CHOREOGRAPHING TRAGEDY INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

What makes a tragedy? In the fifth century this question found an answer through the conjoined forms of song and dance. Since the mid-twentieth century, and the work of the Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch, tragedy has been variously articulated as form coming apart at the seams. This thesis approaches tragedy through the work of five major choreographers and a director who each, in some way, turn back to Bausch. After exploring the Tanztheater Wuppertal's techniques for choreographing tragedy in chapter one, I dedicate a chapter each to Dimitris Papaioannou, Akram Khan, Trajal Harrell, Ivo van Hove with Wim Vandekeybus, and Gisèle Vienne.

Bringing together work in Queer and Trans* studies, Performance studies, Classics, Dance, and Classical Reception studies I work towards an understanding of the ways in which these choreographers articulate tragedy through embodiment and relation. I consider how tragedy transforms into the twenty-first century, how it shapes what it might mean to live and die with(out) one another. This includes tragic acts of mythic construction, attempts to describe a sense of the world as it collapses, colonial claims to ownership over the earth, and decolonial moves to enact new ways of being human.

By developing an expanded sense of both choreography and the tragic one of my main contributions is a re-theorisation of tragedy that brings together two major pre-existing schools, to understand tragedy not as an event, but as a process. Under these conditions, and the shifting conditions of the world around us, I argue that the choreography of tragedy has and might continue to allow us to think about, name, and embody ourselves outside of the ongoing catastrophes we face.

CONTENTS

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

A metal spear hangs from Phia Ménard's right hand. Facing the audience, she lifts the weapon into the air, before driving it down into a cardboard form which lies on the ground. Her hair has been chopped into a blonde shag mullet. 5-inch heeled knee-high boots, a red sleeveless jacket, and a black leather skirt adorn her. After about thirty minutes of work, she admires her creation – a large cardboard structure, which she has dragged, in pieces across the space, stuck, folded, glued, thrown, and fought to assemble.

There are microphones placed on the edges of the performance space. They amplify the scrape of cardboard, thud of steel, the creaking of the sculpture's architectural joins, amplify Phia Ménard's breathing, expended through effort and care. So that each sonic element contributes to the rhythmic choreography of her well-rehearsed performance score, articulating the grind, hitch, lift and drop as she transforms this infrastructural material into a home – which now juts into the sky, provisional but vital. Then, BANG! One after another, she smashes long rectangles out of the building, they fall onto the floor. There is laughter from the audience as the installation is revealed in full. A cardboard Parthenon.

Moments pass before rain slowly begins to fall – drip by drip. Standing back to admire her temple, she is at once a goddess, Athena, a warrior, and a punk.[1] And then the heavens open soaking the cardboard, crashing down onto the stage – as if to break a week of unseasonable heat. The rain slicks Ménard, who slumps to the ground staring out at the audience, at the home she has built. It is a deluge, a flood. The noise is calamitous and wonderful. And then, inevitably, the roof of the Parthenon caves in, the columns of her home

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[1]Ménard (2020) [np].

buckle, the structure ruptures, and collapses – leaving Ménard-Athena standing amongst the ruins.

*Maison Mère* is the first in *The Trilogy of Immoral Tales (for Europe)* (2017). A reflection on creation, destruction, repetition, survival, and the collision between mythic and historical bodies, caught up in the unruly processes of transformation. [2] Informed by Ménard's research on the 'Marshall Plan', implemented to rebuild cities carpet bombed during the Second World War, and by her memories of her grandfather – who died and was interred in a mass grave after a particular night of bombing in Nantes, *Maison Mère* was first staged at Documenta 14.

This iteration of the international art festival sought to address a series of unfolding catastrophes: the refugee crisis, the rise of fascism, transphobia, systemic rearticulations of anti-Blackness, anti-disability legislation and logic, misogyny, neo-coloniality and racism, austerity, histories and ongoing practices of settler colonialism, neo-liberalism, populism, and the climate emergency.[3] We can see this embodied in the performance. On the material level, someone builds a structure, and it is destroyed by the environment; the building represents an idea, a makeshift home, the Parthenon, Europe, the Classical; the person is an archetype, a goddess: punk, Athena, revolutionary, war god. On the symbolic and affective levels, the performance explores ruination, grief, a collapse of the Classical; [4] on the somatic and socio-historical, it stages a reckoning with an eco-catastrophe: a person, a god, builds something that cannot but crumble back into the earth, pulled apart by the flood, the result of an unpredictable environment of which we are a part.

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[2] Ménard (2020) [np].

[3] This iteration of Documenta is an important node for tragedy and choreography and links many of the artists discussed over the course of this thesis. The organisers brought together two curatorial themes: 'Parliament of bodies' and 'Learning from Athens'. I discuss both themes and their relation to tragedy in more detail in chapter four which focuses on another performance from Documenta 14, Trajal Harrell's *Antigone Jr. ++*.

[4] Baudou and Houcke (*forthcoming*).

Paul B. Preciado – organiser of the public programme, Trans* theorist, philosopher, and film director – noted that Ménard uses, 'gender transition as a material, biopolitical process' and works through live art to shape a, '[deepened] critique of hetero-patriarchal conventions [that also] bears witness to a new transfeminist aesthetic'.[5] Ménard herself describes the performance as,

> an attempt to think differently, a thought process born in a world which did not see the crash that was coming, despite its acceleration, and which now continues towards an uncertain future.[6]

My hypothesis is that in the anticipation, the slip of the cardboard joins, in the crash which the world did not see coming, in the deluge of the storm, and its aftermath, Ménard choregraphs a tragedy.

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I begin with this example because it conveys the scope of my argument in its unfolding of a series of questions: What are the ways in which performance can articulate and disarticulate a sense of the world (historic, emergent, speculative)? How is tragedy expressed by the body in contemporary performance? What are the historic relationships between tragedy and the tragic that inform contemporary performances through live and non-live art? And can tragedy be a generative, critical form, in the wake of colonial violence, in the unfolding ecological crisis, as we accelerate towards a series of uncertain and potentially devastating future horizons?

In the following pages, I outline answers to these questions by considering the work of six major choreographers and one theatre director: Pina Bausch, Akram Khan, Dimitris

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[5] Preciado (2017) [np].
[6] Ménard (2020) [np].

Papaioannou, Trajal Harrell, Gisèle Vienne, and Wim Vandekeybus with director, Ivo van Hove.[7] I group these six artist-networks into three groups. Each is organised by an entangled set of affective concerns: grief-mourning; agōn-refusal-disputatiousness; ecstasy-violence-transformation. The purpose is not to designate a dominant or exclusive affective tone or note to each case study, but to introduce three notes in turn, to generate a choreographic patterning for the argument which then moves between grief and ecstasy, each note layering over the other.

I have titled this thesis *Choreographing Tragedy into the Twenty-First Century* in order to account for this movement, and to describe more broadly the movement of tragedy through a series of seismic shifts in the years between the mid-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The goal of the Introduction is to address each of the major concepts encompassed within this title, while attending to the questions unfolded by Ménard's performance. I do so over five sections: i) *Between Word and World: Approaches to Tragedy and Choreography* ii) *Choreography: An Affiliative Model of Relation* iii) *Tragedy and the Tragic* iv) *Tragedy Now: An Ecology of Tragedy* v) *Choreographing a More-Than-Human Tragedy*. These five sections, taken together, articulate a theoretical approach to both choreography and tragedy, and establish a methodology for analysing the performances which follow.

In this way, what I am pursuing here is a deeper understanding of the entanglements between scholarship and performance, through the choreographic, and an expansion of tragedy as currently understood. The roots of this expansion can already be felt in Ménard's transformative material approach to gender, bodies, identity, and collectivity. But I take this further in subsequent chapters which consider the multiform ways tragedy and choreography are enmeshed, co-articulated, and working in generative tension with one another. Simply put

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[7] This does not mean that each chapter is an exploration of five individuals and a pair, respectively. Instead, I discuss six companies, six assemblages of dancers, lighting, costume, and set designers, technicians, dramaturgs, poets, and academics – who move through and comprise the networks and Companies to which these choreographers often give their names.

my argument is that although both tragedy and the tragic can be used to reinforce norms and violent hierarchies, they also allow us to think through, imagine, and articulate ourselves beyond the catastrophes through which we are currently living.[8]

i)      Between Word and World: Approaches to Tragedy and Choreography

Since, at least, Oliver Taplin's *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (1977) and *Greek Tragedy in Action* (1978), it has been apparent to those interested in the study of ancient Greek tragedy, that there is something of the 'live' body, something of the performance which remains in the textual archives of ancient Greek drama. As Taplin notes, 'the power of the Greek theatre rests on its extraordinary combination of word and embodiment'.[9] He proclaims:

> Behind the words of Greek tragedy there is action, behind the action emotion: the abstract and concrete are made one, the emotion and the meaning are indivisible.[10]

Although it would seem at first that Taplin is suggesting a hierarchy of words, action, affects ('behind', 'behind'), his insistence on their entanglement, their combination, articulates how tightly knit these concepts are.[11] In this section I outline several approaches to tragedy informed by an awareness of these entanglements, before going on to consider precisely how this study contributes to previous thinking on tragedy more broadly.

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[8] Much of the thinking, conceptual formation, and argument developed within this thesis is indebted to the work of Black queer feminist activists and scholars, see Ahmed (2015, 2021); Brand (2023); Campt (2017, 2021); Campt and White (2020); Sharp (2016, 2023), Hartman (2019, 2020, 2022 2nd edn), especially the idea of articulating ourselves outside of crisis, which is formed in response to the work of Sylvia Wynter: see Wynter (2003, 2006); McKittrick and Wynter (2015). Cf. the lecture discussing the methodology of a forthcoming publication of Wynter's monograph *Black Metamorphosis*: Alagraa, Bogues, Brown, Denaud, and Maye (2021); *Small Axe* (2016) 49.

[9] Taplin (2003 2nd edn) vii.

[10] Taplin (2003) 1.

[11] Ibid.

By highlighting the interface between body, word and world, Taplin's study shapes not only the Performative Turn in Classics, but also the emergence of Classical Reception studies – which remains invested in the radical potential for tragedy to re-configure our understandings of the relationship between cultures in different geographic and temporal locations.[12] This attention to the ways in which bodies proliferate in literature and literature leaves 'gestures in the body' – as poet and decolonial philosopher Dionne Brand would put it[13] – has led to an efflorescence of critical practice and theory that continues to test the limits, relational understandings, political force, and structural composition of our engagements with the ancient world.[14] Historically much critical investigation has gone into attempts to understand the ways in which Classics and its privileging of tragedy have functioned as disciplining forces in the construction of normative bodies: in relation to the modern and contemporary categories of sex, class, race, gender, and ability.[15]

In recent years this has generated a wave of studies in tragedy which engage with contemporary theory.[16] Of relevance is the work by Ato Quayson, Olga Taxidou, and Nancy Worman, who each engage with the interactions between embodiment, world, poetics, and text.

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[12] Particularly through the formation of the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (the APGRD) and the interdisciplinary work produced between this centre and Theatre and Performance studies: for the APGRD see: Hall, Macintosh and Taplin (2000); Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley (2004); Hall and Macintosh (2005); Hall, Macintosh, Michelakis, and Taplin (2005) through to Macintosh and McConnell (2020).

[13] Brand (2002) 227. The full quote is: 'Books leave gestures in the body; a certain way of moving, of turning, a certain closing of the eyes, a way of leaving, hesitations. Books leave certain sounds, a certain pacing; mostly they leave the elusive, which is all the story. They leave much more than the words'.

[14] See Greenwood (2010); McConnell (2013); Rankine (2013, 2020); Vasunia (2013); Hanink (2017); Holmes (2016); Holmes and Güthenke (2018); Ward (2019, 2023, *forthcoming*); Postclassicisms Collective (2020); Silverblank and Ward (2020); Umachandran and Ward (2021, *forthcoming*); Eccleston and Peralta (2022); Umachandran (2022, 2023); Olsen and Telò (2022). See also the *Cognitive Classics* and *Classical Presences* series through OUP and the *Routledge Handbooks of Classics and Theory* particularly Budelmann and Sluiter (2023) from the former and Haselswerdt, Lindheim, and Ormand (2023) from the latter.

[15] For Classics see n.14 above; for studies outside Classics that have drawn attention to these formations, see Scott (2004); Fanon (2008 new edn); Brand (2002); McKittrick and Wynter (2015). Take for example Ward (*forthcoming*) whose study of the ways in which 'the classical functions as an originary mythology for ableism', and seeks out 'other ways of organising time, diachrony, influence, reception, spectatorship and relation so as not to offer the classical the power to harm disabled people's lives' (*forthcoming* b) 181. In this monograph Ward also links the use of the classical in related mythologies (racism, colonialism, islamophobia, queerphobia, and transphobia), and develops a mode of assemblage-thinking across each of the book's chapters capable of dismantling these connections and gathering alternative, 'wayward' routes. Cf. Hartman (2019).

[16] Lehmann (2016); Taxidou (2020); Worman (2020); Quayson (2021); Olsen and Telò (2022); Ward (*forthcoming*).

Taxidou notes that: 'Placing the body as a methodological and theoretical unit does not necessarily negate or oppose the poetic word, but is read in conjunction with it'. As she explains, our understandings of 'embodiment' would be enriched if we understood it as 'a dialectic between body and word that perhaps shapes our understanding of both'.[17] Worman observes that at the limit of language there is the body, and she insists that this is particularly pronounced in tragedy when bodies and language themselves fall apart: in the scream; the violent act; in the outpouring of desire, fear, hope; through sparagmos and transformation – in such a way that porous body and word unfold, enfold and pleat.[18] Quayson articulates *both* the ways in which the body is shaped through tragedy in colonial and post-colonial contexts *and* how embodiment informs approaches to the tragic within and beyond those contexts working toward an 'interleafing' of texts, theory, somatic reflection, and the archives and repertories of liberatory struggle. [19] And yet, this focus on bodies is not new, and preceding our moment, preceding Taplin's study, there are various points at which the entanglement and collapse between sound, flesh, word, text, and material announces itself.[20]

Take George Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy* (1961). Despite that fact that Steiner provocatively theorises their demise, both tragedy and the tragic constantly re-appear in the text, rising zombie-like from the earth.[21] In the conclusion, Steiner wonders if tragedy hasn't so much died as changed form.[22] He reflects on a performance of Mutter, from Brecht's *Mutter Courage,* given by Helene Weigel:

> As the body of her son was laid before her, she merely shook her head in mute denial. The soldiers compelled her to look again. Again she gave no sign of recognition, only a dead stare. As the body was carried off, Weigel looked

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[17] Taxidou (2020) 6.
[18] Worman (2020) 8–9; cf. Noland (2009) 170–77.
[19] Quayson (2021).
[20] Not least those whose work is in concert with Taplin cf. Wiles (1997) in Theatre and Performance or the aftereffects of Taplin's work with the National Theatre, particularly present in the direction of Katie Mitchell, Struan Leslie's choreography, and the numerous publications which have followed.
[21] See Steiner (1980 3rd edn).
[22] Steiner (1980) 351–55.

the other way and tore her mouth wide open. The shape of the gesture was that of the screaming horse in Picasso's *Guernica*. The sound that came out was raw and terrible beyond any description I could give of it. But, in fact, there was no sound. Nothing. The sound was total silence. It was silence which screamed and screamed through the whole theatre so that the audience lowered its head as before a gust of wind.[23]

Even though the silent scream is 'beyond any description', Steiner's account traces its force, attending to the 'shape of the gesture', even re-animating the more-than-human effects of this cry so that I, as a reader even 'lowered [my] head' when I encountered his description for the first time.

Consequently, Steiner articulates the ways in which tragedy transforms (through) genre and media, jumping between memory, text, live performance, lighting state, sound, gesture, often confusing, collapsing or creating a synaesthetic network from supposedly media specific sensory effects. Suddenly a text touches you, or you see an image in the sound of a word, you feel the force of a gust of wind in the bending of a group of people before an act of devastation, or you hear a scream in the silence of a body yawning open with grief.[24] He even goes further to claim that:

That scream inside the silence seemed to me to be the same as Cassandra's when she divines the reek of blood in the house of Atreus. It was the same wild cry with which the tragic imagination first marked our sense of life. The same wild and pure lament over man's inhumanity and waste of man. The curve of tragedy is, perhaps, unbroken.[25]

But what makes this silent scream the same as Cassandra's? What makes a 'wild cry' tragic? Is tragedy the only force which crashes aesthetic distinctions and medial boundaries? How do such descriptions encourage us to participate within a scene of witnessing and encounter?[26] What forms of embodiment work through and are established by these acts of reception? To

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[23] Steiner (1980) 353–54.
[24] See Worman for the interactions of optic, sonic, and haptic (2020); cf. Butler (2015) on image and sound.
[25] Steiner (1980) 354.
[26] Two landmark works in Black studies ask this question by beginning with an investigation of a scream, see Moten (2003); Hartman (2022).

what extent does Steiner determine their conditions?[27] And can we really say that through the gesture, the curve of tragedy is unbroken?

This thesis seeks to examine further and to critically interrogate this claim. I proceed, in part, by defamiliarizing the practice by which one describes what happens in a scene or theatricalised account of tragedy by returning to what Dwight Conquergood terms the 'crossroads' between 'practice and theory, action and reflection, abstraction and embodiment'.[28] Here scholarship co-constructs the conditions and parameters of witness and encounter but like live performance, it does not determine their meaning entirely; rather, scholarship shapes the encounter, developing conceptual tools which give rise to interpretive communities – working like dramaturgy or, as I will contend, like choreography.

The methodological approach which I deploy throughout this thesis – including my own situated descriptive analyses of performance, of the kind Steiner provides – is to examine tragedy in and *through* performance, allowing live acts, gestures, and arrangements of bodies in space to organise and articulate an exploration of the conceptual material.[29] Thus, I acknowledge that, after Diana Taylor: 'performance also functions as an epistemology. Embodied practice, along with and bound up with other cultural practices, offers a way of knowing'.[30] And that while tragedy and the tragic may not be the only forces which destabilise and problematise form, it is their vibrant troubling of conceptual, historical, geographic, affective, and material boundaries in which I am interested.

Furthermore, I wager that while many have written on the linguistic and grammatical aspects of tragedy, on literature as a key to performance, and on the reception histories of

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[27] See Lushkov (2021) for a semiotic and intertextual reading of a case study – a cricket incident – with no obvious classical referents that can nonetheless be read as an act of reception. Cf. James (1994) on tragedy and cricket. James is also read by Scott (2004) in his study of tragedy, coloniality, and history. As will become clear my approach makes similar claims about seemingly non-classical examples working as acts of reception, but I do so through relation, embodiment, performance and especially choreography.

[28] See work on practice-based research and practice-as research, Conquergood (2002) 153–54; Nelson (2006) 105-107; Kershaw (2014) 138; Allmer (2018) 54.

[29] For another method that works in and through performance cf. Taxidou (2020) 7.

[30] Taylor (2003) 3.

tragedy in the theatre, there has been no theory of tragedy and choreography – the embodied relationships, acts, material practices, affects and politics of performing tragedy. Simultaneously, although there is interest in the chorus and increased interest in ancient dance, choreographic practice and theory have largely been left out of the discussion.[31] This seems to be a serious omission. For, as many have pointed out, in some ways, you cannot think about tragedy without thinking about dance.[32]

Although one could successfully study tragedy's entanglement with dance then as now – drawing out the continued effects of tragedy, postmodernity and the contemporary – this thesis is neither an approach to the interactions between ancient dance and tragedy, nor is it a study of the receptions of tragedy through modern dance and its legacies. Instead, just as people today are beginning to think about the idea of translation as being something much bigger than the transference of information from one text to another text – conceiving of translation instead as a cultural agent, an interrelating, transforming and re-reading of the archaeology of literary morphologies, as well as conceptual and embodied phenomena across time and place;[33] so, the primary claim of the thesis is for an expansion in understandings of both tragedy and choreography. Choreography here is understood as *not only* the arrangement of bodies in space – and the political, ethical, and aesthetic effects of such arrangement – *but also* as a shifting 'nexus of corporeal, discursive, and institutional practices':[34] a material, somatic, and affective means of reflecting culture, in-between words and worlds; a means of modelling and

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[31] On the chorus there are numerous studies but for reception and performance, see: Billings, Budelmann and Macintosh (2013); Jackson (2019); Baudou (2021); on ancient dance see Lada-Richards (2007); Hall and Wyles (2008); Gianvittorio-Ungar (2017); Schlapbach (2017); on dance and reception: Macintosh (2010, 2013); on choreography and reception see: Stanger (2018, 2021); Crawley (2018, 2022); on choreography, reception and tragedy see: Gotman (2017); Gianvittorio-Ungar and Schlapbach (2021).

[32] See Taxidou (2004, 2020); Macintosh (2010); Peponi (2013); Csapo (2017) 119–56; Finglass (2017); Gianvittorio (2017); Gotman (2017); Naerabout (2017); Schlapbach (2017).

[33] See Hankinson (2023) 30, 44, 52–54, 76 on intercultural translation probing exchange, transmission, interanimation, encounter and constructing relational worlds; cf. Bastin-Hammou, Di Martino, Dudouyt and Jackson (2023).

[34] Stanger (2021) 4.

transforming the social, the bio-structural, the conceptual; and a complex poly-perspectival and poly-agential process that articulates, generates, and transforms culture.[35]

The thesis therefore brings two new perspectives to understandings of ancient and modern tragedy and to dance and performance scholarship respectively: i) Namely, that dance doesn't cease to be important in the understanding of tragedy after modernism; in fact, one would struggle to think about the history of tragedy since modernism without dance, especially given the widespread impact of artists like Martha Graham, Pina Bausch and the Tanztheater Wuppertal ii) Dance itself has an historical and ongoing entanglement with tragedy and the tragic that continues to articulate both concepts in variegated, incisive and political ways; and in order to fully grasp those ideas today (in politics, performance, scholarship, pop culture and art) one needs to attend to the history of dance.

ii)    Choreography: An Affiliative Model of Relation

Several questions remain from Steiner's account of *Mutter Courage* and my own description of *Maison Mère* which I seek to address in this section. Particularly pressing are the issues raised about qualifying the experience of witnessing or encountering tragedy in a gesture (how, what, to what extent, of what kind)? Or in other words the problem could be summarised thus: what is it about these performances, about *Maison Mère,* that feels, sounds, and crashes into the earth like a tragedy?

In the edited collection *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond* (1996) which followed a landmark conference in comparative approaches to the topic, Michael Silk

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[35] For an account of the term and its beginning, through its usage by Raoul Auger Feuillet in his systemization of a form of dance notation at the turn of the eighteenth century, see Foster (2009, 2011); on critical approaches to choreography, choreopolitics, aesthetics and politics, see Hewitt (2005); Stanger (2014, 2016, 2021); Banerji and Mitra (2020).

wrote about six unsettled categories (or 'propositions') that are used to define both terms.[36] From his consideration of these existing propositions, emerges a concept that I am particularly interested in, that of 'perceived affinity'.[37] Shakespeare's *King Lear*, he argues, is a tragedy in a way that both Sophocles *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Euripides' *Orestes* are tragedies – even though the latter has a 'happy' ending.[38] Nevertheless, Silk argues, it is possible to think of each of them as tragedies or to think of all of them as part of the tragic – an idea or concept that many propose as co-functional to tragedy in practice, following the emergence of German idealism around the 1800s.[39] Silk suggests that perceived affinity is a sufficient category for tragedy, that functions in such a way that, when one describes *x* as a tragedy one engages in *both* a process of negotiating *x* and the concept of tragedy: 'each time this process takes place', he claims, we confirm or modify a sense of tragedy and the tragic, 'irrespective of whether, in doing so, we consult the now extensive tradition of theorising about tragedy as a whole'.[40]

To account for how perceived affinity works, Silk proposes Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of family resemblance, whereby specific examples that come under the name of tragedy are meant to demonstrate 'recognisable traits or affinities in the manner of members of a family'.[41] This establishes perceived affinity through a filiative model of relation – a model based on what comparative studies scholar Joseph Hankinson has described, after Edward Said, as 'family relationships, direct genealogy, and lines of inheritance'.[42] Thus, to say that *Maison Mère* or *Mutter Courage* are tragedies, in this model, is to announce that the both bear some

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[36] These six categories are as follows: first, what we know of tragedy in 'fifth-century ancient Athens and seventeenth century Europe'; second, 'the concept of the tragic'; third, 'any general definition of tragedy should depend on a definition of Greek tragedy in the particular'; fourth, any 'substantial understanding of Greek tragedy needs to be supported by an understanding of the cultural context of fifth century Athens'; fifth, 'any understanding of Greek tragedy presupposes an understanding of other kinds of tragedy or non-tragedies'; sixth 'there is no consensus on how to decide between the previous five propositions' Silk (1996) 2–3.
[37] Silk (1996) 5.
[38] Silk (1996) 6–8.
[39] See Szondi who argues that: 'Since Aristotle, there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic' Szondi (1961) quoted in Billings (2014) 8.
[40] Silk (1996) 8.
[41] Silk (1996) 5; see Wittgenstein (2009 4th ed) 65–67.
[42] Hankinson (2023) 8.

kin relation to other tragedies. *Maison Mère* for example, may not appear to be a sister to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon,* but it might be a sister of, say, Peter Stein's *Oresteia* (1980). And Stein's performance and Aeschylus are perhaps more closely related.

However, the filiative model generates several problems. A reliance on familial relation has historically privileged patriarchal, normative and patrilinear models of inheritance.[43] Moreover, as Marchella Ward has outlined in an essay on queer relationalities – working against models of biological kinship – filiative logics often,

> insist upon a particular ideological aspect of Classical inheritance: 'the classical tradition, on any reading, is European at the outset and Western, through and through'.[44]

Now, while it is entirely possible to think of inheritance, ancestry, or indeed tradition as critical practices of interrogating, precisely, this colonial matrix of relation,[45] a reliance on the (pseudo)biological and particularly, on heteronormative 'Western' concepts of family leads very often to a reification of the set of structural, historical, cultural, and ideological divisions between 'self' and 'other', 'us' and 'them', 'legible' and 'illegible', 'human' and 'non-human', 'man' and 'woman', 'East' and 'West', 'straight' and 'queer', 'normative' and 'non-normative', which variously emerge from and support the colonial.[46]

Happily, many have offered alternative models of relation that facilitate *both* the critique of power relations instantiated by the filiative, the linear, the causal *and* the development of alternative ontologies, ethics, metaphysics, and epistemologies. Examples are often shaped by disciplines formed through historical injury, and include: models of kin

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[43] See Hankinson (2023) 8; cf. Said (1991).

[44] Ward (2023) 264, quoting Gildenhard, Silk, and Barrow (2013) 245.

[45] See Taylor (2003); Ward (*forthcoming*) particularly 188–91; Milburn (2019). Cf. Budelmann and Haubold (2007) for the possibility of imagined tradition which is not dissimilar from the idea of chosen family for which I advocate, and for the suggestion of a connection 'beyond what is simply human' (in the relation between Homeric and Babylonian epic) which could be reinterpreted in a more-than-human theoretical context.

[46] See McKittrick and Wynter (2015); Puar (2017 2nd edn); Sharpe (2016a, 2023); Balani (2023); cf. Ward (*forthcoming*).

without genealogy;[47] mycelial models of relation;[48] genealogies based on chance, a 'promiscuous' taking, or even development of genealogies organised around a liberatory politics rather than origins and lines of descent;[49] subterranean receptions;[50] frail connections;[51] 'coral like models of reception';[52] intervallic gestural connections, or models of re-enactment;[53] embodied and cognitive encounters or 'kinaesthesia';[54] and the simile of the wake itself, along with wake work, the hold, the weather.[55]

All of these forms can be grouped under the heading of 'affiliative' – a mode of relation proposed by Said and developed by Hankinson, who describes it as a, 'transition from these filiative ties to "a kind of compensatory order that, whether it is a party, an institution, a culture, a set of beliefs, or even a world-vision"', facilitating new modes of (imagining and analysing) relation.[56] I reference many of these models in what follows, and to them I add another, the choreographic.

*Choreography/Choreographing/the Choreographic*

Consider Ménard, moving across the performance space, toward or away from a section of the disassembled cardboard Parthenon; as she approaches a piece of the structure, she attends to a set of histories and potentialities.[57] Having rehearsed the patterning and sequence of actions which will lead to the erection of the temporary installation, she holds each run and re-run of the performance, the mistakes, chance successes, alternatives, and unfolding iterations in

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[47] Ward (2023, fo*rthcoming*).
[48] Stovall (2021); Umachandran (2021).
[49] Amin (2020).
[50] Macintosh and Hall (2005).
[51] Greenwood (2010).
[52] See Ward (*forthcoming*) 188, describing Holmes (2016); Holmes and Güthenke (2018).
[53] Schneider (2011); Franko (2017); Crawley (2018, 2022).
[54] Slaney (2020).
[55] Sharpe (2016a, 2023).
[56] Hankinson (2023) 8, quoting Said (1991) 19.
[57] Hartman (2019).

relation to and between her body and the environment. In other words, she traces previous and forthcoming iterations of this performance: she is in a groove, or connected to a lively embodied residue, or attended to by ghosts of other performances that came before and that will or might emerge.[58] And thus, as she lifts the structure into the air, as she walks around inside of it, or lifts her arm to knock out the colonnades, and as she sits under the rain, what has, what might be, what could and what will become structure the unfolding contours of the present.[59]

The mobile relations Ménard takes up with the Parthenon, as it juts into the sky, are configured by this practice of negotiating memory and potentiality. These are choreographic relations. By this I mean, provisionally, that here relation is constructed, established by choice, repetition, improvisation, force, attention *to* and contact *with* an object/subject. An approach of this kind is in sympathy with studies of choreography and live performance in an expanded field.[60] With the term 'expansion' moving us away from distinct semiotic, historiographic, or formalist approaches and toward interdisciplinary accounts of movement, epistemology, worldmaking, performance and performativity. Dance studies scholar, Anna Leon articulates this shift:

> If choreography is related to a disciplinary arrangement of bodily motion, expanded choreography can be practiced by military officials and gender norms; if choreography is related to patterns of motion, expanded choreography can appear in the development of a fractal; if choreography is directed towards dancing bodies, expanded choreography can encompass the dance of non-human materialities.[61]

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[58] I explore this in detail in chapter one, building on the work of Carlson (2001); Schneider (2011, 2018, 2019); Muñoz (2019 2nd edn).

[59] As Berlant notes, this is an embodiment of the present as a disputed category – under constant revision – a temporal genre with shifting conventions, multiple experiences, and conflicting constitutions which emerges from the personal and public filtering of events 'whose very parameters (when did "the present" begin?) are also always there for debate' Berlant (2011) 4.

[60] This terminology is well established in performance studies, see Finburgh Delijani (2017) 5.

[61] Leon (2022) 22.

Consequently, choreography becomes more than the work of a choreographer or a dance-maker. It is also the arrangement and disorganisation of elements, forces, patterns, affects: the structuring, rehearsal, and performance of a dance; the movement, into and out of contact; the study of collision, compression, flow, falling, rising, resistance, surrender; the entire constellation of relations and potentialities that facilitate production, meaning, culture.[62]

From this nexus and alongside choreographic analyses of memory, capital, sexuality, gender, the politics of space, the histories of displacement, the choreopolitics of the city, bombmaking, racialisation, emerges the choreography of bio and necropolitics, architecture, archaeology and the archive.[63] This generates complex approaches to the forces and relationships which contour embodied and mechanical flows through 'naturecultures' – a term used to account for entangled multispecies assemblages – as well as to the hierarchies of power which form them, and the varieties of response to them, including resistance, destruction, and transformation.[64]

The body thus becomes a choreographic phenomenon, shaped by these discourses – neither entirely human nor non-human – but already comprised of multi-species assemblages, inflected by regimes of power, geography, history, and political context.[65] Assembled, materially and conceptually, through processes of forming and deforming, a cyborgian body, a leaky body emerges, comprised of 'wrinkles, furrows, folds', and full of other traces, microbes, feelings, and companion species.[66] Not a body that is stable, whole, and bounded but

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[62] Gilmore (2022).

[63] Those who explicitly use choreography Hewitt (2005); Foster (2011); Lepecki (2013); Gotman (2017); Petrović-Lotina (2021); Stanger (2021); and those whose studies are like or inform the choreographic Deleuze and Guattari (2004); Weheliye (2014); Hartman (2019); Mbembe (2019); Foucault (2020); Fuller and Weisman (2021).

[64] Choreography and the choreographic have been integral for thinking across Science and the Humanities and for forming the idea of multispecies assemblages. See the dancerly scholarship of: Barad (2007); Haraway (2008); Tsing (2015); Bubandt, Gan, Swanson, Tsing (2017); Deger, Tsing, Saxena and Zhou (2021).

[65] Haraway (1985); Weheliye (2014); Jefferson (2020); Russell (2020).

[66] Quote from Gotman (2012). On the porosity of the body Tuana (2008); Singh (2018); in conversation with Haraway (1985, 2008, 2016); this would provide us with an entry point for understanding the human body as a multi-species assemblage, of variously animate and inanimate bio-technological, viral, fungal, rhizomatic choreographies.

a porous body crumpling, surrendering, failing, stumbling, and stuttering.[67] Beautiful, in the polymodal possibilities of its arrangements and orientations, this is the body as we inhabit it daily, full of complex affects, unresolved questions, grief, love, pain, discomfort, inadequacy, and needing care (always) and support – an inter-/ intra-determinate, never singular, never unattenuated, assemblage, 'rich with needs', it is the place from which tragedy might emerge and return in performance.[68]

Thus, choreography can affiliate *Maison Mère* and *Mutter Courage* as tragedies because it brings us into the fold of collective embodied relationality. Our being with Ménard sets us up for the tragic not because she becomes a relation of Aeschylus', but through material performance practices which work with and through the body, bringing us into contact with a collapse of word and world through choice, chance, an engagement with memory, and symbols of past tragedies (through the Parthenon, through ruination) and tragedies yet to come (the collapsing of the climate and our inter-species systems due to the conjoined forces of colonialism and capitalism). And yet, there is more to this than co-presence. There is something in Ménard's description of this crash, which we did not see coming which also speaks to the material force of the performance, that I perceive as a choreographic affiliation with tragedy and the tragic.

*Collapse*

An example that will help us elucidate those already in play is from a sequence from another performance: Travis Alabanza and Debbie Hannan's *Sound of the Underground* (2023) at the

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[67] Kafer (2013); cf. Lavery (2022) who argues that Theatre and Performance studies are integral to working through the ecological crises we face, by going to the body, and thinking with, from, towards new arrangements of embodiment. While I do not side with Lavery's move for 'the body to be investigated here [as] not a gendered, sexed, racialised, or class-positioned body' (2022) 45, I am invested in thinking through the body alongside many others in the environmental humanities.

[68] Quotation from Lewis (2022).

Royal Court, London. After a riotous prologue, of cigarette smoking, the hurling of programmes into the audience and queer debauchery, the performance shifts into a mock, 'kitchen-sink', realist space – one that has become a favourite for contemporary and modern staging of tragedy, especially following Mike Bartlett's *Medea* at the National Theatre in London (2012), but which was identified following the premiere of *Look Back in Anger* (1956) with the Royal Court itself.[69] Into this space enter eight drag queens. They are hemmed in by multiple crises – cost of living, environmental, the rise in 'state-sanctioned and extra-legal' transphobia, a commodification of queer art, and the various intersections between queerphobia, ableism, classism, and racism.[70] Their initial response is to stage a play, in which they suggest a way out of these crises, but this is ultimately flawed and fails spectacularly.

As Sue Gives a Fuck describes: 'We have had enough. We are tired of the pay disparity, the comparisons, the pressure'.[71] They gather to enact a *coup d'état*, a plan to kill the drag queen, business mogul, and supermodel RuPaul Charles. Well, not exactly RuPaul, but the idea they represent, the conceptual iconography and system of queer normative capitalism; the takeover of radical queer politics, or as Ms Sharon describes, the loss of 'drag as a rule-defying, gender-bending, punk protest', to extractive capitalist 'drag as an advert […] drag selling banks […] drag selling Uber Eats […] Drag selling nuclear fucking weapons for all I know'.[72]

Then, despite the fact that they make it to the oil rig where 'Ru' is holding out – even after a successful transformation of the kitchen into a mobile barracks – and despite the fact that they descend on an effigy of the drag queen with well-rehearsed choreography and heavy weaponry, the plan, and Ru, blow up in their faces. The stuffed doll, representing the iconic

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[69] Alabanza and Hannan (2023) 17.
[70] A modulation of Gilmore's often-quoted definition of racism: 'the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death' (2007) 28.
[71] Alabanza and Hannan (2023) 33.
[72] Alabanza and Hannan (2023) 34.

performer splits open, spurting money over the stage. And then, out of the chaos, everything stops, and everything falls apart.

Rhys' Pieces, Sadie Sinner, Sue Gives a Fuck, Migitte Bardot, Wet Mess, Chiyo, Lilly SnatchDragon, and Ms Sharon Le Grand pull up the tape, remove the chairs, unplug the kettle, take down the walls and unscrew the fixtures, dismantling the set. Bardot backs away in their tank, the beeping of its 'reverse' alarm cutting the silence and creating pools of laughter. The slowness emphasises the work required to take something apart, something established, something legible, understood. And then the whole theatre falls silent, save for the sounds of their gestural tasks, and their chatter as they rest, and change in the back. Eventually, Wet Mess bursts out of a binbag in a suit and begins to lip sync to a track: a series of documentary, audio interviews with the performers.

They recall how much money they make, how much they spend on outfits per performance, where they gig, what gigs they have given up to be here – announcing various gaps in pay; they talk about the dangerous effects of cis-normativity on Trans* and gender non-conforming bodies, they talk about the TV show and global franchise of Drag Race, their lives, and what else it has cost for them to be here performing in Sloane Square. It is a blurring of the real and the constructed, the imagined and the remembered, the virtual and immanent, poetry, drag, and documentary – a collapse of the 'abstract and the concrete'.[73] And, as the backdrop is pulled and the deep recesses of the stage are revealed, as they form chorus lines, as everything comes apart around them, I get a feeling which rushes through my body, and which cannot be neatly described by any of the terms offered by the performance itself, which are 'workers manifesto', 'play', 'cabaret'.[74]

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[73] Taplin (2003) 1.

[74] Cf. Campbell and Farrier (2015) 1–4; these three terms come from Alabanza and Hannan (2023).

The feeling recalls to me, in uncanny detail, *Maison Mère*'s expression of the collapse. Informing both performances is an attendance to apprehension, and shock; a careful expression of the slow and unexpected ways that we hurtle toward something terrible, wonderful – despite that anticipatory sensation and knowledge, despite the warnings that appear obvious in hindsight. Both works of choreography think through and with the 'trouble' (to use Donna Haraway's phrase) of apprehending and awaiting what comes next;[75] both attend to the work that precedes and follows a catastrophe, 'the labour intensive act of transformation […] the material and temporal reality of taking apart one space in order to make way for another'.[76] Both give voice to the tremulous impasse caused by a breach in the everyday – even when the everyday is mired by pain and struggle – offering neither a resolution nor a (straight)forward flight path out of the muddle, the mess, and debris.[77] And they both attend in their variegated ways to moments of humour, irony, care and the queer potentialities of restructuring the world in the breakdown.

Consequently, by calling both *Maison Mère* and *Sound of the Underground* tragedies establishes an affinity that is based on a chosen set of embodied practices – which precedes but is also extended by my account. What connects them isn't a chain of influence or inheritance, or necessarily a particular mode of description, since I cannot guarantee that Alabanza and Hannan saw or knew of Ménard's work, nor can I postulate about their uncannily similar attentions to collapse, survival and transformation – these affiliations suggest themselves. These performances aren't sisters (at least not in a heteronormative sense) but I believe they both express tragedy and the tragic through these collapses.[78] The relation is, in this sense,

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[75] Haraway (2016).
[76] Alabanza and Hannan (2023) 42.
[77] Haraway (2016).
[78] This draws on a practice of sisterhood in queer and anti-racist activist groups that extends beyond normative gender identities and normative family models. See Lorde (2019) especially the essays 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power' (24–26), 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' (52–54), and 'Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference' (54–59); cf. Anzaldúa (2021).

choreographic: partly because the artists are choosing, and constructing relation through choreography in the ways that this project also constructs a relation between these artists – in other words the performances exhibit an imaginative investment-interrogation in the kinds of collapse and reconstruction of relation that this 'criticism itself effects by bringing them together'.[79]

Consequently, each moment, each gesture is a part of a vibrant and complex network of techniques, an assemblage, suggesting 'a new geometry of transpersonal [and I would add trans-species, trans-material, trans*-feminist] relation'.[80] Here the choreographic is a mode of accounting for embodied gestural relationality that operates not from a sense of similarity, allegory, or equivalence; but instead from difference, variation, force, 'dynamic integration', attenuation and through, specifically, a disarticulation of a world-vision or an unmaking of a sense of the world that can hold no longer.[81] As Said notes of his affiliative practice, this mode of criticism is 'to make visible, to give materiality back to' society and culture, to understand their history and efflorescence.[82] It is – after Hankinson – to '[mediate] between [performance] and world' to 'critically focus in the numerous points of juncture, the "strands" and "bonds"' which generate attraction, contact, collision or repulsion between performance and the 'range of circumstances' which make performance and concepts possible.[83]

Returning to Silk and Wittgenstein, in place of the familial model of perceived affinity I want to suggest the idea of chosen family, a chosen affiliative model of relationality.[84] A queer modality which flourishes in, for example, the ballroom scene of Harlem in the mid- to

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[79] Reworking Hankinson (2023) 34.
[80] Hankinson (2023) 8; cf. Said (1991) 19. On the assemblage and Classics, see Ward (2019).
[81] For dynamic integration see Chaganti (2018).
[82] Said (1991) 174–75, quoted in Hankinson (2023) 31.
[83] Hankinson (2023) 31.
[84] See Ward (*forthcoming*) who concludes by articulating a model of relation informed by the ongoing histories of 'chosen family' – especially in queer activism, Black radical study, and Disability studies – particularly the work of Disability studies activists cf. Milburn (2019); the histories of Black activism (attested to by Sharpe (2016a), Hartman (2019); and the intersections with the queer activism particularly of the eighties, cf. Le Vay (2019). For an overview cf. Lewis (2019a, 2022).

late twentieth century where Black and brown, queer and Trans* people assembled with one another in order to not only live but change the very structuring of the world.[85] Which Ménard, Alabanza, Hannan and the queens who comprise *Sound of the Underground* exemplify.

This suggests two things to me. First, that thinking about performance and tragedy through the prism of choreography, emphasises that relation is enacted and re-enacted, affirmed and severed. As such tragedy becomes a place of de- and reconstructing the relation of relations that exceed the boundaries of time, place, nation, identity, and it offers a topos of relation and difference capable of allowing us to think through multiple different kinds and instances of collapse, trouble, tension, transformation, and goings into the unknown. This is not just a tragedy of who gives birth to us but also a tragedy of those we choose and those we exclude from our ideas and practices of kin.[86] Secondly, because tragedy has something to do with an incomprehensible encounter that causes both processes (undoing and reforming) which are articulated through the choreographic, there is in tragedy an expression of the incommensurate that needs further attention. As with Ménard's crash, the choreographic tragic event enfolds various contemporary concerns and crises and unfolds an almost limitless and terrifying sense of possibility as we await what might come next.[87]

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[85] This is not the chosen family of the H&M, Hyundai, Ritz crackers, Absolut vodka, Vanity Fair or Mercedes's advert, but instead the enactment of chosen family as a transformative practice which has emerged in extreme situations of marginalisation and close proximity to death. Cf. Butler (1993) 121–42; Adebayo (2015); Nyong'o (2019). Cf. Livingston's film *Paris is Burning* (1990), and discussions in Butler (1993); hooks (2015 2nd edn) 145–56.

[86] The chosen family model thus articulates that which Black feminists have argued for over the last sixty years, at least, that the family has always been porous. This is given shape and force, for example in Hartman's announcement that 'slavery is the ghost in the machine of kinship', or in Sharpe's expansion of this idea in her essay 'Lose your Kin' cf. Sharpe (2016b) [np]. This essay begins with an articulation of – what Lewis later summarises as – the family as a construct, 'built off the back of an intense racialising gesture' Lewis (2019a, b, 2022); and ends with an invocation to 'rend the fabric of the kinship narrative. Imagine otherwise. Remake the world. Some of us have never had any other choice' Sharpe (2016b) [np].

[87] In later iterations Ménard's *Maison Mère* preceded two further works which also intensified this addictive feeling of, 'what next' which is also a component of tragedy and the tragic, which I return to in the conclusion.

iii)    Tragedy and the Tragic

Since at least the late 1700s both the term tragedy and the tragic have been variously invoked and rearticulated to account for the shifting and often unpredictable relationships between humans and their environments, capturing a sense of what Ato Quayson terms, 'human responses to [a] representational incommensurability'.[88] In this section I discuss two entwined theoretical schools for approaching tragedy. Each grapples, in different ways, with this sense of the incomprehensible and incommensurable – or what the poet Alice Oswald has called the 'more than, more than, more than human […] the violence, frailty, mercy, immensity, and terrifying muchness of all things that are, of which we are a part'.[89]

*Tragedy and History*

The first school is expressed by the cultural critic and literary theorist Raymond Williams who began his 1966 work *Modern Tragedy* by stating 'we come to tragedy by many roads'.[90] Here the tragic is a part of our daily lives: 'It is an idea, a body of literature, an academic debate', some horrible thing, 'a mining disaster, a burned-out family, a broken career, a smash on the road'.[91] It has happened, is happening, 'an immediate experience, a body of literature', and will happen again.[92] Following Williams, scholars like Jennifer Wallace have used tragedy to analyse events stretching from 'the trauma of 9/11, to the hidden atrocities of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the revolutionary sublime rupture of 2011 [the 'Arab Spring'], to the fearful power of mass movements – whether of refugees or hysterical populism – and ultimately to the catastrophic prospect of climate change'.[93]

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[88] Quayson (2021) 36.
[89] Oswald (2023, lecture).
[90] Williams (2006, revised edn) 33.
[91] Williams (2006) 33.
[92] Williams (2006) 33.
[93] Wallace (2020) 181; on futility and powerlessness cf. (2020) 1–6.

The flexibility of this school arises from Williams' definition of tragedy as a connection between 'event and experience and idea'.[94] The event is defined as the thing that happens (a car-crash); the experience is that which gathers around the thing (a slick on the road, the discovery of the wreckage, the arrival of the ambulances or the police, the empty chair at dinner); and the idea determines whether or not that combination of event and experience is perceived to be a tragedy.[95] It is the idea that gives form to event and experience in each case, and ideas are also culturally relative, which is why for Williams: 'tragedy is not a single or permanent fact but a series of [changing and situated] conventions and institutions'.[96] Tragedy's relevance as a concept, consequently, emerges not, from its ability to predict or account for an 'ultimate outcome or denouement, […] but in the recognition it provides of "revolutionary" process: tragic action in its deepest sense is not the confirmation of disorder but its experience, *its comprehension and its resolution*'.[97]

In *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature* (2021), Ato Quayson expands this sense by developing the idea of disputatiousness: a moment where one is unable to give an account of themselves to themselves, or when a community cannot explain their place in history or their relationships to one another anymore – often due to the limiting of one's agency or the limiting of a community's access to tools (conceptual, material) for self-expression and understanding:[98]

> Disputatiousness [refers] not just to disputes between characters, but to the often violent processes of historical and social transition that engender such disputes in the first place. Disputatiousness in historical and social transitions has a correlative in the unruly affective economies that mark the characters' fractured sense of their place in society.[99]

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[94] Wallace (2020) 6.
[95] Williams (2006) 34–35.
[96] Williams (2006) 69.
[97] Quayson (2021) 35–36 quoting Williams (2006) 108. Emphasis my own.
[98] Quayson (2021) 9, 25 working with Butler (2005), 28, 31–32, 43.
[99] Quayson (2021) 26.

Quayson's theory is itself disputatious. It emerges in the aftermath of a neocolonial crisis and insists on the limitation of previous work to account for the ways in which the West has thought itself the exceptional producer of tragic art, without always being aware of its capacity to wreak tragedy on those whose lives it does not consider grievable, whose deaths it does not see.[100] Thus, Quayson points to a tendency in Williams' work (and the work of his contemporaries) to attend to case studies mainly from Europe and North America while ignoring the global majority. By reading and thinking with Franz Fanon, Jean-Pierre Vernant, Richard Halpern, Chinua Achebe, and Wole Soyinka – to name a few – Quayson counters this tendency and vivifies tragedy's unruly relationships with history, politics, and affect as a disputatious decolonial practice.

In acknowledgment of these histories of struggle, and the many lives that have been put on the line in order to fight back against imperialism and white supremacy, Quayson advances the notion that tragedy is no longer to be understood as a Hegelian dialectic: one term with equal ground facing off against another – Antigone / Creon, Man / Woman, human law / divine law, human / non-human.[101] Instead, he argues that tragedy throws into the air a multiplicity of seemingly stable concepts and negotiates or reformulates them (i.e. state, gender, family, history, religion, time, ethics, the good life, agency) in front of and amongst the community, the chorus, the audience.[102] Here, following the work of David Scott, in particular, tragedy becomes a mode of thinking toward liberatory horizons even when one's agency is severely curtailed by colonial and racist forces.[103]

In addition to Quayson, Wallace, Gabriel, and Worman, Sean Gurd, Sara Nooter, Ella Haselswerdt, Pauline LeVen, and Shane Butler account for sound and embodiment, modernity and tragedy, and of course tragedy and the body, materiality, tragedy and the optic, the somatic

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[100] Quayson (2021) 1–2.
[101] See Hegel (1995, 2018 digital edn); Cf. Derrida (2020); Castro (2021).
[102] Quayson (2021) particularly 11–12.
[103] Quayson (2021) 5, 21; cf. Scott (2004).

as components that also experience disorganisation in historical moments of upheaval.[104] Reading these scholars together brings an awareness to the reflexive quality they share, in their individual addresses to their own historical moments.[105] In various ways, for them, tragedy is an interface between scholarship, performance, literature and history with the aim of sorting through ongoing crises and working toward a better more egalitarian world. As Gabriel puts it, 'tragedy represents the political process of societal transition' and it also represents the efforts of those who have 'attempted to imagine a way out from under the weight of history'.[106]

*Tragedy and Representation*

The second school is concerned with transgression: the 'overstepping' of a limit of representation, or the disruption of meaning-making. A major proponent is Hans-Thies Lehmann who argues that tragedy concerns representation, not reality. Here Lehmann critiques scholars like Williams: 'a considerable portion of extant theories of tragedy could have been written as they stand if a theatre of tragedy had never existed at all'.[107] In other words, for Williams and those aligned with the historical–disorganisation school, tragedy occurs in the entanglement between event and experience – which for Williams are indistinguishable.[108] For Lehmann, 'we must distinguish the "tragic" from tragedy, but we must not declare it a reality as opposed to a form of representation'.[109]

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[104] Butler (2015); Gurd (2016); Nooter (2017); Haselswerdt (2019); Gabriel (2020a); Wallace (2020); Worman (2020); Quayson (2021); LeVen (2022a, 2022b).

[105] Each theorist worked during periods of intense transition – marked by ruptures in approaches and relations to colonialism, global war, failed insurrection, or hope. I have referenced Quayson's relation to neo-coloniality but Williams wrote during the emergence of the New Left and the failure of the Soviet Union, cf. McCallum (2006) 19; Wallace during the proxy wars fought by United States of America, Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom, and Russia over resources in South West Asia and North Africa (the SWANA or MENA regions); and Gabriel during the years of Trump and the acceleration of the migrant crises.

[106] Gabriel (2020a) 4–5.

[107] Lehmann (2016) 1.

[108] Williams (2006) 47; cf. Wallace (2020) 5.

[109] Lehmann (2016) 14.

Building on the work of his mentor Peter Szondi, Lehmann ties tragedy specifically to the theatre:

> Tragedy exists as the articulation of tragic experience in various alloys, all of which display different forms of theatricality. At the same time, the tragic does not exist without 'tragedy' as its mode of theatricalization, whatever particular shape it then assumes. As experience, it is strictly connected to performative reality: to a theatre (but not to a drama) of tragedy.[110]

In this context tragic experience is related to a rupture;[111] it constitutes representations of pain and suffering which challenge cultural assumptions and norms;[112] and it involves the disorganisation of established concepts through a transgression of aesthetic, medial, and/or genre boundaries.[113]

The tragic then is a representational phenomena or function, a rupture/ transgression in the interpretative schema querying not just what is aesthetic, but also the 'mechanisms of representation' themselves.[114] This recalls the way that Nicole Loraux theorised tragedy as,

> a genre in conflict. The conflict in question is not between themes or contents but rather between the very elements constituting tragedy as a theatrical form and as discourse endowed with meaning.[115]

And thus, tragedy can *affirm* cultural identity and also threaten its limits:

> Attempts to achieve tragic theatricality now occur in a field of tension described, on the one hand, by the conventions and cultural self-affirmation inherent in the institution of the theatre, *and*, on the other, by tragic overstepping – not just as a matter of theme, but as transgression of the very process of mise-en-scène [als Procedere der szenischen Gestaltung] […] Obviously, we cannot analyse here the whole spectrum of relevant works, which range from direct provocation and opening up the theatre space, to

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[110] Lehmann (2016) 4.
[111] Lehmann (2016) 5.
[112] Lehmann (2016) 46; cf. Hall (2010) 6 where tragedy is described as, 'an aesthetic question mark performed in enacted pain'.
[113] Lehmann (2016) 400–01.
[114] Lehmann (2016) 5.
[115] Loraux (2002) 81.

> rupturing the framework in which tragedies are staged, and on to dance, whose radical language may also seek to create tragic experience.[116]

Here tragic experience disrupts normative concepts, even the historical ideas of 'revolutionary' or 'traditional', throwing the historical methods by which we come to understand ourselves into crisis. It presents their modes of representing the world as themselves a theatricalization which does not understand itself to be as such, challenging even the processes of intelligibility and the legible.[117] Here often there is no answer and no way through the representational crisis; only an offer to participate in a process of discovering one, or an insistence on the futility of trying in the face of the incomprehensible.[118]

This instance on performance is perhaps not novel but galvanising. Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley's edited collection on the re-emergence of tragedy in the last part of the twentieth century makes similar claims about tragedy, culture, transgression and reception.[119] Fischer-Lichte also comments on the negotiation and renegotiation of cultural identity worked through the performances of tragedy in a globalising world.[120] Taxidou has observed how, since Hölderlin, the turn to tragedy 'was not a form of nostalgia but, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe claims, a quest "for the grounds of theatricality"'.[121] Thus, Hölderlin's 'mechane', Schiller's 'On the Uses of the Chorus in Tragedy' (1803), Nietzsche's 'championing of ritual and music', even 'the whole of the modernist experiment in theatre', and the intersections between German Idealism and Cambridge ritualism, each serves as an example of the entanglements of the theatre and tragedy.[122]

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[116] Lehmann (2016) 424.
[117] Lehmann (2016) 400–01
[118] Lehmann (2016) 141; cf. Taxidou (2020) 131.
[119] Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley (2004).
[120] Fisher-Lichte (2014).
[121] Taxidou (2020) 9.
[122] Taxidou (2020) 9–10.

Furthermore artists and theatre makers like Bertolt Brecht, Edward Gordon Craig and Isadora Duncan are each aware of tragedy's power to undo and reconfigure our understandings of the world.[123] Brecht explored the disruption and reformulation of aesthetic norms and categories to encourage the audience to act as judges using the 'caesura' as an the elucidation of representation – as a response to the breach, made possible by the breach – that is the tragic.[124] And Craig and Duncan both explored the collapse of representation and reality – the emergence or theorisation of another possible world – through an investigation of the tragic.[125] This is the case with Craig's exploration of the marionette and the black-figure drawing as lively animate expressions of tragic experience, and Duncan's exploration of the dance through visual art.[126] Thus, as Taxidou observes, Craig, Duncan, and Brecht re-activate Platonic questions about the ethics of representation, technology, the collapse of categories (divine, (non)human, (non)agential object/subject) that Lehmann himself is keen to pursue – and which largely characterise this school.[127]

*Tragedy and the Incommensurate*

In both schools delineated above, tragedy and the tragic are variously co-articulated so as to negotiate the excessive, awe-inspiring, and perhaps terrible encounters with the incommensurate, with the divine, with a metaphysical, ontological, or ethical problem that is much bigger in scope that one person or even one generation of living beings could comprehend, or even address. Both schools share in this expression of the tragic and are captured by the sense of human mortality, frailty, and contingency. And both schools could thus be characterised as expressing an encounter with a 'hyper-object' – as Timothy Morton

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[123] See Taxidou (2020).
[124] Taxidou (2020) 120, 129–31
[125] Ibid.
[126] Taxidou (2020) 45–50.
[127] Taxidou (2020) 51–61, particularly 51, 56, 58, 61.

might term it – of holding an affinity with 'black holes, oil spills, all plastic ever manufactured, capitalism, tectonic plates, and the solar system'; or an entanglement with an assemblage so immense that it overwhelms sense, conception, representation.[128] We see this in Wallace's evocation of climate change; Steiner's call to the 'Sophoclean sentiment that "it is best never to have been born"' as definitional of tragedy;[129] and Loraux's articulation of the unending or unbearable quality of grief, that unfurls in, amongst and against, the vast scale, scope and seemingly unstoppable cumulation of violence in the world.[130]

Where does this leave us? In the aftermath or anticipation of tragedy, both schools account for the desire to change, an insistence on ethical reflection and the attendant affects of horror, pity, and fear, in attempts to make meaning in the face of the incomprehensible. Joshua Billings describes this as the 'most enduring aspect' of Idealist thinking, the 'assumption that tragedy presents a form of meaning, a way of making sense of the world'. [131] It generates, perhaps unexpectedly, a litany of attempts to describe the indescribable, the breakdown of how we come to understand ourselves, each other, and our environments through the concept of tragedy.

Philosophers and critical theorists like Freud, Marx, Benjamin, and Arendt each turned to and chose to rearticulate the work of the idealists Schelling, Schlegel, Hegel, Hölderlin, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as Quayson tells us, in order to 'collectively establish new idioms by which to think about the relationship between the individual, tragedy, history, and ethics' in the face of the incommensurate.[132] They each gave a sense of the world, but Nietzsche, in particular, gave us a sense of our place in the world as one engaged in a dialectic with the incommensurate – establishing, as Gabriel observes, a, 'tradition that sees in tragedy a

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[128] Morton (2017).

[129] In a reflective forward Steiner observes that a strong sense of tragedy continues to be expressed through this sentiment and that absolute tragedy arises in 'the image of man as unwanted life', see Steiner (1980) xi–xii.

[130] Loraux (2002) 12.

[131] Billings (2014) 226.

[132] Quayson (2021) 36.

mediated, cultural access to an originary human experience of 'nature' in terms of terror, ecstasy, excess and violence'.[133]

Nietzsche's theory of tragedy has been hugely influential in dance and performance history.[134] His idea of tragedy as an encounter between concepts in tension questions the schismatic distance between things assumed to be separate (man, nature, terror, pleasure, individual, mass) and is expressed in the encounter between Apollo and Dionysus. And his conceptualisation warrants some unpacking because not only does it shape and continue to shape choreographic practice but it suggests the way for a third school situated between those already in existence.

