RESISTANT FORM

FORM

Mario Telò

ARISTOPHANES AND THE COMEDY OF CRISIS

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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ARISTOPHANES AND THE COMEDY OF CRISIS

Contents

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Resistant Form:
Crisis Comedy Critique

> For me words have a charge. I find myself incapable of escaping
> the bite of a word, the vertigo of a question mark.
>
> — Frantz Fanon

> Critical theory, in its varied iterations, witnesses its most
> impressive moments of efflorescence in times of crisis.
>
> — Hortense Spillers[1]

While Googling "Aristophanes" on the evening of a day
like any other in spring 2020 during the COVID-19 crisis, I
stumbled upon a 25-year-old Taiwanese rapper, Pan Wei Ju
(潘韋儒), who had taken the name of the ancient Greek play-
wright after seeing him in a dream. An online reviewer com-
ments: "With feminist subject matter [and] observations about
the decay of civilization, as well as sharp political and capital-
ist critique, the artist […] is as much a social commentator as
the original Aristophanes."[2] The same commentator adds that,
in Pan's debut album, *Humans Become Machines,* "the mysteri-

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1   Spillers (2020, 681); on Fanon, see Macey (2000, 157).
2   E. Russell (2017).

ous self-professed literature nerd […] waxes poetic on everything from the patriarchy to individualism to rape culture over a soundscape of sinister, spaced-out beats, hazy synths and sickly-sweet melodies."[3] Pan seems to be different from other satirists who have been adduced as modern comparanda to the ancient Aristophanes because of the slippery, unbound contours of their comic personas, their disingenuous, tongue-in-cheek voices.[4] This Taiwanese Aristophanes seems, in fact, to be a genuinely, unapologetically, "seriously" progressive feminist voice.[5] Her video "Scream," which was produced in collaboration with the Canadian singer Grimes[6] and released with both Mandarin and English subtitles, is an anti-rape protest with a graphic description of sexual violence delivered through a voice mixing enraged clamor and defiantly seductive modulations as well as laughter. Instead of undermining the message, the irony, in a sense, enhances it. The beginning of the song temporarily erases the singing "I" with these words, which intensify her rage through an effect of quasi-depersonalization:

> The screams that are buried in the lungs
> Buried in the bones and the muscles
> Unexploded, undeniable

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3 E. Russell (2017).

4 See esp. the important works by Rosen (2012; 2020) and Rosen and Baines (2002).

5 The ironical, "humorous" Aristophanic self-posturing that Rosen and Baines (2002) ascribe to Eminem may have the effect of curtailing analysis and critique of the sexist hate speech that he performs ostensibly through the filter of ironical scare quotes. The criticism that uses irony to deny a "serious" agenda to the violent content of the works of Eminem — and, possibly, other cisgender male satirical haters — reproduces the intentionalism that it disavows (by replacing seriousness with non-seriousness); it also treats the corrosive force of irony as a coherent discursive system, one that consistently results in a negative overturning of the enunciation. But irony can work discontinuously, intermittently, unpredictably, and it can even ironize itself. See D. Young (2014) on queer seriousness and (2019), and P.A. Miller (2018); and on irony and intratextual discontinuity in Aristophanes, see Hesk (2000).

6 Grimes (2016).

Cram into a sickness
What used to be dry is now sodden
Swollen, meaty, moist and juicy.[7]

While the English comes up against the barrier of untranslat-ability and fails to capture or possess the Taiwanese scream, it channels its expressive volition through tense torsions of form, the conative force of repetition or pseudo-repetition, as in the enjambed phrase *sodden / swollen.* Such repetitions cram the page with an enraged insistence, just as the screams, both described and performed, congest the atmosphere, the digital space of the video, and the mental space of viewers and listeners. The scream of the title is not just about language freeing itself, becoming pure sound, but it concerns the excess through which words and phonemes tend to acquire a kind of "visceral abstrac-tion" as they transition toward a non-status between verbal mat-ter and resistant, nonverbal objecthood.[8] This screaming, con-temporary Aristophanes draws attention to the political agency of verbal tumult, to the insistent and insurrectionary impetus of apparently unremarkable formal effects, or micro-formalisms, which take on resistant force in unpredictable motions of self-doing and self-undoing. These are the wayward formalisms, the resistant de-formations, to which I attach a reconceptual-ization of Aristophanes' politics, a theorization of a deperson-alized, anti-contextual metapolitics that transcends the comic intentions of jokes, puns, and recognizable mimeticism. "Anti-contextual" captures my attempt to de-emphasize fifth-century Athens — the original context of the production and perfor-mance of Aristophanic comedy — as the primary referent for constructing arguments, replacing it with a messy, temporally stratified notion of interpretive context. By "metapolitics," I mean a reflection that privileges what can or should be done to *go beyond* ("meta-") the status quo, an articulation of radical ways

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7   Grimes (2015).
8   On the scream as bodily self-exit, see esp. Deleuze (2003, 16, 25), and for the phrase "visceral abstraction," see Ngai (2015).

of reimagining the social.[9] Pan's appropriation of Aristophanes points to ways of connecting his comic output — specifically, his politics, such as they are, the center of scholarly attention for generations — with contemporary critical-theoretical modes of thinking about, or practicing, politics.

To lay out the overall theoretical strategy of this book, I situate my intervention within the current debate on Aristophanic politics, which is dominated by two main tendencies: on the one hand, historicist or cultural-historical contextualism, and on the other, ironical skepticism. I will then elaborate on two interconnected themes of my argument: form as de-formation — and its relation to insurrectionist, resistant, and impressionistic formalisms — and the link between crisis and critique.

Usually, scholars adopt a historicist approach to Aristophanic politics, ascribing an agenda to Aristophanes as a biographical individual, a member of a class or even a party in late-fifth-century Athens[10] — though we know virtually nothing about his life — or emphasizing the text and its context, constituted by an "original" audience's experience or the apparently more abstract, open, and capacious category of civic ideology.[11] In the intro-

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9   As Jason Barker observes in the introduction to Alain Badiou's *Metapolitics* (2005), for Badiou "politics is not […] an overt lesson in pragmatism, or in how best to resolve social conflicts in order to reach a reasonable consensus" (xiii, xvii). The point of metapolitics, he says, channeling Marx, "is not to interpret the world, but to change it."

10   In a state-of-the-field chapter for *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy,* entitled "The Politics of Greek Comedy," Sommerstein (2014, 297) first asks, in the characteristic terms of biographical positivism, "Was Aristophanes himself a convinced anti-democrat?" and assertively responds: "Aristophanes supported a raft of policies which were also supported by oligarchs, and which they seemed to believe […] would never be accepted in a democratically ruled Athens." Cf. M. Griffith (2013, 31): "There is no evidence at all to suggest that Aristophanes was a radical reactionary, a Spartan sympathizer […], a secret oligarch, or anything other than a staunch supporter of the democracy." For a critique of the biographical intentionalism underpinning Aristophanic scholarship, see duBois (2022, 3–9).

11   See, for example, Ste. Croix (1972), Cartledge (1990, 43–53), Henderson (1990; 1998), MacDowell (1995), McGlew (2002), and Sidwell (2009). Konstan (1995) adopts a nuanced, problematizing approach to cultural-

duction of the recent collection *Aristophanes and Politics: New Essays,* the editors, Helene Foley and Ralph Rosen, say that "in a very real sense Aristophanes can be considered a thoroughly 'political' poet," that is, simply, a poet whose work was deeply embedded in and contributed to the political atmospheres and debates of his time. While acknowledging that "'political' [...] is a term with a wide purview," they interpret it as indicating "an explicit connection to the ways in which fifth-century BCE Athens self-consciously organized itself as a society, how it interacted with other cities and societies, or what ideologies informed its civic values."[12] Along these lines, while a 1990 article by Jeffrey Henderson marked a new era of studies on comedy and civic ideology and located the political function of Attic comedy in democratic social control—in the kind of public accountability that democracy promoted through the exercise of freedom of speech, the value expressed by *isonomia* ("equality of political rights") and *isēgoria* ("equal right of speech")—it held on to a kind of intentionalism, cultural-historical instead of biographical. As he put it: "Comic poets [...] wanted the *dēmos* to look through the lies [and] compromises [...] of their leaders. [...] They urged reconsideration of policies not adopted. [...] The comic appeal [...] was a reassuring, because idealistic, example of 'the rule of the *dēmos*.'"[13] In Foley and Rosen's assessment—based on the common assumption of the special link

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historicist reading. As Foley and Rosen (2020, 1) observe, "Political extrapolation about Aristophanes' politics"—that is, "the lure of the subjective 'I' that [...] seems [...] to be speaking directly to us with hortatory [...] voice"—has been hard to resist," despite the warnings against this approach that began with Gomme (1938). Walsh (2009) offers an account of various ways that modern scholars have succumbed to projection in guessing the political orientation of Aristophanes as a biographical entity, an authorial function, or a generic positionality. From the viewpoint of the historian, Osborne (2020) criticizes the excesses of historicist approaches to Aristophanes.

12 Foley and Rosen (2020, 1).

13 Henderson (1990, 312–13). In the same collection *Nothing to Do with Dionysos?* Redfield (1990, 334) similarly speculates on Aristophanes' intentions: Aristophanes "may have wanted to do more with his art, to make it a vehicle of genuine teaching and of public education."

between Athenian democracy and modern Western democracies — the "now" inevitably influences notions of Aristophanes' politics, and "politics as reflected in Aristophanes' plays remains a fertile, and even urgent, area of inquiry, as political developments in our own time distinctly color the ways in which we articulate questions about classical Athens." Yet, while rightly observing that "heuristically useful" contemporary political terms ("left," "right," "liberal," "conservative") "must be invoked knowingly and cautiously,"[14] they do not suggest alternative, creative ways of linking Aristophanes' politics with the present, of channeling, in the interpretive act, the sense of urgency that they speak of.

The critical view that I have called "ironical skepticism" merges comic politics with the game of satiric positioning, a self-indulgent exercise in generic self-fashioning, wearing and unwearing shifting personas.[15] In this critical framework, the political topicality of Aristophanes' comedy is nothing but material for carnivalesque transgression and for the construction of a hypertrophic comic self manifesting itself through autobiographical or pseudo-autobiographical interventions or spectral infiltrations in his farcical plots.[16] Here I am referring to the textual space, the *parabasis,* in which the playwright or the Chorus on behalf of him interrupts the plot, addressing the audience directly to provide detailed yet disingenuous accounts of Aristophanes' personal and para-personal vicissitudes (his alleged conflicts with the politicians of the day and the stories of his victories and failures in the Athenian comic contest where the plays

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14 Foley and Rosen (2020, 7). Ruffell (2020a, 61) proposes "populism" — "frequently marked by its blend of 'Left' and 'Right' policies" — as a way out. Brown (2018, 76) observes that populism is "a rebellion against the perceived breakdown of norms" but "does not always *want* the people to rule."

15 See Rosen (2020, 19): "Even in passages where Aristophanes seems to get as close as we could ever expect to taking a political stance in his own voice […] there is little more than comic braggadocio and platitude." Osborne (2020, 41) observes that many Aristophanic "political lines" leave the audience "in a spin as to what can be taken seriously."

16 See especially Goldhill (1991, ch. 3), Hubbard (1991), and Biles (2011); see also Telò (2016) (with further bibliographical references).

were performed). While ostensibly decentering the authorial function and interpreting Aristophanic autobiographical posturing as a technique for compulsive, strategic self-erasure rather than self-revelation,[17] ironical or generic criticism — which reads Aristophanic discourse as an expression of the irony-driven conventions of the genre we call comedy — reinscribes the intention it seeks to problematize or deconstruct. It does this by positing the crafty figure of an "Aristophanes" who still affirms his presence and power, if only negatively, through appearance in disappearance and through his ability to maintain anonymity and defy attempts to pin him down. In one version of this critical position, a certain defiance — inherent in the Bakhtinian spirit of joyfully carnivalesque (that is, regimented) transgression; in self-ironical pseudo-autobiography; in the ever-present "inverted commas" — is itself a demonstration of democratic values and, thus, a self-reflexive political gesture.[18] But the political Aristophanes that emerges from this picture is different from that delineated by Pan Wei Ju, whose genuine rage expressed through the sheer intensity of poetic microformalisms, through language that resists (a phrase I will return to later), seems particularly appealing to us as we read ancient comedy today (in a not-yet-post-Trumpian, not-yet-post-COVID era).

The critical landscape I have just outlined, in fact, leaves open the question of why Aristophanic politics should matter to us today at a moment of global crisis, or "metacrisis,"[19] when the very principles and foundations of the political are the objects of redefinition and reinvention. Is the comedian's exercise of the right to speak truth to power, to practice *parrhēsia,* sufficient to spur interest in Aristophanic comedy, to justify a scholarly and affective reinvestment in its potentialities for political

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17 See esp. Rosen (2010; 2012; 2020). De Man (1979) famously assimilates autobiography to "de-facement."

18 See esp. Goldhill (1991, 182–84) (from a chapter entitled "Comic Inversion and Inverted Commas: Aristophanes and Parody"). On Aristophanes and Bakhtin, see Platter (1993; 2007; 2016, 32–36).

19 Fassin (2021, 273) uses this term to synthesize the many crises in our time.

meaning?[20] Or is it possible to read Aristophanes differently? How can we envision the possibility of an Aristophanic radicalism relevant to current critical-theoretical discourses? In other words, how can we bridge the gap between scholarly approaches to the Aristophanic corpus and various adaptations in activism and performance, which customarily emphasize, or are seen to emphasize, the socially subversive?[21] Plato, Aristotle, and tragedy customarily figure in discussions of contemporary political theory. Why does there seem to be no room for, or interest in, Aristophanes?[22] What can be gained from reading Aristophanes through various critical theoretical frames and, in turn, reading Aristophanes' political aesthetics as critical theory, that is, as murmuring with emancipatory potentialities, as conveying radical metapolitical impressions? In this book, I want to suggest, perhaps paradoxically, that a non-intentionalist approach painstakingly attentive to the intricacies and minutiae of Aristophanes' language — and less concerned with Athenian history, persona criticism or generic self-fashioning, or an audience-based affective aesthetics[23] — may enable us to broaden the reach of our scholarly engagement with his comic politics and

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20 On *parrhēsia,* see esp. duBois (2022, ch. 5).

21 This is a concern shaping the important recent intervention of duBois (2022). The history of Aristophanes' reception in activism is mostly centered around *Lysistrata*: see chapter 3. See also Van Steen (2000) and Van Zyl Smit (2007).

22 On the "exclusion" of ancient comedy from critical theory, see duBois (2022, ch. 1). Halpern (2011, 546) dwells on the blatant, and surprising, absence of Aristophanes from discussions of Greek theater in contemporary political theory. But see Halpern on Hannah Arendt: "Aristophanes' comedies hardly 'glorify the deeds' of their protagonists, with the possible exception of insurgent housewives such as Lysistrata and Praxagora [in *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen*] — figures who arguably embody a nightmare for Arendtian thinking" (549–50), that is to say, what Arendt calls "a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping" (1958, 28).

23 For an exemplary, non-contextualist approach to Euripides' political formalism grounded in affect, seen as an audience's shifting emotional, psychical, and cognitive involvement in dramaturgical macro-structuring, see Wohl (2015).

to locate alternative possibilities of *engagé* reading in resistant formalisms.

In one of the few non-historicist, or "unashamedly a-historical,"[24] works of scholarship treating Aristophanes as a writer rather than a comedian or a spectator or witness of his time, Michael Silk offers perceptive comments on the distinctive qualities of his style, which I will use to introduce the nexus of linguistic resistance and what I call residuality. For Silk, "the reason why Aristophanes still matters to us as a living force — the reason why he is of more than merely historical interest — is his words."[25] This ahistorical focus on style goes together with an assumption that Aristophanic comedy "is not as *deeply* concerned with politics as it is widely taken to be."[26] While my approach resists the humanistic equation of Aristophanes with the genius writer and emphasizes the Foucauldian discursive function (the "Aristophanic") rather than the author, I sympathize with Silk's interest in reading Aristophanes' comic output as *poetry,* as formal *poiēsis,* and with his zeroing in on the flamboyant inventiveness of Aristophanes' style in a comparative fashion beyond a merely linguistics-based paradigm.[27] But I disagree with his separation of stylistics from politics. Two of Silk's stylistic comments provide points of entry into my own approach. In *Frogs,*

> for most of the long contest between the poets, there is apparently little to choose between the insubstantiality of Euripides, whose "tongue" produces words that answer to nothing, and the bloated turgidity of Aeschylus, whose "lungs" breathe forth a weight of *language that resists* examination.

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24 Murray (2003, 19).

25 Silk (2000, 4).

26 Silk (2000, 319).

27 See Foucault (1979). Dover's treatment of Aristophanes' style (1970) is purely linguistics-based — likewise, Colvin (1999) and Willi (2002; 2003; 2014). While operating within the horizon of philological positivism, Taillardat (1965) remains the most comprehensive study on Aristophanes' metaphorics.

