10
ENCOUNTERING ABSENCE
Queer Traces, Ghosts, and Performance Otherwise

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What happens when you respond to a performance? What if you were not, necessarily, *there* when it took place? For instance, I know you performed last week. You did something endurance based, and messy; I heard that you danced, you sang a poem—an old story about—but I was not there to see it. I know you wore very little, that you had on a lot of eyeliner, all the way up to your—but, I missed it. What was this performance doing without me? Which is to say, what of the gestures, affects, sounds, the historical, political, theoretical, and physical worlds it conjured? I am not so interested in what your performance or its constituent elements meant. Instead, I am interested in a set of poetic, ethical, and ontological concerns: what actions, affects, and situations did you perform, how did your performance subtend or provide the means to decompose certain forms and categories, what did it upset, unsettle, or break?[1] I am interested because these are affective concerns: I am full of backward feelings, melancholic, nostalgic, all cut up that I didn't see you perform, that you did this work without me. But more than anything else I am concerned that something of your performance has gotten into me, even though I wasn't present, while it happened.

In this chapter, I am going to explore the ways that some queer receptions of tragedy have an effect in the past, present (and future) even for those who were not there to see them "live." When I talk about queer performance I am talking about *both* performances made by queer and trans folks—in warehouses, on national stages, on TikTok and Instagram, on the street, and behind closed doors—*and* performances that queer, that disrupt, make new worlds, or that unmake the world as it is. In many ways, then, I understand queer performance to be an acceleration of the features we might associate with performance more broadly; it would be impossible to imagine performance without queer performance, after all. But queer performances happen in a different key. Often without institutional support, hemmed in by the logic of the closet and by national homo- and hetero-normativities, queer performance is precarious, unrecorded, un(der)archived. Queer performance is inflected by historical catastrophes, losses and disappearances too: the HIV/AIDS crises led to the deaths of so many queer artists whose absence is keenly felt, and queerphobic laws still curtail and criminalize both queer forms of expression and attempts to queer or unmake the violent hierarchical systems in which we live.

I focus on the queer performance of tragedy for a few reasons. Queer performances facilitate modes of knowing, recognition, and belonging among minoritarian subjects, which outlast the

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duration of the live event (Muñoz 2019, 99). And tragedy often engages with the disruption and (re)negotiation of aesthetic forms; I wager such disruption indexes an unresolved or emergent dispute within the transforming historical conditions under which the performance is staged.[2] Moreover, queer performances of tragedy articulate affective and political concerns that are knotted up with broader queer activism, study, and theory: how do we recognize one another, how do we deal with grief, and in what ways can we make demands *collectively* in the present for a world ordered differently? What do we do when we fail or when everything comes crumbling down around us?

Throughout this chapter, I take on these questions to argue against the notion that performance is a singular event that happens in a specific place and time *for* a specific group of people—who needed to be there in order to feel and be affected by it. This allows queer performances of tragedy to be understood in complex relation without the need for a straight or linear model of time, not singular stable events in a "chainmail of receptions" playing out diachronically and synchronically but shifting co-functional assemblages that participate within broader networks of diffuse and variously situated assemblage-performances, events in the arts, social sciences, in history, politics, technology, pop-culture, and thought (Ward 2019, 515). As I write, and remember acts of performance I witnessed (rarely) or encountered in images, videos, texts, and other bodies, I render a thesis at a juncture, affecting the assemblage of those assemblages—knitting together convergent but sometimes fractious fields of study, namely, classical reception studies and queer studies. The critical apparatus and intellectual moves made in this paper are informed by Black feminist thought and queer of color critique and many of the epistemologies employed were developed through collaboration (academic, discursive, and practice-based) with the editors of this volume, the Queer and the Classical project, and Critical Ancient World Studies.[3]

Three notions from queer theater and performance studies are relevant here: the trace, the ghost, and the speculative set of relations named the otherwise.[4] These concepts give the chapter three interrelated sections. First, I lay out some of the debates around liveness and ephemerality from queer theater, dance, and performance studies over the last 20 years. I expand this analysis by considering both Johanna Hedva's *the Greek cycle* (2012—2015) in the second and Trajal Harrell's *Antigone Jr./Twenty Looks or Paris is Burning at the Judson Church* (2014) in the third. What I am after is not what queer performance can tell us that is different from "normative" performance but instead, what queer performance brings to the fore and what possibilities and potentialities it opens up, i.e., what it does. My thesis is that queer theory's understanding of performance—as an ontologically unstable, and complex, temporal "putting-into-relationship" of live and non-live elements—has shifted the ground of performance studies and so asks Classicists committed to queer engagements to reconsider that discipline's performative turn.

