Blair’s second point, which is that mind, body, emotion, and consciousness are not separate in Stanislavski’s system. Our emotional responses are part of how we understand our physical circumstances. Knowing and feeling cannot be separated. Suggesting a link between Stanislavski’s system and recent work in the field of cognitive neuroscience, Blair writes, “being aware of feelings allows us to be innovative and creative—conscious, not just automatic—in our responses to the thing causing our emotion”

⁹¹ Blair repeats, here, the widely-held understanding that Stanislavski’s system was developed in “stages,” and that the problem with America versions of his system is that they have overemphasized the first “stage” at the expense of the second. More recently, Jean Benedetti has argued that this conception of Stanislavski is an accident of history resulting from the separation of his text into two separate books. Benedetti writes, “Stanislavski had serious misgivings about dividing the book. He feared that the first volume, dealing with the psychological aspects of acting would be identified as the total ‘system’ itself, which would be identified as a form of ‘ultranaturalism.’ His fears were justified” (“Translator’s Foreword” xvi). Blair’s point, that Stanislavski placed considerable emphasis on physical action and the way that emotions arise from embodiment, stands, if her sense of its teleological status in Stanislavski’s thought does not.

(187). Empathy, as an imaginative act that may help us understand how another feels, might provide a crucial dimension to our critical understanding. Acting, or embodied empathy, takes this one step further—letting our bodies take us where our minds and imaginations need to go.

Thus, as I have suggested already, there is a place for empathy in a Brechtian theatre of estrangement, if not necessarily empathy as Brecht understood it. Merging Brecht's theories with Stanislavski's helps us address the critiques leveled at each—that Stanislavski's is too self-centered while Brecht's denies the benefits of empathy. Joining the two methods creates for a performance practice in which the character's point of view is affectively and critically engaged, but not necessarily adopted. It also encourages the actor to think critically about her own emotions: Is she projecting her own, distinctive responses onto the character or *imagining* how it might feel to be in the character's position? These two processes are indistinguishable for Stanislavski because, as he explains, "An actor can only experience his own emotions" (209). Thus, there is for him no emotion that "belongs" to the character—only what the actor feels. But this is what concerns Smith. What if the life experience of the actor is simply insufficient? How can we pursue an acting process that is not myopic, that does not simply reproduce the self over and over and over? There are ways, I think, to keep one's own, particular, socially and historically specific point of view in mind even as you imagine your way into another—fictional or otherwise. In the remainder of the chapter, I pursue this goal, focusing not on empathy and alienation in audience reception, but in the acting process. In this sense, I am taking up Brecht's own argument that empathy is a useful tool for rehearsal and expanding that idea to argue that rehearsals are useful tools for empathy (Brecht 137).

In turning my attention to acting, I am thinking not only of the ways in which embodiment might aid the work of empathy, but also of how we might pursue a more nuanced

approach to the study of acting technique within feminist scholarship. In her article “Rethinking Feminism, Stanislavski, and Performance,” J. Ellen Gainor notes that feminist criticism which champions Brecht over Stanislavski has focused primarily on audience *reception*, all but ignoring the actor’s process. Gainor points out that many performers categorized by scholars as “Brechtian” actually testify to their indebtedness to Stanislavski’s techniques for preparing a role, leading Gainor to assert that we must stop privileging reception over creation in our search for feminist performance practices. Gainor is interested in separating Stanislavski’s theories from patriarchal systems of theatre production in the U.S., thereby recuperating Stanislavski’s techniques as potential resources for feminist performance and theory. Perhaps more importantly, however, Gainor’s line of argument highlights the important differences that may exist between rehearsal process and theatrical performance. “How,” she asks, “does a performance, such as that of Split Britches, come to be applauded by [Elin] Diamond as Brechtian, when one of its creators assures us that it derives from Method techniques?” (172).⁹² While Gainor seems to attribute this trend to a blind-spot in feminist performance criticism which has led to a championing of all things “Brechtian,” I think we must keep in mind that a great deal of the rehearsal process is invisible in the final performance. As audience members, we cannot tell whether the choices we see on stage were arrived at via improvisation or were dictated by a director. We do not know if actors were asked to identify objectives or engage in

⁹² Gainor is referring here statements made by Deb Margolin, who explains that, in their rehearsal process, the members of Split Britches—consisting of Margolin, Lois Weaver, and Peggy Shaw—would use their own lives to inform their characters. Margolin writes, “What they didn’t know, they vowed to create out of themselves, out of their own desires to speak, to live. . . . They filled the gap between fact and fiction with their own passions (an inherently political methodology *when you let it show*)” (quoted in Gainor 172, emphasis added). I would suggest that Margolin is not describing a purely Method practice. The idea of letting the actors’ personal motivations show is Brechtian—or, rather, a feminist revision of Brecht, since Brecht called more for critique than for desire and passion on the part of the actor. Thus, while Gainor’s point is well-taken, I think what Margolin describes is a practice that draws from *both* Brecht and Stanislavski or the Method, making this a good example of the point I am making here: that these supposedly divergent methods can complement one another in productive ways.

emotional memory to access the emotions they portray on stage, of if these were achieved through techniques which encourage actors to access emotions by adopting the physicality of an emotion (such as occurs with Schechner's Rasa Box technique). It is quite likely that each actor on stage has utilized a somewhat different set of techniques, since a great deal of an actor's work is done outside of rehearsal, and is a matter of personal preference. All of this means that Method techniques may produce estranging performances, depending on how and when those techniques are engaged. Or, to draw an example that takes us outside the Method v. Brechtian dichotomy, performances that create Dolan's notion of "utopian performatives" may very well arise out of entirely non-democratic rehearsal practices.⁹³ We simply do not know if a communal moment on stage was achieved by a director telling the actors where to stand and what kind of emotion to portray. Feminist scholarship has continually reminded us that *how* we do our work matters. But in theatre, as in so many industries, the labor process is frequently invisible in the final product, and as such questions about whether or not a play is "Brechtian" or "Stanislawskian" often rely on performance style alone, neglecting the means of production entirely. *In the Heart of America* counteracts this tendency by staging rehearsals which reveal how Brecht and Stanislavski's techniques compliment one another to produce a working method that is dialogic, respectful, collaborative, critical, and, ultimately, empathetic.

In the Heart of America: Undoing Each Other through Empathy

Unlike *Trestle*, the rehearsed scenario in *Heart* is not a recreation of a past event, and thus it is more exploratory and open-ended than the one which structures Pace and Dalton's rehearsals. As noted at the opening of the chapter, the play follows the growing friendship and

⁹³ Dolan defines utopian performatives as the "small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense" (5).

eventual love affair between Remzi and Craver, soldiers in the first Gulf War. The play shifts temporally between the “present,” which takes place in Craver’s hotel room in Kentucky, and the past, in Iraq. In the present, Remzi’s sister Fairouz has tracked Craver down in order to find out what happened to her brother, who never returned from the war and who the army has classified only as “missing” (Wallace 111).⁹⁴ Remzi and Craver’s relationship unfolds through flashbacks to the past that often merge with and blur into the present, until we finally learn that Remzi is dead—beaten to death by his fellow soldiers when they discover him with Craver. The question Remzi poses to Craver early in the play, the question quoted at the outset of this chapter, thus foreshadows the future. But in as much as it is a call to friendship in addition to a prefiguring of death, Remzi’s question also engages Craver in a hypothetical future, one in which they are “pretty good friends” (Wallace 90).⁹⁵ The scenario Remzi proposes is at once highly critical and highly affective. He asks Craver, literally and metaphorically, to travel the distance between them. In this sense, the walk can be viewed as metaphor for empathy, since empathy is often characterized as “bridging of difference between self and other” (Gardiner 1).⁹⁶ But as noted earlier, the moment is also embodied. It requires Craver to physicalize the distance between them: a distance marked by race, class, and the taboo nature of homosexual relationships within the military. In this latter sense, the walk they devise might be understood as a *gestus*.

⁹⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all Wallace references in this section are to *In the Heart of America*.