At such moments Aristophanes seems almost to prefigure the notion of language as *alienation.*[28]

Further,

Aristophanes's style does […] comprise a great range of techniques and tones, his use of which makes the style as a whole unstable. What makes it discontinuous is that collisions are not intermittent. […] They are a common, even a ubiquitous, feature. It would (that is) be possible, within a mobile style, to modulate from one key to another gradually. […] He does not favour transitions or indeed blocks: instead, he switches. He does so *persistently.*[29]

The *persistence* of Aristophanes' stylistic discontinuity, of his clash of registers and collision of codes, evinces a negative conation that corresponds to the *resistance* of Aeschylus's language to examination. I extend the concept of "language that resists" to what can be called Aristophanes' metapolitics, which I locate in radical effects of formalistic undoing or de-formation, in an ongoing alienation that arises from yet exceeds the logic of verbal humor. "Language that resists" brings to mind what Daniel Heller-Roazen says about Werner Hamacher's notion of "the rest of language" (*der Reste der Sprache*):

As that which is not exhausted in the work of meaning, the "rest of language" is what, in language, exists as language; it is what, in all speech, resists being dissolved into things and, in this resistance, testifies to the existence of speech as such.[30]

Etymologically, *re-sistance* and *rest,* on the one hand, and what I call the *re-sidual,* on the other, indicate similar phenomena: what (still) *stands* or (still) *sits* in the aftermath of something,

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28 Silk (2000, 102) (my emphasis).
29 Silk (2000, 136) (my emphasis).
30 Heller-Roazen (1999, 24).

after the event (of meaning, of a semantic intentionality).[31] Together, resistance and residuality amount to *survivance,* a nonhierarchical formal surplus, a linguistic overload (mainly phonetic or syntactical) on the threshold between meaning and non-meaning — like the thick resonance created by Pan Wei Ju's enjambed phrase *sodden / swollen* — that carries the potential of insurrection against the regimentation, the structure of power, that signification always presupposes.[32] Silk's depiction of Aristophanes' discontinuity, of his ever-shifting play with linguistic registers as *per-sistence,* can be read as suggesting some unruliness that recalcitrantly lingers in the very arrangement of verbal matter. This is the *survivance* from the excess of comic language, which can be genuinely excessive only if it exceeds itself, that is, if it goes beyond and to an extent disarrays the comic intentionality of joking and punning. Constraining the possibilities of comic verbal subversion within its programmed humorous path means limiting or erasing its excess, its rebellious persistence. Heeding this persistence, resistance, or insurrectionary survivance, we may find an avenue for overcoming the hermeneutic binary that currently immobilizes Aristophanic scholarship. The verbal de-formations that I am interested in may be read as manifestations of a parallel, hyper-comic, or beyond-the-comic uncommunicativeness[33] where radical possibilities of political expressivity are located.

Aristophanes' language seems to me to have an anarchical quality distinct from the open-endedness, subversive creativity, defamiliarization, and surprise observed by Silk and attached by him to a "positive vision."[34] Aristophanic *poiēsis* encompasses

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31 Here and sporadically throughout, I introduce hyphens to re-etymologize words whose underlying meaning has become occluded.

32 Derrida (1996a, 60) observes that survivance "no longer means death and the return of the specter, but the surviving of an excess of life which resists annihilation." See Vizenor (2008) and Telò (2023a, ch. 9).

33 Speaking of the slippery quality of Aristophanes' quasi-autobiographical statements, Silk (2000, 47) observes that his "characterizations of his comic practice or his comic ideals […] are *uncommunicative*" (my emphasis).

34 Silk (2000, 403). See also Murray (2003).

what I would call "hyperform," an overdetermined complex of de-formations autonomous from the verbal production of humor. With this term, I refer not to widely recognized characteristics of comic language, the phenomena usually noted in commentaries, but to phonetic, morphological, and syntactical phenomena — subliminal, excessive, radical — that disrupt the opposition between surface and depth.[35] Aristophanic hyperform is a complex of phonetic, phonesthetic, graphic, morphological, and syntactical fractures claiming attention at the expense of jokes and funny nonsense. When I do consider phenomena noted by commentaries (such as overextended compounds in chapter 2), hyperform defamiliarizes them. We can compare this idea to Eugenie Brinkema's notion of "speculative form," which she presents as an effect of close reading arising from an attempt "not to describe something that is already in the text — received as a commodity by the audience — but rather to talk about how the form itself is surprising and speculative."[36] The formalistic anarchy I track is resistant to the carnivalesque constraints of comedic discourse, that is — it pertains to an alternative phenomenology of (non)signification that has the

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35 On surface reading, see Best and Marcus (2009) and Purves (2016); on questions raised by the opposition of surface and depth in practices of close reading, see Eyers (2017, 15), and Telò (2020a, 35; 2024b). Some of the phenomena I will be concerned with here belong to the domain of what Gurd (2018a, 55) has called *'pataphilogy,* which is focused on "the audible glyph of language" — on "the basic material of the linguistic attractions perpetrated in […] etymologies, and new-language formation" — and on "forms of time that […] seem […] to tie the line of history into a knot or a Möbius strip." See also Gurd (2019) responding to Hamacher's notion of philology (2015). For P.A. Miller (2018, 145), a "'pataphilological perspective" is "at once profoundly philological in its attention to linguistic detail and deliberately perverse […] in its attention to the irreducible materiality of language." See also Shoptaw (2000) on lyric cryptography and Oliensis (2009) on the textual unconscious.

36 Brinkema (2019, 69). According to Brinkema (2022, 178), "The text […] is a model of the absolute necessity of a radical formalism. In its staging of forms interpreting and engaging with other forms to generate unforeseen possibilities, it gives rise to a nonanthropomorphic, antihumanist model in which forms and structures speculatively grapple with other logics." See also Rimell (2024).

autonomy and the distributive reach, though not the scale, of a *hyperobject*.[37]

A multifarious excess, beyond relations of form and meaning, word and context, or word and subject (whether auto-biographical, authorial, or cultural-historical), hyperform is a hermeneutic instrument in a depersonalized model of Aristophanic metapolitics, an emancipatory politics. The de-personalizing orientation that I pursue — with attention paid less to Aristophanes' self-reflexive statements as poetic subject than to form as such, as its own force, the intrinsic conation of an autonomous object — has led me to focus on four of Aris-tophanes' later works in which his disingenuous voice seems to be less frequently or blatantly audible and whose titles program-matically contest the normative male subject, focusing on non-human animals and the female (cis- or trans[(*)], as we will see). Hyperform generates a crisis of representation in Aristophanes' verbal art, at the micro- and macro-levels, a crisis, ranging from the individual unruly phoneme to almost unplotted plots, that opens up a space for critique, for thinking about disidentifi-cation, disincorporation, the dismantling of the social as it is given.[38] This formal crisis can, in other words, allow us to cir-

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37 On *hyperobjects* as "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans," see Morton (2013); Moe (2019) sees the energy of poetic language as comparable to a hyperobject.

38 Silk (2000, 424–25) anchors the potential of comedy within generic constraints. He first observes that "discontinuity […] can effect a break-through to another world beyond the contingent, from where the human predicament can be confronted." He, however, adds that "comedy cannot confront any human predicament, unless by simultaneously turning to an alternative, less painful, reading of the human condition." This position seems to me not to consider the fact that humor and humorlessness, the comic and non-comic, are always co-implicated, with possibilities of mutual interference. See esp. Berlant and Ngai (2017, 233): "As both an aesthetic mode and a form of life, [comedy's] action just as likely produces anxiety: risking transgression, flirting with displeasure, or just confus-ing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes the pleasure." For Berlant, comedy and trauma are indissolubly linked: see Berlant, Ngai, and Zupančič (2021), where we also read that "comedy and crises or difficult times are not only compatible, they are often very strongly connected"

cumvent the various issues related to the comedian's or his text's positions and to read elements of emancipatory thinking even into the plays that seem to participate or be invested in sexism and other expressions of violence. These emancipatory potentialities can be perceived in non-representational configurations of corporeality, space, time, and affect that are figured by and, in a sense, correspond to the unruly shapes of hyperform.[39] Emerging from morphological and phonetic constructions, word division, and syntax, as well as confused verbal contours or borders and un-plotting (loose structures, or a total undoing of dramatic divisions and distinctions), formal hyper-continuities are materializations of aesthetic crisis, which projects models of queer politics, opposition to the normative or the "normal" and to the carnivalesque constraints of comic representation, to the very trajectory, subversive yet conservative, transgressive yet reparative, of comic meaning.[40]

To offer a couple of examples from the following chapters: in the abundance of Aeschylean adjectival compounds filling the textual space of *Frogs,* we observe a resistance to the chain of language, a force of inertia, the privileging of a durational temporality or a non-flowing flow, which can be connected with the mobile immobility of the play's eponymous amphibians, with the possibility of stalling time and labor in a context of proto-capitalistic accelerated production. In *Lysistrata* hyperform expresses opacity as a means of enraged refusal at a moment

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(Zupančič) and that "the comedic is about form and movement, and not about representation" (Berlant).

39 In the field of film studies, Shapiro (2019, 118) connects *"aporias* of vision, owed to disturbances of representation, to a micropolitics of sense, to the way such disruptions of transparency create the openings of persons and collectives […] to (re)negotiate the meanings of politically relevant experience as they recognize themselves and their relationships in new ways."

40 On queer politics as a contestation of the "regimes of the normal," see Warner (1993, xxvi). My notion of queer politics encompasses Berlant and Warner's notion of "queer" as "changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex" (1998, 548), as well as Muñoz's idea of the "queer" as a way "to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (2009, 1).

when the Chorus of rebellious women responds to the Athenian men's counterattack by throwing water on them. When the male Chorus says, "Why, enemy of the gods, did *you* come *here* carrying *water* (σὺ δεῦρ' ὕδωρ/*su deur' hudōr*)?" (371), the syntactical gap between *su*/σὺ ("you") and *deur'*/δεῦρ' ("here") is flooded by the joining of *u-deur'*, a non-word, with the similar-sounding *hudōr* ("water"), as though water confounds syntactical division, and disarrays formal, spatial, and political borders, engendering a stretched-out resistant zone of agitated undifferentiation.

Instead of hierarchically privileging the culture of the past in the traditional, reconstructive approach of historicism, my focus on hyperform relies on a queer unhistoricism grounded in nonhierarchical, messy, unpredictable encounters, juxtapositions, or mutual defamiliarizations of past and present, ancient textual suggestions and modern impressions.[41] In this frame of mind, the ostensible objectivity of historicist hermeneutics, the effort to separate the ancient "original" from later accretions and thereby preserve its integrity, is replaced by an embrace of anachronism, which cannot be separated from interpretation as such.[42] Based on the dream of unmediated access, of excluding subjectivity and temporal situatedness from the interpretive act, of separating reception from what are construed as unbiased scholarly endeavors, the positivistic notion of responsibility

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41 See Matzner (2016) on queer unhistoricism and classical scholarship; see also Telò and Olsen (2022, 7) on queer unhistoricism's conception of "the interpretive act not as the impossible inhabiting of irreproducible, historically determined cultural codes but as a creative experience in which the interpreting subject's and the interpreted artwork's temporalities deterritorialize each other." On the melancholic appropriation inevitably produced by historicism, see esp. Best (2018).

42 See Bassi and Euben (2010, ix): "Determined by disciplinary regimes [...], the notion of an original source [...] becomes the basis on which ends or outcomes are predicted," but "the power dynamic inherent in this predictability, expressed in the naturalized notion that a culture's origins are predictive of its final or present form, requires rethinking." As they put it, "'The Greeks' do not exist outside of or prior to [scholarly] practice; in this sense they are always emerging" (x). See also The Postclassicisms Collective (2020, ch. 1.4, 2.7).

toward antiquity is replaced here by a novel, negative sense of responsibility.[43] If we conceptualize ancient culture, or a Greek or Roman artifact, textual or otherwise, in Levinasian terms as the face of the Other or the locus of the ethical encounter, we can regard historicist contextualism as the transformation of the face into a name, the reduction of "the idea of infinity," which is the face, to a finite, limited representation.[44] But the face, Emmanuel Levinas says, "cannot become a content, which your thought would embrace" because, as he adds, "the relation to the Infinite is not a knowledge, but a Desire."[45] This "desire" is the feeling that allows the "interpersonal relation" to safeguard ethical infinity or incomprehensibility, the dynamic irresolution of the in-between-ness expressed by *inter-*. Such "in-between-ness" is also suggested by the *inter-* in the word *inter-pretation,* which contains an additional layer of ethical openness, a hint of the infinite directionality of Desire: *pretium* in *inter-pretation* is, in fact, cognate with *proti* and *pros,* that is, "toward." Queer unhistoricism invites us to see interpretive responsibility toward

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43 See Bassi and Euben (2010, xiv): "We cannot erase the traditions that mediate our understanding of a text. […] But this is neither a failure nor a pathology. It merely urges us to make every condition of our reading the subject of conscious reflection while recognizing that we cannot bypass what the text has become or where we are located sociologically and historically as readers of it." See Loraux (1993b) for a methodological valorization of anachronism against Jean-Pierre Vernant's historicism. While Loraux welcomes Vernant's invitation to recognize and respect the alienness of antiquity, she criticizes the de facto "introduction of the self " (*s'introduire*) in "the atmosphere of another world." As the scholars of the Postclassicism Collective put it, "Thinking we have reached out to the Other, we in fact enclose ourselves in a narcissistic fantasy of self-reference" (2020, 38). Putting the matter in somewhat different terms, I would point to the aspiration to assimilate the Other into our own cognitive apparatus when we aspire to comprehend it. Comprehending, that is, capturing, containing, is an assimilationist operation.

44 See Levinas (1969, 198): "The face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge." See also Levinas and Kearney (1986, 24): "To expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question. In ethics, the other's right to exist has primacy over my own."

45 Levinas (1985, 92).

antiquity as a renunciation of comprehending in favor of creative "impressionism," an apt methodology for enacting the in-between-ness and towardness of interpretation and responding to antiquity's recalcitrance.[46] In line with queer unhistoricism, my impressionism, which does not shy away from "reading into," is a practice that heeds evanescent potentialities as well as the affective, visceral excess that informs poetic form yet exceeds it, coming through in the gaps of representation.[47] In the impressionism that I am proposing and will exemplify in the book's readings, the relationship expressed in *philo*-logy by the invisible genitive, *philia* of *logos,* is Levinasian desire or perhaps at times a *feeling* of that which pushes away and disappears without leaving a mark, a passing touch or a rustle.[48] This methodology, reading for hyperform, opens into a non-intentionalist, non-contextualist, impersonal political aesthetics, which can be connected with crises of the now: bio- and necropolitics, reproduction and reproductive labor, transphobia, democracy, and capital itself.[49]

i. Comic *Crysis*: Resistant Formalisms

Expanding on some of the methodological points made so far, I want to situate the type of readings that I propose in this book within current debates not only on the politics of form, but, more specifically, on form as a site of resistance. Reading Aristophanes' comedy with these debates in mind opens the way to a different kind of utopianism, a negative possibility surpassing

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46 See Nooter and Telò (2024).

47 For a reclaiming of "reading into" for queer formalism, see Doyle and Getsy (2013).

48 On the rustle of language, see Barthes (1989, 76–82); on *philia* and philology, see Bernstein (2019); on feeling in the history of philology, see Güthenke (2020).

49 The complex concepts of bio- and necropolitics, which to an extent shape all the chapters, can be roughly defined as encompassing the state's power to exert control over life and death, to decide who has the right to live and who does not, who must live (and how), who must die (and how), how (to what extent, in which ways) life and death should be accorded or denied.

comic fiction's originating fantasy,[50] a projection of abolitionist demands, a utopia of no's — "No Democracy" (i.e., no calcification of the democratic ideal into governmental closure), "No Labor," "No Reproduction," and "No Gender" — which I locate, in the next four chapters, in *Birds, Frogs, Lysistrata,* and *Women at the Thesmophoria.*[51] In this section, I will create a framework for thinking about resistant or anarchical formalisms eclectically, through the theoretical contributions of old and new Marxisms, Afropessimism, postcolonialism, film theory, and queer and trans[(*)] theory. In a sense, the following discussion is informed by the dual concerns raised by Tom Eyers:

> The temptation to be avoided […] is a retreat into form, the foregrounding of reassuringly abstract figures or techniques at the expense of political salience. […] But equally troublesome would be the assumption that abstraction and formality are inherently apolitical and ahistorical.[52]

At the end of this section, I use *crysis,* a conflation of "cry" and "crisis" as a figuration of the resistant formalism I will practice.

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50 In a wide-ranging discussion of Old Comedy's utopias, Ruffell (2014, 212) says that Aristophanic utopias "are […] impossible in nature," but "can articulate a […] desire for social change." The impossibility is, for me, what makes them strongly political. There is something radical about the impossibility itself, in the sense that it can work as the projection, or the disguised or sublimated version, of an abolitionist fantasy. In addition, the negativity inscribed in, and circulated by, the programmed failure of comic utopias opens unexpected scenarios, which exceed the utopian plan, making the failure itself generative, producing comic excess, and thus political potential in the very process of comic form's self-undoing. On the negative as a source of queer utopianism, see esp. Muñoz (2009, 12–13); on radicality as impossibility, see, e.g., Stanley (2021, 24) and Bey (2022b).