The Apollonian is sculptural, the form of the formed, legible things. It is also the space of dreams and dream interpretations, prophecies, and the (ir)rational unconscious, dialogues, text, and speech. Man, poetic articulation, and music also figure in the Apolline. The Dionysian is the unrepresentable, flow, transgression, the voidal, abyssal, and non-textual; it is not music but the scream, the keening, whirling dance of maenads and satyrs – rhythm and madness. Additionally, this force of nature, as terrible, ecstatic, and excessive, is Dionysian. And tragedy is a dialectical mix of both gods: song and dance; music and percussion; sculptural forms for the formless; grief, the unbearable, the incommensurate and its communal expression or sharing (out).[135] And as theorists such as Nicole Loraux elucidate, very often both categories are almost indistinguishable as tragedy becomes the song of the scream, and the scream of the song; a politics of the anti-political, and as previously mentioned, a sharing out of the unshareable.[136] Lehmann offers us another way of expressing this when he describes tragedy as 'Apollo wearing Dionysus' mask'.[137]

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[133] Gabriel (2022) 224–25 referencing Nietzsche (1999) 30.
[134] There is an abundance of scholarship here but for an overview and critical interrogation of these ideas see: Macintosh (2010, 2013); Taxidou (2020).
[135] Nancy (2000); Muñoz (2019) 197–99; Worman (2020) 7, 8, 63, 247.
[136] See Loraux (2002).
[137] Lehmann (2016) 53.

But the Nietzschean model also functions by equating the Dionysian as formless, voidal, with the process of transgression or disorganisation and revolution.[138] Lehmann expresses this when he observes:

> All tragedies thematise conduct that proves immoderate and excessive in one way or another. Another current of thought holds that, for this reason, the tragic does not amount to the representation of conflict so much as it provides an exemplary manifestation of the power of rupture located in and/or outside the subject: transgressive energy.[139]

How do we reckon with the power of rupture, this transgressive energy? In the disorganisation school, tragedy is indicative of the experience of disruption (unruly affective economies, transformation, revolution), and for the representational school, tragedy is the disruption and (re)negotiation of aesthetic forms (as mediators of experience). I propose a third way: one in which the disruption of the aesthetic indexes an unresolved or emergent dispute within the transforming historical conditions under which the performance is staged. This third way encourages a reckoning with the disputatious rupture that helps us (re)imagine ourselves, outside of those catastrophes, creating sites for new communities to form, new imaginaries, relationalities, and subjectivities to emerge. Most importantly, then, instead of functioning as an event, tragedy must be understood as a process.

This is how *Sound of the Underground* and *Maison Mère* choreograph tragedy and the tragic. In Ménard's work it is the shock of the continued, reduplicating effects of climate change, coloniality, and queerphobia that bring down the makeshift, constructed, precarious Parthenon. In *Sound of the Underground,* it is the shock of the queer rupture that blows apart the normative mundane, while also working to dismantle the entire mechanisms of representation within the performance space.

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[138] Lehmann (2016) 57, 78 where he notes: 'For Nietzsche, the core of the tragic is beyond all moral and historical conceptuality'.

[139] Lehmann (2016) 61.

The tragic emerges in the moment of tipping over: it is the slip, expressed in an act which has been repeated again and again and again – ordinary, mundane – but then suddenly buckling, it crashes over. The tragic is an expression of a glitch in the system, felt in the first misstep in a longer stumble, or in the moment of rupturing, or breach, or the yielding to; the gesture, word, sound, the thought, feeling, the act which hinges us into surrender, or transgression, or transformation. In other words, the tragic is enacted through a collapse. Tragedy is a process of negotiating, anticipating and being in the aftermath of that incommensurate collapse.

iv)    Tragedy Now: An Ecology of Tragedy

On 30th January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a public health emergency of international concern following the outbreak of a novel coronavirus, COVID-19, which would be declared a pandemic by March of the same year.[140] After these bruised and rheumatic years, we know more about the gaps and terrible entanglements between living, hope, devastation, dying, and death. We have all been brought to tragedy. As of 3:56pm CEST, 6 September 2023 the WHO were reporting 6,956,900 deaths related to COVID-19 across the planet.[141] The virus has restructured all our lives, immune systems, senses of the world and continues to modulate and transform.[142] It has not – as Judith Butler notes in their recent work, *What World is this? A Pandemic Phenomenology* (2022) – created a new 'single condition under which we all live, since the pandemic cannot be separated from prevailing social and ecological conditions'.[143] But it has 'configured' these conditions, even if they are emergent.[144]

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[140] This phrasing is indebted to Ward (*forthcoming*) 179.
[141] WHO: https://covid19.who.int/.
[142] Chen (2012).
[143] Butler (2022) 1.
[144] Butler (2022) 1–2.

This section attends to the third element of the title, and reflects on how both the situated experience of writing the thesis during the pandemic and the reconfigurations of tragedy through this ecology of events, de- and re-affiliative processes, devastations, and losses have shaped and troubled the work of making an account of tragedy today – which attempts to go beyond mere presentism.

The pandemic has been, and is still perhaps, incommensurable, in the way that Nietzsche described the encounter between 'Man and Nature', full of terror, ecstasy, excess and violence. But the experience of the last three and a half years has done anything but retrench the stability or supposed distinction between these two concepts, which were erected in contradistinction through histories of coloniality, imperialism, and violence.[145]

To make sense of this dis- and re-entanglement of relation, and especially the sudden exhibition of the world in a new way, Butler turns to the tragic. In particular, they return to Max Scheler's 1916 text 'On the Phenomenon of the Tragic':

> The tragic emerges, consisting not only in the grief over that loss but the shock or bewilderment that the world is such that an event like that could happen at all […] my wager is that Scheler names this sense of the tragic residing in the exclamatory fragment 'what kind of world is this in which such a thing can happen!' it is not just this event, this loss, or the destruction of this value, but the world in which such a destruction is possible.[146]

For Butler this expression not only articulates a shift in the sense of the world, but also an experience of the world as tragic through the loss of a value. Someone, something, or some mode of relation has been destroyed and the environment becomes inscrutable to us as we become inscrutable to ourselves and one another.[147] This builds on their previous work on precarity and grief, where they announce:

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[145] See Yusoff (2018).
[146] Butler (2022) 24.
[147] Butler (2022).

> If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who 'am' I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do.[148]

This inscrutable quality was iteratively expressed in the pandemic, when we 'lost, we left everything' – as Brand put it – and experienced an enfolded/ing series of losses whereby each loss was irreversible and cumulative, and some lost much more than others.[149] Then, we might have asked, who am I without you (all), who are we without one another? This reduplication occurs, Butler notes, until a sense of the world entirely immersed in sorrow begins to emerge, 'and [loss] threatens to become the air itself'.[150]

My argument hinges on a decolonial and postcolonial definition of 'world', which I mean to carry throughout the thesis, and which subtends this theory of the tragic. World here accounts for an assemblage of imaginative, epistemological and material horizons – shaped by proximity to and experience of geomorphic forces, like racism, and colonialism.[151] World is related to Ruth Wilson Gilmore's concepts of abolition geography whereby ownership and the 'fictions' of racialisation, contribute to and construct carceral worlds through 'the processes of hierarchy, dispossession, and exclusion that congeal in and as group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death'.[152] The world is multiple, a set of networks of situated experience – of different kinds, speeds, and qualities – it is not a neutral concept but one configured by hierarchies of power and practices of resistance, solidarity, emergence.[153] The world is also tactile, sensory, phenomenological:[154] it is that which contaminates and constructs

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[148] Butler (2004b) 22.
[149] Butler (2022) 1–2.
[150] Butler (2022) 12
[151] Butler (2022) 20–23; Hankinson (2023) 26. Cf. Harney and Moten (2013).
[152] Gilmore (2022) 475.
[153] Gilmore (2007, 2022).
[154] Butler (2022) 67–88.

us just as we contaminate and construct it – in an efflorescence of sense, affect, effects, matter, and force.[155]

Perhaps counterintuitively in Butler's account, tragedy calls us back to an awareness of the intersubjectivity of embodied life which the tragic affirms. For when we lose a sense of the world, a sense of each other, a sense of ourselves, the 'heavy breath' of tragedy insists that we are of the world and the world is of us.[156] Perhaps the world is even encouraging us to ask, as philosopher Bruno Latour did in the last months of his life  – in a turn back to tragedy –: 'On what soil do [we] now stand?',[157] or as Butler puts it, 'What makes a life liveable?', 'What makes for an inhabitable world?'.[158]

Although Butler also relies on the idea of the event, their scholarship and conception of the relationships between the world and the tragic, helps me to elucidate the processual nature of tragedy, and the intra-active relationality between tragedies in the vibrant 'mattering', the more than, more than, more than human, or the 'terrifying muchness of all things that are, of which we are a part'.[159]


*Time*

Although the majority of the thesis reflects on work made before the onset of COVID-19, in many ways the virus shapes the time-period, experience and the quality of time which I cover. It gives the research an historical curve. The earliest case study is first staged in 1975 – although this performance looks back to work from the early 1900s and the 1700s – whereas the most recent, *Age of Rage* was first performed in 2021, and a handful of performances were first staged in 2022, and 2023.

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[155] Butler (2022) 74.
[156] Butler (2022) 69–70.
[157] Latour (2022) [np].
[158] Butler (2022) 29–31.
[159] Oswald (2023).

The period under discussion is quite diverse in a number of aspects: Germany in the 1980s during the re-activation of the Cold War; Greece and the UK in the 2000s and 2010s, leading up to and following the financial crash; America after 9/11 and its invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan; France in the early 2010s; the UK and the Netherlands just before the arrival of the pandemic; America in the years before the pandemic – journeying from postmodernity into the contemporary and back.

This is partly because the productions I examine also challenge clear periodisation and geographic markers, as many of them toured, and continue to tour across the world, travelling across borders and boundaries – cumulating new meanings, receptions, affiliating and colliding with each other in new and exciting ways. And the geographic marker also fails to say something exhaustive or determinate about the nationalities or identities of the dancers, the quality or ideas expressed through movement. The Tanztheater Wuppertal – for example, since at least the 1980s – has been made up of performers from all over the world and their pieces are performed, currently, in various locations (virtual and not).

Consequently, concepts and terms appear and disappear, in the move between different chapters, creating alternative routes of arrangement, entanglement, and disentanglement than the ones I have suggested. The postmodern, for example is relevant to Bausch's work, Papaioannou, and Trajal Harrell's, and so appears in these places. Bausch experienced the development of postmodern dance in downtown New York during her training in the 1960s, when Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown and artists at the Judson Church were rejecting the mythological elements of Martha Graham's choreographic approach to tragedy. Postmodernity therefore structures aspects of Bausch's Company, informs the dances, and structures the work made by those who come out of, or are in close contact with the Company like Papaioannou. But by the time of the later pieces, this is no longer the case and there are other concerns. The postmodern is not so apparent in Akram Khan, or Gisele Vienne's work, where climate

inflected performance and the inhuman appear hauntingly. Depending on the chapter, the mode of analysis also shifts to fit the content.

<div align="center">* * *</div>

I was in the early stages of researching and writing this thesis when the pandemic emerged. The virus changed the landscapes and ecologies in which the research was situated, again and again, as we came in and out of lockdowns and we got sick again and again. It also generated new forms of affiliation at a rapid pace to the extent that even now the pandemic's full effects are not determined and the ways in which the pandemic will put in place new words and worlds has not yet been fully expressed.[160]

As such my 'archive' is fragmented, trans-medial: based on videos, descriptions, memories, informal conversations that became possible online, and then eventually live performance, again, rehearsals, workshops. Throughout this time, I was trying to make sense of what our bodies had lived through, what we had lost, how we had and were changing.

What stitches each chapter together is, thus, the practical experience of writing about, writing through, writing with dance and the body at a time when our ideas of the body were undergoing and continue to undergo radical transformations. But also, certainly, assembling this thesis is an experience of tragedy reconfigured by the pandemic: opening new modes of understanding, knowing and conceiving of the term. The thesis thus attends to this reconfiguration in each chapter, from within the middle of un unfolding tragedy to try, and to see what might emerge, what alternative horizons exist from within the midst of these shifting ecologies.

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[160] Sharpe (2023) 272.

v)        Choreographing a More-Than-Human Tragedy

The first section, comprising two chapters, is on mourning and grief. The first chapter concerns Pina Bausch. Here I argue that the Tanztheater Wuppertal, which Bausch helmed, combined, in experimental and timely ways, everyday movement, Greek tragedy, ballet, and (post)modern dance techniques to redefine the parameters of dance and performance at the end of the twentieth century. Her choreography speaks to a cumulative sense of tragedy, tragedy as a process of interleafing, an iterative set of spatial and temporal ruptures which constitute the daily mundane. She establishes the turn and the breach as figures for tragic experience. This establishes Bausch as an important node of choreographic affiliation, to which each preceding chapter turns and returns.

The second chapter considers a student of Bausch, Dimitris Papaioannou, in the wake of her death. Papaioannou attempts to structure the fragments of Bausch's quotidian surreal tragedies into a story about the limits of the human. He works to articulate a queer working-class critique of Man, that is quickly scaled up to a global bourgeois art form bent on defending him. Here I critique, after Wynter, the delimitation and overrepresentation of the human as Man. I also attend to Papaioannou's sculptural handling of tragedy as/through the subconscious, a painterly approach to myth as material that leads in his art to romanticism, nostalgia, and a great smash of stone.

The second section also comprises two chapters and focuses on agōn. Chapter three analyses the Akram Khan Company, who critique the idea that tragedy as solely the domain of the human. Thus, rather than presenting tragedy as an articulation of the human limit, he stages

the tragedy of coloniality, from the margins. This is a tragedy of the very definition of human as a bounded category; the tragedy of the overrepresentation of human as Man.

Chapter four is about the work of Trajal Harrell, who makes tragedies that query the event, query liveness. He wonders: What if there was a tragedy of the non-event, of absence, of not-happening? He suggests speculative tragedies, that reimagine the connection and relation between events and non-events, things recorded and things lost, that which is named and which remains unnameable. He does so to dispute the present (things don't have to be this way), to grieve for how things are, to grieve for how they might be, if things stay this way, and to hope. His choreographing of tragedy is a practice in the aesthetics of collapse and in the speculative process of fabulation.

The third section is on ecstasy and violence. Chapter five is about Ivo van Hove and Wim Vandekeybus who turn back to Bausch's iterative techniques. But they do so, I argue, to affirm dominant hierarchies, to affirm a cycle that repeats grief and violence. They envisage a duet between Apollo and Dionysus that will go on forever. There's is a tragedy of cynicism, of futility, a tragedy of looping, and hurtling towards the destruction of the human species, through war, ecocide, and an affirmation of hegemony.

Chapter six considers Gisèle Vienne's *This is How You Will Disappear* (2010), which interrogates the Nietzschean theory of the Dionysian, to ask: what if tragedy, as process, wasn't comprised of the dialectic, of loops, of a reckoning with (an amelioration of) the incommensurate? Tragedy here is a means for rethinking the world again, for reaffirming the aesthetics of Khan, Ménard, Alabanza, Bausch, and Harrell; tragedy choreographed as a process of transformation, of not knowing what comes next but going ecstatically into that unknown.

In the conclusion, I turn to the future, to the calamities we face now, by querying the 'we' of the climate crisis. I argue that tragedy and the tragic are re-emerging again in other

constellations of performance, politics, and art that explicitly address extinction. I suggest that tragedy might not articulate the sentiment that 'it is best never to have been born'[161] but rather the idea that: 'We could not bear the thought of ourselves […] We were used to the way of the world / and if we ever recalled what we might have been / we wept for days on end'.[162]

In concert with emerging scholarship, I look to the chorus as a model that is capable of accounting for this grief. As a commons, a plurality of situated tragic visions of the past and turns towards the future. And at the close I wonder whether the chorus may 'suggest the way', as Saidiya Hartman phrases it.[163] This is my way of extending the argument of this thesis and embedding a critical analysis of an emergent wave of performances that position themselves at the end of the human, but on the verge of something else. And thus, performing as Khan does, a turn forward to the past, perhaps, and back to the end of the human, choreographing tragedy as a dying act, which emphasises, after Brand, that:

> We are remainders of burning oxygen
> We are just the end of helium, we are speeding
> We are slow, water doesn't end.[164]

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[161] See Steiner (1980) xi–xii.
[162] Brand (2023) 68.
[163] Hartman (2019) 260–63.
[164] Brand (2023) 68–69.

MOURNING-GRIEF

Chapter 1

# PINA BAUSCH

> When I was young, I saw ballets. The ballet seemed completely superfluous to me. And then, twelve or fifteen years ago, I saw six or eight productions by Pina Bausch. They impressed me enormously and irritated me a lot, in fact I was disturbed, because for the first time in Germany I saw representations which had the structure of tragedy (*une structure de tragédie*), which one rarely finds in the theatre. It was suddenly something that was very close to me and that immediately moved me – without text. And as I am condemned to write texts for the theatre it was also a disturbance. And it persists.[1]

In *Nelken* (Carnations, 1982) a row of dancers, all in dresses, already dripping with sweat, make gestures on chairs, almost in unison. Their brief movement phrase is based on rocking. As they go back their hands and body go with them, palms up above their heads; as they lunge forward, they bring their hands down across their bodies, behind their hips. Their limbs stay soft, while they move together at an immense speed across the rhythms of the music, in counterpoint. Eventually, Dominique Mercy – who danced with the Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch for over forty-five years, and following Bausch's death took over as co-artistic director with Robert Sturm – stops, turns to the side, and places his head in his hands. The others notice and they mob him, pulling at the dress which is elegantly draped over his body: its black cotton sticks to his glistening skin as he is wrenched through space. He starts to yell, begging them to stop. He tells us that he wasn't there, that it wasn't him, he didn't do it. They don't listen.

His failure to win out over the attack is held viscerally in his arms, and back; his head is bowed to protect it from their fists. He is not really fighting back against them, but instead, overwhelmed, he struggles with the desperation of one who knows they cannot fully resist, one

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[1] Müller (2014–15) translation my own. I begin with this quote from Müller because, as a contemporary of Bausch, his work deals with similar questions, they both struggle with how, or if in fact, making meaning is possible after the horrors and catastrophes of the Second World War. On Müller and tragedy see Fischer-Lichte (2002, 2017); Cole (2019); Baudou (2021).

who acknowledges that the violence their body is being subjected to, is violence to which they were always vulnerable. He screams: 'No!', wild with desperation.

They stop as he leaves, the camera is trained on him.[2] It is as if he is really storming off the stage, out of the performance – a confusion of fact and fiction. While he walks into the background, another dancer steps forward and says: 'Thank you for being here with us tonight'. There is laughter. Then, as if he has found the courage to speak, Mercy turns back, faces the audience, and burns through the middle of the stage, heading downstage right; he screams for the other performers to clear the chairs and the boxes which clutter the space. He berates the audience, screaming at them too: 'What do you want to see next? What do you want me to do for you next? I can do anything you want!'. Another confrontation, this time with the set of relations that structure performance: the contract between the audience and performer.[3] He proceeds to perform balletic 'tricks': *entrechats* (a vertical jump, during which the dancer rapidly crosses or 'beats' their legs at the calf); a *tour en l'air* (a full turn in the air around the vertical axis in singles, doubles, or triples); and an expansive *coupé jeté en tournant en manège* (the dancer leaps into a split, and then turns upon landing, only to leap again out of the turn: by repeating this step the dancer traces a larger circle around the performance space).

After these sequences of balletic virtuosity, he stops and confronts the audience once more: 'Is this what you want? Is this what you want to see?' – before dancing again. He is relentless. The *coup de théâtre* is in their response: the audience members clap – partly affirming Mercy's wager (this is perhaps what they want to see), but also creating space for them to support him following the violence, and partly, perhaps, creating space to celebrate his challenge to the norms of dance, gender, and spectatorship.[4] The dancers dissipate as an officer

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[2] The footage of *Nelken* that I refer to comes from a documentary feature by Akerman (1983). To analyse it I relied on work done at the intersections of Dance and Screendance studies, see Dodds (2004, 2014); Deleuze (2005); Borelli (2014); Davidson (2016).

[3] For broader discussion of this see Klein and Kunst (2012); Kershaw (2014); Diamond et al (2017); Lubin-Levy and Shvarts (2016).

[4] On audience response, see Sedgman (2016, 2018).

(the Master of Ceremonies) appears, checks Mercy's identification papers, and demands that he 'put some proper clothes on'.[5]

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This chapter explores the implications of this series of transgressions as representative of a technique for a form of ineffable, affective choreography of the tragic that disorganises stable concepts and expectations. This sequence, in part, answers the question posed implicitly by Heiner Müller's description of the work of Bausch's Company: How exactly does a performance with the structure of a tragedy function? As such this chapter builds on the affiliative model of tragedy outlined in the Introduction, to wager that Bausch develops the relationship between tragedy as a process and the tragic as a slip, rupture, or collapse.

After an overview of the Company's engagement with the history of tragedy, the tragic, and dance, the chapter responds to Müller's 'disturbance' by examining three major pieces: *Nelken*, *Orpheus und Eurydike* (1975)*,* and *Café Müller* (1978). Bausch's choreography, it becomes clear, enacts tragic experience through the transgression or overstepping of aesthetic boundaries and forms. This overstepping is enacted through the performance of an incommensurable affective, somatic, and more-than-human experience – in this case the flood of grief and the cultural practices of mourning. These transgressions prompt a reconsideration of grief as a non-representable phenomenon by staging it precisely as the disorganization and disarticulation of representation. In this sense, I will argue that Bausch choreographs tragedy as a network of disarticulation, rupture, and traumatic re-iteration.

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[5] Weir (2018) 105.

The entanglements of grief, trauma, and tragedy have been explored in the work of a number of scholars.[6] Olga Taxidou describes tragedy as precisely a dialectic of mourning; whereas for Judith Butler tragedy contains the concepts and symbolic machinery for enacting the political philosophies of grief and the politics of grievability – in other words, it stages an enquiry into whose life is seen as worth living, who is thought to be alive and fully human and therefore fully grievable.[7] Nicole Loraux delineates the (anti-)political force of grief as expressed through practices and rituals of mourning that seemingly have no end, or that will constantly return.[8] Fiona Macintosh examines the affective and social rituals of grief as they are given form in tragedy, through set-pieces which allow the individual to speak to a collective, across place and time, challenging the finality of death, facilitating the formation of a mourning community, and opening a space between the living and dead.[9] Each recognises that part of grief's role in tragedy is to provide the spectator-receiver-witness with the means to think as much about the living as those they have lost, those they will lose; to contend with their own deaths; or as Taxidou notes, '[tragedy can] present us with ways to embrace mourning, grief and loss as part of our historical, aesthetic and political experience'.[10]

i)       Pina Bausch and Tragedy: Moving Together

To account for the pervasive choreographic affiliations between the Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch and tragedy, one must look to the chorus. A persistent image, the chorus is a group moving together – who share a situation, even if they do not share a temporal or spatial sense

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[6] Macintosh (1994); Loraux (2002); Butler (2004b, 2009); Taxidou (2004); cf. Duggan (2012).

[7] See Butler (2000, 2004), (2009) 38–39, (2015), (2020), (2022); Taxidou (2004); cf. Athanasiou (2017); Eng and Kazanjian (2003).

[8] Loraux (2002): on endless mourning, see 21, 29; on the practices of mourning, see 56–65 ; on 'anti-political' as another politics, see 26–41.

[9] Macintosh (1994) 125, 170, 175–82.

[10] Taxidou (2004) 208.

of continuity.[11] Since at least the turn of the twentieth century, the idea of the collective, in European dance and theatre, has been entangled with images, fantasies, and hauntings of/by ancient choruses.[12] But even earlier, Greek choruses were inextricably linked with the development of ballet – through *ballet d'action*, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – and with ideas of community and collectivity.[13] Consequently, in these contexts the dancing chorus can be read as a way in which community has been imagined to move, think, and act.[14]

Take, for example, *The Rite of Spring* (1975) and particularly the moment when the female dancers, in a tight huddle, rotate, before one of them falls, alone, and is selected for sacrifice (a dance to the death).[15] Equally pertinent is *Kontakthof* (1978) when, in the final moments of the performance, the dancer's loop in a large circle, orbiting the circumference of the space, again and again and again, until the lights fade. *Nelken* too is illustrative of chorus as tragic community, when the Company walk, stamping down the flowers – carnations, funerary and celebratory – which cover the stage in their thousands.[16] They mark out a lament with slow steps made in unison, their arms and hands lifting into a sharp pose, lilting down past their faces, tucking into their bodies shivering, before rising up above their heads to describe the sun. A dance of the seasons which repeats, in a seemingly endless loop, as it enacts a planetary model of time.

These performances, thus, provide a political and ethical investigation into that which brings us together and in what ways; a querying of that which we have in common; and often, they offer a means of investigating the impossibility of coming together in the present, based on fantasies of past unity, or the desire to build collectivity in the future.[17] As such, in the

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[11] Baudou (2021).

[12] Billings, Budelmann and Macintosh (2013); cf. Gotman (2017).

[13] Lada-Richards (2010) 19–38. On the development of the *corps du ballet* and Greek chorus, see Macintosh (2013), Meisner (2010), Zanobi (2010). On chorus and collectivity, see Macintosh (2013) and Hall (2013b).

[14] See Laera (2013).

[15] I use the naming conventions of the Pina Bausch Archives: https://www.pinabausch.org/work/kont

[16] Pabst (2010) 20.

[17] Laera (2013) 84–99; cf. Baudou (2021).

historical forms of dance in which Bausch was trained, and which she investigates (ballet, modern, even postmodern), moving together is a political question which relates through choreographic affiliation and imagination to the ways in which the ancient past is enacted on stage.

The chorus, or ensemble, facilitates the experimental structures of the Tanztheater Wuppertal's pieces, which often feel like they follow the logic of a dream. This is, in part, because each of the works described has developed from the Company's ensemble process of practice-based research. Company member Finola Cronin describes how in creation, the dancers were asked a series of questions directly by Bausch, such as 'what is the sun?'.[18] Others recall being asked to give '[s]ome words someone once said to you which totally floored you?', and, 'what is love?'.[19] They were free to respond any way they wished, their mediated responses were then edited and assembled into sequences, and then those sequences were assembled, until a much larger piece was formed – sometimes there would be over one-hundred questions for a piece, sometimes questions were returned to, others were abandoned. [20] Thus, the dancer was foundational to the development of movement, in relationship with, not only the choreographer, but the other dancers in the piece, and the lives they had lived outside of the studio.[21] As one dancer noted: 'We play ourselves, we are the piece'.[22] Thus, the performances would emerge through this combination of site-responsive work, exploration, improvisation, composition, collaboration, practice-based research, and editing, generating a collage: made of gestures, situations, objects, encounters, videos, memories, lighting states, songs, images, and sounds.[23]

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[18] See Cronin (2018a) [26:00].

[19] Cronin (2018a, b); Martin (2019a).

[20] See Klein (2020). On the responses to the *aufgaben* (task) set by Bausch, and their relationship to improvisation, and composition, see Cronin (2018b) [c15.00]. On the creative possibilities opened by the tasks through questions, see Swyningan (2022) [c28:00].

[21] Ibid.

[22] See Klein (2020) 88.

[23] Climenhaga (2013, 2018); cf. Servos (2008); Meyer (2017); Cronin (2018a, b); Martin (2019b); Kortland (2022).

Dance scholar Andre Lepecki has described this impulse in Bausch's work as a 'break with the tradition of choreographic composition and subjectivity'.[24] In opposition to the modernist, or even early-postmodern, interest in formalism, technique, expression of music or space, Lepecki relates this practice to a late postmodern, performance art, or contemporary interest in the dancer's interiority.[25] The work thus engages with pastiche, and improvisation, composition, mundane movement, ballet, repetition; but it also re-engages with myth, ritual, and expressionism (which the postmodern dancers rejected).[26] This compositional choreographic practice itself developed through Bausch's exposure to multiple techniques, histories, and genres of dance. Spending time with Anthony Tudor at the Metropolitan Opera Ballet Company, while also engaging with the work of *Ausdruckstanz* (Expressionist Dance) practitioners, Kurt Jooss and Mary Wigman,[27] Bausch also developed affiliations with performance artists, makers of happenings and 'nothings', in downtown New York.

For example, in the opening scene of *Nelken,* the dancers enter, lay out rows of chairs – on which they will later rock back and forth – but on which they now sit, and wait. Then, they leave. This manner of refusing the audiences' expectations for action is frequently the source for the generation of humour, archly postmodern, and ludic. It prefigures Jérôme Bel's *The Last Performance* (1988), in which multiple dancers enter the stage and glare at the audience, one after the other, only to declare loudly '*Ich bin Susanne Linke* (I am Susanne Linke)', before then leaving.[28] And yet moments later, in *Nelken*, the dancers will run through the space holding fragile *port de bras* (movement of the arms from ballet technique) colliding

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[24] Lepecki (2006) n.15, 136–37.
[25] Distinction between modern, early postmodern, and late is from Banes (1987, 1993a); on interiority and dancing auto-biography, see Thurner (2021).
[26] See Rainer (1964).
[27] Bausch ran Jooss' Essen studio before taking over the Wuppertaler Bühnen Theater in 1973, see Akerman (1983). On Jooss, expressionism, and Bausch, see Klein (2020) 8, 32–33, 39–44.
[28] Lepecki (2006) 60; Klein (2020).

and layering both techniques – critiquing established modes of performance by embodying and deconstructing them.[29]

This commitment to investigating a politics of the collective, alongside an interrogation of existing modes of choreography and performance as well as the politics of representation, means that the chorus is not the only figure through which the Company engages with tragedy.[30] In Bausch's early work *Nachnull* (after zero, 1970), the tragedies of the Second World War provide the subject matter – the piece most likely takes its title from a reference to the *Stunde Null* (zero hour) that followed the capitulation of the Nazi government in 1945.[31] Dance scholar, Hedwig Müller described this as 'a vision of the end of the world following an atomic catastrophe'.[32] *Tannhäuser Bacchanal* appeared in 1972, followed by three tragic pieces made between 1974–75, *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, *The Rite of Spring*, and *Orpheus und Eurydik*e.[33] In a programme note for a double-bill restaging of *Café Müller* and *The Rite of Spring*, at Sadler's Wells in 2008, dance critic and lecturer James Woodall goes so far as to say that Bausch's work could amount to a 'definition of tragedy'.[34]

*Orpheus und Eurydike* also contains the seeds for the Tanztheater Wuppertal's more experimental works, which continue to explore tragedy and the tragic: *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1975/76); *Bluebeard. While Listening to a Tape Recording of Béla Bartók's Opera 'Duke Bluebeard's Castle'* (1977), a horrifying examination of gender violence; *Café Muller* (1978), which takes a memory from Bausch's childhood spent in her parent's cafe during the Second

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[29] Lepecki (2006) n.15, 136–37: 'Tanztheater comes out of a deep dialogue with other antirepresentational forces in early 1970s visual arts and performance (Joseph Beuys's social sculpture, FLUXUS)'. On interactions between Bausch and American modernists Horton, and Ailey, see Swyningan (2022).

[30] Klein (2020) 26–85 proposes five periods in the Company's oeuvre, with which I am in broad agreement: 'democratic awakening and aesthetic upheaval' (1967-1973); 'development of a new concept for choreography and stage' (1973-1979); 'internationalization and stabilization of aesthetic language' (1980-1986); 'intercultural artistic production and the rediscovery of dance' (1986-2000); 'love of dance and nature' (2001–09). On the threads of neo-colonialism and globalisation in the later periods, see Siegmund (2018).

[31] Weir (2018) 12.

[32] Weir (2018) 12; cf. Müller (1986) 100.

[33] Zanobi (2010) 236–54.

[34] Woodall (2008).

World War and Dido's final aria from Henry Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas* (1689); and *He Takes Her by the Hand and Leads Her into the Castle, the Others Follow* (1978), which is an exploration of *Macbeth* which unfolds from the moment at the end of Act I, Scene VI, when Lady Macbeth ushers Duncan inside towards his death.[35] Both *Café Müller* and *He Takes Her by the Hand* are set in hinterlands, the spaces in between living and death, sacred spaces of haunting, madness and transformation which blow apart narrative almost entirely, in favour of an investment in ritual.[36]

Thenceforth until Bausch's death, the Company produced a string of productions that engage with tragedy in multiple forms. First, *Kontakthof* (1978), again an experimental piece with a developed choreographic practice, this time about the impossibility of coming together. This was followed by *1980* which refracted the Cold War (1979/80) and then a period when the Company's techniques and style settled: *Viktor* (1985), *Nur Du (Only You)* (1996). Followed by a series of international co-productions including: *Bluebeard's Castle* (1998), *O Dido* (1999), *For the Children of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (2002), *Vollmond (Full Moon)* (2005), and *'... como el musguito en la piedra, ay si, si, si ...' (Like Moss on the Stone)* (2009), each further enhancing this lifelong interrogation of tragedy through movement, performance, and art. [37]

The Company's promiscuity of style and form speaks also to an interest in politics of alterity, expressed through Bausch's famous remark:

> I am not so much interested in how people move as in what moves them … It is never something you can describe exactly. Basically, one wants to say something which cannot be said, *so we make a poem where one can feel what is meant*. You see it and you know it without being able to formulate it… The pieces have many levels, and what you see depends a bit on where you are yourself.[38]

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[35] See Pina Bausch Archives: https://www.pinabausch.org/work/macb. For a review of the restaging, see Wiegland (2019).
[36] Zanobi (2010).
[37] See Siegmund (2018).
[38] Bausch quoted in Ferguson (1989) 99.

Here perhaps, is the core of the Company's affective drive, the pulse of their choreographic techniques, which Müller describes and which highlights the agency and importance of the lived experiences and body-memories of the dancers.[39] Bausch's comment here also emphasises the agency of the audience in the process of sense and meaning making.[40] Thus, Bausch's focus on the chorus or tragic community is refractive, comprised of: the network of dance artists and choreographers she trained with, whose work she saw or choreographs with; the dancers who comprise the Company, their memories, responses, influences, and affiliations which also comprise the pieces; the pieces themselves, as choral forms – dream poems – which make 'the mundane surreal and the surreal mundane';[41] and the choral network of the audience, shaped into alternative, emergent, meaning making communities by – that which Gabriella Cody describes as – 'a multilingual spectatorship, an alternate willingness to see and hear'.[42]

ii)      Transgression

What is it about grief, that it seems to refuse legible expression? Yet grief constantly spills over, sticks to, and seeks to find form – pouring out of bodies, objects, sounds, gestures, the surround, ruins, again and again, in wave after unbearable wave.[43] In *Let Them Haunt Us: How Contemporary Aesthetics Challenge Trauma as the Unrepresentable,* Anna-Lena Werner notes that since the initial exploration of the limits of representing the Holocaust, trauma and grief have been both theorised through a logic of the inexpressible, as non-representable forces; and

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[39] Klein (2014) 25–38, (2020) 145–63.
[40] See Campbell and Farrier (2015) 1–26.
[41] Berringer (1986) 85–97; Servos (2008); Climenhaga (2013, 2018); Meyer (2017); Seigmund (2018).
[42] On spectatorship, see Cody (1998) 119; on meaning coming from, 'where you moved, how you moved, when you moved', in relation to the other elements and techniques of the performance, see Cronin (2020b) [c15.00],
[43] This description of grief is informed by Sharpe (2016a, 2023) and Werner (2020).

they have been constructed as the limit, and outside, of representation.[44] In this section I suggest that this theory of trauma as the unrepresentable names one mode of encountering the incommensurate, and that *Nelken* provides an example of tragedy as 'a crucial forum for reassembling or reformatting traumata', but also for disassembling established representational forms through its performance of loss and grief.[45]

Following Werner, grief and trauma can disrupt or rupture and can generate instances of tragic overstepping that are marked by gaps in speech, the unsaid, and that which looms in the wings, or which haunts in silences, pauses.[46] Think of the dancers suddenly stopping their repetitive gesture, turning, and mobbing Mercy, or Mercy turning back, ordering the dancers around and addressing the audience. Here I suggest that the tragic emerges as part of a transgression of aesthetic form, in the way Lehmann describes.[47] But that in *Nelken* there is not one break, but the ruptures are successive, generating a montage of transgressions that lead from the chorus line of dancers on chairs to Mercy's eventual admonition at the hands of the Master of Ceremonies.

This iterative process allows the Company to continually shift and deconstruct perspective. For example, the sequence begins with a Classical or Hellenising, Modernist image, with the dancers' rocking back and forth on chairs, their interlinking arms briefly indexing the vase paintings of ancient choral dance, and the efforts of philhellenic dance practitioners – like Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis – to embody their form on stage.[48] Here the choreography turns back to both ancient Greek and modern dance, and through a kind of abstraction it takes on the quality of a public mythology or re-enactment of a constructed

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[44] Werner (2020) particularly 59–99.
[45] Werner (2020) 231.
[46] Werner (2020).
[47] I discuss this in the Introduction, see Lehmann (2016) 5, 46, 400–01, 424. Like Müller (2014–15), Lehmann notes that Bausch work, 'appeal[s] to something like tragic experience', Lehmann (2006) 412. He also describes how dance theatre is an important place for the articulation of the tragic, (2016) 424; in one sense, because dance, 'uncovers the buried traces of physicality. It heightens, displaces, and invents motoric impulses and physical gestures and thus recalls latent, forgotten and retained possibilities of body language', (2006) 96.
[48] See Taxidou (2020) 25–63.

historical reality.[49] The group represent through their embodiment of unity, a 'virtual' return of the Greek choral dancers – in the sense that Brian Massumi connotes, as a, 'dimension of reality, not its illusory opponent or artificial overcoming'.[50] This signals a medial multiplicity between the materiality of the body and vase painting – with the chairs allowing the dancers to 'float' within the representational frame as if on the body of a vase, or within a frieze.

But this sequence fails, glitches out, or is ruptured when Mercy stops moving; without the unanimous agreement of the group, the image of an idyllic unity formed through collective work is shattered. This is affirmed as they become violent – or as they are revealed to have always already been violent[51] – marking a shift from a vision of the ancient past to the revelation of the constructed-ness of that past, through its disruption: a move *from* the repetitive re-enactment work of the rocking gesture on the chairs – which both physicalises the strain put on the body, and puts us in the 'again time' of a reiterative processes of reception,[52] *towards* an experience of durational time or an experience of the 'thick present', in which the ancient is a failed construction, a lost, grieved, virtuality, or dimension of reality.[53]

The next segment focuses on Mercy as an individual. He critiques ballet as a form of narrative grace, and the audience for paying to see the physical spectacle of the dancers. The rage he expresses is a kind of outrage that is entangled with open grieving – an outrage that forms as a response to injustice in the face of intense or particularly disturbing, cruel, or horrific violence.[54] Finally, he is confronted by an official for wearing a dress, control is supposedly reinforced over his disorderly (queer) body. His outburst, that challenges both the audience's expectations of theatrical conceit and gender expression, is curtailed by an outburst of power.

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[49] On abstraction and modernism, see Taxidou (2020) 58–59; on looking back to Greece and forward to modernity, see Taxidou (2020) 61.
[50] Chaganti (2018) 49–50, quoting Massumi (2014) 55–56.
[51] For discussions of this phenomenon in relation to, for example, Benjamin, see Taxidou (2004) 5–8, 160, 187–89, 199.
[52] Schneider (2011). For the tensions between repetition and presence, see Derrida (2006) 143-154.
[53] Berlant (2011) 67–68; cf. Harootunian (2007) 476–77, 490.
[54] Butler (2009) 39.

This is a typically Bauschian punchline as the rules for disruption are here set up to allow the performer to challenge theatrical representations of the 'real'. However, on the moment of near escape, the very codes that permitted the rupture return in an unexpected way catching the performer and spectator out.

Thus, across this sequence a series of losses is announced. First, a loss of effort, a giving up, a glitch in the virtual construction of the Hellenic, as Mercy stops the exhausting repetitive movement. Then, a loss of safety and security as the other dancers attack Mercy, throwing his queer expression of both femininity (the dress) and resistance to group effort (stopping) into high relief. Finally, the loss of both an idea of the real, and a construction of the Classical past as the vase (painting) and Mercy's confrontation of form are both shattered and fragmented in the present. As such, the transitions open onto something else, open onto a series of questions, echoing Butler: What kind of world is this in which such violence occurs? What kind of world is this in which it does not matter if you did it or did not 'do it', as it will not stop violence from being visited on you? What would it take to form a world without such horror?[55]

By not only repeating the rupture, but also the breakdown in the process of representation, the rupture becomes a choreographic, affiliative, material poetic form.[56] This insistence on the instability of the process of representation, continues to the point where the sustained expression of a scene or a moment is sublimated to the process of deconstruction and the viewer is left grasping for a stable ballast. [57] Here grief becomes the dominant tone or voice given by the body, as perspective, sense and meaning-making are continually thrown into

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[55] Butler (2022) 29–31.

[56] Cf. Taxidou (2004) 129.

[57] Lehmann does allow for the possibility of 'double ruptures', or successive ruptures, but he is sceptical of these as he observes that, when the rupture becomes 'a continuum, however much Hölderlin or Benjamin might hiss "caesura" from the wings […] the spectator readily redramatises the intended caesura', enfolding it, normalising it. Lehmann thus suggest that to avoid this adjustment there needs to be, 'a matter of shaking conceptuality itself – the condition for, and medium of, reflection' (2019) 66.

disarray.[58] Until there is no longer form to expression, but deconstruction of expression becomes form and technique itself.

This continues throughout the work. In another moment, two men stand before each other. One slaps the other in the face before slowly leaning in to kiss that same landscape of skin. The first alternates between these two forms of touch as the second's face reddens from the repeating impacts. In another moment, the Company roll back and forward incessantly across their sit-bones. In yet another, they leap like rabbits in creamsicle gowns inevitably crushing the carnations underfoot, only for officials to bring on two Alsatians to hunt them down. The dogs bark, pull at their leads, and threaten to tear into the dancers' flesh.

The dancers scream, and beg for mercy, they torture each other – there is a horrific scene that prefigures a similar moment in Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* (1998), where a man force feeds a woman pastry after pastry. They are repeatedly halted and policed by officials; and the cacophony of border dogs rends the tender moments carefully established between pain and suffering, tenderness, and vulnerability. Those Alsatians stalk the perimeter of the flowering performance space, recalling the border guards between East and West Germany, the terror and violence of the role of dogs in the Holocaust, concentration camps, Nazi Germany, in police patrols – echoing hauntingly for wider audiences.[59] And here a breach in representation enfolds historical processes and experiences of disorganisation, the weight of history and the struggle of trying to imagine ourselves out from underneath its weight in such a way that two conflicting forces emerge. Dance writer Luke Jennings (2010) describes *Nelken* as '[a] flower-strewn battlefield of human misunderstanding'.[60] But as befitting a performance of repeated iterative enunciations of the tragic, of loss, the dancers tell us that the performance is about love.[61]

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[58] On deconstruction in Bausch, see Lepecki (2006) 45; on deconstruction and its relationship to perceptual frames, see Butler (2009) 64, and hierarchies of power 73–74, and punishment 953.
[59] Pabst (2010) 20.
[60] Jennings (2010).
[61] Akerman (1983).

### iii) Turning Backwards

In *Nelken*, the iterative losses perform grief as a disorganising force that can emerge and re-emerge, resisting the frame or even breaking open and collapsing frames of representation. The affective experience of grief comes in waves, interrupting or even constituting daily activity.[62] Choreography thus becomes a method of articulating tragedy's dis- and re-organisation of a series of pulls: love, grief, and the desire to connect. In Butler's work on grievability they note how grief can function thus, as a matter of collective importance, disorganising subjectivity, revealing the ways in which the 'I' was always already generated from the situated 'we' – via a set of intersubjective processes and encounters.[63] They explain that this becomes clear after we lose someone we love because even when we think, in the aftermath of their death, that the state of loss that the 'I' experiences will be temporary, and that some prior order might be restored, such a desire for restoration is based on the idea that the 'I', who I was before the loss, was separate from the 'you' whom I have lost, and this idea turns out to be a fiction.[64]

This sense of grief, which is not a privatised issue, but which names a breach in collectivity and relationality, is also discussed elsewhere. For Loraux it emerges in the anti-political, collective cry of the chorus, and the women of Greek tragedy which articulates an entanglement of self and other.[65] For Macintosh, mourning can create multiple forms of community, those who report the death, those who witness it, and perhaps remain too close to it, those whose lives may end because of a loss, and those who form communities to allow the bereaved to let go of their grief and perhaps move on.[66]

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[62] Butler (2004b) 23–24.
[63] Butler (2004b).
[64] Butler (2004b) 22.
[65] Loraux (2002) 21, 35, 37, 41–65.
[66] Macintosh (1994) 26–31, 106, 135, 173, 178–80.

In Bausch's work with the Tanztheater Wuppertal the collective exploration of grief, as a tragic rupture in established modes of representation is that which brings the collective together. Whether it is through practice research, performance with an audience, in the moments when the previous model of expression breaks down, or the breakdown of the present into someone's memory of the past, the moment of falling out of a circle of dancers, or the slap, or the re-membering of the words someone once said that floored you – tragedy is a choreographic process of ordinary, daily affiliations of the breakdown. The Company's staging of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydike is an intensification of this practice as it examines grief as a collective issue, through the exploration of the loss of a loved one and their haunting returns. If I began by exploring tragedy and the collective before considering the disruption of aesthetic forms, this section analyses tragedy's re-iterability as a form of choreography itself.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

The chorus are moving as the curtain rises, they dance in the open space between Orpheus/*Liebe* – originally danced by Mercy who is stage right, facing a wall in skin coloured dance-shorts – and Eurydike*/Tod* (Malou Airaudo), who is raised high in a wedding dress and veil which floats down behind her. Between these deathly-still eponymous characters, the chorus perform a complex polyrhythmic set of phrases, in slow-motion – a thick experience of the body articulating time in space that Lepecki has described as not 'only a question of kinetics, but also one of intensities, of generating an intensive field of microperceptions'. [67] A particular choreographic technique that facilitates 'an understanding of movement as intensity

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[67] Lepecki (2006) 57.

[that] allows for a critique of choreography's participation in the ontopolitical continuum of representation and subjectivity that takes us directly to the question of the still'.[68]

Two dancer's stand out from the chorus: one in a dress, suspended in the air above a second who is in a suit. They echo Orpheus and Eurydike, and as the upstage group continue to oscillate in and out of time together, the two re-enact the death of Eurydike. Behind them successive iterations of the lovers appear from out of a large dead tree, repeating the lift and fall. Here the re-iterating couples announce a breakdown of the 'ontopolitical continuum' of narrative, perhaps, of a linear account of the world. The falling apart and spectral returns of grief are expressed across the chorus-ensemble, whereby 'one 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'.[69]

Bausch's version is set to an edited score and is divided into four sections: *Trauer* (grief), *Gewalt* (violence), *Frieden* (freedom), and *Sterben* (death). The characters Orpheus, Eurydike and Amore are also renamed. Orpheus becomes *Liebe* (love), Eurydike is *Tod* (death), and Amore is *Jugend* (youth).[70] The music is performed live, with an offstage vocal chorus, while the three lead dancers are doubled, each with an onstage vocalist. This technique, along with the use of sections, reframes the myth through Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (distancing effect or alienation) and character-splitting – which features in works like *Die Sieben Todsünden* (the Seven Deadly Sins, 1933). This division in Brecht has been read to facilitate an embodiment of the conflicts between reason and instinct, one that frequently reflects on and 'results in tragic failure'.[71] But Bausch utilises this strategy of alienation to choreograph a series of proliferating affiliations between modernist, classical, and postmodern choreographers and to encourage further an ethical contemplation of the action.

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[68] Ibid.
[69] Butler (2004b) 23–24.
[70] Weir (2018) 16–17; cf. Meisner (2010) 289–294.
[71] Ibid.

Following a re-enactment of Eurydike's death, the chorus, now on stage left, scatter onto the ground intoning Martha Graham's (in)famous gesture of 'pleading', which is not unlike ancient Greek *supplication* ritual – which collapses submission and the expression of grief into a wager, one aimed at achieving sanctuary, the return of a loved one's body, time to make plans (for escape, revenge) and attempts to '[keep] the tensions of existence within tolerable limits'.[72] This technique – where the dancer raises their head and chest off the ground, contracting from their core, and rising from a prone position, lifting their arms straight out, offering their exposed wrists and hands to the sky – generates a rich affective response, capturing the ritualised patterns of behaviour and speech which accompany mourning and death which do not necessarily ensure the end of mourning or grief, nor the end of death and dying but which hope to ameliorate it by supplicating, with a force much greater than the individual: gods, time, death itself.[73] It is also a dancerly reverberation of keening, a crumpling, that takes one over when one hears about or witnesses a death, or when one is caught out suddenly and overwhelmed by the trauma of such a loss.

Then they stage, symbolically, Orpheus' mourning and a ritualised funeral for Eurydike, introducing us to the themes which will populate the rest of the dance-opera. Here multiple iterative tragic ruptures of form express one of the inscrutable confusions of grief, as when you think you see the deceased in the guise of another, terribly, on the street or in some other ordinary place, but here we witness the effects distributed and shared across the chorus/community.

This feeling of being confronted by the past, unexpectedly in the present, articulates a choreographic model of reception that cannot but entangle with other receptions of *Orpheus and Eurydike*, to which Graham was also turning back in her supplicatory dances. Examples

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[72] Gould (1973) especially the discussion of supplication, tragedy, and 'behaviour', see 85–101.
[73] Macintosh (1994) 175–79.

include the two versions choreographed by Balanchine (1936, 1948) as part of his 'trio of Greek works' which also included *Apollo* (1928) and *Agone* (1957).[74] Or, seminally, Adolphe Appia's designs for the experimental version of the myth directed by Dalcroze in 1912. The 1913 staging at Hellerau made considerable steps in avant-garde scenography and it is worth noting that Dalcroze's Eurythmics is a point of reference for many of Bausch's influential chosen ancestors:[75] expressionist pioneer Mary Wigman was studying at Hellerau when Appia's *Orpheus und Eurydike* was performed, while *Ballet Russes* artists Vaslav Nijinsky, Sergei Diaghilev, and Nikolai Roerich visited the school in that same year in preparation for their upcoming work *Le Sacre Du Printemps* (1913).[76] Consequently, the stage becomes haunted with many versions of the myth, and multiple choreographic interpretations of it.

Intermittently, the chorus dance a slow unison phrase, with haunting *port de bras*, overextended back bends, deep Graham-esque *pliés*, and repeated gestures which bring the hands in contact with the knees, face, and shoulders. In between, and in contrast to this fragile tectonic unison section, the dancers introduce gestural motifs, moments from a fractured ritual, which will return at the work's dénouement.[77] They stage Eurydike's death once more, but this time through symbols: laying birch branches round a chalk ring, bending, falling, and arriving again briefly in unison, only to melt back into coterminous yet dis-continuous activity. The dancers operate through a series of discursive, disciplinary, and temporal excesses, in this exploration of both unison or community and simultaneity. Their movements deftly quote from Balanchine's sylph-like *port des bras*, and Wigman's expressive gestures of crumpling-into or using an impulse to spring out of movements, generated through the torso. Here too is the postmodern dancer's use of the everyday – seen in works like Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* (1966) which plays with sitting, walking, as well as leaning and falling. The moments of total stillness

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[74] Weir (2018) 16.
[75] Beacham (2006), (2019).
[76] Weir (2018) 16.
[77] Cronin (2020 a) [01:01:27].

in this section are also notable and bear remarkable echoes of Wigman's early group dances and Laban's community chorus exercises.[78] These slips, between choreographic style, echo slippages in place and time, in systems of reception and relation.[79] As dance scholar Mark Franko observes:

> Dance, as a time-based art, exists within a historical temporality that comprises historically determined conditions of reception, styles and modes of gesturality, tastes with their concomitant cultural contexts, and technologies of display, all of which are productive of uniquely defined aesthetic experiences.[80]

Simultaneously the slippages refract the tragic myth they are enacting so that they choreograph not one tragedy but a compression of various embodied choreographic receptions of tragedy.

Thus, by re-enacting (and refracting) multiple dance techniques, the Tanztheater Wuppertal scramble linear time even further, displacing those forms from their historically determined conditions of production and reception. They recombine the older techniques in such a way that, like the haunting appearance of the deceased, the dancers recall, re-member, or even summon back those gestural modes, those styles, those visions of the ancient past, and the underworld, into the performance space.[81] In this way, the present appears so riddled with traces of the past, which refuses to remain in the past, that the performance sublimates the present and the world of the living, to those returns of the past and the world of the dead.[82]

This prefigures the second section *Gewalt*, when Orpheus descends into the underworld and is confronted by furies.[83] There, the chorus deconstruct a movement phrase, by dancing a single phrase of the music between them. Beginning at the front and working back, the foremost dancer raises their arm with the melody and then brings it straight down. Then keeping their

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[78] Weir (2018) 20.
[79] Kortlandt (2022) [35.06].
[80] Franko (2017) 10.
[81] See Muñoz (2019) 42–43; cf. Derrida (1994) 51, 63.
[82] Schneider (2011) 14; Gotman (2017) 304.
[83] See Meisner (2010) 292.

elbow close to their hip, they lever their forearm, so it sits at ninety degrees to their body, with their palm facing up. A dancer behind them takes up the phrase, then another dancer continues to the melody, before passing the phrase back to the first dancer who repeats their motion, arm up, down, forearm hinged at ninety degrees while balletic form is re-enacted, and returned to, its discursive and technical excesses continue to appear through slips in both form and timing in the section.

Here Bausch is turning back again to ballet, echoing the way that composers and choreographers of ballet and opera turned back to ancient Greek and Roman pantomime for their reconceptualization of both forms in the 18th century.[84] Gluck's *Orpheus und Eurydike*, for example, was part of a broader project to re-construct the dance-opera which also included *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779). This work emphasised dance, through Gluck's collaboration with Jean-Georges Noverre – 'the first serious modern attempt to re-create the singing and dancing chorus of antiquity'.[85] Bausch's choreographic experiments, thus, contributed to the (de)construction of the Classical in conceptual, spatial, and temporal terms. As dancer, classicist and Dance studies scholar Arabella Stanger has observed, through an analysis of the connections between spatial practices of dance and spatial politics, this is a construction that entangles Classics, classical ballet and coloniality.[86] For, by the late nineteenth century, ballet was deeply entangled with architectural and geographic instantiations of the Classical as a form of empire-making.[87]

Based on ordering of time and space and vertical notions of control and release, ballet, and its dissemination, were used to 'ground the colonial project'. Because, as Stanger observes, in conversation with Susan Forster, its 'conceptualization of a pure space, capable of being organised only according to abstract and geometric principles […], "supported the notion of a

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[84] Hall (2013a) 184–85.
[85] Macintosh (2013) 309.
[86] Stanger (2021).
[87] Stanger (2021) particularly 16, 31–33.

centrality that extends itself outwards in space towards a periphery"".[88] As others like Seeta Chaganti have also observed in concert with these analyses, ballet discipline reshapes the body on a macro scale through process of territorialisation and deterritorialisation, but also on a micro scale by opening hips, reconstructing ligaments, joints, and the bones of the dancers.[89] Through this aesthetic spectacle of control – with its refusal of gravity, concealment of work and pain, strict gender norms, entanglements of imperial hierarchies, and fantasies of an eternal reign – the turn back to ancient Greece became more than a turn to an aesthetic ideal. Instead, it contributed to the construction of a systemic geomorphic force, that not only reshaped the earth, but also the bodies and minds of dancers – suggesting that there would be no outside to colonial rule, and instantiating or inscribing the colonial at the level of muscular-skeletal development.[90]

As in *Nelken*, Bausch subverts these systems of control by pulling at the seams of the dance form, choreographing ballet as a fragile ruin, an afterword to both the colonial era of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and to the Nazi policies and fascist eugenics which revived the Classical as a programme of discipline and genocidal control.[91] Haunted by the colonial and the fascist, the underworld of a multiplicity of bodies, doing one phrase together but apart, generates a series of fragments that do not add up to a whole phrase. The series is made up of multiple iterative fragmented phrases, which allow meaning to be made across multiple bodies in space – anti-monolithic, polysemic, poly-perspectival, communitarian. This intensifies the temporal confusion of the first section; through this slip, the fragility of the Classical is revealed; and its attempted hold over space, time, and bodies is also undone, loosened through a slip in time and place.

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[88] Stanger (2021) 39.
[89] Chaganti (2018) 4–5; cf. Ness (2008) 19.
[90] Stanger (2021) 50–53; this relates to other studies of performance and colonial, racist, white supremacy, see especially Hartman (2023).
[91] On fragility, see Cronin (2020a) [01:01:27]; on ruins see Baudou (2023); cf. Baudou and Houcke (*forthcoming*).

In the third part, *Frieden,* the slip is exaggerated as Orpheus/*Liebe* is reunited with Eurydike/*Tod* in Elysium, but not before an extended section of dance in which we are re-introduced to Eurydike/*Tod*. The style of movement and costuming references Balanchine's world-famous ballet, *Serenade* (1934) – which began with a (proto)typical Bauschian, and overtly postmodern moment.[92] After a line of dancers gracefully lift their right arms, they shift their feet into first position – the foundational ground of ballet technique – then another dancer runs onto the stage, crossing the line, only to fall as she struggles to get into position.[93] This slip was a re-enactment of a moment from a rehearsal when a dancer ran in late[94] – interleaving a turn back to, and deconstruction of, ballet with the efflorescence of modern (Graham) and postmodern (Rainer) techniques.[95]

All of this disrupts ballet's claim to classicising temporalities of eternity and eternal dominion over space, as its hold on the body as a disciplining force, combined with the hyper-iteration of modern and postmodern techniques, merge in a rush. This polyvalent mode of pastiche and deconstruction takes from, alienates, deconstructs, and re-articulates, the work of Wigman, Balanchine, Gluck, Noverre and Graham as organic matter, akin to the haunting skeletal trees which clutter the stage, uprooted, dead but still living. Here the dancers re-enact not only choreographic techniques but reception and history as a reckoning with incommensurable loss, with the tragic, as a network of material affiliative connections and dislocations.[96]

Thus, deconstruction and ruination intensify the affective quality of grief, the fragility of life, and the pulse of love. This is not so much about 'the shock of realizing that the world

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[92] Weir (2018) 21–22.

[93] Weir (2018) 21; Kendall (2013) 234; Homans (2022).

[94] Weir (2018) 22, this action prefigures experimentation with running on stage in dance occurring in works like Paul Taylor's *Esplanade* (1975), where a woman runs for a bus, and in Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown's use of pedestrian movement to construct postmodern dance works.

[95] Cf. Quayson (2021) for interleaving.

[96] Gotman (2017) 1–24.

is so precarious and that humanity is responsible for it'.[97] It is, instead, a performance of grief that knows this and still asks 'What kind of world is this in which such destruction and devastation is possible?'. Consequently, in *Frieden*, tragedy is choreographed as a process of collective temporal and spatial undoing, creating an interaction between tragedy and the tragic based on a ruination, characterising both the untimely condition of being in the underworld, the destruction, violence, and horrors of the twentieth century, and the incommensurate grief and disarticulating pain of losing a loved one. This is not one continuous narrative, but a deconstructed choreography arranged around affective structures, putting into play various iterations of *Orpheus und Eurydike* in dance, as the dancers think, receive, and redo the myth through a network of other danced mediations. But it also functions on hope – the hope that one might be able to bring back, in some sense revive, the dead.