⁹⁵ Remzi’s scenario begs the question of whether or not Craver is only able to entertain the possibility of their friendship under the condition of Remzi’s death, his absence. Alternatively, we might apply theories of friendship here to suggest, as Derrida has done, that “to have a friend, to look at him, to follow him with your eyes, to admire him in friendship is to know in a more intense way, already injured, always insistent, and more and more unforgettable, that one of the two of you will inevitably see the other die” (*The Work of Mourning* 107). There are certainly productive resonances here. But we must also look within the play itself to fully understand Remzi’s choice to propose a future in which he will not be present. Remzi feels fragmented by his hyphenated identity. He is also haunted by the fact that, as a child, he watched his sister be violently attacked for her ethnic difference while he did nothing to stop the assault. Remzi has trouble imagining himself as an active and whole person. At the point in the play when he proposes this scenario to Craver, I would suggest that the only way he can see himself as a whole is in his own death.

⁹⁶ Recall that Smith also alludes to empathy as a kind of bridging between self and character.

Brecht defined *gestus* as an expression of the characters' relationships to each other and to their social environment, a representation of who they are historically and culturally.⁹⁷ Like many of Wallace's characters, the characters in this play bear their histories on their bodies such that everything they do is affected by the past, and walking is arguably the central gestic action of *Heart*. Remzi's sister Fairouz walks with a limp, the result of a childhood injury caused when schoolchildren took a hammer to her foot to prove that the "Dirty Arab devil" had cloven hooves (Wallace 128). The Vietnamese ghost named Lue Ming walks hunched over, like all the women in her country, she says, so as to be "less of a target" for the bombs that fall around them (Wallace 91). Fairouz and Remzi's mother limps from an injury probably sustained at the hands of Israeli soldiers (Wallace 93). Each step these women take is encoded with a history of ethnically motivated hate, religious conflict, war, and violence.⁹⁸

When Craver and Remzi undertake their imagined scenario, they create the opportunity for a different kind of *gestus*—one that expresses, to be sure, the trauma inflicted by Remzi's hypothetical death, but also one that engages both men in imaginative acts of empathy and analysis as they "cross" perspective from self to other. To do this, they approach the situation much as actors might. "This is something important I'm talking about," Remzi says, establishing the "stakes" of the situation. "Let's say I'm you and I see me lying up ahead, dead. I stop in my tracks. I'm upset. We were friends, and I've got to cross the thirty or so feet between us" (Wallace 88). The crossings described in this passage are more than just physical. Remzi

⁹⁷ This is true, at least, of what Brecht characterized as "social" *gestus*. See Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre* 86, 104, and 198.

⁹⁸ In her reading of this chapter, Sara Warner raises the question as to why the two men get to devise this potentially liberatory *gestus* while the women are restricted to representations of suffering and victimhood. There is certainly a gender division at work in the play, but not one, I think, that suggests sexism within Wallace's work. After all, Pace is the instigator of both action and the critical interrogation of her environment in *Trestle*. As for the gender issues in *Heart*, I read them as an attempt on Wallace's part to remind us that violence scars perpetrators as much as victims. Craver and Remzi are as much victims of war and social violence as Fairouz, her mother, and Lue-Ming. And, although I do not have time to address it in this chapter, both Lue-Ming and Fairouz undertake their own quests for retribution and justice in the play.

“crosses” to Craver’s point of view, seeing his own dead body as he imagines Craver might see it. Craver, in turn, studies “his” actions by watching Remzi perform them, a technique Brecht recommended for rehearsal so that each role might be the product of multiple points of view, not just the actor portraying that role (Brecht 197). Remzi and Craver thus develop Craver’s actions collaboratively. The men then contemplate what an actor trained in the Stanislavski system would call the “given circumstances” of Remzi’s scenario in order to devise a walk that both agree suits the situation in all its complexity—the heat of the desert bearing down, Craver’s understanding that he could easily have been the one killed (in the scenario, Remzi has been shot by an Iraqi), Craver’s happiness at still being alive, and their status (in the context of the scenario) as “Pretty good friends” (Wallace 90). Physical, psychological, social, and affective circumstances are all considered. Remzi’s first walk, the men determine, is “too confident,” while Craver’s ensuing attempt is “too careful” (Wallace 88). Remzi then devises a combination of the two walks, which both men find appropriate. Craver attempts to reproduce it, pausing first to pose another question evocative of Stanislavski’s system acting: “Why do I want to get closer if you’re dead and I know it’s you? I mean, there’s nothing else to figure out, is there?” (Wallace 89) Craver is asking, in other words, “What is my motivation? How do I justify this action?” To this, Remzi replies, “Because . . . I’m your friend, and you’d rather be the one to report my death than some jerk who doesn’t know I exist” (Wallace 89). Finally, the two men “*link arms and walk in unison*” (Wallace 90). The final image suggests consensus and mutual understanding.

By inviting Craver to perform in an imaginative scenario in which they are “pretty good friends,” Remzi asks that Craver experience, physically, emotionally, and intellectually, the possibility of this kind of relationship. When they begin the rehearsal, they are not, in fact, “pretty good friends.” Earlier in the scene, Remzi had responded to what he perceived as an anti-

Arab sentiment from Craver by attempting to highlight their mutually minoritized status, stating, “You’re broke and I’m Arab. That about evens it out, doesn’t it?”—a question Craver ignores (Wallace 87). At this early point in the play, they seem unsure of the depth of their friendship, as well as how to address the racial and class differences that identify them to the world and to each other. To realize the possibility of friendship, both men must establish what the distance between them means. Are they, as Remzi proposes, “about even,” or are they not? By accepting Remzi’s invitation and engaging in the imaginative scenario, Craver accepts the challenge that he has previously ignored.

As they exchange roles, traveling the space between them, Remzi and Craver engage in empathy. Like Smith’s description of acting as “*travel* from the self to the other,” Remzi and Craver travel the space between them (xxvi). In doing so, they attempt to see the situation from the other’s perspective, but never by simply imagining what that perspective might be or assuming that they can automatically presume knowledge of it. Instead, they ask questions and respond to the others’ comments. Their respect for the other is revealed in the dialogic nature of their empathy, in the extent to which each man regards the other as having his own, distinct understanding and experience of the situation. Both men are, furthermore, working in the subjunctive mode. While it is true that they agree to *assume* the relationship of “pretty good friends,” this is, at this point in the play, merely an imagined condition. Neither man is sure what this condition looks or feels like, and consequently neither is imposing a particular emotional state or critical response on the other. They are, quite simply, *trying it out*. Their empathy is contingent, able to move in new directions as new ideas and emotions surface. Emotion, after all, comes from the Latin *emovere*, meaning “to move.” As they experience emotions, they are moved to new places, inspiring new emotions, ideas, and questions in the process. When Remzi

suggests that Craver would not be feeling very confident because he would be thinking “that could just as easily be me lying there as him,” Craver agrees (Wallace 88). But when Craver turns this idea around, proposing that, “I might be feeling in a pretty nice way, thinking about being alive and not quite as dead as you,” Remzi concedes, “You’ve got a point there” (Wallace 89). First one possibility is imagined, felt, and enacted, and then another, until both feel that they have explored all the possibilities and permutations, and that they both understand where they finally end up.

The empathy that Remzi and Craver engage in contrasts markedly to the more monologic and unidirectional forms described by theorists such as those discussed in the Introduction: Vischer, Lee, Gauss, Sommer, and, of course, Brecht. For these theorists, empathy consists of an engagement with a relatively passive body: the aesthetic object, the spectator, the minority subject.⁹⁹ These bodies either become a canvass onto which the empathizer projects his or her emotions or an involuntary receptacle for emotion and ideology. Boal expresses the latter understanding of empathy in *The Rainbow of Desire* (1995): “The emotion of the characters penetrates us, the moral world of the show invades us, osmotically; we are led by characters and actions not under our control; we experience a *vicarious* emotion” (42). Under these circumstances, the spectator feels that she must “surrender empathetically” (Boal, *Rainbow* 27). Empathy is seen as an emotional invasion, more of a one-way street than a bridge, and the feelings and thoughts that travel it remain un-affected by the act of transmission. These models of empathy, furthermore, imagine a clear exchange between a stable, coherent “I” and an

⁹⁹ Sommer actually argues that readers intent on empathizing with the minority subject *perceive* that subject as passive and accessible, when, in her analysis, minority writers might actively work to refuse this easy intimacy, targeting “those who would read in the presumptuous register of ‘If I were a . . . ,’ and forget how positionality affects knowledge” (9).

“other”—and, while empathy may threaten to disrupt that coherence, it seems to do so a way that is always invasive, with the power located only on one side of the exchange.