51 In my use of "abolitionist," I follow Dilts (2019, 233), who sees "abolition" in broad terms, as "the 'no' against the current order that opens the ground for other ways of living and acting that do not rely on that current order's logic or demands." When I say, "No Democracy," I do not mean, of course, a fantasy of anti-democracy (oligarchy, tyranny, etc.), but a different democracy, a more-than-democratic democracy, or a democracy beyond itself, as we will see in chapter 1.

52 Eyers (2018).

In *Form: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network,* an influential plea to see the political in the formal, Caroline Levine takes an approach that she characterizes as more New Critical than deconstructionist, though not necessarily anti-deconstructionist. First, she valorizes formal wholes and totalities as politically progressive shapes, playing up "their power to hold things together," their dynamic ability to "brin[g] together conflicting elements."[53] Reacting against the conventional association of formalism and anti-politics[54] while making a case for form as a channel of emancipatory politics, Levine points out that "wholeness" and "unity" are valued not only in the aesthetic-political imaginary of liberal democracies but also, for example, in the Marxist theorizations of György Lukács. What seems problematic in this assumption is the equation of form with unity or wholeness, which she posits by taking Cleanth Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* as a privileged figuration of New Critical hermeneutics.[55] What if we consider form as a liminal space between construction and destruction, doing and undoing, or as the ongoing process of de-formation occurring in this space?[56] As Paul Saint-Amour puts it in a review of Levine's book: "Forms only participate in socially transformative work through their evasion," that is through texts' evasion of the very forms they inhabit (genre, meter, etc.) and, I would add, through the evasion or flight of form itself from the personalized agencies (text, "author," context) that deploy it.[57] Levine's assimilation of form to a "bounded enclosure" seems to reinscribe notions of autho-

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53 Levine (2015, 26–31). For a discussion of Levine's intervention in the context of classical studies, see Vasunia (2022).

54 It is this association that is behind the customary view of Silk's book as an anti-political or an apolitical intervention.

55 Brooks (1947). My impression is that some versions of New Criticism, in a proto-structuralist and even proto-poststructuralist fashion, see form as a privileged site not just of tensions but of intrinsically broken wholes: see, among others, Barzilai and Bloomfield (1986) and Berman (1988).

56 As A. Benjamin puts it, "A politics of form is always a politics of forming" (2022, 106), where, in my view, the gerund *forming* is poised between formation and de-formation.

57 Saint-Amour (2020).

rial control and intentionality, without considering the radical autonomy of form, its unruly agency, and its nomadic motions. The book's impact may be due to its main limitation, that is, a "liberal-ecumenical vision of formal complexity," in Eyers's phrase — a complexity that seems to privilege reconciliation over dissent; safe, centrist governmentality over the possibility of a genuinely anti-hierarchical reshuffling of the social.[58] Although in her discussion of rhythm, Levine adds elements of dynamism and mutability to her political aesthetics, the plural(istic) rhythms that she speaks of as "jumbled and constantly altered, each, thanks to the others, incapable of imposing its own dominant order"[59] still operate within a system, a unity. We might say, however, that rhythm, with its etymological liquidity (from the verb *rheō,* "flow"), carries an anti-systemic, anarchical notion of dissolution, an intrinsic threat to the regular, structured cadence crafted by the patterns and repetitions. Even repetition itself, with its death-driven orientation, brings a chaotic impulse into rhythm, de-forming form.[60] My own political formalism, differently from Levine's, is aligned with various schools of thought that, before or after her important book, see form as de-formation, or even an insurrectionary, or revolutionary, motion.

The link of formalism with revolution is disavowed by Leon Trotsky, who, in 1925, labeled Russian Formalists "followers of St. John," who "believe that 'In the Beginning was the Word,'" whereas, as he said, "we believe that in the beginning was the deed. The word followed as its phonetic shadow."[61] Trapped in

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58 Eyers (2018); Serpell (2017, 1236) speaks of the book's "latent conservatism," its lack of interest in what Serpell calls "weird" forms, and in the way in which "time — as it stutters, swerves, slips, steeps — reforms and deforms form, occasionally moving us toward radical political ends." See also Lesjak (2019) on Levine's optimism. While MacPherson (2017, 1218) takes issue with Levine' s concern with form's power to "impose a powerfully homogenizing, unifying order on the social" (2015, 80), I, like others, am more concerned with Levine's excessive attachment to "wholes."

59 Levine (2015, 81).

60 See Telò (2020a, 17–18, 269–70).

61 Trotsky (2005, 153).

the dichotomy of *logos* and *ergon,* Trotsky's statement under-estimates the non-agentic agency not only of words, but also of "phonetic shadows," an image that, regardless of the hierarchy it is meant to trope, conveys spectral persistence, the *insistence* (in the etymological sense) of silhouettes, their standing in place, as they are projected onto the ground or a screen, fleeing away yet lingering on, eluding capture.[62] In a sense, Viktor Shklovsky's "estrangement" or "defamiliarization" (*ostránenie*), one of the most distinctive and influential concepts of Russian formalism, can also be read as political disidentification, as an estrangement from the regime of socialist realism, from its aesthetic obsession with *erga,* from its "compulsory mimesis."[63] In *The Eighteenth Brumaire,* Karl Marx himself seems to resort to the defamiliarizing power of form to convey the feel of revolution, as we see for example in this striking passage:[64]

> Proletarian revolutions, like those of the nineteenth century, criticize themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltrinesses of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again, more gigantic, before them.

According to Alenka Zupančič, the thematization of "repetition," of "starting over," and "starting over again" in this description of revolution has a "specific comic dimension," what she calls "a

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62 On the relationship between insistence and potentiality, see Muñoz (2009, 21): "The not-quite-conscious is the realm of potentiality that must be called on, and insisted on, if we are ever to look beyond […] the hollow nature of the present." See Ferguson (2014) and O'Rourke (2014).

63 For the equation of socialist realism with compulsory mimesis, see Katsnelson (2006, 80). Mihaylova (2015, 221) suggests that "the regime's response to formalism transformed it into a situated and embodied practice of antitotalitarian resistance." Erlich (1981, 110–17) considers A. Zeitlin's (1923) attempt to reconcile Marxism with formalism.

64 Marx (1967, 14).

stubborn attempt to do something against all odds, which […] enters a territory closer to the comic — not because it keeps failing, but because it keeps insisting."[65] An expression of the comic Real, of the death-driven automatism that Zupančič sees as distinctive of the comic, this insistence derives from the estrangement effected by the prolonged asyndeton, which dismantles syntax into parataxis, into an ever-expanding horizontality, into an impression of never-settled equality.[66] Comic mimesis — here, in the representation of revolutionary failure — is countered by a formalistic Real, by an impetus of de-formation, which teasingly confronts us with the promise "that the world could and must be otherwise."[67] It is in this formalistic Real, corresponding to what in the previous section I called hyperform, that I locate Aristophanes' political utopianism and, in the last chapter, the comic aesthetics of some examples of contemporary critical-theoretical writing, such as those found in the works of Gilles Deleuze, Achille Mbembe, and Jack Halberstam.

My idea of hyperform connects with various neo-Marxist takes on poetic insurrection. The editors of a recent anthology of trans[(*)] poetry, Andrea Abi-Karam and Kay Gabriel, have observed:

> We don't hold that poetry is a form of, or replaces, political action. Poetry isn't revolutionary practice; poetry provides a way to inhabit revolutionary practice, to ground ourselves in

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65 Zupančič (2008, 153–54).

66 I intend the Real in the Lacanian sense as what is located before and beyond symbolization, the entrance of the subject into language; for Lacan, the Real is the Thing that is "the absolute Other […] of the subject to be found at the most as something missed" (1992, 52). On parataxis as syntactical incohesion and entropy, see Nersessian (2020, 24–28).

67 Hamzić (2019, 143). For a formalistic reading of Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire,* see Comay (2021). Clover (2017, 434) remarks that "the *Eighteenth Brumaire* finds its force and its farce in placing literary comedy alongside history. […] In the case of the source text, it draws its comic structure in no small part from a capricious relation to time and particularly to the ordering of events." See also Silva (2023) on Marx's literary expressivity.

our relations to ourselves and each other, to think about an
unevenly miserable world and spit in its face.[68]

This notion of an insurrectional poetry, or of poetry as ani-
mated by an intrinsic insurrectional force, is also at the center
of Fred Moten's theorization in which "the black radical tradi-
tion" is seen as "a sociopoetic activity," that is, as an "improvisa-
tional, anarchically principled (dis)organization," materialized
in poetry and music, especially jazz, or "a poetics of recom-
bination marked precisely by an ongoing anarchic seizure,
excess and intensification."[69] Following Moten, my approach to
Aristophanic form is attentive to anarchic disorganizations of
verse structures, to phonetic "seizures" shaking up morphol-
ogy and syntax, to what he calls "socio-poetic insurgency."
As I will show, rethinking Aristophanes' unruly versification
and plotting as animated not only by humorous devices, but
by the "socio-poetic insurgency" of de-formation can foster
productive encounters of both the ancient and modern and
bring Aristophanes' comedy into current debates within and
outside academia. Moten's notion of formalistic "anarchic sei-
zure," or "anarchically principled (dis)organization" may not be
entirely incompatible with the neo-Marxist "political formal-
ism" advocated by Anna Kornbluh, even though her polemi-
cal target is a group of theorists, including Moten himself as
well as Theodor Adorno, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri,
whom she calls "antiformalists," exponents of "dissolutionism"
or "anarcho-vitalism."[70] Her interest in "letterality," in the shape
of letters, with their typographical, quasi-geometric "excess of

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68 Abi-Karam and Gabriel (2020, 23).

69 Moten (2018, 17, 36, 51).

70 Kornbluh (2019). As Baena (2020) points out in her review, Kornbluh's
     approach seeks to go beyond the apparently antithetical positions of
     "critique" and "post-critique" by "modeling new ways of uniting Marxism,
     novel theory, and structuralism with theoretical rigor" and proposing, in
     Kornbluh's own words, "a speculative projection of hypothetical social
     space" (2019, 30).

meaning"[71]— a theme in realist English novels such as Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*—makes us reflect, in fact, upon the power of individual letters to interrupt the flow of signification by drawing attention to themselves, to their own graphic abstractness and autonomous figurality, to their insistence, a kind of sit-in or strike. In a scene of *Women at the Thesmophoria,* as I will suggest, the letter ρ, *rho,* exemplifies the hyperform of transness as it conveys an erratic phonetic impression traveling circuitous routes of appearance in disappearance.[72]

Care is another manifestation of the resistant socio-poetics of form. Églantine Colon regards "form as the locus for the encounter between 'care' and politics."[73] With its implicit tactile force and its opening of alternative temporalities—a situatedness at the intersection of past (the creative act, the represented object) and present and future (reception)—form can become a means for reclaiming care from the hold of biopolitical appropriation, for reenergizing its dissensual force. For Colon, following Jacques Rancière, "literary creation corresponds to an imaginative musicality that exceeds mimetism as it is traditionally (or idealistically) conceived, putting revolutionary tactics into aesthetic vibration."[74] This vibration, which shakes "mimetism" and, we could add, the structure of versification itself, is not curative in a conventional sense but is rather charged with the force of a non-reparative reparation. In *Lysistrata,* as we will see in chapter 3, the excess of poetic form, exemplified by an apparently unremarkable, insistent repetition of feminine pronouns, seems able to materialize, and even push against, the biopolitically engineered labor of care, to unveil its power of extraction and, at the same time, through the very excess of hyperform, to

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71 Kornbluh (2019, 152–53). See also studies that have explored the formalist politics of punctuation, esp. Brody (2008), Comay and Ruda (2018), Szendy (2018), after Adorno (1990); see also Telò (2023b).

72 See chapter 4.

73 Colon (2016, 141), speaking of the novels of the French–Russian writer Antoine Volodine.

74 Colon (2016, 146).

reclaim care's indefinite, undivided time for a continuous insurrection, beyond a single point in time.

For Rancière, vibration figures in a wider phenomenology of formal and temporal breaks that I group under the rubric of deformation. In *The Intervals of Cinema,* Rancière, using Deleuzian language, remarks that "the art of cinema […] exists through the play of gaps and improprieties" and through "inscribing on film not images of things but vibrations in a palpable material reduced to immaterial energy."[75] These vibrations are deeply sensed formal disruptions of the film's representational regime, prompted by film's capacity for "accelerating or slowing time, shrinking or expanding space, harmonizing or de-harmonizing gaze and action, making or breaking the sequence of before and after, inside and outside."[76] The politics of Rancière's cinematic aesthetics reside in this reconceptualization of Deleuze's time image as the ongoing vibration engendered by ruptures of time and space, formal breaks or intervals, which can register as manifestations of dissent (what Rancière calls *dissensus*).[77] As we will see in chapter 1, exceeding the typical discontinuity of Aristophanic plot structure, *Birds* — with its abundance of digressive scenes, an almost uninterrupted series of interruptions, an expansive breaking — generates an extreme episodicity.[78] *Frogs, Lysistrata,* and *Women at the Thesmophoria,* the three plays considered in the subsequent chapters, allow the reader to locate potentialities of emancipatory political meaning — against labor, reproduction, and necropolitical surveillance — in acceleration or deceleration, contraction and expansion, enacted in aestheticized micro- and macro-effects of de-formation (overstretched

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75 Rancière (2014, 9, 11) (my emphasis). See Deleuze and Guattari (1994, 176): "The writer twists language, makes it *vibrate,* seizes hold of it, and rends it in order to wrest the percept from perceptions" (my emphasis). See also chapter 5 on Deleuze's comic style.

76 Rancière (2014, 103).

77 For an account of Rancière's cinematic political aesthetics, see esp. Baumbach (2018, ch. 1). See chapter 1.

78 See Rancière (2008, 4) on "aesthetic breaks." On Rancière's notion of cinematic *punctuations,* see Shapiro (2019, esp. 118–47).

adjectival compounds, phonetic agglutinations, expanded or broken syntax). In a sense, de-formation sets up a parallel, alternative theatrical stage, the very condition for the emergence of politics, within the intricacies of verbal *poiēsis*.[79]

These effects of hyperform are generated by "too-close-reading," an attention, construed as futile, to apparently meaningless phenomena that become perceptible in the quest for an affective hyper-closeness. D.A. Miller conceptualizes "too-close-reading" as the practice of observing "some striking *failure of transparency* in the film image, a marked resistance to the immediacy of our knowing what to see."[80] This "failure of transparency" shakes the image. It opens "fracture points in the image's presumed obviousness." In my readings, I create the interpretive conditions for the emergence of a failure of transparency by lingering on minimal, seemingly idle phenomena, which, if heeded, if turned into objects of hyper-attention, can allow us to make the very stubbornness of form interpretively relevant. Brought about by the hyper-affective involvement of too-close-reading,[81] Aristophanic hyperform — an array of phonetic, phonesthetic, graphic, morphological, and syntactical breaks exceeding the logic of jokes and funny nonsense[82] — resists the immediacy of humor and provokes alternative laughter (including no-laughter), that is, wayward, often barely palpable, pleasures-in-pain through which formal fractures or vibrations are embodied,

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79 Rancière (2004b; 2004c) observes that "politics is always about creating a stage," it always "takes the form, more or less, of the establishment of a theatre" as an "artificial sphere" (translation by P. Hallward in Hallward [2006, 111–12]). On the theatrical metaphors in Rancière's political aesthetics, see Campion (2000).

80 D.A. Miller (2021, 15).

81 For a problematization of the opposition of performance and reading in the micro-analysis of Aristophanic textuality, see esp. D. Fowler (1997) and Telò (2016, 10–14).

82 On phonesthetics, which posits correspondences between phonetics and meaning, see esp. Genette (1995, 37–42). Important contributions to sound studies in classics are S. Butler (2015; 2018), Gurd (2016; 2018a; 2018b), and Nooter (2012; 2017; 2018). When I speak of "funny nonsense," I refer to the deliberate, highly recognizable phenomena of nonsense examined by Kidd (2014).

transferred outward.[83] The hyper-attention I model is a quest for formal "improprieties," which as such point to possibilities of disidentificatory politics. This version of "too-close-reading" can be connected, to a degree, with Eve Sedgwick's notion of queer formalism as "a visceral near-identification with […] writing […] at the level of sentence structure, metrical pattern, rhyme," a notion in keeping with some of the tenets of the so-called post-critique.[84] "Too-close-reading" can, in fact, be seen as a kind of anti-normative, queer intimacy with the textual object, an intimacy that, according to Sedgwick, allows her and the queer interpreter to align with the object, to become the object and appropriate its "resistant power."[85] As Ramzi Fawaz observes, "Sedgwick is […] enamored of long chains of adjectives and adverbs […] that modify, complicate, extend, 'deform,' resignify, or sharpen terms that have come to be taken for granted."[86] While it can be easily argued that Aristophanes is "enamored" of language, of its playful plasticity, I take the position that an intimate or too-close attachment to language, which valorizes the irrelevant or the insignificant, could or ought to be inhabited by the Aristophanic interpreter to bring out and circulate its "resistant power."[87] For Kadji Amin, Amber Musser, and Roy Pérez, queer formalism heeds "indirection, opacity, and withholding": in Aristophanes, morphological and phonetic plasticity; thickening through repetition; syntactical over-continuity or fragmentation; and, at a macro-level, episodicity can be markers of political de-formation. If approached queerly,

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83 For Berlant and Ngai, "There's a relation between the grin and chagrin" (2017, 248). On formal vibrations, see esp. chapter 5 (on the comic formalism of Achille Mbembe).