*The Turn as Rupture*

Eventually in the middle of the fourth section, Orpheus/*Liebe* turns to look at Eurydike*/Tod* fulfilling the tragic crux of the myth and condemning her to the underworld. Yet, the chorus have already danced Orpheus/*Liebe*'s failure. They repeatedly use the physical motion of turning and re-turning throughout the opera, continually deploying the movement throughout all four sections. These various turns (some like Graham, some like ballet, some in the mode of the everyday) put the tragic again in a network of renegotiation and re-iteration. The action of turning pre-empts Orpheus/*Liebe*'s tragic error in the context of the live performance, while it additionally re-enacts an event from the myth which itself exists prior to Bausch's version – through various networks of reception.

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[97] Baudou (2023).

In Rebecca Schneider's landmark work on re-enactment in performance, she observes the ways in which a re-enactment confuses *both* linear temporality – through the syncopated time of re-enactment, where then and now punctuate each other[98] – *and* the notion of identical repetition or uniform mechanical reproduction, whereby the idea of an original is completely obscured through the circulation and return of elements, sounds, affects, gestures, and ideas that seem the same but rebound in new or uncanny ways.[99] Through the 'again and again' time of re-enactment, the *gesture*, in Schneider's work, is a concept that calls us to witness the re-irruption of the past in the present and to think of the ways in which contact across different places and time can be made – through the interval, the stitch, or the haunting animacy of remains. The gesture's echoing ripple also allows us to query our ethical relationship to the past, or, 'if the past is reiterative', Schneider wonders, 'given to reappearance like the reverberation of a hail, it is also always and again open to response'.[100] Never exactly the same but calling and recalling an idea, an affect, the gesture – which in *Orpheus und Eurydike*, is the turn – stiches multiple versions of the myth together, hinging the dancers and witness-spectator-receivers between states, between having and losing, past and present.

In its symbolic configuration, the turn also represents the act of looking back at the dead, configuring the excess of death as something more than a biological event but a metaphysical conundrum: How is it possible that you are gone even though so much of you is who I am?[101] As Heather Love writes in *Feeling Backwards,* the turn backwards, thus, can be a figuration of the desire to remain in the past and to even stay, like Orpheus, with the dead, in a state of perpetual mourning.[102] This might recall, for us, as it does for Love, other receptions of the Orphic, for example, Foucault's reflections on Orpheus and on queer desire: namely,

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[98] Schneider (2011) 2.
[99] Schneider's work has been taken up widely, my reading of her 2011 book is informed by Moten (2003), Campt (2017); Schneider (2017, 2018); Dorf (2019).
[100] Schneider (2018) 288.
[101] See Derrida (1994).
[102] Love (2007) 5, 49–52.

that there is a pleasure in looking back, after the loved object has gone – after losing Eurydike in the underworld, or after your lover leaves you, disappearing into the distance in a taxi.[103]

However, as Love articulates, this call into the world of the past, the world of the dead can be dangerous, a seductive call in which we are, in Muñoz words, like moths called to a flame.[104] It might even lead us to wonder what belongs to the world of the dead and what to the world of the living, just as Paul Preciado did after the death of a close friend asking: 'Do I belong more to your world than to the world of the living?'.[105] Consequently, we might say that the temporal disorganisation of the turn maps onto a deconstructive collapse indexed by the traumatic or post-traumatic flashback – where things in the past refuse to stay in the past, and memories, affects, encounters, faces, smells, the memory of touch, the potential for touch keep repeating, replaying over and over. One keeps reliving the horror, until it seems like it will keep happening, and will never end – ameliorated only by the comfort that in the traumatic return Orpheus has been with Eurydice once more if only for a moment. This constructs, as Schneider notes, a condition in which 'the dead, live, re-dead, re-live [and enter] into something more akin to indeterminate circulation than to precise linear arbitration of what is past and what is present, what is finished and what is ongoing, what is dead and what is live'.[106] The turn, thus, haunts the stage with previous tragic performances and threatens with more still to come.

This haunting continues into the dénouement. As Klein describes it, during a famous aria at the end of the opera, 'when Orpheus laments, '"Che faro senza Euridice" ("I have lost my Eurydice") […] the audience might have expected a translation of the scene into dance'.[107] Instead, Orpheus turns back to face the upstage wall, 'a heap of misery that just as soon disappeared from the stage',[108] in another turn, another rupture of representational forms,

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[103] Love (2007) 52.
[104] Muñoz (2020) 58.
[105] Preciado (2008) 20.
[106] Schneider (2011) 178.
[107] Klein (2020) 44.
[108] Ibid.

another refusal of performance and another scrambling of real and constructed. Then, at the end of the fourth section *Sterben,* we see a return to the structure of the opening, with the chorus repeating the haunting *port de bras*, the Graham-esque pleading, and Wigmanian/Laban-esque total pauses. This signals a return to the state where the opera begins, grief rippling through a community, but the dancers cannot re-create its conditions exactly, because even though at both the end and the beginning Eurydike*/Tod* is dead, and Orpheus/*Liebe* is mourning her loss, by the end he has lost her again, and again, and again. And we – the audience-spectator-receivers – have witnessed it all (re)playing. Horror looms as it seems, almost, as if we will have to descend to hell one more time, that the performance will begin again, closing the loop on this iterative cycle and adding one more non-linear wrinkle to the collapsing, and pleating of time (each fold only intensifying and confirming Orpheus' loss, Eurydike's death, only intensifying the 'what if' of grief that calls to the alternative present in which the dead never died). Or, perhaps, as Peggy Phelan has written of death, not closing but 'rippl[ing] and tear[ing] time's apparent linearity'.[109] Consequently, in *Orpheus und Eurydike* we are confronted with tragedy's (re)iterability, which is haunting not because it happens once but because – like the patterns of mourning in speech, text, and dance – it threatens and promises to return.


iv)     Ghosts


The re-iterability of the tragic performs a sense of the world cluttered with reiterating traumas, proliferating catastrophes, and ongoing crises, a disorganised place of grief which coherent linear forms of representation fail to address, and which the concept of the singular traumatising event fails to capture. As Lauren Berlant has described, 'crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness, but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about

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[109] Phelan (2017) 303.

navigating what's overwhelming'.[110] And as Elin Diamond notes of the work of Caryl Churchill (a contemporary of Bausch's), we come to know that 'there is profound tragedy in ordinary life'.[111]

The caesura, breach, rupture, or transgression can seemingly appear out of nowhere, in the ordinary, or it can appear even throughout the process of reception as it reveals an always already iterative network of tragedies, a mundane but cumulative set of tragedies which structure a sense of the world based on the (anticipated) arrival of terrible loss. This section explores tragedy thus, as a cumulative choreographic strategy.[112] This is fundamentally a theatrical investigation, one that activates the analysis of the performance space as a space infested with many pasts. As Marvin Carlson says, theatre is always haunted: 'present experience is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations'.[113] And it builds on the rehearsal and choreographic strategies that Bausch developed, which used the body-memories and body-archives of the dancers to generate material. It is a queer sense of tragedy, that emerges then, to describe this cumulative strategy: non-linear, but also queer in the sense that it concerns what Muñoz would call 'minoritarian' experience, a queer engagement with not only loss, failure, and suffering but hope, from the margins of the world as it falls apart.[114]

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In *Nelken*, dancer Lutz Förster stands in the field of carnations which make up the set. He is softly lit, causing the black of his suit to blur into the black of the background. The *mise-en-scène* creates the illusion of an endless field of carnations, a sea of funeral flowers, in which

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[110] Berlant (2011) 10.
[111] Diamond (2014) 751.
[112] On Nature as accumulation strategy, see Smith (2007); on gender as accumulation strategy, see Gabriel (2020b).
[113] Carlson (2001) 2.
[114] See Muñoz (2019).

he stands alone. He gazes into the audience, as an edited version of Sophie Tucker's scratchy, brassy recording (1928) of George Gershwin's 'The Man I Love' (1924) begins to play. The audience applauds. He signs:

> Someday he'll come along
> The man I love
> And he'll be big and strong
> The man I love
> And when he comes my way
> I'll do my best to make him stay
> […]
> He'll build a little home
> Just meant for two
> From which I'll never roam
> Who would, would you
> And so, all else above
> I'm waiting for the man I love.

This performance is based on Förster's real-life experience of learning sign language while he travelled America with his romantic partner.[115] He tells us that during the rehearsal process for *Nelken,* Bausch asked the dancers about love, she asked them to share something they were proud of.[116] This dance was Förster's response.

On first watch, the dance creates a sense of an impossible isolation. After the applause has settled, and it becomes clear that he is signing about another man, the audience laughs. He is stood, all alone, in this field of 8000 carnations, their laughter makes him seem even more so. The chorus repeats, 'someday he'll come along, the man I love'. He is persistent. But the 'someday' he dances is uncertain, more so each time, taking on the grammar of the wish. Each hearing and witness of this first line widens the temporal gap between Förster in the present and the world in the future in which he is loved, creating a deep yearning ('Someday, someday, someday'). The wish is tender, then, and perhaps pitiful. Yet, to express this kind of queer desire

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[115] Akerman (1983).
[116] Ibid.

publicly, also makes Förster seem courageous to a contemporary viewer, a trace of queer resistance from the past.

The more time I spent with this dance, however, the more I was overwhelmed by a terrible loss, stunned by a transgression or, a tragic breach in re-iterations of the performance. *Nelken* premiered on the 30 December 1982 and went on tour throughout 1983. On the 5th June 1981 the CDC in North America reported that between October and May five young men were treated for Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia; on July 4th, the CDC reported that during the past 30 months, 26 cases of Kaposi Sarcoma had been reported among gay men; in 1982 Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), the first community-based HIV/AIDS care provider in the United States, was founded. By the end of 1983, the Institut Pasteur had found and identified the retrovirus that could be the cause of AIDS. The *New York Times*' front page story reported that three thousand cases had been reported in the USA with 1,000 dead and many thousands more dying.[117] This means that Förster's journey around America with his partner was set against the backdrop of the earliest days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, tracing the first year, the fear, the growing numbers of dead, and the spreading of the virus. The dance looks forward to over a decade of catastrophic death, suffering, and loss – pre-figuring the political language of mourning during the HIV/AIDS crisis. [118] And amongst this all it holds to love.

Suddenly, the *mise-en-scène* (the sea of funeral flowers), the costume (his black suit and charcoal tie, his slicked back hair), and the pain in his expression each give the choreography a quality – previously illegible. This is a eulogy. For those who have died, those dying, and those who might survive them: parents, lovers, children, partners, friends.[119] He

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[117] See the following institutions and websites: Terrence Higgins Trust; KFF Global Health Policy; HIV.gov.
[118] On mourning and HIV/AIDS see Athanasiou (2017) 13; cf. Crimp (1989, 2004).
[119] In what would become one of the world's most terrible epidemics, with around 40.1 million deaths worldwide – and a (neo-)colonial distribution of healthcare and support which still caused 650,000 deaths in 2021 – Förster's dance articulates a sense of the incomprehensible loss of life experienced by queer people during this time.

yearns, and in this way, the tragic emerges seemingly out of nowhere, through a slip, in (gestural) repetition.[120]

The tragedy we witness is expressed by the very fragility and vulnerability of his body responding to the tragic loss, scrambling fact and fiction, past, present and future. This is amplified in contemporary restagings which reflect on this history, with other dancers stepping into Förster's gestural orientations, his hope. And in this instance, tragedy becomes a process of networking various communities across time and place, expressed by the interface between me as viewer and the recording of this dance, between tragedy as a transgression of modes of representation and tragedy as a disorganisation and breach in a sense of the world, between mourner and mourned – staged in such a way that one might not only find an outlet for grief through a ritual of public mourning, but they might commune with (enter the world of) the dead.[121] This constructs tragedy not as a living art but a 'dying act'.[122]

And simultaneously, tragedy here is a process of affiliation with the loved one. The gap between Förster in the present and the 'someday' takes on a cruel turn. In the funeral context, this is not just an (im)possible meeting in the future, but an impossible return of the deceased. The assurance, 'and when he comes my way/ I'll do my best to make him stay', speaks to a cruel optimistic desire to protect the ones we love from death.[123] The 'little home / Just meant for two' becomes an impossible (normative) fantasy, not only of domestic life, but of safety from the violence of the world, from the virus. His addresses to the audience, (as he asks them who would ever abandon such a partner) is an invitation to imagine his own loss, (who would ever willingly give such a love up, who wouldn't give everything to stop the lover dying, even

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[120] Cf. Akerman (2009), who describes tragedy emerging in this way through her film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1980).

[121] Macintosh (1994) 161.

[122] Macintosh (1994). Here I am struck that both Macintosh and Loraux's work was published amid the HIV/AIDS crises, when, as Halberstam (2005) has described it, time was being rethought alongside longevity, the concepts of dying and living, potentiality, compression and annihilation in the face of death. Cf. Kafer (2013).

[123] See Berlant (2011).

to turn Orpheus-like into the depths of hell) before reasserting: 'I'm waiting for the man I love'. A desire to be with someone again in the future, held with the knowledge that they are ineffably lost to the past. A holding out for reunion, if not through reconstruction, séance, or revivification, then through a meeting, that will not come in this life, but perhaps in the next.

*Haunting, Cumulation, Afterwards*

While this personal instance taken from the lived-in body of the dancer can be said to present Förster as grievable, it encourages us to think more broadly about grievability and the tragic. Does grieving really go on without end, leading only to eschatological attachments? How does grief impact the life of the Company, their history? Writing on Pina Bausch and Merce Cunningham, Phelan notes that throughout their Company's lifetime:

> Dancers aged; travel scrambled time; tours were extended; AIDS took hold; lovers died; children were born; families and companies were reconfigured. And as both companies continued dancing, stable assumptions about time's linear movement and the complexity of time's affective unfolding rose and fell like breath itself.[124]

In 2009 Pina Bausch suddenly died from cancer, days after receiving a diagnosis. This came as a shock which nearly dissolved the Company. Mercy tells us that they received the news before a performance in Poland, had they been in Wuppertal, it would have spelled the Company's end. But because they decided to perform that night, they discovered that they could, in fact, go on.[125] It would be an understatement to note that Bausch's death reconfigured the reception of their work – as dancers stepped into learn Bausch's parts to inhabit her presence, to run rehearsals, and eventually to go on asking her questions once again. Nowhere is this clearer or more entangled with tragedy than in *Café Müller*.

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[124] Phelan (2017) 303–04.
[125] Phelan (2017) 311.

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*Café Müller* moves at a pace that requires immense focus and control, from performers and audience members alike. Bausch, or the dancer replacing her, enters from a door downstage left, into a dark café. Light gloams into the space from an adjoining room upstage right, illuminating a revolving Perspex door, itself behind a wall of Perspex. Downstage, the silhouettes of black lacquered chairs flicker in and out of view. As the light softly fades up on Bausch, we watch her stumble, eyes closed, arms outstretched, so that her palms push forward into the space at hip level. She slams the door closed behind her using her back. And she careens upstage before clattering into a chair. When she reaches the edge of the café, she turns to face into it, back pressed against the edge of the space.

The revolving door spins, and a figure in a red wig and heels makes two full journeys around its internal circumference before she skitters downstage, charting a safe course through the discarded chairs.[126] Eventually, she exits upstage right. By this time another younger female figure dressed in white bumps into a chair, again downstage left, further centre into the space, arms outstretched, as Bausch, eyes closed. She walks forward and hits two more chairs, clattering, in bare feet. She is diagonally opposite Bausch in the space when she draws her hand up past her stomach across to her left arm and over her left breast. Yearning, as her hand feels the flesh over her chest, arching towards her right shoulder, Dido's final aria begins – a song she sings moments before taking her own life as Aeneas sails away from Carthage.

The music drops her centre of gravity, and she contracts. Her hand pools by her right hip spilling forward and up; she continues the idea, writing out the music through her body

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[126] On learning the role, see Cronin, who describes using the rhythm, the sonic quality and pattern that the steps made (2018b) [c12:07].

until the end of Dido's first 'Oh'. Then, she stops, and lifts her hand to her forehead. Then once more she marks the path across her chest, the melody rises, and her hand floats off her skin towards stage left leading her forward. She breaks into a run. A man clears the chairs from her path as she careens through the space, until her and Bausch both press themselves, face first, against the left wall of the café.

These are the opening five minutes of the work which continues to develop through a series of group interactions, repeated solos shared by the dancers, and vignettes. This opening establishes both the larger themes of the piece and introduces the group of characters who enter and re-enter the space throughout its forty-minute duration.

In Phelan's reading of the work: 'The continuity of the setting […] restages the experience of war survivors who are haunted, repeatedly, by what they did not, and perhaps could not, see: death itself'.[127] We can consider this act of 'not seeing' and the traumatic ruptures of surviving a catastrophe by examining the two figures. They wear variations on the same costume, and both perform the same task throughout the piece, marking similar pathways through the space and repeating the same phrase of movement to the same section of the aria – are they versions as the same character, or different versions of the same person, one remembering/looking forward to the other, both haunting the space, ghosting each other.

As they exist in the stage space dis-conterminously, both versions of the same, the focus shifts from one to the other, without any recognition between the two, their eyes are closed, not seeing but sensing one another in the space.[128] The dancer Breanne O'Mara who has performed Bausch' part noted that in these moments:

> It's not that you lose the sense of your body, but a bit the containment. There's a sense after a while – I had small moments; I would love it if there were more

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[127] Phelan (2017) 308.
[128] Not seeing here does not equate with not knowing but another kind of awareness, O'Mara (2018); cf. Ward (*forthcoming*).

> – where you almost know the whole space, although you are in your one spot there; you're against the wall or you're sitting. It's like another sense.[129]

This extra-sensory awareness is clearest in the repeated solo shared by both dancers as one phrase iterates and refracts between them both. With hands flowing over the chest, pleading 'on thy bosom let me rest', then being pulled out into the space, over the head and around 'with drooping wings'. Until both dancers extend their form past the edges of their own bodies connecting to one another through the re-enacted gestures. Asking for the listener to 'keep here your watch, and never part'.

Here, Dido is remembered, and her tragic death stands in for many enfolding traumata to which the dancers continually loop back. Thus, giving the choreography a post-traumatic quality, signalling the medial multiplicity of embodied memory: Dido's memories, Bausch's experience of the Second World War, her memories of her childhood, the haunting presence of the dead in the bodies of the living. In O'Mara's performance there are the spectral memories of Bausch, moving through her gestures, re-animating the traces left in the space, but also turning and re-turning to loss, to grief, to rupture, the tragic. For example, fragments of the song repeat again and again with long silences in between; encounters and interactions repeat – a man holding a woman kisses her before dropping her onto the floor – dancers sitting at empty tables, they run through a room, scattering the chairs again and again, Mercy pleads on the floor arching his back and hips into the air, others slam into the walls. But importantly, the characters, the dancers go on – not abandoning the dance, or ignoring what has happened, nor being destroyed by it, but staying in contact and conversation with grief, with one another, moving in between the worlds of the dead and the living, the past and the present.

Here the stage becomes a 'place of traces', an archive of encounters and memories, where the dancers' actions remain haunting like the trail of a sparkler, or indexed like, for

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[129] O'Mara (2018) [38.29].

example, the crushed carnation stems which litter the stage at the end of *Nelken*.[130] These traces consequently allow the space to be an 'autonomous co-player of the dancers, seemingly marking dance-time by commenting on the physical processes of dance itself'.[131]

Here repetition is something more than a trope or stylistic inflection. Instead, it is the 'very substance of transfer between the dead and the living'.[132] A means of reckoning with that which haunts us and it is in this sense that tragedy becomes a cumulative choreographic strategy: for, these iterative moments of return and re-enactment signal not only trauma and the post-traumatic – whereby the past refuses to stay in the past but threatens constantly to return – but also the potential for recombination, reconstitution, and re-connection. In this sense held as they are in the bodies of the dancers who take on their roles, Bausch and her memory of Dido remain for return and re-address in *Café Muller*. They do so not to punish the living, but so that another possibility, another set of politics or ethics can emerge in their wake.

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Consequently, Bausch's work and her legacy radically reformulates tragedy through choreography insisting that the tragic encounter is unfinished, that the tragic is as much a part of our daily lives as it is in attempts to represent them, but also that tragedy brings us into collective contact with a variety of traumata which we carry in our bodies, and which remain for redress. This calls us to witness their re-irruption and to think across time and place, moving toward a kind collectivity capable of reckoning with the repeated shocks that we all hold, as

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[130] On virtuality, the 'sparkler' image, and dance, see Chaganti (2018) 7. Cf. Lehmann (2006) 152 who references *Nelken* as an example, describing the way in which the dancers try and eventually fail not to tread on the flowers. Here he accounts for the ways this process allows for the space to function 'chronometrically'.

[131] Lehmann (2006) 151–52.

[132] Phelan (2017) 311.

we recognise the world as a kind of place in which all our grief can emerge, 'always and again open to response'.[133]

Take as a final example Julie Anne Stanzak walking through the field of carnations in *Nelken* holding an accordion. Refusing to play the instrument. On one of her many journeys she is joined by the rest of the Company who form a line behind her, to create the iconic scene of loss, passing, and return: the *Nelken* line, or the dance of the four seasons – which is the overwhelming image in Wim Wenders' documentary after Bausch's death (2011).[134] This return, as she leads the chorus line, reframes her other solo appearances, as suddenly lonely. She has always, until now, it seems, been (re-)tracing the steps of the collective, mapping out the passing of time and the changing of the seasons. Or she was always already with them, walking this line through the stage haunted by their presence, dancing a dance of the planetary loop of time, of death and rebirth.

These associative images – the crushing of the flowers, the changing of the seasons, the soundless accordion, a man attacked and his pretty dress trashed, Mercy turning back on his heels and burning through the middle of the space, Orpheus turning back to face Eurydice, Förster waiting for the man he loves, mourning the death of the many already gone, the thousands dying, the thousands who will die; and finally, the Company hugging the audience, feeding them, rocking, again and again without reprise. A choral refraction. A cumulative network of tragedies wherein: all these images are every time different, impossibly re-enacting the same, each time making an opening, an interval, for something else to emerge.[135]

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[133] Schneider (2018) 288.
[134] Made in the months following her death, dancer Barbara Kaufmann said making the film was a way of processing and reckoning with Bausch's passing: Jays (2020) np.
[135] See Schneider (2011); Franko (2017).

Chapter 2

DIMITRIS PAPAIOANNOU

A chorus move from stage left, to stage right, on the backs of black *Café Müller* chairs. They do not touch the ground, and without enough chairs for them all to stand separately, they cluster, and cling to one another. As they go, they put on black high heels and suit jackets. They must pass these items and the chairs up the line to move forward and to dress. Then, just as they entered, they leave, stage right, inviting us into a three-and-a-half-hour funerary lament comprised of a series of haunting vignettes.

Downstage right there is a mass of green, leafy branches. // Upstage, looming in darkness, a mountain, a hulking shadow. // Everything moves very slowly. // Out of the branches emerges Breanne O'Mara, in a long white Grecian dress. // From the back, another chorus falls, naked, slowly, down the mountain, sliding and bumping over its soft edges. // Then, out of the darkness Julie Anne Stanzak – a long term member of the Tanztheater Wuppertal – emerges in a black dress, partly illuminated in gold. A man places a goats-head mask over her face, its long horns curl into the darkness.

Up-turned tables roll across long cylinders, laid out on the floor. One is crowded with men in suits, the other with women in draped Grecian dresses. // Two dancers fall naked down the mountain. // A woman holding an uprooted tree walks across the mountain's back. // A chorus hold material over different parts of a man, he becomes an ancient Greek sculpture, limbs broken off behind the fabric folds. // A man with long cylindrical arms and bells around his waist lollops spectrally across the stage. // Someone tries to hold as many of the chairs on their back as they can. // Another offers their forearm, another their leg temporarily, as prosthetics for the man whose limbs have broken off. // The man drops all the chairs in a great

clatter. // Tables whirl and rotate through the space. // The chorus gather and pause, in a tableau, in the middle of the stage. It feels like the first moment of stillness in over an hour. A camera flashes.

* * *

This is a non-linear and discontinuous selection of moments, situations, and images from Papaioannou's *Since She* (2018) one of the first full-length, new works to be choreographed on the Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch following the choreographer's death.[1] I have tried to render three things in the description: one is the looping, eddying, choreographic flow of ideas and situations, which resist chronologies, lines of descent or genealogies, but evoke rivers, dreams, memories, and assemblages which, as Deleuze and Parnet described them, flow and affiliate like, 'contagions, epidemics, the wind'.[2]

The second is Papaioannou's use of Greek myth as a plastic material which, he and the dancers mould, crack, and shape as they choreograph multi-species assemblages that move one, two, three dancers at a time. These are murmurating forms with eight limbs, or with the body of a crab, and the head of a woman – more-than-human collages, of people and objects which have collided together into sculptural forms articulating something of the posthuman tragic quality that emanates from Papaioannou's choreography.[3] Consequently, *Since She* expresses in performance, what Mario Telò and Melissa Mueller have called tragedy's 'uncanny sense of our own material limits and troubled boundlessness'.[4]

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[1] Three shorter works were produced before this for an evening *NEUE STÜCKE* (2015): 'Somewhat still when seen from above', by Theo Clinkard; 'The Lighters Dancehall Polyphony', by Cecilia Bengolea and Francois Chaignud; and 'In Terms of Time' by Tim Etchells.

[2] Deleuze and Parnet (1987) 69. See Papaioannou (2020a) [np]: 'I like to arrange things to encourage a dreamlike atmosphere, I don't know if I succeed, but this is the territory where I would like to communicate with others. I'm not going for the myth, I'm not going for the poetics necessarily, but I am trying to explore a universe that is beyond realism, so I enter this kind of subconscious, fusion, fantasy'.

[3] See Mueller and Telò (2018); Bianchi, Brill, and Holmes (2019); Worman (2020).

[4] Ibid.

The third element I have highlighted here is the dancers' returns to and re-enactments of Bausch's work following her passing, alluded to in the title *Since She*. For example, the branches, chairs, suits, and high heels are all objects from the Tanztheater Wuppertal's network of tragic choreographies. The chairs were once obstacles to movement, quickly shifted out of the way by dancers, or even by the set designer and Bausch's close collaborator, Rolf Borzik.[5] There, they represented empty spaces at a dinner table, spots reserved for dead or missing loved ones – vibrant haunting matter. Here they form another kind of bridge into the world of the dead. The tree carried by the dancer in Bausch's last choreography for the Company *'... como el musguito en la piedra, ay si, si, si ...' (Like Moss on a Stone)*, appears, as if the figure has been carrying it all this time and is now looking for somewhere to replant it and set it down. The suits, the shoes, the sight of a woman alone smoking: all haunting reappearances. These uncanny returns of the deceased which in *Since She* come into embodied contact with the living.

In the previous chapter, I argued that in the Tanztheater Wuppertal's performances tragic experience was enacted through a transgression, rupture, or 'overstepping' of and between performance forms.[6] In the breach, the tragic events from the dancers' everyday lives were threaded into the performance – past traumas, the calamities of war, structural violence, lost loved ones, deceased friend, the HIV/AIDS crisis. This threading of the everyday disrupted the frames of performance which then emerged in the rear-view as they collapsed; it functioned through the body-memories of the dancers and the audience members coming into contact; and it was felt in the collective and sometimes confrontational performance of a violent, erotic, hopeful and traumatic situation. I also observed that the tragic overstepping in the Tanztheater Wuppertal's performances both threatened and promised to return, as re-iterative breaches, like

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[5] *Since She* Digital Programme (2018) 7.
[6] 'Overstepping' is Lehmann's term, cf. Lehmann (2016) particularly 42, 49–50, 62–63, 374, 376.

the turn Orpheus makes towards Eurydice in the underworld – which happens again and again in cumulative receptions. In Bausch's work, grief is both a disorganising force and a connective tissue.

This chapter stays with the trouble of grief and argues that in Papaioannou's work mourning functions, in Loraux's terms, as 'the final word sung', the resounding vibrations of tragedy that extends a sense of belonging beyond 'civic community' and towards an 'even more essential membership', that of belonging to 'the race of mortals'.[7] However, does this expanded sense of grief's ability to connect those living, those dead and those not yet among us, always guarantee such membership, especially given the precarity and vulnerability of marginalised groups?

To be grievable one must first be thought of as human.[8] And the concept of the human is not so straightforwardly a universal category that encompasses everyone living and dying on the planet.[9] Many are dehumanised, or have never been seen as fully human and thus not everyone is considered grievable by everyone else, not all deaths have been grieved for, and not everyone finds such easy membership in this 'race of mortals'.[10] Further, not everything that dies, is grieved for universally. Plants, rivers, animals, insects, bacteria, viruses, oceans can all die, can and do become extinct, yet grief, for them, is not always a given. And additionally, attending to our grief for all the multi-species systems, communities, and ecologies that compose and are composed by this 'damaged planet' is not straightforwardly ameliorated by announcing that we are comprised of the planet and the planet is comprised of us.[11] While this question is explored in further detail in the following chapter, I think it is worth raising here, as the argument moves toward a posthuman or more-than-human sense of grief

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[7] Loraux (2002) 94.
[8] See Butler (2000, 2004), (2009) 38–39, (2015, 2020, 2022).
[9] See Wynter (2003); Mignolo (2015); McKittrick (2015); McKittrick and Wynter (2015); Jackson (2019).
[10] Loraux (2002).
[11] Bubandt, Gan, Swanson and Tsing (2017).

even as Papaioannou choreographs a virile and extractive sense of the human as Man – a concept from Silvia Wynter's work that will be integral to the analysis that follows.[12]

Working towards this more-than-human sense of grief, then, the first section charts an overview of Papaioannou's work to draw out major themes and tensions which shape his affiliations with tragedy. I go on to examine Papaioannou's work for the Olympics Opening Ceremony staged in Athens (2004) and analyse the ways in which he uses tragedy to perform a universal concept of being human – by establishing a mode of turning back to the past which is indicative of a kind of dominant or normative colonial model of relation. The conclusion reflects on iterations of this mode of re-turn, through the figure of Medea who threatens, undoes, or queers the concept of the human – undoing this relational form. Taken together, these three sections form an argument that operates around a central tension: between theories of tragedy as an ahistorical universal aspect of the human condition, on the one hand, and tragedy as an historically situated process of more-than-human assemblages or a deconstruction or troubling of the human in its moment on the other. Additionally I attend to the ways in which queerness has been figured variously as an inhuman and a foundationally human(ist) phenomenon. Here I argue that tragedy is a hinge that not only shifts but oscillates between performances of queers as non-human, dangerous 'things' (somewhere between subject and object) and as grievable human beings.[13]

i)      Loss

Papaioannou is an enigmatic and ambivalent artist. He is a working-class choreographer who founded a queer, underground, countercultural theatre Company, Edafos Dance Theatre

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[12] See Wynter (2003).
[13] On thingliness, see Lepecki (2016) 34–60; cf. Moten (2003); Harney and Moten (2013).

(ἔδαφος 'ground')–which partly operated out of a squat.[14] But he also holds a Golden Cross of the Holy Order for his contribution to national Greek culture. Both sensual and provocative, he combines, like Bausch, several aesthetic and choreographic languages describing himself as 'primarily a painter', but working mostly with bodies, lighting, and objects.[15]

Over its thirteen-year run, Edafos gained a loyal audience for integrating a queer choreographic sensibility with an experimental practice, and performance lab structure. Mentored by postmodern theatre director Robert Wilson, Papaioannou takes forward his emphasis on the choreography of concepts (time, space) over narrative and character.[16] Papaioannou notes:

> In theatre, anything can become material to use. From your subconscious to a disco ball. The only good thing about postmodernism is that we can put together anything that we need; what comes out on the other side is the composition.[17]

Before founding Edafos in 1986, he was a student of the queer Greek artist Yannis Tsarouchis at the Athens School of Fine Arts. A painter, stage designer, illustrator, director, and writer, Tsarouchis was positioned 'at the crossroads between, on the one hand, the regionalism and nationalism manifest in revivalist tendencies in Greek art at the time, and, on the other hand, the internationalist aspirations of the avant-garde'.[18] And yet, 'instead of choosing between the two, Tsarouchis embarked on his own path […] [negotiating] the difference between the promise of modernisation and the spall of tradition'.[19] He designed sets for Samuel Beckett's work in Paris and Thessaloniki, and designed both the costumes and sets for Maria Callas' performance as Medea at the Dallas Civic Opera (1958).[20] His focus on the

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[14] Papaioannou https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/profile.
[15] Papaioannou (2020a) [01:05].
[16] On Tragedy, the postdramatic, and the shift from narrative to concepts, see Cole (2019).
[17] Papaioannou in Trobetta (2020) 10.
[18] Szymczyk (2021) 299.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Szymczyk (2021) 300

male nude, the 'vulnerability and latent sexual energy of the male body', recoded and reframed gender roles and hierarchies from 1930s modernist aesthetics.[21] From Tsarouchis, Papaioannou says he gained his focus on a queer poetics of the mundane, the 'sacredness of simple things', and ephemerality.[22] But he also embodies Tsarouchis' sense of aesthetic and political inbetweeness.

This affiliative combination – of postmodern material choreographic practice and queer poetics – has facilitated contact between *Medea*, Homer, Prometheus, Achilles, Medusa, *The Oresteia*, Sappho, the nude, and the ruin across Papaioannou's body of work. For he uses queerness as a kind of plaster, that can shape or crack open, linking fragments or crumbling into and among other broader mythologies: moulding answers to questions about who we are, what we are doing on this planet, and how we make sense of our relationship to the earth and to one another. This is expressed in Papaiouanou's' earliest works, which interrogate Euripides and Aeschylus: *Xenakis' Oresteia - The Aeschylus Suite* (1995); *Iphigenia at The Bridge of Arta* (1995); and *Medea* (1993). These pieces set the stage for Papaioannou's lyric work of mass mourning, *A Moment's Silence* (1995), which was both a eulogy for his recently deceased friend (the queer new wave director) Alexis Bistikas, and a reflection on Bistikas' death as one among many thousands during the HIV/AIDS crisis.[23] *A Moment's Silence* is enacted through tragic-elegiac choreography, where the ensemble, on their hands and knees, attempt to climb a set of steps, but they cannot maintain their grip, and so tumble into the depths, again and again.[24] Here Papaiouanou's attention to beauty and a queer aesthetics of failure frustrates, in generative ways, what Muñoz has called the 'anaemic' and 'pragmatic' LGBTQ+ politics, at

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[21] Szymczyk (2021) 299.
[22] Papaioannou (2020b) [c06.40].
[23] Papaioannou (nd) [np]: https://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/recent/a-moment-s-silence.
[24] See Moten (2003) 98—99.

the beginning of the millennium – one interested in assimilation, and the expansion of norms – by insisting on the scale and terror of the many deaths in the epidemic.[25]

In 1999 Edafos made an opera *The Return of Helen* (1999) and in 2001 a dance-theatre work *For Ever*. In the latter Helen appears alongside Marylin Monroe, pre-figuring Anne Carson's later exploration of the pair in *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy* (2019). The Athens Olympics Opening Ceremony comes in 2004, two years after the dissolution of the Edafos Dance Theatre Company, followed by *2* (2006), which explored the particularities of queer life, desire, politics, and their intersections with *both* the tragic presentation of the world in a new way and ancient Greek myth. This is very similar to the phenomenon Emilio Capettini describes whereby ancient Greece 'provides models for imagining one's futurity, even in the face of the incommensurable loss brought about by the AIDS epidemic'.[26]

This performance features a central sequence where two men run towards one another on travelators which run in opposite directions. There is a tension here between queerness in postmodernity (as a disconnection of elements, a deconstruction of identities and signs), and staging queerness as connective across a network of myths which plays against a memory of a sense of unending death, or total vulnerability to death exemplified by *A Moment's Silence*. These works might ask another question: in postmodernity how does/is queerness working both as a popular set of aesthetics and a rejected set of sexual practices? But in each it is this sense of chosen affiliative relationality that comes through. As Papaioannou phrased it, 'from your subconscious to a disco ball […] we can put together anything that we need'.[27]

Papaioannou restaged *Medea* as *Medea(2)* (2008–09), alongside *Nowhere* (2009). During the process of making the latter, Bausch died and the work became a dedication to her, featuring a central scene of three-minutes' length where two rows of dancers form two

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[25] See Muñoz (2019) 19; cf. Halberstam (2011).
[26] Capettini (2018).
[27] Papaioannou in Trobetta (2020) 10.

undulating wings, attached to a central couple, whom they undress.[28] This assemblage of flesh, affect, grief and tenderness would go on to feature in multiple choreographies across the world, as in Akram Khan's 'Dust' performed as part of the English National Ballet's *Lest We Forget* (2014) – a choreographic memorial marking first the centenary of the beginning, and then reperformed to mark the centenary of the end, of World War I.

Both *Nowhere*, and *Medea(2)* were also performed against a backdrop of rioting in Greece, as the streets burned following the murder of a young person, Alexandros Grigoropoulos, by the police.[29] And, during their runs, the financial crash happened which shifted the country from a place of prosperity to a questioning of everything, magnifying the 'contestation and anti-authoritarian protest' movements across the country.[30]

As the crash intensified *Homer's Iliad – Book Four* (2010), and *K.K* (2010) were staged, both responding to the terror and tragic devastation of the historical, political and economic climates: one through the epic the other through Cavafy's lyric elegies. *Inside* (2011), which comes after, was a critical failure. It's grand durational exploration of apartment living, featuring multiple haunting loops of the ordinary, was rejected by audiences. And it thus precedes a reflection and deconstruction of his practice, which was driven by a desire that, 'if there is anything interesting for me to do in the midst of a financial crisis then [it is] to go back to minimal materials'.[31]

*Primal Matter* (2012) is this deconstruction, and it performs a history of Western art, from the Parthenon friezes – especially focusing on the Centauromachy (which in Papaiouanou's words represents, 'humanity not yet liberated from animal instincts') – through to Greek sculpture and painting in general.[32] Here, Papaioannou plays 'the mind, psyche, the

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[28] Somzé (2017) [np].
[29] Papanikolaou (2021) 33–35.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Papaioannou (2020b) [01:54].
[32] Ibid.

intellectual, complicated self-destructive and completely cannibalistic creature', and his duet partner, 'Michalis [Theophanous] is nature itself, beauty itself, simplicity of existence itself'.[33] Describing this as a staging of the development of the human/civilisation from ancient Greece the work eventually sees Papaioannou become the 'father' or 'cowherd' to his 'son'/'cattle', washing his body delicately after he has defecated, before then pretending to drinking his urine and tenderly drying his hair.[34] When speaking on the work he mused, '[surely] overcoming the physical limitations of this world is actually the quest of humanity. No?'.[35]

*Still Life* (2014) and *The Great Tamer* (2017) both push the development of the bodily 'optical illusions' developed in *Primal Matter*, reshaping the dancers into composite fragmentary assemblages. The opening sequence of *Still Life*, *Sisyphus* was presented by Robert Wilson at the Watermill Centre in New York, as part of his annual Summer Benefit Gala, on 26 July 2014. It is dedicated to Homer and features explorations of Astronauts, Thomas Eakin's *Portrait of Dr. Samuel D. Gross (The Gross Clinic)* (1875), and a searching exploration of the human at its limits.

The most recent phase of Papaioannou's *oeuvre* includes *Since She* (2018), *Sisyphus / Trans / Form* (2019), and *Ink* (2020), all made before the pandemic. The 2019 work is a collage of sections from previous pieces organised around ideas of transformation and the Sisyphus myth; *Ink* is a soaking, wetter trio that figures a second relationship between Papaioannou as clothed choreographer and a naked younger dancer: this time, they are joined by an octopus. He describes *Ink* as a reflection on succession, father-son relationships, and ancestor-inheritor models/myths like: 'Cronus and his children'.[36] It has been read by many as a valorisation of pederasty with the younger dancer, Šuka Horn, being described as Papaioannou's son, his lover, and uncomfortably as a 'savage double' who needs to be 'tamed' by his father, the

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[33] Papaioannou (2020b) [11:00].
[34] Papaioannou (2020b) [24:00].
[35] Papaioannou (2020b) [11:00].
[36] Papaioannou (2020a) [04:33].

civilising force.[37] Most recently, there has been a major post-lockdown co-production, *Transverse Orientation* (2021), which is an exploration of proprioceptive movement, surrealism, and the figure of the moth. This work refracts these themes of fatherhood through the Minoan bull, which is for Papaioannou the 'beginning of European culture', a 'monster that you have to kill in the labyrinth to be free'.[38]

Papaioannou has moved from queer underground DIY spaces to (inter)national stages, and he has shifted between countercultural expressions of queerness as a non-normative force, a grieving for the losses of the HIV/AIDS crisis, and a form of, what Jasbir Puar calls, 'homonationalism'.[39] 'Homonationalism' is a historical and political concept used to account for the moves to assimilate homosexuality and some forms of queerness into dominant and normative culture, society, and politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As Puar explains, these moves rely on a programme of humanising certain queer people, 'excluding the racialised other from the national imaginary', the formation of an exceptionalised 'national' form of homosexuality, and the shifting of 'the terms of degeneracy', as such 'that homosexuality is no longer a priori excluded from nationalist formations'. [40]

While Puar's work is focused on North America and 'the coming out of the exceptionalism of American empire', Papaioannou similarly explores a form of 'national homosexuality' that links Greece with ancient and modern empires. [41] Through the portrayal of male-male erotic encounter and exchange on stage – his valorisation of the male nude, civilisational practices of taming, and controlling, and especially his references to ancient Greece (in myth and tragedy) as a landscape for the queer imaginary –, he universalises certain

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[37] Trobetta (2020) 15, 24; cf. Papaioannou (2020a); Vaccarino (2021). For a deconstruction of the relationship between pederasty, queerness, and coloniality, see Amin (2017).
[38] Papaioannou and Goff (2020) [np].
[39] Puar (2017).
[40] Puar (2017) 1–11.
[41] Ibid.

forms of queerness as a part of the human condition. Consequently he adopts or co-signs the regulatory scripts of homonationalism.

Operating in the aftermath of the HIV/AIDS crisis the various tragic choreographies Papaioannou developed ask a number of questions relevant to contemporary queer theory: Given queerness' proximity to grief and loss,[42] to what extent should one advocate for inclusion, expansion, and protection within existing systems, and to what extent should those systems be undone?[43] Should queers be relational or anti-relational with regard to heteronormativity?[44] How important is anti-normativity as an axis in queer(ness') critique?[45] If we combine both the relational and the anti-relational,[46] in what proportion should one work toward utopian horizons that exceed the boundaries and potentialities of the world, and/or struggle to unmake the world as it is?[47] Finally, is a queer politics only possible if one, not only denounces the place of queers in the social hierarchy, but also the social hierarchy as a material, ideological, conceptual, and political practice?[48]

In the pieces surveyed, it is apparent that Papaioannou's choreography and its reception is ambivalent with regards to these questions. The strategies of deconstruction he works through create space for re-assembling normative tropes and ideas, his exploration of the ephemeral, beautiful and leaky body challenge assumptions, but his alignment of queerness with coloniality as a civilisational force belie a relational and worldmaking strategy which contours his work.

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[42] On the relationship of this problem to queer time, see Goldberg and Menon (2005); Freccero (2006); Jagose (2009); Matzner (2016); Ward (*forthcoming*). On time and, particularly, HIV/AIDS, see Halberstam (2005), Kafer (2013); and on politics and ephemerality, see Muñoz (2019).

[43] For a history of this debate, see Bersani (1987); Edelman (2004); Muñoz (2019) 10–15, (2020); Anzaldúa (2021). Cf. Lewis (2019b) [np] who notes: 'Ever since [Edelman's work was published] it's been quite clear to many (especially nonwhite, nonmale) critics within queer theory and politics that an anti-maternal, anti-baby politics will never transcend the repronormative regime Edelman calls "reproductive futurism". Because it is simply an inversion of it […] *No Future* has – forgive me – no future'.

[44] Muñoz (2019) 10–15, 34, 91–94.

[45] See Amin (2017); cf. Weigman and Wilson (2015).

[46] See Muñoz (2019) and Nyong'o (2019).

[47] Both in the sense of a queer undoing of boundaries including life and death, and queer lives as precarious. On bad feelings, see Love (2007); See (2020). On unmaking, see Bey (2021); Halberstam (2011, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023a, b).

[48] Puar (2017) 2. See Amin (2022) for a development of this argument, which includes a reflections on 'nonbinary' as an emergent identity category that can also enforce regulatory scripts.

Without attempting to resolve this ambivalence, which itself is indicative of a kind of queer politics and aesthetics in the early twenty-first century, I wager that by attending to the presence and function of both tragedy and grief in Papaiouanou's choreographic practice a more well-defined set of strategies emerges – in response to loss – oscillating between an affirmation of the queer as human and an assertion of the inhumanism of the queer. This is the investigation I will develop in the following sections by turning to two case studies in particular.

ii)     Tragic Man

> Too much has been made of origins. All origins are arbitrary. This is not to say that they are not also nurturing, but they are essentially coercive and indifferent. Country, nation, these concepts are of course deeply indebted to origins, family, tradition, home. Nation-states are configurations of origins as exclusionary power structures which have legitimacy based solely on conquest and acquisition.[49]

Throughout the Olympics' history much attention has been given to the Opening Ceremony as a performance event through which a particular set of narratives about the host-nation are presented.[50] Origins and the fantasy of harmonious progress are common ways of thinking about the nation in this context and are frequent among the Opening Ceremonies of the early 2000s. Sydney in 2000 presented 300 years of settler colonialism as a harmonious celebration, 'an allegory of postcolonial reconciliation' to the anger of the indigenous communities still working to decolonise their land.[51] Beijing in 2008 reflected on the theme of progress with a performance that celebrated and constructed a view of China as both ancient and rapidly developing, obscuring dangerous working conditions while effectually testing their soft power on a global scale.[52] The Opening Ceremony in London 2012 reflected on the industrial

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[49] Brand (2002) 64.
[50] Gilbert and Lo (2007) 1–4.
[51] Gilbert and Lo (2007) 1; Squires (2000) [np].
[52] Chen (2012) 194.

revolution without, of course, even a suggestion that it had been facilitated by global settler colonialist practices, engagement with the slave trade, and continued neo-colonial imperialism.[53]

Historians of the Olympics have consequently seen the games as ways to examine the discursive and material construction of the nation, what Stuart Hall has called the 'narrative of nation'.[54] The Olympic Games are networks of various events, sporting and otherwise, which perform certain values: hospitality, unity, struggle, taking part over winning, and innovation through competition, but also failure, the limits of the body, collapse, even death.[55] They are a space in which a form of relating to the past is formalised, broadcast, and performed on a mass scale.[56] This both nurtures and is nurtured by an ideological orientation towards origin myths. Or as the founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Pierre de Coubertin noted, 'the Olympic Games are a pilgrimage to the past and an act of faith in the future'. [57]

This was no different for the 2004 Athens Olympics which foregrounded the theme of origins in its Opening Ceremony, staging the nation of Greece as the fount of humanity. Entitled *Birthplace*, the performance was a large-scale spectacle choreography involving thousands of dancers, stage-machinery, moving sculptures, sets, costumes, and props. On account of the development in technologies for filming and broadcasting, more viewers tuned in to watch the athletic competitions and the opening and closing ceremonies on 13 August than at any previous Olympics.[58] According to a document released by the Global Television

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[53] This repeats a narrative that mis-locates the origin of industrialisation, and as Ward notes, (*forthcoming*) 69, this '[mis-location of] the geographical origin of industrialisation (in the cotton mills of the North of England, rather than China, India or other places where the natural materials of cotton are grown, for example)', is a reflection of a point made by Bhambra (2007), who has examined other such narratives which continue to 'mis-locate and thereby, create, and sustains misleading narratives of Europe's superiority' (*forthcoming*) 69.
[54] Hall (1997).
[55] Gilbert and Lo (2007) 2.
[56] See Postclassicisms Collective (2020) 8–18.
[57] Coubertin, cf. Muzaffar (2021) [np].
[58] The Athens Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXVIII Olympiad (ATHOC) (2005) and International Olympics Committee, (IOC) Global TV Report (December 2004) 1–5. The report marks these as metrics of success: how many viewers, how long did they watch for, how did the world respond affectively to the spectacle?

Report for the International Olympic Committee, in the UK each viewer consumed almost 14 hours of Olympic Games coverage in total, which is almost one hour each for every day of the competition.[59] And the Opening Ceremony alone attracted an average audience of 8.6 million, which was a 41% share of the UK television audience at that time.[60] In Greece, coverage of the Opening Ceremony on ERT attracted an audience of 2.4 million.[61] There was even a video made by two members of the international space station stating they would be tuning in to watch the ceremony.[62] This means that the Opening Ceremony was not only produced for the particular performance space of the stadium but also meant to be consumed by a more-than-planetary, pop, audience.

Such mass media events – which are transversal in their multi-class, gender, race, geographic and even temporal engagements – are neither sites '[of] "pure" autonomy', nor of 'total encapsulation', and indoctrination. Instead, as Stuart Hall has explained:

> Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured.[63]

This struggle, Hall notes, is a part of what he sees as a broader strategy to 'disorganise and reorganise popular culture' at the end of the twentieth century. Here new media (and now social, virtual, and digital media) form a series of interfacing inter and intra-medial landscapes where representations (ideas, concepts, and materialities) are re-worked and reshaped, through 'repetition and selection'.[64] As spaces for the establishment and contestation of hegemony, such

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[59] IOC (2004) 14.
[60] Ibid.
[61] There were 12.9 million viewers of the Opening Ceremony in Germany, 3.6 million viewers watched coverage of the Opening Ceremony in Canada; in South Korean viewer consumed a staggering 15 hours of Olympic coverage over the full run and Live coverage of the Opening Ceremony attracted 95% of the total television audience available at that time. See IOC (2004) 11–17.
[62] Tsangari (2004a) [22.16].
[63] Hall (2018) 360–61; cf. Hastings (2022).
[64] Hall (2018) 187–88.

events are a series of colliding and refractive frames where complex and contradictory perceptions and affects are revised, worked through.[65]

Thus, beaming to 8.6 million viewers, the Opening Ceremony explored ideas of the human, civilisation – embodying the conceptual thrust of Dionne Brand's reflections on origins, as excerpted in the epigraph for this section. For, this was a performance of Greece as a mythic configuration of a story of the origin of the human species. It sought no specific historical moment out of which the human might have sprung but instead choreographed a mode of relating to humanity based on an arbitrary but coercive (conceptually and materially co-constructive) incision of difference, a modelling of progress, (techno-biological) development, expansion, and consumption. And, it is under these conditions that Papaioannou turns to tragedy for the climactic moment in a ceremony worked through the history of the world, by returning (turning back) to the ancient past and looking forward to the future.

*Choreographing an History of the History of the World*[66]

The performance began with a sea of volunteer performers playing drums, emerging into the stadium – the centre of which was flooded with 2,162 cubic meters of water.[67] Then a voice declared: 'Olympic Games: welcome back to Greece!' This was followed by a series of rituals (including the entrance of officials) which connected ancient ideals of democracy with a contemporary instantiation of it. Then two liminal frames were staged. The first was the entrance of a heterosexual couple who run at the water's edge before falling asleep. The second, a reading of a section of George Seferis' *Mythistorema*.[68] This oscillation between a performance of ancient, modern, and contemporary politics frayed the edges between the three

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[65] Ibid.
[66] An iteration of Brand (2020).
[67] Traganou (2009) 83.
[68] Seferis, Keeley, Sherrard (1997). For discussions on Seferis' relationship to tragedy see Liapis (2014)

sites: Olympia collapsed into Seferis' Greece, collapsed into a post-9/11, pre-financial crash Athens.

As Seferis' famous lines are read – 'I woke with this marble head in my hands; / it exhausts my elbows and I don't know where to put it down. / It was falling into the dream' – the audience waves hand-held lights, creating a cosmos within the stadium.[69] A centaur, illuminated in red ambles into the lake, raising a javelin, 'so our life became one and it will be very difficult for it to separate again'.[70] The music swells, as the javelin is thrown into the middle of the stadium. Seferis' reflections on the legacy of ancient Greece are then reified as an enormous Cycladic head emerges from the middle of the lake. This is the beginning of the 'Allegory section', an expression of, the 'evolution of Greek civilisation'.[71] In the dream, into which we wake, as the Cycladic head rises from the water, beams of light are projected onto it forming digital patterns, meant to signify geometry, mathematics, and eventually the atom.

The centaur crosses the lake and the Cycladic head ruptures, revealing a *kouros*, which ruptures again to reveal a contrapposto statue: the Archaic and the Classical periods of sculpture are here virtually signalled.[72] As the pieces float in the air over the water, and images of people from all over the world are projected onto them – a mother cradling a baby, an eye with one tear rolling onto its cheek –, it becomes clear that from these hyper-iterations and fragmentations Papaioannou means to construct a grand narrative, the story of humankind. The images fade and a giant cube appears on which a singular male figure sits, before rising and eventually running in slow motion over its flat surfaces as it turns. The fragments settle in the water signalling the geography of Greece and its islands. And suddenly the world, the human

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[69] Seferis, Keeley, Sherrard (1997) 3.
[70] Ibid.
[71] ATHOC (2005) 170.
[72] Ibid.

is collapsed into Greece and all the human species are collapsed into this singular Man. As Papaioannou phrases it, this is a 'celebration of humanity'.[73]

In his analysis of national narratives, the Athenian Olympics, Hellenism, and archaeology, Dimitris Plantzos notes that this structure is not unique to the Opening Ceremony in Athens, nor to opening ceremonies in general:

> Re-inventing the past as spectacle, however, had been a project instrumental to Western modernity long before the time when Greece, as a fledgling nation-state, decided to forge its national identity based on its perceived Classical past. Through excavation, reconstruction and exhibition European archaeology managed to represent the ancient world as a picture, in order – to paraphrase Heidegger – to achieve its conquest.[74]

Here Plantzos explicitly ties inventing the past as spectacle with Western 'modernity' and the process of conquering other peoples and land via colonialism. For Arabella Stanger in dance in particular, these are 'acts of spatial imagination that negate the fissures, conflicts, and ruptures […] and produce dance as projection, aspiration, and simulation of that world perfected in some way'.[75]

Consequently, this choreography of Greece *as* the world enacts a politics that repeats the colonial moves made through dispossession, devastation, attrition to instantiate the West, for whom Greece can here metonymically stand, as a dominant and ordering force.[76] As Stanger has noted, thus, dance's 'interplay of spatial forms and material conditions', not only shapes but is shaped by 'sensations of movement, experiences of cultural identity, or modes of theatrical perception', which are 'involved in socioeconomic processes of production and dispossession'.[77] In other words the moves the dancers perform, and the patterns they take in

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[73] Papaioannou quoted in the IOC news (2004) [np].
[74] Plantzos (2011) 615.
[75] Stanger (2021) 25.
[76] Umachandran and Ward (2021).
[77] Stanger (2021) 12.

the stadium, are not arbitrary nor are they only aesthetic, but they are informed by, enact, and in turn re-inform one's ability to think about and articulate socio-politics.[78]

Papaioannou is aware of the dangers of such an act of spatial and temporal choreography:

> Let's be clear: these ceremonies might use art, but they are not art in and of themselves. These assignments are national propaganda – one has to be positive and optimistic at all times. Part of the job is to erase the malfunctions of history, and this is not how art works. But it does take artistic skill to do these big advertisements for culture. It has been a great exercise to sharpen and test my tools on an enormous scale using incredible technology and thousands of people.[79]

And yet, despite his protestation, what he reveals here is precisely the crux of Stanger's argument. That such mass events cover, bury, 'erase', negate the 'fissures', 'malfunctions' (read: dispossession, genocide, attrition) by extending movements, which are shaped by and inform socio economic processes *like* dispossession.

Papaiouanou's work enacts this shaping and reshaping of the socio-cultural on both a material and conceptual level. As he tells us, in this assignment of national propaganda he is staging a history of thought, a history of practices and theories relating to and understanding the world, which are meant to map onto the development, expansion and evolution of the human, or human civilisation. Each move, from Cycladic to contrapposto to flesh, signals a shift from the philosophies of Pythagoras and Democritus to lyric and eventually tragedy.[80]

As with Bausch's work on *Nelken*, here we find a series of iterative ruptures in form that index a breach in an understanding of the world. And while projection is utilised to layer mathematical figures and atoms performing the thought of Pythagoras and Democritus, the two poetic art forms (lyric and tragedy) are signalled by the statues themselves, and their collapse:

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[78] See Hewitt (2005).
[79] Somzé (2017) 171.
[80] ATHOC (2005) 170.

The standard Kouros stands gazing at the future with a smile. With his left foot forward, he seems ready to conquer it. It is the first time in history that a statue stands alone, with no background supporting it. Lyrical poetry is born […] The statue breaks into six pieces, to reveal another statue, from the 5th century BC, born alongside democracy a human figure that stands alone in space, leaning from its vertical axes. The Classical statue does not smile any more. *It represents the first free citizen of Europe, the citizen of the first democratic regime ever born. In Athens, tragedy is born.*[81]

Then, as the free(standing) contrapposto statue explodes an enfleshed human emerges from the plaster rubble, lifted on a giant cube. This overstepping confuses representational forms once more and brings into sharp relief the precarity of the fleshy human body against the enormous machinery.

As the applause dies down, a Minoan snake priestess appears rocking back and forth, clutching two snakes above her head: the opening vignette in a grand parade which has employed mechanised bodies, posing, and shifting and fused with or emerging out of stone, marble, clay and rock. Entitled Clepsydra, this portion staged a clock, part Homeric image and part Benjaminian 'angel of history', choreographing an autochthonous aetiology for not only the people of Athens but the people of the world.[82] Next, multiple floats wind their way round the stadium leading us from Cycladic art through Hellenic sculpture, the Byzantine era, up to the turn of the twentieth century. One of the last tableaux is of a Tsarouchis-inspired set of sailors who lean and reach towards each other, reifying homoeroticism, and queer aesthetics looking beyond tragedy and becoming a part of the development of human civilisation out of ancient Greece.

But the ceremony does not end there. The last stage in the procession is a single performer, a pregnant woman, the same woman who lay down with the man in the shallow artificial lake at the start. After she has symbolically cast off the heavy sculpture of the past –

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[81] ATHOC (2005) 170.
[82] ATHOC (2005) 175.

Papaioannou tells us this is a snake shedding its skin – and with her stomach glowing, literally radiating light, she wades into the water and gives birth to a new Greece. [83]

The stadium lights dim, and the audience hold up torches again. Lasers mark out a cosmos across the space and from the mist rises a constellation which takes on the shape of DNA. The camera frames the reader of the poem in the background and the woman who will give birth to the new Greece stands in the fore. The dual-helix spins faster and faster before evaporating, then there is a blackout. Finally, the drums return, as do all the performers who are now out of their costumes and machines. An olive tree – the symbol of Athens – rises while the fragments from the allegorical sequence lift to frame it before the athletes are welcomed in.

Thus, by choreographing an history of Greece *as* the history and future of the world Papaioannou enacts a politics that repeats the colonial moves made through dispossession, devastation, attrition to instantiate the 'West', for whom Greece in this performance is meant to metonymically stand, as a force of control and domination.[84] In other words, the Opening Ceremony choreographs tragedy as a process of organising the world into lines, and causal sequences in response to the continual collapse of senses of the world, based on loss. This mythic-colonial choreography functions by organising a linear timeline which runs from the origins of the cosmos through Archaic, Classical, and Modern Greece on towards a future of cosmic human singularity, using the aesthetics of modernity (Arthur Evan's snake goddess, Tsarouchis' sailors), while also organising a spatial choreography of Greece, as the West, as Civilisation, as humanity which encircles the world.