Querying the Present: The Case Against Liveness

In this section, I look at ephemerality. After interrogating an influential view from theater and performance studies, which has contoured the performative turn in Classics, I outline two entangled critiques of this slippery term, offered by queer theorists José Esteban Muñoz and Lauren Berlant. In the first instance I work to undo the strict event-ness and live-ness of performance and in the second query the stability of the present.

In the landmark *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), Peggy Phalen theorized a fraught but seductive ontological distinction between live and non-live: writing that "performance honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an

experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward" (Phalen 1993, 194. See Ellis 2020, 157). As Phalen says elsewhere in the text,

> Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.
>
> (Phalen 1993, 146)

Consequently, Phalen wagers that performance happens live in the moment, and the things which record, document, or archive it—performances' residues—are ontologically distinct from performance itself. These residues are not unimportant, but when we talk about them we talk about *a residue*: a photograph or a script, a video or a review and we are not, according to Phalen, talking about performance.

A wave of performance and live art preceding *Unmarked*'s publication influenced this reading. Conceptual art, happenings, postmodern dance and the Judson Memorial Church, punk, FLUXUS, and the proliferation of performances in the streets, corridors, buses, offices, and warehouses all emphasized performance outside of the traditionally demarcated theater space, revealing the always already performative nature of sociality. This work very often only happened once in a specific location and left little or no physical trace. Take for example the work of Joseph Beuys, Zoe Leonard, Pope L., or Bruce Nauman which circulates through video recordings, images, or oral histories. The modes of performance they employed de-emphasized text, did away with scripts, and confronted the literary canon—preferring to use the performance score or the impulses of those gathered to generate work. This caused a crisis in the ways that academia had been handling performance: what was to be the object of knowledge production if not the live event of theater or its reconstitution from material remains? What now that those remains were severed from live performance? In this moment, performance studies began to contend with the questions that Classicists had often been worried about: what do I do about this performance which happened without me which I have some remnant(s) of but which I did not see live. How can I write about and produce scholarship on something which I cannot hold, touch, re-construct, or check out at a library? Enter Phalen, who claims that what we engage with, when we engage with performance, is not the performance, but its documentation, it's non-live, not-actual echoes.

This is roughly where Classics and Reception Studies gets us in the performative turn. Take for example the introduction to *Theorizing Performance* (2010) where the editors write, "[m]ethods of archiving, documentation and analysis have emerged from engagement with the source material and actual performances" (Hall and Harrop 2010, 2). This distinction between performance and its archives, documentation, and analyses makes the same ontological separation between "actual" performance and its implied "non-actual" remains. Furthermore, consider this quotation from *Choral Mediations in Greek Tragedy* describing an ancient performance as,

> A dramatic event [that] happens in a certain space, in the presence of a given audience, and in a distinctive social, political, and cultural context. In addition to the words spoken by the performers, it involves a wide range of stimuli, visual and auditory alike, which fundamentally informs the spectators' experience.
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> (Renaud and Hopman 2013, 18)

The echoes of Phalen's work are evident: performance happened, and we cannot know what people did on stage because the only way we'd know is by being there to see, hear—and I would

add—smell, touch, propriocept, introcept, and orientate ourselves toward or away from live performance in the moment. So what we are left with is a series of detailed analyses of performances' non-live, inert, non-actual remains. Elsewhere, Phalen holds that writing can re-animate or re-imagine performance, but she also observes that doing so would change the nature of the performance, making it, perhaps, more illusive, more lost. Think of what this means for our understanding of the reception of ancient Greek tragedy in performance. Does it really amount to a series of essays, poems, performances and monographs that are not actually concerned with ancient performance but its remnants, with every act of reception only mangling, obscuring, and changing an originary, singular performance event?

I believe that this point of view—though perhaps exaggerated for argument's sake—is a consequence of the particular way in which performance is being theorized. And I am interested in finding ways to move on from this position. I believe that Muñoz offers us the first step forward. He suggests that Phalen considers the audience to be too much of a forgetting community, suggesting instead that performance's affects and material remains can stay with a spectator even if they are fleeting (Muñoz 2019, 98–99). This matters for queers interested in performance for, in Muñoz terms, performances' force lies in its ability to generate modes of belonging, "knowing and recognition," especially among minoritarian groups (Muñoz 2019, 99). This keeps some elements of the performance alive and viable in its residues, because part of performance's very existence is assembled by the folks who animate it, through their participation.

Take for example the work of the late producer and musician SOPHIE who, in her song *Just like we never said goodbye* (2015), sings,

> But then you called me up the other day/I was shocked, but what could I say?/And your voice exactly the same/And it makes me feel, makes me feel/Oh, just like we never said goodbye.

