Fictional Realness:
Towards a colloquial performance practice

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Michel Foucault's statement 'one writes in order to become other than what one is' (1987:182) points to a kind of repetition in writing and performance that is generative and expansive rather than subordinate and reductive. It is also the impetus for my discussion here of a concept that I am calling a colloquial performance practice. By paying attention to cultural performances and vernacular works that produce a colloquial language, rather than merely representing a colloquial behaviour or style, I will argue for a form of repetition beyond the subjugated languages of imitation and parody, in order to call forth a new language – one we might call 'fictional realness'. I will do this through an exploration of colloquial performance in two parts. In the first, I will look at the colloquial performance of 'realness' developed in the New York City drag ball culture in the '80s and '90s documented in Jennie Livingston's seminal film Paris is Burning (Livingston 1990). I will offer Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's concept of a minor literature in their book on Kafka as a framework for thinking through realness and the potentials of colloquial-becomings in the drag balls. In the second part I will turn to the work of South African rap-rave group Die Antwoord to consider fictional realness as a performative mode, which shifts beyond representational modes like postmodern parody and irony (using language that signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect), through an affective acceleration of those critical modes. I am interested in how this shift, and intermeshing of reality and fiction in Die Antwoord's work, which they call 'documentary fiction' and 'exaggerated experience', might bring about ethical, rather than behavioural and moral, questions.

FROM REAL TO REALNESS

The idea of the 'colloquial' connotes the conversational, informal, non-formal, nonliterary, unbookish, unliterary, vernacular and vulgar (Merriam Webster Dictionary 2013). But how can we think of colloquial performance as pushing beyond such characteristic definitions? How might a colloquial performance practice create holes in the very fabric of authority and knowledge in order to transform the languages of performance? How might not knowing whether something is real or fictional, formal or informal, serious or unserious, move us to understand things differently? My enquiry here takes as its starting point the colloquial term 'realness', which was used predominantly by African-Americans and Latinos in the New York City drag balls of the '80s and '90s to mean to 'pass' as a specific gender or social class other than their own. But I am also interested in how as a colloquialism the term 'realness' has transformed since its inception and is still transforming in its more contemporary usage. The ballroom scene consisted of a catwalk parade with competing 'houses' such as The House of Extravaganza or The House of Labeija, all made up with a familial structure – a house mother – and all competing for trophies by 'walking' in the ball. 'Walking' usually consisted of an exuberant display of one's self-transformation into a variety of 'looks', for example, banjee realness (passing as an urban male), executive realness (passing as an executive) or schoolboy/girl realness (passing as a schoolboy/girl) amongst other 'looks'. Members won trophies by performing the greatest approximation to those representational norms. Paris is Burning focuses on the way 'house' culture provides a sense of community and support for the flamboyant and often socially shunned performers. Also touching on issues of racism and poverty, the film features interviews with a number of renowned drag queens, including Willi Ninja, Pepper LaBeija and one of the older drag queens, Dorian Corey, who describes realness as being 'as close as we will ever come to the real', by which she refers to a white, middle-class, heterosexual reality from which she is excluded (Livingston 1990). Queer theorist Judith Butler has focused on the subversive potential of ballroom realness in her book Bodies that Matter, writing that by repeating hegemonic forms of power they simultaneously 'open possibilities for resignifying the terms of violation against their violating aims' – a means of reclaiming those norms for themselves (1993:124). In another account on the film, Jack Halberstam reads realness as 'not exactly performance, not exactly imitation; it is the way that people, minorities excluded from the domain of the real, appropriate the real and its affects' (2005:51). Both these theories suggest that realness is performative, through acts of recuperation (via Butler) and appropriation (via Halberstam), but when the film cuts between the ballroom and images of supposed 'real' executives, who are also highly made-up with '80s style, make-up, big hair, shoulder pads and power suits,