84 Sedgwick (1993, 3). On post-critique as a hermeneutic orientation, influenced by Sedgwick herself, that emphasizes the centrality of the interpreter's affective disposition, broadly conceived, see esp. Felski (2015). My model of reading seeks to bridge the gap between "critique" and "post-critique": see Telò (2020a, 34–37, 279–82; 2024b).

85 Sedgwick (2003, 3).

86 Fawaz (2019, 16).

87 Amin, Musser, and Perez (2017, 227): "Aesthetic form offers resources of resistance to the violences of interpretation."

(too) intimately, they appear charged with "opacity," with potential for "withholding," a withholding mimetically reproduced by the reader's self-isolation from hierarchical time, which comes precisely from reading too closely, from an embrace with form.

In *Aesthetics and Its Discontents,* Jacques Rancière theorizes "resistant form" as what "encloses the political promise of aesthetic experience in art's very separation," in an absolute form of illegibility.[88] This version of resistant form may at first sight seem to be apolitical, something like the radical formalism proposed by Brinkema.[89] Identifying affect with pure form, instead of seeing form as a somatic channel, Brinkema's radicality defines a formalism "utterly indifferent to context, allegory, all provocations of putting […] representational depths […] to work."[90] As she puts it, "radical formalism" is "not a formalism in thrall to radical politics," but one that recovers "the speculative ground of what formal thinking can claim."[91] Differently, and more in line with the approach that I follow here, Craig Dworkin connects "radical formalism" with a version of radical politics, adapting the concept from the "radical praxis" of Bruce Andrews, a representative of the so-called L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets.[92] Radical praxis, in Andrews's view, "involves the rigors of formal celebration, a playful infidelity, a certain illegibility within the legible: an infinitizing, a wide-open ex-uberance, a perpetual motion machine." There is something politically radical in the very idea of illegibility, of disruption of the legible in the practice of writing and reading poetry. This illegibility conforms to a notion of anti-functionalism, which we find for example in Alan Ruiz's somewhat Adornian theorization of radical formalism. For Ruiz, "radical formalism" is to be located in objects' ability

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88 Rancière (2009c, 44).

89 In an interview with J. Anger and T. Jirsa, Brinkema (2019, 71) labels Kierkegaard as "radically formalist" because he "abstracts and depersonalizes love in his philosophical work."

90 Brinkema (2016, 94).

91 Brinkema (2019, 84).

92 Dworkin (2003) ("Radical Formalism" is the title of Dworkin's introduction); see Andrews (1990; 1996, 51).

to withstand their designated function, in their radical reluctance to do what they apparently are for. Andrews's illegibility and Ruiz's anti-functionalism inform my approach to comic hyperform as a praxis that feeds on the radicality of the useless, on what becomes illegible by being of no use.[93] The excessive episodicity of *Birds* has been labeled "useless," and some of the micro-phenomena (phonetic, metrical, syntactical) and the "impressions" I will point to may be dismissed as tenuous, useless, and irrelevant.[94] As a hermeneutic judgment, "uselessness" establishes hierarchies of what counts and what does not for the interpretive exercise, but it may conversely be reclaimed as the resistance of form, a locus of radical anti-normativity. Returning to Rancière's idea of resistant formalism, we should perhaps factor in his idea of style not as "the sovereignty of one who manipulates sentences and form, the manifestation of an individual's free will," but as "a force of disindividualization," that is to say, as "the power of the sentence […] to manifest new forms of individuation"[95] or to make a claim for deindividuation as such. In this statement we can see the political relevance of Rancièrean "resistant form" as a force of "disindividualization," a word wherein the "dis-" — the impetus of rupture as such, the negative force of the "illegible," of making no sense[96] — has an agency and importance in itself, autonomous from the "new

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93 See Ruiz (2016, 237). For a critique of the utilitarian rhetoric of the "useful" and a re-evaluation of the "useless," see Ahmed (2019). For Ahmed, "To queer use can be to linger on the material qualities of that which you are supposed to pass over." See also Harney and Moten (2021) for a critique of what they call "the usufruct of man." In chapter 2, I employ Ahmed's theoretical model to read *Frogs* as a critique of labor and its utility. In rehabilitating the "useless," Ahmed valorizes the idea that "what appears to be giving up can be a refusal to give in" (214). Guerlac (2007) analyzes Georges Bataille's concept of the "useless image" as something between "abstract" and "iconic," sense and nonsense.

94 See Revermann (2006, 336), on the "redundancy" and "dispensability" of the intruder scenes of *Birds*.

95 Rancière (2011, 117).

96 Comparing Rancière's notion of "resistant form" to the formalism of the ʟ-ᴀ-ɴ-ɢ-ᴜ-ᴀ-ɢ-ᴇ poets, T. Fisher (2013, 166) observes that "Language Poetry does not depend upon opening new possibilities for life, but rather

forms of individuation" or "new worlds of possible sense making" that it may give birth to.[97] For Kara Keeling, speaking from the perspective of queer theory and critical race theory, poetry is "a way of entering the unknown and carrying back the impossible."[98] My emphasis on the unremarkable, the anti-functional, the merely impressionistic in Aristophanes is conceived as a method for experiencing textual moments that rupture literary-critical regimes of legibility. In such moments, we feel the affective impact of a quasi-depersonalized force irrupting into, shaping, and, in a sense, stalling the hermeneutic encounter. The resistant form that I heed with my own practice of radical formalism is an aestheticized expression of radical impossibility, which I take to be the affirmative negativity — the imagination of an otherwise, of a not-yet-ness, of a not-yet-possible — necessary for emancipatory change. Non-legibility is the force that makes impossibility erupt within stale givenness (political as well as discursive), which the status quo urges us to identify with the realm of the possible.

My radically formalistic readings of Aristophanes seek, in a sense, to bring out what Édouard Glissant calls the "cry of poetry" (*le cri de poésie*). At the beginning of *Poetics of Relation,* Glissant connects this cry with the sound of the marine abyss in the Middle Passage.[99] Heeding the ways that form does and undoes itself, realizes itself in and as de-formation, entails, in the readings I will suggest, being attentive to an indistinct "cry" — something calling for a hermeneutic apprehension that encompasses but goes beyond figures of nonsensical or mimetic sound. This cry makes for a different sort of laughter, inviting

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in holding the rupture itself by way of sustained presentations of the unrepresentable, the 'impossible' and the 'illegible.'"

97 T. Fisher (2013, 168).

98 Keeling (2019, xii), referring to Audre Lorde.

99 Glissant (1997, 9): "We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone." See also the "cry of art," which figures broken glass, in Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "Boy Breaking Glass" as discussed by Best (2018, 55–62).

us to read against overarching oppressive agendas. Listening to "the cry of poetry" in Aristophanes means listening to what may be characterized as noise, a phonetic and syntactical turmoil emerging from a "too-close" encounter with the verbal surface. This turmoil can be made perceptible if, in the practice of reading as an *engagé* impressionism, we linger on the cry in its manifold forms: whispered suggestions, shadowy feelings, tenuous connections, murmuring resonances, hazy shadings of meaning or non-meaning, insinuations. Interpreting the impressionist strokes left by these whispers, murmurs, and insinuations — an experience of radical closeness that lets form exert a pressure on us — can alert us to expansion or contraction of the verbal flow and of the plot and to thickening and dilution of phonetic matter: all formal phenomenologies through which we can register politically expressive disruptions of conventional temporal regimes, even in the most unremarkable lines. This is a practice of "critical-sensual, visceral-formalist reading,"[100] which can connect us with intimations of Aristophanic metapolitics by enabling an imaginative encounter with the radicality of the impossible.

I want to offer a final conceptualization of hyperform by positing a convergence between Glissant's *cri de poésie* and Mallarmé's *crise de vers.* The latter is the title of an essay in which, commenting on the "revolution" of free verse ("an exquisite and fundamental crisis" undergone by literature), Mallarmé observes that "all of language, measured by meter, recovering therein its vitality, escapes, broken down into thousands of simple elements."[101] Shoshana Felman characterizes this *crise de vers* as "a violent experience of linguistic rupture" or "the historical advent of a linguistic fragmentation in which the verse is violently and deliberately 'broken.'"[102] In Mallarmé's notion of the crisis of verse, the "of" does not simply indicate the historically contingent event of free verse, but indirectly points to the pos-

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100 Neyra (2020b, 34).
101 Mallarmé (2001).
102 Felman (1992, 19).

sibility of crisis as an attribute of verse as such. In this respect, we can assimilate the idea of the crisis of verse, divorced from its original, fundamentally literary-historical meaning, to a political revolution produced in the moment, in the very provisionality and singularity of the poetic act, and, in particular, to Rancière's idea of politics as "a specific rupture of the logic of *arkhē*."[103] In the next five chapters, focusing on four Aristophanic plays and quasi- or para-Aristophanic examples of critical theoretical writing, the resistant formalism that I practice can be encapsulated in the neologism *crysis,* by which I mean the cry of crisis, the cry that manifests or constitutes a crisis, the cry that turns crisis into a percept, the verbal crisis that makes comic form an ongoing cry, the restless *poiētic* de-formation or disability that gives material shape to the politics of crisis or to crisis as politics. *Crisis* is the marker of political utopia "not as an achieved or achievable hypostasis" that occurs "under conditions of power-free timelessness, but rather as a resistance to the foreclosures of present temporality […], a recollection of the possible with a critical edge against the real."[104] It marks the art of the impossible, a continuous inscription of the impossible within the possible. But even crisis is deterritorialized by the cry, made different from itself by an affective intensity, personal and impersonal, that is at once "useless" and insurrectionary.[105]

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103 Rancière (2010, 31). We could also connect the "cry of the verse" with the political "event" in Alan Badiou's sense, that is, what poetry can bring about, as, in his words, it "trains language to the […] function of maintaining that which — radically singular, pure action — would otherwise fall back into the nullity of place" (2006, 202–3). Badiou makes these observations in the context of a reading of Mallarmé that emphasizes the notion of the poem as a pure inscription of a quasi-Platonic revolutionary Idea (i.e., divorced from the sensible), which then, for Rancière, theater should "turn into mobilization" (2004d, 227). Bersani (1982, 4) observes that there is a "current in Mallarmé's thought" to "displace our attention from the sense of words to those 'cadences' through which wordless impressions simultaneously structure and erase language."

104 Athanasiou (2020, 253, 259), discussing Spivak's vision of utopia (1999).

105 See Athanasiou (2020, 269): "The impossible performs a critical move beyond the reification of the existing present and toward interstitial and

ii. Comic Crisis/Critical Comedy

In the preface to *Crisis on Stage: Tragedy and Comedy in Late Fifth-Century Athens,* the editors observe with reference to the Peloponnesian War, the backdrop of most of Aristophanes' plays, that "the political crisis of the late fifth-century aggravated the weaknesses of Athenian society and stifled its strengths, undermining well-established norms and polarizing personal and national relations."[106] The chapters of the collection place the tragedies and comedies produced in the last two decades of the fifth century, the years that marked Athens's decline, in dialogue with the alleged historical causes of the crisis, with specific events and personalities, with manifestations of fin de siècle Attic, or Peloponnesian, culture and with what is called "civic ideology."[107] It is inviting to read Aristophanes' dramaturgy as one of crisis, to see the surviving texts as reflections of a historical crisis, which has lost its ontological autonomy, being merely the ghostly projection of the texts themselves. But what is a crisis? What are its temporal configurations and its forms? (And here I do not mean specific historical phenomenologies, but rather abstract conceptualizations.) What is the (not-simply-etymological) relationship between *crisis, critique,* and *criticism?* Paul de Man famously writes that "crisis and […] criticism are very closely linked, so much so that one could state that all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis."[108] How does literary criticism connect with the idea of crisis when crisis itself is the object of

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liminal qualities of making time (and taking one's time) otherwise in the interlocking realms of ethics, politics, and aesthetics."

106 Markantonatos and Zimmermann (2012, v).

107 Halpern (2011, 545), a Renaissance scholar interested in linking Greek drama with the political theory of Arendt and Rancière, summarizes the scholarly view of "civic ideology" in these terms: "Theater helped to educate the demos in the deliberative reason, critical judgment, and civic values that undergirded political life." See esp. Euben (1990) and Winkler and Zeitlin (1990). For a refreshing, non-contextualist approach to Euripidean politics at the end of the fifth century, see Wohl (2015).

108 De Man (1983, 8) makes the further point that "to speak of a crisis of criticism is, then, to some degree redundant."

literary-critical inquiry? How does criticism connect with critical theory, the interdisciplinary enterprise — "runn[ing] out of steam," for some[109] — that has set itself up as a response to crisis since its commonly recognized "foundation" by the Frankfurt School? This book sees Aristophanes' comic dramaturgy of crisis as an expression of the crisis that poetic form itself can be. Rather than using Aristophanes to understand the crisis of fifth-century Athens, I will try to connect his dramaturgy of crisis with our own critical times, conceptualizing criticism as critique while depicting Aristophanic comic form as a version of critical theory in its own right. In this mode of reading, Athenian history provides an instrument of interpretation that only occasionally emerges amid other discursive structures or potentials: metaphors, syntactical shapes, patterns of sound.

For Judith Butler, the idea of the critical presupposes crisis, just as for Aristophanes comedy is a critical response to a crisis through the staging of a crisis within a crisis. "The critical," in Butler's words, is "the call for an intervention," a "thoughtful response to what is most urgent." As they put it:[110]

> For the ancient Greeks […] crisis was a central concept by which justice and political order could be harmonized to appropriate legal decisions — in the case of illness, crisis both refers to the observable conditions and to the judgment about the course of the illness. A crisis had to be followed by a crisis or a diagnosis.[111]

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109 See, e.g., Latour (2004) and Anker (2017). Their refusal of critical theory and denunciation, in Anker's words, of its "purely negative, oppositional hermeneutic" and of the "sense of either impossibility or failure" (195, 198) resulting from it run the risk of legitimizing empiricist, "realist," antitheoretical approaches (which are customary in classics) and reinscribing modes of traditional liberal thinking.

110 Fondazione Gramsci Emilia-Romagna (2017).

111 J. Butler refers to Koselleck (1988), a classic historicist study of the relationship between crisis and critique originally published in 1959. See also Roitman (2014, 16–19) and Fassin (2021, 262–63).

The Aristophanic plot can be seen as an enactment of this complex of issues centered around the word and concept of crisis. The Peloponnesian War produces a perpetual crisis, a perennial state of emergency,[112] where the disruptive eventality of the crisis morphs into a state of inertia, of immobility, a critical no-crisis, as it were.[113] Each plot is infused with the wayward energy of a main character or two who embody the sense of urgency killed by the prolongation of the crisis, suppressed by the habituation to the sense of emergency.[114] Usually, the comic heroes' action stages a crisis to respond to the crisis, or to restore crisis to its lost temporal acuity, to its punctuality, as it were.[115] Their action is an intervention and a call for intervention. In this respect, the comic hero seems to play the role of a fanciful medical doctor, of the healer,[116] diagnosing and responding to the crisis. Yet the urgency also brings the diagnostic activity beyond rational cognition.[117] There is an affective surplus, an excess, legible as a

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112 Agamben, the theorist of the state of emergency (2005; 2019), remarks, "Not only in economics and in politics, but in every aspect of social life, the crisis coincides with normality and becomes […] just a tool of government" (2013). As De Cauwer (2018, xv) observes, "By continuously creating a state of exception, government, Agamben claims, has taken the form of a constant coup d'état." While COVID has de facto created a situation of perennial emergency, Agamben's characterization of the state's response to it as a sanitary dictatorship (2021) is very problematic: see Nancy (2020b), Balibar (2021), and Bratton (2021, ch. 16). See also chapters 1, 2, and 3.

113 As J. Butler puts it, "critical judgment," which is produced as a response to a crisis, "emerges at a time of temporal indeterminacy" (2017).

114 Class is an important motivation in the comic heroes' actions: see esp. Roselli (2014, 247–50) (on "working class" heroes). Roselli observes that Greek Old Comedy "is keenly attuned to social stratification" but "does not make an issue of all forms of exploitation" (246).

115 Following Roitman (2014), Bryant observes that "it is when the possibility that the world could be otherwise emerges that an event turns into crisis" (2016, 20).