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[83] Tsangari (2004a) [33.25].
[84] Umachandran and Ward (2021).

*Anthropos*

In the context of the Olympic Games, tragedy becomes a stage in human civilisational evolution. This affiliates Papaioannou with humanist theorists of tragedy and the tragic who identify – even in the faltering and perhaps futile confrontation with 'the injustice and futility of existence and in their suffering and defeat', that tragic protagonists 'affirm the "indomitability of the human spirit", the preeminent value of human life'.[85] These connections, allow us to reflect on tragedy as a means of understanding the overcoming of a breach, as well as a reflection on survival in its aftermath, but they also open up a broader question: How does tragedy relate to the material and conceptual boundaries of the human? Or in other words, how does our understanding and enactment of tragedy shape what it means to be human through performance?

In Sylvia Wynter's seminal essay *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument*, she writes that the 'struggle of the new millennium', will be over two factors: the 'conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, *and* that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioural autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves'.[86] One of the underlying premises of Wynter's argument, which she will spend the rest of the article outlining, is that Man is a particular 'genre' of the human,[87] which has two forms, Man1 (*homo politicus)* and Man2 (*homo oeconomicus*).[88] Both are produced historically: the former through the secularising process of science (Galileo's discovery that the earth revolved around the sun, and that the human was not the centre of the

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[85] Diamond (2014) 751.
[86] Wynter (2003) 260, emphasis my own.
[87] Wynter (2003) 269, 272, 277, 281.
[88] The former is a Renaissance invention following the Galilean shift, a rational vision of man; the latter is a figure of extraction, and capitalism. As such neither term is gender essentialist and many, of various genders and identities, can find membership in either category – if, perhaps, others can be excluded still: see Wynter (2003); McKittrick (2015); Walcot (2015). See Vergès (2021) for forms of feminism which function to support Man1 and Man2.

universe but a part of it) made possible in the enlightenment by experiments performed in/on

for example, the Caribbean;[89] and the latter through the extractive mechanisms of capitalism,

forged from and through the plantation and the transatlantic slave trade.[90] These categories are

produced, sustained, and enacted through both material and conceptual processes – ontogeny,

sociogeny – storying, choreographing, knowing, and becoming human.[91]

Key to both forms is a mode of relating to the ancient world which naturalises certain

processes of affiliation as if they were biological fact.[92] This relies on the establishment of

modes of relating to the ancient past as if the current and emergent formations of Europe, the

West, and whiteness were naturally formed through models of genealogy and inheritance – and

not constructed by practices of racialisation, and colonialism (which fabricate the production

of sex, gender, race and ability in order to support the continuation of the colony).[93]

My hypothesis is that both forms of Man are entangled with the vision of tragedy and

the tragic that Papaioannou's performance exemplifies. For example, Man1 is expressed in the

image of the performer rising up, set against the incommensurable backdrop of the cosmos;

and Man2 is articulated by the use and development of new technologies for the expression of

this vision, the enormous scale of the machinery, the volume of water, the number of

performers. Both are enacted in the linear, heteroreproductive, timeline within which the

performance takes place, with the history of the human expressed as the dream of the

contemporary couple through whom a new age of Greece is birthed.

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[89] Walcot (2015) particularly 190–92; cf. Wynter (2006).
[90] Or as Wynter has phrased it, in a rejoinder to Marx: 'The secret of capitalism […] is to be found not in the factory but in the plantation' Wynter (nd) cf. Sorentino (2022).
[91] On Wynter's relation to Fanon through sociogeny, see McKittrick and Wynter (2015) 11: 'sociogeny (our codes or masks or mythoi or origin narratives) is linked in semantically activating causal terms, with the bios phenomena of phylogeny / ontogeny'; see also McKittrick and Wynter (2015) 53–59.
[92] Ward (*forthcoming*).
[93] Ward (*forthcoming*) 48: who notes such devastating geomorphic and colonial moves were made possibly by, 'a particular humanist way of studying the ancient world', which made connections between humanism and dehumanisation – particularly anti-black and racist'.

Consequently tragedy shapes the human by offering a vision of Mankind as limited by capacity, fragile, and mortal but also capable of extraordinary feats which breach the boundaries of the possible, extend past the limitations of a single life, and are – despite death – performances of the human full of hope. Hope expressed either at the prospect of overcoming challenges and shortcomings or by expressing, 'a human willingness to [self-sacrifice]', through failure and death, for the development and acceleration of the species – toward a Western vision of human progress.[94] This is exemplified by the images projected on the fragments and the postmodern assemblage of all the ages of Man, who first walk in the procession and then gather together in front of the olive tree as it rises in the stadium. Here the fantasy of linear progress and the development of civilisation is symbolically ensured through reproductive futurity as the heterosexual couple, and their conceptual birthing of the new Greece, is figured as the machine and guarantor for both linear temporal and radial spatial expansion. Or in other words, if the tragic threat to Man, in theories of humanist mortality, is death, here that limit is overcome through reproduction, ownership, lineage, progress.

Here is a form of the human defined by its ability to reproduce, grow, and outperform, to fail: but in a great tragic-Romantic attempt to overcome or transcend some aspect of mortality.[95] That is, here Papaioannou choreographs an instrumentalization of the claims that 'death is the great leveller'[96] or that there is 'a "common" corporeal vulnerability', which links us by orientating (fear of) grief and mortality toward ownership, development, and control.[97]

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[94] Honig (2013) 18; cf. Macintosh (1994); Loraux (2002); Butler (2004b); Scott (2004); Diamond (2014) 751; Bianchi, Brill, and Holmes (2019) 5–6; Leonard (2019) 77–79, 89–92; and Quayson (2021): who each comment on the deconstructive and reconstructive relationship between tragedy and humanism or posthumanism, describing them as affiliatively and filiatively interrelated. They each outline several attempts to undo the ties between certain forms of tragedy and forms of domination.

[95] Scott (2004).

[96] Macintosh (1994) 92.

[97] Butler (2004b) quoted in Honig (2013) 17: here Honig also reflects on a then emergent debate around Butler's humanism. This stems from Butler noting that: 'There is a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human' Butler (2004b) 3–4. The debate carries through the work of Edelman (2004) and Arteel (2011) who each differently observe Butler's growing concern over the human.

In a lecture on her last book project, *Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) Donna Haraway spoke to the then contemporary debate around the suitability of the term Anthropocene to describe our current epoch, as proposed by the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG).[98] This debate illuminates the performance of Man via tragedy that Papaioannou choreographs. For, the name Anthropocene is meant to describe the way humans have changed the planet through coal-mines, oil-pipelines, microplastics, fracking, nuclear and atomic energy. But, the term is controversial, partly because of the ways in which it can erase the unequal distribution of suffering, power, and ethical responsibility for the climate emergency. As such others propose 'Capitalocene' and 'Plantationocene'.[99] Haraway, here responds specifically to the philosopher Bruno Latour,

> But Bruno argues also for the term Anthropocene, but his Anthropos is after the fall of the tower of Babel. Okay, it's not species man, it's not technological determinism, it is a heteroglot and polyglot after-the-fall figure. And I, I share with Bruno this work [of thinking with a heterogeneous polyglot figuration of species man], but I don't think the term [Anthropocene] can do it.
> 
> *Anthropos* the one who looks up, the one who looks from below, and takes over the power of the gods, the one who is on a tragic itinerary of self-formation, the one who is autopoietic and takes over from the autopoiesis of the earth in the great tragic-phallic project of escape velocity and de-tumescence in the tragic, but really quite deeply desired death of everything. We all know this Anthropos very well; we know the stories in our bones. [100]

This figuration of Man as *Anthropos* is the one who rises in Papaioannou's choreography of tragedy, 'a statue for the first time standing alone […] It represents the first free citizen of

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[98] See AWG (2019).

[99] For the debate about the use of the term, see Yusoff (2018); who responds to the AWG's proposed term. Yusoff articulates the racist colonialist entanglement/erasures of the term and its figurations of the human, arguing instead for an inhuman geography. For 'Plantationocene' and 'Capitalocene', see Haraway (2016): who takes a different tac to Yusoff by suggesting with think from an 'earthed' perspective; similar to Latour's formulation of Gaia, see Latour (2017).

[100] Haraway (2014) [c16.25]; cf. Haraway (2016). Her account of Anthropos builds on Le Guin (2019). She also references, through the idea of Anthropos as the one who looks up, an idea from Plato, Cratylus 399c. While Haraway's argument may not function on linguistic grounds, as an accurate etymology for the term Anthropos, it does reveal further connections between a way of thinking of the human (as the one able to see and analyse) and a way of turning back to the past that supports or has been adopted by white supremacy and fascism, namely that platonic ideals of the human have supported particular visions of Man as a colonial fantasy, see Kim (2017) and Weidmann (2017).

Europe, the citizen of the first democratic regime ever born. In Athens, tragedy is born'.[101] The choreographic pose, which confuses human and statue, flesh and fleshy object, vibrates with what Haraway diagnoses as the *Anthropos'* potential for both 'escape velocity and de-tumescence'.[102] The performance makes it seem as if humans have always been and will always be like this, rising up. Isn't the devastating effects of this 'autopoiesis' enough to encourage us to consider other forms of being human? Or, phrased another way: Is the tragic aspect of Man which is indicative of the violent force of the systems of affiliative relations he suggests – naturalised through pseudo-biological genealogies – deep and broad enough to suggest another way?

This figure cannot, I would argue, but bring back into view the sublimated violence, suffering, and grief that Man has wrought. Or in other words, this 'celebration of humanity' is a celebration of the process of forming Man as the overdetermined representational genre of being human. This is a process (which on a meta-discursive level) we could also term a tragedy as it attempts to choreograph the 'very deeply desired death of everything' as a romantic narrative of overcoming, liberation, progress, growth; as an autopoietic overtaking of the earth.[103] Consequently, in the rise of the human as Man on the abstracted cube of the world, more and more iterative tragic ruptures (what kind of world is this in which, what kind of world is this in which ...) emerge on the horizon, to which the Anthropos gazes, even as or perhaps precisely because they are buried, erased, by the choreographic perfection of the world according to the colonial vision.

As he walks over the earth, or sprints along the track, rising up in a great tumescent 'autopoietic' attempt to '[take] over from the autopoiesis of the earth', he leaves a great wake in his path.[104] The wake that Christina Sharpe has theorised as 'the conceptual frame of and for

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[101] ATHOC (2005) 170, emphasis author's own.
[102] Haraway (2014).
[103] IOC news (2004) [np].
[104] Haraway (2014).

living blackness in the diaspora in the still unfolding aftermaths of Atlantic chattel slavery'.[105]

The wake of the still unfolding aftermaths of the colonial projects of extraction, which shape the catastrophes of the present. The wake as a metaphor meant to enfold the 'entirety of its meanings (the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness)'.[106] The wake of the parade from the Minoans to the birth of a new Greece, choreographs linear colonial history as a series of cumulative wakes, as the tragic-romantic aftermaths of the gesture, the rupture between Man and the world, the terror of a form of the human rising up to dominate the world in a 'tragic and deeply desired death of everything', which is really a set of gestures that produces Man1 and Man2.

But this is to read the choreography against the grain. Remember that Papaioannou explained how the performance, was 'national propaganda – one has to be positive and optimistic at all times. Part of the job is to erase the malfunctions of history'.[107] Even though the wake and the terror of the *Anthropos* are a part of the reception of the work, its function is to celebrate these forms of being human above all.

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Therefore, Papaioannou's performance of linear progress from ancient Greece towards a utopian future buries the pain wrought by colonial development through a romantic narrative in which tragedy plays a part (colonial Man overcame the challenges of living and dying on the planet through expansion, extraction and enslavement). Thus, the ceremony intones and buries 'a dissimulation of racialised relations of power', discourses of normative gender,

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[105] Sharpe (2016a) 2.
[106] Sharpe (2016a) 17–18.
[107] Somzé (2017) 171.

sexuality, and embodiment underneath a celebratory performance of the nation as the birthplace of the human.[108]

He stages a humanist theorisation of the human as tragic Man made possible via those processes and their burial, whereby the tragedy of Man's continued mortality and his participation in devastating acts of genocidal violence remains, haunts, and limits his capacity for ethical action. In response to the troubling gesture of the tragic rupture, which looms on the horizon, tragedy becomes here a process of relating to the past through its impress on the present. This turns out to be an attempt to cover the unmaking of other worlds (non-white, non-human, queer, disabled, indigenous) through a fantasy of utopian Western worldmaking that presents a particular image of the human through tragedy.[109] And, this act of mass pop propaganda interfaces with the other sporting events which will take place in the stadium, foregrounding a vision of the human as a species of civilisational expansion, progress, and the overcoming of limits.

Thus, we could say again, after Ward, that this choreography '[reminds us of] Sylvia Wynter's nuanced response to the search for an origin point for mono-humanism'.[110] For Wynter argued that the key to understanding how Man emerged, was not located by identifying the precise date and location of his birth, but in describing the model of relation which sustained, construct, and established Man as a material and mythic reality. Or in other words, here Papaioannou choreographs the human as Man not by insisting on a particular point in time and place through which he is formed but by performing, on a global scale a particular choreographic practice of turning back to the ancient world that relies on a form of tragedy and the tragic to affirm certain genres of the human. As such we might note that tragedy is another axis on which this struggle for the 'conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself

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[108] Stanger (2021) 14.
[109] Stanger (2021) 14.
[110] Ward (*forthcoming*) 150.

as if it were the human itself' is played out. And tragedy, thus, is a process of contest and struggle, in the wake and anticipation of a terrible loss, where an idea of the human can be affirmed or undone.

iii)    *Medea*

At the culmination of Papaioannou's *Medea* – in both the 1993 and the 2008 versions – the eponymous tragic character stands still in the shallow water which floods the performance space. She is holding two figurines. Each a small sculpture, about a foot and a half in length, grey renderings of her two children. She holds them both perpendicular to her body, slotted over the end of her forearms. By this point in the performance, Jason has crossed the water in shoes with moulded ships for soles. He has taken the rams horns and boned skirt, which encased her flesh and extended her form into an animal/human-animal assemblage – part sphinx, swan, gecko, statue, and Minoan snake goddess. He took these adornments from her before they pulled the clothes from each other's bodies and crashed naked against one of the four enlarged tables which make up the set – each to represent an island on the stage of her journey from her homeland of Corinth to Thebes. Now Medea stands in the water, in between, gazing out at the audience.

She has just seen Jason with another woman, Glauce, and watched the two of them roll naked on the same surface of wood that she and Jason shared. In response, she has slid across the water gripping two enormous chairs, double her height, stood precariously on their edges, dragging their weight beneath her. She has put the ram's horns back on. She has wrapped the boned skirt-corset around her chest again and stalked across the water, tearing her body between tense held poses and agitation. Now she stands, holding the children aloft. For a moment she is still, looking up, and out at the audience. Until, she begins to expand the shape

she has initially taken to support the statuettes. Her arms move out and up. It is almost a challenge and a call to bear witness, to feel the weight of them, to anticipate the vibrations of what is about to come. They seem heavier and heavier as her arms extend into this unstable 'V' shaped pose. The distension, the effort, is visible in her shoulders, neck, and biceps.

The wait, the stillness is excruciating. It is as if the air has thickened. Amid this act of violence, she has been rendered with grace. Holding time, she creates a sustained durational proximity to awe, terror, and grief. She is magnificent – on the edge of a kind of sublime, that could in another world be a moment of contemplation. If only, someone could intervene, or if only things could be different: she is surely calling for the world to be different. There is a second terrible transformation. The pose is untenable. The suspension harmonically calls for resolution, and the release comes as Medea hurls both of her arms down and crashes the statues together. The models of the children, which partly enclosed her forearms, explode. The noise of the break echoes, and the recoil of the impact is read across her body. In the crash the shrapnel from the impact – made up of plaster, and light downy feathers – is blasted across the water at different velocities. Some of the material smashes into the water while the feathers, which on impact have made a diagonal scar through the space, float.

Thus, Medea's story is transported from a global and universalising myth of the human as Man to a particularised investigation of one of the many who have resisted him. Stood alone in the hinterland between his territories, Medea kills his offspring, future iterations of Man, and works to undo his expansive and tumescent domination. The piece I describe here is repeated in the work's two iterations, already an assemblage of many others. In this section I treat them as two different forms of turning back which complicate the *Anthropos*. I pick up a thread of questioning that ran throughout the descriptions of *Since She* which opened this chapter, and ask how does an attention to material affect/effect the choreography of tragedy, how does an attention to the non-human or inhuman change the role tragedy plays in theories

of the human? Or as Elin Diamond phrases it, 'what happens to the humanist foundations of tragedy when understandings of the human are subjected to these "new materialisms"?'.[111] Here I observe differing responses to the troubling of human bounds, or what posthuman philosopher Janette Bennett calls, the 'swarming activity' of collisions and encounters between human and non-human matter that reveals the already (de)constructed boundaries between both categories – particularly pronounced by grief – as well as the attendant categories of live/non-live, subject/object, and their relative agential distinctions.[112] I read these performances for an affiliative troubling of the vision of the human as Man so confidently presented in the Opening Ceremony, and ultimately as a counterblast to the idea of tragedy as a universal human(ist) 'foundation'.[113]

*Queer, Inhuman, Tragic*

The first iteration of *Medea* was commissioned by Spyros Merkouris, the brother of the socialist politician, actor, and singer Melina Merkouri, through the Cultural Centre of the City of Athens.[114] *Medea* premiered at the Royal Dutch Theatre, Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg (Antwerp - Belgium) in 1993. It was then staged at the National Theatre of Greece in 1994 and went on to win the First Award for Dance of the State of Greece and to tour internationally.[115] The quality of the show was informed by the DIY conditions in which they produced the work, its scale and grandeur made possible by their vision from within this space. It was staged through a queer aesthetics of excess, a camp operatic smash of references, ideas, and sounds. On this camp quality of the piece Papaioannou notes, reiterating many of Susan Sontag's observations on the term:

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[111] Diamond (2014) 751.
[112] Mueller and Telò (2018) 5.
[113] Diamond (2014) 751.
[114] Delikonstantinidou (2014) 219; cf. Papaioannou (nd): http://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/medea.
[115] Papaioannou (nd): http://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/medea.

When something is too much of a gesture, too reminiscent of silent movies and postcards, when something embraces the banality of beauty and at the same time tries to place it in an environment that ridicules it, [it is camp] yet at the same time re-creates it on the other side of ridicule. Camp is very useful when you can't say something directly, because it's worn out and forces you have to find another way of phrasing it. I think that's where camp is useful, at least for my work.[116]

*Medea(2)* was commissioned by the Greek Ministry of Culture for the 'Cultural Year of Greece in China' premiering first in Athens (1–5 June 2008), before transferring to the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing (1–2 August 2008) and returning to Athens for a longer run at the Pallas Theatre (1 October 2008–2 February 2009), where it was described as 'a masterpiece of an extrasensory vision'.[117] *Medea(2)* works in opposition to *Medea*: it is deadened, with Papaioannou noting that he wanted to 'reconstruct *Medea*, refine it, clear it out, strip it of anything unnecessary, drain the blood from the performance and deliver it in the cleanest form I could manage'.[118]

Whereas *Medea* utilised camp-ness as a practice, as a way of responding to the multiple layers of sound, costume, image, a way of turning back to the ancient past and enjoying the queer opulence of making work on a grand scale from a DIY space, *Medea(2)* is controlled and restrained. The choreography has a haunting somnambulant or spectral quality, which serves as another way of working with the 'worn out' quality of the tragedy. Now in the white cube – choreography becomes an artifact or an art object and the 'liveness' of performance is removed. *Medea(2)* thus reworks the lively animate queerness of its first run but now, in the twenty-first century, presents it as deadened, drained of blood. The hopeful explosion of a work once performed for Bausch is now emptied of its life after her death.[119] By staging this iteration as a 'bloodless' haunting of the first, Papaioannou also signals, as queer performance artist and

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[116] Habermacher and Papaioannou (2011) [np]; cf. Sontag (1964).
[117] Dimadi (2008) [np].
[118] Ibid.
[119] Papaioannou (nd): http://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/medea.

tragedian Johanna Hedva has described it, that something here is unfinished, some part of the performance in the present must deal with that which has come to be and that which might come to pass. Or in Hedva's words:

> To reckon with being haunted is important political work. It can account for why the world right now has come to be as it is. And it can re-imagine a world that is not already foretold.[120]

This haunting of the first piece is amplified in the way the choreography alludes to various other receptions of Medea: as a witch, a feminist figure of resistance, and an anti-colonial resistance figure, contributing to the sense that Medea troubles distinctions and boundaries – a mother, woman, the granddaughter of a god, a princess, a witch, a monster, an epic hero, a force. And it amplifies the observation that 'Medea is arguably the most theatrical of all Greek tragic characters'.[121] Consequently, Papaioannou's Medea collects, re-enacts, and iterates various performances of herself.

Maria Callas' Medea is present here in two guises, from both Cherubini's opera and Pier Paolo Pasolini's film adaptation.[122] From the Cherubini, he takes the sonic quality of Callas' voice by sound tracking the performance not with her rendition of *Medea* but instead with excerpted recordings of her performances from a selection of operas by Vincenzo Bellini. From Pasolini, the production samples the ritualising/occult elements deployed throughout the 1969 film including the appearance of spinning wheel and the use of ram's horns both in costuming Medea and as a prop. Other echoes include: Martha Graham's numerous iconic performances, Yukio Ninagawa's *Medea* (1978) which can be felt in the scale and deliberateness of gestures and especially in the relationships that come about between the dancers in the few choral moments of Papaioannou's work (particularly at the beginning when

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[120] Hedva (2016) [np].
[121] Macintosh (2000) 1.
[122] Mueller and Telò (2018); on Callas, see Reynolds (2000); on Pasolini, see Christie (2000).

the characters approach the edge of their respective tables, lean towards each other and then back away).[123] Heiner Müller's *Medeamaterial* (1983), particularly Theodoros Terzopoulos' influential staging of the work with ATTIS theatre (that premiered in 1990 in Theatermanufaktur (Berlin, Land Berlin, Germany)) resounds in the postdramatic staging and in the performance's emphasis on Jason as a modern figure of colonisation – that inspires Heiner Müller.[124] By moving deftly between each register Papaioannou produces a bricolage of references that come not through text but through a deconstruction and recombination of a network of performance receptions.

This choreographs *Medea* as composite. And consequently, both iterations perform alternative ways of holding and transmitting these networks of tragedy through two re-enactments of embodied memory: one as a camp re-emergence of the past, which takes the 'worn out' perhaps overdone quality of tragedy and '[re-]phras[es] it'; the other, a barely-live bloodless return of the myth, an accretion of layers and clusters of referents that fossilise, or petrify.

This is an example of what Rebecca Schneider and Fred Moten describe as the inter(in)animacy of performance, where various elements in the performance are enlivened and deadened. Interanimacy for Moten explores how the 'photographic' and the 'phonographic', 'vision and sound', the past and present, can be said to ghost and enliven each other.[125] Whereas for Schneider, the term refers to performances in which the past re-turns to the present and they deaden one another or trouble the 'immediacy of things to themselves'. Thus, she modulates the term in favour of inter(in)animacy.[126] *Medea* and *Medea(2)* work in this way: one does not cause the other, but both constellate the other; one is a camp rephrasing of something worn out, and the other is a worn-out collapse of that camp energy. This creates an affiliative feedback

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[123] See Macintosh (2000) 4, 5–6.
[124] Macintosh (2000) 26.
[125] Moten (2003).
[126] Schneider (2011); see also Noland (2020) 2.

loop, where both performances in haunting each other variously trouble the distance and difference between them both.

Consider the gesture of smashing that connects both performances. Through the performance of holding and lifting, the dancers (Evangelia Randou and Angeliki Stellatou) allow the children to speak, to almost call out to us, or to stare in silent terror. While Medea becomes static, immobile, stone-like, deadened, cold. In the crash both are entangled, as the gesture both enlivens and deadens. This draws us to realise, as Bennett observes, that 'if matter is lively, then the difference between subject and object is minimised and the shared materiality of all things is elevated'.[127] And in the nightly repetition of this act, in the iterations of Medea killing her children which are calcified in this moment of stillness – through the iconicity of both children and murderess – Papaioannou, returns us to the 'tracks and steps and bodies sweat … performed by past dancers' and draws us to observe how such acts do remain open to 're-response'.[128] In other words if Papaioannou's Medea(s) assemble(d) various other infanticidal versions of the same then his performances also conjure and intensify – in this moment before death – the ethical feeling that Schneider repeats, 'what if the past had yet another future?'.[129]

These pieces prompt consideration of the gestural qualities of material as well as the material qualities of the gesture – both with strata of meaning, potential, and memory. And they emphasise, through this cumulative strategy, 'the recalcitrance of things', that notion that cultural forms and objects are 'vibrant', themselves 'powerful, material assemblages' with agential, affective, ethical traces and force. Vibrant qualities that can remain in a gesture, a thing, and object. This is what Moten has elsewhere called the 'eloquence of things' or the

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[127] Mueller and Telò (2018) 5.
[128] Schneider (2018).
[129] Schneider (2018) 287; cf. DeFrantz and Furtado's call for papers to which Schneider refers to in the article, n.18; cf. Weheliye (2014) on assemblages and temporality. Cf. Kraut (2017) 356.

'resistance of the object'.[130] Thus, Papaioannou's *Medea/Medea(2)* insists that it is not only the living human body that enlivens tragedy, but the corpse, the object, the thing.[131]

Here tragedy works with a troubling of human bounds on two scales: revealing how inhuman things can have profound human effects, and that that which is perhaps thought of as human, can turn out to have not been nonesuch, after all. For despite our potential identifications to the contrary, Medea was never fully human to begin with. Sitting outside of the bounds of normative categories and understandings of what it is to be a woman she is always slipping out from under terms and boundaries, despite or because of Jason's attempts to 'tame' her.

Sarah Nooter observes that Medea undoes not only ancient Greek but modern and contemporary gender norms.[132] She stages queerness through her acts of infanticide but also through her performance of 'a category of queer womanhood that arises in response to the social failure of a female life'.[133] Both these aspects emphasise for Nooter a kind of 'No Future' rejection and devastation of the child as the guarantor of the continued reproductive future of heterosexuality – a counterblast to the Opening Ceremony's heteroreproductive normativity.[134] As such they also trouble the gendered power structures, historical practices, frames, norms and expectations that facilitate the reproduction of Man. Thus, Medea's act of destroying inheritance, or denying a lineage reconfigures the performance and performativity of gender, undoing and collapsing a set of frameworks for becoming woman, by 'unbecoming woman'.[135] Nooter describes this as creating an 'imagined space', but I am more inclined to think of it as

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[130] Moten (2003); see Muñoz (2019) 5.
[131] Chen (2012) 2.
[132] Nooter (2022).
[133] Nooter (2022) 99.
[134] On 'No Future', as a form of anti-relational and anti-repronormative queer politics, see Edelman (2004).
[135] Nooter (2022) 105; on unbecoming see Halberstam (2011) 125; on gender performance and performativity see Butler (1993, 2004a, 2006).

an imaginative but material practice of troubling the ways that bodies matter, troubling the axes on which a myth of the human as Man is choreographed.[136]

*Collide, Expand*

The *Anthropos* represents a way of choreographing tragedy as a process of reckoning with and reaffirming a series of tragic ruptures in the face of death as the limit of the human. But it also attempts to bury underneath this Romantic celebration of progress the mechanisms of overcoming death and dying through repro-futurist colonial expansion and extraction.[137] These two iterations of *Medea*, however, present an alternative set of relationalities, ways of engaging with the ancient past, that threaten the Anthropos' attempts to secure the human as Man. Consequently, by choreographing Medea as two different ways of looking back at the ancient world, Papaioannou interrelates them both through a choreographic re-enactment of the tragic rupture, rather than via an attempt to overcome it.

This is invoked in our proximity to Medea as she raises both statues aloft. For, being close to her, in the stillness of her slowly expanding pose, which unfolds and keeps unfolding, Medea becomes, through the choreography of tragedy as a cumulative strategy, a kind of hyper-object, vibrating with the conceptual density of a black-hole – that threatens to pull apart everything that it comes into contact with.[138] Every time she has moved and been moved to kill her children is rendered here with such grace, such horror and such terrible grief, that the gesture culminates in a point that cannot be sustained any further, until, the children's bodies rupture, in a great crash and explode back out into space – an image both mortal and cosmic in its descriptive scale. This loop of expansion and collapse through a more-than-human set of centripetal and centrifugal forces performs not only Medea's queer inhumanism but also a

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[136] Butler (1993).
[137] On repro-futurity and reproductive normativity, see Lewis (2019a, 2022).
[138] Morton (2017); cf Porter (2019).

suggestion that we too have never been human, or were always already not quite human, but more-than-human to begin with.[139] For, in Medea's undoing and redoing of a relational model – through grief – she troubles our conceptualisation of ourselves. Consequently, reading across *Medea* and *Medea(2)* a queer, inhuman model of tragedy emerges – one based on the constellation, dissimulation, and expulsion of non-human forces, affects, matter, and gestural assemblages – that frustrates the anthropotic mode of turning back to the past, established by the Opening Ceremony.

In Papaioannou's work, therefore, the queer is both a figure of grief and a limit case for re-networking the concept of the human – a site for rethinking queerness and Queer studies through tragedy. For, if tragedy is the choreographic and affiliative field in which associations between human, non-human, inhuman, grievable, and non-grievable are worked out. And queerness or the queer hinges between different positions in this field, depending on its/their identification with a tragic rupture in the concept of the human or a stage in the human's development – within a broader tragedy that is living and dying on this planet. Then, this sets up the possibility for not only a reconfiguration of queerness and humanism, through the tragic inhuman, but also for a shift in the terms of queer theory, in line with current developments in the field, away from debates around relationality or anti-relationality, normativity or non-normativity, and toward a critical examination of queerness as a breakdown and (re)construction of material, epistemic, ontological, and conceptual relationality.[140]

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[139] For the differences between inhumanism, non-human, and posthuman, see Chen and Luciano (2015, 2019).

[140] In other words, Papaioannou's practice is descriptive of a set of emergent questions in Queer Theory and Trans* studies which argue for a move away from understandings of queerness as a possessed and claimed identity – discovered and divulged over time – towards an understanding of queerness as a shared multi-temporal, existential, and ontological set of orientations and material conditions, see Bey (2022). For theory that approaches this shift through entangled processes of worlding and unworlding, see Muñoz (2019); Halberstam (2021, 2022, 2023a, b).

This apprehension was, in a sense, always present in Papaioannou's choreography. In *The Great Tamer* two astronauts' space-walk across an empty stage towards the audience and a man emerges naked from the floor, sprawling, new-born. He is encased in classical white sculpture. And he breaks it from his body before collapsing and being held by one of the astronauts in a pieta gesture. Later countless Golden arrows are thrown onto the stage, they arc through the sky, and a dancer hides under one of the floor-boards as they rain down onto him. He disappears into the earth and a woman emerges, in another draped Grecian dress, with a hydria (a water vase). The arrows have become a field of corn. And here ancient and future choreographies of the human dance as an assemblage of mythic symbols – resonant of epic imagery of young men harvested like crops, a Blakean sense of bones emerging from deep in the earth, and the mythic terror of mass death – pile up, enfold and unfold: as the naked bodies layer on top of each other and begin to emerge from the ground.

However, in Papaiouanou's choreography, this attention to the inhuman and the more-than-human does not fully undo the whiteness and coloniality of Man. Papaioannou's posthuman and inhuman querying/queering of humanist tragedy in *The Great Tamer, Medea* and *Medea(2)* is not enough to undo the wake of colonial violence that the colonial figuration of the Anthropos subtends. And neither his queering of the human through tragedy, nor his tragic performance of Man will cut it: this is not the same as wake work, a mode of 'a mode of inhabiting and rupturing' the violence of coloniality.[141] Partly because the performances remain unaware of the 'interconstitutions of race and environment',[142] they cannot reckon with the violence and devastation wrought by these conjunctions. But most importantly because they

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[141] Sharpe (2016a) 18, 17–24.
[142] Chen and Luciano (2019) 115.

still centre a human, Man as the centrifugal and centripetal axis, around which grievability expands and contracts.

Indeed, this is not the main force of Papaioannou's tragic choreography. And yet, he still provides us with choreographic tools with which to critique the way that things are now. For, in our moment of terrible climate emergency and inter-ecological crisis, as we turn back to these choreographic assemblages, there is a potential, emergent energy here. In this colliding and expanding sense – with which Papaioannou's two *Medea*s remind us of grief's insistence that we were never separate beings to begin with – there is a troubling of Man, in the insistence on his always already inter-determined status. For, like the figure who rises up in the Opening Ceremony Man1 and Man2 is entangled in the muddle the mess of the world.

If we were to return to the dancers grieving for Bausch in *Since She*, then, we might wonder if they encourage us to reflect on the various intersections we have with the earth and to other possible socio, onto-genic formations of the human after all. Through grief, and Papaioannou's returns to Bausch's work we might be called to think about the intersubjective, interconnected, networked, emergent, and decaying ways in which our bodies are riddled with other things: full of affects, memories, ideas, processes and gestures that we cannot claim as fully our own. And we might observe how the dancers perform grief, the loss of a person, through both animate and inanimate things:

> A woman holding an uprooted tree walks across the mountain's back. // A chorus hold material over different parts of a man, // A man with long cylindrical arms and bells around his waist // Someone tries to hold as many of the chairs on their back as they can // another offers their forearm, another their leg, as prosthetics for the man whose limbs have broken off. // The

dancers pool on the backs of chairs, which were once moved out of Bausch's way as she walked, eyes closed through *Café Müller's* haunting expanse.

AGŌN

Chapter 3

AKRAM KHAN

From the back of the stage falls an acorn husk. Akram Khan is alone in the middle of the floor, behind him the platform holding the acorns tilts forward, one or two sheets of their dried bodies slide down toward the stage floor. Momentum building, they tumble, in a great torrent, coming down onto the ground like rain.

This is one of the climactic sequences of Akram Khan's *Xenos* (2018), a reflection on the colonial conscription of soldiers in the First World War. The work was commissioned to mark the centenary of the War's end, and it explored the conflict through the memories and dreams of a shell-shocked musician.[1] As these husked bodies fall, animate but emptied of life, Khan begins to turn – seemingly without end.[2] The words, written for the performance by queer Canadian playwright Jordan Tannahill still echo in the hold of the theatre, sitting in the bodies of the spectators: 'Do not think that this is war. This is not war, it is the ending of the world'.[3]

Staged to mark the culmination of more than twenty years as a solo performer *Xenos* works with the myth of Prometheus, like, a seed planted in the rehearsal room – its roots growing through each part of the creative process: music, lighting, sound, movement, and costume.[4] Indicative of Khan's multi-dimensional approach, the piece uses myth and tragedy to interrogate and challenge dominant narratives and forms of meaning- making – by applying his interdisciplinary practice to three aspects of the Prometheus myth (making humans out of clay, the gift of fire to mortals, and eternal recursive punishment). Using a fragmented sense of time, place, and affect that is typical of the posttraumatic experience, Khan dances as if it is

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[1] Khan (nd) https://www.akramkhancompany.net/productions/xenos/.
[2] Cf. Telò (2022).
[3] Featured in the production, cf. Akram Khan Company (2018).
[4] With thanks to Jordan Tannahill for suggesting this phrasing.

not only the shells on the battlefield, or the bodies of comrades and loved ones, but the entirety of world coming down around him. While this chapter does not examine *Xenos* in detail, it does use its dominant theme as an organising principle and argumentative drive, working from coloniality to the end of the world.

The previous chapter considered the ways in which tragedy can be choreographed to enact a universalising model of the human, overrepresented as Man; it also argued that tragedy can undo this figuration by attending to the inhuman, and to more-than-human assemblages (of stone, flesh, and clay). I observed how choreographing tragedy through grief can call attention to the intersubjective entanglements between humans and things, to insist on the interconnective sense that is amplified through loss.

This chapter moves further with grief to encompass agōn and disputatiousness – terms that describe the tension, energy of, and potential for change that is loaded in the social sphere like a spring. This potential for change is expressed through the gathering of people in assembly, sporting competition, debate, and also the performance of tragedy and its capacity to stage disorganisation.[5] The argument has two steps: first, I examine Khan's choreographic work for the London 2012 Olympics *Abide with Me*, which interrogates dominant narratives of mourning and grief, to upend national sentiments about migration. I then turn to *Outwitting the Devil* (2019), in which Khan and the dancers choreograph the epic of *Gilgamesh* as a tragedy, staging, what we could term after Sylvia Wynter, the unsettling, destruction, and undoing of Man by re-thinking the human in the context of the unfolding climate catastrophe.

To make this argument I rely on and develop discussions of agōn in Performance studies, Dance studies, and Classical Reception.[6] While the agōn, and agonism, have been well studied in analysis of ancient Greek tragedy, comedy and their historical and social contexts, more

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[5] See Edwards, Efstathiou, Karamanou, and Volonaki (2022); particularly Efstathiou (2022) vii–viii, Karamanou (2022) 1–6. On disputatiousness and tragedy, see Quayson (2021).
[6] See Petrović-Lotina (2021); Stanger (2021) particularly on Balanchine's *Agon*: 55–87.

recently, scholars are calling for an increased attention, or a return, to agōn's potentially disruptive and liberatory political energies.[7] For example, working at the intersection of these disciplines, Stephe Harrop argues that agonism is a force of not only performed politics, but also the politics of performance.[8] She builds on David Wiles' study of Greek tragedy as a series of spatial confrontations which correlate to political democratic debates; Margherita Laera's consideration of the coagulation of tragedy into a mirror for elite cultural identities, and the potential to upend this practice, and disrupt the process of elite cultural formation and socio-cultural hierarchies; and, perhaps most important as a source is Chantal Mouffe's definition of agonism as a democratic process of shifting relationships, worked across contested ground, which is both disputed and shared by various engaged and interested groups.[9]

In these discussions, agōn plays a major role in studies of ancient Greek tragedy and its receptions as a force of dispute, friction, resistance, challenge, protest, revolutionary foment, and even collapse. Simultaneously, it has become a central force (or set of forces) in political, queer, and decolonial theory.[10] As I move through both case studies, I hold on to each layer of agōn to explore what Ato Quayson has termed a postcolonial 'disputatiousness' of tragedy, which is expressed in Khan's work and his approach to technique, myth, and politics.[11]

i)      *Abide with Me*

In silence, a group holds still, bent over double. Above them gloams an orange sun - a moment of stillness that comes over halfway through the Opening Ceremony for the London 2012 Olympic Games. Before the group gathers here in silence, we have watched: a celebration of

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[7] See Mouffe (2000, 2013); Laera (2013); Harrop (2018); Petrović-Lotina (2021).
[8] Harrop (2018).
[9] Harrop (2018) 100-101, 103, 113; cf. Mouffe (2013); Laera (2013); Wiles (1997).
[10] See Butler (2015); Halberstam (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023a, b); Mbembe (2022); Preciado (2023); cf. Umachandran and Ward (2021) for a discussion of the disputatiousness of decoloniality and classical reception.
[11] Quayson (2021).

the NHS; the late Queen Elizabeth II meeting Daniel Craig's James Bond; a nightmare sequence introduced by J.K. Rowling, featuring villains and monsters from Harry Potter, who are eventually driven off by a chorus of Mary Poppinses; a comedic sequence featuring Rowan Atkinson playing the theme to *Chariots of Fire* with the London Symphony Orchestra; a re-enactment of the cultural revolutions of the 1960s, 70s, 80s, 90s, and 00s in music and fashion; the arrival into the stadium of the Olympic torch, on a boat driven by David Beckham; and a memorial for those friends and loved ones who have been lost by athletes, performers, and spectators. Consequently, the change of affect and mood is stunning.

We hear an exhale fill the stadium, as the dancers throw their hands up, scattering dust into the air to create a thick, amber fog. As its floats and clouds the air, it becomes clear that all except one of the dancers is standing. Their heads look up to the sky; the outlier is crumpled under the weight of his body, hanging still over bent knees. Dust falls covering their heads and necks, indexing, as dance scholar Royona Mitra has observed in her extensive study of the Akram Khan Company, the reduction of the human body back to earth following burial or cremation[12] – a complex image of grief, surrender, and celebration.

The group splits down the middle, creating an opening through which a young boy runs. They work to open and *hold* open the space through which he emerges, before they begin to move again, beating a silent and complex rhythm into the space, shifting left and right. They complete these virtuosic phrases to the sound of a heartbeat thrumming, shifting in and out of relation to its coronary 'da dum'. The boy proceeds to run, uninhibited, around the stadium, past the spectators, past Khan, who responds by raising his arms into an open 'T' shape – a flattened echo of the group's earlier lifting action. He tracks the boy, turning his head and torso, attentive to the path he takes, its expanse.

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[12] Mitra (2015) 4.

Mitra continues her analysis from this moment, noting that the boys 'freedom is juxtaposed against the constrained and synchronised movements of the collective, captured in their relentless repetition of earthy and visceral gestures that embody anger, violence and despair'.[13] Worked through emphases that come off the main beat of a bar of 8-counts, the phrase shifts with sharp changes in direction on the 2, the 4, 5, the 6 count; swirling away and back together which amplifies the disjunction: between the dancers; their expressions of work, freedom, hope; and the tension between collectivity and individual expression. The relationship between older and younger performer refracts these complexities, situating their affiliative kinship within a broader network, but without confirming their identities or their precise relationship. Are they a father and a son, a man reflecting on his youth, or strangers thrown together by circumstance? As the group reorientate and face into the camera lens, Emile Sandé begins to sing the hymn, 'Abide with me' – an expression of a human calling out to God to be with him as he dies.[14] And here the hopes for the future held by the young boy, nostalgic memories of the self, and the fleeting contingencies of mortal life overlap and refract in a non-linear collision of past, present and future. And, to the sound of her song, the chorus expand, moving fast and hard, pressing into the space, staying low to the earth.

While it should not determine our reading, Khan often evokes his childhood in discussions of his choreographic process in a way that might lead to an illumination of the complex choreographic and political tensions at work here.[15] Born and raised in East London in the mid-seventies, to British parents who migrated from Bangladesh around the time of its independence, Khan and his family moved among and between great swathes of history unfolding.[16] Around this time, Margaret Thatcher was implementing free-market, neo-liberal

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[13] Ibid.

[14] 'Abide with me': a hymn which has been performed before the final of every FA cup since 1927 and before kick-off at every Rugby League Challenge Cup final since 1929, written by Henry Francis Lyte (1874), after Luke 24:29 and 1 Corinthians 15:55.

[15] See Mitra (2015) 13–25.

[16] Khan quoted in Mitra (2015) 55.

political strategies – with devastating effects. The National Front (NF), a fascist, neo-Nazi organisation, who spawned the still active British Nationalist Party (BNP) were also taking root. Thus, racism and the colonial languages of xenophobia were ever present, but so also were resistance movements; and both currents effloresced in ways that have continued to inflect British politics and culture,[17] and also theatre and performance, up until this day.[18]

From within this assemblage of nationalism, racism, resistance, protest, hatred and solidarity Khan trained in a mixture of techniques – kathak, contemporary, classical, modern and postmodern.[19] Informed by encounters with Tanztheater while at college and particularly the work of Pina Bausch, he developed a practice for staging sociopolitics through an abstraction and fragmentation of narrative – into mythical registers – preferring, like Bausch and Papaioannou, to work through the structures of dream or memory. He tells us:

> I remember going to the library because I got there early, and I saw Pina Bausch and DV8 on video. I'd never seen contemporary dance, and I was completely horrified. But at the same time I asked myself, 'Then why am I still watching it?' I didn't know you were allowed to be provocative in the arts. But I could see the poetry in it, the poetry in the violence, in the truth.[20]

Consequently, Khan emphasises the transdisciplinary, the multimedial, the poetic, and the political. This is stimulated by his early appearances in work by Jonathan Burrows and his participation in the X-Group project – a programme established by formalist and conceptual choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker to support emergent choreographers.[21] But most evidently it comes through his deconstruction of and agonistic approach to form and technique, seen as the collective of dancer's twist, release, impulse, and sharply carve through space.

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[17] On borders El-Elnany (2020); on racism, abolition and politics, Cradle Community (2021) 24; on the ways in which modern Britain was shaped by Imperialism, Sanghera (2021); on the construction of race, sexuality and gender through British coloniality, Balani (2023); and on islamophobia and colonialism, Manzoor-Khan (2022).

[18] See Haddow (2015) on riots and performance; Rapley and Macmillan (2015) on contested futures; Rebellato (1999) on post 1950s performance and its intersections with making modern Britain; Tronicke (2020) on post-Brexit theatre.

[19] Mitra (2015) 35–56.

[20] Khan quoted in Perron (2008); cf. Mitra (2015) 41.

[21] Mitra (2015) 45.

Refusing accounts that describe his work as a fusion of contemporary and kathak, or a contemporizing of kathak – for the neo-colonial and orientalist implications of each description –, Khan instead talks about his dance practice and methods of choreography as 'a "confusion" that was being generated in his body'. [22]

To return again to London 2012. As the boy traverses the Olympic stadium, the group disperses and Khan is left at the centre of the performance space.[23] Expanding again, the chorus create a large circle around him as he describes an orb between his hands. Here, the dance articulates the world in two scales, simultaneously – a hybridity of place and time, local and global – paying attention to the push and pull, the confusion and multivocal articulations of self and community that take place between both simultaneously.[24] Then they shift, into two long lines which striate the space: two shorelines or borders which Khan stands in between. Lastly, they form one line that bisects the performance space and connects the points where the two striated lines stood. Expressing a complex poetic mediation on migration that takes but seconds to dance. Here agōn becomes a choreographic mode of holding contradicting, conflicting senses of the world simultaneously.

Each phrase or a series of images increases in scale, zooming in from a planetary perspective, passing two countries next to one another, to a single shoreline. With each phrase moving as an echo of the other, discontinuously collapsing and reforming as the dancers disassemble and then re-assemble to form the world, borders, nations, and eventually crests, indexing waves breaking, growing in size and force as they get closer and closer to the shore. In their wake Khan and the young boy stand next to one another, and together, using one hand each, they articulate another orb, another world, together.

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[22] On the rejection of fusion, see Mitra (2015) 9, 10, 15, 24, 27, 44; cf. Khan in Burt (2004) 104. For 'confusion', see Mitra (2015) 9.

[23] Mitra (2015) 4.

[24] For the concepts outlined here, see: Bhabha (1994), Said (1985a, b).

The planet and the wake: two choreographic patterns that here operate in tension in another confusion in the body and a collapse of jostling frameworks. The first, a hopeful image that expresses connection, complexity, perhaps even unity, commonality through difference, across time and place. The latter a mournful articulation of migration's cost. As Jack Halberstam reflects in the final chapter of his *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020):

> It is impossible after Christina Sharpe's lyrical, devastating study *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* to ignore the dense relations that gather in the water (and in the weather) between Blackness, violence, obliteration, and a temporality that comes after and is awash with trauma. The wildness of the wave and the spectacle of the boat tossed upon high seas cannot be a neutral image in the wake.[25]

Here the dancer's attend to these 'dense relations', the 'violence, obliteration', and multiple complex temporalities of grief. This choreographs via successive ruptures, a synaptic proliferation of connections: precarity, intergenerational striving, stories of successful ocean crossings and a remembrance and attention to those who have been swallowed by the wake's pull.

Both images are amplified by the setting sun, the cosmic witness to tragic suffering, which signals the vulnerability of the body – the shortness of human time – the fleeting, contingency, and ephemerality of life.[26] This tragic sense of mortality is amplified too by the lyrics of the hymn which ring out as Khan stands in the middle of the chorus; circle – 'Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day / Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away / Change and decay in all around I see / O Thou who changest not, abide with me'.[27] Thus expressing, as Khan puts it, 'a reminder of our own mortality and the transfer of possibilities and hopes between generations'.[28]

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[25] Halberstam (2020) 178, referencing Sharpe (2016a).
[26] Macintosh (1994) 94–107; cf. Hall (2010) 3.
[27] Lyte (1873).
[28] Akram Khan Company (2021) [01:47:59]: here Khan explains how these ideas were both informed by the brief given to him by Danny Boyle – which was one word: 'Mortality'; and he explains his interpretation: 'How the gods laugh at us and out plans […] we respond to them', cf. Akram Khan Company (nd).

Following the sequence of collective ocean crossing, Khan pulls his hands into his body as he swirls and ripples backwards, increasingly agitated. Behind him, the chorus slowly raise their arms above their head, a return to the opening gesture of the performance. The boy chases the orb as Khan articulates its different speeds, densities, and scales around him. He retreats towards the collective. Continually bending, rolling, and shifting the orb until, in a rush, he brings in into his body and holds it above the boy's head. Khan is now almost indistinguishable from the group; the boy stands in opposition to them all. There is a pause. A tension as Khan's hands are raised above him: does it represent an unachievable goal – a lost sense of the world, now that the boy is separated from the group – will he try to reach up above Khan's head to grab the invisible orb, the promise of the world that it holds? There is a brief pause within the rhythm of the work, before suddenly, instead, he reaches out and embraces Khan.

The world, the ocean, the shore, and the wake, the dancers have transformed through their collective articulations of struggle, under the light of the setting sun, as they fade into darkness, out of existence, into the embrace of death. But here they become both ancestors and a future utopian collective, a chosen family, community, nation, a world of another kind: those who let the boy loose into the stadium and now – after re-enacting the scattering of dust, which indexed death, the corpse – they welcome both the boy and Khan into their midst. And yet, just as Khan is about to become one of the shadows, perhaps one of those left behind, lost to the ocean, one of those held in memory, or even a hazy image of the future too far off to feel material, or reachable, the boy hugs him. Khan hugs him back, and lifting him into the air, they move into the mass of bodies. The group goes to ground as the boy, on Khan's shoulders, raises a single arm to the sky, reaching up to the setting sun.

*Disputatiousness*

Until this point, the ceremony had been a celebration of British Modernity via concepts of progress and industrialisation.[29] The shift to an exploration of precarity, the wake work of attending to those lost to the 'conscripts of modernity', the entrance of the young dancer onto the stage whose presence is facilitated by the chorus, all bring into focus *not* the continuation of this epic narrative but instead a rupture.[30] Consequently, by staging the danger of passage, the hybridity and confusion attendant on cultural collision, the hope and striving between generations, the performance '[haunts] public memory' as Mitra puts it, 'with images of intergenerational legacy and hope in multi-ethnic communities'.[31]

By gesturing towards the labour and sacrifice which facilitated Modernity's progress, and exposing the very real gaps, disappearances, and absences it has created, Khan prefigures Quayson's formulation of postcolonial tragedy, as a disputative process. Here there is a performance of the body's precarity under the conditions of colonialism, an indeterminacy between narratives of romantic overcoming or tragic dilemma – sacrifice, loss, grief, devastation which interleafs with the emergence of an unruly affective economy within which the actions, gestures, utterances and failures of the performers rebound.[32]

This disputatiousness functions initially on the level of dance technique, whereby different elements of the dance will be recognizable to different members of the audience, but one is not explained to the other. As Mitra argues:

> This strategy of non-translation refuses to make accessible or explain in easy terms the highly complex, racialised, dehumanising condition of being the Other in white Western environments. [Thus] Khan deliberately denies layers of meanings from different members of the audience at different points in order to upend power, and makes dis-ease an integral component of his aesthetic.[33]

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[29] On Khan and the Opening Ceremony, see Mitra (2015) 1–30. On epic and the 2012 London Olympics Opening Ceremony, see Macintosh and McConnell (2020) 104.
[30] For conscripts of modernity, see Scott (2004).
[31] Mitra (2015) 1.
[32] Quayson (2021) 20–33.
[33] Mitra (2015) 18.

However, within the context of a national celebration, there is a chance that these currents of dis-ease could be missed.

Performed years before Brexit, COVID-19, and the current wave of ant-migrant, austerity politics, it is tempting to present a picture of the UK in 2012 either as a more stable place, which celebrated to some degree unity, multi-culturalism and community. Khan's Opening Ceremony could in fact serve as an example of this vision. However, following 9/11 and the tragedy of 7/7, the UK was actively engaging with the global politics through what Ronan Kapadia has described as the 'forever war'; [34] encouraging a period of intense political, cultural and social change.[35] The ideological and political categories of 'Muslim', 'terrorist', and 'immigrant' – through which the UK has engaged in programmes of surveillance, securitization, and control – where being (re)formed. [36] And ideas around the status of the Other within British cultural identity were being shaped and reshaped.[37] Khan's performance thus, neither fully affirms nor totally deconstructs the positive image of the UK as a site of multi-culturalism, instead it sits in-between this celebratory performance of inclusion and a critique of imperialism, oscillating between both.

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[34] See Kapadia who argues particularly that the 'war on terror' is 'against a shape-shifting constellation of enemies' rather than a war on a particular coherent foe: (2022) 1. In addition to the construction of an Other, Kapadia argues that the war also constructs an imagined location, somewhere over there, even though the reality is that the wars take place across, 'a nearly two-decade-long globalised biopolitical struggle of regulating, managing, and warehousing populations scattered across the heterogeneous landscapes of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Algeria, Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, Niger, and beyond – to say nothing of the undeclared wars closer to home' (2022) 1–2 .

[35] Kapadia argues that the 'terrorist' or enemy of the 'war on terror' is an embodiment of the constructed Other to the British or American citizen; cf. Bharucha (2014); Manzoor-Khan (2022); and Mitra (2015) who explore the structural and political effects of this construction on British Muslims. With Mitra (2015) taking the Opening Ceremony and its reception as an example: 1–30; and Manzoor-Khan considering the 7/7 bombings: 129–32.

[36] See Bharucha (2014) 71–103; Manzoor-Khan (2022) 46–47, 58–70; cf. Vergès (2021) particularly 104–77. For a discussion of the way this performance sits within broader narratives of nation and conceptualisations of the British Muslim, see Mitra (2015) 2.

[37] Balani (2023) 319–27; El-Elnany (2020) 1–6; Manzoor-Khan (2022) 53–70 and on more recent transformations 85–98, on Prevent 105–21.

However, the performance doesn't fail to work because it is caught in between two readings; rather, it is because it performs this in-between-ness that it enacts a disputative politics, an agōn. Here it is worth recalling Quayson's definition of disputatiousness in full, which refers,

> not just to disputes between characters, but to the often violent processes of historical and social transition that engender such disputes in the first place. Disputatiousness in historical and social transitions has a correlative in the unruly affective economies that mark the characters' fractured sense of their place in society.[38]

Consequently, it is not that Khan's dance fails to be radical enough nor that it fails to express the dissent well enough, but instead by oscillating between explanation and obfuscation, national feeling, and critique of the formation of the nation, it expresses something of the contradiction of being amongst and in-between processes of historical and social transition. Thus on a secondary level, the dance generates a confusion or a disruption of normative intelligibility of the terms of the dominant culture. This is ambivalent because the choreography is expressing simultaneously different aspects of multi-ethnic, multi-polar communities, even multi-form senses of the self, which do not coalesce but jostle, and remain in conflict. The dancers thus work as 'ciphers of the changing social and historical realities of which they are a part'. [39]

Consequently, by performing the ocean crossing, the alienation, and the difficulty of migration under the context of colonial violence, *Abide with Me* asks a series of different questions: How do you secure a safe, and free life when British coloniality is such that safe living and flourishing are held back for only a few, and the price of accessing it may be your identity, your ties to your loved ones?[40] How should the exercise of ethical action be carried out under social and political conditions of great limitation?; And, how should one '[give] an

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[38] Quayson (2021) 26.
[39] Quayson (2021) 21–26, quote from 26.
[40] Ahmed (2015) [np].

account of oneself when the instruments of such a self-accounting have been contaminated by history'?[41] Set against the backdrop of national pride, unity, and sequences of industrial celebration, the choreography works by disaffiliating the dancers from stable concepts, and allowing them to become partly unintelligible. Whereas previously the tragic has been an emergent rupture, iterative and cumulatively breaking frames, here it is a disputative collapse through resistance, reaching, and disidentification with the systems of dominant meaning-making, which leads to a fractured process of performing tragedy in-between.

*Dispute, Agōn, Grief*

This interleafing and overlapping are indicative of disputatiousness but also of grief. And in turning to one it is important not to neglect the other. After the reflections on the construction of grievable subjects and tragedy in the first and second chapters, in which the process of resistance to stabilised binaries of self-other, us and them, human animal, material immaterial was explored, this chapter considers mourning through performance as itself a political expression, what Athena Athanasiou has called agonistic mourning.[42]

Athanasiou articulates the ways in which mourning can be disputative by disarticulating the entanglements between becoming and mourning, grief, grievability, gender, race, and class.[43] For example, while discussing the Yugoslavian feminist performance-activist collective ŽuC, Athanasiou notes that 'their mode of protest is about accounting for loss – loss of others, real and imagined communities, sense of belonging in the world – that haunts the common intelligibility of memorable life'.[44] In such a way that the dominant scripts around grievability are deconstructed, made unintelligible, enacting what Athanasiou might call a

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[41] Quayson (2021) 28.
[42] Athanasiou (2017).
[43] Ibid.
[44] Athanasiou (2017) 3.

'catachresis', a slip in the object of mourning, that actively 'opposes the very intelligibility of the political and its gendered, economic, ethnic, and racial conjurations'.[45]

At the end of the performance when the young dancer is faced with a choice, whether or not to reach for the world, our/their world, or another world altogether, we see this slip in the object of mourning. And although he hesitates, he instead moves to hug Khan, and thus become (re)integrated with the collective, with a community, past, present, or future. Yet, the identity of this community is not disclosed, nor affirmed. Thus, the dancer performs a recuperative move through the embrace that does not preclude a decolonial connection with the past, nor does it preclude an affirmation of a multicultural UK. As Athanasiou puts it, this '[transforms] mourning's impossibility into an incalculable and unquantifiable political potentiality, capable of deconstituting the interpellating terms of conventional mourning'.[46]

Perhaps we could then say that Khan's performance, which refuses the linear notions of progress that are championed elsewhere in Boyle's 2012 celebration, instead strives for something else through confusion, through the undoing of the very thing that produces the danger, the fragility, the struggle – namely what the rest of the ceremony celebrates: empire, modernity. Thus, *Abide with Me* refuses the common-sense and naturalised origin narrative which the rest of the ceremony announces, even going so far as to transform a sense of the world.[47]

Turning back to the performance in 2023, it is hard not to feel a rush of all that has happened in the subsequent years. It is hard not (re)experience and recall the emerging calculus of grief and violence that has congealed within British politics as a hatred for outsiders, others, those whose lives have been destabilised by the aftershocks of colonialism and slavery – the climate crisis, war, but also systemic persecution based on religion, gender, and sexuality – leading to

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[45] Athanasiou (2017) 2.
[46] Athanasiou (2017) 289.
[47] Petrović-Lotina (2021) 2.

a proliferation of journeys across the ocean, which are turning the planet's waters into a graveyard once again. Yet, even in our moment of the calcification of hatred and violence, there are still routes that agonism suggests, by holding onto grief and refusing to accept that the organisation of the world in the way that is must be necessarily so.

ii)     *Outwitting the Devil*

> What can I do? One must begin somewhere. Begin what? The only thing in the world worth beginning: The End of the world of course.[48]

*Outwitting the Devil* begins in darkness. In the 2021 staging at Sadler's Wells, as the audience enter, the lights are dimmed – the darkness calling for increased awareness and sensitivity to the surround. The first gesture of the performance is to amplify this feeling by plunging the space into pitch black, in which we hear an overwhelming noise, that vibrates the theatre; a cracking, a crunch and a melting scream ring out, past the limit of human possibility but containing the tearing yawn of keening. It is the felling of a forest, and the roar from its trees as they are torn down. The vibrations of this act move through the auditorium, through the bodies of the spectators, situating them in and amongst the crashing of branches, foliage, and trunks.

