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Acting politically: Making performance in the eye of history

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'History has its eyes on you', as Lin-Manuel Miranda and Christopher Jackson's brilliant song from *Hamilton* affirms. 'History has its eyes on me'. However, how does history see? How does history see us when we ourselves are historical beings living in and through the very storm of history? How do we see ourselves historically? Theatres of the left have been concerned with investigating the visual construction of historically lived experience since Brecht, seeking to deploy performance as a critical optic through which to examine and make visible the political relations at play in the contemporary social formation and historical conjunction. This chapter provides a sustained account of what Brecht called 'the crucial technical device' of historicization (2015: 140), demonstrating its centrality to practical theatre-making methodologies and the creation of new horizons for acting politically. It explores the continuation of the Brechtian method of opening up ways of seeing historically in contemporary performance practice, and in the political theatre of Anna Deavere Smith in particular. The chapter offers a detailed exposition of her work, *Notes from the Field* (2018), outlining how it historicises the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement theatrically and situates its performative exposition of structural and systemic racism in the context of exposing the deep-seated continuities and connections between the contemporary social formation and the historical inequalities and injustices of segregation and slavery.

Of course, *Hamilton* itself raises these questions by suggesting that recasting the eyes of history—reframing who gets to be seen as a historical actor and re-functioning the aesthetic-political apparatus of appearance by which they are seen—changes the very nature

of seeing historically. By insisting on Black, Latino, Asian and First Nation actors being seen as foundational to the constitution of America, *Hamilton* challenges and destabilises the hegemonic historical narrative of nation formation by creating an image of the historically lived reality of racial co-presence and grounds this in the materiality of the theatrical apparatus. As image theorist Georges Didi-Huberman argues, 'seeing perpetually changes the nature of what is seen as well as the constitution of the one who sees it' (2018: xvi), demonstrating the performative co-production of historical forms of visibility, ways of seeing, and political modes of subjectivation. For Didi-Huberman, perhaps inadvertently reprising the line from *Hamilton*, 'history has eyes just as a hurricane makes its eye' (2018: xxiv). He regards the eyes of history, forged in the 'relative calm' at the epicentre of history's events—'in the very eye of history' (2018: xxiv)—as having binocular heuristic clarity and historiographic focus. This chapter argues that the critical function of this optical apparatus—seeing through the eyes of history—is mobilised methodologically in the creative practices of contemporary theatres of the left to deconstruct the political operation of the social and historical events that they might otherwise be seen to merely represent.

In his book, *The Eye of History*, Georges Didi-Huberman elaborates how looking at and through the eyes of history enables the practice of seeing to 'both deepen and critique historical knowledge' at the same time as ensuring the historicisation and critique of forms of visuality and modes of visibility (2018: xxv). Although primarily concerned with the matter of photographic images and the material conditions of their emergence as partially torn from the fabric of lived historical experience, Didi-Huberman recognises that through the materiality of their very production, 'images *participate in a gesture*' of historicity by indexing the act of their making within them. Accordingly, he sees making an image as 'a gesture that transforms time' and acts 'in and on history' to render visible not only that which is seen but also the social production of its conditions of visibility (2018: xxvii). Whilst Didi-

Huberman is at pains to stress that this is not the same thing as acting directly in the sense of taking direct action or participating in political activism, it is also clear that the trajectory of the gesture is towards becoming act, towards its codification within an apparatus of action and logic of dramatisation. As Sruti Bala contends, gesture 'is situated between image, speech and action; no longer image but not yet act' (2018: 15). It is still to be condensed and contained by the codification of what Bertolt Brecht named *gestus*: 'the gesture of a gesture' (Puchner 2002: 15) within a specifically theatrical mode of presentation. For Brecht, *gestus* is demonstrative and denaturalising, bringing the immediacy of gesture under the control of the theatrical operation. It forms part of the aesthetic dynamics of estrangement, breaking open the mimetic closure of the gap of representation to show the material relations and social reality underlying its manifestation. The theatrical transition of gesture into *gestus* thereby not only contributes to the aesthetic mode by which theatre seeks to regulate and limit uncontrolled mimesis, but it also serves to demonstrate 'that what we took to be natural was, in reality, social'—the historical product of human actions and social relations which remain 'equally capable of turning it into something else' (Jameson 1990: 84). As such, it offers a way of seeing and acting, politically.

Throughout *The Eye of History*, Didi-Huberman turns to Brecht as his touchstone reference for his argument that '*art shows politics*; it exposes it in every sense of the word' (2018: 104). This emphasis on exposure, with its photographic resonance, recalls Walter Benjamin's insistence that 'the epic dramatist makes use in a new way of the great ancient opportunity of the theatre—to expose what is present' (Benjamin 1973: 267). For Benjamin, likewise channelling Brecht, the political task of performance is not to 'reproduce' the historical situation by means of representation but rather to 'discover' it—to allow its historicity to be seen—through an aesthetic of critical exposition that seeks to historicise the contemporary by uncovering its conditions and demonstrating their contingency. He contends