116 See Whitman (1964, 53) and Rosen (2014, 235–36) on the convergence of parabatic therapeutic imagery and the comic heroes' allegedly salvific actions; see also Telò (2016) (esp. chs. 2–4)

117 Defining the comic hero, Whitman (1964, 24) says that "whatever is heroic […] tends towards *excess* or at least *extremes*" and that the figure of the comic hero carries with itself "waywardness, wickedness." Critiquing the very idea of heroism, Rosen (2014, 226) observes that many of Aris-

kind of madness, which can turn the staging of a crisis into a critique, that is, into the possibility of seeing things otherwise.[118] The so-called *agōn,* the most blatant element of deliberative or judiciary mimeticism in the extant plays,[119] is a *krisis.* And this is what it is called in *Frogs,* where the word appears to describe the contest of Euripides and Aeschylus, and the choice that, looking ahead to the word's poetological uses in the Hellenistic period, needs to be made between them.[120] But the critique imported into the play by the comic hero's action is impersonal as well as personal. In other words, the sense of urgency inhabited by the comic hero and driving their action affects the comic script, its language, its formal texture, charging it with an autonomous, mad, eruptive force. This autonomous urgency opens a critical rupture in the protagonist's and their allies' professed intentionality and even in the ironical undermining of such intentionality, generating, in turn, a kind of depersonalized seriousness, located in the core resistance of form itself, which one may call "queer seriousness."[121]

In the following three passages from *Knights* (1207–10), *Frogs* (779–80), and *Wasps* (590–91), we can glimpse the implica-

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tophanes' protagonists present "anti-social, narcissistic, even villainous qualities."

118 On mania as an indispensable ingredient for political change, see J. Butler (2020a, passim); see also Bruce (2020) and Morales (2022); on comic madness, see Beta (1999), Prauscello (2013), Wohl (2013), and Telò (2016, passim); see also chapter 5.

119 On the parallelism between theater and the deliberative and judiciary institutions of Athens, see esp. Hall (1995) and Wohl (2014b).

120 On *krisis,* see Too (1998, 115–150) and Telò (2016, 4–6); on *Frogs* and the language of criticism, see Porter (2006). See also chapter 2. M. Wright (2012) considers the comic poet as a proto-literary critic.

121 Rosen (2014, 226) observes that Whitman's idea of the comic hero is shaped by "paradigms of humanistic self-validation," to which Rosen offers the alternative model of "humour that arises from the hero's own presumption, indeed, *insistence* […], that he really is heroic" (231, my emphasis). While Rosen challenges Whitman's humanistic critical orientation, my own perspective is post-humanistic in that it focuses on the insistence of form as a depersonalized force. On queer seriousness as the outcome of an overturning, an ironizing, of irony, see D. Young (2014).

tions of the nexus of crisis and critique that I theorize: the thin interval (the *dia-*) between critique as resolution and critique as irresolution; the noise of crisis; and the hyperform of crisis:

> SAUSAGE SELLER Why don't you *decide* (*dia-krineis*), Demos, who among us is nicer around you and your belly?
> DEMOS What kind of proof should I use to make the spectators believe that I have chosen (*krinein*) well?

> HOUSE SLAVE The people (*dēmos*) were shouting (*an-eboa*) that there should be a judgment (*krisin*) of which of the two [poets] is more clever regarding his art.

> PHILOCLEON The council and the people (*dēmos*) have decreed that whenever there is uncertainty on how to decide on an important case (*krinai mega pragm' aporhēsēi*), citizens who committed a crime should be handed over to the judges.

In these three passages, the citizen body's ability or will or need to decide, to make a pronouncement, to solve a crisis, generates uncertainty, hesitation, or, we can say, a crisis.

In the first passage, from *Knights,* pressing Demos to become itself, that is, to exercise its own decisional power, to choose its leader and, thus, settle a dispute between two apparently antithetical candidates once and for all (*dia-krinein*), one of these candidates demonstrates, according to a possible reading, the crisis of Athenian democracy, its widespread corruption, its weakness or its calcification into what has been called postdemocracy.[122] But we could read this dialogue differently, not as a comment on the decline of democratic governance at a specific historical moment, but as a dramatization of the crisis that

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122 As Rancière (1999, 177) puts it, "Post-democracy is a system in which democracy is thought of as a simple conjunction between a state of the social […] and constitutional forms. But democracy is neither one nor the other. It is a mode of subjectivation of politics," that is, a possibility for those who have no part to become political subjects.

democracy always is. In the words of the Sausage Seller, fancifully aspiring to become Demos's caretaker, *dia-* ("through," as in "all the way through") connotes a full resolution of the crisis, a complete removal of doubts and hesitations, the proclamation of a clear verdict after an act of discernment.[123] Yet *dia-* also expresses a separation, not the act of rational *dis-cerning, distinguishing,* which is intrinsic to the judgment required by *crisis* (from the proto-Indo-European root **krei* "to sieve"), but the unsettling division, the disconcerting rift, the disharmony, or the aporia within an individual's or a community's epistemic apparatus.[124] In evoking the spectators, Demos maps its own dilemma onto the judgment of the spectators (who will applaud or boo), and of the members of the jury who will be involved in the *krisis* of the comic contest.[125] More importantly, this reference conjures "the condition of a spectatorial mind," which, as Lauren Berlant observes, is intrinsic to the very idea of crisis as "a crisis in judgment."[126] To respond to a crisis, or to exercise a kind of practical critique, means to place oneself in contemplation of the event, of the critical situation, but also to internalize the judgmental gaze of those who will judge your crisis-solving, which in turn entails a fraught relationality, overdetermined feelings of shame, fear, and narcissistic anxiety in the space between the interchangeable positions of subject and object. In the repeated use of the verb *krinō* ("to judge," cognate with *krisis*) we can also see a version of the state's abuse of the rhetoric of crisis. One might say that here, where Demos is unexceptionally and *once again* asked to enact the pretense of being in charge, to participate in the ephemeral turnover of leadership, crisis functions as a disingenuous strategy for turning an unremarkable

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123 As Fassin (2021, 262) puts it, crisis "has an analytic dimension (to separate) and a normative one (to judge)."

124 Derrida (1993a, 70) makes us see aporia as "the possibility of an impossible" or the "possibility *of* the impossible" or "the manifestation of the possible *as* impossible."

125 On comic antagonistics, see, with different orientations and emphases, Ruffell (2002), M. Wright (2009; 2012), Biles (2011), and Telò (2016).

126 Berlant (2007, 760).

situation into an event "because as a structural or predictable condition it has not engendered the kinds of historic action we associate with the heroic agency a crisis seems already to have called for."[127]

In the second passage, from *Frogs,* we move to the Underworld, where the local *dēmos* clamors for a judgment between Aeschylus and Euripides over who should occupy the throne set aside for the best tragedian. The uproar expresses the urgent need for a decisive intervention. The proximity between *an-eboa* and *krisin* in line 779 invites us to think of "noise" — a dismissive label for the assortment of individual voices in an assembly — as the auditory corollary of crisis. The response that "emerges from a historical situation of disarray," critique is not simply the domain of *logos;* it opens *logos* up to minoritarian forces.[128] It listens to and embraces noise, as it were.[129] In Greek medicine, *crisis,* as has been observed, refers to "a turning point between two possibilities — to succumb to an illness or to recover and become healthy": as such, it "is a proper metaphor to express transformative potentials immanent to any crisis."[130] In the case of *Frogs,* the critical intervention necessitated by crisis can also become an opportunity to think beyond the binary of Aeschylus and Euripides, not simply to stage the aporia that emerges from the realization of their similarities and of the uncanny overlap between illness and health.[131] Noise is the supplement of *logos:* it can be conceptualized as a buzz of unformed, novel possibilities

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127 Berlant (2007, 760).

128 On minoritarian politics, see Deleuze and Guattari (1986; 1990). Foucault (1997b) famously regarded critique as "the art of not being governed in this way."

129 Goldberg (2021, 201) observes that "to make noise is to act out, to insist on an even unarticulated or inarticulate concern to receive a hearing." While for Goldberg "noise is counter to form, to information […], the perturbing intrusion of 'world' into structure and form" (203), I see what I call hyperform as noise, as "critical […] rage," a "punctuation" (to repurpose Goldberg's language): see chapter 1.

130 Jovanović (2021).

131 On the instability of the opposition of aristocratic Aeschylus and democratic Euripides, see esp. Rosen (2004). See also chapter 2.

in the space between alternatives. While crisis can be evoked "to set up the conditions to impose different kinds of exceptional measures [...] 'justified' by the urgency, for which different rights and freedoms [...] are suspended,"[132] it can also amount to "the 'no' against the current order that opens the ground for other ways of living."[133] To heed noise is, as Andrew Dilts says of abolition, "an inherently *critical* project" because, in spite of the binarist call of crisis, one rejects "a fixed reference point, teleological end, or finished solution." Crisis impels us to consider a noisy unboundedness: "both the world as it *has become* and the world that is *otherwise*."[134]

In the passage from *Wasps,* an old man who makes a living by serving on juries enacts not simply the specific litigiousness of Athenian society, but the litigiousness of democracy as such.[135] Litigiousness is not simply an obsession with *krisis* in the sense of "trial." It demonstrates, again, the crisis of Athenian democracy, but, especially, the idea that democracy *is* crisis.[136] The juror Philocleon says that when the *boulē* and *dēmos* — respectively, the executive and legislative branches of government — face an impasse, an aporia, or a crisis, they delegate the *pragma* ("thing, matter, case") to the judiciary. A crisis engenders a *krisis* ("a

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132 De Cauwer (2018a, xv).

133 Dilts (2019, 233).

134 Dilts (2019, 237).

135 On Rancière's political valorization of litigiousness, see chapter 1. In *Wasps,* this litigiousness, which Allen (2003) sees as an instrument of democratic control, is favored and enhanced by comedy itself, for, as Wohl (2014b, 333) remarks, "comic justice operates by inculcating in its audience a specific prosecutorial disposition, a readiness to laugh at — and through this laughter to put on trial — the laws [...] most vital to the polis."

136 Moten (2011) observes: "Here's where the neoliberal lament regarding 'the crisis of democracy' [...] can be understood as the animating trace of certain folks, claiming to be on the left, whose lament of the current loss of 'our democracy' is driven by nostalgic fantasies of a democracy that supposedly was held within the structure of, rather than resistance to, American exclusion." One way that *Wasps* shows that democracy is crisis can be found in psychoanalytic terms in the "paternal *jouissance,*" which, as Wohl points out, is figured by the crazy father and juror Philocleon, who "is not beyond or antithetical to the law but operates within it" (2013, 178).

trial"), which, in turn, is meant to generate a *critical* response. In the texture of this passage, an elision separates *pragma* from *aporhēsēi* ("it is uncertain"), provoking a micro-crisis or micro-aporia, as a different *divisio verborum* could turn the alpha privative of the verb into the last letter of the preceding *pragma* and, thus, repair the truncated noun (*pragm'*). "Under a regime of crisis ordinariness, life feels truncated," as Berlant remarks.[137] The crisis that the juror and his colleagues are meant to solve materializes as the indeterminacy brought about by an alternative phonetic division. *Divisio verborum* is a figuration of hierarchy, an aesthetic-political taxonomy.[138] The phenomena of de-formation, or hyperform, that I track encompass many examples of de- or re-phoneticization, which I will use to artic-ulate a formalistic micropolitics based on encounters between the possible and impossible. Crisis, in this passage, is the buzz of a difference of inflection, a minimal, almost imperceptible, redistribution of parts, which may deprive the aporia contained in *aporhēsēi* of its alpha privative, introducing the negative vir-tuality of a rearrangement of breaks on the page and through the voice. The fact that the alpha could belong to both words, *pragma* and *aporhēsēi,* also conjures the possibility of no divi-sion, of the nonsensical compound *pragmaporhēsēi,* the image of a crisis that is impossible to sieve out, of the undifferentia-tion of a drawn-out crisis, or of a resistance to the imperative of deciding, of cutting, of separating.[139]

In this book, my focus on crisis is an opportunity to rethink the relationship between literary criticism and critique, one lin-gering on minute details, the other aiming at the big picture, and to conceive of ways of bringing them together, of enabling

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137 Berlant (2007, 779).

138 See, in a different theoretical framework, Bhabha (1994b, 113), on Fanon's style: "The awkward division that breaks his line of thought keeps alive the dramatic and enigmatic sense of the process of change. […] It is this palpable pressure of division and displacement that pushes Fanon's writing to the edge of things."

139 On Derridean undecidability, see Telò (2023a, ch. 2; forthcoming); on deci-sion as cutting, see Derrida (2007, 237). See also chapter 1.

them to deterritorialize each other. Writing about the crisis of the COVID pandemic, Hortense Spillers articulates the relation between criticism and critique in these terms:

> What we have done in contemporary practice since the post-1960s theoretical efflorescence is to separate "criticism" and "theory" […] into adjacent precincts of intellectual energies, the former related to the protocols of "close reading" and its earlier iterations in the *New Criticism;* while the latter, in its proximity to the "afterlife," I suppose we could say, of "philosophy," is hierarchically supersessional to "criticism." […] If we think about it, we can see how "criticism" and "theory" are not only mutually supportive, but *interpenetrative* in the relay of emphasis and competence that they evoke at varying moments of reading and paralysis. […] We need wait no longer for a crisis to inspire a renewal. We're up to the neck in crises.[140]

In the chapters that follow, the practice of literary criticism, a criticism grounded in close reading, or rather too-close reading, is conceived as an analysis of crisis — of democracy, of labor, of (re)production, of gender un-becoming — and a critical (i.e., critical-theoretical) enterprise. The practice of too-close reading and resistant, radical formalism that I apply in my readings is a *critical* mode of literary *criticism* because it brings out intimations of the political unspoken by means of the excessively episodic, the non-plot, and the non-action, as well as the emergence of alternative phonetic and syntactical arrangements. These phantasmic arrangements are wild loci of resistant de-formation of comic language — of the de-formation, of the *ex-cess* that alienates comic language from itself — where we can form impressions of a depersonalized energy of dramaturgical and political crisis beyond agendas of character, genre, and authorial personas, disingenuous or not. It is in these places that we can locate the noise of the (im)possible, unruly configura-

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140 Spillers (2020, 683).

tions of utopia with its inbuilt negative force. The uninterrupted interruption of the hyper-episodic in *Birds,* the undifferentiation of animal time in *Frogs,* the refusal of the state of emergency through agitation in *Lysistrata,* the obstinacy of un-becoming in *Women at the Thesmophoria,* and the fusion of these formalistic disruptions of temporality in the quasi-comic examples of contemporary critical theory examined in the last chapter: all of them emerge from the critical synergies of time and affect in my radical version of formalistic criticism, which is at the same time New Critical, deconstructive, and post-critical.[141] These critical feelings, the feelings of crisis, result from a version of Spillers's interpenetration of theory and criticism. They are minoritarian gestures in the Deleuzian-Guattarian sense:[142] expressions of "aggressive passivity," of willful immobility, of anarchic disability, of "performative withdrawal," of "visceral immediacy," of insurrectional murmurs that make "a world from political affect in which practices of politics might be invented that do not yet exist."[143]

The de-formations explored in my (too-close) readings generate unruly temporal configurations of crisis and rebellious affects against the rhetoric of crisis, which is often entangled

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141 As Rooney (2017) shows, making the question of reading a problem of form may complicate many of the dichotomies that have emerged from the recent debate on critique (aligned with deconstruction) and post-critique. For example, Rooney observes that "reading against the text" — a practice rejected by some versions of reparative reading and post-critique — is "also reading with the text" (131). For Rooney, reading always involves a "play on words," which generates "the rendering of form as reading's effect," but this play "is never simply 'itself,' self-identical, indivisible, unified, present" (136). Stuelke (2021, 17) observes that "the widespread commitment to the reparative […] can sometimes seem to stave off the difficult work of imagining possible worlds that break definitively with this one"; for her, "the turn to repair is entangled with the very history and practices of neoliberal empire."

142 See Deleuze and Guattari (1990); for Berlant, minoritarian politics, "becoming minor," means "creating an impasse, a space of internal displacement," which "shatters the normal hierarchies, clarities, tyrannies, and confusion of compliance with autonomous individuality" (2011, 48).

143 The quotes are from Berlant (2011, 229).

with the racialized, xenophobic ideology of invasion and assault, as we will see in the analysis of *Lysistrata*. As Daniel Knight and Charles Stewart observe, crisis makes time elastic. "Crises," they say, "turn ordinary daily routine inside out and expose the seams of temporality to view"; they "rip the seams of existence apart[,] requiring the extemporaneous re-stitching of time."[144] At a time of crisis, time is subjected to expansion and contraction, to continuous interruption, or to interruptive continuity, as we see in *Birds, Lysistrata,* and *Women at the Thesmophoria.* The hyperform, in its micro- and macro-expressions, that is the concern of my analyses releases wayward motions with temporal purchase: creative reconfigurations of or challenges to punctuality (pointed time, or points in time), transition, and differentiation. As the COVID pandemic has demonstrated, at a time of crisis "heterogeneous historical moments are knitted together to form the 'whole' of contemporary experience."[145] This synchronic conflation of multiple temporalities creates an oppressive sense of durational contemporaneity, but "the weighty 'edifice' of crisis," which "crushes the foundations of the present, open[s] cracks of hazard and anxiety" and creates the possibility of alternatives — a Deleuzian sense of temporal collapse, of a-chrony, or queer time or time out-of-joint.[146] In *Frogs,* as we will see, crisis is framed by the Underworld's non-chronic or a-chronic temporality, which can invite us to reassess the hierarchy between slowness and fastness and between linearity and non-linearity in the world of the living. There is no doubt that in our contemporary world, crisis — not just COVID, but, for example, the Greek economic crisis in 2016 — "has triggered affective pasts or intimacy with histories that are not yet fully discovered" or has enabled "once silenced pasts […]

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144 Knight and Stewart (2016, 3).