what is exposed is the fiction also at play in the so-called 'real'. Whilst realness may be considered as belonging historically to the ballroom and its community, realness is also going through somewhat of a revival in contemporary performance cultures. We find examples in rap and hip hop with artists like AB Soto (US), Zebra Katz (US) and Mykki Blanco (US), as well as in works such as Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at The Judson Church (2009) by choreographer Trajal Harell (US) or in the voguing of visual artist Jacolby Satterwhite (US) – all Latino or Afro-American artists who draw on the ballroom history and blend banjee realness and butch queen realness with contemporary urban fashion, music and art. But as a colloquial term, realness has also transformed and lost its ballroom sense or meaning. Contemporary usage of this colloquialism has shown a transference from ballroom realness (passing as an executive or approximating the socalled 'real'), to its more recent iteration in reality television shows that stage competing drag queens like RuPaul's Drag Race, where competitors use phrases like: 'I'm serving you some trashcan, Primadonna, Cleopatra, Judy Garland Realness' (Thibault 2012). If in Butler's terms, 'what determines the effects of realness is the ability to compel belief' (1993:129) and to pass as 'real', then in RuPaul's use of the term, a drag queen's performance is an approximation to pass, not as 'real' but as a mutation of all these queer icons from a variety of historical fictions. The fantasy subject has perhaps shifted through repetition and arguably re-regulated its terms through a form of commercial drag for television. But this shift has also rendered absurd the approximation or desire 'to pass' as a mutant multiplicity of queer icons. For what does 'trashcan Primadonna, Cleopatra, Judy Garland Realness' actually mean? Is it possible that it means nothing? Has its meaning been hollowed out to 'retain only the skeleton of sense' (Deleuze and Guattari 1986:21)? Whilst the excessive iteration of female archetypes and icons listed beside one another is conceivably superficial and nonsensical (and perhaps palpably empty), it is through this means that it also stops operating through the major language – the real – and through abstraction begins operating differently. Realness in this instance is understood not through imitation but through affect: a layering of textures – a counter-knowledge – felt and understood between publics who hold affection for such icons; and in some ways a counter-toknowledge – as it stops making sense – calling forth a future scene or a public not-quite-hereyet. We might say that realness is something felt beyond logic inscribed in a major language. This is also what makes ballroom realness different from the power-suited executives who, in Livingston's film, are shown to represent the 'real'. Still, the question persists: when contestants 'walk' in the ballroom are they resignifying or merely reaffirming representational norms? I want to suggest that ballroom realness is an autonomous language

produced by the ball community inside the real, but which escapes sanctioned critical language such as the one used here.[1] Its impossibility to be read in or reduced to a major language is precisely its potential, thus enabling the question of what constitutes realness and what realness does to remain.

FROM MINOR LITERATURE TO COLLOQUIAL PERFORMANCE

Deleuze's and Guattari's theory of a minor literature offers a useful framework though which to understand this process from real to realness further.[2] It enables an understanding of realness as a fictioning device rather than an identity or category. As a colloquial performance, realness 'repeats, not in order to express what goes before, but to express an untimely power, a power of language to disrupt identity and coherence' (Colebrook 2002:119). In this sense, realness is a state of becoming beyond imitative repetition, style or behaviour and lacking a definitive original. 'Passing' in the ballroom may thus enable a repetition that produces a difference, rather than a subordinate repetition, which would reduce realness to the kind of imitation at stake in the power-suited executives who represent the 'norm' in the documentary. As Claire Colebrook writes, 'a minor literature repeats the past and present in order to create a future. It is a transcendental repetition: repeating the hidden forces of difference that produce texts, rather than repeating the known texts themselves' (120). In order to understand better the colloquial concept of realness I will now discuss the ways a minor literature subverts the major language or 'genre' from within (Deleuze and Guattari 1986:16). According to Deleuze and Guattari the 'minor' does not refer to minority groups as described in ordinary language, as minority groups are defined by identities and the state. Their central example instead is Kafka, who finds himself at home amongst neither the Prague Jews nor the dominant German and Austrian-Hungarian power structure. For Kafka a 'people is missing' and his literature sets out to summon that people. Deleuze and Guattari discuss Kafka's use of Prague German, a ghettoized or creole language, which I want to relate here to realness in ballroom culture, and to ongoing transformations in the languages of contemporary performance cultures. Realness as a term incorporates, subverts and mutates the major term 'real'. We might think of realness in Deleuze's and Guattari's terms, as

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[1] To 'read', in the ballroom sense of the word, is a colloquial form of critique that highlights and exaggerates someone's flaws. My own 'reading' of the failure of the major language to critique (within the major language of sanctioned academic writing) addresses the subversive potentials of more colloquial forms of performance and criticism.

[2] Artist and theorist Simon O Sullivan's concept of a minor art practice following the DeleuzeoGuattarian framework of a minor literature has also informed my thinking here (O'Sullivan 2005).

a deterritorialization, simultaneously doing and subverting (and extracting power from) the major language (or meaning of the real). Whilst retaining 'a skeleton of sense', realness (inside 'the real') allows for the possibility of other relations and significations (17). For Deleuze and Guattari, a minor literature is characterized by three elements, which I want to relate to the colloquial performance of realness now:

1. The deterritorialization of the major language. Realness as a colloquialism is the process of 'informalizing' or 'nonformalizing' – it makes nonsense out of the established language. For example, 'realness' in the drag balls changes the meaning and register of the 'real' (major language) into something different or abstract (minor literature).
2. The political. Everything is political because it is always linked to the larger social milieu of what signifies and what does not. It is linked in this case to those groups who use the term 'realness'. An informal or nonformal language always functions within (or in relation to) the major, formal language.
3. The collective, enunciative value. Minor literature is a collective literature still forming or 'yet-to-come'. Realness is partially formed but its signification, particularly as a spoken term rather than a written term, is still transforming (i.e. from ballroom realness to RuPaul Drag Race realness).