Remzi and Craver, on the other hand, open themselves willingly to one another, inviting respectful exchange that is not only multi-directional, but is also constantly shifting as the two subjects engaged in the project grow, change, and respond to one another. Their exchange, then, is more characteristic of clinical empathy than aesthetic empathy. As Warren S. Poland argues, “Emotional traffic goes two ways” (90). Craver and Remzi reflect this as they carefully, slowly establish trust and understanding. But even this model of exchange suggests a closed system, with stable subjects transferring emotion back and forth from stable origin to stable destination. We must keep in mind that this exchange is continually shifting, complicated by the ways in which Craver and Remzi each change through their encounter. As Katz writes of clinical empathy, “the client with whom we empathize is far from static” (25). This is presumably true of the clinician as well. It is certainly true of Remzi and Craver, who are in the process of reimagining their relationship, and thus themselves, as they undertake this empathetic exchange. By engaging in this dialogic, contingent empathy in their rehearsals for an imagined future, Remzi and Craver render themselves vulnerable to change not because they risk being invaded by the other’s emotion, as Boal describes, but because they are willing to *respond* to the other and possibly change in the process.

This sense of contingency is also attached to the *gestus* the pair develops. Elin Diamond has argued that “Because the *gestus* is effected by a historical subject/actor, what the spectator sees is not the mere miming of a social relationship, but a *reading* of it, an interpretation by a historical subject who supplements (rather than disappears into) the production of meaning” (53). Before they can present their reading, however, Remzi and Craver have to produce it.

Furthermore, they are not, strictly speaking, developing a *gestus* in order to express their relationship and structure future understandings of it. At this stage in the play, they are not entirely sure what their relationship *is*. Thus, their actions are performative. Unlike the moment when an actor sums up a character's social situation, like Helene Weigel snapping her purse closed as Mother Courage, Remzi and Craver use the methods of rehearsal to analyze, explore, and develop their relationship, to make discoveries, to create *gestus*, and to rehearse their own possible future. In the process of building a "reading" of their relationship, Remzi and Craver perform that relationship into being; they rehearse their way into friendship.

Building on Dolan's work, Shannon Baley has suggested that Wallace's plays offer multiple examples of utopian performatives originating in *gestus*. Dolan defines utopian performatives as the "small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense" (5). Remzi and Craver's democratically attained union certainly seems affectively to evoke a possible, utopian future. What Baley and Dolan's analyses do not fully account for, however, is the fact that Craver and Remzi do not simply *perform* a utopian moment: they *build* one through rehearsal. Both scholars focus on the moment of the performative itself—the achievement of the utopian goal, in this case, the walk in unison. But what did it take to get there? What other possibilities were tried along the way? What mistakes and missteps? Wallace calls our attention to a key difference between *performing* and *rehearsing*. If we are to perform new worlds into being, utopian or otherwise, how do we get there? The potential utopian moment that we might achieve in the theatre must be built, and, like

anything in the theatre, it is built through rehearsal, through taking the time to try things together and then try them again and again.

The range of performance theories and rehearsal styles Wallace incorporates into the scene, furthermore, emphasizes the combined importance of affect, cognition, and embodiment to her characters' labor. Remzi and Craver's discussions about their environment, motivation, and the authenticity of their enactments resonate with Stanislavski's system of actor training. Brecht is evoked by having both Craver and Remzi perform the actions that are "assigned" to Craver. But even these actions are also empathetic—while one of the men critically observes the other in order to analyze his actions, the other man is putting himself, physically and emotionally, into the position of the "other" Craver who is "pretty good friends" with Remzi. This is a rehearsal which requires its participants to act as both actors and spectators to their own actions—to embody and analyze. When Craver tries to copy Remzi's walk, he concludes, "That didn't feel right" (Wallace 89). Whether this is because the solution was too much Remzi's and not enough Craver's, or whether it is simply not the right solution, what Craver identifies in that moment is the importance of affective and embodied knowledge, as well as the fact that we are unlikely to adopt solutions that we cannot comfortably embody, a lesson reminiscent of Boal's work. It is also a lesson that highlights the importance of embodiment to social change in general, and the fact that engaging in empathy or experiencing utopian performatives in the theatre may not be sufficient for such change. Wallace's characters learn and change by *doing*. Susan L. Feagin makes a similar point in regard to empathetic reading: "My reading the novel and empathizing with a character in it may or may not reflect or change how I would respond to the actual situation were I to encounter it. Even if the thought of *x* affects you in a given way, *x* would not necessarily affect you in that way" (100). Until you get up and do something, you

cannot know how it will impact you. Furthermore, embodying new ways of being takes practice. Most new things are uncomfortable the first time we try them. Sara Ahmed suggests that our discomfort can be generative; it tells us something about our relationship to our environment. She aligns this with her notion of “queer feelings,” which “may embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving, along with an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where the discomfort may take us” (155). As spaces where we might explore our discomfort, rehearsals not only offer us the chance to acclimate to new ways of being, but also to understand why and how particular ways of being are more “comfortable” than others.

The scene suggests, ultimately, that we must engage not just the affective moment of the utopian performative or the critical analysis evoked by the *gestus*, but also the creative labor that produces these moments: labor that is at times tentative, scary, and contentious; labor that requires trust, listening, attending to your own thoughts and feelings as well to those of others. It is labor that responds to the call of friendship and the responsibilities entailed therein.¹⁰⁰ It is labor that requires empathy (and an empathy, more specifically, that requires labor). This

¹⁰⁰ I am alluding, here, to Derrida’s work in *The Politics of Friendship* (1994), in which he suggests that the call to friendship both anticipates and recalls the friend who can hear and respond to this call—what Derrida refers to as the “future anteriority” of friendship (249). In responding to the call to friendship we are already caught up in the responsibilities of friendship, having accepted our interpellation as potential friends. The call to friendship “points to that which must indeed be supposed in order to be heard, if only in the non-apophantic form of prayer: you have already marked this minimal friendship, this preliminary consent without which you would not hear me” (Derrida, *Politics* 236). Derrida associates the responsibility of friendship to *respect* and to the distance required for both: “[*R*]espect and responsibility, which come together and provoke each other relentlessly, seem to refer, in the case of the former, to languages of the Latin family, to distance, to space, to the gaze; and in the case of the latter, to time, to the voice and to listening. There is no respect, as its name connotes, without the vision and distance of *spacing*. No responsibility without response, without what speaking and hearing *invisibly* say to the ear, and which takes *time*” (*Politics* 252). I find Derrida’s account of friendship useful because, rather than drawing on notions of similarity and fraternity, it preserves the alterity of the friend. Moreover, Derrida’s account of the response to the call to friendship supports my reading of Craver’s response as the first step toward friendship. Derrida’s work, of course, is part of a larger body of contemporary scholarship on friendship drawing on both ancient and early modern writers like Cicero and Montaigne, a great deal of which focuses on the imbricated nature of male same-sex desire and friendship, as well as the relationship of friendship to death and mourning—both of which are relevant to the present case study. For more of this subject, see the work of Alan Bray, a special issue of friendship from *GLQ* edited by Jody Greene (issue 10.3 (2004)), as well as Derrida’s *The Politics of Friendship* and *The Work of Mourning* (2001).

listening, collaborating, risk-taking, and empathizing is physical, emotional, and intellectual work. It is the work of rehearsal.

For all that they might offer us, however, rehearsals, as the search for what can be repeated, are never free from economies of reproduction. For each rehearsal in which the characters attempt to build new ways of being in the world, Wallace offers as contrast the rehearsals and repetitions that structure the social world, ones that attempt to resist change and to remain invisible. As the ghost Lue Ming tells us, “what’s done is often done again and done again” (Wallace 118). The past is remade in the present. The genocide of Native Americans, the wars in Vietnam, Panama, Iraq—all are depicted in the play as repetitions of a perpetually re-activated scenario of invasion and destruction. As identities and social structures are made and re-made through the re-inscription of social norms, Wallace’s characters are faced, to paraphrase Butler, with the problem of when and how to repeat. In one scene, for example, Remzi and Craver are taught how to interrogate Iraqis by acting out the interrogation with their lieutenant, Boxler, who shouts insults at the pair until they hit and kick him. Boxler urges them to “Hold on to that anger” so they can use it later (an instruction that resonates with Stanislavski’s notion of emotional memory), instructing them to blame other minorities for their own suffering in a logic that collapses historical, racial, and ethnic specificity: “If the ragheads hadn’t shot our buffalo, we could have swapped them for their camels, and then we wouldn’t have needed the coal mines to begin with, and your father would have worked in an auto factory, and he’d be alive today” (Wallace 99). Successful learning requires not only enacting the correct behavior, but also strategically deploying emotion, turning their own frustrated sense of minoritization and feminization against the designated, appropriate “others.” Through rehearsals like these, the two men try to remake himself to fit neatly into the U.S. military’s one-size-fits-all scenario for

interpreting the world, a scenario in which “America” is constantly threatened by an “Other” who goes by the various names “gook,” “Indian,” and “sandnigger.” This is particularly the case for Remzi, who joined the military because he was “sick of a being a hyphen,” a status that left him dangerously close to the “other” who is always the enemy (Wallace 95). Being a soldier, he hopes, will solidify his identity as an “American.”