that, in performance, the interruption of a scene or sequence of action does not simply offer a dramaturgical 'stimulant' but operates as 'an organizing function' of the aesthetic of critical distancing [*verfremden*] (1973: 266). This constitutes performance as an art of interruption—the interruption of the everyday lived experience of history and the apparent continuity of social conventions and ideological formations—in order to create an 'eye' on its operation formed in its 'very eye'. Cutting across the normative frames of naturalistic action and teleological narration, interruption suspends dramatic time and displaces the representational 'drama of history' to create an image, a freeze-frame compression that Benjamin describes as revealing 'the dialectic at a standstill' (1973: 12). The image formed within such a temporal disjunction operates as a *gestus* exposing the historical conditions and social relations underscoring the dramatic situation, enabling the effective historicisation of events on stage. The example Benjamin gives is of a stranger interrupting a scene of domestic violence at a crucial moment (a woman is 'just about to grab a bronze sculpture to throw it at her daughter'). His entrance freezes the action and constructs a critical relation to it, enabling a new way of seeing the everydayness of 'present day existence' (1973: 267). The stranger's interruption is, in micro, a demonstration of the intervention made by the epic dramatist and politically engaged spectator: the initiation of complex seeing and its implication of critical thinking. The dialectical image thereby 'bears within it, upon it, the very conditions of its own gesture' (Didi-Huberman 2018: xxvii), creating a viewpoint for seeing historically.

Didi-Huberman centres Brecht's theatrical conception of the image as demonstrative in order to explain that 'the eyes of history … reveal something of the space and time that they see' (2018: xxxv). This suggests that the theatre—as the space of seeing par excellence [*theatron*]—serves to explicate the processes by which 'seeing could both deepen and critique historical knowledge' and contribute to the 're-temporalizing of our way of looking' (2018: xxxvi). The political potentiality of theatre is seen thereby to correspond to its

historicising operation. Accordingly, theatre for Brecht functions as an 'art of historicization' that, interrupting the seemingly seamless continuity of narrations to show their social construction, 'restores the essentially critical value of all historicity' (Didi-Huberman 2018: 59). Such a re-functioning [*Unfunkionierung*] of performance as a critical operation on the social, puts the 'crucial technical device' of historicisation to the service of exposing the social relations of production of the specific historical conjunction (Brecht 2015: 140). It is, therefore, important to recall the specific historical conditions that Brecht's aesthetics sought to uncover and to caution against regarding theatricality as essentially or necessarily producing reflexive critical practice.

In this context, Bishnupriya Dutt usefully situates Brecht's concern with the development of *gestus* 'against the experience of National Socialism's use of overt gestures and hyperperformativity', suggesting that his aesthetic of interruption 'deliberately focused on countering the dangerous consequences of being drawn into a vortex of totalitarian mimetic frenzy' (Dutt 2021: 524). Putting acting at a distance from the representation of an action or into partial suspension can be seen as an attempt to break open the 'mimesis of mimesis' of fascist theatricalisation, whose 'monotonous repetition of words and gestures' seeks to foreclose critical intervention (Adorno and Horkehiemer 1979: 185). So, for Brecht, the notion of *gestus* as a deliberate re-functioning [*Unfunkionierung*] of the repetitive gesture enables it to become a critical intervention into the mimesis reflex, detaching it from its immediate context and demonstrating that 'in every sentence and every gesture there is [a] decision to be signified' and a political choice to be made (Dutt 2015: 62, 185). Dutt explains that this allows both the actor and the spectator 'to focus on the gaps between mimetic and gestural expressions' (2021: 524) and thereby begin to open up the gap between reality and representation otherwise foreclosed by the mimetic operation.

The prising open of this gap is central to both the aesthetic critique of representation and the possibility of making a political intervention into the social situation, which is thereby placed 'in quotation'. The quotation itself demonstrates 'that the action is intended to achieve a purpose in the world that the gesture, the agent of action, must use as a means to achieve that purpose' (Brecht 2015: 23). For the actor, then, acting politically means acting in a way that places it in suspension, rendering it quotation, in order to prize open the space of an emergent *gestic* action to counter the hegemonic modes of theatricality and representation. Brecht sees quotation as a mode of interrupting the historical formation, for, first and foremost, as Benjamin explains, 'quoting a text implies interrupting its context' (1973: 19). Acting as quotation requires the actor to adopt a critical position in relation to the action and their acting, producing a form of 'third-person' acting that enables the actor to hold both the text and their acting 'at a distance on stage and allowing its ventriloquism to designate itself' (Jameson 1998: 54). Nonetheless, this procedure is not entirely self-referential as it necessarily involves the citation of existing historical material—the gesture or text being 'quoted' that still appears within the space of the recognisable 'quotation' and continues to provide the 'substance of the quote' (54)—even as this material is opened up to dialectical seeing. For the audience, the actor's performance 'interrupts the context into which it is inserted', producing a disjunctive experience that invites them to take a critical position on a dialectical image which 'counteracts the illusion' of the self-evidence of history (Benjamin cited in Buck-Morss 1989: 67). The framing of acting as quotation, in this respect, not only enables the mimetic operation of theatre to be disrupted—so that, as Brecht contends, historical social reality can be demonstrated to be the result of contingent human action (praxis), and therefore capable of being transformed by praxis—but also creates the space to recognise that the specific bodies, voices, histories and social identities of the performers themselves might interrupt the culturally constructed gestures and historical narratives they

are ostensibly performing. Put simply, the performers' 'third person' presence itself destabilises the mimetic closure of representation and draws the audience's attention to its citational operation.