145 Knight and Stewart (2016, 6).

146 The citation is from Knight and Stewart (2016, 9). See Deleuze (1989, 100–106). On time out-of-joint, see Derrida (1994, 3); see also, among others, Freeman (2010, 19) and Edelman (2011). See Freeman (2019) on queer time and *chronocatachresis,* also discussed in chapter 2 of this volume. See also Gurd and Telò (forthcoming) on the pandemic's achronicities.

to seep through the cracks into present-day narratives."[147] The silenced "pasts" that in *Frogs* are thrown into the present of the script and into the multifaceted, multitemporal, transhistorical worlds of Aristophanes' readers include the a-chronic ancestrality of the Underworld, but also the "wild" time of non-human animals' lives, which, in humans' perception, works as a kind of disavowed ancestrality.[148] The unhistoricism of my readings is a mimetic instrument for encountering and intimately connecting with the critical temporalities of four of the most powerfully crisis-ridden plays of the Aristophanic corpus: two zootopias and two gynotopias, where the micro- and macro-forms of episodicity (in *Birds*), undifferentiation (*Frogs*), agitation as ongoing acting (*Lysistrata*), and un-becoming (*Women at the Thesmophoria*) are all different expressions of the negotiation of chronicity and a-chronicity, and of resistance to crisis, but also of resistance to the status quo, which itself provokes crises, and to the state's self-serving rhetoric of crisis.[149] Literary criticism can operate alongside theory and likewise inhabit crisis. In that sense it can become fully critical, crafting, in its own practice, versions of *presentpasts* or *pastpresents* through which the stifling presentness of crisis can be alienated, made other from itself, by non-regimes of *à venir:* "an awaiting without horizon of the wait," the opening of a space of ethical infinity in the apparent self-identity and givenness of *avenir*.[150]

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147 Knight and Stewart (2016, 13).

148 On animality as a present, repressed ancestrality, see Bataille (2005); see also Buchanan (2011).

149 Derrida (2002b, 71) observes that the representation of crisis is an attempt to tame what cannot be tamed: "to determine, in order to limit it, a more serious and more formless threat, one which is in fact faceless and normless." As he adds, "By determining it as crisis, one tames it, domesticates it, neutralizes it." The representation of crisis is thus a disavowal of vulnerability.

150 Derrida (1994, 81). For Derrida, "awaiting without horizon of the wait" means "awaiting what one does not expect yet or any longer." As Nancy puts it, the Derridean *"à venir* is always strictly opposed to the future, to l'*avenir,* that is, to the present-future that is projected, represented, given in advance as an aim and a possible occurrence" (in Fabbri [2007, 431]). The Derridean *à venir* is a non-hierarchical form of temporality that

Critique converges with the agenda of abolition, whose "political and theoretical force is to dismantle, build, and transform from within existing systems of oppression."[151] While not explicitly evoking abolition, Butler says that "critique is a mode of thought, which is also a mode of life outside the terms of law in relation to the law." It is, in other words, "what becomes politically obligatory during times when violence assumes sovereign, legal, and administrative form and where judgment either becomes a form of violence or its arrival is indefinitely postponed."[152] In *Birds,* episodicity is, as I argue, the critical form that uninterruptedly interrupts the ethical violence of democracy as a governmental form that closes out the democratic principle, that casts itself as the "obligatory" choice, as, in a sense, the emergency sovereignty that protects its citizens from emergency, from the crisis that is perennially feared.[153] In *Frogs,* the formal crisis materialized in Aeschylus's overstretched adjectival compounds, which challenge the division of syntax, seems to suggest, as I argue, that the debilitating wounding of labor cannot be "indefinitely" perpetrated, that perhaps a world not centered on labor can or should be imagined. *Lysistrata* illustrates the state of perennial crisis inflicted by the heterosexist state on women through techniques of necrocitizenship, that is, of controlling, surveilling, excluding, and debilitating; but with a radically formalistic ongoingness suggestive of both feminist agitation (continuous acting) and the temporality of pregnancy,

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disrupts the opposition between before and after, between the past and the future, making room for creative, unexpected, in-comprehensible temporalities always on the threshold, on the shore of becoming. Again, for Nancy, the Derridean *à venir* "is not, and in not-being it exposes us to an absence or a void" (2020a, 97).

151 Dilts (2019, 233).

152 J. Butler (2017). But see Butler's reading of *Eumenides* (2023) in light of abolition.

153 As Brown (2015, 10) observes, democracy is presented, or presents itself, as "the permanent achievement of the West and therefore [something that] cannot be lost." Yet "democracy is an empty form that can be filled with a variety of bad content and instrumentalized by purposes ranging from nationalist xenophobia to racial colonialism."

it also dismantles reproduction's evental logic, its focus on the singular, teleological moment of birth, which is homologous to the idea, during the so-called refugee "crisis," of the foreigners' invasion. In *Women at the Thesmophoria,* "trans-form," that is, the translation of transness or transing into the very texture of the play, subjects comic *poiēsis* to a resistant, critical transitivity, which challenges the eventality of becoming, its possible affinity with forms of hierarchical ontology, and may even make us see gender as the product of a *krisis,* a crisis calling for a judgment, which manifests itself equally in biometrical technologies and transphobic violence.

At the beginning of the global medical crisis, many looked at it as a possibility for "postcapitalist futures," for the emergence of "new forms of solidarity,"[154] and thus, à la Antonio Gramsci, as a critical turning point.[155] The hyperform that comes into being if we do a too-close-reading of the crises of Aristophanic language may afford us an encounter with utopia not as a "no-place," but as something similar to an experimental, tentative investment in an abolitionist fantasy: no-democracy, no-labor, no-reproduction, no-gender. Yet the "no" in these phrases is not simply nihilistic. The sequence of "no"s carries with itself the non-agentic agency of refusal, but also the need to prolong the instant of protest, the moment of dissent, into an ongoing aftermath.[156] Comic utopia resides in the negative force of de-

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154 Walby (2021, 24). In relation to the current medical crisis, Balibar (2021, 19) says that what can emerge is "a *community effect,*" that is, "moments of practical communism," or a "logic of horizontal *commonality*" (my emphasis). See also Winant (2020) and Goldberg (2021, 207); see also chapter 2 of this volume, with discussion of Žižek's position.

155 See Gramsci (1971, 210), on the "crisis of authority," arising "because the ruling class has failed in some major political undertaking for which it has requested […] the consent of the broad masses […] or because huge masses […] have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity."

156 See Angela Davis in uchrivideo (2020), and the discussion in chapter 3. For Goldberg, the antidote to the "viral dread" provoked by the current medical crisis is "to imagine the possibility of a sociality without end, a non-teleological ethic."

formation, which corresponds to the de-formation, the spasmodic disfiguration of the face's contours in the act of laughing, continuous and contagious.[157] As we will see in the last chapter, laughter's utopian negativity is eminently critical: it permeates some Aristophanic moments in the formal textures of Deleuze's, Mbembe's, and Halberstam's works.

Whether through episodicity, undifferentiation, agitation, or transitivity and un-becoming, Aristophanic form inhabits crisis as the generative force of a discontinuous ongoingness or continuity. Moten has observed:

> Crisis is ongoing, generative resistance to the regulation, the policing, that it generates. Put another way, the seemingly infinite production of crisis finds its limit in the infinite rehearsal of generative capacity, in the open field of a generative grammar, in the fecundity of a range of generative principles. […] This is the crisis that is always with us; this is the crisis that must be policed not just by the lethal physical brutality of the state and capital but also by the equally deadly production of a discourse that serially asserts that the crisis that has befallen us must overwhelm the crisis that we are.[158]

The non-evental future, or utopianism, promised by what I have called Aristophanes' resistant formalisms or resistant de-formation may be regarded as a precarious sense of infinitude — in Frantz Fanon's view, the condition curtailed by the colonial Symbolic[159] — which is negatively recovered in resisting our apparent desire to overcome allegedly sudden crises and, thus, in keenly embracing the comic crisis that, in a sense, we all are.

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157 On this Bataillean view of Aristophanic and Old Comic laughter, which rethinks, the usual reading of Aristotle's discussion of the comic mask in *Poetics,* see Telò (2020a). On utopia and disidentification, see J. Butler (2018, 12), who observes that "utopia […] constitutes a significant distortion of those forms of progressive time that are presupposed as the privilege of the recognizable subject."

158 Moten (2011).

159 See Fanon (1967, 114–15); on this passage, see esp. chapter 3.

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The structure of the book tracks a progression, or an unraveling, in my interpretive experimentalism: from a topic (democracy) familiar to readers of Aristophanes to less familiar ones and, especially, from macro- to ever more micro- levels of resistant formalism, from the first chapter's initial, exploratory attempt to place comic form in dialogue with contemporary metapolitics, to more and more radical versions of non- or anti-representational reading and formalistic impressionism within politically engaged theorizing.

In the first chapter, "Episode-mocracy and Disability: *Birds,*" I consider the crisis of democracy and democracy as crisis through a rereading of the play alongside Rancière's aesthetic politics. In this play, the comic heroes found a community that maintains its intrinsic inequality through the incorporating, cannibalistic power of consent, the conformist *consensus*—dependent on policed boundaries between language and non-language, human and non-human—that democratic governments self-servingly present as equality. Hyperform manifests itself in the crisis of episodicity brought on by an uninterrupted series of intruders (the disabled New Musician Cinesias; a bookish oracle collector; Iris, the female messenger of the gods; a father-beater) who disturb the comic heroes' utopian plot, disabling these boundaries and the normative distribution of the sensible that they demarcate. Calling into question the rules of who speaks and who does not, what should or should not be heard, these isolated, intense moments of disagreement and disordering (or *dissensus*) open gaps in *consensus,* which correlate with interruptions of regimented democracy's perceptual (or aesthetic) hierarchies. *Birds*'s hyper-episodicity illustrates how democratic government elicits from us an absolute allegiance to its self-styled superiority, which we can withstand by pushing for a decisional dynamic that is at once interruptive and durational in its ongoingness. Somatic non-normativity and resistant de-formation are the material counterparts of democracy understood as a dissensual democratic government

always in pursuit of a never fully achieved equality, kept in flux by its own critical disabling.

The second chapter, "Compound Labor: *Frogs,*" thematizes what I call the batracho-politics of a play that dramatizes the relation between crisis, animal an-omaly, and the stubbornness of form. In my elaboration of batracho- or froggish politics — an emancipatory model that valorizes amphibian expressivity and the mobile immobility of becoming frog — labor and the temporal rhythms of production are at the center of hyper-formalistic readings. In this chapter, *crisis* captures a condition similar to the permanent crisis of our day, that is, "the normal state of capitalism […] as a pathology against which the individual is deemed to be powerless."[160] I locate effects of reading that bespeak a kinship between Aeschylus and the frogs as embodiments of disidentification and resistance against the Symbolic's attempts at closure and totalizing incorporation. In particular, I consider the political ramifications of the aesthetic convergence between the frogs' uneven skin and Aeschylus's stylistic roughness. Aeschylus's kinship with the amphibian *animal* amounts to political *anomaly* in the etymological sense of *an-ōmalia* ("unevenness, unequalness"), an experience of disunity that Deleuze and Félix Guattari see as a form of deterritorialization. The critical force of anomaly emerges from the subliminal Aeschylean appropriations of amphibian sound, but also from the parallelism between the frogs' unruly inertia, their apparent stuckness in the marsh's still water, and, especially, the stubbornness of Aeschylus's form, the rigidity and solid mass of his overstretched adjectival compounds, which hold their ground against the imperatives of syntactical flow. The rigidity of adjectival hyperform, I argue, can be read as a push against the hyperactive, zany frenzy of joke- and comedy-making embodied by the figure of the slave Xanthias, who is repeatedly ordered by his master, the theater god Dionysus, to produce laughter. *Frogs* can thus be connected with slow life, anti-accelerationism, and no-work theory, with possibilities of reinventing the social by

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160 Rancière (2018, 57).

slowing down the rhythm of production through the dissensual mobility of amphibian immobility.

The third chapter, "Agitation and Necro-Reproduction: *Lysistrata*," considers agitation as the resistant formalism of a feminist push against the evental logic of the crisis, of the state of emergency (mis)used and abused in our time to justify the bio- and necropolitical confinement and turning away of refugees at the border. The male discursive response to the occupation of the Acropolis orchestrated by Lysistrata and her allies is nothing but a projection of the state's own exclusionary *dispositif,* a violent apparatus of surveillance and marginalization. Hyperform manifests itself both as a plot immobilized by the very continuity of acting and as micro-effects of phonetic and syntactical persistence that convey sensations of unbroken time and of a prolonged overstepping of boundaries. In this play — whose structure resembles its own Chorus and, more profoundly, *chōra* — feminist agitation, materialized in resistant de-formations, is a response to the debilitating duration of pregnancy, to the agitation imposed by the state's reproductive machine. Numerous effects of verbal non-partitioning, of unbroken syntax and phonemic matter, block the play's restored status quo, its restorative moving-forward, with fetishistic exhaustion, (re)productive unfinishedness, and, especially, formal undifferentiation of gendered bodies: all of which contest the spatial and ideological configuration of the border, but also the evental temporality of the state of emergency and the idea of the insurrection as just a moment in time.

The fourth chapter, "Trans-Form: *Women at the Thesmophoria*," examines the un-becoming of verbal *poiēsis* as transness. In a play in which the Oscar Wilde-like Agathon and the female-besotted Inlaw, who intrude on an all-women festival, are usually read as metatheatrical trans-vestites,[161] we can, instead, conceptualize a trans-form, an insistent subjection of the micro-textures of the script to a cutting rage, exemplified in rough

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161 On the theoretical complexities around the word trans-vestite in relation to various debates in trans(*), see chapter 4, note 10.

syntactical breaks, guttural contortions, and triangulated slip-
pages of one word into another, a critical impetus foreclosing
textual foreclosure. Rereading the play through Jordy Rosen-
berg's 2018 novel *Confessions of the Fox,* in which the protago-
nist's transgenderism materializes as a de- and re-forming of
prose, an incessant excess of linguistic repetition, interruption,
and obstruction, I also reinterpret the play's obsessive parody
of many Euripidean plays as an expression of what Halberstam
has called the "fleshy insistence of transitivity." Reading against
the transphobic dramaturgy, I heed the utopian crisis of a verbal
plasticity, which convulses the normativity attached to gender
as such even when it is regarded as indeterminate or fluid. The
manifestations of hyperform in Aristophanes' *Women at the
Thesmophoria* also resonate with the transitive formalism of the
iconic 1973 speech of pioneer activist Sylvia Rivera, a speech that
noisily and creatively claims the right to exist without ever being
assimilated into structures of *consensus.*

The fifth chapter, "Comic Form, Critical Theory: Aris-
tophanes Beyond Aristophanes," applies the same paradigm of
reading for resistant formalism to works of critical theory that
display Aristophanic or quasi-Aristophanic features: obscen-
ity, parody, farce, surrealism. The works that I choose as com-
paranda, broadly intended, of Aristophanes' resistant de-forma-
tions are Deleuze's *Un manifeste de moins* (*One Manifesto Less*),
Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony,* and Jack Halberstam's
Gaga Feminism. In *Un manifeste de moins,* style as such, a "delir-
ious" enactment of minoritarian politics for Deleuze, is iden-
tified with parodic, "ob-scene" de-formations in the theatrical
oeuvre of avant-garde thespian Carmelo Bene, which, as I argue,
are reflected in the very texture of Deleuze's prose. Mbembe's
On the Postcolony draws on African satiric traditions, which
he himself characterizes as Bakhtinian, to craft a de-forming
poiēsis that laughs at the purely representational. Possibilities of
opening lines of flight in the oppressive immobility of the post-
colony materialize as microformalisms, as vibrations of laugh-
ter, the resistant de-formations that emerge from Mbembe's
intemperately, obscenely grotesque descriptions. Halberstam's

theorization of gaga feminism is shaped by a gaga formalism, which reflects on the earlier readings of Aristophanes' metapolitics. Just as there is something programmatically comic about Halberstam's anti-identitarian, queer theorization of feminism, a queer political aesthetics seems to shape Aristophanes' utopian, anti-reparative negativity, the critique embedded in the hyperform of crisis.

The book responds to a widespread desire to connect ancient political discourses with contemporary discourses, which can help us bring out emancipatory potentialities through new modes of reading against the grain. In a moment of deep crisis for the humanities, I subscribe to the principle, enunciated by Butler in a recent reading of Aeschylus's *Eumenides,* that "we can, and must, read texts against and beyond themselves, so that they can continue to speak to us."[162] My goal is to shake expectations and create the conditions for the formation of a new kind of classical reader, committed to creative juxtapositions of cultural worlds that are spatially and temporally distant from each other and of ostensibly incompatible academic or non-academic discourses.

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162 Butler (2023, 17).