Remzi and Craver’s embodied scenario differs from that proposed by the lieutenant in that theirs is focused not on rejecting others, but on engaging them. Whereas Boxler wants them to internalize their emotions, focusing intently on their own hurt and anger, Remzi and Craver attempt to step away from themselves—creating a little critical distance from which to view their burgeoning relationship, but also allowing themselves to imagine that relationship from the other’s perspective. It is this willingness to imagine and analyze other perspectives and ways of being that allows their friendship to emerge. And it is this friendship and the eventual love that develops from it that changes both men. “I wanted to travel everyplace on your body,” Remzi tells Craver. “Even the places you’d never been” (Wallace 136). Wallace has remarked that “Love supposedly has the capacity to reconstruct and rediscover the body’s sensuality” (qtd. in Istel 25). Love remakes us—the positive side of Butler’s claim that love undoes us. It recovers that which we may have lost and also constructs us anew. Are those places on Craver’s body places he has never been, or places that did not exist prior to his relationship with Remzi? In Wallace’s work, life experiences not only change the physical body, they influence how that body experiences the world. Just as Pace and Dalton challenge each other’s ways of viewing the world, Remzi and Craver’s interaction allow them to experience new ways of *feeling* their bodies and their relationship to their surroundings. Wallace has commented that “The body is central—and vulnerable—in both love and war,” a comment which echoes Butler’s argument that it is our

bodily vulnerability to others, our susceptibility to violence as well as to desire, that reminds us of our collective responsibility for each other's physical and social lives (Wallace qtd. in Istel 25). It is, in fact, the dual recognition of the vulnerability of the Iraqi population and his own vulnerability to Craver that causes Remzi to rethink his purpose for being in Iraq.

As a soldier, Remzi is asked to participate in the perpetuation of particular social structures, to play his part in the perpetuation of predetermined scenarios. Explaining his reasons for joining the military, Remzi repeats the "official line" to his sister: "Iraq invaded a sovereign country. That's against international law" (Wallace 93). So he will go to Iraq to defend freedom, to "protect a way of life"—phrases and scenarios deployed by the U.S. to justify its military presence in foreign nations (Wallace 87). As I discussed in Chapter two, scenarios, according to Diana Taylor, are the "meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes" (268). Scenarios are the frequently repeated structures we use both to understand our world and to act in it, and this later condition—our action—is precisely where the potential for change emerges. Scenarios require the embodiment of social actors, and Remzi begins to find that he cannot fit himself into this scenario the way that he had hoped (Taylor 29). Significantly, it is his affective responses that signal Remzi that there is a problem. He is uncomfortable in the embodiment of the role he must play, a discomfort that becomes further pronounced in response to his growing love for and attraction to Craver.

The more violence Remzi sees around him and the more love he feels for Craver, the more Remzi begins to rethink both his role in the invasion and his desire to overcome his hyphenated identity. As he watches the bombs fall on Baghdad, he recites the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme and asks Craver, "Do you think he really wanted to be whole again? . . . I think he was tired of being a good egg" (Wallace 119). His statement resonates with the notion of "good

subjects” and “bad subjects.” To be a good subject, he would have to conform to the identities provided to him by mainstream society. In this case, that would mean accepting the military’s notion of what it means to be “good”—a choice that would require him to give up his love for Craver and to engage wholeheartedly in the violence against the people of Iraq. The more Remzi sees Iraq shattered—“like a body with every bone inside it broken”—the less he wants to feel whole (Wallace 130). Wholeness, or self-sameness, after all, is itself a kind of violence, the negation of disparate selves (Diamond 97). In Remzi’s case, it comes at the price of remaking himself according to the racist, sexist, and homophobic norms of the U.S. military. Nevertheless, love is not a simple or complete solution. Craver explains that “Love can make you feel so changed you think the world is changed” (Wallace 136). Remzi and Craver make the mistake of forgetting the world outside the tiny social unit they create. When they are caught together by other members of their unit, Remzi’s psychic fragmentation is made literal as he is beaten to death by his fellow soldiers, an act of violence that says “that this body, this challenge to an accepted version of the world is and shall be unthinkable” (Butler, “Beside Oneself” 35).

Like Pace’s death, Remzi’s death did not have to happen. Wallace is suspicious, however, of unearned happy endings and utopian solutions, stating, “I’m not utopian. I know we’re never going to have a society where there’s no injustice” (Interview, *Women Who Write Plays* 471). This does not mean that someone like Remzi can never be accepted, but that we have not yet achieved the conditions under which this would be possible. The deaths in these plays are reminders to the audience that the work begun in the play is not yet complete. We see Remzi undertaking this work even in the moment of his death; it is, in fact, what kills him. Remzi died, and not Craver, because he could no longer stand by as a witness to violence and hate—the same violence and hate that was targeted against his sister when they were children, and which has

been targeted at him his entire life. After they were caught, they were brought before the ranking officers. There was an Iraqi prisoner in the room whom the other soldiers were taunting, calling “Sandnigger. Indian. Gook” (Wallace 135). Remzi “when wild,” fighting the officers, one of whom had a knife. Even after the Iraqi died, Remzi kept fighting. Craver recalls, “I shouted for you to stay down but you wouldn’t stay down” (Wallace 135). Remzi feels that he can no longer be an observer, and that he must act for the sake of others as well as himself.

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed empathy as a kind of travel between self and other. The difference between the empathy I am describing here and one that collapses differences is that the travel to which I am referring is continual. You never “arrive” at your destination. At the end of the play, Remzi’s ghost comes to Craver and asks, “What are you, Craver?” Craver begins, “I am a White Trash . . .” and then Remzi joins him and they say together, “Indian, Sandnigger, Brown Trash, Arab, Gook Boy, Faggot,” Craver concludes, “From the banks of the Kentucky River” (Wallace 136). Of this moment, Beth Cleary writes that Craver “is freed into solidarity with all others, freed from the lie of white privilege, out of the closet, dead to his conditioned self and alive to his desiring uncategorizable body” (10). Baley similarly argues that *gestus* in Wallace’s plays evokes “a world in which desires, bodies, and identities are fluid, escapable, anything but fixed” (239). Without undermining the potential for new ways of desiring and being in the world, I want to add a cautionary note about reading this moment as a kind of arrival or union, the completion of the act of crossing from self to other which then releases Craver from the strictures of identity.

Although the play abounds with border-crossings, these actions come with a warning. The war itself represents a border-crossing in the form of a military invasion. Lue Ming performs both spatial and temporal border-crossings, traveling through time and across continents to find

the American soldier who murdered her. Fairouz spends the play searching for her brother, who never returned from the war and who the army has classified only as “missing,” an ominous designation (Wallace 111). Lue Ming instructs Fairouz, “If you are going to find your brother you have to cross borders” (Wallace 108). Even Remzi’s quest to overcome his hyphenated identity is an attempt to cross borders, to firmly locate himself on one side of his divided identity so that he can lead “a quiet life. As an American citizen” (Wallace 94). But in all of these crossings, people seldom end up where they intend, and their searches mostly fail. The first time we meet Lue Ming, she has overshot her intended destination by more than fifteen years and several states. When the army fails to provide Remzi with the stable identity he craves, he visits Palestine in hopes of finding it there, only to come back and tell Craver that he was “a tourist there. An outsider.” His inability to escape his split identity is highlighted by an old woman who calls him “Yankee Palestina” (Wallace 107). Fairouz never finds her brother. These are not hopeless failures; each character finds something, although perhaps not what they were looking for. The empathetic journey from one person to another is no less subject to failure, uncertainty, and inexactitude.