Hamilton itself is a good case in point. The casting of actors of colour to play all the historical figures in the musical—representing their otherwise unmarked whiteness by inverse association with the material presence of the non-white actors performing the work—breaks open the narrative of the foundation of America as an explicitly ideological formation. The actors' work—the work of acting—exposes the gap between presence and representation through the critical deployment of bodies, gestures, and voices, drawing attention to the history being performed as itself being a narrative construction. Their work in performance indexes the unacknowledged labour of the workers of colour who do not necessarily appear in the historical narrative as specific historical individuals such as Washington and Hamilton but whose presence (and exploitation) is nonetheless essential to the history being represented. Whilst the actors appear to re-enact one of the foundational moments of American history, they do so by placing it in quotation through their voices and interrupting its context through their performative presence and embodied gesture. At the same time, the overt theatricality of the musical theatre form—its self-knowing artificiality—serves to reinforce the sense of the agency of the performers in deploying their specific voices, bodies, histories, and heritage to interrupt and destabilise the historical narrative they are themselves performing. The theatrical event allows the performers to hold the story at a distance on stage and thereby to show it as an imaginary construction, utilising ventriloquism, quotation, and citation to enable its deconstruction. In this way, we see 'the migration of history into the work's very form' as theatre and recognise acting as a social as much as aesthetic labour (Jameson 1990: 187), precisely to the extent that it appears as a counter-acting of the representation of history as a singular narrative and completed teleology. Acting politically,

in this context, appears as a re-opening of historical perspective and performative possibility by showing the constitutive absences structuring the social formation by virtue of their visible presence and overt theatricalisation.

'History has its eyes on you', *Hamilton* reminds us. Yet it also reminds us that the task of learning to see with 'the eye of history' is a theatrical challenge specifically, foregrounding how theatre constructs ways of seeing and being seen historically. Acting and spectating, with their focus on the framing of historically lived experience through the political codification of visibility and speech, remind us that 'we make history, and we make histories, because we are historical' (Ricoeur 2004: 284). In other words, acting reanimates the possibility of history being imagined, and practised, otherwise—precisely by resuscitating the political potential archived within it. By placing the historical figures being represented in quotation, the performers of *Hamilton* adopt a position in relation to the action, which enables the historical exclusions, omissions, and missed opportunities it contains to be made visible again and seen not simply as theatrical but as 'genuinely historical' (Benjamin in Buck-Morss 1989: 249). In this repurposing of history as immanent potentiality, *Hamilton* suggests that the theatre's performative historiography rests at least in part in the recovery of the remaindered possibilities covered over by the chance of history's violent unfolding. The song, 'History has its eyes on you', itself stages a scene of Washington's own pre-history—the story of Washington before he became Washington mirroring Hamilton before he becomes Hamilton—which also, of course, at the same time reflects the history of the racial-capitalist imperial settlement before it is sedimented as 'History'. Accordingly, the protagonists are not the only ones who 'have no control who lives, who dies, who tells your story'. We are all subjects of history, because we are historical subjects. Whereas Washington's and Hamilton's duet places them together but separately in the eye of history, appearing in the calm of the centre of the storm, other stories circulate around them,

reverberating in the bodies and voices of the performers. ‘History has its eyes on you’, the song concludes. And by association, it also has its eyes on us, spectators but also social actors and the potential re-makers of historical relations. In this respect, as Ricoeur tellingly suggests, ‘the presumed meaning of history is no longer dependent on [the historian] but on the citizen who responds to the events of the past’ (2004: 500) and seeks to determine redressive action and possible future direction.

The dialectical seeing opened up by the theatrical interplay of presence and representation creates space for the imaginative construction of what Ariella Azoulay calls ‘potential history’ (2019: 43). Drawing on Benjamin’s conception of the dialectical image emerging in the ‘flash’ of the discontinuous experience of history and offering a mode of recovering its potential political alterity—the capacity for things to have been otherwise, and to be otherwise—Azoulay regards ‘potential history’ as offering ‘a space wherein violence ought to be reversed’ and ‘different options that were eliminated are reactivated’ in order to counter ‘the imperial movement of progress’ (2019: 43). Critically, this space is conceived theatrically as ‘a form of being with others, both living and dead, across time, across the separation of the past from the present’ in order to decolonise an intrinsically ideological conception of history as teleological and irreversible (2019: 43). For Azoulay, the space and time opened up by ‘potential history’—a theatrical space and time, enabling the reanimation of dialectical seeing—serves to reconnect ‘history and politics’ as the ground of civic, social responsibility (2019: 43). She echoes Benjamin in suggesting that, far from being fixed, past actions can be recovered and resuscitated in order to trouble the narrative temporality of ‘progress’ and draw attention to the political tension between the lived experience of ‘people’s worldly active life’ and the ‘operative actions’ of the ‘imperial apparatus’ that attempts to consign such struggles to the past (2019: 43). Benjamin’s concern with the reanimation of the remaindered potentiality of historical materials (1978: 99), neatly recast by

Azoulay as ‘potential history’, suggests that history remains the source of redressive future action: ‘because the past has been a future it always retains the trace of the latter’s power’ (Düttmann 2002: 22).