Listening to this song, I am struck by its expression of one of griefs' cruel tricks—it feels as if SOPHIE herself is still alive; suddenly, for a brief moment, all that loss and the distance between then and there, here and now is erased. In the same way that SOPHIE is shocked to hear the voice of someone she once said goodbye to, when I am listening to this song, and feeling, in the tones and vibrations of the music, SOPHIE's presence—which sits alongside my memories of her live performances—the proximity shock she describes is redoubled: 'your voice exactly the same/and it makes me feel […] oh, just like we never said goodbye'. For a second it feels as if SOPHIE might still be alive, still here, like we might still be able to see her perform again.

Some affective vitality from her live performance remains in the sonic-embodied residue it left behind. That residue is neither inert nor entirely distinct from the live performance which produced it. This phenomenon is diffuse, as each encounter with SOPHIE's voice *and* even with the re-proliferation of the queer decompositional techniques they pioneered—i.e., the diffusion of "hyper pop" and PC music into the mainstream—tricks my brain into thinking again and again that they are still making music. It is just like we never said goodbye. But with each slip, I also re-encounter her death. I felt it when JSLOIPNHIE (2021) was posthumously released. Even now, I move through these feelings when she is played on the radio or when I hear her in other artists' work. I encounter her but lose something of myself every time I remember she is gone (Butler 2006, 22).

This might leave us wondering: how do we understand the present tense or the present moment? Is it one thing that everyone experiences together, is it even clear while it is happening that it is *the* present? How much of the past and the future seep into the now? Take the work of Lauren

Berlant who confronted these questions in the field-shifting *Cruel Optimism* (2011). Noting that the present is not an object but first a mediate affect, they move to consider the present as a disputed category—under constant revision—a temporal genre with shifting conventions, multiple experiences, and conflicting constitutions which emerge 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).

Consequently, Berlant suggests that an event is not a singular *thing* which happens, but a part of what they call "crisis ordinariness" (Berlant 2011, 10), where multiple competing and conflicting affects, feelings, memories, and desires gather. The event is an assemblage of *things* within this zone: some parts cohere, becoming articulate or actual—some parts are live, living—and some are not live, dead, imagined, non-actual. In tragedy, the stability of, participation in, and ability to identify elements within this zone are at stake, as affective situations, intersubjective ideas, other events, or fantasies from the past return, or a vision of the future collides with the now, generating multiple unstable ontological statuses, muddling then and now here and there.[5] In these scenarios, disputatiousness and inscrutability can also become normalized. This protracted state of disorientation and bewilderment is especially possible in queer life and performance, as in my experience of continual, reiterative, and extended encounters with SOPHIE's present-absence.[6]

Thus, we could still say—if we really wanted to—that performance's only life is in the present, but we would have to understand that the present is not a stable category, it mixes past, future, live, and non-live, into itself. And if we say performance is happening in the now, we must understand that the "now" is firstly, affectively mediated; it is comprised of multiple conflicting histories, histories tracing backward, at the same time as they look forwards (Campt 2020). We would also have to understand the social political and cultural contexts which structure a dramatic event are not coherent unities, but multiple, fricative, actual, and non-actual coalescent relationships. In this sense performance neither happens in a stable unified moment for everyone present, it is not a singular event which happened at one time or another; it is an arrangement of different elements which gather only for as long as they are co-functioning. This arrangement is political precisely because it is up for dispute and because its form, structure, and content depend on both the situated positionalities of the participants, their agency, and the power structures that shape and inflect them. In this reading the residue left by performance is not inert; instead, it contains a vitality of feeling/affect that is, in and of itself, capable of inhabiting/haunting us in a way that is difficult to disentangle from the very participation in a "live" performance. That "residue", even if it is non-actual or not-real, is a component of the performance's effect.[7]

Queer Performance and Ghosts: The Non-actual/Actual, Not Live/Live, Absent/Present, or Dead/Living

In this section, I am less concerned with what remains and more interested in the non-actual, or the performance of non-actuality—in other words, encountering absence in performance. I wager that non-actuality is often the space and modality of, and in which, queer performance operates. In the last section, I demonstrated that the ephemeral present already contains multiple times and tenses: past, present, and future. In this section, I observe what happens as performance spills out of the present. Thus, I explore how, like a gesture, ephemeral things can reemerge, reappear, and rework themselves—documenting the ways in which performance slips out of and jumps across different times and spaces in queer studies. Consequently, I will be thinking about some other slippages, between the live, the visible, the living, the actual—and their entangled antitheticals.