Episode-mocracy and Disability: *Birds*

Synopsis: Peisetaerus and Euelpides, two Athenians unhappy with the pathological litigiousness of their fellow citizens, seek refuge in the aerial community of the birds, where they interact with the tragic Tereus, turned into a hoopoe. With his help, they convert the stateless community of the birds into a city (Cloudcuckooland), but their plan, marked by the building of a wall, is obstructed by various intruders, including a young poet who wants to be hired as the new city's official singer, an oracle monger, a sycophant, a "father-beater," and the disabled dithyrambic poet Cinesias. In the meantime, Iris, the messenger of the gods, sent as a spy, is intercepted and abusively assimilated to an intruder. As Prometheus explains to Peisetaerus, the gods, worried about being cheated of the beneficial aromas of sacrifices, are ready to negotiate a treaty with the birds. The divine embassy of Poseidon, Heracles, and the Triballian god meets with Peisetaerus, who tricks them into handing over Basileia, the female personification of Sovereignty. Peisetaerus is celebrated as the ruler, but at the party some dissenting birds are killed and eaten.

Fig. 1. Constantin Brâncuși, *Bird in Space* (1928). Photo © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

Let us begin with a modern crisis — of representation — at the border. In 1926, Constantin Brâncuși's original *Bird in Space* (fig. 1) was sold and shipped to an American collector but ran into trouble when New York customs officials classified it not as art but as ordinary merchandise. In court, the officials cited an earlier case, *United States v. Olivotti* (1916), which established that sculptures had to provide "imitations of natural objects in

their true proportions of length, breadth, and thickness."[1] Seeking to capture the feel of a bird's boundless motion, and the way the animal's body blends into space, Brâncuși offended a reductive mimetic ideology that measured artistic form according only to the laws of realistic representation. Privileging sensation over representation, Brâncuși's avant-garde art caused a moment of what Jacques Rancière calls *dissensus,* a disruption of the communal modes of perception that incorporate a population into the social order, what Rancière, in turn, calls *consensus.*[2] Brâncuși's subject — a bird's motion, which disfigures contours of the bird's body into a sleek, elongated shape — is an apt metaphor of rebellion against this social order, which Rancière, adapting Louis Althusser's term, calls the *police*.[3] The representational crisis caused by Brâncuși's bird offers an entry point into one of the conceptual concerns of this chapter, democracy's ongoing need for disidentification or disincorporation, homologous, in a sense, to form's inseparability from de-formation.

The Rancièrean dialectic of *consensus* and *dissensus* will supply the theoretical framework for this chapter's exploration of Aristophanes' *Birds* and what has been called "the paradox of

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1 My account of this episode relies on Levine (2015, 68–73).

2 Rancière (1999, 102–3) defines *consensus* as "a certain regime of the perceptible: the regime in which the parties are presupposed as already given" and as "the conjunction of a determined regime of *opinion* and a determined regime of *right,* both posited as regimes of the community's identification with itself, with nothing left over." Conversely, *dissensus* "breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the 'natural' order that destines specific individuals and groups to occupy positions of rule or of being ruled" (Rancière [2010, 139]).

3 See Rancière (1999, 29): "The police is [...] an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task." It is, as Tanke (2011, 46) puts it, "a logic of inequality that creates forms of inclusion and exclusion" and pre-emptively forecloses claims of equality. While, in Althusser's view (1971), the police creates the subject by subjecting it to ideology, for Rancière it is separation from the police that makes the political subject emerge. See Panagia (2009, 41–42).

democracy."[4] This phrase expresses the unresolvable contradiction between democracy as a critical, self-critical, almost anarchic, principle of constant openness to the other and democracy as a form of government, which as such entails unifying people through constraint, conformity, and the incorporation of the outside within the inside.[5] This contradiction is exemplified by majority rule, one of the essential principles of democratic government, which absorbs dissenting voices into a dominating part cast as the whole. As Wendy Brown observes: "Democracy is what […] carries the dream of freedom and equality," which are, in a sense, compromised when one side wins, when what was unfixed and open experiences a kind of closure.[6] I wish to take *Birds* as a reflection upon this paradox by showing how the play's formal textures, macro- and micro-, expose democratic government's reshaping of equality as conformity through supposedly self-evident models of what is visible or audible, a policing of perception referred to by Rancière as "the distribution of the sensible." Establishing a system of conventions that distributes meaning to what appears to our senses, this policing determines what should and should not be seen and heard, what constitutes language and what amounts to pure noise, what counts

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4 My version of the paradox is in line with Derrida's assumption that "democracy and sovereignty are at the same time […] inseparable and in contradiction with one another" (2005, 100), since, as Brown puts it, "sovereignty is inherently antidemocratic insofar as it must overcome the dispersed quality of power in democracy, but democracy, to be politically viable, […] appears to require the supplement of sovereignty" (2009, 118). See also J. Butler (2000, 268–69): "The reason for preserving the ideality of democracy, its resistance to a full or final realization, is precisely to ward off its dissolution."

5 On this contradiction, see esp. Derrida (2005, 28–41) and Brown (2009). On democracy as an anarchic principle, see Rancière (2010, 61). On the relation between Derrida's and Rancière's ideas of democracy, see Rancière (2009b), Hoa (2020), and Kahane (forthcoming). Wolin (2004, 602) sees democracy as "an ephemeral phenomenon rather than a settled system."

6 Brown (2009, 123). In this chapter, I am not specifically concerned with perceptions of the meaning of *dēmo-kratia* in the fifth century, on which see, most recently, Ober (2008; 2017, 18–33) and Cammack (2019).

as art and what does not.[7] Such policing brings the aesthetic, that which concerns *aisthēsis,* to the core of the political by imposing a "picture of the world" — normative notions "of what can be conceived, discussed, and disputed" — and ultimately defining "the field of possibility and impossibility."[8] Challenging the conventional representation of a bird, seeking to make us feel its motion in space rather than seeing the bird itself, Brâncuși's statue disrupts the "distribution of the sensible," the "field of possibility and impossibility" presented as natural and self-evident by the police. It thus makes room for *dissensus.* Providing a corrective or a supplement to the regime of the *police, dissensus* creates episodic moments of disincorporation from it, which can re-energize democracy as a principle introducing reminders of its promise of equality and open-endedness.[9] With the episodic in mind, I read the interloper scenes in *Birds* — radical moments of formal interruptions — as epiphanies of *dissensus,* similar to the appearance of Brâncuși's *Bird* on the American scene. These repeated interruptions, forming a protracted episodicity — a digressive dilation — that gives the sense of a constantly renewed crisis, of an ongoing disidentification, contest the immobilizing complacency inherent to democratic government, its inclination to present itself as a political teleology, the obligatory choice. The exhausting episodicity, which has been seen as a "dispensable" part of the plot, carries an impersonal energy of *dissensus,* the excess that makes the democratic principle incompatible with governmental closure. Macro- and micro-form enact the ongoing de-formation or even disabling that corresponds to democratic disincorporation, to the crisis constitutive of democracy. The play's two comic heroes found Cloudcuckooland in dissent from Athens, but the new state

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7   See esp. Rancière (2010, 44).

8   The quotations are from Tanke (2011, 2).

9   For Rancière (2010, 44), "The essence of the police lies in a partition of the sensible that is characterized by the absence of void and of supplement," and as "the essence of politics," *dissensus* "disturb[s] this arrangement by supplementing it," producing "lines of fracture and disincorporation" (2013, 35).

can be formed only by pre-emptively suppressing dissent. The interlopers, enablers or figures of resistant formalism, of episodic hyperform, as well as agents of political subjectivization, promote disruptive alternatives or supplements to normative hierarchies of perception, including physical difference, disability, the circulation of writing, and a musical decomposition of human language. The silencing of these alternatives exemplifies *consensus,* democratic government's inescapable coercive force, inviting reflection upon the line between democratic cooptation of the outside and anti-democratic erasure of it. I will follow the interplay of *dissensus* and *consensus* from the beginning to the end of *Birds,* paying special attention to how the interloper scenes in the middle trouble the norm of democratic "sameness" (of a choral "we") that is ominously suggested at the foundation of Cloudcuckooland and solidified in the finale, where a quasi-tyrannical crisis is exploited to legitimize democracy as the unavoidable, mandatory solution and, thus, deprive it of its (self-)critical vocation, wherein its affirmative force negatively resides.[10] Rancière's categories, which reactivate the notion of "sensation" (*sensus*) within "dissent" and "consent," help illuminate the nexus of aesthetics and politics in the play and read it as a reflection on the danger of democracy: not degeneration into another form of government but rather an inherently anti-democratic, albeit essential, element of democratic government as such, a unification of modes of sensing, perceiving, and experiencing — a kind of "aesthetic" control. The sliding of democracy into forms of authoritarianism that we are currently witnessing in many countries (e.g., in several states of the US as well as Italy, Poland, Hungary, Israel, and India) can arguably be read as an extreme consequence of the anti-democracy that democracy needs in order to structure itself as government.[11] Resistant for-

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10 As Butler (2009, 298) puts it, "The point of politics is not to assemble a 'we' who can speak or, indeed, sing in unison, a 'we' who knows or expresses itself as a unified nation [...]. The question of politics resides instead in the encounter with what troubles the norm of sameness."

11 The pandemic has heightened the sense that democratic government relies on an unpredictable, uncontrollable degree of anti-democracy: see Robin-

malisms, as we will see, are the depersonalized lines of flight, the nomadic energies that de-form the representational regime of democratic *consensus,* bringing about episodic outbursts of sensory excess and moments of aesthetic crisis.

i. Cannibalistic Consensus

At the play's start, the frustration of the comic heroes, Peisetaerus and Euelpides, with the conflicting directions supplied by their non-human guides, a crow and a jackdaw, arises from an attempt to subject the birds' voices to the constraints of human discourse. In an exchange on the way to Tereus's lair, Peisetaerus hopefully observes: "This crow is *saying something* (*ti legei*) about the route; by Zeus, now it isn't crowing the way it did before" (23–24), prompting Euelpides to ask: *"What's it saying (tí […] legei)* about the route, then?" (25). The repetition of *legei* underscores an anxiety to convert vocalizations into linguistic deixis, the secure guidance expressed by the verbs *phrazō* ("I indicate") and *deiknumi* ("I point out"), that the birds' seller had promised they would offer (15, 50, 51). We can perceive a trace of the same anxiety in the play's second line, in which Peisetaerus says that his avian guide "is crowing again" (*krōzei palin* 2). Interpreters usually place *palin* ("again, back") in quotation marks, as though the crow were imparting directions and saying, "Go back!"[12] But Peisetaerus's comment may result from a metonymous process in which he shifts from the repetition of a sound to a word for that repetition (*palin*) and then to a different meaning of that word ("backward"), all to stabilize and exploit the crow's vocal expression, the sound of the feral or the wild.[13] In the following line, Euelpides complains about being led "up and down," or "back and forth" (3), conveying discomfort with

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son (2022, 42–43).

12 See, for example, Dunbar (1995, 134).

13 On crows' "epistemology of the feral" and their instantiation of "flights from time" and "chaotic and illegible political associations," see Halberstam (2020a, 110), referring to Arsić's discussion of crows in Thoreau (2016).

the birds' nomadism, their physical and vocal wandering, which Laurie Anderson renders as "constantly flying in huge circles."[14] Later, Peisetaerus will urge the birds to stop "flying around in every direction" (165) and will describe them as "unstable, […] never remaining in the same place" (169–70),[15] like *palin* itself, which hovers semantically between temporal and spatial poles.

The policing operation that Peisetaerus's first sentence captures fully emerges at Cloudcuckooland's founding through the transformation of the birds' *polos* — the "sky's vault" where "everything passes through" (*di-erchetai / hapanta dia toutou* 181–82) — into a *polis*. This simple exchange of vowels, which entails a closing of the mouth, must be materially shored up through the construction of a wall, as Peisetaerus recommends to his ally Tereus (183–84): "As soon as you build and fortify this [place], *from this polos* (*ek tou polou toutou*) it will be called *polis*." The fortification seeks to turn a non-space (a literal *utopia*) into a bounded, and thus recognizable, space, even though the prolonged assonance of *toupoloutoutou,* a conglomeration of rhyming phonemes evoking *ou-to-pia,* conveys the impression of unboundedness, of a resistant non-delimited space, of a stubborn u-topia. This fortification also demarcates a political order, that is a "distribution" (*nemein*) of the sensible, since *nomos* "can be described as a wall."[16] By building a wall, the birds will claim the universe's middle area between humans and gods (187), and by charging a fee for the passage of sacrificial aromas from earth to ether, they will gain a strategic position of power. An illusory sense of sovereignty and dominance stems from the opposition of inside and outside that the wall creates, that is, "us" vs. "the others" ("the enemy"), the denizens of Cloudcuckooland vs. the gods.[17] Apparently protective, it is the means by which the com-

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14 Laurie Anderson's song "The Beginning of Memory" from the album *Homeland* (2010) is inspired by Aristophanes' *Birds.*

15 On this passage, see esp. Konstan (1997, 9).

16 Schmitt (2006, 70).

17 See Brown (2010, 25): "Walls project an image of sovereign jurisdictional power and an aura of the […] secure nation that are at the same time undercut by their existence."

munity gathers and recognizes itself through abuse of the outside.[18] But the wall also generates abuse on the inside, in that, it also *limits* freedom while *delimiting,* safeguarding, and empowering the new community. The fortification that founds Cloudcuckooland is an enclosure that prevents the birds from "flying around in every direction" and thus fulfills Peisetaerus's wish. We can accordingly align *polos* and *polis* here with Rancière's concepts of *politics* and *police* respectively. *Politics* designates the gaps in *consensus,* emancipatory disagreements challenging the communal modes of perception maintained by the *police.* Peisetaerus's wall produces something similar to the *police's* system of *consensus.* Conversely, the prefix *dia-* ("through") in the verb *di-erchetai,* which refers to an action characteristic of the free space of *polos,* suggests the opening of gaps, moments of nomadic disincorporation, *politics,* and *dissensus.* Although as a physical space, *polos* is replaced by a *polis, politics* in Rancière's sense does not disappear altogether, but, like the hyperform of quasi-undifferentiated phonemes (*toupoloutoutou*), intermittently breaks through the comic hero's policing wall.

While *dia-* concerns the gaps opened up by *politics,* the crisis that is *dis-*identification, the force of the *police* is discernible in the persistent *sun-/xun-* ("with") compounds, which body forth not just joint effort in building the *polis* but a violent process of assimilation. The foundation of Cloudcuckooland resonates in the play through repeated language and imagery of cohesion and unity. *Xun-kaleō,* "I summon," and *xul-legō,* "I collect" (201, 294, 437) express the gathering of birds at Tereus's behest, an action that constitutes the community, a unitary "we," while other *xun-* compounds reinforce it, including *xun-nomos, xum-phōnos,* and *xun-trophos* ("consort," "sounding with," "living with"), all occurring in choral sections.[19] The political valence of

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18 In *Birds,* the fortification is part of Peisetaerus's plan to restore "power" to the species of the birds (162–63). The resonance of Peisetaerus's program in the 2016 American presidential election need hardly be stated.

19 209, 221, 659, 678–79. Perkell (1993, 7–8) sees the abundance of these compounds as an expression of "a harmony in the cosmos, which links the birds and the gods."

this proliferation of *xun-* compounds is foregrounded by *xun-dokeō* ("to decide together"), the verb that Tereus employs when he puts Peisetaerus's foundational plan to a vote, adhering to democratic decision making (196–97). However, the ominous associations of some *sun-/xun-* compounds with the misdeeds of Tereus disclose a less than harmonious dimension and suggest that though ostensibly benign, he has not entirely shed his tragic (Sophoclean) past.[20] Introducing the colonists to the Chorus (324), Tereus, Peisetaerus's ally and alter ego, presents them as "lovers (*erasta*) of this community (*tēsde tēs xun-ousias*)," a phrase that brings the congregation of the birds eerily close to the brutal *xun-ousia* ("being-with") carried out by the Thracian king, the rapist of Philomela.[21] When, in the same context, he mentions the exiles' "desire" (*erōs*) to "share a home with and be with the birds" (*xun-oikein* […] *kai xun-einai* 412–13) — an extension of their earlier request to "confer" with him (*xun-gen-esthai* 112–13)[22] — the sinister force of the king's own infamous eros taints the constitution of the community with sexual violence.[23] The effect of these subliminal associations is not so much or not only the sense that an apparently democratic regime may be haunted at its conception by the specter of tyranny, but rather, that the physical, phonic, and political cohesion that realizes the

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20 Regarding *Birds*'s engagement with Sophocles' *Tereus*, Dobrov (1993; 2001, 105–32) suggests that "virtually all distinctive features of the violent legend […] are banished from the comic stage" (2001, 106). Cf. Holmes (2011, 9–10), who sees an allusion to Tereus's crimes in Peisetaerus's depiction of the ideal state as the one where men do not take sexual advantage of the children of family friends (137–42), as Tereus did with Pandion, the father of Procne and Philomela. In Attic *xun* and *sun* are alternative forms of the same prefix, which takes an *–m* before a labial such as *b*.

21 On the thematics of *eros* in the play, see Arrowsmith (1973). On the ideological and psychic complexities of democratic *eros*, see Wohl (2002).