Azoulay describes ‘the practice of doing potential history’ in explicitly Brechtian terms as ‘rehearsing disengagement’ (2019: 43). The principle of distancing [*Verfremdung*] is apparent in the strategies of defamiliarising and disrupting the ideological effects of imperialism’s narrativisation and naturalisation of history as ‘the motion of progress’ that she suggests. These include: the *reiteration* of ‘existing statements that were made obsolete by imperialism’ (2019: 44); the *quotation* of texts performed or written under conditions of ‘imperial violence’; and the *restaging* of ‘moments of resistance to imperial power’ regarded as failures or deemed futile in order to demonstrate their continued resonance and potential repurposing and reanimation (2019: 44). For Azoulay, ‘rehearsals of disengagement’ serve as creative investigations of performative historiography that aims to ‘retrieve a world’ in which the colonial-capitalist settlement ‘was not yet accomplished’ and ‘could not be taken for granted’ (2019: 44), thereby showing imperialism as an historical ideological formation not simply a given historical condition. As rehearsals function by subjecting texts to a transformative process, opening up their incompletion to discover alternate meanings, contexts and urtexts, the dynamic of restaging is itself directed to recovering ‘modalities of protest, erased by imperial power’ so that they might be re-functioned aesthetically and ‘emerge again as competing valid options’ (2019: 44). Rehearsals also imply the co-presence of performers whose embodied agency challenges and changes the direction of the text and its representational logic. The reiteration of gestures and detached quotation of texts thereby situates actors as the political as well as aesthetic subjects of the rehearsal process, crediting them with ‘the assertion of the gesture in civil society … as a form rooted in the materiality of bodily performance’ (Dutt 2021: 519). Effectively, the formalisation of rehearsal discovery

into repeated performance concretises the transition from ephemeral protest to practised resistance. Yet the key to potential history, for Azoulay, lies in the rejection of 'imperialism's conceptual apparatus altogether' and the avoidance of a 'temporality that asks us to seek new solutions for a better future' (2019: 44). It is therefore to hold open the space of rehearsal as a moment of temporal suspension and political refoundation.

This suggests that the practising of theatre might be usefully re-conceived as continuous critical enquiry and creative investigation rather than simply a space for the composition of discrete works or performance outcomes. It implies the re-functioning of theatre as a site of learning and unlearning, as a mode of investigating ideas and positing possibilites, as a practice of generating and testing historical ways of seeing. Accordingly, for Brecht, the years spent in exile from 1933 to 1948—without a theatre, without actors—proved a crucial opportunity to forge a performative approach to the rehearsal of disengagement and the practice of critical spectatorship as the ground of political action. During this period, Brecht developed a detailed method of observing, analysing, and archiving the materiality of everyday life, seeking to document the fabric of historically lived experience in his journals in order to construct a horizon of possibility for action and actors, to come. His systematic recording of journalistic articles and propagandist image materials, explicated by Didi-Huberman in *The Eye of History*, works as a practice of assembly and quotation that attempts to unpick and prize open the 'mimesis of mimesis' of fascist theatricality and imperialist fantasy. As an exercise in curating potential history, Brecht attempts to invest in the absence of theatre to rehearse a theatre of material presence and political possibility—a theatre without theatres, designed to resist hegemonic theatricality. In the process, he effectively recasts the work of the actor and acting from the domain of representation (as a discrete function and skillset) to the space of presentation (as a political task and critical orientation). This means that the actors' work and training—their practising

of rehearsal as an expanded cultural field—'consists in acting in such a way' as aesthetic-political subjects that they are 'oriented towards knowledge' (Benjamin cited in Didi-Huberman 2018: 54) and the production and circulation of distributed social critique. As Didi-Huberman puts it, 'in order to know we must take a position' (2018: 3); 'in order to know, we must know how to see' (2018: 24). Accordingly, the art of observation is positioned as central to acting as a process, and to the construction of the distance that is necessary for the actor to be able to show. Distancing [*Verfremdung*] is essential in pointing to the gap between the act of showing (presentation) and what is shown (representation), thereby enabling the production of a spectatorial dialectics of seeing. For Brecht, 'to distance is to show' (Didi-Huberman 2018: 58); which is why historicisation is not only a 'crucial technical device' in the actor's repertoire and training (2015: 140) but, as Roland Barthes has pointed out, 'a general exigency of thought' (1957: 98). The actor's production of embodied thought—manifested in gesture, voice, and ensemble interaction—necessitates their taking a position on the contemporary moment being observed, and altering the existing configuration of discourses, images, and relations in order to expose their ideological construction and political operation. Acting as distancing thereby operates as a rehearsal of disengagement that 'dismantles and reassembles history in order to show its political content' (Didi-Huberman 2018: 104) and recover its potentiality. It reframes acting as acting politically.

For Brecht, taking a position in relation to the action was the key to the actor's work in enabling the spectator to construct their own. By adopting a stance [*Haltung*] on the material investigated and presented, the actor facilitates a critical and political relation to the historical situation. This is why Brecht calls acting an 'art of historicization'. By breaking narrative continuity and creating disjunctive juxtapositions, the actor's work—the work of distancing—consists in knowing 'how to handle one's visual or narrative material like a montage of citations referring to real history' (Didi-Huberman 2018: 58) and being able to

insert the materiality of their own—and the audience's—embodied, lived experience of contemporary history into the gaps created. As Didi-Huberman explains, 'to take a position is to desire, to demand something, to situate oneself in the present and to aim for a future' (2018: 3)—to go beyond the reality currently experienced by enabling its historicisation. The 'crucial technical device' of historicisation (Brecht 2015: 140) enables the actor's work to be refashioned neither as a merely representational practice nor the simple presentation of embodied presence but as an active prizing open of the gap between presence and representation. This then determines not only the political content but the formal organisation of the performance (Benjamin 1969: 148). For Brecht, taking a position or adopting a stance [*Haltung*] was the key to the actor learning to be able to hold open the eye of history and to historicise the contemporary. It enables the actor to rehearse disengagement from the action, opening up a space of disidentification through the work of aesthetic distancing. Rather than being indissociable from the role they embody or portray, the actor stands alongside the representation and opens up its gaps in order to demonstrate both their ideological construction and the need for a re-foundation.