At the end of *Unmaking Mimesis*, Diamond writes about the potential of “a subjectivity that seeks to explore relatedness while refusing the easy assumption of analogous or common reference points” (181). Rehearsing the walk, Craver and Remzi explore not just the position of the other but, perhaps more importantly, their own uncertain positions *vis a vis* one another and the space that they each have to cross to begin to empathize with each other. They explore, in other words, the terrain of relatedness. It is important to note that in the dialogue quoted above Craver both begins and ends the speech alone. The minority identities he recites with Remzi are bracketed by two distinct identity markers: “White Trash” and “From the banks of the Kentucky

River” (Wallace 136). This moment, then, “rehearses” the earlier moment of the walk, as Craver moves from his own socially, historically determined subject position to those that Remzi has occupied or been forced to occupy by society and back again. The shared lines, then, might not represent the fluidity or uncategorizability of identity, but rather a greater knowledge on Craver’s part of how minority identities are formed and assigned to a person, and thus where his subjectivity and that of his former lover might converge, and also where they might diverge. It suggests greater empathy with Remzi, but not necessarily identification with him.

There is no arrival, no solution. Empathy is a process. Understanding and social change are processes. Moments of hope are present in these plays, but they are often undermined by social pressures, just as Craver and Remzi’s relationship is destroyed by hate and violence. What is important, for Wallace, is that we remain open to the possibility that things can be other than they are, and that we continually seek a better future, grappling honestly with the obstacles that stand between us and that future. She notes that the last line of *Heart* is “Go!,” called out in a flashback of Craver and Remzi in another one of their games, a race: “the last scene is a moment when there was happiness and connection between Remzi and Craver, when they are going to race again. It’s this feeling, for me, of energy and forward power, and although we know Remzi has died, in that moment we see that anything was possible” (*Interviews* 464). There is hope. She ends the play with another kind of “not . . . but.” Remzi did not *have* to die. The outcome could be otherwise.

Hope in the play also resides in the message that is passed on: a message that reinforces the idea that we must remain open to unstable subjectivity, that when we let others in we are unmade in terrifying and wonderful ways. At the end of the play, Fairouz and Craver discuss the need to tell Remzi’s story, thereby acting as witnesses to his life and his loss, just as Dalton

finally acts as Pace's witness. This is a form of activism for Wallace, a means of attesting to the parts of each other that "were clipped or squashed or strangled because they didn't fit in with the norm" (*Interviews* 463). Fairouz muses about something Remzi said to her in the past: "balance could be a bad thing, a trick to keep you in the middle, where things add up, where you can do no harm" (Wallace 138). She then admits that Remzi did not actually say this, "But he might have" (Wallace 138). In the space opened up by grief and loss, the possibility—the thing *not* said—is as real and vital as that which has actually occurred. And Fairouz is right, in a way. While Remzi went to Iraq looking for stability, balance, he failed to find it. His "failure," however, reflects a growing willingness to challenge the identities available to him through mainstream sources, willingness manifested in his final act of defiance. It is in the unsettled, unbalanced space where we may fall in unanticipated directions at any moment that we encounter the possibility for change: for unexpected love, for an end to war. As Fairouz and Craver cope with their loss, they, too, are unbalanced and unmade, carrying change into the future. Remzi and Craver's rehearsals initiated this change, allowing them to produce a future that was not possible until they engaged one in their collaborative, imaginative scenario. As an audience, we, too, are witnesses to these acts. By telling the story, we pick up where the characters left off, engaging, perhaps, in rehearsals of our own. This is not to say that we have necessarily been passive until this point; empathy and critical viewing, both of which we can undertake as audience members, are important parts of the work in which Wallace's characters engage. Embodiment and action, however, are also required—a message that reminds us that no matter how much we feel in the theatre or what critical discoveries we might make, these responses and discoveries are only part of the labor of social change. Like Wallace's characters, we must also act, testing new behaviors and ways of being in the world.

Conclusion

Acting is scary, and fear in the theatre is not different from fear in life: fear of being judged, fear of becoming exposed and vulnerable, fear of failure and rejection, fear of the unknown. In theatre, this fear manifests perhaps most or famously in the form of stage fright, a fear inspired by “deep, dark void” on the other side of the proscenium arch described by Stanislavski in his very first chapter of his text on actor training (9). Nicholas Ridout argues that this fear, particularly fear of the audience, is necessary to theatre:

[T]he initial moment, the founding crisis upon which the possibility of truthful acting seems to depend, is a bruising physical and psychological encounter with the audience that leads to the actor’s complete failure and a collapse into the experience commonly known as ‘stage fright.’ The violent exposure of this experience is that of a snail ripped from the protection of its shell, or rather, the infinite vulnerability of the slug that has never even known the comforts of a shell. (Ridout 39)

Stage fright, Ridout writes, entails a loss of control, a “failure to properly manage relations between inside and outside” (58). It occurs in that moment when theatre undoes you, moving you from one self to another, rendering the “I” heterogeneous (Ridout 67). The foundation for truthful acting, according to this argument, is a vulnerability so profound that you lose yourself.

The self-undoing fear that accompanies this exposure, the awareness that an other (seen or unseen in the darkness of the void) can potentially divorce you from yourself acts as a source of great possibility in Wallace’s work. And, as much as it may terrify us, it is an awareness that can also bring great pleasure. Others help us access another “I” by their watchful, responsive, respectful, and loving *presence*. This is the promise that Pace depends on and the possibility that

allows Craver and Remzi to build a friendship. The fear that is introduced into these characters lives is accompanied by new pleasures found in unexpected places—a kiss on the back of the knee, a new friend and lover who changes the very way we understand ourselves and the world. The first time Remzi and Craver make love, Remzi kisses him and says, “You are my white trash, and I love you,” giving new value to a denigrated identity (Wallace, *Heart* 134). As much as Pace frustrates Dalton, he is drawn to her, offering the only partially joking reason, “Warped people can be fun sometimes” (Wallace, *Trestle* 287). Pushing the boundaries of our world can be exhilarating—as exhilarating as running a train or one’s first sexual encounter. Fear and pleasure are no more separable than affect and cognition; these are mutually informing response to the world, ways of processing and interpreting our environments. Wallace’s characters live on the boundary between the thrill of newness and the terror it can invoke, helping each other negotiate this fraught territory.

While the fear (and pleasure) of vulnerability may be at the heart of truthful acting for Stanislavski, in Wallace’s work, it is at the heart of estrangement. But here, again, Wallace offers a much messier account of estrangement than Brecht. In the Brechtian model of estrangement, the spectator is shocked or startled into the realization that the world as depicted on stage could be different. The spectator is called into question as one who has formerly thought as the character thought, at the same time that he or she discovers that the production of life (reality, self, etc.) is a project open to him or her. Pleasure, for Brecht, arises after fear, in the critical and productive labor incited after estrangement occurs. Fredric Jameson describes this as

a joyous process, a kind of creative play, in which new acts are formed together out of pieces of the old, in which the whole reified surface of a period seemingly beyond history and beyond change now submits to a

first ludic un-building before arriving at a real social and revolutionary collective reconstruction. (47)

He is tempted, he writes, to call this an “ethics of production,” that is distinctly pleasurable (Jameson 47). In Wallace’s work, on the other hand, this estrangement is generally accompanied by an acute sense of vulnerability, the sense that one is being undone. There may be pleasure in this, but there is also fear. The ability to embrace the critical assessments and affective implications produced by estrangement depends on the ability to embrace vulnerability. Rather than an ethics of production, which supposes that undoing neatly proceeds redoing and that overlooks the way that pleasure and fear operate in *both undoing and redoing*, I suggest that we conceive of this as an ethics that I can describe in no other way but “theatrical”: In theatre, we are better able to see, feel, and experience our status as a subject constituted *by and through others*—the sociality of our being. This means that we must understand ourselves as being continually made and unmade, both through estrangement and through empathy.

When we empathize—at least, when we empathize in a way that maintains the alterity of the other and which respects the other’s responses as potentially quite different from those that are “natural” or “familiar” to us—we imagine ways of feeling other than our own. In doing so, we confront the possibility that to be “not me” is also to be “not not me”—that there are other ways of being ourselves. Empathy undertaken in this way is not an uninvited emotional transmission nor a projection of one person’s thoughts and feelings onto another. It is not identification or a feeling of oneness. It is, instead, an active process requiring imagination, historical analysis, embodiment, and vulnerability. As such, the path of empathy is never simple or straightforward, but rather circuitous and ever-changing in response to social circumstances and to the changes that we ourselves undergo when we explore our relationships to others.