Since *Abide with Me*, Khan has developed a choreographic form of decoloniality, which is expressed in *Xenos'* reflection on the choreographer's place in the margins, despite his pre-eminent position within dance in the UK for over twenty years. This choreographed decoloniality is also apparent in the recent *Jungle Book Reimagined* (2022) which investigates the effects of the climate catastrophe – by staging Rudyard Kipling's tale in a future iteration of the world where all humans but one are extinct. Both works reflect strategies from Khan's

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[48] Césaire (2001) 27.

early pieces – *Loose in Flight* (2000)*, Fix* (2000)*, Rush* (2000)*, Polaroid Feet* (2001), all of

which experimented with form – and his later works, including *Zero Degrees* (2010), which is

partly an exploration of Khan's embodied experiences of being stopped by a border guard

during a trip to Bangladesh, and *Desh* (2011) which Mitra has described as a dismantling of

the third space.[49] But *Outwitting the Devil*, which involves dancers who have different styles,

technical backgrounds, lived experience, who come from different parts of the world and are

all different ages, especially taps into Khan's interest in the fricative potential for change,

danced through a nexus of ancient and contemporary myths.

Myth is a deeply important mode of communication for Khan, an axis on which his entire

practice has turned. And it has become typical for him to use myth as a mixed-medium for the

translation, and transmission of ideas between people, places, times, and things:

> My father and mother have been through a very intense conflict in Bangladesh,
> the independence of Bangladesh, and then I was born three years after. Somehow
> they never really allowed that experience to filter through to us. And if it did
> filter through, it was through narrative, through myths. And I think myths are
> important, because the myth of being displaced is somehow a continuous myth
> through history. From the Jewish people having to be displaced, to the Hindus
> and Muslims in India when it was partitioned, to Syria right now. All over the
> world, it's continuous. Of course there are peaks, like the Second World War or
> right now.[50]

In this sense, Khan is a part of a series of networks of artists, writers, and philosophers who

have expressed the complexities and poetics of displacement, migration, and intergenerational

trauma, through myth.[51] His *Vertical Road* (2010)*,* which takes inspiration from the Sufi

tradition and the Persian poet and philosopher Rumi, reflects on (dis)connection to home;

*iTMOi* (2013), a deconstruction of the *Rite of Spring*, queers ideas of self, place, and

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[49] Mitra (2015) 92–114.
[50] Bohm-Duchen and Khan (2018) 64–66.
[51] The examples here are numerous and variegated, but I think of the recent scholarship on migrant experience in the UK by the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, in addition to contemporary poetry about migration: see the queer Vietnamese-American poet-novelist Ocean Vuong: Vuong (2016, 2019); cf. Quan Manh Ha and Mia Tompkins (2021) on Vuong's work.

belonging;[52] and *Until the Lion* (2016) enacts sequences from the *Mahabharata*, deconstructing colonial approaches to the epic – like that of Peter Brooke, whose work Khan starred in as a young boy – and stages a conversation between mother and son.[53]

In a similar way to the poet's translation of experiences between cultures, places, identities, and times, Khan choreographs work in the in-between, and expresses through the body (his body and the bodies of the Akram Khan Company dancers) previously unaccounted for stories of travel, suffering, collapse, and transformation. Two further examples here include his choreographic reworkings of two European classics for the English National Ballet: *Giselle* for the which he uses the classical form – as Bausch once did with *Orpheus und Eurydike*; and *Creature*, based on Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1983), an apocalyptic choreography which reflects on the ways the human has been overdetermined as Man.

This section focuses on one of these mythic works, *Outwitting the Devil* to argue that Khan's work has shifted from a postcolonial examination of migration to a decolonial performance of the ending of the world. As such I attend to and account for the ways in which Khan's *Outwitting the Devil* choreographs a series of tragic ruptures, and agonistic intensifications, that result in a repeated crying out of Butler's rhetorical question, 'what kind of world is this in which…?'. In this dance, disorderly experience overwhelms and collapses the boundaries between the world outside of the performance space and the performance space itself, generating an imaginative afterward that asks us to experience and feel not the end of species-human but the end of Man.

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[52] Mitra (2015) 138, 143, 149, 153.
[53] Mitra (2015) 5–7.

*Deforestation*

As the lights fade up, we see two men facing one another: one in green old age (Dominique Petit), the other in his youth (Sam Pratt): two iterations of Gilgamesh gloaming softly from the darkness, barely lit. An audio cue sends a woody voice into the space, with surtitles appearing to the left and right:

> Night after night I have the same dream:
> I am young, immortal, an axe in my hand.
> The young man cannot imagine the old man he will become.[54]

We hear the echoes of breathing. Petit carries a black stone tablet on his shoulders, trekking across the stage, heavy and slow. Strings begin to cry into the space and his durational interaction with the object shifts in meaning. Before, as the tablet is laid next to the other fragments, the rhythms of their organisation evoked the severed bases of trees dotting the contours of a deforested landscape. Now as he lifts and carries this object carefully, it connotes a ruined, man-made object, another kind of fragment: a piece of architecture, or even a stone tablet, like those on which the epic of *Gilgamesh* was inscribed.

In a post-show Q&A for the work, one of the dancers, Mythili Prakash, tells us that – for the performers and production team – the object also connoted a Black Box or Crash Survivable Memory Unit (CSMU): a recording device, used to capture the final moments of a vehicular catastrophe in which the likelihood of human survival is low. This technology is meant to convey information to those on the other side of the crash or catastrophe, and to inform them of what happened. The CSMU is thus an archive of terror and pain, and the scrambling or ruination of sound, bodies, and materials. And in fact, as Prakash tells us, noises from CSMU's were sampled in the sound design. So that as we experience the felling of the forest, we also hear the crumpling and melting of metal being replayed. This positions us on

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[54] Tannahill (2019).

the other side of a disaster, looking back, and keys us in sonically to both ancient and contemporary experiences of collapse.

Note here then, how this opening refracts a theme from *Abide with Me*: the collision of the past and the future in the same space. And again, as in *Abide with Me*, this troubling of past-future-present doesn't situate us firmly in 'either / or', but works via a 'both / and' logic, a speculative temporal grammar of then as now, there as here – and vice versa.[55].

More figures appear at the margins of the stage after another soft fade of the lights. James Vu Anh Pham, whose body melts in sinuous folds, performs a solo, describing wave after overlapping wave of motion into and out of the floor.[56] The others join Anh Pham but just as the dancers gather to move together there is a stillness. It is sudden, as a chorus of string instruments make a sharp orchestral stab. The pause articulates both a moment of reflection and terror. Then the stage pulses with more light, revealing a vast network of ruins behind them. On the left there is a high-rise of small columns and trunks, on the right, nestled among more smaller fragments, is a long altar, or table-slab, a funerary monument. We hear a falling melody. And the dancers all find their way into deep muscular movement – it is as if the air has become dense, thick, and heavy; then, very slowly as if out of nowhere, the other dancers find themselves all walking towards, and then eventually amassed into a group facing Petit. Their hands are placed onto each other's shoulders.

Multiple tragic breaches of choreographic form play out in this sequence, sending the body into more folding, melting, and then silent, still orientations to the space. We can see this intensive work in micromovements of the dancers' musculature, as they press against the air

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[55] This collapsing and refracting of time-places is reflected in other accounts of the genesis of *Outwitting the Devil*, including for example, as a reworking of Michelangelo's *The Last Supper* (1495–98) by Susan Dorothea White titled 'The First Supper'(1998) which re-enacts Michelangelo's painting but with women from around the world; and also as a response to the 'discovery' of a tablet fragment of the Epic of Gilgamesh, Al-Rawi and George (2014).

[56] While multiple dancers have played the parts in this work, I refer to originators of each part for the world premier: 13 July 2019, COLOURS International Dance Festival, Stuttgart.

coming into and out of relationship with the music which wails, growls, and tenderly laments. The stops give the spectators time to process each image, but the overwhelming sound of the scene and its unpredictability prevent thought – the only response is to feel your way through the vibrations of this world as it forms and deforms.

Amid this performance of climate catastrophe a figure dressed in gold (Prakash) emerges behind the gathering dancers. [57] She raises her hands above her head, and as she rises, the group in front of her lowers, creating a diagonal sight line between her and Petit. Someone is being dragged away from him as he sits, Andrew Pan, who dances Enkidu. Then Prakash, in gold, describes an orb with her hands, the others move very slowly again. But as soon as she raises her arm behind her, once more the group breaks out of their established deep, slow time and shunt, towards Gilgamesh, before recoiling back as a group. The vibration of their forward motion plays out across their bodies differently as they push, hard, and then release backwards – generating a rhythmic pattern from their stops, their stillness, which breaks again and again. The inertia of the rebound also comes back into hard contact with each stop, throwing energy and momentum at Gilgamesh. A synthetic scream, low, like bending metal beams and tectonic friction, is introduced into the sound design. As it resonates the group turns back to the figure in gold.

In a post-show discussion Prakash, who generated this role and its choreography via her Bharata Natyam training, said that initially they had thought of her as the figure of Gaia. But they then discovered she was Kali – a goddess of death, time, and change, who gives a cosmic sense not only of the tantric, but also of destruction and creation.[58] So Kali begins to dance and to re-orientate the chorus around her. She marks out a new rhythm. The low tectonic scream has become a drone, playing again and again. She beats the earth across and in between

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[57] Khan states that climate, and mankind as the Devil, where two main themes of the work, see France 24 (2019).

[58] See Chatterjee (2013) 1439, 1441, 1450, 1464, 1472, and n. 123.

its howls, dancing between technology and eco-terror; between chorus and individuals, between past and present, slow and fast, hard and soft, between techniques, and worlds. She moves the dancers back into memory (first of the forest and then of Gilgamesh) appearing – like Aphrodite, Dionysus, or Athena at the beginning of an ancient Greek tragedy (*Hippolytus, Bacchae, Ajax*) – so that she may articulate the destruction that is to come.

The dancers move into relation with one another as they begin to dance a repeating phrase that describes the devastation of the forest. First, their torsos and arms fall into a bend, they stop suddenly, before pulling back up so that their hands cover their mouths; then, elbows perpendicular to the vertical line of the body, they rend the air pulling their hands away from their faces as their mouths stretch wide open. A silent scream. Consequently, there is a productive confusion or elision between the bodies of the trees and the bodies of the dancers. This is affiliated with a piece of text that appears and reappears throughout the opening, on surtitle screens, spoken in French, titled 'Confession':

> I remember their screams / Their open mouths / Their faces to the sky / How they came apart / At the joints and the seams / Their faces in their hands / Their faces at night / Their faces in the ground / I was strong to perfection / A raging bull / A terror / An axe / A prophecy
>
> There was a forest / The smell of rain / I remember / How they fell and broke
>
> I cut down the Cedar Forest/ I carried the Forest guardian's head / I remember they were tender/ There were tender parts / Soft as the hand / Soft as the eyelash / Soft as the bone
>
> Soft as the heart.[59]

As we hear or read, 'their faces in their hands / their faces at night / their faces in the ground/', we see how movements suggest the trees' faces like open wounds, gazing up at the sky. As we hear, 'I remember how they fell and broke', we witness the action of the cut and the fall; as we

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[59] Tannahill (2019).

hear, 'I remember their screams / their open mouths […] how they came apart at the joints and the seams/', we feel the chorus pulling their hands away from their wide-open mouths, rending invisible bark and flesh. This confusion of animate and inanimate matter, human and nonhuman form also entangles enactment and re-enactment.

Their bodies crumple, pause, and then melt off the vertical axis, 'I remember there were tender parts/ Soft as the Hand / Soft as the eyelash/ Soft as the bone / / Soft as the heart'. An intermediality expressed through a dance of a collapsing forest reveals a previously illegible tenderness to the wooden trunks, branches, and verdant leaves. As they catch themselves and return upright, Pratt's Gilgamesh moves in opposition to them. Following the tragic transgression of a boundary, in the excessive devastation of the forest, a mutation in and confusion of categories proliferate. Tragedy is choreographed as a process of dis- and re-organisation as neither the meaning nor the ontological status of the dancers is secured but instead the entanglements of word, world, wood and wound are revealed in the collapse.

Thus, the choreography refracts the ancient and contemporary against one another in various ways, echoing for example the 'discovery' of a fragment of the epic of *Gilgamesh,* around which these sequences are phrased.[60] A tablet full of sounds, the noises of bird calls, and the cries of monkeys which play out in the sonic emphasis of the performance, all again, call us to heed the interconnection of Gilgamesh and Enkidu's ancient acts of tree felling with contemporary and historic processes of extraction, deforestation, and capitalist development.

*Becoming Human*

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing is one of a number of theorists, who are studying, across disciplines, the collapse of world systems, and worlds, due to coloniality and systemic programmes of

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[60] Al-Rawi and George (2014).

racism.[61] In a much-cited work, Tsing examines what emerges in the ruins created by racialised capitalism by focusing on the figure of the Matsutake mushroom. Noting that the world has become littered with the ruins of capitalism, Tsing recalls how, after the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the first thing to grow was this species of mushroom, figuring it as a disputative cypher that performs itself as a result of the process of historical change, disruption and reorganisation.[62] This mushroom becomes, in Tsing's hands, an epistemological and ontological assemblage, a performance thus of that which emerges in the ruin, and a conceptual schema for thinking against and beyond the bio-mythic stories of the *anthropos*.[63]

Thinking not only with the destruction but also the regrowth of forests, Tsing's mushroom connects various organisms across place and time. An alternative model of relation, the mycelial, becomes a figure that articulates not only the promise and ruin of capitalism but also the dances of the forest.[64] This model enables us to ask: 'What emerges in damaged landscapes, beyond the call of industrial promise and ruin?', and permits us 'to mix with multispecies others without knowing where the world-in-process is going'.[65]

In Khan's work, this mycelial quality is present in the dance which de-composes and refracts the forest, performing something of the memory of the trees as they come down. But it is also there in the choreography of Gilgamesh's fractured memories (the stories of promise and ruin), which sit in tension, forming an agōn with the forest. In the dance we experience human-animal multi-species assemblies in tension, protagonist and chorus in opposition and ancient and contemporary myths meeting. And although we will come back into the forest's hold, as the performance develops we move deeper into the memories of Man.

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[61] Tsing (2015); Haraway (2016); Latour (2018); Butler (2022); Mbembe (2022); Halberstam (2023b).
[62] Tsing (2015) 1, 3, and 9.
[63] Tsing (2015).
[64] Tsing (2015) 170, 248; cf. Stovall (2021); Umachandran (2021).
[65] Tsing (2015) 18, 264.

First, we see Enkidu and Gilgamesh together. Enkidu dances through the space, echoing the melting folds of Anh Pham. He encounters Gilgamesh and the two of them begin to take on multiple non-human animal forms. They enact the gestures and sounds of elephants, monkeys, and birds, while the soundtrack announces in French their names. Eventually they take on upright and mobile stances and we hear 'l'homme'. They then play back through the animal figures cycling quicker until we see and hear the name of the human-animal repeated '*l'homme, l'homme, l'homme, l'homme'*. This sequence references the newly discovered section of the epic explicitly, a section where Enkidu is taught how to become human. But it also choreographs the fluidity of human as a verb in becoming. As the dancers continue to shift between (non)human modes of moving, sound-making, and socialising, this pluriversality is left open but it will be challenged as the two figures move into the next sequence.

The forest guardian (Anh Pham) and a forest spirit (Ching Ying-Chien) enter, almost immediately in conflict with Gilgamesh and Enkidu, with whom they shift in and out of a choral relationship. Ying-Chien begins to melt, bending her right leg, extending her left while she rends the air away from her wide-open mouth, an echo of the choral deforestation phrase that eddies and loops via this single repeated gesture. The chorus of dancers watch her repeated ruination, iterating again and again. As Gilgamesh and Enkidu face up to the forest guardian, Enkidu is wounded; in response Gilgamesh kills the forest Guardian; and into the performance space cries a repeated, horrible beeping, the noise of incoming death, the sound of a drone strike warning, the aesthetics of war. This suddenly sets Gilgamesh in opposition to the fluidity of the other dancers. He watches on in horror, transfixed as Ying-Chien plunges her hand into Enkidu's mouth, lifting him up and back so that his ribs jut up into space, slowly killing him.

Until this moment one of the recurring choreographic gestures was touch, contact, the sharing of weight between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. For example, in the opening sequence Petit's Gilgamesh cradled his friend's body before it was dragged through space; as Gilgamesh

taught Enkidu how to become human both engaged in physical contact, hugging, shifting their flesh over one another: playful, tender, loving. And, now that Enkidu is dead, Gilgamesh holds him once more, willing his heavy body to be filled with life.

Prakash told us in the Q&A, that during these scenes of violence, she and the other dancers saw and felt catastrophes from the world outside of the theatre play out on stage. One dancer saw the riots in Hong Kong, another the burning of the Amazon rainforest; Prakash told us that she saw images of the riots in India the night they performed there, and that those nights she would weep while dancing.[66] In these encounters, the landscape of the theatre refracted other sites of ruin in a breach between the stage world and world events as both collapsed through assembling and disassembling scenes of violence, destruction.

The choreographic strategy of going back into memory into the dead, only to lose the loved one again, recalls Bausch's exploration of the Orphic turn backwards. And, as in the Orpheus myth, here there is another movement which goes past this sense of loss and grief.[67] For, in what follows we witness not only Gilgamesh attempt to conquer death,[68] but emerging through the collapse, his failure, and a greater sense of death that will encompass us all. As the lighting state lifts finally to reveal the whole stage, a cityscape of ruins, a city of the dead, is revealed. And in this mirror of our lives, our blasted and ruined landscapes of skyscraper after skyscraper, we feel the oncoming catastrophe of global, planetary system collapse echoing through the space.

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[66] Prakash (2021).

[67] It is as if Tsing is speaking through the dance, telling us: 'Neither tales of progress nor of ruin tell us how to think about collaborative survival. It is time to pay attention to mushroom picking. Not that this will save us – but it might open our imaginations' (2015) 19.

[68] Echoes *Gilgamesh*, tablets X and XI, when Gilgamesh goes through the darkness to reach Utnapishtim and he hears the story of the flood, see Helle (2022) 94–112; later in the choreography this moment is performed through the unfolding of fabric which covers the earth.

*The End of The World*

What kind of world is this in which so much of the planet has become, is becoming, uninhabitable? What kind of world is this in which so much devastation falls on the Global South, on racialised, marginalised disabled, queer, and trans* people? How should we inhabit this planet? How should we share it, and can we repair our relationships to each other as they are constructed by our situatedness on the soil upon which we stand? How do we slow down so that we do not cross a threshold, that we are fast approaching, which would turn the planet, irreparably, into a 'hot house'?[69]

The preceding sequence choreographed some of the devastating processes by which Man has come to overrepresent the human. A tragedy of planetary proportions: murder, displacement, attrition, deforestation. What follows in the piece is an enactment of the tragic undoing of Man that moves us past narratives and concepts of 'repair', re-worlding, re-wilding, or worldmaking – as models for thinking through our current and unfolding experiences of calamity[70] – and instead turns to destruction, abolition, the wild, and unworlding.[71]

These theoretical, performance-based, and activist conceptual moves rely on the premise that the worlds in which we live are so subtended by sets of relations defined by subjugation, hierarchies, suffering, histories and ongoing investments in enslavement, attrition and coloniality, on the forms of Man1 and Man2, that there is no other way but to pull them apart. As Wynter and McKittrick have put it, 'our contemporary age of multiple and overlapping crises, […] derive[s] from "our present biocentric ethnoclass genre of the human,"

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[69] See Mbembe (2020, 2022).

[70] Halberstam (2023b) [c36:00], where he does a reading of Silva (2022) to argue for a move past repair. On the grounds that repair has become part of 'the gestural architecture of settler states', cf. Simpson (2017). This is part of a broader pattern in Halberstam's thinking (2020, 2021, 2022, 2023a, 2023b) that connects him to thinkers like Warren (2018), and Bey (2021) who call for the end of the world as both a philosophical position and an abolitionist practice.

[71] Opposing scholars like Muñoz (2019) and Spivak (1985), Halberstam says utopian projects of worlding have failed and as such we must turn to unworlding and collapse (2022, 2023b). He builds on traditions of Afro-pessimism and related works which combine Afro-pessimism with optimistic threads in Black studies: see Campt (2017, 2021) and Hartman (2019, 2022).

Man' and as such – the argument goes – that genre of becoming must come undone in order to undo and/or think past the crisis.[72] Consequently theorists and practitioners of unworlding insist that the only way in which another world is possible is not through practices of imagining alternatives, but through destroying the grammar, the conceptual structures of the one that we are in.[73]

This comes through in Khan's own reflections on myth and our moment in time: '[W]hat's happening', he wagers, 'is the old myths, the religious myths perhaps, or even capitalist myths, haven't died yet', myths of capitalist progress, global expansion, what Tsing calls the stories of 'promise and ruin, promise and ruin', or what Haraway named *Anthropos.* These myths haven't come undone because they still describe something of our relationship to each other and the planet.[74] 'The other problem' Khan continues, 'is the new myths haven't been born yet. So we're in between; we're in no man's land. Because we can't create new myths until we destroy the old myths. Until we let go of the old myths'.[75]

*Outwitting the Devil* affiliates in uncanny ways with both this expression from the artists, and those emergent theories, and contemporary historical arts movements.[76] It positions us as the end of a genre-configuration of the species and then asks: What if the only way *to* another form of world was through the total annihilation of this one?[77] What shape, sound, what form, what affects, what disorder and collapse would come about from such an ending?[78] What

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[72] McKittrick and Wynter (2015) 317.

[73] Warren (2018), for example, reads Heidegger (1927) to argue that there is no freedom without the end of the world structured on Being and Nothing, on the ontological categories of self, and on oneness divided from nothing and absence. Warren summarises hence, that: 'What I have argued throughout this book is that black being constitutes the nothing in an antiblack world, which is continually degraded, dominated, and violated'. Instead of reform one must be committed philosophically to 'an ontological revolution, one that will destroy the world and its institutions (i.e., the "end of the world", as Fanon calls it)' (2018) 169–70; cf. Fanon (2008) 194.

[74] Bohm-Duchen and Khan (2018) 66; Tsing (2015) 18.

[75] Bohm-Duchen and Khan (2018) 66.

[76] Echoing Bey (2022) 200, for instance, where Bey argues that the end of the world is not only possible, and happening, but requires urgent attention.

[77] On this, scholars like Yusoff (2018) go back to earlier decolonial works to point out that the world has ended many times before, with colonial settler invasions, theft of land, and culture; cf. Césaire (2001); Fanon (2008).

[78] Silva notes that, 'that world is a future world and a past world: it is even another world, a virtual world or not a world at all; it is a possible world, perhaps one among many possible and not probable worlds – and as such it

does such an unworlding look like? And what might the planet be like after our current world and species organisation, overdetermined as Man, has come to an end?

* * *

Gilgamesh and Kali stand together. It looks like another confrontation between the two of them will begin. But, instead, she helps him to lie down on the altar and prepares him for death. Another dance would have ended here. But this dance did not begin with Gilgamesh, it began with the felling of the cedar forest. And so, after Gilgamesh dies, Kali re-enters. The chorus re-form around her to beat out the rhythms which marked her entrance: in a circle they spin and bend, raising their arms in curving and slicing gestures. Terrible and awesome they introduce a large, beautiful piece of fabric that becomes an ocean, manipulated by the dancers. As another prone body is laid into it, Kali dances an extended solo.

In the backdrop smoke rises from the city of ruins. Everything comes apart, and in a rush a series of affiliative associations emerge: forest fires, wars, apocalypse, the ending of the world, but also the funeral pyres, the smog of oil and gas. The lights begin to dim. Eventually, Kali is left on stage, virtuosic, she combines, and re-members fragmented gestures from across the show, reaffiliating, re-articulating the story of Man's anthropotic rise and his undoing. She continues to explore the depths of her technique and the embodied memories from the performance which clutter the stage – thick with traces. The lights continue to fade, little by little. Drawing us back further and further still to nothing, so that the back wall of the stage fades, the mess of fragments is absorbed by darkness; the side plots of tree stumps are swallowed, all traces of human development and harm which were revealed to us throughout

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is nothing like a world because it neither presumes nor posits nor produces something like a subject (whether transparent or affectable)' Silva (2022) 110. See Halberstam (2023b).

the piece are swallowed up, devoured by the nothingness of the dark – all being undone, unmade, through collapse, drawing us back into darkness, into nothing, into death. Until, it is just Kali that we can see, gloaming in the middle of an abyss, lit by the same hallucinatory haze through which we saw the two figures at the start. Her last movement, with only her arms focalised by light, is to render an orb with her hands.

The rush of sound, feeling, and the overwhelming choreography performed in Prakash's solo is awesome and terrible, wonderful and devastating. As is the gradual disappearance of everything as we see gestures and moment replayed in a flash – which is like witnessing our lives flash before our eyes – dragging us towards and into a state of nothing, toward non-being, close and then into death. Here the excesses of emotion and sensation co-contribute to a collective and disorderly agonism of the human which includes the audience and the dancers in the ending of the world. And then through the removal of individual sensory elements – as everything goes quiet, and the world turns into only darkness – the performance encourages us to reflect on this becoming nothing, on mass death, and asks us urgently how we might become otherwise, through the collapse.

*Outwitting the Devil* thus, performs the terror that Tsing describes, as the world has become a ruin and 'the ruin glares at us with the horror of its abandonment'. Here, 'it's not easy to know how to make a life, much less avert planetary destruction'.[79] And in this terror the dance enacts tragedy as a process of collapsing the formation of human and waiting to see what might emerge on the other side. And yet, because the dancers also situate us in the roots of the trees, there is some hope left here for us, perhaps it is as Tsing notes in her conclusion, '[lucky, for us, that] there is still company, human and not human [and that we] can still explore the overgrown verges of our blasted landscapes – the edges of capitalist discipline, scalability, and

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[79] Tsing (2015) 282.

abandoned resource plantations. We can still catch the scent of the latent commons – and the elusive autumn aroma'.[80]

Kali's final gesture is of this kind insisting that in the ruins, even as we fade from existence, a possibility looms on the horizon, emerging from the rooted *other* story which has always already been running through the performance: the story of the planet, the forest, which now opens to new horizons: a world without Man, without humans in a form recognisable. And thus, Khan works with the epic of *Gilgamesh* to explore the undoing of concepts like linear time, being, self, human and nonhuman in a way that collides the past and the future together leading to a choreography that transforms one of the oldest works made by humans into one that describes itself to us, as one of our last – beginning and end enfolding and pleating together.

Tragedy in this instance, is performed as a disputative process of forming and unforming the world – shifting between individual and collective experiences, memories, affects, ideas – a process of collapsing and unforming our senses of self, collapsing ontology, metaphysics, aesthetics. Tragedy is revealed here through destruction and ruination of ideas, forms, techniques that could not have come about through the rejection of the world in its entirety, but instead can only emerge in an agonistic interrogation and collapse of the way things are.[81] This is not calling for or insisting, as Halberstam has done, that we 'unbuild the world [we] inhabit, unmake its relentless commitment to the same, ignore the calls for more'[82] Instead it asks us, in a great tragic, disputative performance of disorientation, to stay with the trouble of that which is left. To sit in the rubble left in the wake of the collapse of hierarchies, the end of ownership, the devastation not of the undercommons, but of the dominant ordering forces of extraction and ruination. This is not the end, not the end of all life; it is instead the end of Man and, as McKittrick puts it, 'rather, *a manifestation of new ways of living with each other* that emerges

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[80] Ibid.
[81] Halberstam (2023b) on artist Beverly Buchannan.
[82] Halberstam (2020) 180.

from an interspecies-interecological schema'; an invitation into new ways of living with each other – planetary, decolonial, queer.[83]

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[83] McKittrick (2021) 42.

Chapter 4

TRAJAL HARRELL

We sit on the stage at the Barbican Theatre, London looking back out to the auditorium, with

row after row of empty seats staring back at us. We must seem so small. There is an intimacy

here, and a sense of insignificance, fragility. Trajal Harrell sits among us, although this is not

clear until part way through, when he stands and, quivering, walks into the middle of the thrust

space. The dancers filter in after a quick break from the preceding performance. They stretch,

chat a little and go on to prepare their costumes behind a flat. After a minute or so, as we all

settle, they enter, by walking from upstage in slow-motion, onto a white rectangle of sprung

flooring, raised onto a delicate relevé. Some hold poses (seductive and aloof), others bring in

objects in brown wooden cases held carefully in white-gloved hands.

Out of the cases come wire brushes, teapots, layers of paper, puppets, and from the back

of the stage come the dancers layering and arranging different items of clothing that have come

as if from an old wardrobe or attic – a fashion show made out of someone's life. They cross

back and forth in front of us, sit next to us, and eventually begin to float in and out of relation

in the middle of the space. A choreography of things that hold imaginative traces – traces of

the impermanence and ephemerality of a life once lived.

This is the opening of *Deathbed* (2020), the first part of a triple bill titled *Porca Miseria*

(2020)[1] that also features a work based on *Medea*, titled *O Medea* (2019)*,* and another based

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[1] Translated to mean 'miserable bitch', Harrell notes that in the trilogy he 'was interested in rethinking the notion of the "bitch". Of course, in ballroom culture, the term "bitch" is an honorific title, is also often used to degrade or disempower women. I wanted to look at that, so I chose three female characters that might have been associated with that word, and rethink it. [sic] The first was Maggie from Tennessee Williams' *Cat on the Hot Tin Roof*. The second one is the deceased choreographer and African-American activist, Katherine Dunham. The third person is Medea, from ancient Greek mythology, who was, and still is, known as the ultimate bitch for killing her children' Arakaza and Harrell (2022) [np], https://www.glamcult.com/articles/interview-trajal-harrell/.

on the Tennessee Williams tragedy *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1952), titled *Maggie the Cat* (2019).[2] Each piece is a choreography of tragedy that expresses pain and joy, in a disputative series of relations. *O Medea* focuses on the repetition of one gesture: a waving, pulsing articulation made with hands up in front of the body, as if to ward off horror. The dancers iterate this gesture for half an hour, lying on the ground or gathered in a circle around a geographic sculpture; weeping, as the rhythm of their footsteps carries them from despair and horror to elation and release. Can we not all in some sense identify with Medea's grief? the dancers ask. *Maggie the Cat* plays with the idea of the catwalk, staging an intervention on William's play, where it is the servants, their sound-worlds and beauty which fills the stage.

*Deathbed* expands on a meeting Harrell had with the modern dance choreographer and activist Katherine Dunham as she lay dying.[3] The choreography imagines various conversations between the two, as if they had been able to speak to one another for years, to dance with one another. By choreographing a series of encounters between the two, on the level of choreographic relation and affiliation, these speculative dialogues become embodied, realised, in part, through the dance – which moves through various shifting and collapsing frames attempting to vivify more of their imagined encounters: performance art; modern and postmodern dance; vogueing; butoh; the museum; and eventually a funeral. [4]

This chapter begins and ends with an account of this performance to articulate two modes of agonistic relation which drive the argument. The first is a dialogical but tense interaction between the past and the present, a speculative re-examination of both that which has been lost to time and that which hauntingly remains. The second is a disputatious approach

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[2] On the trilogy, see Arakaza and Harrell (2022); on *O Medea*, see Onassis (nd); on *Maggie the Cat*, see Sulcas (2019).
[3] See Harrell and Thomaka (2022) [np].
[4] Arakaza and Harrell (2022) [np]. Throughout I refer to 'vogue' and 'vogueing' rather than 'Vogue' to disambiguate the dance and performance art from the magazine.

to categories of being that is worked through, particularly, the quality of thingliness,[5] which is an ontological state that the dancers interrogate. Thingliness is a category of being between subject and object, active and passive, 'looking and being looked at', doing and undoing, acting and being acted upon.[6] Taken together both modes of relation amount to a politics of refusal, that is, a refusal to be made into either an object performing or a performative representation of humanity.[7]

* * *

The previous chapter contended with the end of the world. By considering Akram Khan's *Outwitting the Devil*, I explored the ways in which the Akram Khan Company dancers choreographed fragments of the epic of *Gilgamesh*. I argued that they performed a tragedy of species extinction in the ruins of a racialised capitalocene, and that this overwhelming encounter with the collapse of an ongoing way of being human came in wave after wave of sound, movement, and speech.[8] I noted that tragic experiences were interleafed in the collapse, through an iterative and non-linear series of memories, each amplifying further breaches between the stage world and world events, between past, present, future, human-animal, nature-culture, creation, and destruction. This experience was not only deeply and complexly affective (what does it mean to stare at the wreckage of the world and yet to go on?), but it also asked another set of questions of us: what would it look and feel like to imagine the 'human'

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[5] Defined by Lepecki 'as whatever escapes instrumental reason, whatever exists outside logics of manipulation, whatever is unconditioned, whatever actively wants to run away, escape, from being reduced to graspability and comprehension, whatever reminds us that "uncertainty surrounds the holding of things"' (2016) 28–29, quoting Heidegger (1968) 8–9; and building on Harney and Moten: 'Some people want to run things, other things want to run' (2013) 51.

[6] For quotation, see Moten (2003) 1. Cf. Lepecki on this quality in Harrell's work (2016) 25–54; and Bennett (2010) on the recalcitrance of things 1–19.

[7] See Moten (2003) on the resistance of the object, 1–24, particularly 2.

[8] McKittrick and Wynter (2015).

from both its end and its beginning simultaneously?[9] What would it take to avert planetary collapse?

Motivated by *Deathbed*'s politics of the dying act – its tragic insistence on change and loss – and set in the wake of Khan's investigation of the ruins of the contemporary world, this chapter explores non-becoming, and its proximity to death and dying further. I consider two major dance-works by Harrell, which pre-figure Khan's 'aesthetics of collapse'.[10] First, I consider *Notes on Less than Zero* (2004) and argue that here the tragic is not enacted through a performed rupture, but instead emerges through the absence of an event, action, or response. This creates a disputative process whereby one is haunted by the unresolved past, and no longer able to relate to themselves and to others in a stable way. Then, I consider *Antigone Jr ++*, which was performed at the public programme for Documenta 14 (2017), to argue that Harrell embodies Antigone – informed and partly determined by Bausch's *Café Müller* – to express not her desire to become closer to death, to take her own life, but instead her desire to reshape the world, or perhaps to shape another world through the disarticulating grief of her losses.

i)      Tragedy and Disaffection

*Notes on Less Than Zero* begins with an unpopulated stage. As the audience enter, they are confronted not with people, at first, but things: an archway which indexes the divide between the audience and the backstage area at a typical nineties New York runway show; and the grey wedge of a TV set from the same era, spilling hazy blue light. In between stage left and right are squares of white fabric tessellating against one another. Despite the lack of human performers, something is happening as the audience enter, and then settle, breathing, into this

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[9] On the idea of imagining the human from the species end, see Mbembe (2020).
[10] Halberstam (2021).

installations surround. As Tavia Nyong'o writes on Harrell's work, 'the performance begins while the audience is still waiting for it'.[11]

Eventually, a dancer walks in, to a recording of a monologue from the novel *Less Than Zero* (1985). He traverses the runway half-listening, half performing, mostly uninterested in the audience or the sound of the voice playing over the speakers. He couldn't care less. But I am transfixed by the grainy recording of the performance housed in the New York Public library's dance archive.

The monologue is from the perspective of a custodian at a museum, perhaps, a nightwatchman, or security guard. And the dancer embodies the custodian through the movement language of a fashion model strutting down the runway, in such a way that the speech becomes both internal monologue and a soundtrack. Here there is an identifying gesture and a dissociative split between body and voice. And then he leaves, like the dancers leaving at the beginning of *Nelken*. Silence and emptiness follow. The TV and the squares of fabric almost breathe with the audience, in the stillness, until more dancers begin to fill the space. They are equally, vibrantly, care-less, taking up poses and languishing before they themselves also, exit.

Here, as in Khan's work, choreography becomes a kind of translation process, which plays with both the gaps and uncanny echoes between choreographic grammars. Discussing his work recently, in an interview with dancer and choreographer Arnold Arakaza, Harrell recounts the developmental trajectory of this practice:

> At first, I was working on postmodern minimalism and its ideas, but trying to work through them in my own way. Then I got introduced to voguing! It showed me a world where fashion language could be utilised as a dance, and that was very big for me. The first piece I did at the Judson Church explored what would happen if voguing was minimalist. Of course, voguing is not a

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[11] Nyong'o (2019) 27.

> minimalist procedure, so for me, that spurred a new way of thinking and developing performance, the language of dance and the history of dance.[12]

Vogue – a history, style, community, a technique, a mode of competition.[13] Developed in the mid-twentieth century through the Harlem Ball Scene, vogue is one part of a larger agonism that takes place at the Ball. Harrell again explains, in a project proposal to Dance space in 2003 for *Notes on Less than Zero*:

> In traditional voguing balls, participants compete in categories such as Butch Queen, Executive Realness, and Schoolgirl, for example. Each participant's goal is to take on the manners in dress, movement, and attitude of their particular category thus claiming 'realness'. For the mostly working class African-American and Latino/a queers who participate, this realness is both ironic and problematic. It is a mark of skill to be able to pass as the privileged other, thus seeming to erase the otherness of one's birth and societal stigma. Realness is both performance triumph and the longing of 'passing' acclaim.[14]

Thus, initially formed through the mimicry, embodiment and re-iteration of poses from fashion magazines, vogue has always been interested in the gap between the glossy worlds conjured by those pages and the lived realities of those who attend to compete. But it has also been a performance form capable of conjuring alternative, wayward, and queer socialites: neither assimilationist nor entirely refutational.[15]

Harrell's combination of vogueing with postmodern dance reveals that both forms are thus interested in examining the everyday, and in de/re-constructing processes of composition and abstraction but approached from different angles.[16] In his work, Harrell's combination of these (temporal, aesthetic, spatial and somatic) grammars thereby generates a collision, a

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[12] Arakaza and Harrell (2022) [np].

[13] See Butler (1993) 121–42; Adebayo (2015); Nyong'o (2019); cf. Livingston's film *Paris is Burning* (1990), and discussions of the film by Butler (1993) and hooks (2015) 145–56.

[14] Jerome Robbins Dance Division, Performing Arts Research Collections - Dance *MGS (U.S.) 19-2648.

[15] See Hartman (2019) 408–09: 'the errant path taken by the leaderless swarm in search of a place better than here. The social poesis that sustains the dispossessed'.

[16] Cf. Nyong'o (2019) 27–29.

further agonism, which Arakaza describes in the interview quoted from above as 'an unparalleled devotion to finding revelatory abundance in seemingly opposing forces'.[17]

The opening of *Notes on Less than Zero* is an example of one such a moment where the choreography becomes interested in the mundanity of walking (as a member of the Judson Dance Church would), but also the formalism, the ritual repetition of the catwalk (as in a vogue ball).[18] These tensions are worked out across the entirety of the performance, wherein, only very rarely does a performer (Harrell himself) swing arms and legs, twirl and flex out into the space, before disappearing just as swiftly as he arrived. As the dance grammars layer, so too do the references, to other fashion shows, to dance works, and to the world of the novel – one rife with sex, drug use, and hyperviolence – in a grander homage to 90s melancholy and punk anti-authoritarianism.[19]

After Bausch, there are also vignettes, scenarios across the piece which further rupture the task-based dance episodes: two men caress one another tenderly, a man and woman both stagger downstage and then back up, one man leaves another alone in the dark. And threading across the work is another task, a run that goes around the four-square sides of the performance space. It is taken up by every member of the cast at least once: they do it in various states of dress, and undress, sometimes they are alone, but at other moments they are joined by one or more members of the Company. About a third of the way through the dance, they all come together, running these big square circuits of a floor populated with things. And this is how the performance ends, with one dancer, who has run the most, pulling the thread from the beginning of the show until now, looping again, and again, and again, and again around the

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[17] Arakaza and Harrell (2022) [np].

[18] For Judson, see Banes (1987, 1993a); Banes and Manning (1989). For the ritual elements of catwalk and vogue, see Harrell and Thomaka (2022) [np].

[19] Here Harrell pulls references in the way that a designer might reference a silhouette from a previous collection. For example, he pulls from British punk postmodern choreographer Michael Clark's work on the 2004 Spring Summer collection for Alexander McQueen. A work for which Clark – an impresario of British postmodern dance – developed a set of choreographic situations, that were in turn based on the dance marathon in Sydney Pollack's Depression-era film, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1969).

space until the lights fade out gently, bringing us into darkness for the first time, and leaving him running, seemingly, forever.

*Disaffection, Apathy, Tragedy*

What is additionally notable about *Notes on Less than Zero* is the lack of emotional performance, the absence of identifiable, major affect(s) in the choreography. This can be partly described by Harrell's indexical relationship to the world of the catwalk and the avoidant, sometimes absent, expression of a model's walk.[20] And yet it is clear, as the performance unfolds, that this aesthetics of cool utilises flatness, and a seeming lack of interest, as a kind of façade: a 'false' surface which scrambles senses of what is and is not real, and asks questions about the relationships between outward expression and inward feeling.[21] To be more specific, note that by 'combining the image and movement language of fashion runway, print advertising, and editorial layout with that of club kid euphoria and nonchalance', Harrell intends to '[use] the image conscious posturing of young adults as a superficial mask and physical metaphor for *longing, delusion, emotional confusion, loneliness and the need for human contact*', in order to express the idea that 'the teenage characters in *Less Than Zero* have all appropriated some guise of hyper-cool, betraying their sense of vulnerability and disillusionment amidst a culture saturated by money, drugs, and violence'.[22]

What interests me here is the language of the mask, and the idea of flatness or nonchalance as a physical metaphor.[23] On the one hand, this calls up the mask of ancient Greek tragedy, as a tool that can facilitate durational proximity to unbearable emotions, and the

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[20] This is also expressed through his engagement with postmodern dance and Judson Church, see Nyong'o (2019) 27–29; cf. Javensky (2017) [np].

[21] Berlant (2015) 198 referencing Jameson (1991), describes flat affect as a condition of postmodernism and contemporaneity, which registers 'the end of personal life and historical experience as well as the emergence of a spatialised being distributed across an endlessly synchronic surface'.

[22] Jerome Robbins Dance Division, Performing Arts Research Collections - Dance *MGS (U.S.) 19-2648.

[23] Ibid.

revelation of deep feeling through such proximity.[24] And on the other, Harrell's description reads as an intensification of what cultural theorist Lauren Berlant once described as the 'flat affect' and 'recessive action'.[25]

In other words, here in the choreography there is a gap between inward feelings (perhaps, horror, urgency, attraction, trauma, grief, rage) and a flat, apparent numbness, a sense of cool, or dissociation, that may allow for the revelation of buried emotions through durational proximity to the unbearable. Berlant tells us that flat affect works thus, in such a way that,

> worlds and events that would have been expected to be captured by expressive suffering – featuring amplified subjectivity, violent and reparative relationality, and assurance about what makes an event significant – appear with an asterisk of uncertainty.[26]

This is apparent throughout *Notes on Less than Zero*, wherein events like the entrance of the first dancer function more like a query than a statement; and the duets between Harrell and the other male dancer seem devoid of outward emotional expressions of love, desire, or care. Until one sequence, suddenly, where they hold each other, under the soft light of a single bulb, awash with the TV's incandescence. This phenomenon is also present in that repeated scene where a man and woman both stagger downstage and then back up. At first these journeys seem almost like an iterative social dance, when they first pass downstage, a kind of waltz or tango: both of them in evening dress. [27] But as they continue to stumble and fall over one another, and as this sequence is repeated – and in each repetition as the female dancer is less stable and the male dancer places his hands over her body to support her more, to manipulate her more, and eventually to drag her – it becomes clear that the man has already sexually assaulted her (or is

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[24] There are a great number of good works here, but on physical remains of Greek tragedy, including masks, see Hart (2010); on modern performance and Greek masks, see Hall and Harrop (2010); on masking and blackface in American performance, see Rankine (2015); on ancient performance and mask, see Wiles (2007); and on practice-based research and mask, see Dunbar and Harrop (2018); Vervain (2012).
[25] Berlant (2015).
[26] Berlant (2015) 193.
[27] There are sequences reminiscent of this interaction in Bausch's *Kontakthof* (1978).

at this very moment doing so or is about to). Here flatness betrays not desire but something else, the experience and reverberations of trauma.

There is no depiction of the act, no direct answer or response in the rest of the dance, only scenes where the female dancer lies on the floor, alone, immobile. The aftermath of the violence is marked everywhere constituting an incident which is 'non-eventualised' in the performance, but can be somatically and emotionally intuited as both having happened and being about to happen (again).[28] Here disaffection is a mode of expressing a kind of agonistic mourning and a post-traumatic disorganisation of temporality. Additionally, the returns of the couple and her returns made again and again – in a white oversized shirt, in white briefs, in a suit, a dress, jeans and a t-shirt – haunt the performance, inscrutably, insisting that things do not and did not have to be this way.[29]

Here there is a tragic slip, or overstepping, not through an event, or clear rupture of frames, but through a non-event, or the bubbling up of that which has not been addressed. Or as Berlant phrases it, a rupture that occurs via,

> a performative insistence that the connective encounter is unfinished, is being handed off to waiting and seeing, which involves a social, public, or collective component that has not been eventilised from the beginning.[30]

Cultural theorist Xine Yao's theorisation of disaffection is a useful intertext here.[31] For, they describe the term as a move against dominant cultural affects, an 'unfeeling rupture that enables new structures of feeling [the workings of ideology and belief at the level of the affective, the somatic] to arise'.[32]

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[28] See Berlant (2015) 195–96.
[29] Berlant (2022) 160.
[30] Berlant (2015) 195-6
[31] Yao (2021).
[32] Yao (2021) 6, quoting Williams (1977) 128–35.

Consequently, because there is no answer, no response, no reprieve, no 'violent and reparative relationality' the non-expression of the problem threatens itself to become a problem that opens out endlessly. Without answer, the flat affective performance of the dancers which began as a reflection on cool, then disorganises and unsettles a series of relations that were seemingly stable – by relating in a deep way to the discomfort and inconvenience of being in a world with which you are at odds, and perhaps even, relating the experience of being subject to the cruelty of a world in which you were not meant to survive.[33] And here, Harrell points to the terror perhaps, of the way things are, in which such violence becomes normalised, and does not have a clear redress within the structuring of the world, encouraging us to ask, what kind of world is this in which such violence is possible, and presenting us with another route, that arises not through taking that world apart but by disengaging from the way things are, and thus allowing other modes of relation to emerge.

*Becoming Thing, Unbecoming*

What does it mean that this disaffected expression of tragic choreography emerges at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Performed four years before the onset of the financial crash, three years after 9/11, a year and a month after the invasions of Iraq, and a month after the revelation of the industrial scale of torture, sexual abuse, and humiliation employed by the American military in Abu Ghraib,[34] *Notes on Less than Zero* was staged during a time that Judith Butler has described as constituting a crisis in grievability, a shift in the categorisation and boundaries of the human.[35]

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[33] Lorde (1978); cf. Ward (*forthcoming*) 191, who references Piepzna-Samarasinha (2020).
[34] For reports on Abu Ghraib, see Getler (2004) and Leung (2004). For an analysis cf. Butler (2009).
[35] For contextual discussions: Butler (2004b, 2009).

In a book published the same year as Harrell's performance, Edith Hall argues that tragedy's function, contextually, was to 'speak the unspeakable',[36] to articulate 'otherness' (within and without) and to wrestle with the potential for, or impossibility of, '[learning] to live together'.[37] Subsequently, Jennifer Wallace's *Tragedy Since 9/11: Reading a World Out of Joint* (2020) suggested that the dramaturgical forms of Greek tragedy can be used to read the disorganisation of history in the lead up to and aftermath of the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Tragedy here becomes a mode of registering and rendering incomprehensibility in the wake of crisis.[38] And in both of these studies, there is an expectation that performances of tragedy or the theory of tragedy will speak in some way (even incidentally) to these wars and war crimes. There is a suggestion even that tragedy can provide a theoretical and dramatic set of structures for making meaning out of incomprehensible devastation, even if that meaning or sense is incomprehensibility itself – by examining lament, grief, revenge, and the limits of human ethical action.[39]

Harrell's *Notes on Less than Zero* expresses something else. It refuses these strategies of meaning-making, refuses to emote, to say something about that which is ongoing, or to make a space for lamenting – which many contextual dance-theatre works attempted;[40] and instead, it suggests that collective mourning is not yet possible, collectivity is not yet possible without resorting to a binary logic of 'us' and 'them'.[41] And so, in the flatness of the dancers, and their

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[36] Hall (2004) 169.

[37] Hall (2004) 169–97, particularly 196–97.

[38] Wallace (2020). Recently Kaplan has suggested that Greek tragedy can be a tool for negotiating 21st century geopolitics; that an absence of tragic modes of thinking actually contributed to the devastating invasion of Iraq; and that tragedy truly arrived for him in the dawning realisation that such an act of neo-colonial violence was a mistake, see Kaplan (2023) 13–18.

[39] See Wallace (2020) 182.

[40] Contextual works consulted include: *Time Out*, accessed at the New York Public Library Jerome Robbins Dance Division, which lists Eiko and Koma's *Tree Song*, American Ballet Theatre's (ABT) George Balanchine retrospective, via a programme of ballets set to Tchaikovsky and Koosil-ja Hwang's *deadmandancing EXCESS*, a performance re-enactment of death scenes from over forty films. All performed in 2004. And in some way respond to the aftereffects of 9/11, Eiko and Koma particularly hope their dance can provide an opportunity for collective mourning: Jerome Robbins Dance Division, Performing Arts Circulating Non-Fiction 793.28 B.

[41] On this binary logic, see Taylor et al (2002); Butler (2004b, 2007); Kapadia (2019) 18–21.

immobility, we witness a benumbed, traumatised state that refuses: refuses legibility, refuses to claim that things are unmanageable or illegible; that refuses too, the coming together of a collective around a shared experience. What the performance insists on is shock: the shock of witnessing and being a part of a catastrophe, and feeling so powerless, and insignificant amidst its wake and undertow.[42] This attendance to the halting of the traumatised body after a tragic rupture, its hope for stillness in a changing world, whose shifting politics, modes of becoming, and affective registers seem to rush by, at a pace too fast to grasp, and which layer over one another again and again – all of this is an agonism of a terrible kind. For here, the dance refuses the terms and dominant structuring forces of that world, but it also asks us to consider what it means for such a world to make you feel like you do not matter.

An example of this can be identified in Harrell's repeated use of tableau: before, after, and sometimes during which the immensity of structural violence can be felt. Here the dancers lie still, not moving at all, their breathing shallow. Sometimes one dancer will strike a pose, only to be joined by another and another; and together they produce a scene reminiscent of an editorial spread, but they could equally be signalling a freeze frame – a memory or an idea of life (a still life). The stillness is disaffective, disputative; it refuses the economy of emotional transaction and transference that is expected in other forms of performance. But also, it shows another kind of process. For, each set of relational poses dissolves the scenes and vignettes, which precede these moments of stillness, into nothing. And in the durational stillness the dancers start to resemble, not exactly humans, but sets of fashion mannequins, posing, abstracted, (lifeless) (in)animate things.

In a study on another of Harrell's work's *Tickle the Sleeping Giant, the Ambien Piece* (2001)– an 'open-ended, modular, and unfinished' performance in 20 stages –, André Lepecki describes a shift from understanding movement as macro-displacement to micro displacement

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[42] See Taylor and Diamond in Taylor et al (2002) 95–96, 136–38.

through the concept of thingliness.[43] In *The Ambien Piece* the dancers each take a dose of the drug and allow it to run their bodies. Sleeping, in situ, they give themselves up to its effects, for up to eight hours at a time, with Harrell sitting beside them watching, caring for them.[44] Spectators, witnesses gather or pass by as they twitch in their sleep or as they doze unmoving, under the drug's effects. And as they move or lie still, it is not clear where the impetus for either movement or its absence comes from: is the dancer shifting to get more comfortable, is this a nocturnal gesture made out of boredom, a displacement of weight and balance into another stable or unstable pose, which must find its sleepy resolve, and/or is it all being driven by the drug's effect? Because Ambien overdetermines any reading of action and movement, the work generates what Lepecki calls a 'thingly zone of actions', whereby it is not clear who is moving or being moved by whom.[45] This is furthermore, for Lepecki, a space in which 'representation collapses' generating a new mode of witnessing based not on deciphering the representational meaning of an action, but on attending to the material realities of bodies existing, in space, to their vulnerability. This is a mode of participating based on an attendance to the eloquence, resistance, and recalcitrance of things.[46]

As in *Ambien Piece,* the movements into stillness and flatness in *Notes on Less than Zero* can be frustrating, confrontational, even boring.[47] They have a kind of dissociative quality, a lack of interest, or focal action. But these stops keep coming, absorbing the kinetic energy of the performance. And as they do something happens. There is a hinge, a slip, or a tragic overstepping, enacted as the artifice of the poses begins to vibrate at an even higher frequency than the scenes of 'real life', than the macro-movements of the dancers, sublimating 'reality' to

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[43] Harrell (nd.a) [np]: who notes that even though the work, at one point, 'explored the notion of how the "aesthetic of cool" gets written on the body' eventually the work has morphed from a performance into an artwork – 'despite resisting' that transformation. Cf. Lepecki (2016) 41–45 for an analysis of the piece.

[44] For safety, as the drug can produce side-effects like somnambulance, involuntary attempts to have sex, to drive, or cook food and because the audience (in previous iterations) poked, prodded and dragged the dancers in attempts to have them perform, see Lepecki (2016) 44.

[45] Lepecki (2016) 42.

[46] Bennett (2010) 1–19; Lepecki (2016) 42; Moten (2003); Harney and Moten (2013).

[47] Lepecki (2016) 44.

the force, of the materiality of the still body, sublimating it to the poetic 'ecology of (eloquent) things'.[48]

Here, by not engaging directly with representations – of the tragedy of 9/11, the invasion in Iraq, American programmes of torture, the accelerating commodification of violence – and by not naming those programmes of violence but showing part of their effects, Harrell reveals the ways in which 'non-eventalisation' – as in the unspoken quality, of many of the structural violences which inflect North America as a settler construction – can conceal and naturalise violence.[49] This 'non-eventalisation' is such that, even though it is neither legible, nor articulated, it results in the violence still being felt. This affiliates with a series of (performance) art projects which have attempted to describe the silences, gaps, and absences that appear to be widespread in the years following 9/11.[50] These are the years which were marked by an intensification in violence and fear, with the emergence of drone warfare, and a glut of capitalist projects in securitisation, torture, confinement.[51] This set of silences, disappearances, and gaps not only facilitated the proliferation of hyperviolence and 'gore capitalism', the rush of information, and the succession of multiple unbearable images of suffering, they can be viewed, sometimes (as if) in real-time, passing in front of witnesses in a great and terrible rush, which in fact facilitated their efflorescence. This seems not to have produced a cohesion around or against horror, but instead a fragmentation in spectatorship and aesthetics, a fragmentation in 'intimacy, affect, and sensation'.[52] Marked in part by moves toward abstraction (with the violence removed, faces pixelated, detail obscured on the screens of drone operators, for example), the generation of the (mass as) benumbed spectator, and the intensification of some

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[48] Harney and Moten (2013); cf. Campt (2017) on stillness, politics, and thingliness.
[49] Cf. Gilmore (2022).
[50] Kapadia (2019).
[51] Kapadia (2019) 10 on the 'new and flexible forms of remote killing, torture, confinement, surveillance, and lawfare'. Here Kapadia also discusses how these forms generated and were generated by – not only a shift in aesthetic practices but also – changes in the 'infrastructure of gendered, racialised state violence both within and beyond US borders'. Kapadia argues that this 'in turn marks the ongoing present as a distinct age within the *longue durée* of US settler colonial society'.
[52] Kapadia (2019) 14.

forms of grief in conversation with the removal and erasure of their humanity, and thus the grievability of a series of communities, constructed as other.[53]

 In this kaleidoscope-ing of subjectivities, aesthetics, and modes of witness, where there is paranoia, hypervigilance and a sense of an unending iterative loop, Harrell refuses to stake a claim to a particular emergent side. Instead, he 'insists that the connective encounter is unfinished', that something has not 'been eventilised from the beginning'; that we cannot begin to grieve without a full account of what brought us here, without reckoning with the non-eventalisation of structural violence. And thus, he choreographs tragedy as a process of returning to the catastrophe, via the shock of witnessing, and the collapsing of a sense of the world – restaging the 'tragic choruses' which formed on the streets, frozen, glaring at crumbling skyscrapers and oceanic swells of ash,[54] instead of reperforming that which caused the trauma, the collapse itself. In this sense, Harrell seems to insist that both are inevitably entangled, and that we can feel the traumatising, tragic slip in the dancers who stare out into an audience, who stare back at them, like a mirror.

This process of return to the catastrophe proliferates throughout the dance in increasingly intense moments of silence, emptiness, in yawning spaces of grief. Finally, whilst the performance is upon the brink of stopping, the inert, horror of the dance gives way to a run, which continues to loop around the space, again and again. The effect of this shift is described by Susanna Sloat:

> *Notes on Less Than Zero*, Trajal's first full evening piece, incorporated the fashion walk as it commented on characters in that novel, using appropriations from fashion, advertising, and cinema, and movement styles and structures that he had been cumulatively exploring for some time. The revelation for me was the ending, with one man running and running and running in such a way that I felt a void open up and swallow me, disturbing and enveloping like nothing I had experienced.[55]

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[53] On drones: Kapadia (2019), Butler (2009) 73; on benumbed spectator, see Finburgh Delijani (2017) 50; cf. Habermas (2003). And on the intensification of grief for some, see Butler (2009); Wallace (2020).

[54] See Diamond (2002) 136–38; Taylor (2002) 95–96.

[55] Sloat in Harrell (2017) 46–47.

Another tragic experience, then, another breach, a slip, that does not function by giving the breach a gesture or an action, but by continually repeating a mundane action to the point at which its mechanics, propulsive speed, and rhythm overwhelm. And as the footfall of the dancer iterates – and his steps, too, become empty, violent, mundane, futile, absurd – generated by the dance is another kind of horror. One that emerges from the sensation of being left there at the end to just keep running on, into the darkness – in other words, what one does, does not matter at all.