To this extent, acting politically produces an alternate image of the actor as contesting the frame and regime of representation through a practice of counteracting and de-representing what the actor otherwise appears to represent. Accordingly, Brecht saw the development of *Haltung* as core to the actor's work in training and rehearsal as well as being a mode of performance, creating a framework for them to investigate the reality of the representation's construction rather than subsuming themselves into the reality being represented. Fredric Jameson argues that this constitutes the core of the Brechtian intervention, developed as an underlying methodology of practice across all modes of his aesthetic thinking. Jameson contends that the rigorous deployment of the concept of *Haltung* suggests that 'there existed a Brechtian "stance" [*Haltung*] which was not only doctrine,

narrative, or style, but all three simultaneously; and ought better to be called, with all due precautions, "method"' (1998: 132). This method is designed to systematically dismantle what Alain Badiou calls 'the intimate and necessary links joining the real to semblance, links resulting from the fact that semblance is the true situating principle of the real' (2007: 48). *Haltung* as method exposes this gap within the real and 'renders visible the brutal effects of the real's contingency' (Badiou 2007: 48). Taking a position is therefore not only an acting technique but a coherent critical-aesthetic method through which the actor, acting politically, is able to demonstrate that semblance (ideological, political, cultural) is not co-extensive with the real; and that what is constituted as historical 'reality' operates as a political construction.

At the time of Brecht's exile, the practice of taking a position on contemporary history would have been experienced as an immediate political necessity. In the midst of an historical situation that showed, as Benjamin argued, 'that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule', the demand to 'bring about a real state of emergency' that would acknowledge and accelerate 'the struggle against Fascism' was acute. For Benjamin, this required 'a concept of history that is in keeping with this insight' and the development of a lived cultural-political practice of dialectical seeing (1969: 257). In this context, the method of *Haltung* offered a framework for resisting totalitarian mimetic theatricality and countering its operation through the suspension of acting as a mimetic procedure altogether (Dutt 2021: 524). The task of the actor, in rehearsing detachment and disengagement from their interpellation in the situation 'is not so much the development of actions as the representation of conditions' (Benjamin 1969: 150). By constructing a critical relation to the action, the actor seeks to reveal the historical conditions of the political situation and their own imbrication within it: 'he [*sic*] shows his [*sic*] subject by showing himself [*sic*], and he [*sic*] shows himself [*sic*] by showing his [*sic*] subject' (Benjamin 1969: 153). For Benjamin, it is the actor's adopting a position in relation to their role that enables

the audience to 'adopt an attitude vis à vis the process' (Benjamin 1982: 266)—the aesthetic-political process of the rehearsal of disengagement and the performance of detachment—by which the conditions revealed to them show 'the dialectic at a standstill' (Benjamin 1973: 12). *Haltung* as aesthetic-political method is designed, then, not only as a mode of presentation and technical operation, but the construction of an historical way of seeing the social that enables theatre to 'expose what is present' and thereby to historicise the contemporary (Benjamin 1982: 267).

Whilst it is important to stress the precise historical conditions giving rise to Brecht's development of the methodology of *Haltung* as the actor's aesthetic-political responsibility for taking a position or 'adopting a stance' on the historical situation they occupy and that occupies them, it is equally crucial to note in concert with the knowledge of 'the tradition of the oppressed' within which Benjamin grounds his philosophy of history (Benjamin 1969: 257), that variations of the fascist-imperialist 'state of emergency' from which it emerged continue to be experienced as lived historical reality. In this context, it is worth recalling that the Brechtian practice of disassembly and reassembly of historical materials within a reimagined chronology—designed to demonstrate the ideological formations and deformations that constitute them—gravitates towards and 'swirls around an inaccessible knot of *real*—the eye of history, the eye of the hurricane' (Didi-Huberman 2018: 168). The methods developed in Brecht's exilic journals and anticipatory actor-training theory might therefore remain useful as a resource for making performance in times of crisis. Furthermore, tracing their reappearance in contemporary acting practices enables a timely re-examination and critical explication of the continuing significance of acting politically in the eye of contemporary history.

Anna Deavere Smith's virtuoso solo performance, *Notes from the Field* (2018), provides an exemplary investigation of these dynamics in the context of the racist colonial-

capitalist formation of the United States of America. *Notes from the Field* offers a compelling articulation and impassioned voicing of the experience of the current and continuing 'state of emergency'—the state of emergency of structural and systemic institutional and ideological racism drawn attention to by the Black Lives Matter social movement—from the perspective of people of colour who have lived and are living through it. This extraordinary documentary theatre work is the product of over 250 interviews conducted by Deavere Smith over a seven-year period of sustained research and inquiry into what she calls the 'school to prison pipeline' that subjectivates young Black men, in particular, through the racialised dynamics of educational exclusion, criminalisation, and incarceration. That the extended period of investigation is coextensive with the emergence of Black Lives Matter movement enables the work to become interanimated by and interconnected with its social, historical, and political context. Consequently, it operates not only as a documentary theatre practice but as a persuasive document of contemporary history, tracing the continuities and convergences between the current moment of crisis and the historical experience of colonial-capitalist exploitation in the US. In drawing clear lines of connection between Black Lives Matter and the Civil Rights Movement, *Notes from the Field* outlines the contemporary social formation's continuation of the divisions, dispossessions, and injustices of segregation and slavery. The work consistently historicises the Black experience of exploitation, degradation, and confrontation within White social institutions as effects of the structural antagonism that continually reproduces racialised logics of othering and objectification as socially sanctioned violence.