Here I bring tragedy deeper into the fold by examining Johanna Hedva's *The Greek Cycle,* specifically *Motherload* (2012) to answer the question I asked at the top, again, in another way: how can an absent thing touch you? Take a moment to visit their website to see video footage and images of the performance, but do be aware the webpage and this section will contain references to and discussions of miscarriage.[8]

Hedva tells us in the essay which archives these works, *Euripides is not a Genius I am*, that the cycle "is a series of four plays, based on Ancient Greek texts, that [they] wrote and directed, which served as a four-year long cathartic thrash" (Hedva 2020, 3) In one sense the cycle might seem traditional: it is about re-writing texts and directing them. Yet, the method of re-writing is also figured in the cycle as a process of destruction, exhaustion, and exhibition, not preservation, translation, and transmission. Thus, what they signal by the term directing has more in common with live art than theatrical or dramatic acting techniques,

> 15.
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> My *Motherload* script is 166 pages, all of which were tacked to the walls of the gallery, visible at all times, for the thirty-hour performance and a total of 160 hours as an installation—in a hallway in CalArts. To read the 166 pages out loud took six hours: the play was performed six hours a day, for five days in a row, with the entire script read each day. The performers, of which there were twelve, including me, were asked not to memorize their lines but instead to read them out loud and note any changes they made to the text by marking the script on the walls. So that the marks of thinking would be shown.
>
> I gave the direction that, over the course of the week's performance the performers could read any words, lines, or role, begin and end anywhere, and do with their bodies whatever they wanted. My direction to one particular performer was: 'you're trying to read with your body.'
>
> (Hedva 2020, 7)

Here, Hedva creates what fellow live artist Tino Seghal terms "constructed situations" (Ferretti 2021). These situations are not focused on the individual artist but instead, on a commons assembled by the performance, and the performance space. Through these constructed situations, *Hecuba* is not re-enacted but discontinuously re-membered in various durational, impermanent, and partial non-linear acts of performance, giving the work a somnambulate, spectral quality. Hedva notes "I'd wanted to make a world separate from our world but still embedded in it, which depicted suffering and grieving as a ritualistic but unknowable kind of working" (Hedva 2020, 9). Consequentially, in *Motherload* the dream-ghost-spectral-absent is not separate from but instead a constituent part of the waking-live-present-living in a sticky and co-constitutive mesh.

As in other acts of performance featuring text on stage, the text is made into a *thing*, placed within the scene of performance; unlike other acts of performance, without scripts, *Motherload* figures that *thing* as an active element of performance through its abjection. For, as the text is shredded the effect is that Hecuba/*Hecuba* is being destroyed. Each falling page and crumbled sheet indexes a destroyed body and the ruination of the text actualizes the fall of Troy, the murder of all of Hecuba's children, and Hecuba's disintegration through grief. In this tragic affinity between text and body, "inanimate" matter performs as it falls, tears, rips, and gathers in piles on the floor. And animate material, the human body, is performed via inanimate objects. Thus, inanimate objects signal one another in a lively way but also radiate with the violent process of making humans into things, or of the performance of thingliness. A sheet of paper performs a

corpse through a performative simile, the process of destroying a text performs the destruction of a city.

To be attuned to this collusion of text-body is to note how performance sits and is situated between live and non-live elements—bringing together things that are alive and things that are not. Take the following description of the work from Hedva,

> *Motherload* is based on the Euripides tragedy *Hecuba,* which is the story of an old queen who's had fifty children who are all killed in the Trojan War. The only things that happen in Euripides's play are that Hecuba's last two children still alive are killed, and she beseeches and supplicates the men around her for mercy, pity and explanations—but finds none. She is told, at the end, by a seer, that she'll turn into a dog.
>
> Anne Carson, whose translation I used, said about Hecuba in an interview, 'She dies and dies and *dies* and *dies* but *never dies,'* which, when I heard it, filled me with a deep, reverberating sound.
>
> (Hedva 2020, 7)

Something of death and the dead, something of the not-real, not-actual has gotten into, or embedded itself, in the real, the living, the live. In Hedva's performance of this situation "matter that is considered insensate, immobile, deathly, or otherwise 'wrong' animates cultural life in important ways" (Chen 2012, 2). This phenomenon of live and non-liveness crossing allows us, in the words of Fred Moten and Rebecca Schneider, to experience the inter(in)animacy at work every day— playing out in crisis ordinariness. Moten is interested in how the "photographic" and the "phonographic," "vision and sound," the past and present, can be said to ghost and enliven each other—to interanimate one another (Moten 2003)—Schneider thinks about how, in performances in which the past returns to the present, the past and present can deaden one another, or trouble the "immediacy of things to themselves"—interinanimacy (Schneider 2011; see also Noland 2020, 2).