Here the audience-participants are invited to become things, left inert, immobile, as the mirroring between the still dancers and the stillness of the performance breaks. This is another tragic rupturing of relation. But then the audience-participants face another kind of reflection, that the mundanity of going on, of running, is also replete with another kind of pointlessness. Another unfeeling rupture that announces through futility: 'What kind of world is this in which…?'; a deadening encounter with a kind of hyper-object (the violence of American Imperialism, which works like a blackhole, or all the plastic in the ocean) *and* a lively refusal to matter on the terms given by such an object-network. This is a dance, then, not of the tragedy of war, nor the uttering of unutterable things, but one choreographed, under these conditions, in which the tragic is a collapse of the social/affective networks by which outward and externalised emotional responses make sense.

ii)      Antigone, Whatever: Choreographing Collapse

September 10th, 2017. It is the closing day of the public programme for Documenta 14. The theorist, curator, and filmmaker Paul B. Preciado sits on a camouflage covered sculptural plinth, in the rotunda of the Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany. He speaks into a microphone:

'and now I would like to introduce to you, as a member, Trajal Harrell'. It is 10.00pm and the room is crowded with people. The camera pans to the left and you can hear Harrell say 'thank you' before the audio distorts and wobbles out.[56]

He stands in a grey bath robe and makes gestures, guiding people into different seats with care. They begin to reorganise, shifting blocks, changing seats; a cameraman moves over to the left, and another person in a print shirt walks towards the lens. Outside the frame, Harrell continues, and the audio eventually returns, 'umm, I'm Trajal Harrell and tonight I am here with Thibault Lac, and this is *Antigone Jr. ++/Paris is Burning at the Judson Church*'.[57] More participants cross the screen with bags in their arms, nonchalant.

Harrell explains that the series was made between 2009–16 and it comes in 8 sizes: a small, an extra small, a medium, a junior (*Antigone Jr.*), a plus size (*Antigone +*). The sound cuts out again – as Nyong'o observed, 'the performance has not yet begun, even though it somehow has'.[58] When the audio returns, Harrell is saying: 'You don't have to move, it is only quite short. And then you're gonna see the ++ section. So, okay, with no further ado, Thibault, are you ready?', Lac nods, 'Okay, let's go'.

As a part of the anthology *Paris is Burning at the Judson Church,* Harrell and Lac's performance at Documenta is modular, critical, and speculative. 'What would have happened in 1963', Harrell asks, 'if someone from the voguing dance tradition in Harlem had come downtown to Greenwich Village to perform alongside the early postmoderns at Judson Church?'.[59] Though there are many iterations of the work, in each one Harrell utilises these same sets of performance techniques and speculative grammars, scrambling the catwalk with

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[56] Both analysis and description are made from a recording of the performance archived here: https://www.documenta14.de/en/calendar/24986/the-strategy-of-joy.The sound comes in and out so I have supplemented my analysis with another archival video here: https://www.numeridanse.tv/en/dance-videotheque/antigone-jr

[57] Harrell (nd.b).

[58] Nyong'o (2019) 27.

[59] O'Neill–Butler, Carson, Critchley and Harrell (2015) [np].

multiple styles of vogue and postmodern dance practices – deploying mundane movements and producing dance by responding to a set of tasks: taking off or putting on items of clothing, reading passages of text, singing along to certain songs, and organising the audience in certain ways.

In this section, I will explore the ways in which Harrell develops an aesthetics of disidentification and collapse by working with the figure of Antigone. Building on my critique of *Notes on Less than Zero*, I argue here that in the affiliative connections Harrell's choreography makes, there is always a shift in orientation, away from the world as it is and toward a sense of how it could be, through the temporal grammar of 'what if?'. In this sense, if the last section enquired into what it means to feel like you do not matter, then this section asks how tragedy might work through and from this place of not-mattering (ontologically and affectively) to generate alternative arrangements of power, materiality, relation, and affect. Rather than suggesting that we engage in a process of non-becoming, nihilism, and nothingness, Harrell's Antigone – through her grief – encourages us to ask why there should be something, some shared sense of the world, at all.

* * *

Harrel and Lac begin with Sharon Jones and the Dap-King's 'Stranded in Your Love'. While it plays, Lac saunters into the space, giving – what is called in ballroom – butch realness. Harrell follows and, on his return, he is flanked by a member of the audience, serendipitously. Harrell and Lac emerge from and return to the audience to change into different looks, presenting them in turn to the crowd: Lac drapes fabric over his head while Harrell walks; it forms an elegant shroud, and he sits into his hips; Harrell follows, a shawl around his shoulders, demure; Lac now, with the fabric shaped into a long halter-neck peplos, Harrell, in a scarf.

Eventually, Lac exits the space and Harrell calls for the music to cut. There is applause and laughter as Harrell also leaves, following him out of the room.

In a conversation with the poet, translator, and playwright Anne Carson and the philosopher Simon Critchley, Harrell describes the effect he wants to achieve, with his performance practice in general, and in these performances of *Antigone* in particular:

> I'm always trying to call people into the moment, to show that we're in the theatre together – as Graham said, before theatre was a noun, it was a verb. I'm always trying to get them to realise this imaginative thing that we're in, all doing in the room together. It's not just us over here performing something for you. As a performer it starts from just being clear about where you are, and what's going on in the room with you.[60]

Harrell and Lac's abrupt exit activates these ways of seeing and being with each other, encourages the audience to imagine together and to ask themselves, perhaps: what are we doing here, what they are doing here with each other? Their exit in this way encourages the remaining participants to become attendant to the processes of co-presence, co-absence, and co-becoming.[61]

Harrell now sits among them – some people are drinking from water bottles; others take photos of one another. Some look bored, others attentive, expectant – he then stands and addresses them before entering the performance space again: a second beginning. Top Drawer's *Songs of a Sinner* (1969) plays. Harrell stands in a black top and trousers, indexing the look of a postmodern Judson dancer and, as the bass line kicks-in, he begins to step: left, then right, left, then right, left, right. His hands and arms glide over and around his hips. The lyrics ring out, 'how can you keep me, knowing I've made you sad, and yet I ask to be forgiven'. The words resonate in the space as his hands come up to his head, allowing him to

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[60] Ibid.
[61] Fischer-Lichte (2008); cf. Harrell and Thomaka (2022) [np].

draw a line in front of his face till his palms face the sky, 'and now it's too late, cause on your

judgment day your gonna close your gate on me'.

The camera cuts to the audience, and back to Harrell. The walk fractures and he steps

right, right, right, right. And then a guitar riff tears through the room. He transitions into vogue,

femme-hand performance conjuring the ball room *and* the Judson church simultaneously, one

technique pulling at the threads of the other. Lac watches Harrell, as the vibrations of the song

fill up the room. Then Harrell begins to speak:

> Listen up!
> I wanna tousle your hair in the morning.
> I wanna lick your ass, but I don't wanna be you.
> Who am I?
> You created me. All of you,
> all of Toulouse, all of Los Angeles, all of Tokyo, all of New York, all of Athens.
> You created me.
> Who am I?
> I am Trajal. I am Trajell, I am Trajal, I am Trajano, I am Trajal, I am Trajan. I
> am Antigone.
>
> Okay, Thibault, let's get this show on the road. [62]

Now we hear Antigone's name, the culmination of a list of things Harrell 'is'. A polymorphous

becoming that cannot be made coherent by one frame or another, but which instead relies on

the glitching and fragmentation of multiple existing frames and modes of being: I am, I am, I

am – an expression of the kinaesthetic glitch: right, right, right, right, that he dances.[63]

In this way Harrell critically joins past, present, and future tenses. This, we can consider

in terms of Afro-Fabulation, as laid out by Nyong'o, where, 'the gap opened out between the

possible and the potential, no matter how slight, remains crucial'.[64] Here, if we understand

possibilities as routes already charted, 'ready at hand', and potentialities as emergent routes to

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[62] See archival videos here: https://www.numeridanse.tv/en/dance-videotheque/antigone-jr and here: https://vimeo.com/113526193

[63] After Muñoz (2019) 148

[64] Nyong'o (2019) 10.

places, times, and alternative arrangements of relation,[65] then this glitch, and its set of proliferating iterative potentialities, suggests, in addition to the breakdown or fracturing of the normative categories of being, a re-organisation of the world 'otherwise'.[66] This is not a re-enactment or re-creation, but a speculative dance research process that creates a world in which Antigone, postmodern dance and Harlem ball co-exist. And as such, it is another form of refusing the way things are now.

After Harrell's speech, there is yet another beginning. Lac, in grey sweats, joins him and they dance together, repeating certain grooves and gestures, in their arms, legs, and hips, before Harrell leaves the centre space again. Then Lac releases into the space and the music, through a deep articulation of each of his body's joints in an improvisatory sequence, which culminates in a gesture as he throws his arms into the gap between him and the audience again and again. As the lyrics return, he shifts into another hand performance, caressing the space around his shoulders and face, looking back at Harrell. Here is Ismene, watching Antigone, already grieving her absence. Here is another Antigone. The lyrics of the song ring out 'on judgment day you're gonna' close your gate on me, on me, on me'. Lac draws a line down, carving the air in front of his face, before moving up to a seated member of the audience and circling his hips and arms towards them. He travels across the front row, inviting them into the space. Midway through one of these receptions, he stops and moves to take a seat amongst the crowd. The song continues to play: 'I'll be left here on my own'. Here he echoes Harrell, re-inscribing the speculative collisions of each of the three parts of the performance's 'as if' into one world (Antigone, Ballroom, Judson dance). But he also becomes Antigone grieving, and Ismene already grieving, Antigone's death.

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[65] Nyong'o (2019) 11.

[66] For the 'otherwise' as a speculative and radical formulation in Queer of Colour critique, Black studies and Black feminisms, see Muñoz (2019) 148, (2020); Olufemi (2021); and cf. Hartman (2019) 408–10 on 'wayward'.

As the last words of Top Draw's 'Song of a Sinner' (1969) ring out into the space. The audience shift their gaze to Lac, maybe some of them never took their eyes of him following his looping echo of Harrell's deconstruction of vogue and postmodern dance. He is looking at Harrell again. They watch each other as the song cross-fades into a driving syncopated rhythm: an insistence, an urge, a call. Lac, casual but determined, gets up, scratches his nose, and walks into the space, all the way to the back. He puts his hands in his pockets, turns, and starts to sketch out an old-school New York runway walk – hips kicking out at exaggerated angles so that each step creates a deep 'c' curve, oscillating left, then right. The first step is a warm-up but as his second step hits and his right hip reaches an apex, the bass line fills the space – returning on every third bar of eight, propelling him deeper and further forward. On the bass line's third return, Harrell is propelled into the space with him. The lyrics pour out, 'when I came to this world, I arrived in a car, I was a boy, I was a girl, pyramid, glass scraping the sky'. The two dancers move through a series of further experiments in postmodern vogue: trying different shapes, and patterns of walking.

What feels clear in this section is the conversational and improvisatory relationship between Harrell and Lac, as co-participants in the performance. Here improvisation becomes part of their expression of the tragic, a development of afro-fabulations interest in the pre-existing and the emergent potential for change, worked through re-combination, iteration, abstraction, and play.[67] The audience and by extension a viewer of the video recording can't discern who will take the focus next and so their gazes becomes fragmented, split: not one group watching but multiple networks of gazing, sensing, as vibrating witnesses. There is an indeterminacy here, an inability to find a resolution, or sense of style or gender in the continuous movement between feminine or masculine, as the dance moves between periods, techniques, modes of relating to one another. And there is, here, thus emerging on the horizon

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[67] Cf. Moten (2003) 98–99.

another sense of collectivity, a feeling that the imaginate space conjured by the dancers sits somewhere between an imagined history of our world and the imaginative creation of another.

For, in these opening sequences neither the ball scene, nor Antigone, nor postmodern dance is fully rendered as reality, but instead traced, ghosted – appearing on the horizon as if it belonged to both the past and future, to both here and now, then and there.[68] This is what Nyong'o has described as a refusal of the 'burden of liveness', a refusal that '[accounts] for and [critiques] the way in which queer, transgender, and racialised bodies are so often exceptionalised through temporary displays of liveness in the very institutions that reject them as permanent occupants or stakeholders'.[69]

We can see this in the way Harrell relates to vogue. As for example he performs a ghost of voguing, 'against the backdrop of [vogue's] living repertoire'.[70] Engaging with it as a theory, as a set of procedures, 'even as its actual participants – dancers and announcers – only occasionally cross over into his shows'.[71] While this could be read as an appropriation, there is, in this, a refusal to give all of voguing up to the institution, in what Nyong'o calls, a 'de-dramatizing the theatrical canon'.[72] Consequently, the half-live, thing-ly quality Harrell and Lac give to their dance 'employs the form of black queer ball culture to reshape the contents of postmodern dance's interest in everyday life'.[73] And by extension, they employ a form of black queer ball culture to reshape our investments in tragedy, in *Antigone*.

The dancer's play off one another as they move towards and away from the crowd. Lac, on the second chorus, starts to iterate a series of gestures that relate both to the underground ballroom scene and to modern dancer Martha Graham – namely, the angular arm gestures that Harrell picks up. Then he begins to speak, but the audio is lost. Perhaps he is reciting lines

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[68] See Ellis (2020) 156–57.
[69] Nyong'o (2019) 34.
[70] Nyong'o (2019) 33.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Nyong'o (2019) 41.

from *Antigone* or describing the conditions that have led to the beginning of Sophocles' play. He is increasingly animated, crying and calling as he and Lac both vogue through the space, bouncing off one another in an improvisatory break, of the kind that Moten describes in his analysis of Black radical aesthetics: a break that is noisy, jubilant, mournful, interstitial, moving between question, answer, body, sound, voice, materiality, and immateriality, between both tragedy and elegy.[74]

Both Harrell and Lac head to the back of the room and Harrell begins to walk from the left to the right of the space. Back again and again, Lac joins him on one of the returns, as the two begin to explore the idea of structure as process, in a minimalist fashion.[75] For they move in and out of sync with one in degrees of slight difference, before breaking out into repetitive, energetic phrases of vogue, which then quickly collapse back into the walk. This intricate call and response is formally complex and continues despite the music falling away. In the relative silence they both begin to speak to one another. Harrell leaves Lac, who starts to yell again, moving his body harder and harder, before whacking (a dance technique which also has its roots in the ballroom, but includes fast rotary movements of the hands, and arms). Until, at the apex of his movement, he drops to the ground, which in ballroom is called a dip – one leg folded under the body, back arched, the other leg pointing into the air, with arms spread in above the head. The audience applauds as he rolls over onto his abdomen, kicking his heels in the air. What came before is framed now through cheeky, proud, ludic joy.

The dance's virtuosity, its complexity, and the speculative processes it embodies, begin to stage a kind of queer tragic methodology, that works –in such a way that Muñoz would recognise it – as 'a backward glance that enacts a future vision'.[76] One in which the potential

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[74] Moten (2003) 98–99.

[75] A choreographic embodiment of what minimalist composer Steve Reich conceived of as phase shifting – common in the dance work of another post-modern Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, see Fase (1982); cf. Bräuninger (2014) for structure as process.

[76] Muñoz (2019) 4.

for improvisation with historical dance grammars produces through choreographic translation another way of articulating a sense of the world, another world, another mode of affiliation.

This speculative practice thus becomes a way of relating to what has been left unfinished in the past and of revivifying the questions posed by each moment. Harrell reflects on this, further into the interview with Carson and Critchley:

> I thought a lot about the relationship between the performativity in ancient Greece – men playing female roles – and the performativity in voguing. It seemed to me that ancient Greek theatre and the voguing balls were maybe not that different. For instance, there is the link between rethinking what a democracy could be in 1963, in terms of civil rights, and how rights are represented in *Antigone* […] As I'm interested in historical imagination, I tried to come up with some imaginary possibilities drawn from researching how Antigone would have been performed then: What would have been the impetuous, the drive, and the spirit? We might not ever know, and that's interesting. You can read Greek scholars, but there were no videotapes. Even the scholarship has a certain imaginative practice around it.[77]

Thus, through the speculative encounter with these different choreographic grammars, there is a chance to reappraise and gain a deeper understanding of tragedy. Both employ performativity for example: the stylised repetition of acts over time which queries both the formation of the 'real' of gender and the historical processes which shape gender. [78] While also there emerges, in counterpoint, a chance to re-examine the radical politics of the Harlem Ball scene through *Antigone*.

By choreographing Antigone within the speculative worlds of the ballroom, Judson dance, and ancient Athens, Harrell thus, allows us to see how the alternative futures proposed by each time-space might yet be realised, and invites us to pick up the threads of those past attempts to realise the world differently which 'failed'. The result is a constant reminder of the possibility and potentiality for things to be different. As Schneider puts it:

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[77] O'Neill-Butler, Carson, Critchley and Harrell (2015) [np].
[78] See Butler (1993, 2006).

> We have to find a different future for the reiterative violences of the irruptive past […] so-called failed revolutionary actions are never wholly disappeared but lie in wait for re-response, re-call, or the again time of re-ignition. The logic of gesturing forth the past – reiterating – in the form of performative resurgence is the idea of making palpable the alternative futures that responses otherwise to those so-called pasts might have realised, or, better, might yet realise. [79]

Thus, what if, like tragedy and the 'so called failed revolutionary acts' that Schneider describes, the figures from the Harlem ball and Antigone lie in wait for re-response? What if the ancient past of *Antigone* and Antigone's acts of rebellion and her death had another yet another future?

*Disidentification: Antigone(s)*

In José Esteban Muñoz's work *Disidentification: Queers of Colour and the Politics of Performance,* he argues for a mode of engaging with dominant forms, canonical works, and even violent norms, which rethinks their orientation and force. Disidentification thus works like a negotiation, that does not completely refuse nor fully identify with the stereotypes, dominant figures, topoi, affects, concepts, gestures and character tropes it interrogates. Instead through this agonism, it transforms them through speculative modes of embodiment leading to what Muñoz called, 'the world making power of disidentificatory performances'.[80]

Since the publication of this work and following Muñoz's death, disidentification has had a vibrant critical life. For example, in a talk with Halberstam at the Institute for Contemporary Art in 2019, Preciado noted that he believes that the contemporary emphasis on identity politics has led to a situation where the revolutionary energy of the 70s and the longer revolutionary energies of decolonial and anti-colonial revolution have been channelled – in the global north – into questions of identity, channelled into *both* the production *and* contestation

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[79] Schneider (2017), prefiguring Schneider (2018) 305.
[80] Muñoz (1999) ix.

of proliferating identity politics.[81] Because of this, he argues, people are becoming increasingly dissatisfied and politically disengaged.[82] Preciado wagers that we *could* continue to make commitments to a kind of futurity based on an intensification of these rights-based identity formations (where identities are partly based on processes of injury and response to injury). But we could also shift, instead, towards collective practices of disidentification. This would constitute a refusal, a disaffective shift, so as,

> to not be tied to the differentiating and intersecting ways those communities experience violence but to develop a politics of disidentifying with that subject position produced by violence and [demand] more, [demand] the undoing of the systems that produce those identity markers and categories through violent acts.[83]

Echoing Preciado, Halberstam notes, in a lecture delivered a year after Documenta 14, that critical disidentification is a necessary practice. As opposed the inclusive logic of '"we're here, we're trans*, recognise us" this [politics] says, "what is that world in which we are the wrong body, let's unmake *that* world so that we cannot return to the logic of normative and deviant"'.[84] This is a tragic exclamation then – a shock to the world that presents itself in such a way that one exclaims: 'What kind of world is this in which some bodies are marked as wrong?'. But also, a hinging of Muñoz theory away from worldmaking toward unworlding, a presenting disidentification instead as a way to '[unmake] the world that marks those [queer, racialised, disabled] bodies as wrong in the first place'.[85]

Disidentification is present in the way Lac and Harrell perform as Antigone and Ismene, in their ghosting and temporal scrambling of the tragedy. It was also a major theme of the parliament of bodies – the public programme for Documenta 14 – of which their performance

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[81] Preciado and Halberstam (2022) [np].
[82] See Táíwò (2022); cf. Amin (2022).
[83] Preciado and Halberstam (2022) [np].
[84] Halberstam (2019).
[85] Halberstam (2019).

was a part. Organised by Preciado and featuring a lecture by Halberstam, Preciado tells us that part of his intention for the public programme was to develop these critically disidentificatory practices. [86] They aimed to do this in part by occupying intentionally fraught spaces entangled with histories of fascism and dictatorship,[87] and then by working within them, striving not to make, but to seek and find new forms of intervention, new systems of solidarity, and new forms of subjectivity.

This turn away from contemporary practices of identity formation and politics echoed a deeper turn back in time. Subtitled 'Learning from Athens', Documenta 14 held several events in the Greek city. Unprecedented for Documenta, these satellite events made a series of physical, and intellectual connections: both to ancient Athenian direct democracy and to the ruins of ancient Greece. Not unproblematic, the parliament of bodies travelled between Kassel and Athens, to interrogate the relationship between the individual and the collective, the past and the present, between ancient and contemporary ruins.[88] These gestures, made across borders, positioned the artists, and art works 'against the individualization of bodies but also against the transformation of bodies into a mass, against the transformation of the public into a marketing target'.[89] There were even multiple discrete societies, that comprised the parliament of bodies, which met over the course of an entire year. They all culminated in this

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[86] Documenta14 (nd): https://www.documenta14.de/en/public-programs/927/the-parliament-of-bodies. Preciado (2019) https://www.documenta14.de/en/calendar/24986/the-strategy-of-joy intro talk.

[87] In Kassel they used the Fridericianum rotunda, which was one of the first public museums in Europe, a space that was intended to be one of the first parliamentary meeting spaces in Europe, but which never became such. It was later appropriated as a Nazi Party meeting place, before becoming a ruin during bombing raids on Kassel in 1941 and 1943. In Athens, the participatory, social-situational art was located in Parko Eleftherias at the Municipality Arts Centre, 'a building that was the headquarters of military police during the years of dictatorship in Greece, between 1967 and 1974': Anonymous (nd) [np] https://www.documenta14.de/en/public-programs/927/the-parliament-of-bodies.

[88] Some accused Documenta 14 of participating in 'poverty tourism', because they brought in the monumental force of the international art market, and because even though they aimed to engender large-scale political change – that would affect multiple areas of society – the work they did mainly spoke to the already rarefied cultural milieu of art and academia. The language they spoke in was one of esoteric critical theory. Cf. Tulke (2017).

[89] Anonymous (nd) [np] https://www.documenta14.de/en/public-programs/927/the-parliament-of-bodies.

three-day event which closed with Harrell's *Antigone Jr++,* a week before Documenta 14's one-hundredth and final day.

The audience continue clapping as Lac changes, removing his t-shirt and trousers, changing back into the grey bathrobe: he styles it like a chiton, he is bare-chested underneath. As the sweat pours from him he reads from a physical copy of *Antigone*. He is playing both characters and reading their names before their lines, Antigone and Ismene:

> Ismene: not a word Antigone of those we love, neither sweet nor bitter, has come to me since the moment we lost out two brothers.[90]

He reads the rest of the line and Antigone's reply. The audience look between him and Harrell. He stands, clutches the text, and improvises a monologue from Ismene's point of view, that not only recaps the story but also gives a sense of her interiority:

> Quickly I understand what Antigone is trying to say […] umm I don't really know what to say, it seems bit crazy, or it seems like a really bad idea.[91]

Then she explains that their parents are also siblings, that their mother has committed suicide, and that their father has mutilated himself, before continuing:

> And now our two brothers are dead. And I think it's enough. But I know there's nothing I can do. Antigone has decided, she will go, bury Eteocles, and I understand, that my sister… is gonna die.[92]

Here is the reception of ancient Greek tragedy as a temporal conundrum: a kind of somatic experience that is neither fully identificatory nor fully dissociative, but disidentificatory. Here *Antigone* is performed for the audience at a distance. Lac is and isn't a part of the scene, is and

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[90] From an archival video of the performance to be found here: https://www.documenta14.de/en/calendar/24986/the-strategy-of-joy.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.

is not Ismene, and we are simultaneously positioned after the events of the play – signalled by the physical copy Lac holds – and yet here we are situated before its events unfold.

Lac's grief troubles the stability of *Antigone*, it is combative and elative. And suddenly it becomes clear that this affect has structured the affiliative relations throughout the performance that night. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that grief has been the force which has unstructured each affiliative connection as it has emerged. Grief that caused things to begin and then stop; grief that encouraged choreographic exercises to start only for the performers leave the stage or even the room; grief that presided over the unstoppable oscillations between feminine and masculine, past present, here and there, then and now. A grief that points to the systems which attempt to organise and produce identities, that aim to adjudicate on who is and who is not grievable, that attempt to name and figure that which is unnameable, that aim to control that which wants to run as the problem. Grief now insisting – as Lac's staging of the play emerges seemingly out of nowhere, rupturing the previous aesthetic forms and modes, only to dissolve back into silence, creating a gap, more empty space – that things cannot stay the way they are.

Consequently, their process of performance becomes neither fully identifying nor fully rejecting of Antigone, instead it is disidentificatory in its insistence of grief's disarticulating effects. This is present in Harrell's discussions of the performance, as when asked by Critchley, 'So, what does Antigone love when she loves? Who does she love?'. Harrell replied:

> I can never play all of what I think and know and think that I know. There are so many ideas around the play, and so many different ways to think about Antigone. I just have to focus on what is it like to lose a brother. I have to concentrate in a way separate from my choreographic mind. I just sit there and go, oh my god. The audience watches me going through a hell of a lot of grief. And they begin to relate to it.[93]

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[93] O'Neill-Butler, Carson, Critchley and Harrell (2015) [np].

Here then, perhaps, the collectivity which was fragmented earlier reassembles around this feeling of loss: an enunciation of: 'What kind of world is this in which such iterative losses are possible?'. And here Harrell conjures a mode of disaffective resistance not just to Creon's edict, but to the state of the world, in which she has lost father, mother, brother, and herself. Not then an Antigone of the contemporary stage nor of contemporary theory (a rebel, a political dissident, an expression that which is rendered unintelligible, a force of interruption) but instead Antigone as unnameable, inconsolable, inarticulable and disarticulating grief.[94]

*Undoing Antigone*

Here in the aftermath Tinderstick's 'Another Night In' (1997) begins to play, and Lac returns, holding a microphone, wearing large black sunglasses – in mourning garb now – singing while Harrell dances. He works through little echoes of Bausch's choreography for *Orpheus and Eurydice*, particularly the sequence when Orpheus goes down to the underworld and moves through space, flat and planar, echoing again vase images, friezes, modernism.

Harrel joins Lac in mourning garb and takes a seat beside him in the space. Together they perform a medley of songs, in an arch, loving way – two noisy chanteuses singing beautifully and wretchedly in the wreckage of the world. Here, Harrell and Lac invite us in, through another disputative moment of tragic disorientation. They sing for love lost, for the pain of the collapse and for going on. They sing so that new life after, or in the wake, may emerge.

Here we might recall Preciado's words, which were spoken at the opening of the Parliament of Bodies which Harrell's performance closed, '[In the last five years w]e've seen things that we thought would not be possible, that we couldn't even imagine'.[95] This

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[94] See Butler (2000) 77-78; Honig (2013); Morales (2020); Castro (2021); Ellams and Eastman (2022).
[95] From an archival video of the lecture to be found here: https://www.documenta14.de/en/calendar/24986/the-strategy-of-joy [c05:48].

disputatious performance, thus, points to a continual and cumulative series of harms that constitute the world as it is. But in its disaffection – among the speculative encounter of black queer vogueing and postmodern dance – it marks a shift in our orientation towards harm: a refusal to allow those acts of violence to organise and produce stable identities that can be named. Marking a form of collective refusal of the kind that Saidiya Hartman has described as 'shorthand for what can't be named within the conceptual field of the enclosure': racial capitalism, the ship's hold, the wake, the weather.[96] This culminates, then, through a series of glitching sequences that emerge and collapse, not only in an urgency, in an insistence that 'if we don't act today this [present gathering, this world] may no longer be possible'.[97] It also culminates in an Antigone, transformed: no longer invested in death, and dying, but instead engaging in a process of re-configuring what it means to live, what it means to gather here together.

### iii)     Letting Go

In Butler's reflections on both Loraux's *Mourning Voice,* and Athanasiou's *Agonistic Mourning*, they ask, 'what disposition, then, allows us to establish the anticipatory powers of regret and remorse such that our present and future actions might forestall a future we will come to lament?'.[98] They reflect on the chorus in Greek tragedy, who for Butler, are able to reverse the usual patterns, in which 'lament seems to follow rage and is usually belated'.[99] Instead, the chorus by 'gathering and chanting in the face of propulsive rage […] lament in advance, mourning as soon as they see' catastrophe looming on the horizon.[100]

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[96] Hartman in Sharpe (2023) 254.
[97] Preciado (2019) https://www.documenta14.de/en/calendar/24986/the-strategy-of-joy intro talk.
[98] Butler (2020) 102; cf. Loraux (2002) 99–103; and Athanasiou (2017).
[99] Butler (2020) 102.
[100] Ibid.

It is this kind of gathering and chanting that Harrell achieves at the end of *Antigone Jr ++*. One which recalibrates how we might think of disaffection and disengagement, not as disidentificatory processes of unworlding but as techniques and strategies of letting go, unbecoming, that is – as Marquis Bey puts is – with 'respect to a profound gaining of something else that might allow us to do things differently'.[101] In the intervening years since *Antigone Jr++*, Harrell has invested more and more in this collective practice of anticipatory mourning which facilitates a wayward inhabitation of the world as unfixed. This encourages a letting go, a detachment from the world's harmful, violent conditions.

*Deathbed* is one such an example. Inspired by speculative historical connections between Haitian Vodun, Katherine Dunham, Butoh and one of its mercurial founders Tatsumi Hijikata, the piece is a ritual.[102] Following a two-year residency at the Museum of Modern Art and extensive training in Japan, Harrell has worked with Butoh – an experimental performance form that arose in the aftermath of World War Two, as a means of confronting in part the fixity and oppressive nature of gender norms in Japan. Here Harrell affiliates Butoh, Greek tragedy, and Dunham's practice to explore the ways in which 'the dead [can live live] through the body, [dance] through the body'.[103] He insists here that we grieve and engage in practices of agonism by letting go of our attachments to the world, encouraging us to participate, through speculation, in a mode of hopefulness. This is a form of agonistic mourning that holds the potential for overturning power, as a response to injury, death, loss, and harm that Athanasiou describes as a process that 'involves and compels being disposed toward others, thinking in action, bearing, responding, resisting, and engaging', or, in Harrell's words, engages us in a practice where you 'see something that you believe may be impossible but that can come true'.[104]

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[101] Bey (2022) 12, 127.
[102] Harrell and Thomaka (2022) [np].
[103] Ibid.
[104] Athanasiou (2017) 293–94, 311; Harrell and Thomaka (2022) [np].

Here, like in *Antigone Jr++,* or in the run which loops around the space again and again in *Notes on Less Than Zero*, tragedy emerges in the gap, between our world and the one that looms on the horizon, terrible, hopeful, ambivalent. It becomes attuned to, what Athanasiou might call, 'the labour of re-membering what is at stake in the intractable political imagination arising from the ordinary criticality of the not-yet-here'.[105] And through these choreographies of tragedy which '[try] to make people feel the need for the impossible',[106] Harrell announces in these anticipatory waves of collective mourning, and re-encounter with the unfinished, re-irruptive past, in the elative grief for the ways thing are and might be, another kind of agonism. Here is a combination of the speculative re-return of the dead into the bodies of the living with an insistence on a potential alternative, a speculative route out of, or through, a shared proximity to non-being that does not result in death. This is one that asks to what will we continue to attach, and what new connections and additional affiliations might arise not through a process of unworlding, but through becoming unfixed and letting go? This is an announcement of another way, perhaps, of choreographing tragedy: as a contemporary ritual process that articulates why there is something, rather than nothing, that encourages us to gather together to reckon with world endings and world beginnings.[107]

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

A stage manager sits to the side of the performance space watching intently, carefully as the dancers either continue to walk through the space, posing, draped in layers of clothes, or as they begin to open their cases – lifting out the wire brush, metal teapot, a braiding rope, pen and paper – and to engage in a series of esoteric games (shifting objects back and forth, waiting,

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[105] Athanasiou (2017) 311.
[106] Harrell and Thomaka (2022) [np].
[107] Here Harrell connects Athenian Greek tragedy with both Haitian Vodun and Butoh as ritualistic practices, and as practices for dancing the dead through the body of the living. See Harrell and Thomaka (2022) [np].

gesturing, watching).[108] Amidst the gentle noise of this activity, the stage manager begins to play the Eurythmics 'Here Comes the Rain Again' (1983) on an iPhone: its tinny speaker is unable to fill the Barbican's expansive hold, and instead makes a smaller space, which envelops all of us who have gathered here to watch, feel, and listen. The lyrics, 'here comes the rain again / falling on your head like a tragedy', ring out, as, moving through triplets, the dancers begin to carve elegiac patterns through the air.[109]

Then there is more silence. Some of the dancers come to sit with the audience, they hold books – a biography of Dunham's life – and they too watch intently: they watch us, and one another, as they move into and back out of the middle space. The rhythm of their entrances and exits is conversational, improvisatory, an assembly of different ideas, desires, experiences, which all thread through and over one another, creating patterns of affordance, harmony, suspension, collision, refraction, but also resolution, reverberation, amplification and annihilation. An agonism of ambivalent affects, and various rituals which articulate different grammars, each seemingly with their own specificity – although the precise nature and origin of each is left unknown, emphasising both qualities of conversant sociality and improvisation.

Then, Anohni's cover (2012) of Fleetwood Mac's 'Landslides' (1975) begins to play. One performer reads a list of numbers, '0.01, 0.5' but the song continues: 'I took my love, I took it down, I climbed a mountain and I turned around'. And, as the dancers continue their tasks, a series of associative vignettes unfolds: the performers dance with puppets, they vogue, write letters, ring bells – generating a contemporary ritual with brushes, hand sanitisers – all to the fragility of Anohni's voice, and the guitar's falling, repeating arpeggios.

The song cuts out, midway. More exercises follow as the dancers go back to walking, through the silent space. A long time passes here, or at least it feels like it has been very long,

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[108] For these details I relied on dust (2023) [np].
[109] Cf. Moten (2003) 98—99.

only for this seriousness to be interrupted by the eruption of joy and laughter. This is a section where the performers all begin to explore vogue through the theoretical frames of postmodern minimalism, cheering and calling to each other, modelling their patterns and arrangements onto/from a memory of the runway categories performed in a Harlem ball scene: 'black body suit', they call, trill and repeat, 'black body suit', 'black body suit'. This is a reminder of the way laughter can fracture grief's serious hold on space, bodies, time. A reminder of the way laughing can also be a mode of grief, and at times a kind of agonistic mourning.

Anohni's cover plays again, the lyrics filling the space, 'and I saw my reflection in the snow-covered hills, 'til the landslide brought me down'. The dancers bring in more objects, some balanced on their heads, some imagined. A projector whirrs, and casts them in a hazy light – blurring ritual and anthropology. As the song rings out, they melt and fold underneath one another's arms with social dances of love, joy, and sorrow.

Another montage will play out to close the work, in which they will return all the objects back to their boxes and carry them out of the space; return again to dance their triplet phrases; and appear in headscarves like medieval choral dancers. Harrell will return into the performance space, before leaving once more, and they will all sit and wait until one dancer rises shaking with grief. She will wail, although she will produce no sound, and rising, begin to track into the space. They will move to cover her, undone by grief, in layers and layers of scarves, until she can no longer stand and, lifting her body softly into the air, they will gather behind her, to walk, leaving in a funeral procession with that dancer carried on their shoulders like a coffin. But for now, they float, towards, and away from one another, forming groups, triplets, quartets as Anohni croons, 'well, I've been afraid of changing, 'cause I've built my life around you'.

ECSTASY

ECSTASY

Chapter 5

IVO VAN HOVE & WIM VANDEKEYBUS

*AGE OF RAGE*

> Carson: He sees it as… well, maybe you should ask Ivo [van Hove], but I gather he sees it as a balanced conflict between Antigone and Kreon. Very substantially balanced. Lack of balance was what he objected to in *Antigonick*.

> Critchley: It's more the Hegelian view then.

> Carson: I think so. Well, he's … Belgian [laughter]. Actually, his whole team went to school together, I believe. That's one thing that I learned in Luxembourg, that he and his whole design team work together as a sort of molecule.

> Critchley: Oh really?

> Carson: All five of them eat breakfast together, work all day, and have dinner together, always in a hubbub. They've been friends for so long, they have their own language by now. Like twins.

> Critchley: It would be interesting to hear more about that from Ivo. What I find particularly liberating about your translations of Euripides – and it's there for me underpinning your *Antigonick* as well – is the idea to liberate tragedy from the Aristotelian framework, and in particular the straitjacket orientation toward catharsis.

> Carson: I've never understood catharsis.[1]

The stage is a mess. We are nearly four hours into Ivo van Hove's *Age of Rage* (2021). Thick, well-trodden mud is caked over the first two-thirds of the proscenium stage. The mud is also all over the legs, arms, and necks of the performers. They are head-banging, threatening to destroy any part of the set they can get their hands on, threatening to spill out into the audience at any moment. This is *Age of Rage*'s final choral ode. It follows a montage of six different Greek tragedies, concerned with the violence and long aftermath of the Trojan war: *Iphigenia*

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[1] O'Neill-Butler, Carson, Critchley and Harrell (2015) [np].

*in Aulis*, *Hecuba*, *Trojan Women*, *Electra*, *Orestes* by Euripides, and *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus.

In this chapter I analyse this production by Van Hove for the way that it claims to say something about not only, the 'age' we find ourselves in, but also about the 'origins of violence' and 'primal' human emotions: rage, grief, and ecstasy.[2] In the first part of the argument, I will demonstrate that Van Hove and his 'molecule' – which also includes choreographer Wim Vandekeybus for this production – turn back to the work of Pina Bausch to bring together the six ancient tragedies they have selected. In the second part, I explore how the work functions as a representation of war, explicitly thinking about how it relates to other relevant synchronic and diachronic examples. I argue that *Age of Rage* does not complicate or question the ways that war is presented in performance but instead it reveals just how established, and perhaps conventional, postdramatic techniques have become.

In this sense, *Age of Rage* is in tension with many of the case studies I have discussed previously because the production undergirds dominant hegemonic fantasies of dance's relationships to primality, primitivism, and coloniality. This is my focus in the third section of the chapter when I analyse the way that the performance Others and remains wary of 'disorderly' collective group movement, figuring it as a kind of bacchic ecstasy as it relies on modernist, particularly Nietzschean, entangled binaries of individual/collective, self/other, civilisation/barbarian to present group movement as the primitive foil to individuated Man. I conclude with a discussion of the final choral ode, which I argue not only brings all these ideas together in its concluding moments – reflecting on war, hyperviolence, primitivism, and ecstasy – but also stages a fantasy of the end of the world.

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[2] *Age of Rage,* Barbican Digital Programme (nd) [np]: https://www.barbican.org.uk/digital-programmes/internationaal-theater-amsterdam-age-of-rage.

i)        Tragedy, Ritual

As might already be clear, *Age of Rage* is a bloody, mud-drenched, epic performance – a cascade of scenes of amplifying eroticism, destruction and bodily mutilation, linked by the themes of revenge and conquest.[3] It is important to contextualise *Age of Rage* not only by considering Van Hove's previous engagements with tragedy, or Vandekeybus' choreographic practice, but also by exploring how both artists turn back to, but also modulate, the work of the Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch.

Described as a 'maximalist minimalist',[4] Van Hove is well understood to be a field-leading, although not an un-controversial, director.[5] *Age of Rage* was developed from a shorter work *Electra/Orestes* (2019) that was staged in an historic collaboration between the Comédie-Française and the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus.[6] The longer work repeats the themes and aesthetics of this initial production: both feature similar scenography defined by the use of mud, a reference to Bausch' practice of engaging with ecological elements on stage, and particularly the mud in *Rite of Spring* (1975); and both works participate in the same blurring of ancient and contemporary arts festivals: Epidaurus (ancient and modern) for *Orestes/Electra* and large scale music festivals for *Age of Rage*. Both productions are also interested in, and particularly Electra's capacity for, blurring gender presentation and norms, adopting queer aesthetics.[7] Choreography for both is provided by Vandekeybus and in each work multi-rolling is relied on, for example the roles of both Helen and Clytemnestra are played by one actor.

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[3] On epic performance and war, see Macintosh and McConnell (2020) particularly 114–33 on Suzan-Lori Parks *Father Comes Home from the Wars Parts 1, 2, and 3* (2014) and Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphosis* (2001).
[4] First used in Brantley (2015) in a review of Van Hove's *A View from the Bridge* [np], in reference to Catton (2015) [np] who examined how Van Hove gets 'more from less'. Catton quotes him as saying, 'by removing the naturalism, we got to the tragedy of it'. For Brantley the term also concerns Greek tragedy, 'this must be what Greek tragedy once felt like, when people went to the theatre in search of catharsis' he observes. Van Hove has been asked about the term and notes, 'I can't improve on that' Kellaway (2016).
[5] See Brantley, Vincentelli, Zinoman (2019); Pollack-Pelzner (2020) [np]; Wiegand (2022) [np]; Cain (2023) [np].
[6] Athens Epidaurus Festival (nd) [np]: https://aefestival.gr/festival_events/electra-orestes/?lang=en.
[7] On queer aesthetics and dramaturgy, see: Campbell and Farrier (2015); Edward and Farrier (2020).

Both *Electra/Orestes* and *Age of Rage* form a small part of a career-long engagement with tragedy that includes, amongst others: Sophocles' *Ajax/Antigone* (1990); William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1992–93), both at Zuidelijk Toneel theatre; Euripides' *Die Bakchen* (*The Bacchae*), the director's first international production (1993); and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1998). In the new millennium came Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (2004), *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner and the *Roman Tragedies* by Shakespeare (between 2006 and 2008). Then came two major productions, Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* (2011), and Arthur Miller's *A View From the Bridge* (2014) – cementing Van Hove's status in both London and New York, with one New York reviewer even stating, of the latter, 'this must be what Greek tragedy once felt like, when people went to the theater [sic] in search of catharsis'.[8] The following year Van Hove staged Sophocles' *Antigone* in Anne Carson's translation, starring Juliette Binoche at the Barbican after opening in Edinburgh during the Festival; in 2019 he directed *Hedda Gabler*, again, but this time with London's National Theatre, and later that year a version of Luchino Visconti's *Les Damnés* with the Comédie-Française. He staged *West Side Story* (2020) before the highly controversial performances of Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, which were staged iteratively (2018–23). *Age of Rage* is situated between these last two works, and has something of both: music, dance and representations of extreme trauma and violence.

Greek tragedy is as prominent in Van Hove's career as are Elizabethan tragedies (both by Marlowe and Shakespeare), and American tragedies by Kushner, Miller, and Williams co-mingle with Ibsen. Knitting them together are the many echoes of landmark European theatre makers and directors who have staged those tragedies across the turn of the century. These include: Patrice Chéreau, who Van Hove references in his blurring of opera and theatre techniques; Rainer Werner Fassbinder in his approach to ensemble; Peter Stein's imprint in his

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[8] London: Gardner (2015); New York: Brantley (2015).

interest in text, dramaturgy, power, and architecture;[9] and Katie Mitchell, whose cerebral approaches to (live) video and live performance also appears frequently and make her a key reference and interlocutor.[10] Heiner Müller is reworked often in the stumbling choruses and in his use of tragedy to investigate democracy;[11] the combative approach to bodies comes partly from Jan Fabre – a controversial choreographer who has recently been given an eighteen-month suspended sentence for violence, bullying, and sexual harassment – as does Van Hove's predilection for representations of violence.[12] Film makers (Visconti and Bergman), writers (Yanagihara but also Ayn Rand) and composers also shape his aesthetic sensibility and approach to dramaturgy (Van Hove staged David Bowie's musical *Lazarus*, also based on Walter Tevis' 1963 novel *The Man Who Fell to Earth*). But so do choreographers and dance artists.

As a culmination of over three decades of work, *Age of Rage* functions as a sustained series of reflections on tragedy and therefore provides an opportunity to analyse some major trends and internationally significant approaches to staging tragedy. Particularly relevant here is Van Hove's decision to work with Vandekeybus. This choice dovetails over thirty years of theatrical practice with the network of choreographers, whose work I have been tracing in the thesis. *Age of Rage* demonstrates how the tragic, developed in choreographic practice from Bausch onward, is configured on a global scale by a major theatre director. It also shows how the tragic – expressed by the enunciation of 'what kind of world is this in which…?', and enacted as a slip, rupture, transgression, or even a breach in representation caused by the absence of an event – is transformed further through choreography.

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[9] On his relationship to Chéreau, Fassbinder, and Stein, see Bosanquet and Van Hove (2015) [np].
[10] On Mitchell, see Cole (2015); Baudou (2022).
[11] Baudou (2021).
[12] Lyons (2022) [np].

As the audience enter the Barbican's brutalist theatre space, they are met with the smell of cooking meat, a butcher hacking at flesh with a cleaver, a bubbling vat of blood, and a large collection of coordinated digital screens – we are watching tragedy 'in the flesh', as Oliver Taplin reminds us.[13] On the screens, a scrolling family tree is articulating the lines and knotted kin-networks of the house of Atreus beginning with Tyndareus, Leda, Zeus, Pluto and going all the way down to Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus, Clytemnestra and her sister Helen and their (murderous) children: Orestes, Electra, and Hermione.

As the performance begins, a date is flashed up, and we are told that we are in the Minoan period, but the screaming guitars and heavy drums index a contemporary music festival. Out of the sound, smell, and digital moving-image work emerges a chorus, dancing. They establish the movement language for the performance as they fill the stage – grounded with low centres of gravity, sharp tense arms, and swinging hips; a chorus of dancers, some of whom are trained in the techniques of ballet, contemporary dance and physical theatre, others whose dance-styles may well have been developed in social settings: the bar, wedding, nightclub, or house party. After they enter and establish themselves through dance, they begin to re-enact a mythological sequence in which Atreus, having killed his brother's children, feeds them to him. The butcher, suddenly, is integrated into the mythological narrative of the performance and a Greek tragedy is assembled through this first ode. The brutality rings through the space via peels of doom with metal guitar and drums.

This opening sequence collapses numerous times and places in a style that we could describe as postdramatic – after Hans Thies Lehmann's description of the tragic experience as a series of transgressions and as a deconstruction of character, place, time and the embrace of polysemy, and disunity to the point at which 'matters of plot dissolve and the explosive moment

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[13] Taplin (2022) 31.

of reversal becomes almost constant'.[14] Here a myth emerges through an intermedial or multimedial combination of projection, live music, choreography, and live art techniques.[15] This is not a synthesis, nor a Wagnerian *Gesamtkusntwerk*, instead as Erika Fisher-Lichte describes, in an essay on performance art and ritual, 'it seems that their unrelated coexistence closely approximated Wagner's nightmare, "of, for example a reading of a Goethe novel and the performance of a Beethoven symphony taking place in an art gallery amongst various statues"'.[16] For the sequence described neither completely folds dance, gesture, sound, set into or across one another. And yet, each element becomes entangled through the co-creation of the mythological scene. The emphasis here on music and dance, on repeated gesture – both in the choreography of bodies moving through space and the action of cutting up the meat, which we later find out is the flesh of the children – coupled with the invocation of contemporary music festivals and underground or counter cultural music scenes evoke the idea that contemporary cultural and social rituals are collapsing into ancient ritual and performance.[17] This is emphasised by the projection screen which invokes the names of the gods, plugging us back into ancient religious performance contexts.[18]

Following this opening sequence, we emerge onto a shoreline. A gigantic rope tethers an implied (offstage) boat to the land. Onstage, Agamemnon wonders whether he should send

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[14] Lehmann (2016) quoting Schößler (2010) 326 in a discussion of Sarah Kane's *4:42 Psychosis*; on tragedy and the postdramatic, see Lehmann (2016) 401; for tragedy and transgression as a 'a problem of the institution of the dramatic theatre of representation' 411; for uncertainty in relation to space, voice, bodies 425–26; for chorus as landscape 427; for chorus and montage 435. Cf. Cole (2019) especially 2–19.

[15] For an overview of intermediality and multimedia, see Rippl (2015) 1–31: for British contemporary performance and intermediality, see Georgi (2015) 530–46; for intermediality and dance Ljungberg (2015) 562–83. On dance, multi-media, and dynamic integration, see Chaganti (2018). On transmediality, *the Odyssey*, and classical reception, see Myers (2020). On the development of inter/transmediality through immersivity in performance there are numerous but particularly helpful is Kolesch, Nikoleit, and Schütz (2019).

[16] Fisher-Lichte (2003) 229 referencing Wagner (1887/8) 3.

[17] There are multiple papers from Anthropology, Classics, and Performance studies of relevance here, and of course of great importance are the Cambridge ritualists, but on ancient tragedy and ritual: Girard (1972); Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1972); Easterling (1988); Zeitlin, Winkler, and Halperin (1990); Nagy (1991); Vernant (1991); Seaford (1994); Burkett (1996); Lloyd-Jones (2005). On performance, anthropology, and ritual: Schechner and Turner (1985); Schechner (1993) particularly 228–63. On contemporary performance and ritual Fischer-Lichte (2003).

[18] Cf. Rodosthenous and Poulou (2022).

a letter that would prevent the arrival of his daughter Iphigenia to Aulis – he has told her and his wife that she is to marry the warrior Achilles, but underneath this lie is a terrible plot. Agamemnon has agreed to sacrifice Iphigenia, offering her to appease the goddess Artemis and gain winds to sail to Troy for war. Agamemnon tells us that he has become a 'slave' to the wills of his men and must sacrifice his daughter to appease the gods and gain fair wind to sail.

Van Hove's *Iphigenia in Aulis* is telescoped into around forty minutes and eventually Iphigenia agrees, becoming ecstatic for her own death, declaiming how this act will be a beautiful opportunity to allow her – a woman – to become a part of the Greek war effort, to rout the 'barbarian' Trojans, and to extend 'Greek' domination across the world. Her death is staged as the second part of this ancient-contemporary festival ritual.[19] Occupying the same conceptual space that the butcher did in the opening, Agamemnon sharpens a blade on a large spinning whet stone, while Clytemnestra dresses her daughter. The chorus bring out candles, trays of food, they set up an altar, all while the band plays heavy, looming, doom metal. Eventually, they place a white blindfold over Iphigenia's eyes and the butcher raises his weapon, but just before the knife drives into her flesh, time stops. She slips out from underneath, dancing across the stage – a shuffling winding dance, an interplay of convulsions, runs, tilts, off balance, leans, and jitters – and as she moves, her body is replaced with that of a deer, which is winched up into the air.

As recently described by Ella Haselswerdt, 'the appearance of the horned doe in IA similarly sidesteps the plot's seemingly inevitable telos, but the ontological terms of the replacement of the girl with the horned doe are difficult to discern'.[20] This is apparent in *Age of Rage* in the same Deleuzean way that Haselswerdt describes, where Iphigenia is both

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[19] On sacrifice in relation to gender and human sacrifice: Girard (1972); Foley (1985); Easterling (1988); Loraux (1987, 2002); Zeitlin and Winkler (1990); Burkett (1996); Zeitlin (1996); Lloyd-Jones (2005).
[20] Haselswerdt (2022) 54.

herself/and the deer, and vice versa – both becoming the other.[21] However, Haselswerdt

identifies more queer potential in Euripides than is available here. She writes:

> The bestial queer double of Iphigenia is a promised but not yet present escape
> hatch in a play otherwise marked by a grim, overdetermined fate. The plot
> of IA is a prison. It methodically chews through every indulgence the
> patriarchy has to offer the girl – the paternal sympathy of Agamemnon, the
> heroic gallantry of Achilles – all of it revealed to be toothless and useless in
> the face of the war machine, mobilised as the ultimate expression of
> masculine squabbling over the ownership of a woman. But when Iphigenia
> becomes the horned doe, a line of flight, a narrative disruption, emerges. No
> longer a cow raised for ritual slaughter, or a young girl raised for the rites of
> marriage, Iphigenia may yet break free of the heteroreproductive structures
> designed to tame both animals and women.[22]

If only there were an escape from the war machine in Van Hove's direction and Vandekeybus'

choreography.[23] However, not only does Iphigenia make clear that her sacrifice will be for the

expansionist aims of the Greeks over barbarians, the performer who plays Iphigenia – Ilke

Paddenburg – will also play all the other young women and children who are blood-sacrifices

for the war: in *Hecuba*, and *Trojan Women*, she embodies Polyxena, Polydorus, and Astyanax,

(all who meet gruesome deaths). Thus, it seems that

Iphigenia/Polyxena/Polydorus/Paddenburg/Astyanax will die again and again until, finally, in

Van Hove's staging of Euripides *Orestes*, the actor plays Helen's daughter Hermione – forcibly

married to Orestes (the man whose comrade tries but fails to kill her) by the god Apollo. This

reasserts the telos that Haselswerdt identifies in *IA* that the substitution is meant to route. Van

Hove thus bolsters rather than frustrates the heteroreproductive structures designed to 'tame

both animals and women'.[24]

This sequence in *Age of Rage* also reworks the first choral ode in *Agamemnon*

(Aesch.Ag. 40–263) where the chorus reflect on the murder of Iphigenia as a ritual killing that

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[21] Ibid.
[22] Haselswerdt (2022) 55–56.
[23] For war machines, see Mbembe (2019) especially 83–87; cf. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) 351–423.
[24] Haselswerdt (2022) 55–56.

facilitated the Greeks journey to Troy. For it is from the chorus's opening dance that the shoreline emerges, and it is back to the choric throng that the play returns after her death. It is as if we have travelled through the chorus of *Agamemnon* back into *Iphigenia in Aulis*. This enacts Iphigenia's death as a reiterating, rebounding act that knits across both tragedies. Spinning us backward and forward: functionally setting up the later action – we see Iphigenia killed so that we can later understand Clytemnestra's desire for revenge and her revenge killing of Agamemnon becomes an inversion of the earlier ritual-killing Agamemnon performed on his daughter. But it also reinforces the importance of the chorus as a mechanism for facilitating the return and iteration of such acts, elements, plots, and images.

In a panel discussion staged for Robert Icke's *Oresteia* (2014), Van Hove argued that Icke had been mistaken to discard the chorus on the grounds that they slow down the plot and stop the action.[25] According to Van Hove, it is precisely their ability to stop and gather, to sing and dance, that enables the past narrative and affective structures to be remembered and dismembered, connecting ongoing performance events with iterating historic and forthcoming catastrophes. Hove calls them an 'archive of grief'.[26] We can read the entire opening and the *IA* sequence of *Age of Rage* as if it emerges from the chorus as an archive of grief. For the scene on the shoreline and the ritual killing of the child erupts from their movement and song, before being submerged back into it.

This is a Bauschian conceptualisation of a chorus, a means of performing form as process, and enacting a liminal ritual space between scenarios to which the performance can return to facilitate transitions, and emphasise the expression of certain ideas, situations, and actions again and again. We will see this throughout *Age of Rage*. Here the chorus function

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[25] Goold, Van Hove and Warner (2015).

[26] Goold, Van Hove, and Warner (2015); Van Hove was at the time collaborating with Anne Carson on *Antigone* and his thinking here is informed partly by her work, cf. Carson (2012, 2015).

like a landscape into and out of which characters, figures, mythic plots emerge.[27] Certain choreographic modes for the chorus are lifted from the archive of grief and re-enacted by a group of people who come together to remember, through their bodies, previous traumatic, violent or even tender, hopeful moments.

Simultaneously, Iphigenia's sacrifice in *Age of Rage* establishes another, virtual, chorus. For each cumulative iteration of the sacrificial figure played by Paddenburg appears on the projected screen via videorecording. There she re-iterates the looping, jittery dance she performed before and after her sacrifice as Iphigenia. Each iteration layers over the other, until the number of young women and children killed for war seems endless. This has two effects: the first is further temporal collapse and confusion in line with Lehmann's articulation of the tragic experience; the second is a collapse between war violence and the mythologies of war. The first effect is illuminated because the performance uses pre-recorded footage which comes from a time before the unfolding mediated 'live' of the performance and thus brings the past into contact with the present.[28] But the video recordings depict not only deaths in the past and recent present but deaths yet to come, the next sacrifice, the next woman or child on the altar;[29] and so the digital also indexes the future – not in the speculative condition of 'what if' but very much in the sense that this will and has already come to pass. This is a choreography enacted between the bodies on stage, the bodies in myth, and the bodies projected on the screen. The second effect is pronounced because of the civilizational aims of Iphigenia's sacrifice.

Consequently, the digital recording which plays out and performs the ghosts of all the women and children sacrificed for the war machine haunts the stage, haunts the debates between men over how to deal with war and how to deal with its victims, haunts too the

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[27] On this phenomenon in the work of Einar Schleef, see Lehmann (2016) 427 and on chorus, the postdramatic, and montage 435.

[28] For the roots of the debate about liveness in Theatre and Performance studies, cf. Phelan (1993); Auslander (1999)

[29] Cf. Carr (2022).

intergenerational curse of the house of Atreus which we see played out in full in the second act. But the residue of that haunting is not one of railing against war, nor is it one that captures an energy of resistance to war, to collapse it and find fissures and breaks in its architectures, structures, and machinery. Instead, the residue is one of ecstatic surrender to war, an energy which thrills at the machine's advance and continual takeover of land, air, sea.

Here is another echo of Bausch's work with the Tanztheater Wuppertal. There, repetition was something more than a trope or stylistic inflection, rather the 'very substance of transfer between the dead and the living'.[30] Repetition in Bausch was a way of exploring the body-archives encoded, previous/past/historic experiences of grief through attempts at forming a collective; this is a group effort to try and re-assemble, speak to and about the horrors of multiple global wars. But in *Age of Rage* repetition and re-iteration enunciate something slightly different. The chorus forms first, and then individuals try to step out from it, before being dissolved back into the chorus' midst, presenting the return and perpetuation of war and trauma as seemingly inescapable. In this context repetition is necropolitical, amounting to a choral performance not only of the dancers ritualised post-traumatic memories of war and violence, but also a performance of war as ritual.[31]

*Turning Back*

It is notable that Van Hove and Vandekeybus turn back to Bausch. Vandekeybus shares, and works in the wake of her interest in the body's potential as an archive and material.[32] But in opposition to Bausch's question-based method of practice-based research, Vandekeybus asks dancers to react to certain situations instinctively, playing on trained reflexes – dancing not 'as

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[30] Phelan (2017) 311.

[31] For 'necropolitics' as the discourses and conscripts that structure dying, see Mbembe (2019).

[32] Lehmann (2016) 400 also notes that Bausch and Vandekeybus both shared the ability to create tragic experience through post-dramatic effects in their choreography.

if' something is happening to them, but responding live to a constructed situation while it unfolds.

This is a method of choreography that asks, what does the body need to do in order to move through and survive certain situations? For example, in his first work *What the Body Does Not Remember* (1986), one dancer threw a brick up into the air and waited - until another came, pushed them out of the way and caught the brick before it collided with the dancer's skull. Then that second dancer threw the brick up above their head and waited.[33] This style of confrontational, dangerous dance emerged from Vandekeybus' training with Fabre. While it is disturbing to consider Fabre here, it is important because his work influenced a certain amount of thought on tragedy on the postdramatic stage;[34] and Vandekeybus has held onto this physical, risky form of dance throughout his career, producing what dance scholar Alena Alexandrova describes as 'highly confrontational work which "thinks" the encounter between the radically exposed body […] and the overwhelming gravity of its emotions'.[35]

Consequently, Vandekeybus aims to excavate the body for movement that comes from 'the inner state of being' and not via the construction of scenarios or the re-construction of previous experiences.[36] He does so by putting the body in extreme situations and generating choreography from both 'the intensity of the physical challenge' – the use of leaps, dives, rolls, and materials like fire, clay, heat, and water – and also by engaging with 'the natural vocabulary of movements with which the human body reacts to [those] extreme states'.[37]

We see this commitment to movement and the extreme taking place while Iphigenia talks to Agamemnon, and clambers over her father. She moves his centre of gravity as she goes up over his shoulders or around his waist, daring or threatening always to make him spill over

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[33] Cf. Vandekeybus (2016).
[34] Cole (2019) 247–74.
[35] Alexandrova (2003) 21.
[36] Ultima Vez (1999) 3.
[37] Alexandrova (2003) 21–22; cf. Vandekeybus (2016).

and force him to change position, but he adjusts at every step, cradling her or holding her to his body. Going through this series of micro and macro displacements, Agamemnon and Iphigenia dance a duet which describes, in somatics, the kind of life and death negotiation they find themselves in theatrically.