As Achille Mbembe has explained, racist violence does not interrupt the smooth functioning of state democracy but is intrinsic to its operation, to the extent that 'democracy, the plantation, and colonialism are all part of the same historical matrix' (2019: 23). The tendency of modern democracies has been to contract out the 'originary violence' of this

formation and locate it in exteriorized spaces such as ‘the camp and the prison’ in order to codify its alterity and constrain its latent capacity for re-emergence as social disruption, political protest, and potential revolution (Mbembe 2019: 27). Deavere Smith’s account of the systematic reproduction of the ‘school to prison pipeline’ confirms the historical materiality of this ‘radically stigmatized’ space as internal to the US system of governmentality and essential to its biopolitical operation (Deavere Smith 2019: 34). It is worth recalling that biopower, according to Michel Foucault’s explication of the term, refers to the myriad ways in which division is made between lives that matter and lives that are deemed not to matter and the mechanisms through which the boundary between them is perpetually re-inscribed. Importantly, this is not conceived as a merely a repressive regime, but the active production of lived relations constructed by the operation of power within the field of living beings – ‘of which it takes control and in which it invests itself’ (Mbembe 2019: 71). For Foucault, the ensemble of capillary activities that constitute biopower as the interpenetration of biological life and political apparatuses enables the subdivision, categorisation and hierarchisation of both forms of life and groups of population, which, as Mbembe notes, he ‘refers to using the seemingly familiar term, “racism”’ (2019: 71). Yet for Mbembe, the terms biopower and biopolitics are insufficient to account for the historical divisions determining the differentiation between ‘those who must live and those who must die’ (2019: 71), not least because they do not recognise the ‘contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death’ which have been optimised by colonial-capitalism to create ‘new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions which confer upon them the status of the living dead’ (2019: 92). The terms he proposes instead, necropower and necropolitics, are intended to demonstrate how in the ‘displaced topographies of cruelty (the plantation and the colony)’ (2019: 92) and their contiguous successor spaces (the prison and the ghetto), there exists an inversion of the

priority of life and death, 'as if life was merely death's medium' (2019: 38). Political sovereignty is here designated as 'the capacity to define who matters and who does not' and the power to determine 'who is *disposable* and who is not' (2019: 80). Disposability is in this respect the necropolitical effect of the colonial-capitalist world order, whose epistemic violence produces racialised groups of human beings as material to be worn out, used up, and discarded; as having lives that are presumed not to matter outside of their economic function and social instrumentality (Vergès 2021: 76).

Francois Vergès argues that the persistence of the social formations resulting from the colonial-capitalist deformation continues to structure the contemporary field and to produce 'a politics of disposable life' (2021: 16)—of gendered and racialized injustice and structural violence—even 'when the regimes associated with these phenomena have disappeared' (2021: 15). Deavere Smith's *Notes from the Field* makes a similar argument through constructing diagonal connections between the contemporary situation and the inheritance of the necropolitical logics of slavery and segregation. The performance works in the mode of verbatim theatre, with Deavere Smith performing the words spoken by her interviewees as recorded and acting all eighteen 'characters' in the show herself. In her actorly vocalisation of her their words, Deavere Smith does not attempt to simply *imitate* her subjects' tone and mode of speech but rather to enable their voices to resonate through her own virtuosic acting. To the extent that this mode of performing inevitably deploys a degree of mimicry-mimesis in order to embody another voice and presence, it does so in order to open up acting practice to difference and distance and to refunction it into a formal theatrical *gestus*, 'in which an actor's body is trained to encode historical resistance' (Diamond 1997: 39). Deavere Smith's expert performance augments her subjects' experiential accounts theatrically, ensuring her acting functions to reverberate their acts of resistance by asserting their significance as a gesture of resistance in civil society. In performing their words and consolidating their

gestures, Deavere Smith *takes a position* alongside her research subjects as 'characters', allying her acting to their historical actions and thereby visibly adopting a political stance of the material co-produced and seemingly co-performed with them. The effect is an extraordinary reverberation of the contemporary political-aesthetic potentiality of the methodology of *Haltung*.