Deleuze and Guattari write, 'a minor literature does not come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language' (16). Realness works similarly within the major language to disrupt; however, the distinction between a minor or major language might also blur, as what was once a minor literature might become major, and require reterritorializing again. This is what happens (we may speculate) if or when realness becomes a sanctioned language in performance studies the way that, for instance, minimalist tendencies or post-dramatic theatres have become celebrated languages in the field.[3] But it is also, perhaps, what happens with a dualistic form such as parody, which as a subordinate language can prop up and reconfirm the existing power structure. If RuPaul's Drag Race realness shows the ease with which imitative 'drag' and the 'fabulous' can become no longer minor but normative ideas, and part of the endless refashioning of the self

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[3] I am in agreement with Jennifer Doyle, who writes: 'There is a lot of language out there celebrating the silence of John Cage, the sparseness of Donald Judd' (Doyle 2012: xvii).

under capitalism, then what contemporary forms of drag and colloquial performance might push at the limits of these repetitious languages? This is precisely what excites me about the work of Die Antwoord, who perform what I will call 'fictional realness': incorporating drag realness with an accelerated parodic repetition of popular culture, which (for now, at least) resists reterritorialization. DIE AN TWOORD The increasingly popular South African rap-rave group are made up of three members – Yo-landi Vi$$er (Anri du Toit), Ninja (Waddy Jones) and someone they call DJ Hi-Tech (an anonymous band member played by various different people). Die Antwoord's performances and videos operate at high-speed frequency, often escaping any narrative, producing multifaceted myths with fragmented identities. There is an ambivalent subversiveness in their work. Whilst they appropriate images, narratives and aesthetics from popular culture and South African political struggles, one is never quite sure if their intentions are critical or if they are just having a good time. What is clear, however, is that something is happening. This was felt in the swelling energy and enthusiasm of their audience when I attended their concert at Brixton Academy in London in June 2013, and is exemplified in the scene they have summoned – in their very diverse cult following. Die Antwoord's tracks, including 'Evil Boy' (2010), 'Rich Bitch' (2011) and 'I Fink You Freaky' (2012) amongst many others, are always accompanied by a music video in which they infiltrate and spread what they call their 'zef' aesthetic. Zef, according to group member Yo-landi, is 'associated with people who soup their cars up and rock gold and shit. Zef is, you're poor but you're fancy. You're poor but you're sexy, you've got style' (Hoby 2010). In an essay by Anton Krueger on the band's distinct aesthetics, zef is discussed as a particular South African style emerging since the end of Apartheid in 1994. As Krueger writes: 'It involves a way of presenting a persona in a purposefully degrading way, exaggerating one's appearance and mannerisms as low class, ill bred, and boorish' (2012:404). Whilst Krueger considers zef as 'an authentic representation (albeit exaggerated) of a confused, multi-lingual emerging national identity' (406) in South Africa, there are obvious similarities between zef and the proliferation of chav, bling and trash in pop culture in the northern hemisphere. We might then also consider Die Antwoord's work and aesthetic beyond the South African context, and as a language developed through the networked, global economy of the internet. In interviews Die Antwoord often promote the idea that anyone can start a band just like they did, all you need is camera and a Wi-Fi connection. With the same imaginative force of their performances, the group claim: 'A lot of people wanted to ban the interweb to stop us getting known' (Hoby 2010). Onstage at the Brixton Academy the Die Antwoord trio emerge in high-visibility orange hoodies and baggy pants that glow in the dark. Behind them is an