Boundaries and destinations are continually shifting we engage in a process that, by nature of its sociality, changes with each exchange. As a result, empathy is never complete; it necessitates continual renewal and reappraisal. Understanding empathy in this way moves us away from empathic models in which the spectator is either a passive victim or a conqueror, and in which affect is transferred or projected across stable boundaries from body to body. The subjects who engage in empathy are contingent—bound by social and historical circumstances. They are also social actors engaged in the process of making and remaking the social world and themselves. To understand how to *do* this empathy, we can look to the techniques of theatrical rehearsal and actor training. Just as I am suggesting about empathy, acting is a process, and finding one's way into a character is a journey without end; each rehearsal and performance affords a new experience of that character, both for the actor and audience. The kind of acting that Wallace's characters model—drawing from Stanislavski, Brecht, and Boal—is affective and cognitive, embodied and critical. Wallace's integration of these techniques into the dramaturgy of her plays suggest that the theatre is not only a place where we might experience empathy, but also a place where we might find the tools and techniques that could help us engage in a collaborative, creative, and critical empathy, one that may move us—and the borders we attempt to cross—in unexpected ways.

While many have argued that Brecht's theatre, by revealing the constructed nature of representation, ultimately risks the status of the subject, it is important keep in mind that Brecht also intended for theatre to help audience members gain, out of their newfound critical seeing, the ability to act, to produce themselves and the world.¹⁰¹ Brecht was, after all, attempting to restore the agency and individual critical capacity of each spectator, which he believed had been

¹⁰¹ Wright argues, for instance, that "The inevitable deduction made from Brecht's theory is that illusion is not merely false consciousness but that the self is illusory through and through" (139).

robbed by a theatre that treated its audience as “a mob, which must be and can be reached only through its emotions” (*Brecht* 79). Postmodern readers of Brecht reject the notion that his theatre traded one ideology or form of authority for another, emphasizing the provisional nature of any worldview promoted in his plays. Diamond, for instance, argues that “Brechtian theatre depends on a structure of representation, on exposing and making visible, but what appears even in the *gestus* can only be provisional, indeterminate, nonauthoritative” (54). But it is nevertheless difficult to deny the fact that Brecht wants to instill both interpretive and productive power and authority in the spectator. He calls for a theatre that “could enable the spectator to understand his social environment and to govern it rationally and emotionally,” for a theatre that would help him “master himself and the world.”¹⁰² This is not altogether a bad thing. The mastery he calls for is not over other people, but over the production of social life. Brecht wanted to put that power of production back in the hands of the audience—to make them self-producers. And as discussed in the Introduction, Brecht saw this project as a social one. We cannot exist outside of our social relationships for Brecht. In his effort to instill the audience with creative and interpretive capacity, however, Brecht’s polemical language often emphasizes power, agency, and production in a way that elides or downplays what it means for us to be producers *in a social environment*. This necessitates that we think not only about the ways in which we make ourselves and each other, but how we unmake each other in necessary ways as well. Wallace’s work is thus not a correction of Brecht, because I would argue that he was acutely aware of these issues, but rather a further articulation of the complex nature of sociality that is sometimes oversimplified by Brecht in his attempt to overcome what was, for him, the primary problem of the audience’s passivity.

¹⁰² These are my translations from “Über Experimentelles Theater,” pages 92 and 106.

Accordingly, even as Wallace depicts characters in the process of understanding and making their worlds, engaging in estranged seeing and producing *gestus*, she simultaneously focuses our attention on how our decisions not only *affect* others, but are continually *affected by* those around us, and on how little “mastery” there is in any of this.¹⁰³ We might think of rehearsal generally, and empathy specifically, as ways of exploring this state of being affected, because when we imagine ourselves into the positions of others, we are, ourselves, impacted by that process. This does not mean that we can understand everything someone else thinks and feels, or that our empathy is always accurate—which would, after all, imply a sort of interpretive mastery. It does mean that we entertain the possibility of other ways of thinking and feeling, and that in doing so we may find ourselves changing. Engaging in respectful, dialogic empathy with another requires a flexible orientation to the world, an ability to be responsive to continually changing conditions, circumstances, and affective responses. If there is theatrical territory where emotional “truth” and estrangement meet to produce the same ends—the condition of being “beside ourselves,” both in the sense of being critically self-aware and radically vulnerable to others—these plays seem to offer at least one example of such a meeting.

This meeting, crucially, emerges most clearly in the subjunctive, liminal moments of rehearsal, when choices are still under negotiation. Theatre is always a space of risk: the danger of liveness ensures that. This is one of the hardest lessons for amateur actors to learn: As much as you may prepare your performance, you always have to work with what your fellow players

¹⁰³ In their writing on the theories of Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze and Michael Hardt have both focused on the issue of power as being two sided: not only the power to act/affect, but also the power *to be affected*. While both Deleuze and Hardt seek, in their work, to increase a body’s capacity to act, this capacity is always tied to its same capacity to be acted upon. Because the body, in Spinoza’s work, is not a static entity, our power to act is always changing in relationship to others. Hardt writes, “A simple encounter between two bodies . . . poses an extremely rich and complex scene for analysis; because one body itself is not a fixed unit with a static structure, but rather a dynamic relationship whose internal structure and external limits are open and continually subject to change” (94). Because we social beings, because we are affected by others, our ability to act is always in some way dependent on those others—or at least on how we are constituted and affected by them. The imbricated status of affection and action is central to Wallace’s dramaturgy.

give you. The scene that you played in your head, alone in your apartment, is never the scene that happens on stage or in the rehearsal room, live, in the moment:

The difficulty of executing an action lies in dealing with that which is actually happening in the other person. You can't execute your action in general; you must stay in tune with the responses you are receiving. This requires a great deal of bravery and will due to the fact that you can never know exactly what is going to happen next. (Bruder, et al 40, emphasis in original)

Another way of stating this is to say that the most important person in a scene is always your partner, never you, because it is your partner who will inform each choice you make. The key is to stop thinking about yourself (how you will act, what you will do or say, how it will be received, etc.), and to open yourself to the other. Thus, acting always necessitates a certain amount of surrender to your partner. If you resist, you will not be “playing in the same scene,” and the audience will know.¹⁰⁴ Rehearsals amplify this condition because they are a space for exploration and experimentation. In rehearsals, everyone involved is learning—about the play, each other, what it means to embody these actions in this place at this moment. Decisions are provisional; risks are required.

The implications for feminist scholarship and performance are numerous. First, to return to Gainor's point, we must consider modes and methods of production. This is important not only so that we might understand what Stanislavski's work may offer a feminist theatre, as Gainor argues, but so that we might also consider what we as activists, teachers, and artists can gain from the labor of theatre itself. This requires us to recognize theatrical labor that often goes unmarked and to attend to the nature of that labor. What do actors *do* in rehearsal that might

¹⁰⁴ Even if you are not aiming for emotional “truth,” you still have to be in the moment on stage. If you are doing a *commedia del'arte* scene and your partner executes a *lazzi* differently than she has in previous rehearsals, you have to respond to this specific execution, today—not yesterday's or that of the day before.

transfer to other situations? What are the implications of understanding empathy as labor? I am suggesting that the materialist feminist embrace of Brechtian theatre and the ethics of productivity it espouses (to borrow Jameson's phrase) has ironically overlooked crucial labor, hewing too closely to a Brechtian model in which our understanding of the world is changed in a single shocking realization, rather than through deliberate and difficult work. Moreover, by exploring the work of empathy within the creative process, a process that is by its very nature messy and provisional, Wallace troubles the models of affective exchange that we associate with Brechtian theatre. As feminist scholars and artists, we are left with the challenge of how to imagine and understand a Brechtian theatre in which empathy and affect move in a constant, multidirectional exchange, and in which terror and fear are not passing shocks, but rather potentially persistent states of being that may hinder our ability to embrace new ways of seeing and being.