To see how this works, let's come away from Hedva for a moment. In the dominant "space[s] of heteronormativity" (Muñoz 2019, 223) some or perhaps most of queer performance is always illegible, invisibilized, or lost to those outside its circle, but even sometimes to those within it. There is sometimes good reason for this. In certain places and times, visible queer performances are (and put their performers) at risk. So they happen surreptitiously, leaving fleeting or covert traces. Take for example, as Muñoz does, Tony Just's photographic project which documented public toilets—which may have been the site of queer public sex, before the HIV/AIDs crisis. By scrubbing them clean and removing the physical traces, stains, scuffs, and other marks Just thereby re-doubles and marks the systematic processes by which queer sociality, history, and "sexual citizenship" are erased by normativity. By recording this process, the pictures also reveal and provide access to "a hidden queer history of public sex outside of the dominant public sphere's visible historical narratives" (Muñoz 1996, 5–6; cf. Nyong'o and Chambers-Letson 2020, xxvi). Here, that which is no longer visible or is made invisible, by Just's acts of performance—scrubbing and photography—are the lives and sexual encounters of queer people in the past. There is, in this act of scrubbing, an emphasis on folks who were once there having sex, who are no longer anymore. This refracts a performance of absence across multiple media and times: in the ghostly past of public sex, the act of scrubbing, and the photographs, but also in Muñoz writing, and in mine. Thus, performance extends and slips out of the once present into multiple instantiations of the now, via an inter(in)animacy that is multi-material, multi-animate, and multi-temporal.

This brings us to think about the idea of loss or the idea of grief in queer performance, and in queerness, more generally. Elsewhere, Muñoz articulated the idea that,

> we can understand queerness itself as being filled with the intention to be lost. Queerness is illegible and therefore lost, in relation to the straight minds mapping of space, queerness is lost in space or lost in relation to the space of heteronormativity […] To accept loss is to accept queerness—or more accurately, to accept the loss of heteronormativity, authorization, and entitlement.[9]

Thus, queerness is located not in an anti-normative move but in the negation of normativity: it is lost, not here, not actual, otherwise; not concerned with being but non-being, or unbecoming. Importantly, this becoming lost, this unbecoming does not banish grief or grieving from the mix. It might even leave us wondering, as Paul B. Preciado does, in conversation with a dead friend: "Do I belong more to your world than I do to the world of the living?" (Preciado, 2013, 20).

Remember how something of Hecuba's situation had gotten into Hedva, even though they were not necessarily there together. Note how it is not text, reading, or writing that fills them with this deep reverberating sound, but Carson's poetic interpretations, her own re-performance, of the dramaturgy of Euripides' *Hecuba*—as an investigation of living while dead or dying but remaining alive. Here we find an example of affect jumping or leaping across time and space—as has been theorized by Sara Ahmed in the stickiness of emotion (2014) or by Schneider in the jumping of affect through reiterative gestures and reenactments (2011). Constituting, what we might call—after Derrida and Muñoz—a hauntology. The appearance of a spectral being, the alive-dead Hecuba, is animated through an encounter with the affective residue, experienced by Hedva, which is itself between ontological states, neither living nor dead, nor situated solely in one time: not past, present, nor future but a co-constitutive spectral mesh of each: Hedva, Carson, Euripides, Hecuba, Homer. I wager these ghosts, or this commingling ghostliness, comprise the vibrant matter of inter(in)animacy. This living deathliness is how an ancient, absent tragedy affects and animates *Motherload*. The ancient performance is never one singular event that stays put in the past, instead, it is a sticky, ghostly network of gestures, feelings, words, situations, and sounds that is multiply situated across various historically specific places and times—in flux—some live, some not. These networks speak to one another through the voice of the ghost, the ephemerality of gesture, and the crisis ordinariness of the present, because of, and not despite, these conditions.

Holding onto the presence of ghosts and situating ourselves in their realm of (non-)being and (non-)actuality, does not require us to deny the effect of that which does vanish, or is lost. We cannot ignore the very real-life absences, vanishings, and deaths which happen in, through, and around performance or that are referenced explicitly by it. The emotional loss referenced by SOPHIE in "Just like we never said goodbye" now spectrally indexes her own loss to the listener, exacerbating the tension in the lyric: it is "just like" but not actually the case.

Yet, to find more recuperative space here we can turn to the residues of performance again. Take the photos of *Motherload* on Hedva's website: in one, a face presses against a mask, lipstick smears across them both; in another, performers stand in the ruins of the text, wigs askance, mouths open. We can watch the video montage of the work too. Someone is shredding a dictionary, shredding their knees on the floor, carving the space with a repeated swing of their right leg in an arc, back and forth, back and forth, back and up, in and over. These lines of choreography function in a similar way to the moments when the performer marking the text leaves traces of their thoughts as they read. As the dancers carve, shred, motor, and unspool space they leave their own material and immaterial traces: bits of paper, the non-visible chem-trail of a gesture, the curve of

a line drawn with the body, the outline of a thought. The photographs and videos inter(in)animate queer tragedy—queer life, liveability, and its systematic erasures. But these practices of tracing routes off the map of heteronormative life, and being, also gather something up, the crux of the problem and its unravelling, a question: how to survive together, how to build a more liveable future, together?