inflatable figure (a white plasticized sacred object, habitually a wooden carving of an indigenous character, the kind frequently sold in 'hippy' shops in the Northern hemisphere) with a humongous erect 'penification'.[4] This is a reoccurring emblem throughout their music videos. So is the group's logo – a kind of geometric stag – and visuals from their music videos are projected behind them. Accompanying their music and live performances are videos and images, including collaborations with photographer Roger Ballen and a short film collaboration with American filmmaker Harmony Korine titled Umshini wami (2011). The film title references 'Awuleth' Umshini Wami' (English, 'Bring me my machine gun'), a controversial Zulu-language protest song used formerly by members of the military wing of the African National Congress during the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa, and which caused an uproar in 2006 when it was made available by President Zuma's defence fund as a ringtone on its website. Die Antwoord have not shied away from controversy. The music video for their track 'Fatty Boom Boom' (2013) incorporates a cheeky parody of the pop star Lady Gaga in her famed meat dress, whose safari of the 'South African Concrete Jungle' gets hijacked by armed, masked gunmen.[5] Die Antwoord's Gaga flees and goes to see a gynaecologist to get a giant prawn/ parasite removed from her vagina. This appears to be a very direct response to the pop star, who, according to gossip magazines and press, had invited the band to join her on tour as her support act, and which they vehemently turned down (Haupt 2012). But the prawn, a common domestic pest known as the Parktown Prawn in South Africa, also relates to their depictions as aliens in Neill Blomkamp's science fiction action thriller District 9 (2009).[6] In the film an extraterrestrial race are forced to live in slumlike conditions in District 9, and are given the derogatory name 'Prawn', which is meant to imply that they are bottom feeders, scavenging about and living off of the waste of everybody else. This is one example of the way Die Antwoord's work builds on multiple references and registers and thus escapes singular meaning. Whilst they deliberately employ recognizable forms such as parody – Gaga is but one example – their appropriation of multiple identities in this video escapes the duplicity of parody and produces the affective

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[4] I invoke the term 'penification' here as a minor literature following artist Vaginal Crème Davis' use of the term in her lyrical performances of word-twisting, tongue-incheek self-exploitation and rude provocations of racial and gender confusion.

[5] There was debate surrounding the originality of Gaga's concept Meat Dress. Many in the art and fashion press remarked on its similarity to Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic, a meat dress made by Canadian sculptor Jana Sterbak in 1987 exhibited to considerable controversy at the National Gallery of Canada in 1991

[6] The setting of District 9 is inspired by historical events during the Apartheid era, particularly alluding to District Six, an inner-city residential area in Cape Town, declared a 'whites only' area by the government in 1966.

abstraction of realness, even problematically so. In the video Yo-landi wears a yellow dress, her body and face painted black, she spits the lyrics 'Murder Murder Murder/kill kill kill', and we don't know if she is protesting or celebrating. The video edit then skips between Yo-landi in blackface and whiteface and Ninja dressed in what looks like football hooligan attire complete with stripy face paint, and DJ Hi-tech, who wears a mask obscuring his face à la Pussy Riot. Intermittently dancers in onesies with childish prison designs, reminiscent of Ninja's own tattoos, dance wild choreographies. The group are singing, drumming and gesturing furiously. They are not just zef – they are super-zef – they are zef power! Die Antwoord display anger, but without any fixed enemy or agenda. In the absence of a stable signifier or enemy, their performance becomes impossible to read in the major language.[7] In such instances, when language stops making sense, knowledge is produced instead through affect. Art theorist Irit Rogoff describes affective inhabitation (via Gilles Deleuze and Baruch Spinoza) as a means of understanding something through its textures and layers (Rogoff 2010), rather than through the major language or register. That is to say, we might know something by feeling it, rather than by defining it through a major language. In this sense, Die Antwoord are not acting: they are not merely imitating zef style and colloquial behaviour; they are inhabiting its forms and textures with brilliant intensity. Whilst Die Antwoord's apparent appropriation of multiple identities has been problematized in popular media – particularly in relation to their so-called appropriation of lower-class zef aesthetics, use of blackface and potentially fascistic imagery – the group, nevertheless, remain defiant in their fictioning that 'reality' is not interesting for them, as much as they are not interested, I expect, in pinning down a genre we might call 'colloquial performance'. As such the question of their privileged perspective as white South Africans persists. Die Antwoord consider their work a 'documentary fiction' and 'exaggerated experience' (Marchese 2012), which draws on everyday realities and cultural significations and mixes them up with other realities – virtual, actual and fictional. Discussing the fictive dimensions of their outfit – group member Ninja (Waddy Jones) says: 'Ninja is, how can I say, like Superman is to Clark Kent. The only difference is I don't take off this fokken Superman suit' (Marchese 2012). Ninja's words echo the mode of affective inhabitation discussed by Rogoff – a kind of 'entering and living out a set of conditions' (2010). As such Waddy is either possessed by Ninja, or there is a greater sense of commitment involved, differentiating his performance of

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[7] Whilst drawing on 'gangsta rap' their fictioning as a group also offers something different to the languages of popular hip hop groups and rappers like Jay Z, Drake or Dizzee Rascal.