The section of *Notes from the Field* re-examining 'The Death of Freddie Gray' at the hands of the Baltimore police in 2015 exemplifies Deavere Smith's approach to putting aesthetic practice to the service of critical enquiry and the documentation of historical resistance. The section begins with a short videoclip of Freddie Gray forcibly being taken into custody; taken on his cell phone and offered as eye-witness footage of the arrest by a young videographer, Kevin Moore. This was the last moment Freddie Gray was seen before his arrival at the police station with three cracked vertebrae, a crushed larynx, and an effectively severed spine. Deavere Smith portrays Kevin Moore onstage as a theatrically doubled figure framed by both his constant speaking and continually being filmed. Her verbal delivery is animated and intense, stretching vocal dexterity to capture the shape and texture of his west Baltimore accent and authenticate the embodied evidence he presents. The otherwise slightly incongruous playing of a young man by a middle-aged woman wearing an oversized hoodie with the caption 'Copwatch' printed on it is framed by her always talking directly to a camera operated by an onstage videographer who follows her movement around the stage. The video is itself relayed live, creating the impression that Kevin's verbal testimony is itself a reflection and redoubling of the testimony of the visual image. In keeping with this, the character notes that his role in the scene of Freddie Gray's arrest was to ensure the capture and circulation of images because 'somebody has to *see* this' (Deavere Smith 2019: 14)—History has to have its eyes on it. It is precisely this operation of refocusing the attention of the eyes of history by reframing and restaging the dialectical images generated within its very

eye that Deavere Smith's performance purposefully enacts by standing alongside them. 'It's a movement', Kevin/Anna says; 'and it ain't gonna stop' (Deavere Smith 2019: 14).

The performance itself is directed towards supporting this movement. Arresting the frenetic motion of the stage, Deavere Smith sits calmly at its centre and shifts the tone of the narration. 'Eye contact'; it sounds like a heading but functions performatively as a caption, condensing and containing the 'whole story' narrated (Deavere Smith 2019: 14). At the moment she says it, the screens framing the stage flash up a triptych of images from a street mural showing the face of Freddie Gray with figures from the civil rights movement, past and present, moving in solidarity behind him. In the foreground, a young Black man—conceivably Kevin—is walking along the street in front of the wall on which it is painted. Staring out from the image, the eyes of Freddie Gray make contact with the audience and hold us in their gaze, even as the figure in the street resolutely looks away. 'Eye contact', we're told, is the 'whole story' of the murder; because Freddie Gray made eye contact with the police officers involved, they maintained they had 'probable cause' to apprehend him and 'do whatever' thereafter as Kevin puts it. It acts as the moment of interpellation into a racialised matrix of criminalisation. 'Just a glance. The eye contact thing … it's like a trigger. That's all it takes here in Baltimore, just a glance' (Deavere Smith 2019: 14). Here on stage, the moment of eye contact is reopened and repositioned as a theatrical relation of seeing and being called upon to see. Here, its gesture of resistance is reanimated and redirected so that the theatre might act as a moment of recognition and re-subjectivation in the eye of history. In this space, the act of making the image makes apparent the fact that 'images demonstrate: they rise up, and sometimes make us rise up too' (Didi Huberman 2018: xxii).

The impression of the performance as being inter-animated by social protest and political uprising is confirmed in the next scene, which presents Deavere Smith embodying the figure of Allen Bullock, an eighteen-year-old Black Lives Matter protester facing charges

of rioting in the wake of the murder of Freddie Gray. The scene opens with projected images of the windscreens of a Baltimore city police car being smashed by a man wearing baggy jeans and a pair of Timberland boots. This man is Allen Bullock. Anna Deavere Smith sits in a large leather high-backed chair in front of the screens also wearing a pair of Timberland boots. Her vocal embodiment of the character's testimony—explicitly framed as such, being recorded in a swanky lawyer's office—is even more remarkable for being delivered seated, its containment and localisation enabling the audience to see the work of the actor in a politically focused way as taking a position in relation to the action, character, and narration. The actor's micro-gestures, described in the stage directions as 'hand gestures of the time, probably specific to Baltimore' (Deavere Smith 2019: 18), are distinctive and yet denotive of a lived historical experience that extends beyond the representational depiction of a single character towards the presentation of a connection linking 'the gesturing bodies to resistance' (Dutt 2021: 519). The narration itself focuses on Bullock's resistance to being interpellated by the police into the role he is presumed to occupy as a young Black man. He refuses to 'even look the police way'—that is to compliantly look down or look away—and either ignores them completely or takes the decision to 'look back' enigmatically without being drawn into the kind of confected scene of confrontation a direct 'hard and straight' stare would imply (Deavere Smith 2019: 18). Here, in the doubled space of Deavere Smith's performance, the act of looking the police in the eye appears as a mode of facing down the eye of the storm, defiantly looking back at the eye of history. Bullock disengages from his role in the drama of policing—'runnin' from them' being outlined as his preferred strategy, because they 'don't like it when you run from 'em' (Deavere Smith 2019: 20)—and in so doing offers an awareness of his own acting in this scenario and acknowledgement that the beatings that follow act to re-incorporate him into it, re-interpellating him as a racialised subject within this scene of subjection. The character's double-consciousness of his own

acting within and against a lived historical racial formation is redoubled by Deavere Smith's adopting a position of active distance from and non-participation in the apparatus of dramatic representation as likewise operating as a mode of subjectification and normalisation. She appears as the actor within the theatrical *mise-en-scène*, but at the same time her acting demonstrably points to both the character's contestation of the role of racialized 'actor' in a colonial regime of representation and her own rehearsal of disengagement from its structures.