Consequently, Hedva's performance is loaded with ephemeral gestures which bring the dead back into the ontologically in-determinate state of ghostliness, gestures which deaden the living, producing specters. As queer of color performance scholar Nadia Ellis—who thinks with Muñoz, and responds to Phalen—has written, "No visible trace, of course, does not mean zero trace" (Ellis 2020, 157). The very practices of trace-making—including writing, and gestural practices, which describes the fault lines, borders, the color line, that the performers negotiate and leap over—allow us to answer the conjoined questions above, while activating a further set of ethical, political and poetic questions (Ellis 2020, 156). We can ask them now of *Motherload*: what are the performers tracing in their situational endurance tragedy? What do they jump over? Hedva writes, "You can substitute the word 'Greek' for 'Patriarchy' and the meaning of *The Greek Cycle* won't change" (2020, 21). They continue,

> If nothing else is gleaned from *the Greek cycle* I hope that its audience felt, even as a wordless tremor, the cruel totality of the heteronormative gender binary that traumatizes every one of us.
>
> (Hedva 2020, 21)

I wager then that the series of lines the performers trace is an attempt to gather up the "cruel totality" of the heteronormative gender binary, which is also the gender binary of colonial racialization, the designation of human against non-human via the analytics of gender and race (Hartman 2019), the production of thingliness in opposition to the construction of the human. But it is also an attempt to unspool that totality.

This unspooling happens as *Motherload* performs inter(in)animacy beyond these categories, by performing both living-death—Hecuba's being deadened or being made non-articulate, non-legible, non-actual while she is alive—and also the dead-living—in that the bodies of her children animate the paper strewn across the gallery space: a gathering and scattering of things. But also because Hecuba does not end up actually dying, there is no release from her condition, but instead she is told that she will "turn into a dog," thus extending the decomposition of live/non-live, animate/inanimate, toward human/non-human without foreclosure. Under these conditions, in the distended state of tragedy, Hecuba occupies a queer position of being lost from the map of normativity through her grief, she is unmade through the systematic erasures and violence it enacts, but she also unmakes that very map.

In *Motherload* the non-foreclosure between the dead and living renders some tragic affects, some sense of having too much intimacy with inter(in)animacy. Thus, the performance might be said to reconceptualize the hierarchy of things as they are. For this tragic feeling is not all about inactivity. It often encourages action and animation—like the re-tracing of these lines and their gathering, in order to attend to some material loss. Consequently, we are left with a set of unanswered questions: what comes out of the "cathartic thrash"? What can we do with this absence that touches us? How can deploy our being animated by inanimate things, affects, situations, and ancestors, and move toward an understanding of queer tragedy in contemporary performance

that goes beyond the crisis ordinariness of contemporary life, allowing queers to build alternative worlds? This I address in the final section.

Performance Otherwise

The previous two sections marked turns toward and away from what remains, via queer performance. They outlined that, performance is not contained simply within the present of the ephemeral-live, it extends through other materialities, via non-humans and (non-)agential objects which can *perform* animately. Performance also stays in circulation through the transmission of materials, things, visual and embodied representations, and reenactments as (or when) they vanish or fade. So we might now say, it is not despite ephemerality but because of it that performance moves (us). But, what do I do, now that I know some of your performance did get into me, even though I wasn't there, and now that I know the residue of performance is an animate, tentacular thing? We can (re)orientate ourselves with queer dancer and (live) artist Trajal Harrell, whose speculative performance practice and critical choreographies suggest a network of co-ordinates for approaching absence and loss with a queer poethics. In this section, I suggest where we might go next and so bring this chapter to a close.

At the beginning of one iteration of *Antigone Jr./Paris is Burning at the Judson Dance Church* Harrell stands in the middle of an open studio. Black strips of sprung flooring run vertically away from the camera's lens; the back wall is a bare gray index of a warehouse.[10] Harrell is wearing black loose dance wear, signaling an American lyrical or postmodern training. Top Drawer's *Songs of a Sinner* (1969) floods the space. As the bass guitar lick kicks in, Harrell begins to step: to the left and then the right. Left, right, left right, his gait begins to widen as he imperceptibly shifts into a two-step. Right, left, he floats a hand softly, over a horizon, and back: his torso tilts off a vertical axis. Left, right, left, right. Two hands float across at waist level, and back again, while, left, right, left, right. On a third horizontal pass, one of his hands meanders, carving an "S" shape into space and continuing, onwards, it goes up, back, over his head, and down again. Harrell's torso echoes his hand as he beings to spiral around a vertical axis. Left, right, left, he waves one hand beside his head, as he articulates his spine. He is building a series of gestures and rhythmic articulations, he is re-membering—right, right, right, right, right—and eventually begins to describe, to fabulate, a compression of speculative worlds.