We could read this as Iphigenia's attempt to convince Agamemnon to change his stance, to tell her why she is really in Aulis, or even to persuade him to refuse to go through with her sacrifice, and to save her. He does not budge – their bodies express something that their words imply, allude to, but cannot name. Here Vandekeybus' techniques for revealing the inner state of being come across ironically though a constructed task that lets the encounter between the radically exposed body and its emotions play out. We see this later, when Clytemnestra finds out what will become of her daughter – a blood sacrifice to Artemis and the war machine – and she keens, stretching her mouth wide, hunching her shoulders and pointing a single finger into the sky, her body a taut and bulging wreck of grief and horror. The same physicality returns after she kills her husband, Agamemnon. As the performance shifts, hurtling towards cycles of revenge and escalating violence in the aftermath of this murder, we see a young man in ripped jeans and a band t-shirt – who we will later come to know as Orestes – strike his own body repeatedly, slamming his hand off his rib cage and flank again and again, till he drops to the floor, back arched in rage, pain and pleasure, hand still crashing against his flesh, skin, and bone – a prophetic vision of the violence to come from within the ongoing war between Greeks and Trojans.

Here Clytemnestra puts physical form to grief and trauma through gesture – echoing both Vandekeybus' claim to choreograph bodies in extreme states of survival while reworking Bausch's practice of trusting the body to express what words cannot, to express its own archive of memories, pains, joys, hopes, its repertoire of re-membered sensations, feelings, and fantasies. And Orestes' repeated gestures of self-harm become an iterative gesture meant to

call up the intergenerational trauma that he will enact on stage when he murders his mother, for having killed his father, in the second act. In that moment he will push a knife into her chest, into the very same place where now he slams his own hand on his own flesh.

Consequently, repetition and re-iteration name the mechanisms that produce death: the machine of war and the structural institution of violence and revenge. Here dance is used to express war as ritual but also the bare, linguistically inexpressible emotional and physical states engendered by such a ritual. Thus, the production can be said to return to Bausch, in the identifiable ways in which the Tanztheater Wuppertal have informed this staging of tragedy through choreographies of trauma and grief. But we can also identify how this model has been changed.

In *Café Müller* and *Nelken*, the Company was interested in investigating the aftermath of war, collective trauma, and in how the dancers could 'represent the unrepresentable' excluded by dominant framings of war – and in this sense they worked through the body-archive to undo the frames which supported war as a system. They presented stories of people who had lost lives, relationships, loved ones, and senses of themselves, to war and adjacent hierarchical systems of violence. But because Bausch and the Tanztheatre Wuppertal were also interested in love, care, tenderness as well as their cruel, violent obverse, they frequently expressed the embodied experiences of those who resisted, worked against and saw moments in which the war machine broke apart, failed, and collapsed. In contrast, Van Hove and Vandekeybus use the techniques of tragic experience and dance not to point to the faltering and failure of the war machine, nor to love and care in the face of devastation, but instead, to present war and devastation in all its dominance and seeming totality.

ii)        Performing War as Tragedy

Neither Van Hove, Vandekeybus, nor Bausch is alone in using performance to investigate the (im)possibility of representing the horrors of war.[38] Nor are they alone in using tragedy to do so.[39] In fact performance has been a key analytic for exploring and expressing the ways in which war is performed on the battlefield, through training, and simulated immersion – for example fake practice towns were set up in Canada and the UK, for soldiers to simulate 'forms of punitive yet "culturally sensitive" militarism' which they are to apply when they are in the theatre of war, mixing an idea of immersive theatricality with Rebecca Schneider's notion of the 'cross-temporal mobility' of re-enactment.[40] But also, performance has been used to analyse how war involves the construction of image, use of sound, organisation of bodies and interventions on space;[41] and it has been used to analyse how the performance of war in live art, film, television, drama, theatre, musicals, and opera constructs certain narratives, orientations, sensoria, and ideas.[42]

In *Watching War on the Twenty-First Century Stage: Spectacles of Conflict*, Clare Finburgh Delijani begins by observing that 'fighters and arms are mobilised during wars and conflicts. So too are images'.[43] While at war, the construction of 'reality' – as a set of 'ideological claims and aesthetic positions'– is articulated as a series of fields upon which conflicts can be won or lost.[44] Reading performance hence as part of the war machine, and the

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[38] The connection between war and theatre and/or performance is well attested in scholarship see Finburgh Delijani (2017) 61; Alvarez (2022); cf. Weber (2004); Mirzoeff (2005); Giroux (2006); Carruthers (2007); Mieszkowski (2012); Bakogianni (2015).

[39] The references again are almost innumerable, but for a selection of recent studies on Greek tragedy and war in performance: Michelakis (2010); Cole (2015, 2019); Wallace (2020); cf. Alvarez (2022). Cf. the theatre Company, 'Theatre of War'.

[40] Alvarez (2018) 6 referencing Schneider (2011) particularly 37–43, 181–86.

[41] Alvarez (2018, 2022).

[42] See Finburgh Delijani (2017).

[43] Finburgh Delijani (2017) 13.

[44] Finburgh Delijani (2017) xv.

war machine as reliant on various expanded modes of performance, we might note that tragedy

plays an important role in their constructions. Finburgh Delijani notes that:

> European theatre has represented war from its beginnings. One of the first plays in the European canon, Aeschylus's *The Persians* (472 BCE), focuses on King Xerxes's invasion of Greece. Even before Aeschylus, his predecessor Phrynichus was renowned for his exceptionally graphic dramatization of the atrocities of the Persian War in *The Sack of Miletus* (511 BCE). At the beginning of formalised theatre in England, which was consolidated by Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, war was also a constant.[45]

This observation on the questions war throws up continue to be asked in the choreography of

tragedy today: which performs on multiple fronts an enquiry into the relationships between

war, performance and identity (particularly European-ness and ideas of the canon), between

reality and the construction of reality, and between what can and cannot be represented in

performance (indexed here by the example of Phrynichus).

Yet, much has changed in our experiences of the world and war. Since the beginning

of this millennium, for example, there has been a series of major shifts. Finburgh Delijani

points to 9/11 as a moment not only of political or historical rupture and disorganisation, but

also as a change in the way representation functions due to 'the global media coverage' of the

attacks, filmed live on camera which '[transformed a] local event simultaneously into a global

one'.[46] Following the advent of social, new digital and virtual medias, the role of TV stations,

post-hoc descriptions or memories of violent events, and photo-journalism have also

changed.[47] Events, scenarios, catastrophes, and processes are now often archived as they unfold

via a wide variety of sources, including more formalised and sanctioned forms of recording

such as black boxes, CCTV footage, satellite location data, remote sensing, and phone-tower

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[45] Finburgh Delijani (2017) 48, for a postcolonial reflection on this, cf. Finburgh Delijani (2021).
[46] Finburgh Delijani (2017) 50 referencing a debate between Habermas and Spencer, cf. Habermas (2003) 28.
[47] See Fuller and Weisman (2021) 7–24 on 'counter-readings' that gather all the traces left in the wake of an act of war, an invasion, or an attack but which are often ignored by more traditional forms of media – exemplified by their presentation, through *Forensic Architecture* at Documenta 14.

data and more informal means such as smartphones and the data generated by other kinds of personal electronic device that inform and construct events, memories, processes (smartwatches, medical devices, headphones), which are all integrated into art practice and performance.[48]

This does not mean that we have a more direct access to the world, as these technologies variously mediate, construct, and contour its (re)appearances. But it does mean that images, sounds, the materialities and traces of war, and its violence, proliferate in a seemingly endless, unfolding refraction of surfaces, webpages, bits, pixels, audio data, spatial mapping, and algorithmic affiliation.[49] War disseminates and can be reconstructed in ways that can, but do not always, exceed state and media sanctioned forms.[50] Its hyper-mediation entangles with digital media's capacity for hyper-repeatability, hyper-modulation, and hyper-re-iterability leading to the point where the individual can become dissolved in a series of webs and systems – through synoptic oversight of multiple cameras, data-feeds, and big-data sets and/or by becoming disarticulated through capture and construction by these multiple systems.[51]

Consequently, the relationship between war, conflict, spectacle, and media, has given a new quality and force to repetition in performance. The ability to see, hear, and feel again and again the catastrophe of war is now readily available. However, even though we do have more and proliferating captures of traumatic events as they happen, there are still a number of questions about the relationship of those images and sounds to the material consequences of trauma in the body which performance unfolds.[52]

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[48] For an example, see *Forensic Architecture* and the publications of the group, particularly Weizman (2017); Schuppli (2020); Fuller and Weizman (2021).

[49] Fuller and Weisman (2021) 2–24 and 26–30. On critical approaches to AI, see Benjamin (2019); Raley and Ree (2023).

[50] Fuller and Weisman (2021); Kapadia (2019).

[51] All features of what Fuller and Weizman (2021) call 'hyper-aesthetics', a dissolving of the self into a multi-networked assemblage which can cause feelings of the sublime or ecstasy, and which bring about the possibility for hyperaesthesia: which is a state of overload or collapse whereby things stop making sense, cf. 26–30.

[52] See Barthes (1981); Sontag (2003, 2004); Campt (2017, 2021); Wallace (2020); Fuller and Weisman (2021); Sharpe (2023).

This is the focus of Finburgh Delijani's analysis as she, after Judith Butler, and prefiguring Jennifer Wallace, investigates the framing of the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, considering images of migration, of people fleeing these conflicts, while considering also the ways in which those images are disseminated by state and anti-state groups and how they are combined into spectacles, manufactured, framed, and constructed.[53] Finburgh Delijani and Butler both analyse how these images become sensationalised, and often how slick, and oversimplified such imagery is.[54] Furthermore, like Butler, Finburgh Delijani thinks with performance for the way in which it can reveal the staging and construction of those images, narratives, and stories 'live', unfolding in front of an audience.[55] Performance can, in this way, encourage an audience to think about how they relate to the production of images, feelings, sounds, affects, intimacies, and stories. And it can also encourage a critical or complicit engagement with their production.[56] Finburgh Delijani adds that 'since the start of the twenty-first century, conflict – from the use of barbaric executions to the neocolonial scramble for land and resources – has been allied with hyper-modern audio-visual technologies'.[57] Or in Butler's terms, performance can interrogate the 'cultural modes of regulating affective and ethical dispositions through a selective and differential framing of violence'.[58]

*Dogs of War*

We can identify this tension in the way that Van Hove and Vandekeybus work with the chorus as an 'archive of grief' for their performance of war as ritual. After the death of Iphigenia, there

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[53] Butler (2009). Cf. Wallace (2020) whose discussion of 'image making' and the connection between tragedy, theatre, and photography is particularly illuminating 75–100.

[54] See Butler (2009); Delijani (2017); cf. Wallace (2020) 76–87.

[55] Finburgh Delijani (2017) 17–26; 48–50 for a theatre-historical discussion, including analysis of works such as Kane (1995). Cf. artists including Anne Imhof; Harun Farouki; and those discussed in Kapadia (2019). These examples all highlight how war is comprised of a contested systems-field of sights, sounds, smells, sensations, and feelings.

[56] Finburgh Delijani (2017) 54–61.

[57] Finburgh Delijani (2017) 3.

[58] Butler (2009) 73.

is an extended dance sequence as the performance melts back into choral movement and dance. Bodies slam against one another, dancers rush at one another, only to be pushed back and propelled through the air. They fall to the ground, again and again, indexing multiple innumerable war dead. The speed, collision, rebound, and height at work puts the body into extreme positions, but also functions to express symbolically the Trojan War, as dance theatre. The height, speed, and collisions which happen between vulnerable bodies on stage physicalise those elements of war that force the body to move, to slam flesh into flesh or to fly through the air. The digital screen plays footage of unending flames, and it is not only murder, or death which is signalled here but the violent mutilation of bodies and the immolation of entire towns, cities, communities through combat. Eventually, dancers begin to bark and pad across the stage on all fours, leashed to another's arm. This 'hounds of war' image connotes the violent hunger for destruction in war, its rending of flesh.

Out of the chorus comes Euripides' devastating pair of plays: *Trojan Woman* and *Hecuba*, spliced together with another excerpt from *Agamemnon* – Clytemnestra's beacon speech. Finding themselves stranded after their city has fallen, the women of Troy face enslavement, sexual violence, torture, and death at the hands of the Greeks. Hecuba, the former queen of Troy, has already lost all but two of her children. Her daughter, Polyxena is to be sacrificed on the tomb of Achilles, a mirroring of Iphigenia's death at the beginning of the act. But her son Polydorus (also played by Paddenburg) is revealed to have already been killed by the family who were meant to be protecting him.[59] Hecuba's revenge is enacted in excruciating detail as she pulls out the eyes of Polymestor – the man responsible for Polydorus death – on stage, as his sons' throats are slit. Polyxena's sacrifice is equally brutal and bloody: unlike Iphigenia, there is for her no deer to take her place, and blood rains from the sky covering her body as it rises into the air. All the while Cassandra, a priestess of Apollo cursed with the gift

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[59] Paddenburg is also credited as playing the baby Astyanax, murdered in *Trojan Women*.

of delivering prophecies no one will believe, dances with glowing red versions of the batons used to guide airplanes into land, ushering the gods of catastrophe, chaos, vengeance, and fury into the space.

There are two possibilities for reading this sequence. On the one hand, you could say that this combination of registers challenges representational modes: for example, the audience reflects critically on the processes of representing war by staging the ways in which technologies of war produce material human violence, and death.[60] This redoubles in the fragmentation of performance modes where the actions of the main characters operate in a realist style with all manner of blood, tendons, optic nerves, and viscera revealed on stage. But the choreography of the chorus works through symbolic and analogous representations of violence (through expressions of force, collision, repulsion), and the raising of Polyxena's body.

On the other hand, just because multiple registers are used, and the violence punctuates sequences of speech, this does not mean that it is radically disruptive. This second reading depends on how you view the performative force of extreme staged violence. As Finburgh Delijani notes there is a possibility that:

> when even the most atrocious or outrageous events are presented in theatre by realist means, they are inevitably reabsorbed into the dominant representational modes that tend to commodify real events into readily consumable products.[61]

This is certainly true of the several dismemberments that take place in the sequence described. They are shocking but their commitment to blood and viscera does not challenge dominant framings of war nor violence, and instead co-contributes to a celebration of blood-lust. This is clear counter to the idea that the disruption of realism equates to a critical intervention.

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[60] Cf. Gilmore (2022); Verges (2022).
[61] Finburgh Delijani (2017) 59.

I believe there is sufficient reason to say that *Age of Rage* does not disrupt or interrupt the processes of representing war, nor does it lead to a form of 'critical mimesis' that other kinds of postdramatic performance offer.[62] For even if the production employs those postdramatic and non-realist techniques, the 'projections of self and other mobilised by the mimetic excesses of a system in crisis' are left uncritiqued.[63] Consequently the production mirrors hegemonic values – for instance, those implicit in patriarchal and capitalist realism – and thus fails to disturb, critique and refuse their familiarity, norms, and ideological allegiances.[64] *Age of Rage* thus presents the machine of war, which enacts control over women and animals through heteroreproductive systems as if this were not only an unavoidable telos of a war that will never end, but also a part of the construction of the real.

*Hyper-Aesthetics and the Hyper-Tragic*

What does this mean for the relationship between the performance of war and tragedy, what can we make of the ways in which tragedy becomes a process of reckoning with violence as an expression of the tragic? The hyper-proliferation and manipulation of information through not only TV, film, radio, but also digital platforms (like Twitch, YouTube) and social media platforms (like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook Twitter), especially during and following the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, have meant that realism is, arguably, no longer the dominant mode of cultural production and mediatisation. Much of the information from current conflict zones is delivered to the public through a flood of interrelated media: from smart-phone cameras to drones, from TikToks made by people in bunkers to livestreams set up by military leaders, who appear on Zoom in rooms filmed by another set of handheld and rigged camera

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[62] Finburgh Delijani (2017) 59; cf. Hughes (2011).

[63] Hughes (2011) 18 works through 'critical mimesis' as a response 'to the urgent demand for an interruption of the atrophic, petrified projections of self and other' mobilised by this system.

[64] Hughes (2011) 22–23.

systems.[65] The visual, textual, audio, and somatic frames of war are no-longer shaped in the same way as they once were.[66]

Perhaps this is why it is hard to offer a description of where we find ourselves now. But in drawing attention to this difficulty, one significant quality of the present comes into focus, the hyper-networking of multiple disparate media and technologies, and the speed at which it happens.[67] Video, image, sound, artificial intelligences, generative AI, location data, bots, and facial recognition software all feed into, construct, are fed and constructed by, algorithms that discern taste, that construct identity categories, political and aesthetic norms facilitating the iteration of gestures, sounds, ideas which are copied across bodies, stolen, appropriated and sold.[68] The human-technological relationship has been reconfigured, the human-technological relationship is being reconfigured, and so are the entire constellation of social relations in the loops of digital, virtual, artificial and 'AFK' (Away from Keyboard) cultural production.[69] Multiple, fragmentary, polysemic, paratactic: these are all terms to describe our contemporary multi/inter-/hyper-mediated worlds. And as such, instead of being expressed through realism, the dominant mediatisation of catastrophes and other such political events now resembles the (anti-)representational, deconstructed techniques of the postdramatic.

The contemporary experience of war is therefore worked through a multiply mediated, intermedial sensorium – a non-synthesised co-functional combination of sound, smell, taste, sight, new technologies of movement, sensation, visibility, surveillance and touch.[70] This choreography of different media, senses, sensations and materialities can produce the feeling

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[65] On TikTok and coverage of Ukraine, see Chaya (2022); Paul (2022); Tiffany (2022). On TikTok's previous usage to get information out of other held territories: Najib (2022); Ward (2021). Cf. reports on Somalia's recent TikTok ban, for its ability to disseminate both propaganda and horrifying images, see Aljazeera (2023).

[66] They have changed considerably since, for example: Sontag, (2003, 2004); Butler (2009); Finburgh Delijani (2017).

[67] For critical AI studies, see Raley and Ree (2023): on ecologies in relation to AI, see Melody (2023); on racialisation in relation to AI, see Scannell (2023); on ethics in relation to AI, see Stark (2023).

[68] Raley and Ree (2023).

[69] Russell (2020) 28–29.

[70] Kapadia (2019) 26–31.

that war will never end, that war is everywhere and that 'the contemporary field of vision is itself constituted through the war making violence of security'.[71] Here, following Fuller and Weisman, we can understand a form of hyper-aesthetics emerging, where we understand that it is not just human-animals that sense and make sense of the world but other living creatures, and 'material surfaces and substances, on which traces of impact or slower processes of change are registered, including in digital and computational sensors, which themselves detect, register and predict in multiple novel ways'.[72] In this context, performance still holds the radical potential to break open war as an expression of the real and to resist the enactment of its totality, even its necessity.

Let us turn back to the production proper. In the aftermath of the events of the Trojan War, the chorus moves with a low centre of gravity, through the space, to the heavy doom metal. A voice plays over the speakers, deep, low, threatening. It tells the story of Agamemnon's ancestor, Tantalus. As the tale unfolds the chorus forms into one undulating mass, like a throat or a snake. They move along the floor behind a central figure. The scene is backlit, so they become a silhouette, a monstrous form, barely human, more-than-human. Behind them and additionally illuminating them plays footage of a nuclear explosion: perhaps it is the nuclear explosion at Hiroshima or Nagasaki. The implication here is that even the Trojan War has a precedent, in Tantalus' expression of extreme violence, and that it serves as precedent in the (perhaps unimaginable) future, as seen from the perspective of an ancient Greek – in the terrible threat and promise of nuclear destruction.

This contrasts with other performances which unsettle, and expand the boundaries of established seeing, hearing and feeling. Finburgh Delijani reminds us that:

> In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière calls for images and words 'where the eye does not know in advance what it sees and thought does not know

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[71] Kapadia (2019) 195.
[72] Fuller and Weizman (2021) 26.

what it should make of it'. He continues, 'Images change our gaze and the landscape of the possible if they are not anticipated by their meaning and do not anticipate their effects'.[73]

I think this is a call for tragic experience in performance, a call for a combination of sounds, affects, images, words, gestures that make a change in not only the way we experience but also in what we make of that experience. Finburgh Delijani and Rancière are not alone in their call. Butler asks:

> Is there some way to register war in a way that transforms the senses? And what role do transformed senses have in the demands for the cessation of war? . . . What restructuring of the senses does that require and enable?[74]

Finburgh Delijani herself articulates such a question when she announces that she is interested in spectacular performances involving 'the visual, void and appearance', which, 'might avoid a simple replication of these values, and instead stage critical interruptions that can interrogate spectacles of war'.[75] It is indeed important to ask what form of tragic experience might register war via a transformation of the senses, via a tripping up and over the frames of war-making violence in such a way that it calls for the cessation of war, and in such a way that it queries our relationship to war and performances of war?

Van Hove and Vandekeybus turn back to Bausch, modulating her techniques of repetition, to perform the war machine but in such a way as to deny escape from it. This repetition is clearly part of a broader configuration of war in performance, in which the dominant mode of representation has become in a sense postdramatic – but here tragic collapse of aesthetic frames is no longer transgressive in the same way. And while this still contains the residue of tragic affect, this large-scale production of Greek Tragedy reproduces the dominant frames of war without necessarily challenging them, or without implicating the audience in the war-making

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[73] Finburgh Delijani (2017) 53 referencing Rancière (2009) 105.
[74] Butler (2009) xi–x, cf. Kapadia (2019).
[75] Finburgh Delijani (2017) 53.

processes of sense, memory, and affect. *Age of Rage* encourages us to rethink the usefulness and radicality of Lehmann's formulation: that tragic experience emerges from a transgression of the process of *mise en scène*, from a transgression of aesthetic forms and modalities in order to cause a shock to cultural intelligibility.

iii)    Annihilation

In the second act, *Age of Rage* combines three plays concerning the house of Atreus in the aftermath of the Trojan War – Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, alongside Euripides' *Electra* and *Orestes*. In these works, Clytemnestra takes revenge on her husband Agamemnon, and is then killed by her son, after baring her breast to him. Aegisthus, Clytemnestra's lover is castrated and killed on stage by his niece Electra. And Electra and Orestes, having killed their mother and her lover, kiss passionately. Across this second act, the scenes of violence and erotic disturbance continue to flow into and out of choral movement and dance. The body, again, serves the function of expressing the inner nature of the characters through its becoming flesh, material extremity, or viscera.

As the plot of *Orestes* turns and the siblings become increasingly desperate – the city have voted to stone them to death for their role in killing Clytemnestra – they decide to kill Helen to make their escape. We see her trudge downstage through the wet mud in heeled boots. Everything else stops. There she takes a sword and penetrates herself with the clichéd phallic symbol, which kills her. After she dies and is left to rot in the mud, Orestes, Electra and Pylades climb into the rafters; they have taken Helen's daughter hostage and they now will attempt to burn the stage, and their home, to the ground. Here the shock of self-inflected sexual violence is played out as the culmination of a series of increasingly violent and/or erotic acts: eyes pulled out of sockets, castration, murder, incest. In an echo of works like Sarah Kane's *Cleansed*

(1998), or *Phaedra's Love* (1996), each iterative act interrupts and modulates speech.[76] But unlike Kane, Van Hove and Vandekeybus return to the female body as the site for violation and destruction by men or the patriarchy. Along with the digital chorus of sacrificed young women, Helen's horrific death is merciless, disturbing, painful, and eroticised.

Instead of considering patriarchal forms of control and exploitations of the body to be motivated by contextual political, colonial, cultural, and ethical forces – circulating through and structuring the social context[77] – they present the colonial strategies, the surveillance systems, the bloodlust, and imperial war-making machineries which are used by states and countries at war, including especially heteroreproductive control over and violation of women's bodies, as the manifestation of a 'primal' human force.[78] Not only does this glut of stage violence and incest place *Age of Rage* in the tradition of using tragedy to query what is permissible on stage;[79] it also sees tragedy – once more – as a means for exploring Man as the overdetermination of the human. This suggests that, at their base level, humans are violent animals who form complex social networks to dominate, enslave, and violate each other, and sometimes they turn these techniques onto the ones closest to them.

*Age of Rage* uses ancient tragedy, and the choral archive of grief, to represent not only 'the long murderous twentieth century' and the beginning of the murderous twenty-first, but the entirety of the human species in its performance of war as ritual.[80] According to the show's digital programme:

> For Van Hove, *Age of Rage resonates* with our times not so much through references to current events and figures, *but through the exploration of primal human* motives, emotions, fears and desires that also *seem* to guide the world today. *Age of Rage* tells of the origins of violence, perpetrated by people who feel unheard, wronged or left out. All over the world, people are taking to the

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[76] See Cole (2020) 39–69. On disgust, and Kane in relation to disgust and tragedy, see Ablett (2020) 127–72; on disgust and tragedy in general, see Ablett (2020) 15–38. Cf. Douglas-Fairhurst (2007).
[77] Verges (2022) 32–49; cf. Gilmore (2022).
[78] On the wild in relation to modern and contemporary structures of power, see Halberstam (2022).
[79] See Laera (2013) particularly 136.
[80] Gilmore (2022) 110.

streets, storming the heart of democracy or committing acts that they feel are legitimate because talking is no longer an option. In that sense, *Age of Rage* exposes the Achilles' heel of our society today, the fissures of contemporary democracy, something we will have to relate to in the years to come.[81]

'Primal human motives, emotions, fears and desires', 'people taking to the streets', 'the origins of violence', 'the fissures of contemporary democracy', 'the Achilles' heel of our society today': these descriptions paint a rich picture of the contemporary world inflected by modernist ideas such as primitivism, and especially, a fear of the choral Dionysian mob.[82]

The emphasis here is on the brutalisation of the body and the transgression of the body's limits. We can see this throughout *Age of Rage*, as the performers rend backwards, or they repeatedly slam their palms against their ribcages, or tear desperately at each other's flesh. Bodies are exposed and language collapses through the experience of disarticulating pain and violence. The dancers throw each other through the air, clamber over one another, slop about in mud, threaten to smash their skulls against the metal set, run about metres above the ground, threatening to leap, or winched into the air. Their jaws gape open, and their musculature seems to press against the porous boundary of their skin (echoing the techniques which Akram Khan's dancers explored at the end of the world) as their bodies threaten to turn inside out. This is for Lehmann a feature of the tragic experience:

> To be sure, in an age when anything and everything can be discursified and made public, real taboos have become rare. All the same, they do exist, and they are operative precisely in the realm of culture; they reemerge especially once they have been violated. At the same time, every conceivable form of superficial taboo-violation has become the bread and butter of mass communication. That a great deal of contemporary art walks a fine line between dealing a real shock to cultural intelligibility and merely offering fashionable provocation, however, does nothing to refute the fact that tragic art proves unthinkable without overstepping a given border – and, even if it is suspended by form and caesura, it always proves perilous.[83]

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[81]*Age of Rage*, Digital Programme: https://readymag.com/ita/AGEOFRAGE-EN/overdevoorstelling/.
[82] See Gotman (2017) 298–315.
[83] Lehmann (2016) 429.

Lehmann highlights Fabre, who offers us tragedy as a bacchic, patrician form of blood sport: 'ancient tragedy, which Fabre invokes, was at heart the merciless exposition of the human body – in the figural sense, a "bare" offering to the gods'.[84] I would suggest that the attempt at work in Van Hove and Vandekeybus' collaboration is precisely this, to 'risk touching something painfully, embarrassingly, frighteningly and disturbingly – which has been forgotten and repressed and no longer reaches the surface of consciousness' via that 'merciless exposition'.[85] *Age of Rage* thus provokes some feeling of primality, a constructed idea of an ancient sense of the body in extreme emotional and physical states: keening, and pleading to the gods.

Vandekeybus' choreography expresses trauma, surrender, ecstasy, and pain. In this sense, the body takes the place of, say, the untranslatable interjections left in the remains of Greek tragedy: the screams and stuttering, the moans and ululations of pain which often challenge or give translators pause.[86] As Kay Gabriel has noted of Anne Carson's work, Van Hove and Vandekeybus are figures in:

> the Nietzschean tradition that sees in tragedy a mediated, cultural access to an originary human experience of 'nature' in terms of terror, ecstasy, excess and violence – as Nietzsche writes in *The Birth of Tragedy*, 'nothing but primal pain and its primal echo [Urschmerz und Urwiederklang desselben]'.[87]

This sense of primal pain and its primal echo explore the porous, open, fluid boundaries of the body through violence. *Age of Rage* offers a transgression of the way that linguistic, grammatical, and discursive formulations construct and maintain bodily integrity; and an undoing of the stable secure body through erotic pleasure, monstrosity, transformation, and violence. And here the loosening of the body's form takes place in the context of a totalising heteroreproductive war, and any potential queerness we might identify here is again re-routed

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[84] Lehmann (2016) 430.
[85] Lehmann (2016) 429–430.
[86] See Gabriel (2022) 222–24.
[87] Gabriel (2022) 224–25 referencing Nietzsche (1999) 30.

for those aims. The body is undone, and through this performance of primality it is portrayed as terrifying, feminised, inevitable, and ecstatic.[88]

This is not the only way that the primal is evoked, however: it is also present in the first act and recurrently in the second, in the dancer's choral take on the character, not of elders from Argos, libation bearers, furies, or women traveling from afar to see soldiers preparing for war, but of maenads. Frequently, they move with a low centre of gravity, stepping forward and back, their hands falling from above their heads, palms facing forward. And as they bring their wrists in contact with their hips they thrust rhythmically, exhaling on each movement forward. Their hands move quickly, reaching back up above their heads, fingers splayed. This repeats, as the dancers move into a tight group. They call to one another and laugh, describing circles around their hips, mouths open as if a Dionysian throng. Later they repeat this dance as the stage floor moves back revealing the tranche of mud; and again they dance in this way, once before and once after Clytemnestra's death – they cake themselves with mud, calling into the sky, bouncing, thrusting, arching their backs.

In *Age of Rage* this relationship between the individual and the collective – Man and the chorus, Man and the horde – echoes fantasies of primitivism constructed by modernity, and Nietzschean constructions of the Apolline and the Dionysiac.[89] For the maenadic collective appears as the wild, repressed/oppressed, and unruly set of energies which threaten always and promise to pull civilisation(al Man) apart.[90] As Jack Halberstam might describe it, this is a 'colonial sensibility that is both drawn to and repelled by expressions of the wild'.[91]

We can see this in the work's description: 'All over the world, people are taking to the streets, storming the heart of democracy or committing acts that they feel are legitimate because

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[88] Cf. Verges (2022).
[89] Gotman (2017) 298–99.
[90] Gotman (2017) 299. Cf. Halberstam (2020) 5.
[91] Halberstam (2020) 8–9.

talking is no longer an option'.[92] Here the contemporary protestor and the fascist insurgent appear as figures in different iterations of the same horde: a modernist relation, not rupture, whereby 'the Classical and the Avant-Garde, the Edenic and the apocalyptic, the primitive and the civilised' come together in dance.[93] A 'perennial Bacchic chorus' who are indescribable and yet repeatedly described as outside of language, outside of conception and understanding, always at the edge of civilization.[94]

Consequently, a rhythm and flow are established in the performance's dramaturgy: first via choral movement, then a scene from one of the named tragedies, which emerges from it, before an act of shocking violence, which dissolves the scene into choral movement once more. And when violence overwhelms the performance, the scenes between actors blur into the choral mass from which the performance began. Just as each scene, taken from a Greek tragedy, collapses into an act of horrific staged violence, so each act of violence collapses back into dance and song. The figures and ghosts of each individual tragedy are blurred across one another so that associations build between characters, performers and identities double, and bodies transform, but what remains is the maenadic chorus thrilling at and for the bloodshed. Dance scholar Kélina Gotman comments on this phenomenon in her landmark study *Choreomania*: *Dance and Disorder*:

> But the demos (or its dishevelled other half, choreomania) does not become constituted any more decisively than does 'man'. Rather, 'man', like his shaking, plural conceptual counterparts, at closer scrutiny melts right back into the seascape Foucault alludes to at the conclusion of *The Order Of Things*: 'man', Foucault writes, just as he was conjured into being in recent centuries, might just as soon become 'erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea', dissolving back into the plural and heteromorphic formations he emerged from.[95]

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[92] *Age of Rage,* Digital Programme: https://readymag.com/ita/AGEOFRAGE-EN/overdevoorstelling/.
[93] Gotman (2017) 299.
[94] Gotman (2017) 304.
[95] Gotman (2017) 299.

And thus, even though it does not name the play explicitly, *Age of Rage* is as much a reception of Euripides' *Bacchae* as it is of Aeschylus *Oresteia.* Indeed, Van Hove's engagement with Bacchae predates *Age of Rage* – the central scene of *Les Damnés* (2016) was a reworking of the Dionysiac. For what underpins the work overall is not simply the chorus as a concept, but a maenadic chorus generating a Dionysian structure of feeling, a Nietzschean fantasy, where 'the Dionysian throng emerges as the oceanic fiction at the limit of which this "Man" emerges'.[96]

*The End of the World*

After Apollo declaims the fates of the cast, they begin to rave and thrash to the doom metal band, BL!NDMAN. The performer playing Electra has clambered up onto the metal structure which frames the action – designed to resemble the rigging for lights, projection-screens, and speakers at a large music festival. They are throwing their head away and powering it back towards the metal beams, their red mullet flecked with grey mud; their neck and mouth both stained with the fake blood they had drunk after castrating Aegisthus and rubbing his severed genitals on their face. The actor who played Agamemnon, murdered in *Age of Rage's* take on Euripides' *Electra,* and the actor who played *both* Clytemnestra, stabbed to death by Orestes, *and* Helen – who died by suicide in Hove's take on Euripides' *Orestes* – are both clutching microphones screaming.

The entire ensemble is with them: the chorus, as well as the actors who played Menelaus, Aegisthus, Hecuba, Cassandra, Orestes, and Iphigenia; all those ghosts from this assemblage of Greek tragedies, which has left innumerable bodies in its wake. They are all thrashing wildly. And, in time to the band, they sing-scream, something like: the sun is dead

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[96] Ibid.

we're all going to die. The chorus of non-professional and professional dancers, are moving with and alongside the named performers, leaping into the air, hurling clods of mud, rolling on the floor, head banging too. What we see is a doubling and a refraction. The ensemble index *both* the riotous performance techniques of a festival headline act *and* the ecstatic response of a crowd of people attending said festival. Then, there is a change in energy. Clambering down from the frame, leaving behind their acts of destruction, walking towards the audience, the performers gather into one long line which stretches across the entire length of the stage. This is another echo of the Tanztheater Wuppertal and their strategies of direct audience address, and particularly, *Kontakthof* when the dancers present either themselves or the stories of their characters to the crowd, in overlapping iterative waves. But here, unlike in Bausch's work, the performers all speak in unison, as one force. They are not a polyvalent system of sounds and narratives – expressing competing, sometimes illegibly contradictory views of an issue, or situation, as a group of individuals – instead, they state one collective message: the sun is dead, and we are all going to die.

Once again, we are faced with an image of species destruction. However, unlike Khan's reflection on *Gilgamesh*, there is seemingly no line of flight, no fungal, rhizomatic routeway, no decolonial unworlding in *Age of Rage*'s conclusion. Instead, the force of the performance comes from its emphasis on the totality of violence, on the surety of our orientation towards mutually assured destruction. Unlike Bausch – for whom this kind of collective ecstasy, in unison, might have seemed like an impossible echo of Nazism – *Age of Rage* thrills at the fact, presenting it as a kind of erotic, abjection-fantasy. Are they trying to hold a mirror up to the audience? What are they saying about the time we find ourselves in by asking their cast to embody the blur between the horror and pleasure of the abject destruction of the world?

Unlike Trajal Harrell, the production engages with tragedy not to present a speculative otherwise or a set of techniques for grieving in the present for the future we might inhabit, and

so encouraging us to unmake the world as it is. Instead of encouraging us, through dance, to re-activate previous, no-longer-conscious orientations towards hope, Van Hove and Vandekeybus deploy tragedy to render war and violence at the beginning of the twenty-first as a part of the construction of the real. Just as they enact war as a totalising force, so these cycles of violence redouble. What kind of world is this in which we are all inevitably hurtling toward annihilation?

*Grief and Rage*

What keeps this loop going? What energy, what system turns the tragic potential of rupture and transgression into a normative cycle? There is an answer given in the same digital programme from which the previous quotes are taken:

> 'Why does tragedy exist? Because we are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief', writes the Canadian author and classics scholar Anne Carson.[97]

Here is the quote in full, from Carson's 'translations of Euripides' which Critchley commented on in the epigraph to this chapter:

> Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief. Ask a headhunter why he cuts off human heads. He'll say that rage impels him and rage is born of grief. The act of severing and tossing away the victim's head enables him to throw away the anger of all his bereavements.[98]

The idea belongs to the Ilongot peoples. But Carson doesn't name them, instead she references the American Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo who transmits the Ilongot idea to us through his field work. Rosaldo writes, notably using the same rhetorical structure that Carson will adopt:

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[97] *Age of Rage,* Digital Programme: https://readymag.com/ita/AGEOFRAGE-EN/overdevoorstelling/.
[98] Carson (2006) 7.

> If you ask an older Ilongot man of northern Luzon, Philippines, why he cuts
> off human heads, his answer is a one-liner, on which no anthropologist can
> really elaborate: he says that rage, born of grief, impels him to kill his fellow
> human beings.[99]

It is not clear to Rosaldo, on first blush, what the Ilongot elder means – which is why he says, 'no anthropologist can really elaborate'.[100] He wagers that the practice is a result of ritual symbolic exchange, an eye for an eye, but later finds out that the, 'Ilongots did not think any such thing. Nor was there any indirect evidence for my exchange theory in ritual, boast, song, or casual conversation'.[101] Instead, unfortunately, the answer comes to him after the sudden and shocking death of his research partner.[102] Rage comes not from a desire to seek vengeance but through the overwhelming force of grief and loss. The Grief is unbearable, indescribable – so says Rosaldo, Carson, Van Hove – and as such it is converted into violence to be given expressible/legible form.[103]

Butler picks up this thread of argument in a talk they delivered on grief and rage, which began with the same definition of Tragedy, quoted above from Carson's *Grief Lessons*. After reading through it they added:

> We know the contours of this terrible circle, destroying to stop the unbearable
> grief to bring an end to the unbearable only to then redouble that loss by
> destroying again. Perhaps, that destructive act is a way of announcing that
> what is unbearable is now someone else's problem, not mine. Here, you take
> this unbearable thing, now it belongs to you.[104]

The headhunter cuts off a human head because rage impels him, 'the act of severing and tossing away the victim's head enables him to throw away the anger of all his bereavements'.[105] The

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[99] Rosaldo (1993) 167.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Rosaldo (1993) 168.
[102] Rosaldo (1993) 170–71.
[103] Carson (2006) 7–9; cf. *Age of Rage*, Digital Programme: https://readymag.com/ita/AGEOFRAGE-EN/overdevoorstelling/; cf. Rosaldo (1993) 174–75.
[104] Butler (2014) [c2:00] in a talk referencing Carson (2006). Cf. Butler (2004b) xii, 10. On Aeschylus in particular, see Butler (2004b) 17.
[105] Ibid.

anecdote modulates the anthropological account, in such a way that it appears to be a filmic or dramatic scenario, a memory, a psychoanalytic phantasm. And it stands in for an example of anthropological evidence. The person yells at their wife, someone destroys to stop the unbearable grief, you, me, Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, Electra, Orestes, Helen. Carson continues:

> Grief and rage – you need to contain that, to put a frame around it, where it can play itself out without you or your kin having to die. There is a theory that watching unbearable stories about other people lost in grief and rage is good for you – may cleanse you of your darkness. [106]

The word cleanse here feels almost like a direct reference to catharsis. Someone else is decapitated and killed so that they don't turn their hand on themselves or kin. An actor takes on this grief and rage by performing its violence for you, for the community, for the world. An actor performing to cleanse you of your grief and suffering and the headhunter throwing away the head both become refracted images of one another.

Here we could say the headhunter becomes not only a choreographic embodiment of tragedy but also a figure for interpreting catharsis, an archetype, a choreographic figure. We see these scenes throughout the performance which disrupt a linear cyclical eye-for-an-eye pattern, but still end up looping us through grief, rage, and violence: first it is Atreus, then Iphigenia, then Polydorus, Polyxena, Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, then Thyestes baking his children into a pie, the atomic bomb dropping on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Orestes and Electra killing Clytemnestra and her lover, Helen killing herself, Orestes, Pylades, and Electra about to kill Helen's child and to destroy the house. The world about to be destroyed, the collapse of the sun.

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[106] Ibid.

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Van Hove and Vandekeybus, in many ways, return to Bausch to reconfigure the Tanztheater Wuppertal's techniques of repetition and their use of the body-archive to explore somatic experiences of trauma, grief, and violence. But the reconfiguration here turns out to be profoundly un-Bauschean in effect. Because *Age of Rage* emphasises the inevitability of violence as a result of unbearable grief, it situates itself instead among a network of receptions of ancient Greek tragedy that appropriate indigenous models of knowledge while also adopting the modernist, colonial fear and desire to take control of and be undone by the wild.

I argued that *Age of Rage* (re)configures the aesthetics of representing war and intergenerational trauma onstage, as abject erotic embodiment – a kind of hyper-aestheticised pornography of violence. Using the 'shock' of staged violence alongside intermedial digital, and performance art techniques, the work choreographs a tragic overstepping in terms of aesthetics, which attempts to 'make strange' a series of familiar cultural codes and networks of meaning-making. These include the music festival, performances of Greek tragedy in Europe, performances of war. However, instead of collapsing the infrastructures of thought and feeling that shore up patriarchal racist coloniality, staging the process of their disarticulation, making their power felt, or even pointing to ways in which they might be re-routed, *Age of Rage* embodies their sensuous architectures and affirms a destructive 'No Future' orientation.

Consequently, this chapter also offers a critique of Lehmann's model of tragic transgression, providing both weak and strong versions of the tragic experience. In the weaker sense, transgression can come from shock, or from something unsettling, even if that experience is not totally disruptive of the systems of meaning-making, nor does it lead to new structures of feeling.[107] In the stronger sense of the tragic experience, as *Age of Rage*

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[107] Cf. Williams (1977) 128–35.

demonstrates, it is not enough to shock an audience with violence and gore, nor is it enough to disrupt realism with postdramatic techniques: the very systems of producing meaning and sense have to be troubled. In this way, the tragic experience is not about bolstering established identity categories, norms, and modes of social, ethical, philosophical relation. It is about looking for the breach, the glitch in those relationalities, and the generation of not only new ways of sensing, but of making sense, and of new identity forms, that allow communities to emerge on the horizon.

Chapter 6

GISÈLE VIENNE

The stage is overrun by a thick, green forest —partly illuminated by a midnight haze. Two car headlights gloam from the deep. We hear a struggle. Downstage left, a man (Jonathan Capdevielle) is on top of a young woman, the Gymnast (Nuria Guiu Sagarra).[1] Just as the lights come up the Coach stops. She stands and moves away from him. Although it is not shown to us, we realise that he was sexually assaulting her. Now, the Gymnast moves in slow-motion, walking into the middle of the stage, rolling her shoulders, and then, she begins to warm up.

This is the opening sequence of Giselè Vienne's *This Is How You Will Disappear* (2010–23) which Vienne describes as 'an inquiry into the Nietzschean view of tragedy – how it is born from the reconciliation of conflicting gods?'.[2] The choreography brings together the Apolline embodied by the Coach, and the Dionysian embodied by a figure called the Rockstar (Jonathan Schatz), with the Gymnast – entangling practices of live art, installation performance, sculpture, and sound. Vienne begins the work with an instance of a kind of violence that has concerned each of the choreographers under consideration thus far – patriarchal, colonial, structural – and from this moment she unfolds a critical examination of intimacy, affect, ontology and perception in its wake.

The effect is such that Vienne synthesises elements from each choreographer I have studied: Bausch's practice-based approach to the aftermath of trauma and violence, affiliated with the Tanztheater Wuppertal's enactment of the ordinariness of tragedy, through associative and dream-like structures; Papaioannou's mythic exploration of the mundane, the subconscious, the human; Khan's processes of inter-medial translation, and his deconstruction

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[1] I refer to the dancers who developed and first performed the roles.
[2] Vienne 'Presentation' (nd): https://www.g-v.fr/en/shows/this-is-how-you-will-disappear/.

of the human as Man; and Harrell's choreography of refusal, his speculative insistence that things do not have to be the way they are now. Consequently, *This is How* choreographs each of these techniques not only to query hegemonic systems of desire, perception, and violence – a rejoinder to Vandekeybus and Van Hove – but also to dance a model of tragedy capable of transforming unbearable grief into a queer and feminist affiliation that has not yet been given discursive, aesthetic, and political form.

In the previous chapter the choreography of *Age of Rage* expressed the end of the world, which came as the inescapable culmination of an endless, expanding, and looping cycle of violence and devastation. In one sense, this chapter considers how that particular fantasy can be problematised and undone. The first section explores the ways in which Vienne upends hierarchies of perception and their relationship to violence through a deconstruction of the 'visual regime of seeing and being' – the cultural and historical systems of making sense of an overwhelming wave of perceptual, sonic, and somatic information.[3] The second section confronts the idea of an endless cycle of violence by arguing that tragedy can generate a looping response to the moment at which one verges on and tips over into a state of collapse. But tragedy can also be a process of modulating and undoing this pattern and this section accounts for the ways in which Vienne deconstructs an existing model of tragedy, the Nietzschean one, which she identifies as paradigmatic of a dialectical model for thinking about tragedy as a cycle. The third section explores an alternative model of performing tragedy as process, choreographing a series of responses to the tragic. This model of tragedy does not loop but instead pulls apart, disintegrates, and moves deeper into the state of collapse. Consequently, in addition to the tragic utterance: 'What kind of world is this in which…?'. Vienne's choreography asks a series of related questions: What comes next after the collapse? What are

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[3] Sharpe (2023) 123; cf. Fuller and Weizman (2021).

the ways in which we might make life liveable on this planet? What is a liveable life? What is

an inhabitable world?[4]


i)       Coming Undone


The Gymnast and the Coach warm up. The Gymnast tracks a set of cartwheels, handstands,

and tricks through the muddy undergrowth. In these reverberations which follow the opening,

we are asked, as an audience, to interrogate the ways in which the performance of sexual

violence vibrates, haunts, and inhabits the space, the bodies of the dancers, our bodies. As the

performance begins, we find ourselves already in the aftermath of a tragic and traumatic breach.

This is not a choreography of exceptional shock, but instead one comprised of the 'ordinary

notes' of structural abuse.[5]

In a post-show talk for the performance at Sadler's Wells, Vienne explained that her

creative process began in 2008, after she engaged in a conversation with an ice skater in France,

and was told about the serial, and shocking levels of structural violence that she had both

experienced and been told about from other athletes.[6] Vienne explained that, at the time, no

journalist was talking about this issue in the way they are now, post-#MeToo.[7] And even though

some things have changed – journalists are more open to covering these stories, they are

negotiated in mainstream feminist TV series, films, documentaries, performances and

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[4] Butler (2022) 29–31.

[5] For 'ordinary notes', and for her searing analysis of anti-Black violence, and survival, see Sharpe (2023).
Particularly relevant here is her analysis of whiteness as/and violence. For discussion of systemic abuse in
coach-athlete relationships in women's artistic gymnastics, see Kerr, Stirling, Wilson (2020). For scoping report
into sexual violence and 'the Coach' from a sociological and psychological perspective, see Gaedicke, Schäfer,
Hoffmann, *et al* (2021).

[6] See Abitbol (2020). For reports on the inquest, see Associated Press in Paris (2020); BBC news (2020a,
2020b); France 24 (2021); Le Monde with AFP (2023).

[7] See Projansky, (2001); Horeck (2004).

academic theory[8] – rape and sexual assault still happen on a staggering scale;[9] and there is still little material support, in terms of institutional recourse, and structural redress for survivors.[10]

The opening of this piece, thus, engages with this set of catastrophes, questions, and conditions (what has changed?), and the tragic shock redoubles because the violence is only just legible, on the very edge of the visible, as the lights come up. In registering this horror, one might utter the phrase, what kind of world is this in which such violence is a structural feature of life? In the aftermath, the attack affects each of 'us' in this audience differently.[11] And, in contrast with *Age of Rage*, from the performance's first moment, we are engaged as co-participants in a series of questions asked at the levels of seeing, hearing, feeling, and being.

As the dancers move in slow motion in between the thicket of the trees, with the car growling behind them, the Coach pushes the Gymnast's body into stretches, holds her hips in handstands. There is no longer a line between his 'coaching', his 'disciplining', the (re)forming of her body into an athlete, and his abuse. As feminist art historian Nancy Princenthal has observed of performances which deal with incest and systematic sexual assault in this setting,

> the artworks, installations, and exhibitions establish *repetitive* traumatic sites, representations and stories that surround, involve, and challenge the viewer to witness acknowledge and remember sexual trauma. Rather than aestheticise and neutralise this violent subject matter, these artists instead expose it as a traumatising experience.[12]

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[8] Including coverage of #MeToo and journalism: Benedictis, Orgad, Rottenberg (2019). See also Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You* (2020, TV Series), and the scholarship highlighting its impact, cf. Benson-Allott (2020); as well as scholarship on rape and sexual assault in popular culture and TV, cf. Havas and Horeck (2021).

[9] See for example 'Rape Crisis England' for facts and statistics: https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/statistics-sexual-violence/.

[10] 'Rape Crisis England' reports that in 2021, only 1 in 100 rapes recorded by police in 2021 resulted in a charge that same year. And following the kidnapping, torture, rape and murder of Sarah Everard the Casey report, published in March 2023, explains that systematic racism, misogyny, and homophobia are characteristic of the Metropolitan Police. The report includes a description of the Police as a breeding ground for perpetrators like the officer who murdered Sarah Everard and another officer who is a serial rapist and has been convicted of 12 instances of raping women. Cf. Casey (2023) 279.

[11] Informed by Sharpe's reflections on how representations of and memorials to anti-Black violence and the wake of white supremacy cannot be registered in the same way by an audience, although they may gather people together to bear witness, see Sharpe (2023) 34–74, especially 36.

[12] Princenthal (2019) 19.

Therefore, the tragic shock of the opening reorients us to the mundanity of sexual violence and harm, and this shock asks us to confront the way in which that violence is represented. Then, by enacting this trauma within the installation of the forest, Vienne asks us to register the failure of (representational) systems to fully account for and to deal with such violence in a reparative, recuperative, and justice-focused manner. This is tragedy as a process of failing to register, to grapple with; tragedy as a process of survival in the aftermath of violence, while the threat of future attacks still remains; tragedy, as a feminist procedure for rendering the horrors of the world, the insistent violence of patriarchy.[13] This is in Vienne's mind: when she was asked to expand upon the relationship between *This is How You Disappear* and tragedy, she turned first by way of explanation to systematic sexual assault and the terror of patriarchy.[14]

*Choreographing Violence*

Vienne studied philosophy before going on to train as a puppeteer in the École nationale supérieure des arts de la marionette. Her early work, such as *Showroomdummies* (2001), which has since had four iterations, is explicitly concerned with the effects of the patriarchal gaze and violence, focusing on women displayed in a showroom, waiting, surviving, figuring out what to do and what will become of them. This practice developed through *Kindertotenlieder* (2007), *Jerk* (2008), *The Pyre* (2013), *Crowd* (2017), *L'étang* (2022), and *Extra Life* (2023).[15] Each of these performances investigates contemporary rituals, mythmaking, sacrifice, whiteness,

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[13] I am thinking here with Sharpe: 'Every memorial and museum to atrocity already contains its failure' (2023) 38. Cf. Vergès discussions of the links between gender violence and the 'transformations that have produced the world we live in today: acute inequality, wealth concentrated in the hands of the very few, the ever faster destruction of living conditions, and politics of murder and devastation' (2022) 45; cf. 45–82.

[14] Vienne (2022).

[15] *Pyre* and *Crowd* also explicitly engage in the tragic. *Pyre* turns back to ancient Greece, to generate sacred horror, by moving between dissociation and embodiment – which is meant to echo the work of Isadora Duncan. *Crowd* is a contemporary *Rite of Spring*.

perceptual systems, tragedy, and violence through underground music-culture, via queer and feminist methodologies.[16]

Vienne's philosophical training is evident in her approach to movement: she thinks *with* the body as 'a locus for developing knowledge and questioning our culturally constructed systems of perception'.[17] Vienne refers to this as a practice of 'dissociating playing', a choreographic technique for developing the inhuman qualities of the human body through dance.[18] She and the dancers instead aim to deepen their awareness of and sensitivity to touch, the environment, sound, noise, time and materiality through procedures of becoming absent, becoming a series of sensory surfaces, folds, bones, ligaments and joints – by refusing liveness.[19] And consequently, they seemingly expand to include environmental non-human sensory, aesthetic, agential, temporal and erotic phenomenon, as a part of the choreography – asking: how would one slow down, expand, and move as/with/becoming a geo-biological form rather than, imitating one, how does one dance the already non-human capacities of the body?

This practice developed through a series a long-term collaborations with a number of artists: Dennis Cooper, a queer writer of exceedingly dark and twisted books; musicians Peter Rehberg and Stephen O'Malley; and more recently the philosopher Elsa Dorlin, whose work on the body as a nexus of power, pain, and resistance is particularly relevant.[20] Through these collaborations, Vienne has developed strategies for facing up to some of the most horrific and macabre aspects of living and dying on this planet: incest, rape, serial murder, torture, human

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[16] On Vienne and ritual, see Manson and Vienne (2011); Festwochen (2018); particularly Van Meter and Vienne (2022). Cf. Bataille (1988–91) who Vienne frequently references in interviews, cf. Holland Festival (2021).

[17] Vienne (2021b).

[18] There are some similarities here between Vienne's work and Craig's theory of the über-marionette particularly his interest in abandoning realism and replacing the actor with an 'inanimate figure', not competing with life but 'rather the body in trance', clothed in a 'death-like beauty while exhibiting a living spirit', Craig (1911). But absent here is the insistence on mastery, for Vienne prefers to use her training with puppetry to allow the puppet to speak – not to emphasis her ability to control it, but to facilitate its own animacy, to allow the dancers to explore the potential of non-becoming and thingliness without control or 'strings' attached.

[19] See the documentary made about Vienne's work and practice: Chiha (2020).

[20] Dorlin (2009, 2022).

sacrifice, child abuse, suicide, and particularly, white patriarchal violence.[21] She works through these experiences of deadening, absence, and disassociation to generate tragic bodies, bodies that breach normate confines, that glitch, rupture, sweat, leak, and seem to be constantly surrendering, or fighting not to surrender, to forces much larger than they are.

'I like to go to the edges', Vienne says, 'to question what the limits are and what we can accept. There's something very exciting in going there. I often make this comparison to extreme sports – I think there is something ecstatic in going to the limits'.[22] If this sounds very similar to Fabre's proposal that tragedy explores human bodies in a bare state, it is because Vienne dances the other side of the coin, by querying the Fabre-esque philosophy – one which stages tragedy via a ruthless exposure of bodies to violence in an eroticised manner – she resists exposing the performer to extreme scenarios to reveal something about 'human nature' (as in Vandekeybus and Fabre). And thus she interrogates the spectacle of violent exposure, through performance, by reframing violent encounters. Instead of gazing at the body made vulnerable, Vienne shifts the gaze onto the perpetrators of violence, the durational horror of abuse, the perceptual systems that dehumanise bodies through the enactment, creation and exploitation of differentially distributed proximity to death.[23] From this place she works to give space to those made vulnerable by systems of power, to choreograph through re-distributed agency – avoiding or aiming to avoid harming or re-traumatising performers who have experiences of patriarchal violence's brutal effects.

In this way Vienne deconstructs some of the cultural and social processes by which violence is commodified and monetised through contemporary hyper-aesthetics.[24] And as such, by engaging in a choreographic process that attends to the traces left in the body – and the

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[21] See Dorlin (2021).
[22] Vienne in Winship (2019) [np].
[23] Cf. Gilmore (2007) 28.
[24] Dorlin on Vienne, 'everything is encoded to sell violence, our violence, to make it profitable' (2021) [np]. Cf. Gilmore (2022) particularly 305–42, 861–74. Cf. Mbembe (2020); Vergès (2022).

surround – or the ways in which trauma can cause erasures, gaps, glitches, and tears and scars in the body-environment's sensory, somatic, perceptual networks, Vienne demonstrates how choreography can become a mode of (re)configuring the capacity to witness, record, re-member, and imagine. This is an investigative and forensic archaeology of the body that operates through a set of counter-aesthetics. This is not a sensationalising of abuse, a great slick of blood, gore, nor a commodification of harm through the norms of the real, but a 're-encoding [of] systems of signs and spaces of desire' that works to reveal and undo the arts' ability to 'collaborate in political violence through the normalization and assimilation of perceptions'.[25]

This is an insistence on the philosophical potential of/for embodied knowledge,[26] which relates to Dorlin's theorization of the body as a 'battlefield of power', 'a place of resistance', a network for resisting hierarchies of perception and cultivating the 'reinvention of our abilities to perceive'.[27] This is a 'philosophy of physical awareness, and a physical experience of the world' that arises through touch, intimacy, but also proprioception, movement through space, collision, growth, decay, and collapse. Here Vienne works with the body, the tree, a noise, a lighting state, each as a 'material witness'.[28]

This situates Vienne within a network of queer, queer of colour, and feminist art, theory, and activism.[29] As she works not only to register violence, insisting on its everyday, ordinary, structural nature;[30] she also works to deconstruct the hierarchies of perception which facilitate such harm (by distinguishing between human and non-human, living and non-living, collateral damage and protected targets, grievable and non-grievable, animal and plant, agential and non-

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[25] Festival TransAmérique (2023) [np].

[26] Dance Reflections by Van Cleef & Arpels (2021) [np].

[27] Vienne (2021a) [np].

[28] Schuppli (1994).

[29] Cf. artists like Nan Goldin, Judy Chicago, Ana Mendieta, Suzanne Lacy, Adrian Piper, VALIE EXPORT, Marina Abramović, Kara Walker, Yoko Ono, and Emma Sulkowicz who have all engaged with representations of sexual assault and its aftermath. See Green Fryd (2019); Hartman (2019, 2022); Princenthal (2019); and Sharpe (2023) 139–43.