In the rehearsal space, we can explore how it feels to try new ways of being and relating, what results from embodying social structures in different ways, or from subverting familiar scenarios. Wallace structures into the very dramaturgy of her plays the idea of theatre as a social activity, one in which the desire to have some control in the world is balanced with the willingness to surrender control to another. This surrender is not the complete loss of will described by Boal, but an openness to the other as a part of your social world and thus, in a way, a part of you. She explores the bravery that is needed for that surrender, as well as the discomfort it may cause. To be "beside ourselves" means to step aside and observe ourselves, to narrate ourselves and to let others narrate us. But it also means to be outside the lines that clearly define you as a subject, vulnerable to oblivion, to loss of self. Butler makes this point regarding the search for what it means to be human: "[O]ne must enter into a collective work in which one's

own status as a subject must, for democratic reasons, become disoriented, exposed to what it does not know” (Butler 36). As pedagogical tools, Wallace’s plays offer more than a lesson in complex seeing. Wallace takes the actor’s work in rehearsal and reveals it as the work of social change, as well as a means of confronting the fear of self-displacement that comes with change. Empathy, embodiment, critical analysis, and self-reflection are all a part of this work. It work, moreover, that is ongoing, contingent, and dialogic.

CODA

On February 15, 2009, I saw Marc Bamuthi Joseph perform *The Spoken Word* at the Kitchen Theatre in Ithaca, NY. The performance left me feeling conflicted—wanting to engage and yet unsettled by the implications of doing so. I have returned to that night many times. I have come to the conclusion that the performance troubled me because I felt that Joseph was inviting me, and everyone in the audience, into an exchange, but I worried that I had nothing appropriate to contribute to that exchange. In other words, this performance troubled me because it invited the kind of empathy that I have been advocating throughout this dissertation, and engaging in this type of empathy, as I hope I have established, is not easy. It puts us in uncomfortable positions. It forces us to confront the limits of our understanding, and to respond to that which we cannot know.

Joseph is a skilled performer. His one-man show is a combination of spoken word poetry and hip-hop movement that contemplates what it means to be black in America today. He draws on his life, taking us through the challenges he faces as a young man, an academic, a performer, and a father. I found him to be a compelling performer, channeling rage and sorrow and confusion and love and hope. The show opens with a poem about ancestors bent over working in cane fields, an action that Joseph reads as a labor of faith and love for future generations that they do not yet know—generations that they will never know. This gesture—of giving and laboring for those we do not know—is precisely what Joseph’s performance asked of me, and precisely where I found myself unsure of how to respond.

For Joseph, his performance is a ritual, a dialogue, an exchange. He wants to hear that the audience is with him. He wants us to be participants, not observers. Between the poems, he speaks to us in a voice that is markedly different from the one we have just heard—a shy,

tentative voice. Here is the actor behind the character, he reminds us. Yes, that character is real. The words are spoken with conviction. The motion is “authentic,” if, by authentic, we mean a mode of performative voice that seeks to express something about lived experience. But so too is this other man, this slightly self-conscious man who is not sure if his mostly white, upstate New York audience is following his hip hop communication. Do we speak rhythm, too? So he tries to get us to participate, to affirm: “Word, word.” It is a secular version of “Amen” and “Tell it, Brother.” It is a confirmation not only that we are with him, but also that we can give something back and not just take from his performance.

I find that I am resistant to his desires—not to his desire to know that I am engaged, because I am. Like Joseph, I am bothered by the stillness and quietness of the audience, even though I am a part of that response. There should be stomps and claps and comments, mnhmms, and uhhuhs. But “word”? I am so acutely aware that his is not *my* word, that “word” is not my word, that there are moments when he goes places I cannot.

This moment in which I sat, wondering if I could or should give Joseph a “word,” has replayed in my head a hundred times. I have felt and thought my way in, around, and through it every way I know how. In this process, the moment has become more than the whole of the performance, creating a rift or a gap in experience and memory. In the space of this gap, the questions created by the moment, I have found the room for critical reflection.

This dissertation is full of moments. Moments of interruption and encounter, of repetition and discovery. What a moment in the theatre can do, I think, is address us. A moment can take us out of the flow of narrative; it can interrupt our modes of reception and understanding. It is, after all, moments, not entire plays, that get stuck in our heads, destined to be rehearsed and replayed. In their persistence, their ability to endure, these moments at once stand in for the larger

questions and issues of the whole and exceed those questions. Each time we revisit a moment, we may pose new questions and open new avenues for understanding.

In this process of seeking understanding, we create new narratives, which is, of course, the work of this dissertation. To understand what happens in the moment of encounter that is empathy, I have traced a genealogy of the term that emphasizes the importance of dialogue and process. To understand what happens when empathy is interrupted, I have suggested that we think about the larger social context in which that empathy takes place, and why it might be important to place limits on empathy. I have placed repetition and rehearsal into conversation with various theories of theatre and performance, framing them within these larger discourses. Each chapter, in a way, is an attempt to take a moment that ruptures understanding and to reinscribe it with clarity and meaning. Thus, as much as I hope that I have offered provocative and compelling ways of understanding empathy, I also hope that, in doing so, I have not been too prescriptive in my description of how that empathy might work. I want to offer, here, a few concluding thoughts, as well as a reminder of just how messy empathetic engagement might be.

I have endeavored to demonstrate, in this dissertation, that empathy is best understood in the theatre not as a state, but as a process. It is both critical and affective. If that empathy is to be useful in projects of social change, it must involve dialogue and exchange, and emerge from a sense of parity. For these conditions to be met, this empathy must avoid identification, retaining a sense of the other's alterity. This empathy need not—and in fact cannot—be “complete.” It emerges in the moment of encounter, responding to and accommodating gaps, changing as the persons involved in the exchange change. It is, in that sense, like live theatre—the next moment is always unknown.

Set out on the page in this way, this definition seems rather simple. To complicate it, or rather to reiterate the complications that I have been tracking all along, I will ask the same question that I asked at the beginning of this dissertation: “Did you empathize with him?” Whereas this question was posed, in the introduction, to another, I ask it this time of myself.

Did I empathize with Joseph’s performance? Following the definition of empathy that I have pursued in this dissertation, I believe I did. But I also think I failed in my empathy—and this failure rests in an uneasy space between the failures that I think are part of the empathetic process and those that I see as marking a disengagement. I was moved by the performance, and also sent into a critical and emotional tailspin. Mine was an empathy continually interrupted by the sense that there was so much informing Joseph’s performance of race that I simply could not understand, and by my acute awareness of the racial politics involved, both within his performance and in the theatre itself, in that moment. I do not think that Joseph intended these interruptions. He struck me as much more willing than I to engage across all manner of boundaries. But I, personally, could not stop thinking about the racial politics of performance embedded in Joseph’s work. *The Spoken Word* evokes, addresses, and questions the history of African Americans *performing* for white people—through labor, entertainment, sports, etc. The specter of minstrelsy emerged in the shuffle of his feet. Even his tableau of the black man shooting hoops evokes this legacy, presented in a stunning stillness that resonated, for me, with Harvey Young’s idea that the performance of stillness can act a means of both highlighting and reclaiming the ways in which black bodies have been held captive and motionless in cells, the holds of ships, and auction blocks.¹⁰⁵ It was a reminder of the fraught nature of his being here

¹⁰⁵ See Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (2010), particularly chapters two and three. I am reminded, too, of Frank X. Walker’s poem, “Death by Basketball,” which describes the sport as “a dream / that kills legitimate futures” for young black men (Walker 26).

before us, and thus, in some ways, *for* us. The demographic makeup of the audience at the Kitchen Theatre replicated this situation, adding a complexity to the performance that seemed to go unmarked. Because of this, I found myself caught up in wondering how to respond, and in my conflicted feelings about what it meant to engage him in this time, this place. Where does empathy fit in a performance like this?