Through *Paris is Burning at the Judson Church*, a series of works which was first conceived in 2002, Harrell makes critical gestures against normative, white, and straight conceptions of dance and theater history. "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?" (Harrell 2015) Harrell's speculative investigation is embodied. As he moves from stepping: left, right, left, right to a kinesthetic stutter: right, right, right, right he suggests a breakdown or fracturing of the normative mundane, or ephemeral (Muñoz 2019, 148). In doing so he oscillates between the world of Judson—signaled through the investigation of mundane movement without "narrative"—and the Harlem balls, signaled by Harrell's vogue hand performance and runway hip articulations. At this moment Harrell scrambles both dance techniques.

Now, his right hand is up, his palm touching his forehead; he melts into a series of shifting polyrhythms, adding variations through a gentle buck of his hips, a honeyed arch of his spine, and the curve of his arms. His feet kick out in front of one another as he *walks*, giving us a taste of New Wave vogue femme, soft arms spiraling and caressing space in loops around his body, as his hips

swing fiercely, left, right, left, right. This sharp syncopated walk propels his body through space. And as he approaches the front of the dance floor, he 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 Tolouse, 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.

In this opening section—as he re-performs the movement languages, exercises, and modes of relation from both dance techniques—Harrell critically joins past, present, and future tenses. We can consider this in terms of Afro-Fabulation, as laid out by Tavia Nyong'o, where,

> Fabulation as I mean it participates in this 'kind of time' that Bergson names 'duration' and that I refer to mostly as 'tenseless time,' or the time of the virtual.[…] such a sense of tenseless time is of particular importance to black and minoritarian subjects, for whom the gap opened out between the possible and the potential, no matter how slight, remains crucial.
> (Nyong'o 2019, 10)

If we understand possibilities as routes already charted, "ready at hand," and potentialities as emergent routes to places, times, and arrangements of relation otherwise, then we could say Harrell layers and teases Black, queer, postmodern, contemporary, utopian, and ancient possible worlds against one another. This is his fabulation: he plays them contrapuntally to produce potentialities which resemble and diverge, so they (are/were/will be) inter/connect(ed) by his choreography and its archives which emerge in co-constitution through the dance: 'I am Antigone.'

This suggests, even through solo performance, a spectral chorality across time and place that refuses the demand for liveness produced by the history of western dance/theater. While watching the performance you can sense the presence of the Harlem ball culture, it is as if there might be an emcee calling to a chorus who are twisting, carving space, motoring, swinging, beating their faces, and repeating gestures from the covers of magazines, the office, the sidewalk. But Harrell is alone. So the chorus is a spectral-absent-presence which emphasizes the performance contexts of the work, situated largely in "highly valorized venues like the Museum of Modern Art, New York Live Arts, and the Hebbel Am Ufer theater in Berlin […] against the backdrop of [vogue's] living repertoire, even as its actual participants—dancers and announcers—only occasionally cross over into his shows" (Nyong'o 2019, 33). Because the ball scene is not fully rendered by Harrell, but traced, there is a partial refusal at work: a refusal to give all of voguing up to the institution. Nyong'o describes this as an intentional refusal of the "burden of liveness" (Nyong'o 2019, after Muñoz). A concept that "[accounts] for and [critiques] the way in which queer, transgender, and racialized bodies are so often exceptionalized through temporary displays of liveness in the very institutions that reject them as permanent occupants or stakeholders" (2019, 34).

Emerging from this network of performance techniques and political interventions ("I wanna lick your ass, but I don't wanna be you") is Harrell/Antigone. He is seated in front of a microphone

in repose or moving around the edge of the space—shrouded in black, overwhelmed by grief. Antigone's ancient *pastness* interrupts the scene inaugurated by Harrell's co-composition of Judson dance and the Harlem ball. He tells us, he "wanted to go big, to encompass the idea of theatre, specifically the foundations of western theatre" (Harrell 2015). Thus, Harrell's performance of and as Antigone places her (and western theater) in the same co-constructed speculative world as the Harlem balls and postmodern dance, producing each as an equally available but constructed possibility. Nyong'o suggests here that by "de-dramatizing the theatrical canon, *Antigone, Sr.* employs the form of black queer ball culture to reshape the contents of postmodern dance's interest in everyday life" (2019, 41). I wager, by extension, he also reshapes the methodology of Classics by performing Antigone as speculative, lost, ghostly, re-irruptive.

It is this tension between what Harrell describes as the "imaginary possibilities" of performing *Antigone* and the "imaginative practice" of scholarship on ancient Greece—combined with the unavailability or inaccessibility of the "impetuous, the drive, and the spirit" of live ancient performance—that suggests a queer constellation of possibility-practice-absence-loss. Queer because of the ways in which queerness is defined by and operates in spaces of loss or non-becoming, queer in the way it traces lines-of-flight off the map of (hetero)normativity.