[30] For examples of shifting the gaze through art and performance in the 70s, 80s, see Princenthal (2019) 6–9.

agential matter).[31] In other words, as Dorlin has described it, 'she investigates the framework of intelligibility that governs our gestures, our imaginary and our collective myths, our identities, our morals, and, ultimately, social order', not alone but in conversation with existing and historic attempts to imagine the world otherwise.[32]

Her recent production *L'étang* (The pond) articulates this practice. The performance is about loneliness, the family, violence, incest, fantasy, and questioning the ordering of those phenomena as they are constituted and facilitated by norms. The performance works through a process of strong tragic collapse, which fragments the ideological and political construction of reality, 'like a varnished painting that cracks', opening out onto 'a game of abysses and chaos'.[33] One of the stars of the work, actor Adèle Haenel – who left the film industry, citing its entrenched structural racism, sexism, and queerphobia, and particularly the defence of '[Gérard] Depardieu, [Roman] Polanski, [Dominique] Boutonnat'[34] – tells us:

> What's interesting […] in the movements proposed by Gisèle, is that it [sic] allows for visibility […] to lend visibility to what is otherwise rendered invisible by the ways of the world.[35]

Haenel echoes Dorlin and Vienne's insistence that the choreography deconstructs and reveals the political interests behind the construction of the field of the visible and sensible, by also deconstructing the designations of sense and nonsense, legible and illegible, as they are generated in relation to those fields.[36] Haenel continues to explain that 'Gisèle creates these tools, let's say these techniques or forms…to try and make visible what is invisible' to try and represent the unrepresentable, to transform – as we saw with Bausch – the illegible ruptures of

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[31] See Chen (2012); Weheliye (2014); McKittrick and Wynter (2015) 270–79; Yusoff (2018); Hartman (2022); Sharpe (2023); Ward (*forthcoming*).
[32] Dorlin (2021) [np].
[33] Vienne, 'Presentation': https://www.g-v.fr/en/shows/letang/.
[34] See various news articles which have reported on Haenel's letter, including Willsher (2023) [np] from which the quote is taken.
[35] Recording and translation of an interview provided by a fan site for Haenel: @adelehaenelenfeu (2021) [c4:37]
[36] Ibid.

grief and trauma into choreographic experience.[37] Consequently, Vienne allows the process of performance, in *each* performance, to be a continual process of questioning the performance itself as it unfolds. This allows the 'centre of gravity' to change, and to 'push the boundaries which are the boundaries of violence, to even change what is considered violence'.[38] For Haenel, that is the central question of *L'étang*. Through the choreography of tragedy, then, Vienne gives the performers agency in the rehearsal room and on stage, in the performance space, in part, to query the representational systems which frame their experiences, but also to challenge the hegemony which structures the violence they encounter. And thus Vienne provides dancers and audiences with embodied tools to rethink epistemic, ontological, ethical, political and representational concepts such as embodiment, presence, tenderness, brutality, violence and, in this case, tragedy itself.[39]

*Expanded Aesthetics: The Forest*

The Gymnast moves in slow motion, engaging in a series of sit ups. The Coach checks to see if anyone is there in the darkness. Peering into the web of trees, foliage and branches, a voice-over plays, he talks about killing her and throwing her body in the river. He comes back to support her sit ups. She stops as he tries to assault her again. Eventually she begins a series of tumbling exercises. As he pushes her to the ground a man – a hooded figure, silhouetted, emerges from the darkness of the forest. He is watching the Coach and the Gymnast. Eventually the Coach turns and follows the man into the depth of the forest.

Because Vienne refuses to claim that violence, and the ways of seeing and being that facilitate that violence are natural or necessary, and instead argues that violence is encoded through perception and the gaze – her critique also includes the ways in which expectations

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[37] @adelehaenelenfeu (2021) [5:24].
[38] @adelehaenelenfeu (2021) [6:24].
[39] Princenthal (2019) 1–19.

and desires are situated through perceptual systems. In the post-show discussion, Vienne noted how many stories repeat and re-circulate in culture: 'I guess I try… I think… we don't often tell new stories'.[40] She goes further, explaining that these stories work through the repetition of a telos, a trope, a rhythm or choreographic pattern: 'if you put a young girl crossing a forest, there is a fucked-up expectation that she will get damaged. How are these stories training those fucked-up expectations?'.[41] Here Vienne calls attention to the effects of associational modes: girl, forest, damage. Writing on Vienne, Dorlin expands on this idea:

> '…it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism'. This sentence by [Frederic] Jameson addressed the libidinal economy of advanced neoliberalism. According to Gisèle Vienne, we might also continue, 'it is easier to imagine killing little girls than to imagine the end of neoliberal patriarchy'. [42]

By setting the opening of the work within the forest's hold, Vienne stages a performance that insists on the mythological, choreographic, and narrative importance of the systems of relations in/through/by which the action takes place. For Jameson, and Dorlin reading Jameson, the impossibility of imagining the end of capitalism emerges in the 'libidinal economies of advanced neoliberalism'.[43] For Vienne, and Dorlin reading Vienne, the impossibility of imagining the end of neoliberal patriarchy emerges through perceptual systems of performance, art-making, storying, and choreography within advanced neoliberalism.

However, by staging *This is How* in a hyper-realistic forest installation, a wild and queer place, and then by deconstructing the hierarchies of perception, sensation, desire, and affect

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[40] Vienne (2022).
[41] Ibid.
[42] Dorlin (2021) [np] citing Jameson (2003) [np]: 'Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world'.
[43] Ibid.

Vienne points to the idea that the system which facilitates the processes of meaning-making can also be undone, patriarchy and capitalism can be undone.[44]

To make this case, Vienne expands the sensing and sensory capacities of witnessing to include the bodies of the forest, to wager that environments can contain encoded stories, and their undoing, fantasies, memories and their deconstruction, expectations and alternative ways of seeing, feeling, re-membering and affiliating. And as such, the forest becomes a holding ground, a set of aesthetic surfaces, capable of sensing, recording, and expressing the unfolding violence that replays night after night. A poly-perspectival assemblage, a lively choreographic series of association, memories, and affective possibilities: a place of myth, folklore, transformation, maenadism, and violence.[45]

In Vienne's process, then, the forest becomes a choral form. And instead of engaging with trauma through an image, or video in planar dimensions, the forest installation becomes a three-dimensional, simulated space, for the re-enactment and documentary performance of violence. And so, the installation space of the forest becomes a site for processing trauma that 'requires going back to problems, working them over and perhaps transforming the understanding of them'.[46] It calls us to previous iterative instances of sexual assault and acknowledges that trauma 'keeps being replayed in continually recycling memories and in a reorganised nervous system'.[47]

Thus, like Khan, she is interested in undoing the relationships encoded in mythmaking, and the potential for them to foreclose our horizons, and make certain alternatives unimaginable. However, Vienne also insists that the story of sexual violence and harm is not

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[44] A large team of artists produced the installation: Raphaël Rubbens, Dorothéa Vienne-Pollak & Gisèle Vienne who worked on the mannequins; La Licorne Verte Hervé Mayon, Ô Bois Fleuri, ateliers de Grenoble François Cuny who worked on the trees; Carl Faia on live electronics; Ken Furudate on the visual effects; Shiro Takatani worked on video projection; Patrick Riou on lighting; and Shiro Takatani who designed the fog sculpture with fog engineer Urs Hildebrand.

[45] Vienne (2022).

[46] Princenthal (2019) 24 referencing La Capra (2001) 148–86.

[47] Princenthal (2019) 148.

the only one held, recorded, witnessed. And as such the forest becomes a place for interrogating other ways in which networks of myth, history, fantasy, desire and political horizons intersect. And particularly, here she interrogates tragedy as a choreographic process of performing violence and representing the survival of that violence, asking: What if tragedy was like a forest? Are there modes of performing tragedy that train certain expectations of violence, suffering, harm? That naturalise, and enact again and again with seemingly no way out, the patterns of repeated abuse? And are there other ways in which the forest can be assembled? Does it only contain stories of promise and ruin, or is there more to be gained from attending to the alternative interspecies and interecological schema offered by the forest's embrace?

After the Coach leaves the Gymnast, she stands up, looks up into the trees, taking her time, before going to her bag and pulling out a protein bar. She takes off the wrapper and eats. But the food does not stay down for long, and she vomits onto the leaves. Another pause, an impasse, and then she turns and looks out, into the forest, at us. Can you see me, she seems to ask?


*A Note on the Breach*

In previous chapters, the breach or rupture was a collapsing of frames; a collision of material; an expression of violence and contestation which brought down boundaries between memory, history, fantasy, and reality; the absence of an event; and an iterative expression of violence and control that became totalising, inescapable, annihilating everything in its path.

Expressed by a turn, or a rending of distinctions between material and immaterial, a slip, or a fall, the tragic is choreographed as a sudden embodied change in relationality – one that announces a loss of the kind that changes our sense of the world.[48] For example: I was

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[48] Butler (2022).

standing, but now face up to the sky or down to the earth and howl in pain, keening, for the loss I didn't see coming, couldn't imagine.

Variously, then, tragedy is a choreographic process of reckoning with these various incommensurable changes – a series of modes for responding to ruptures. It is an interleafing of reconfigured and reconfiguring relations, a means of processing and assessing emergent connections, generating speculative arrangements of the world otherwise, or fractured interrupted attempts to reconfigure the world before the collapse. This previous world remains as a haunting insistence that the violence, grief, ecstasy, and rage which contributed to the breach also remains, and can return, it can even threaten to return endlessly in experiences akin to the post-traumatic. Both processes (speculation and re-construction) can be combined in varying scales, and proportions, to different effects in performance. This was especially the case in Harrell's investigation of historic modes of choreographic relation that generated speculative wayward routes and potentialities.

Across each choreographic process of engaging with tragedy and the tragic, there is consequently a question posed: What is the relationship between the two? For as the tragic rupture disorientates, scatters, and changes our sense of the world, tragedy emerges as both the backdrop for that breach and its aftermath. Tragedy becomes a process of re-orientation, collection, and emergence, or further disorientation, disarticulation, disappearance. It is a process that can therefore generate or be interrupted by new ruptures in form, frame, timing, and materiality. Van Hove and Vandekeybus' choreography suggested that this relationship is cyclical. Yet, by performing the tragic as both the shock of systematic sexual abuse, patriarchal violence, and as a rupture in the systems of representation and hierarchies of perception which facilitate such violence, Vienne suggests that these two concepts might yet find another relational modality through choreography.

Talking about the Nietzschean tragic model, Vienne noted how the repetition of an old story repeats an expectation, and pre-figures not only actions but cognitive and affective responses. Vienne assumes here that the repetition of the story is a repetition not only of its content but also the framing, the hierarchies of perception, value, meaning, the structural logic of the story and its reception – which do not need to be monolithic or determinant guides to meaning but do contour the limits of meaning-making or the possibilities for imagining what next, what else, why, and how. And as such, Vienne suggests that the solution is straightforward:

> It's just a matter of changing the gaze on the same story. And I would say [that] about this story […] It's about telling the same story [tragedy] and trying to help us again to create these perceptual shifts. So that is why I think its… there is this repetition, and I try to work on this even there in the structure… I mean the structure is more Greek based: thesis, antithesis, synthesis and after. Even like, I mean that's how I was trained, and what does it mean to be trained, think this way, I mean I think it's very problematic. So, I was trying to engage with this, I mean it was inspired by this kind of thinking structure and trying to not end up with the synthesis, and try to work on the next chapter.[49]

Thesis, antithesis, synthesis and after – this is not only a philosophical system for understanding the expression, historical development, and changes in culture. It is also a model of reception, and an epistemology: one established through repetition and one which structures our understanding of the ways repetition and connection work. But Vienne insists that this model is not necessary or essential. Instead, it is a way of being disciplined, trained and provides a framework for interrogation, undoing, undisciplining.

Take, for example, Nietzsche's theory of tragedy, which Vienne is keen to interrogate. It is expressed *both* through a synthesis of the Apolline and Dionysiac, *and* by the excessive and iterative rupture-of-form (the Dionysiac).[50] This Hegelian sequence of thesis, antithesis,

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[49] Vienne (2022).
[50] See Lehmann (2016) 57, 61, 78, 424.

synthesis is based on a series of ruptures, splits, collisions, and schisms – Apollo/Dionysus, sound/noise, human/animal, civilisation/the wild, alive/dead, then/now, here/there, man/woman, inside/outside, pain/pleasure, sex/gender, clean/dirty, beautiful/ugly, high/low – which synthesise in the performance of tragedy.

This Nietzschean model of tragedy has been understood as desire to ameliorate what Lehmann describes, after Hölderlin, as:

> an incurable 'caesura' between words and things: a problem [*Problematik]* of interruption and limitation that befalls all language and forever separates it from the world.[51]

This desire to ameliorate the 'incurable "caesura"' can lead to the looping, cyclicality of violence, both a conundrum, and a question that is really a series of interrelated questions: How do we deal with unbearable grief, the terror and horror of a loss marked by the enunciation, what kind of world is this in which? According to Lehmann, from here, the wish for tragic overstepping constitutes itself as 'the ambivalent desire for overcoming this break, initially in aesthetic fashion; at the same time, however, it must interrupt art itself, insofar as the latter functions as an inert component of normative culture'.[52] Overcoming the break, through aesthetics, but also interrupting aesthetics which causes another break, and so on: a loop of thesis, antithesis-rupture, synthesis that leaves a remainder, (syn)thesis or attempt to integrate the remaining, antithesis-rupture, synthesis with remainder, and so on, and so on. For as Lehmann describes it, even though the forces of articulation (poetry, science, literature, performance) are broadly '"refined"' in such a way that 'mythical terror' opens out 'to interrogation and problematisation', this terror '[is] not resolve[d by] it'.[53]

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[51] Lehmann (2016) 404.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Lehmann (2016) 51.

Tragedy, according to this model, becomes an iterative expression of our ongoing inability to deal with the tragic breach, the separation of Man from nature, which redoubles, and reiterates, like a wound that refuses to be healed, leaving an 'affective surplus, a remainder that does not always resolve into aesthetic or discursive form'.[54] Tragedy, then, is an always incomplete process of failing to represent fully and deal with the horrors (and terrible wonder) of the world, which we attempt to express in Apolline forms but which always collapse into Dionysiac excesses and maenadic choreomania.[55] As Butler writes, albeit in a slightly different context, describing the loops of tragic violence and grief: 'we know the contours of this terrible cycle'.[56] In this sense, synthesis attempts and fails: it fails to stop the unbearable; to integrate, in part, the affective remainder; it fails to try and end the unbearable schism between Man and world, word and thing, only then to redouble that remainder through a failing, looping repetition of the process of synthesis.

But what if we critiqued this model? Not on the grounds of its articulation but on the assumption embedded in the foundations of the argument, namely that there is a schism between human and world, or that this schism is a necessary and sufficient condition of what it means to be human as expressed through the concept of the tragic.

*Towards 'the After'*

Vienne tells us that in the choreography she is 'trying to not end up with the synthesis', that she is 'trying to work on the next chapter'.[57] Or in other words, she asks: Is there something else to be done with the overwhelming grief, violence, and disputatiousness of the world as it collapses and reforms? What processes would allow for another way? Is there, then, a way to

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[54] Lehmann (2016) 78.
[55] Gotman (2017).
[56] Butler (2014) [c2:00].
[57] Vienne (2022).

stand on the edge of the world but not to call the past back into the present – in such a way that the cycle begins to loop once more? Or is there, in other words, a mode of describing tragedy's relationship with the tragic that is not cyclical, looping?

To engage in this choreographic programme of enquiry, Vienne attends to that which Bausch insisted on, Papaioannou experimented with, Khan worked into an art, that which Harrell developed into a practice of refusal, and that which Van Hove and Vandekeybus denied: namely, the inter(in)animating, interleafing, interdependency of both processes of living and dying. Dorlin picks up on this impulse in Vienne's work, explaining that:

> she seeks to decompose and dissect the imaginative mechanism of our advanced capitalist societies. She seeks to pierce what binds together the discourses of tolerance and respect, of good and evil, of equal rights and individual freedoms, and the permanent, prosaic, rampant extreme violence that our democracies generate: first of all, the violence of images and the imaginary.[58]

Under these conditions, the look, the turn back to audience performed by the Gymnast is tragic in its ability to breach this 'imaginative mechanism': just as Dominic Mercy turned back to the audience in *Nelken*; just as Medea gazed into the crowd in Papaiouanou's work, before she brought the two sculptural children crashing together; just as Kali stared out into the audience after the world was destroyed in *Outwitting the Devil,* and the lights faded on her as she described a planet with her hands; and just as Trajal Harrell gave the audience of participant-spectators that *look*, those songs, as Antigone, full of grief, challenging them to join her and mourn now for what will be. In all these case studies, the turn to the spectator is a hinge that brings another kind of offer: what if we did something else? Here it is almost like a shrug, a sense of cool, an unreadable provocation. When the Gymnast turns out to face the audience and she confronts the representation systems which facilitate the enactment of violence, then

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[58] Dorlin (2021) [np].

perhaps, she confronts even the looping failure of tragedy and asks us to move away from its cyclical pulls, toward something else, through the collapse.

ii)     Ecstasy

Upstage right, there is a gap in the thicket, a little woodland atrium. The moonlight pools here. The Gymnast turns to consider it, turns away from us, and the car's headlights fade. She goes into this space. And under the moon she begins to dance.

It is a kind of witching. Time both speeds up and slows down, as she bends and slides through space, fast-forwarding, rewinding, looping, glitching. The atmosphere takes form through her movements. Her hands are above her head, as ricocheting backwards she drifts slowly, gently. And then, as if she has fallen from a great height she crashes into a large body of water and, drifting below the surface, melts through space. Talking about her work on *Crowd* – where this movement technique is explored in depth – Vienne notes that while hyper-slow, the body is also hyper-sensitive.[59] In these moments, the dancer is over-stimulated, open and porous to the transfer of affects, sensations, and intensities while also leaving deep traces in space and time.[60] In other words, the hyper-slow quality is a way of becoming attuned to the environment, and also a means of becoming highly responsive, less in control, and less directed, but vibrating more.

Exhale, release. Inhale, rise. Exhale, release. Her feet are planted in parallel, set wider than shoulder width; from there she moves into a deep lunge. The impulse of the move carries the rest of her body around, then forward, releasing, unfolding. But then her shoulders pull her back up. Inhale, they begin to move separately. Exhale. One movement overlapping another, seamlessly, shifting into a complex polyrhythmic system with cascading pulls and directional

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[59] Bobák, Chiha, and Vienne (2020).
[60] Ibid.

impulses moving through each limb, each joint, into the wrists, fingers, back up forearm, bicep, shoulders, down, into the lower back, expanding the ribcage, working at the levels of skin, flesh, tendon, muscle, bone. One arm drops down as she comes back to standing, then a knee bends until her body begins to yield to the floor, to gravity. The arm, at the apex of its down-swing loops back up, pulling the rest of her body up and round after it. She opens her arms to the sky, to the darkness of the forest.

<div align="center">* * *</div>

In *Cruising Utopia* José Esteban Muñoz spends much of the final chapter discussing ecstasy. Not only does he go back to ancient Greece to make sense of the term (*Ekstasis*, 'to stand or to be out outside of oneself'), but he also reflects on ecstasy's relationships to pop-culture – via a song called 'Take Ecstasy with Me' (1994) by the Magnetic Fields.[61] The song, he tells us, foregrounds ecstasy's relation to carnal and pharmaceutical pleasures, 'but', he continues,

> when I listen to this song I hear something else, or more nearly, I feel something else. A wave of lush emotions washes over me, and other meanings for the word ecstasy are keyed.[62]

He builds on the rest of the book's attention to queer temporalities and performance strategies, which seek to defunct the normative structures – telling us that:

> The Magnetic Fields are asking us to perform a certain 'stepping out' with them. That 'stepping out' would hopefully include a night on the town, but it could and maybe should be something more. Going back through religion and philosophy we might think of a stepping out of time and place, leaving the here and now of straight time for a then and a there that might be queer futurity.[63]

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[61] Muñoz (2019) 185.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.

I contend that, as the Gymnast dances, she performs such a 'stepping out of time and place'.[64] Her techniques of shifting, living through, and shaping the spatiotemporal, allow her to vacate the here and now amplifying the body's internalised feelings and hidden desires for escape. [65] Instead of engaging with a linear, dialectic, mapping of the tragedy of structural sexual assault, a narrative of revenge, healing, survival, the performer uses ecstasy as a strategy for disrupting linearity, refracting some of trauma's effects, and for expanding the unruly affective remainder of the tragic breach.

As the dancer glitches time, looping and fracturing to the building soundtrack, fog begins to pour from upstage. Curling around her ankles first. Then it cascades like a river, until waves of it roll through the forest. Licking her knees, it keeps coming, a flood of fog. It is up to her waist now. rising more and more as she continues to dance, body melting through space, pressing against the vaporised water sculptures. She is being swallowed consumed by the surround of branches, leaves, and fog, until, eventually she disappears.

But the fog does not stop there. It pours over the lip of the stage in increasing intensity. Until the first rows of the audience disappear, flooding the auditorium, the stalls, circle, the entire room. At its fullest and densest, I can barely see the person sat next to me, or even my hands inches away from me. And in this way the fog sculpture (designed by Fujiko Nakaya) performs a spatial unfolding of pain. A surrendering of the violence held by the body to the environment. We become lost, disorientated in the way that 'readers of tragedies can become lost […] between the song that becomes a crying out and the crying out that is a song'.[66] And we end up asking, what soil is this on which we stand, visible partly, only to those who are closest to us?[67] Encouraged to look around, to try and figure out what it is, that is still around us, we rely on senses other than sight, listening to the music as it continues to build, feeling its

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[64] Ibid.
[65] Ahmed (2021) 280.
[66] Loraux (2002) 67.
[67] Latour (2022) [np].

vibrations. Consequently, through this ecstatic dance there is a shift out of the scene of trauma, a displacement of the e/affects of sexual violence and the intensification of a process to 'decompose and dissect the imaginative mechanism' of tragedy.[68] And doubly there is an invitation, a call to step out of there here and now, performed by the dancer, and into the ecstasy.

*Sparagmos*

At the end of Nancy Worman's monograph *Tragic bodies: the edges of the human in Greek tragedy* (2021), Worman reflects on sparagmos and performance. Worman's study explores the language and semiotics, the discursive aesthetics of 'bodies in pain' in ancient tragedy.[69] She interleafs theorists who 'focus on the body and its senses, including especially its sensuous edges' and develops an approach that works with 'skin and the fold […] tracking how material surfaces and bodily folds operate in tragedy, as these layer and pleat by means of contiguities, confluences, and extensions'.[70] While by no means the first to consider the sparagmos as a feature of radical performance in the twentieth century, Worman does emphasises its queer and feminist potentiality as:

> a dismantling approach to bodily confines [that] reveals human–animal edges
> as intimately enfolded, as contiguous and continuous […] a kind of upended
> bodily dismantling (sparagmos).[71]

The fog facilitates a dismantling approach of this kind, displacing and disorientating by disarticulating the performance space, displacing the field of the visual and collapsing our pre-existing modes of relation and affiliation.

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[68] A root meaning of the noun ekstasis, ecstasy, (Hipp. Art. 56).
[69] Worman (2020) 13.
[70] Worman (2020) 15, 18.
[71] Worman (2020) 251.

If, as Muñoz notes, ecstasy is queerness' way, and we understand queerness to be a method of describing the inadequacy of the ways in which things are arranged in the present, a mode for disorganising and breaking down the fixity of the here and now,[72] then Vienne floods the theatre with this queer feeling as the fog spills into the audience. As Muñoz wrote, in his chapter on ecstasy,

> queerness is not yet here but it approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality. And we must give in to its propulsion, its status as a destination. Willingly we let ourselves feel queerness's pull, knowing it as something else that we can feel, that we must feel.[73]

This simile allows for an expansive understanding of the symbolic and material qualities of the choreographic flooding of the space. Muñoz's connection between emotional, affective, and political waves – crashing as potentiality – names something of the posthuman force of queerness, which the fog articulates in its voracious swells. Writing back to Munoz, Halberstam expands this idea with the concept of wildness, which also comes in waves and waves as 'a journey out of order and into the swift ever-changing currents of the ocean'.[74] Neither utopian nor dystopian, wildness is, for Halberstam, a disorganising force which we cannot ignore, despite the fact that many have tried to taxonomise, straighten and control it.[75] It calls us to 'unbuild the world […], unmake its relentless commitment to the same'.[76]

The fog sculpture then might be read as making such a call as it fills the space, tearing us from one another, swallowing us all in a 'crashing wave of potentiality', that has some force we must negotiate, but cannot negate, erase, or stop.[77] And in this way, the flood and the decentring rupture in the human choreography it enacts can be interpreted as a 'mode of

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[72] Muñoz (2019).
[73] Muñoz (2019) 185.
[74] Halberstam (2020) 180.
[75] Halberstam (2020); cf. Halberstam and Nyong'o (2018).
[76] Halberstam (2020) 180.
[77] Halberstam (2020) 180; Muñoz (2019) 185.

desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present', to see beyond, to displace, but not to deny the aftermath of sexual violence, and additionally to decentre and displace the human from performances of tragedy through an expanded choreography.

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From here images and scenes are re-configured. The fog clears, car headlights and spotlights search the forest. The Rockstar emerges. He crashes slowly through the trees, never finding his centre of gravity, always off balance, teetering. A pre-recorded voice tells a story of hyper-violence, the voice talks about death, about wanting to die; he tells us he has killed his girlfriend and disposed of her body in a lake. He can barely stand as he drunkenly takes off his jacket, struggling, limp, moving so slowly that his body takes on a viscous inebriated quality. Then, he goes down into, and can barely come back out of, the muddy ground.

The Coach emerges from the trees too, he watches the Rockstar. Here the elements of the first sequence – the Nietzschean mode of expressing tragedy – that were blown apart through ecstasy and then sparagmos, begin to reassemble, rearticulated in a different key, as these two archetypes – one of order, abuse, beauty, the Apolline (the Coach, thesis); the other of ruin, beauty, chaos, the Dionysian (the Rockstar, anti-thesis) – both encounter one another. They tell each other about their crimes. They are staggering and bouncing around the trees. Both move slowly, open to the scene's atmosphere, vulnerable, and terrifying. The two re-recorded voices dissociate and re-associate to the human bodies in the space, but they also stick to and emanate from the trees, the lights, the shadows cast on the environment.

The Coach smashes the Rockstar over the head with a bottle. Blood begins to gush. They fight, they caress one another, tightly, violently, holding their faces to each other's bodies. The Coach's nose breaks, he is already covered in blood, and more blood begins to pour, until

they are both drenched; it is not clear whose blood is whose. The Rockstar lies over the branch, lifeless.

Highlighted is a mode of understanding the world, which faces collapse but refuses to be cleared, and the haunting capacity of that world to return in another form when it is not fully addressed, forgotten, undone, or abandoned. It is as if the performance is telling us that it is not enough to move out of the present through ecstatic practices of getting lost from, or stepping out of, the here and now. Leaving the here and now does not guarantee safety, if that world remains, haunting. However, as that which was torn apart by the fog is reassembled, we see that there are gaps, fractures in the world; that it is different from before, bloodier, messier. Not a synthesis but a failed attempt at rearticulation, re-enactment, re-membering: repetition becoming displacement.[78]

The Coach-Apollo stands bloodied. The Rockstar-Dionysus lies like an animate corpse, hanging over a tree branch. The Gymnast enters in a jacket. The three of them gather, all standing together now in a circle. Not synthesis, but after. And she begins to sing. She tells them, and us, how she once dreamt of being the best gymnast in the world and how the abuse she experienced at the Coach's hands cost her that dream. As she sings, the Rockstar lies dead, once more, over the tree branch. And once more fog begins to roll in from the deep of the forest. The quality of the light changes, and we watch the forest transform. The music for this sequence is overwhelming. Coming from all around us. It is as if the forest is wailing, filled with, and filling us with dread and pain, intermingling the breath and grief of the world with our breathing, our grief. This is, after Loraux, tragedy expressed through a mourning that nothing can appease, not even the repetition of its own voice, nothing except its own enormity.[79]

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[78] Lucbert (2023) [np].
[79] Loraux (2002) 12.

*The not yet Formed*

Hitherto, the dramaturgy of the piece has consisted of a situation, followed by ecstasy, and fog. The initial situation is then reformed and rearticulated, before a song leads into another flooding of the space. Now, in the fog we are left without sight of each other, connected by breath, sonic vibrations, and particles of liquid air. Emerging out of the darkness of night, we witness a scene at dawn. A tent, a campfire, extinguished, a collection of campers, their debris, and downstage, hanging over a tree, the Rockstar's corpse. The music is at a high-horror frequency – the glacial terror of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, reconfigured by decades of rock, prog-rock, punk, and metal. It is as if the sound is visibly displacing the air around the bodies.

It takes a few moments to recognise that these are not people but mannequins. A choreography of the death of tragedy that Steiner might recognise – as an echo of his analysis of Beckett – where there is 'a puppet show made momentarily fascinating or monstrous by the fact that the puppets insist on behaving as if they were alive'.[80] Or as an echo of his recollections of Helene Weigel's performance of Mutter in *Mutter Courage*, where her (dis)embodiment through grief, her silent scream led him to reflect on tragedy as a lament over 'man's inhumanity'.[81] These mannequins become ecstatic inter(in)animate – enlivening the dead and deadening the living – figures who 'displace meaningful relationships, ways of associating and dissociating'.[82] Or what Dorlin elsewhere calls 'beings of flesh, rag and silicone, […] monsters, delirious figures, delusional, clairvoyant, performances of puppets, of dolls'.[83] There is a moment of insisting on the lively quality of humans reduced to objects and objects speaking, insisting, after Mel Y. Chen, that we understand 'matter [which] is considered

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[80] Steiner (1980) 350.
[81] Steiner (1980) 354.
[82] Dorlin (2021) [np].
[83] Ibid.

insensate, immobile, deathly, or otherwise 'wrong' animates cultural life in important ways'.[84]

Or it is a moment of asking a set of questions: 'Are the dolls figures, stereotypes that need to be put into crisis? Or are they, rather the people representing the rifts in the tragedy of the times, indomitable resisters to the raw violence of the world', asking, 'why?'.[85]

Then, just as the fog clears, it rolls in once more – filling the space a third time – in another inhuman choral ode. Tension and fear escalate, impossibly, as the haptic nexus of the fog swallows us once more. The 'visual regime of seeing and being' is undone but our connections through sound and touch, haptic and sonic, are amplified, by a heightened awareness of the sharing of breath, and a deep sense of the vibrational quality of the sound which is carried by and vibrates the fog that fills our lungs. Here as the visual is collapsed, we are revealed as 'bodily beings [who are] in the world at the same time that the world is in us'.[86] And we are immersed, again through this breakdown of perceptual fields in the animate, oceanic sculpture and brought into its surround together.

There is an overwhelming sense of the incommensurate here, a threat of non-re-emergence, a feeling that we will be suffocated, that the air is toxic and that the heavy breath of the tragic will consume us completely. A dying act, whereby the materialisation of the tragic experience articulates the idea that 'death in tragedy does not inform the tragic characters' lives', our lives; instead 'it is the form of their lives'.[87]

This is a re-call of the queer invitation to get lost from the normative mapping of the world, and a moment of becoming disarticulated and flooded by the sensations of touch, breath, and sound. This decomposition of perception insists on the experience of liminality, of being

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[84] Chen (2012) 2.
[85] Dorlin (2021) [np].
[86] Butler (2022) 74.
[87] Macintosh (1994) 90.

participants in a 'lugubrious atmosphere suggestive of a borderland somewhere between the lands of the living and the dead'.[88] This is a process Dorlin describes as working:

> not just to undermine and unravel the myths, social constructions, norms and the disciplining of bodies and lives, of desires and fantasies, of perceptions of the world, but to give substance to the lived dimensions for which we do not yet have words and discourses, narratives and visuals, disciplines and aesthetics.[89]

Here not only are bodies thrown together breathing, but through the process of unmaking a previously held model for experiencing and making sense of the world, we find one another in a sense emerging, in a heightened awareness of the space between living and death that we inhabit together – constructing us, 'as spectres in the land of the living'.[90] This is an insistence that 'tragic existence means being denied access to the process of living and being forced to die into death'.[91]

Here we might ask again, what makes a liveable planet, what would it mean to live together on this earth? Configured as we are by 'exclusion from the process of living' and instead thrust into close 'proximity to death' and thrust into contact with 'the process of dying'.[92] Here, 'under the tentacular [conditions of living and dying on this planet we are] mired in each other', understanding too perhaps that we are, 'neither pure boundary nor pure opening but a complex negotiation among the two'.[93]

Thus, ecstasy and sparagmos become forces that contour the dissembling of the senses, reformulating not only the sensible but also the visible, the haptic, the relational and ontological. And as the visual is disrupted, and the human is decentred and torn apart to reveal the human-atmospheric edges as intimately enfolded, Vienne leads us further into the breach.

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[88] Macintosh (1994) 85.
[89] Dorlin (2021) [np].
[90] Macintosh (1994) 90.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Macintosh (1994) 78–79.
[93] Butler (2022) 108–09.

Through this process of breakdown, we are being asked not to go back to 'reality' but to see what happens in this 'parenthesis' of the ordinary notes of patriarchal violence, colonial ownership. What would it be like to stay with the uncertainty, the unnamed, and not-yet conscious sense of a world – devoid of patriarchy, capitalism – and to accept our fragility, precarity, that we are a part of the terrifying muchness of everything that is?[94]

### iii) Towards a New Model of Tragedy

From the mist, a wolf emerges, and then another. There are gasps from the audience, as they pad downstage, threatening to cross over into the audience, like the fog. A handler appears; then, a hunter emerges with a bow and arrow. He observes the wolves, the handler, and they leave. The hunter slots an arrow into his bow and draws; hanging from the tensile pull of the bow, there is silence. Then he fires, bullseye. He loads the bow again, and we wait, it is so violent: the waiting and the impact. He fires, a very close bullseye, an adjacent shot. A woman emerges from the forest with a wolf. She looks at him. She could kill him. She looks at him. It is the same performer who played the Gymnast. But she is not the same person as she was before. The difference is stark and the recognition tricky, slippery, precarious. She could kill him, but instead, she watches, standing with the wolf. And then, she leaves. Blackout.

What to make of this ending? In extant ancient Greek tragedies from the 5th century BCE, the last lines of the performance are often delivered by a chorus. A group of people gathered in the wake of the catastrophes that have played out in the performance space. A group, who have had some part in what has unfolded, who now sing and dance perhaps one last time. Tragedy did not end with the death. But with a collective refraction.

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[94] Dorlin alternatively phrases this, thus: 'the challenge is not to relieve us of our mystifications at the least cost, in a parenthesis during which, in the space-time of the performance, we might reflect on them, as if to relieve ourselves, to spare ourselves, and then quietly go back to our "real" lives' (2021) [np].

Over the course of the performance the Gymnast, who has been subject to so much violence – who disappears into the woods with the Coach and disappears again into the depth of the forest, into the mist's swell, who invites us with her into this flood to decompose – becomes like Artemis, she is transformed. Terrible in her potential for destruction, but on the moment of enacting it, she leaves the forest, the performance, the stage.

Here the performance echoes various tragic instances of transformation and abandonment in an uncanny way: Iphigenia's transformation into a deer choreographed in *Age of Rage*; Medea's transformation into a goddess, expressed in Papaiouanou's dual iterations of the myth; Antigone's transformation into a corpse; or Dionysus' revelation of his divinity and his iterant promises to transform Cadmus and Agave at the climax of *Bacchae*. But also, the Gymnast becomes like Artemis, Dionysus, Antigone, Medea as they turn away from the mortals left in the ruins, devastated. Just as when Antigone leaves to change form, only to return to sing in the ruins of the world, and leave again in *Antigone Jr ++*, or Kali who leaves the corpse of Gilgamesh, as our world is reduced to rubble in *Outwitting the Devil*. Just so, the Gymnast becomes a force for leaving.

*Age of Rage* asked: 'What keeps the loop of unbearable grief and violence going? What energy, what system turns the tragic potential of rupture and transgression into a normative cycle?'. *This is How You Will Disappear* decomposes this loop through repeated breakdowns, that displace, and collapse, undoing norms and expectations. In place of a model of looping, excessive rupture and reformation, Vienne choreographs tragedy as a politics of ecstasy and transformation. The choreography insists on the queer potentiality of giving 'substance' to ideas, energies, sensations, relationalities, and affects 'for which we do not yet have words and discourses, narratives and visuals, disciplines and aesthetics'.[95]

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[95] Dorlin (2021) [np].

The piece consequently asks us to become a part of the affiliative series of refractions, the network of turns away from the world – not to abandon the world but to unmake its commitment to the same and to leave behind that which we once thought of as ourselves, and to remerge in ways that might, at one time, have seemed unimaginable. It asks us to listen just as much to the force of Artemis, Aphrodite, Athena as we do to Apollo and Dionysus, and to give ourselves over to that which cannot be articulated by the current structures of perception and normative modes of relation that dominate our lives. It asks us to name ourselves outside of the catastrophes through which we are living. And, it asks us to grieve and to move on. A kind of mourning that is brought about through ecstasy and the tragic. This is perhaps what Butler meant when they observed that:

> one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance.[96]

In ancient Greek tragedy, the chorus sang and danced the final moments. In *This is How You Disappear* we are left chattering in the reverberations – seated or standing as the lights come back on, after the applause, after the performers have left. We exit the space, travel home, to fragment and re-affiliate again, and in uncanny, myriad, and as yet unimaginable ways. We are also transformed. And perhaps, the performance will stay with us as an affiliative residue, a refractive network of turns, invitations, breakdowns that invite us to become members of a speculative community yet to form. After this tragedy, then, a final question remains: What will we make in the wreckage of the world?

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[96] Butler (2004b) 21.

AFTERWARD:

Towards a Planetary, Inhuman and Queer Model of Tragedy

Over the course of the thesis, I have examined six case studies grouped under three main headings: mourning, agōn, ecstasy. Affiliating each was an interest in studying how choreography shapes, undoes and reforms the ways we perform and make sense of an encounter with the incommensurate, how tragedy and the tragic are performed. This manifested as a series of analyses of the tragic as the moment which meaning and a sense of the world are undone; and analyses of tragedy as the anticipation, experience, and process of emergence, of living and dying in the aftermath of the tragic.

In the first chapter I argued that Bausch called us into awareness of our relationships with one another, through the articulation of grief as an unarticulated, embodied, and relational concern at the end of the twentieth century. In *Nelken, Café Müller*, and *Orpheus und Eurydike* tragedy was mundane, daily, surreal, and ordinary: a practice of cumulative gestures whose intervals suggested the possibility for something else to emerge. Then I considered Papaioannou's queer performance of tragedy as both a universalising human force and as an inhuman articulation of the entanglements between things, objects, flesh, and material. In the Opening Ceremony tragedy was a process of stabilising relationships to the ancient past which I approached through Wynter's figurations of Man1 and Man2. [1] Here the choreography of tragedy reinforced normative claims: linear temporality, colonial expansion, and ownership of the earth. In *Medea* and *Medea(2)* the collision and expansion of materialities called us to appreciate our always already intersubjective, networked, and affiliative connections. Grief was embodied through choreographic practice as a means of exposing the interconnection

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[1] Wynter (2003) cf. McKittrick (2015, 2021).

between things, bodies, places, and affects, as a means of exposing the possibility for things to be different in the intervallic space opened by repetition, re-enactment, reception, redo.

Perhaps we could say that Khan's work operated in those spaces. His choreography of the Opening Ceremony, eight years after Papaioannou's work for Athens, held onto grief and the sense that things do not necessarily need to be so. His choreography of migrant ocean crossings used myth as a means of transferring hopes, stories, affects. *Outwitting the Devil* expanded this practice, generating a disputative choreography of forming and unforming relation that insisted not on the end of all life, but on the end of Man. Here choreography expressed both the collapse of the world, and the search for new forms of relationality in the rubble of that collapse. Khan's tragic gesture invited us into new ways of living with each other – planetary, decolonial, queer.

Harrell approached the intersections of coloniality, violence, and planetary devastation from another angle. His choreographic practice enacted the collapse of the social/affective networks by which outward and externalised emotional responses make sense, while also working through hope. After *Notes on Less Than Zero*, *Antigone Jr ++* and *Deathbed* both insisted that other arrangements of the world were possible and that there are forms of agonistic mourning, disidentification, and grief which are capable of animating a transformative mode of relation, that works through becoming unfixed and letting go. This announcement of another way configured agōn and disputatiousness as choreographic strategies for both searching, fracturing and for encouraging unruly movements into the world. While also suggesting a series of flight paths over the horizon, a dance that moves into other possible and potential arrangements of how things could and might be.

Van Hove and Vandekeybus denied such relational strategies. They insisted on the impossibility of escape and the inevitability of the death – constructing violence, war, revenge, and devastation to be constitutive components of the real, of the human. But their performance

also encouraged, through counter distinction, and dancing against the grain, a return to more hopeful or even more critically nihilistic choreographies. Vienne offered us strategies and procedures for moving toward these counter-choreographies by suggesting how tragedy might undo the terrifying loop of *Age of Rage*. This hinged on a deconstruction of the Nietzschean model, which had subtended previous approaches, via a problematisation of our relationship with the incommensurate. A choreography not of schism and affirming human presence, but one of anti-relational relationality, dissociation, queer ecstatic sparagmos. Consequently, Vienne suggested that, instead of responding to a schism, caesura, or breach, tragedy might be comprised by modalities of deep affiliation with the collapse and rupture. Tragedy here became a process of undoing the world and insisting on queer futures and decolonial horizons through the dismantling of hierarchies of perception.

Across each chapter I explored various choreographic arrangements of tragedy that have effloresced into the twenty-first century: ideas of death as the tragic limit of the human – which often prop up extractive models of Man as owner, user, and organiser of the earth; posthuman conceptions of tragedy as the un-ameliorated wound in multi-species relations and planetary systems, caused by plantations, capitalism, colonialism; and queer models of tragedy that articulate the necessity for things to fall apart by insisting on our inter-leafed, inter-determinant state within more-than-human and multispecies assemblages.

From this we can identify two emergent structures of feeling.[2] The first can be described as a sense that things have never been so bad, that there is no way out but through total annihilation. Here tragedy is a cumulative strategy, a cycle, a loop, an origin point, and a predetermined horizon on which we will all converge, but which we can move through by relying on the intervallic and the spectral. The other structure is described by refusal, by illegibility and confusion, found in the turn towards the more-than-human, the queer, the

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[2] Williams (1977) 128–35.

decolonial. This is a tragic and elegiac insistence on survival and care in the face of climate devastation, in the wake of mass extinction. This model of unfixity articulates tragedy as a transformation, as an unmaking rather than a devastation of the world.

Each chapter also considered the possibility, that through choreography, tragedy could articulate and gesture towards forms of community (yet unimaginable). This occurred in the spaces, where we could no longer articulate ourselves to ourselves, no longer relate to the way we are and have been but instead might imagine that another way is possible – suggested by alternative forms of sensing and relating which emerged in the unrecognisable space of the tragic-incommensurate, in the parenthesis, the temporal condition of emergence.

In the years since the first performances of *Age of Rage* and *Porca Miseria* the world has been overwhelmed, in a seemingly relentless interleafing of tragic collapses. COVID-19 continued to change what tragedy might mean, it both exposed and intensified the effects of racialisation, police brutality, sexism and neo-colonialism – which continue to be enacted day after day. As such both the requirement to transform in the face of the unfolding and looming terrors of climate catastrophe, and the question of who comprises the 'we' of tragedy are even more fraught and urgent.[3]

The majority of this thesis operated through an analysis of the entanglements between criticism, choreography, tragedy, and performance. Vienne's work, however, encouraged a reflection on what happens when we leave the performance space, gesturing toward the audience as a potential site for the formation of radical meaning making communities. But the argument leaves open the question of how such collectivity might work, or what it might mean to come together in the wake of devastation, in the aftermath of a performance of tragedy. Consequently, in order to suggest a final flight pattern, generated from the situational practice

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[3] There are innumerable papers and reports, but for an overview, see IPCC (2023).

of examining the ways in which tragedy has been choreographed into the twenty-first century, I want to reflect on what composes us, now.

*Extinction*

Crystal Pite and Simon McBurney's *Figures in Extinction [1.0]* (2022) and Miranda Rose Hall's, *Play for Living in a Time of Extinction* (2023) both choreograph tragedy in a form that is emergent. They both ask us to imagine that the unfolding creative encounter is (or will be) one of the last ever made by the human species, in its current configurations.

Hall's performance takes place within two timescales of the process of dying. The play begins with the entrance of a dramaturg (played by Lydia West at the Barbican), [4] who tells us:

> NAOMI. And uhm – I thought we would be presenting our / performance tonight, / which is a kind of / in-your-face / spectacular meditation on the catastrophe of climate change.[5]

However, Naomi's two collaborators and best friends, co-founders of 'ZeroOmissions Theatre Company', cannot be here because one of her friends' mothers has fallen:

> NAOMI. It was a random accident. / She is fifty-nine. / Her name is Evelyn Martinez-Goldberg. / And she is currently – / uhm – / – / she is dying. / – / In hospital.[6]

They've asked Naomi to continue the show, it is the last night of the tour, and they are performing in the Barbican, a dream, Naomi tells us.[7] And so, instead of presenting their scheduled performance, which ended in:

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[4] The play operates via an ecological touring model 'conceived of by Katie Mitchell and developed with the support of Jérôme Bel and Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne', in such a way that, 'the play tours whilst the people and materials do not' Barbican (2023) [np].

[5] Hall (2023) 14.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

> NAOMI. In a sort of – carnival of death. / An – unscientific apocalyptic bacchanal.[8]

Naomi will talk to us. She will reflect on the concepts which structured their performance, recount the lives and deaths of species who are no longer living, discuss Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (2014) – a study of our current era of mass species extinction (potentially the largest loss of life, 'since the time of the dinosaurs'[9]) –, and she will invite us to perform with her:

> NAOMI. Because even though we have lived through a pandemic, / and we are living through a war in Europe, / I think our culture is still struggling / with how to deal with death. / And especially mass death. / And especially mass interspecies death – / – So I'm just going to try to tell you a few stories tonight. / About some of the things I have been thinking about and / researching in private. / So that none of us has to be unbearably lonely. / Is that okay?[10]

Over the course of the performance, developed with postmodern dancer Jerome Bêl and director Katie Mitchell, the dramaturg choreographs a series of improvisatory choruses to account for where we are now, and how we got here. The first chorus enters before the lights in the theatre cut. They climb onto bicycles which flank the performance space in two banks – they will power the lights and sound for the entire show. We hear the hum of the bikes throughout the entire performance, see them working, the repetitive lift and drive of their legs. The next chorus begins to form as Naomi asks us to breathe with her,[11] to lift our hands to describe the first single-cell organisms ever to emerge on the planet,[12] and then then asks us to perform the first mass extinction event, their deaths.[13]

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[8] Hall (2023) 16.
[9] Hall (2023) 34; cf Kolbert, who tells us that the sixth extinction is a term for the current time-span, through which we are living, and which might rival the other five major extinction events in history in terms of the scale and force of ongoing extinction (2014) 2
[10] Hall (2023) 20.
[11] Hall (2023) 22.
[12] Hall (2023) 25.
[13] Hall (2023) 26.

In order to tell the story of the history of the earth through the five preceding major extinction events Naomi asks the audience to come on stage to dance as trees – the first forest ever formed –, to share their stories about lakes, trees, and mountains that they have loved, and might have lost. She dances too, exploring deep time by walking at a geological pace across the length of the stage, explaining the conjoined effects of coloniality and racism which are two drivers of the extinction events of which we are all a part. And she makes a chorus through a slide show presentation, comprised of all the species that are or are at risk of extinction currently.[14] Choruses of death:

> NAOMI. It feels like everywhere I look is a wound. / I am so overwhelmed by these rates of death, / as if this scale of violence were somehow unavoidable, / as if brutality were inevitable, / as if brutality were not a choice, / as if choices were not human, / as if what is human could never be changed, / as if it were inevitable – / it isn't inevitable – /.[15]

And then Naomi turns back to Evelyn Martinez-Goldberg. And she delivers a contemporary embodiment of the 'big speech',[16] one of the defining characteristics of tragedy's performance of the dying act:

> NAOMI. Evelyn Martinez-Goldberg, / who sent me a special note of condolence / when my Grandfather Jimmy died / who always said that our productions were great / and donated fifty pounds each year, / Evelyn Martinez-Goldberg, / who wasn't supposed to die today, / who is dying in her hospital bed, / I wish you a good death. /
>
> […]
>
> Evelyn Martinez-Goldberg, / and all of the beings dying around you: / the bats and the frogs and the fish and the trees and the reefs / and the bugs and the birds and the people – / all creatures whose mothers are dying, all mothers, all beings / who have ever given life – / I wish you good deaths.[17]

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[14] Hall (2023) 42–43.
[15] Hall (2023) 47.
[16] Macintosh (1994) 181.
[17] Hall (2023) 48–49.

Naomi goes on to extend the speech to include us, in the theatre space, articulating mourning as the resounding note of tragedy once more.[18] The final chorus emerges here, as we witness the Citizens of the World Choir perform – in the wreckage of life that *Play for Living…* conjures –, as the cyclists continue to peddle on, before finally stopping, and allowing the remaining power to run out. Now we all listen together to the silence, in the dark, to its hum.

*Figures in Extinction [1.0]* is one part of a trilogy of works developed between Pite and McBurney. It was informed by a question McBurney's daughter asked him during rehearsals, after observing a bird flying from their garden: 'Has she gone for ever?'.[19] From this question both artists unfold an elegiac tragic reflection on a mode of leaving that seemingly has no return:

> We are living in an age of extinction: of animals, of language, of our connection with nature and of age-old ways of knowing. Can we ever hope to give a name to what we are losing? What does it mean to bear witness to a violence in which we are both perpetrators and victims?[20]

Throughout the performance the dancer's take on the embodied character, quality, and affiliative patterns of that which we have lost. As they move, forming and collapsing, reanimating and dying throughout – as they index extinct insects, mammals, aviary species, rivers, and glaciers – they chart figures which come into and move out of being, in beautiful, elegiac, and tragic waves and folds. Through choreography those organisms and geographic phenomena, some of which haven't been seen alive for centuries, are briefly held again in the dancers' bodies; traces of extinct life therefore emerge and vanish in front of our eyes.

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[18] Hall (2023) 49; cf. Loraux (2002) 94.
[19] Cf. Winship (2023) [np].
[20] Complicité (2022) [np].

In a reflective piece – written during the recursive throes of wave upon wave of lockdown, social distancing, and mass death – Ben Okri proposes an alternative sense of time that can help us here, that he 'refer[s] to as existential creativity. This is the creativity at the end of time'.[21] A practice that is shaped by situating oneself at the end of the world, on the edge of a sense of the world, about to collapse. He observes:

> … I must write now as if these are the last things I will write, that any of us will write. If you knew you were at the last days of the human story, what would you write? How would you write? What would your aesthetics be? Would you use more words than necessary? What form would poetry truly take? And what would happen to humour? Would we be able to laugh, with the sense of the last days on us?[22]

If our current arrangements, relationships, and forms of being are to come apart, then what 'form would poetry truly take?', 'what would your aesthetics be?', 'if these were the last days of the human story, what would you write?'.[23] How would you dance? Both *Play for Living…* and *Figures in Extinction [1.0]* are acts of existential creativity which engage with these questions by reimagining choreography at the end of the human in its current configurations.

Okri insists that this creative practice will help us to understand the challenges we face but also to think outside of them, past them. He does so, not by arguing that it is the first time humans have considered their demise, but instead, by reflecting on the fact that this time the scale of devastation is planetary, and that we are aware of it happening (in advance).[24] Like Butler's choruses lamenting before the grief and violence has struck, Okri insists: 'We have to find a new art and a new psychology to penetrate the apathy and the denial that are preventing us making the changes that are inevitable if our world is to survive'.[25] Iteratively, relentlessly,

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[21] Okri (2021) [np].
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.

determined, he continues: 'We need a new art to waken people both to the enormity of what is looming and the fact that we can still do something about it'.[26]

This is the effect of Pite's choreography, her tragic choreography. As the hands of the dancers' tremble in chorus, beating out the last movement of a species of fish running from an end they could not escape, they also describe the transformation of matter from one inter-species or inter-ecological organisation to another: shoal becoming glacier, becoming ibex, becoming human, becoming ocean, becoming Man, becoming … This is extinction configuring patterns of transformation.

Both performances, thus, ask us to engage with the climate catastrophe without resorting to the kinds of 'apocalyptic imaginaries' that have not only limited our abilities to imagine alternative futures outside of the continuation and intensification of capitalism, but have also displaced existing social agonisms and struggles for equality.[27] Instead, by not denying these unequal social realties – through the articulation a false, global, universal 'we' – they insist on the afterlives of colonialism and racism which configure the pain, heat, the crushing flood of climate change. From this inflection point, they gesture toward the inhuman 'actualization of a community-to-come'; challenging us to think with those who fall 'outside the cultural space of ethics, relationality, and the sacred';[28] and ask us, 'to remain suspicious of the hasty impulses of an affirmative politics of life and relationality profoundly unequipped to recognise the mundane and persistent ways in which death and perhaps even extinction always already constitute existence'.[29]

Both performances therefore enact the iterative and cumulative tragic breaches in a sense of the world and choreograph tragedy as a process of reckoning with extinction. But the beauty and pain of Hall, Pite, and McBurney's work is that the dancers, and the construction of

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[26] Ibid.
[27] Karera (2019) 33
[28] Karera (2019) 45 quoting Warren (2017) 391.
[29] Karera (2019) 46.

audience-choruses, invite us to hold in our bodies the traces of the dying, the dead, and the extinct, to carry them with us as we go into the world outside the theatre. They extend the chorus to include the spectators, as already a part of the ecology of the tragic which they perform, so that on leaving the performance space, we might recognise in the crush of people gathering for the tube, or assembling outside of a pub, the extinct relational form of a river, flowing.

Both call us into a space of collective grief, encouraging a disputative engagement with the neo-colonial, racist, and extractive capitalist structures accelerating and profiting from these catastrophes, mythic in scale, terrible in their cost. Both forms of the contemporary dying act thus, not only ask us to hold onto, re-enact, to inter(in)animate those gestures, patterns, shapes and figures; but they also allow our bodies to be changed through choreographic contact with the extinct, the terrifying more than, more than, more than human of which we are a part. Through 'repetition, recall and recognition' they ask us to reimagine our affiliations with the living.[30]

*The Chorus*

This route into collective imagination, born from tragic devastation, has been suggested before. Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019) is an examination of the experiences, memories, and dreams of people living and dying in the generations after the abolition of slavery in North America. The work listens to the vibrations held in the archive: the 'journals of rent collectors; surveys and monographs of sociologists; trial transcripts; slum photographs; reports of vice investigators, social workers, and parole officers; interviews with psychiatrists and psychologists; and prison case files'.[31]

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[30] Macintosh (1994) 180.
[31] Hartman (2019) 10.

Hartman's work here is to query that which links and affiliates the wayward, female, queer acts of existence in this period, expressed by 'the refusal to be governed'.[32] She theorises – from these seemingly differentiated acts of resistance, queer efflorescence, and hope – a chorus. One assembled from the 'moments when the vision and dreams of the wayward seemed possible'.[33] A chorus that generates another network, not of defeat, failure, devastation, and giving up – although those affects and gestures are all a part of the history she writes –, but instead, 'of the exorbitant, a dream book for existing otherwise'.[34] The chorus, as:

> vehicle for another kind of story, not of the great man or the tragic hero, but one in which all modalities play a part, where the headless group incites change, where mutual aid provides the resource for collective action, not leader and mass, where the untranslatable songs and seeming nonsense make good the promise of revolution. The chorus propels transformation. It is an incubator of possibility, an assembly sustaining dreams of the otherwise.[35]

I think this is where choreographing tragedy might take us, deeper into questions that affiliate the emergent practices of unworlding, and disidentification with historic struggles for freedom. In the shift I have outlined across this thesis, which approaches tragedy not as event but as process, I considered the disruption of aesthetics an index for unresolved or emergent disputes within the transforming historical conditions, under which the performance is staged. Extending this analysis further, we can observe how the chorus can create sites for new communities to form, new imaginaries, relationalities, and subjectivities to emerge inside and out of the performance space. Choreographing, thus, a series of emergent choruses who practice iterative and intervallic calls for a radical re-articulation of the 'we' under the conditions of extinction and climate change.

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[32] Hartman (2019) 9.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Hartman (2019) 162.

Each of the case studies I examined argue for this process of relational choreographic re-articulation in some way, even if they ultimately insist that this 'we' becomes, through performance, a chorus of annihilation and death – as in chapter five. This is perhaps because each choreographer turns back in some way to the work of Pina Bausch, while also turning forward to that which Hartman describes as the chorus' wayward, imaginative, and improvisatory energies of change. By interrogating the impossibility of moving together in chapter two; or the transference of hope in chapter three; by wagering that the audience could become a choral form through which the dead can move, in chapter four; or by articulating the ways in which both a forest can be a sensory witness to patriarchal violence, and a flood of fog could become a chorus – capable of ecstatic release – in chapter six: each choreographer relied on the Bauschian techniques of choral dis-unity, and simultaneity. They each queried that which affiliates us through the processes of collapse and rupture which I argue constitute tragedy and the tragic. And each of them asks in various ways, as Brand does elsewhere, 'what is collected at the end of breathing?'.[36]

We can see this practice in Hall, Pite, and McBurney's work as they ask the dancers – in a recollection of Bausch's interrogative choreographic strategies – if they can in fact move like the first organism ever to emerge on earth? If they can feel what it feels like, to be a species going extinct? Here we might find a model of tragedy that is planetary, decolonial, queer – in an insistence, after Brand, 'that verbs are a tragedy, a bleeding cliffside, explosions', which each enact a tragedy of more-than-human, ecological quality.[37]

There, on the imaginative horizons suggested by these performances, is a modality of performing tragedy that insists that we become unrecognisable even to ourselves, but that we do so through deep affiliation, through strategies of radical chosen family, mutual aid, care,

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[36] Brand (2018) 212; cf. Sharpe (2023) 151.
[37] Brand (2022) 504.

and through the choreographic practices of disidentification, refusal, unworlding, and resistance. There across those horizons, is that which was gestured towards, by the queer performers and drag queens who comprised *Sound of the Underground*, who took apart the performance space, piece by piece, in anticipation of a riotous queer performance they would enact in the ruins of heteronormative, racialised capitalism – hope. A chorus, whose 'collective movement points toward what awaits us, what has yet to come into view, what they anticipate – the time and place better than here; a glimpse of the earth not owned by anyone'.[38]

There, perhaps is an invitation to turn and return to the incommensurate field of the tragic, like Phia Ménard – who stared out past the fallen Parthenon – witnessing, surviving, sensing, and awaiting the notes and movements of a choral song that will, one day, drift up from the wreckage of the end of the world. Indeed, such a form of chorality was already apparent to the dancers of the Tanztheater Wuppertal who walked through the wreckage of a field of carnations, gesturing back to the passing of the seasons. It was apparent to the dancers of the Akram Khan Company whose performance of the ending of species Man affiliated collapse, collision, and the slip, in such a way that we were allowed to imagine ourselves outside of the catastrophes we still now face. But to reiterate, this is not a chorus interested in the tragedy of 'man's inhumanity'.[39] Instead, it is a chorus which speculatively imagines that which we could have been, that which we could yet become, a chorus which doubly turns forward to the communities which will form in the tragic wake, and returns us to the sense that:

> We are remainders of burning oxygen
> We are just the end of helium, we are speeding
> We are slow, water doesn't end.[40]

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[38] Hartman (2019) 263.
[39] Steiner (1980) 354.
[40] Brand (2022) 68–69.

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