fictional realness from strategies of imitation and appropriation. Ninja responds to the ponderings over their realness and says: 'some people are too far gone. They'll just keep asking, "Is it real? Is it real?" That's dwanky. That's a word we have in South Africa, "dwanky". It's like lame. "Is it real?" Dwanky. You have to be futuristic and carry on' (Marchese 2012). Despite the group's name – Die Antwoord (Afrikaans for 'The Answer') – it is clear that this group don't have the answer, or rather don't want to answer questions about the reality or authenticity of their identities. Die Antwoord's refusal to discuss their zef act elicits instead a series of ethical questions and responses from their audience about their integrity, and allows them the process of becoming-zef, not through imitation, but through colloquial inhabitation. As Colebrook writes, 'what is repeated in minor literature is literary becoming' (2002:119). Uninterested in truth-seeking, the quest to 'read' them in the ballroom sense of the word, to fix identity and prove them fake, is less an insult, and more an always-already thwarted reality. Die Antwoord's work and mode of performance, I argue, escape complete critical capture, as we don't know whether to take them seriously or not. This perhaps produces the futuristic quality that Ninja talks about. Through excessive repetition and overidentification with the aesthetics of trash, pop and counterculture, Die Antwoord's work shifts beyond the antagonistic and dualistic subversions of movements like punk. Instead, their work becomes absurd – a counter-toknowledge. As Krueger also points out: One gets the feeling that they are not only mocking the establishment by sneering at it from a Zef perspective, but also parodying the idea of being Zef. It almost feels like parody for its own sake – an exuberant irreverence; a flamboyant display without any fixed enemy or goal. (2012:407) Die Antwoord perform (affirm) and parody (make fun of) zef at the same time, adopting cult strategies and unstable fragmented identities with a throwaway charisma to match. They are not unlike punk, but neither can they be seen as the offspring of their often overly clichéd elders. They appear, very urgently, to be pushing forth a new aesthetic that incorporates a trauma that is both personal and contingent upon struggles in South African cultural history, but also impersonal, opening out to the trauma of our time – of living in a high-speed, hypereverything, networked world. By staging multiple references, from South Africa's grim political struggles and intermeshing them with representations of thugs, football hooligans, blackface, whiteface and Gaga, they draw on the energies of violent histories and practices, putting them to work differently, incorporating them but 'subverting them from within' to produce strange celebratory fictions. Die Antwoord are not making claims or taking positions when they act. Such refusals (including the refusal to refuse) make their work difficult to read in the major language. Whilst narratives and meaning do not

always line up in Die Antwoord's work, their affirmation is celebratory and noted in their ability to affect a crowd, and call forth a radically diverse audience. Despite their questionable incentives and tactical ignorance, the very fact that Die Antwoord, a group with millions of fans worldwide, elicits questions about identity and political strategy today is inspiring. Working beyond the doublecoded flip of postmodern parody or irony, or antagonistic opposition, to read their work as mere style and appropriation is to miss their radical potential to deterritorialize style, categorization and language. Whilst Die Antwoord offer parody they always go further than parody: they accelerate it – they parody parody. Their childish appropriations, colloquialisms and irreverence surpass the act of reductive reading and always potentially misreading, rendering the act of reading in a major language (as I have done to some extent here) as always potentially 'dwanky'.

FICTIONAL REALNESS

By offering up mutating representations from the realness of ballroom drag to the irreverent realness of Die Antwoord, I have argued that it is the indeterminacy of colloquial performance, the thrust of its intensity as both fictional and real, through and beyond dualistic modes of signification that makes it an appealing endeavour. My aim has been to highlight performances that become colloquial through expansive rather than reductive repetitions, and which produce difference (Deleuze) or which 'become other' (Foucault) through affective inhabitation. In this sense I am also uninterested in gate-keeping a genre we might call 'colloquial performance'. The process of colloquial becoming works against such categorization. Ultimately, fictional realness as a colloquial performance produced through modes of affective inhabitation (in place of imitation) allows subjectivity, identity and language to produce itself in place of being subjectivated by hegemonic power. Such performances always produce the question of ethics. Understood through the lens of a minor literature, colloquial performance 'repeats nothing other than the power to be different; its becoming is not within time, but is untimely' (Colebrook 2002:123), and can be influenced by, but not limited to, a time, genre or identity. Its potential for escaping the sanctioned language of performance and criticism is made visible in the examples discussed here. In the drag balls realness is a knowledge shared between a community in constant transformation and renewal, but which has since been absorbed back into capitalism and taken up by commercial interest for network television, and thus requires reterritorializing again. In the case of Die Antwoord, fictional realness becomes not so much a knowledge shared by an extant community, but perhaps a yet-to-be realized community – a community to come.

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