These queer entanglements open critical possibilities for writing, and understanding the past outside of the norms this chapter began by interrogating. Ancient performance is not inaccessible, unknowable, or inert because it is lost; it is precisely because ancient performance is lost that it is—through speculative and queer encounters, responses, and performances—available, animate. The absence of ancient performance figures in *both* the circulation of its remains *and* the speculative attempts to incorporate it into contemporary acts of knowledge production, as a lively residue—it is just like we never said goodbye.

Consequentially, ancient tragedy is performed, as in Hedva's *Greek Cycle*, as grief work; as an undoing and re-choreographing of relation; and as an investigation of non-becoming, a commitment to the otherwise (other worlds, unmade worlds) over the normative and anti-normative dialectic. This attention to both the return of the irruptive past and the continual mundanity of crisis ordinariness—perpetrated by the racializing colonial heteronormative gender binary—is then a constant reminder of the possibility and potentiality for things to be different. As Schneider puts it,

> 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 realized, or, better, might *yet* realize.[11]

This is the work that I believe Harrell's performance of *Antigone*—among the speculative co-constructed space *between* Harlem ball, ancient tragedy, and Judson church—enacts. It allows us to see the alternative futures that might *yet* be realized, to pick up the threads of past attempts to realize the world differently which "failed". In the conjunction between *Antigone*, the Harlem balls, and Judson, Harrell asks: what if the revolutionary acts posed in each space were not foreclosed; what if they lie in wait for re-response? (Harrell 2015).

In summary, the residue of queer performances of tragedy provide us with the lively affects and material remains left by previous attempts to imagine a better future—perhaps also failed attempts to enact a safer and more equitable future than the one we find ourselves in. Queer performances of tragedy in the contemporary moment can refuse to accede to way things are by re-activating

those remains, and by continuing to leave traces and further remains of their own: journeys backward and forwards, here and there, between the worlds of the living, the dead, the actual, and the non-actual.

I want to end with this in mind, and with a quote from Muñoz, one of the many queer folks indexed by this chapter who is no longer with us today. He wrote,

> The performance, its documentation via video, and my writing practice become ephemeral resources for many who are drawn to the possibilities they suggest, like moths to a flame.
> (Muñoz 2020, 58)

I offer this sense of queer response to performance, that perhaps we missed, or that only ever existed in the realm of the speculative, as a shared practice. I hope that the moth can be a tool for others folding queer theater and performance studies into their work, a choreographic orientation toward elements that are deemed inert or not really there. Because I know by making these moth-like returns to the flames of the past we can decompose the structures and forms of its institutional colonial instantiations. We can rebuild something elsewhere, outside the Classical, for all the queers who gather around us, be they our living comrades and co-conspirators, our ancestors, or the queers who are not yet here, but already and always on the horizon.

Suggestions for Further Reading

At the heart of this chapter are a set of questions currently animating queer and trans studies: questions of identity, ontology, ethics, and their relationships to temporality. Bey 2022 is at the cutting edge of this debate arguing for a move away from understandings of queerness as a possessed and claimed identity—that is further discovered and divulged over time— toward an understanding of queerness as a shared multi-temporal, existential, and ontological set of orientations and material conditions. Relevant here is Pereira 2019, who analyzes queerness' relationship to colonialism; Hartman 2019 and Sharpe 2016, to the aftermath of slavery; Kapadia 2019, to the American imperial war machine; Puar 2017 to nationalism; and Chen 2012 to ableism, all of which are animating forces for Classics and its study in North America and the UK. Relevant too is a broader move in queer studies to understand queerness *not entirely* through anti-normativity, divergence, or deviance but to think about it as a set of accidents, convergences, as an aesthetics and politics of collapse, undoing, unmaking, or non-becomings, as in Halberstam 2020. These debates enhance and build on work that connects queer folk across time and place in non-linear and politically charged ways, and so I think the best place to start with any inquiry that might deal with these themes, with multi-temporal community making, and with queer performance is Muñoz 2019.

Notes

1 On poethics, I am in conversation with Silva 2014, 90. On backwards feelings, see Love 2009.
2 See Lehmann 2019 and Quayson 2020.
3 I am especially grateful to Marchella Ward, Mathura Umachandran, Nicolette D'Angelo, Eleonora Colli, Estelle Baudou, Ella Haselswerdt, Sara Lindheim, Kirk Ormand, and my co-supervisors Felix Budelmann, Fiona Macintosh.
4 See, for example, Muñoz 2020 and Olufemi 2021.
5 Baudou 2021, 123–128.
6 Listen also to Ezra Furman "Ordinary Life."

7 Thank you Ella Haselswerdt for the wording here.
8 https://johannahedva.com/the-greek-cycle.php
9 Muñoz 2019, 72—73. Thank you to Izzy Levy who drew me back to these words during Queer and the Classical 2022.
10 See ANTIGONE JR. via Numeridanse https://www.numeridanse.tv/en/dance-videotheque/antigone-jr?s
11 Schneider 2017, prefiguring Schneider 2018, 305.

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