In this context, the deployment of the methodology of *Haltung* works to re-articulate and recalibrate a constantly interrupted yet continually repeated gesture of defiance—'looking ba—' (Deavere Smith 2019: 18)—so as to re-accentuate it as a calculated act of resistance. By opening up the gap between the actor and the character, Deavere Smith foregrounds the political potential of the gap between the social actor's mode of appearing within a racialised regime of representation and their resistance to this ideological construction. The gap between presence and representation essential to the theatrical operation of *Haltung* is thereby used to redouble the Black subject's resistance to their subjectification and objectification within a racialised frame of seeing and appearing. Deavere Smith's construction of an actorly *gestus* to stand alongside the historical image of Allen Bullock draws attention to his narration's exposure of interpellation as a form of violence whilst at the same time directly implicating representation itself in the 'epistemic violence' of racism. As Achille Mbembe explains, 'in racist contexts, "to represent" is the same thing as "to disfigure"', manifesting theatre's participation in 'a play of shadows' that constructs the other as a 'phobic object … first discovered through the gaze' (2019: 138—39) and repeated endlessly through the representational injunction to 'relive the traumatic scene … being reproduced in the reality of the present' (2019: 170). In *Notes from the Field*, this 'theatre of appearing' (Mbembe 2019: 170) is disrupted by the political agency of the actor in perpetually opening up the space between the subject and its representation—a space that the

racialised subject of representation continually observes as 'the spectacle of his [*sic*] own duplication' and experiences as 'the capacity to become separate from himself [*sic*] and objectify himself [*sic*] while at the same time becoming a subject' (Mbembe 2014: 98). In occupying that space theatrically as site of political dissonance and aesthetic dissemblance, Deavere Smith's rehearsal of disengagement from the structures of racialised representation enables a dislocation of 'the fictive double referenced by the shadow' (Mbembe 2014: 99) and the construction of a potential history of self-presentation.

Notes from the Field stages some of the overwhelming weight of evidence testifying to the historically lived experience of racism and racial violence in America, and to the role of representation and image construction in perpetuating as well as contesting that history. Anna Deavere Smith's extraordinary performance grounds these testimonies in the materiality of theatre as a space of seeing and hearing, constructing an aesthetic-political apparatus of visualisation and Brechtian method of critical distancing to frame the historicity of the images and stories presented. Her acting, conceived as acting politically, is designed to enable her interviewees' words to resonate through being inter-animated by her voice, enabling them to find a place on stage as at once specific, doubled, and multiplied. The intersecting and overlapping of multiple voices through a central, single performer works dramaturgically to produce a compelling theatrical argument demonstrating the interconnectedness of the lived historical experience of racism and its reproduction within the racialized regime of representation governing the social formation. Composed through montage, the argument works through and across the singularity of the accounts assembled, breaking down any residual sense of isolation or anomaly to build a sense of resonance and reverberation that accumulates to enables a presentation of the historical situation in its specificity. The form of the work itself, opening up the gaps between actor and character and exposing the tension between presence and representation, augments its production of a

dialectic of showing and seeing that seeks to historicise the contemporary and demonstrate its theatricality.

Yet, perhaps the theatrical construction of potential history requires as much investment in imaginative possibility as it does the rehearsal of critical and political disengagement. Deavere Smith appears to focus on such transformative leap of faith in her performative re-enactment of Pastor Bryant's funeral oration for Freddie Gray. She focuses on connecting two moments of resistance form the earlier episodes that are linked together in this extraordinary speech. Firstly, looking at out to the audience, she recalls that 'in a subtlety of revolutionary stance', Freddie Gray decided to do 'something that black men were trained—taught—know *not* to do. He looked the police in the eye' (Deavere Smith 2019: 25). Standing in the eye of history, he decided to look history in the eye. And so, secondly, 'he stopped running' (Deavere Smith 2019: 25), refusing to conform to the role ascribed to him historically. He decided to take a stand, to adopt a stance, and to refuse the role of the shadow by appearing in the eyes of history as not as a doubled, contorted figure but as a political actor, acting politically. In Pastor Bryant's eulogy, this moment of re-subjectivation is likened to the resurrection of Lazarus, with Jesus lifting his hands up to touch the casket. These words, this action—explicitly referencing the Black Lives Matter gesture of 'hands up, don't shoot'—elevate the gesture so it acts as consciously political *gestus*. The epideictic mode of the funeral speech here becomes performative, as the audience are implicated in the instruction to 'Get up' (Deavere Smith 2019: 27). Although initially framed as Jesus' statement to Lazarus, the phrase is repeated and reanimated in the contemporary context as a historical injunction to re-subjectivate Black cultural identity and to mobilise it politically. As *gestus*, its repetition interrupts the normative state of the situation—depicted by Pastor Bryant as a state of resigned acceptance that must be redirected as political resistance—to make an

intervention ‘in the break of colonial-capitalist time’ (Schneider 2018: 306), which historicises its operation and deconstructs its organisation. Deavere Smith’s re-enactment of his address underscores this point directly, making theatre ‘in the break’ between act and actor, event and representation, and opening the space between them as a site of performative intervention and potential history. ‘This is not the time for us to have no respect for our legacy and for history! … He said, “I need you to get up”. … get yourself up! …. get up! … Get your black self up and *change* this city!’ (Deavere Smith 2019: 27). The Pastor’s words have the young man in the casket rise up to form an image—an image forged in the eye of history, an image enacting an historical uprising. The image rises up and it invites us to rise up too. ‘No justice!’ it silently exclaims; ‘No peace!’ the audience vocally replies. ‘No justice!’ in the eyes of history; ‘No peace!’ in history’s eye. ‘No justice!’; ‘No peace!’ all repeat.

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