About midway through the performance, Joseph tells a story of theatre as offering, as gift, recounting a moment in his own life when he presented his own awkward dance—all he had to give—to a group of African villagers. He is not talking about barter, exactly, in Eugenio Barba’s sense of the term, but theatre as something you bring because you should never approach others empty handed, especially when trying to involve yourself in their business.¹⁰⁶ When we give each other performance, we give ourselves. Joseph gave himself all night—a gift that, as I have already stated, was deeply complicated, for me, by the racial demographics of the room, and by my own whiteness. The only right thing to do, under the circumstances, seemed to be to give back. If I had a song at that moment, it should have been his. But still, I resisted accepting his word as my own. Later, Sara Warner, who was leading the talkback, said that we witnessed him. Witnessing, as discussed earlier in this dissertation, is different from sharing, knowing. It is a means of responding to the other *as other*, a process that Kelly Oliver ties to subjectivity, or “the ability to respond and to be responded to” (91). For Oliver, we emerge as subjects when we

¹⁰⁶ Barba and his group, Odin Teatret, developed a “barter” approach to intercultural performance. Ian Watson describes these events this way: “A theatrical barter is an event in which actions are the currency of exchange, performances of songs and dances, displays of training exercises and techniques, even fragments from full-length plays are transformed into commodities in barter. But, unlike economic barter, in which the emphasis is on commerce, the focus in theatrical barter is on the traders and how they interact. Those who meet to exchange and the dynamics of that exchange are far more important than what is exchanged” (94). Barter, in other words, involve an exchange of cultural performance in which is the process of meeting and exchange, not the “products” or performances themselves, that matter the most. This notion is very close to what Joseph is describing, but it is perhaps more goal-oriented, more determined to prompt exchange and discussion and increased cultural understanding. What Joseph is evoking, I think, has much less to do with this process of understanding through exchange than the simple fact that, when we may have nothing else to give, we always have our performance.

address ourselves to others and when we respond to their addresses to us. She writes, “Subjectivity is the process of witnessing, or addressing oneself to others, of responding to the address of other” (223). We saw Joseph. We heard him (when we could, for there are moments that were obscured to me, and my sense of loss is as important as anything else). We witnessed that which we do not—perhaps could not—know or understand, what Oliver calls witnessing “beyond recognition” (106). His voice is not mine, though it tugged at me, spoke to me and cut me open, exposed me. At the end of the talkback, an African American woman in the audience said that he was an answer to the ancestors’ supplications. She was right. She was right because that night, in that performance, in that moment, Joseph had responded to a question we did not know was asked, to a prayer that is lost to us. He responded “beyond recognition.”

Should we, can we, affirm an experience that we cannot fully recognize? What is the difference between “responding,” the term Oliver uses, and “affirming,” the term that I think best fits the performative action enacted by “Word.” Can we give a “word, word,” with the understanding that the word is not our own? I think that to give this response knowing that is insufficient and presumptuous takes more bravery than to give it without pausing to consider what it means to enter this exchange. I am reminded of Joseph and his awkward dance, his willingness to give of himself even when he felt that what he had to give was inadequate, and I wish that I had been as brave as he.

Joseph’s performance speaks to the wonderful way in which discomfort and desire collide, and how such conflicting feelings may persist in ways that less complicated ones might not. I *wanted* to engage Joseph. I found him kind and smart and skilled and interesting. I was also made uncomfortable and uncertain by his request for such engagement. Had I felt more sure of myself and my ability to engage him, I do not think I would still be pondering this

performance today. The moment of knowing that we are engaged in a dialogue but not knowing how to respond is, I think, incredibly productive. It is also not what is usually required of us in the theatre. Beyond feedback in the form of laughter or applause, we are generally allowed to keep our emotional and intellectual responses to ourselves, unless we choose to share them in the form of reviews, conversations, or academic essays. Except in these circumstances, no one is likely to challenge how we understand the characters, and thus what our responses—empathetic, critical, or otherwise—have led us to conclude. But the empathy that matters is the one that, like Joseph’s performance, invites and urges us to share our responses, to analyze them and assess them in dialogue with others. This dialogue may take the form of a story circle or an exchange of performances. It may be as simple (and complicated) as verbalizing our response in the moment of performance, or offering a comment in a talkback. This is what was both tremendous and scary about Joseph’s performance. It is why it remains with me today.

I have concluded with this particular moment not only because I think it highlights how messy and complicated empathy can be, but also because it brings me back to the figure of the audience member—the figure with whom this dissertation opened. In this dissertation, I have explored various empathetic relationships: between audience and characters (*Black Watch*), among characters (*Betsy*, *BOP: The North Star*, *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, and *In the Heart of America*), and among co-participants in community-based performance (*RFK in EKY*). The trajectory of the dissertation is also one from questions of spectatorship to questions of practice, suggesting that empathy is not only an activity, something that we *do*, but also something that benefits from embodiment. Where is the line between participant and observer in a performance like *RFK in EKY*, and how does it impact empathy? What is happening to the spectator when Craver and Remzi are engaged in their rehearsals? Must theatre provoke us to action and

engagement, moving us from the position of spectator to that of actor, for empathy to function in the ways that I have been describing?

The short answer, I think, is no. We learn through stories all of the time. But what theatre creates is the opportunity, not available in literature or visual art, for a direct confrontation with another living being. That being may demand our engagement and response. This demand may not always be overt, as Joseph's was, but it may be there nonetheless. What I am suggesting is that theatre may be the ideal place for empathy not because it places people and situations before us that would otherwise remain remote, but because when we respond in the theatre we open ourselves to an engagement with other human beings, beginning an exchange that we cannot control. It is this fear—as much as the fear of embarrassment—that we see on the face of the poor person who is chosen to come up on stage out of the audience: the fear of what will happen next, of needing to respond without foreknowledge, of being unbalanced and exposed. When a performance allows us to sit comfortably in our seats and interpret, assess, and respond without the uncertainty produced by dialogue, then any empathy it produces is dangerously one-sided, an assumption rather than an exchange. It is, I think, in the discomfort produced by not knowing how to respond and working through that feeling that empathy can be *embodied* in the spectator. Until we imbue empathy with that radical sense of contingency and sociality, and until we learn how to function in that space of indeterminacy, it cannot work in the service of social change.

The way that Joseph's performance has lingered with me also raises an issue that remains, otherwise, unexplored in this dissertation. If we understand empathy as a process, how, if at all, does this impact the temporality of empathy? One of the problems often cited surrounding empathy, along with sympathy and compassion, as a motive for social change is that the feelings provoked though it seem to fade rather quickly. We may care when we see the

images of tsunamis washing away people's homes, or we may consider the immigrant's experience for a few hours while sitting in the theatre, but what happens when we turn off the television or internet, or head home to our beds? I do not have fully-formed answers for these questions, but the way that a performance like *The Spoken Word* has remained with me does propose some avenues for exploration. For me, at least, there has been a direct correlation between the level of disturbance or unease created by a performance and the duration of its effect. This is not to say that *The Spoken Word* unsettled me in a negative way. I appreciated every moment of the performance and every moment of contemplation it has produced since. But it is the complex and contradictory nature of the moment that ensured the longevity of its effect.

The other issue that is underexplored here is the impact of culture on empathy. How do cultural attitudes and standards impact how, when, and with whom we empathize? Chapter two begins to address this question with the consideration of Appalachia's history of marginalization and how this history informs the empathetic encounters in the performances I discuss. But this is only one brief consideration of a much larger issue. Future work on this topic would have to consider the ways in which empathy performs a particular kind of cultural labor, and how that labor is understood and defined. One might consider, for instance, the gendering of empathy as a kind of "women's work," where the labor of understanding others, and with this understanding accommodating those others' needs, falls to women. Or one might examine the institutionalization of empathy and what it means when the "caring professions" fail to care, as we see happening in Suzan-Lori Parks' play, *In the Blood*. When does empathy emerge from the position of power and comfort, such as Cocke describes in chapter 3, and when does it emerge from or express a state of dis-empowerment, and what role do culture and society play in this shift? I have focused primarily on the problem of exercising power through empathy, in part

because the genealogical approach I have taken in the introduction suggests such a path, and in part because of the dangers presented by the links between empathy and a neoliberal agenda. But empathy's power dynamics can work both ways, something of which we must be cautious any time we promote empathy as a tool for social change.

I did not give a "word" that night in the theatre. But perhaps, in a way, I am giving Joseph that word—or rather my own version of it—now. I have emphasized, in this dissertation, the importance of empathy as an engagement, and I have privileged the moment of encounter. Dialogues, however, do not necessarily end when encounters end, and neither do the resonances of performance. Each time I have returned to this moment, I have engaged Joseph again. This is a highly imperfect and incomplete empathy because the one I am engaging cannot respond to me. But, as I have repeatedly emphasized, what empathy is perfect or compete? Performances, and particularly moments of performance, can linger with us, engendering questions and thoughts and ideas long after the curtain falls. What is important, I think, is that we keep in mind the *differences* between empathy in the moment of encounter and the processes that may go on in our minds and bodies long after. As with any empathetic engagement, we must be aware of the context in which it occurs, the nature of the engagement it produces, and our own relationship to these conditions and to the other. This is part of the labor of empathy. It is a very messy process.

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