22 The initial dialogue between the exiles and Tereus is interspersed with innuendos relating to the female body: the *aphuas* (both "sardines" and "prostitutes") that Tereus "desires" (*erai*) to eat (76); *murta* ("myrtle" or "female genitalia" 82); and *hulēn* in *anoige tēn hulēn* ("open the forest" 92), which replaces the sexually charged *pulēn* ("door"). See Holmes (2011, 12–13).

23 See also *sun-eimi* ("I am with" 704) and *xum-paizō* ("I play with" 1098).

foundation plan, as signaled by the *xun-* compounds, masks an imposed system of incorporation into a unified whole, precisely what Rancière calls *consensus.*[24]

Appropriating Procne's lament, but excluding her voice, the monody, single-voiced ode, of Tereus the hoopoe is laden with further suggestions of incorporation.[25] Although the Thracian king's declared intention is to summon his wife, Procne the nightingale, and to rely on her vocal charm to gather the birds, she does not leave the *skēnē* nor does she ever sing.[26] Her threnody, or elegy, for Itys, the son she vengefully served up as a meal to her husband, is reawakened entirely through the hoopoe's voice (209–22):

> TEREUS Come on, my *consort* (*sun-nome*), stop (*pausai*) sleeping, and *release the strains* (*luson* […] *nomous*) of holy hymns, which through your divine mouth bewail *much-lamented Itys* (*polu-dakrun Ityn*), *my son and yours* (*ton emon kai son*), warbling with the liquid notes of your trilling jaws. An echo goes untainted through the

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24 See Poseidon's response to Heracles and the Triballian god at the end of the play (1630): "Well, if you both think so, I'll think so too (*sun-dokei*)."

25 I take Tereus himself to be the singer of the monody: see Dunbar (1995, 200–201).

26 For this reconstruction, see esp. Barker (2004). Imagining the staging of this scene has proved challenging for interpreters, and I do not mean to intervene in this debate, on which see, most recently, Liapis (2013). I believe, however, that the scene can be fruitfully read apart from the staging of the first production. Procne's absence from the stage and her contribution to Tereus's performance through music, not words, are unremarkable from the viewpoint of what we can reconstruct of Athenian theatrical convention. As Helene Foley points out to me, there are no duets in Greek drama, an *aulos* player does not sing, and the appearance of a female *aulos* player would be novel. While Procne's verbal silence and offstage placement conform to, and can be explained as expressions of, convention, it is my position that the tragic story against which the comic plot sets itself invests the absence and silence of Procne with an additional charge and a degree of overdetermination. It is this overdetermination that I seek to interpret, heeding the ominous resonances that the tragic story casts over themes and elements of staging that, in other contexts, would be unremarkable.

leaf-haired bindweed to the seat of Zeus. […] Through immortal mouths, the divine cry of the blessed ones resounds, *at the same time* (*homou*), *in unison* (*xum-phōnos*).

This beginning of Tereus's performance plays upon the mismatch between its festive appropriation and threnodic origin, between the solidarity of musical harmony and the rape, mutilation, and cannibalism in the background. When Procne does appear later (667–74), dressed as a piper and assaulted by a series of sexual jokes and threats, she remains silent, as expected of a piper,[27] a role that makes her de facto re-experience the trauma of her sister, Philomela, whose tongue Tereus had cut out, transforming speech into frail if persistent sound.[28] Such mutilation, which is shockingly evoked at the end of the play, albeit displaced onto other victims — informers "living by their tongues" (*en-glōtto-gastores* 1702)[29] — is, to a degree, also perpetrated during Tereus's performance, when Procne's singing voice

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27 On the staging issues connected with Procne's role as a piper, see, most recently, Compton-Engle (2015, 136–37).

28 In Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* our main source for the mythical story, Philomela is said to have remained with a "mute mouth" (*Metamorphoses* 6.574). We can, however, surmise that she would still have been able to produce sounds without the use of the tongue. Her severed tongue itself is said to "mutter" (*immurmurat* 558): on this sound, see esp. Marder (1992, 160), Enterline (2000, 89), and S. Butler (2015, 62; 2019, 180: "This tongue briefly becomes a voice, indexical of the body from which it has come; it 'says' nothing, except this: there is a body here, my body"). Rimell (2006, 32n96) notes the hissing sound of Philomela's mutilated tongue "twitch[ing] on the ground." Philomela's murmur brings to my mind the words of Frank B. Wilderson III in *Afropessimism:* "The hinges of my jaws made moans or howls but not words. I thought, *how funny is that?* I answered him in the words of a bird as its throat is slit" (2020, 4).

29 In 1702–5, we read that "everywhere in Attica the tongue is cut away from those men living by their tongues." The allusion to an apparently well-established sacrificial practice is here repurposed to conjure an image that, in spite of commentators' silence on the matter, refers us back to Philomela.

is replaced by the backstage sound of the *aulos*.[30] Although she provides the music, thus spectrally shaping the sonic atmosphere like the repressed Real, Tereus sings *instead of* her. In addition, the metrical structure of the song exhibits an orderly and tight structure, which, as has been observed, is strikingly at odds with the rhythmic and vocal embellishments that have been labeled New Music, an umbrella term for a series of virtuoso musical innovations in mid-to-late-fifth century Athens, of which the nightingale is a symbol.[31] Tereus seems to practice a deliberate metrical normalization, a transition from flamboyant New Musical effects to regimented structures, thus producing a kind of mutilation, of vocal expression and aural perception. Even the call to Procne, to "stop sleeping," ostensibly liberating with the goal of waking her and bringing her onstage, uses an imperative (*pausai*) that, as we will see, Peisetaerus repeatedly employs to silence intruders. In fact, when Euelpides applauds Tereus, Peisetaerus shuts him up (*ou siōpēsei?* 225), a displacement of the barbarian king's wish to silence Philomela and Procne. The command *luson* […] *nomous* ("release the strains"), playing on the ambiguity of *nomos* ("song" but also "law") and on the common phrase *luein tous nomous* ("to revoke or abolish the laws"), is similarly double-edged, understandable as a self-exhortation referring to Tereus's violations of the rules of civilization, a self-exhortation, that is, to inhabit his tragic self. Meanwhile, Procne's confinement behind the *skēnē,* a concealing container like the stomach, casts Tereus's vocal appropriation of her song as a quasi-cannibalistic incorporation. This internment anticipates the Ovidian Tereus's imprisonment of Philomela in the hut where he will rape and mutilate her,[32] a silencing incorporation

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30 On Procne's backstage *aulos* sounds, see Barker (2004, 195). Gurd (2016, 208n178) observes that "Procne's song remains a wordless quasi-song."

31 On this "normalized" metrical-rhythmical structure, see Pretagostini (1988, 194). On the New Music, see, e.g., Csapo (2004), Wilson (2004), Csapo and Wilson (2009), Prauscello (2012), and LeVen (2014).

32 We do not know whether Sophocles' *Tereus* featured a similar scene of internment: see Fitzpatrick (2001, 96–97).

that foreshadows his unwitting ingestion of Itys, his infant son.[33] In the monody, the adjective *sun-nomos* — "sharer of habits," but also "of songs" and "of laws" (*nomoi*) — along with the connection of *ton emon* ("my") and *son* ("your") through *kai* ("and"), conveys a marital reconciliation belied by Procne's confinement as her individuality is swallowed up by the perturbingly harmonious unity of singers and performers, Tereus and the gods, who are affectively bound together by her music, by the resoundingly excluded third party. With its all-encompassing and homogenizing spell, its ostensibly lawful "distribution" of sensory roles, which usurps Procne's role, Tereus's musical *nomos* seems to coincide with the *police's consensus*-enforcing *nomos*.

In the formal texture of Tereus's song, the cannibalistic consumption of Itys figures the communal distribution of the sensible, that is, the arbitrary distinction between language and nonlanguage that brings about *consensus*. When Tereus resumes his song, after the momentary interruption by Euelpides and Peisetaerus, we are assaulted by an elaborate call, which stages an encounter or a conflict of human and non-human voices (227–29):

> TEREUS Epopopoi popopopoi popoi, *co co com com com com, come* (*iō iō itō itō itō itō ítō*) here every one of my *fellow winged ones* (*homo-pterōn*).

The name of Itys is encrypted in the series of wailing sounds ἰώ ἰώ ἰτὼ ἰτὼ ἰτὼ ἰτὼ / ἴτω (*iō iō itō itō itō itō / ítō*), the last of which, with a minimal accent alteration, turns the avian ἰτώ (*itō*) into the imperative ἴτω (*ítō*) that gathers the multiplicity of birds and forms the new society.[34] This imperative, created by the accent's motion toward the word's beginning (the *archē*), functions

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33 *Eisō* ("inside") — the stage direction that could be used of the position of Procne ("inside the *skēnē*") — corresponds to the Latin *intus;* on the pun between Itys's name and *intus,* see Feldherr (2008) and Oliensis (2009, 87).

34 The transition is effected by the quasi-imperceptible movement of the acute accent from the last syllable in the avian wailing sound (ἰτώ/*itō*) to the first one in the imperative (ἴτω/*ítō*).

almost as an Althusserian interpellation, the act — similar to the policeman's "Hey, you there!" — that turns individuals into subjects by subjecting them to ideology.[35] The shift of intonation from ἰτώ (*itō*) to ἴτω (*ítō*) registers how one language cannibalizes another, a metaphor suggested by the evocation of Itys.[36] In *Disagreement,* Rancière notes Aristotle's distinction in the *Politics* (1253a9–17) between human *logos* and the *phōnē* of animals and observes that the *consensus* enforced by the *police* rests upon the symbolic division of bodies into those with *logos* and those without, "those who really speak and those whose voice merely mimics the articulate voice to express pleasure and pain."[37] This *logos* operates within what Rancière calls the *account,* "by which a sonorous emission is understood as speech […] whereas some other emission is merely perceived as a noise."[38] The micro-shift from ἰτώ (*itō*) to ἴτω (*ítō*), which absorbs into human *logos* what is received as a simple expression of pain, implicitly construes avian language as mere noise, a cacophony deficient in meaning, as Philomela's murmurs after the mutilation of her tongue might have seemed to be, notwithstanding their encoded call for jus-

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35 Payne (2012) has read the resemblance of ἰτώ (*itō*) and ἴτω (*ítō*) as a bridge between human and non-human, drawing on Aristotle, *History of Animals* 536b, where humans and birds are said to share the ability to produce *dialektos* ("speech"), articulated through the tongue and throat. In the same passage, Aristotle suggests that what might be called the *dialektos* of animals is only a likeness of the "true" *dialektos* of humans — "articulated voice, which one might describe as a sort of 'speech' (*hōsper dialekton*)." Like the accent separating ἰτώ (*itō*) from ἴτω (*ítō*), *hōsper* ("like, a sort of") underscores that similarity can indicate not just relatedness or unity, but also non-relatedness and division, inasmuch as "similarity" is radically different from sameness.

36 I use "cannibalism" here to indicate that members of the same community, even if they are of different species, are eating each other.

37 Rancière (1999, 22). For Aristotle, *logos* is meant "to demonstrate what is beneficial and what is harmful and thus also what is just and what is unjust."

38 Rancière (1999, 22–23). In the introduction to *The Undercommons* (Harney and Moten 2013, 9), Halberstam observes that the authors "tell us to listen to the noise we make and to refuse the offers we receive to shape that noise into 'music.'"

tice. Tereus's call hints at the oppression behind his teaching human language to birds, which he presents as the most fruitful result of his long "cohabitation" with them (*xun-ōn* 200). Far from attesting to his comic transformation, from brutal tyrant to civilizer, this act becomes an enactment of his cannibalistic drive, the violence with which he has *assimilated* them (in)to himself (*homo-pterōn* 229). The cannibalism is foregrounded by persistent effects of phonemic ingestion, "Itys" and *iō* incorporated by *itō/ítō,* and *popoi* by *epopopoi,* which circulates echoes of the hoopoe in its etymological function of supervisor or *policeman* (*epops*).[39] Tereus's verbal ingestion fixes parameters of what should be heard and what should not, what is *logos* and what is not, founding the community harmoniously and thus legitimizing its inherent inequality. This arbitrary hierarchy of *logos* and non-*logos,* speech and pure noise, brings to mind the tendentious opposition articulated in many texts of oratory, historiography, and philosophy between the language of authoritative figures and the *thorubos* of the crowd, a multiplicity of voices, or an indistinct cry, cast as a disorderly mass of sensation. A similar opposition also legitimizes cosmic power in the *Theogony,* at the end of the battles between earth-born and Olympian gods, one of which is evoked in *Birds* while the new city is founded (824–25). The honey-sweet *xum-phōnia* of the Hesiodic Muses covers up Zeus's abusive system of *consensus,* which silences Typhoeus and the Titans as producers of pure noise, hurling them into the earth's belly in a preview of the supreme god's cannibalistic consumption of Metis.[40] (As David Theo Goldberg has observed, in reference to protests across the US after the murder of George Floyd: "Noise runs counter to

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39 Epops evokes *ep-optēs* ("supervisor") and *eph-oraō* ("to watch over"). The controlling role of Tereus is also expressed by the connection of his name with *tēreō* ("to watch over"): see R.D. Griffith (1987). Payne (2013, 48) suggests that the transition from *epopopoi* to *popopopoi popoi* converts what "sounds like an invocation […] into pure sound," but the subsequent transformation of ἰτώ into ἴτω lays bare the cannibalizing power of *epopopoi.*

40 See Too (1998, 29). On the violence of the Muses' *logos,* see Pucci (1977, 31–33, 135).

the imposed dominance of silence, of political shushing."[41]) In his response to Tereus's singing, Euelpides points to the political and aesthetic transformation of Typhoean unevenness into a smooth, unified texture (223–24): "King Zeus, that bird's sound!" he says. "How did it pour honey (*kat-emelitōse*) all over the thicket?" But this uniform sweetness has a bitter undertaste, as suggested by the last exhortation to the birds (*all' it' eis logous hapanta,* "Now, all of you, come to the speeches" 259), which, while apparently urging "all [of you]" (*hapanta*) to participate in the assembly, reaffirms the initial interpellation (*ít[e]*) and their incorporation into oppressive *logos*.[42]

Tereus's call dramatizes the cannibalistic power of democracy as a government system that swallows its constituents, with their consent, into *philia* ("friendship"), concealing conformity as equality, subsuming the notional "other" within the "self," pre-empting the possibility of disidentification — of the crisis that is democracy — through the seductive fantasy of participating in democratic identity. While the construction of the wall is underway — with Peisetaerus's serial imperatives to Euelpides rhythmically mimicking the building process (838–42) — the Chorus of birds expresses enthusiastic approval of the foundational rites in a short song, which again closely tracks Tereus's monody (851–59):

> I consent (*homo-rrhothō*); I concur (*sun-thelō*). *I join in approving the decision* (*sum-parainesas*) to approach the gods with great, solemn processional songs and, in addition, at the same time, to sacrifice some little sheep to ingratiate ourselves with them. *Let* the Pythian cry *come, come, come* (*itō itō itō*), and *let* Chaeris *accompany the song with the aulos* (*sun-auleitō*).

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41 Goldberg (2021, 201).

42 Later, in the lyric sections of the parabasis, the Chorus of birds demonstrates this incorporation by repeating words from Tereus's song while evoking the Muses and their *xum–phōnia:* compare 213 with 744 and 221–22 with 771 and 781–83.

Three *sun-* and *homo-* compounds at the beginning and the imperative *sun-auleitō* at the end encircle the triplet of Tereus's interpellation (ἴτω ἴτω ἴτω [*ítō ítō ítō*]) and the re-enactment of his imperious address to Procne as a command to a female piper (Chaeris) to play *along.* Peisetaerus's opposite order, in turn, to the *aulos* player onstage (*pausai su phusōn* "you, stop blowing" 859) reiterates the mutilating force of Tereus's appeal to his wife (*pausai* […] *hupnou* 209). Arranging multiple gestures of compliance in an enclosing structure, the song's formal design builds up the wall of *consensus:* not only do the birds *consent* to be incorporated, but they become enforcers of the power that cannibalizes them. The birds' conformism, their jolly willingness to play along, invites us to see Cloudcuckooland as an allegory of what has been called "cannibal democracy."[43] It is through the birds' consent that Tereus, on behalf of Peisetaerus, legitimizes, and democratizes, the inequality of the new regime, though the bond of *philia* between the birds and the founders, Tereus and the colonists, mitigates this inequality, at least on the surface (313–15, 329, 371, 627).

Following Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1159b–61b), Jacques Derrida, in *The Politics of Friendship,* suggests that "the concepts of law (*nomos*), convention (*sunthēkē*), [and] community (*koinōnia*) […] are implied in friendship as well as in democracy, and […] bind together, in their very essence, friendship and democracy."[44] Elaborating on the analogy between friendship and democracy, he also remarks that while "there is no democracy without respect for irreducible singularity or alterity," "there is no democracy without the 'community of friends' (*koina ta philōn*), without the calculation of majorities."[45] However, for Derrida, following Montaigne, friendship can amount to a cannibalistic act, "a reduction of the friend to the terrain

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43   I owe this phrase to Nunes (2008).

44   Derrida (1997a, 198). In *Nicomachean Ethics* 1161b9, Aristotle notes that "while in tyrannies friendship and justice hardly exist, in democracies they exist more fully; for where the citizen are equal[,] they have much in common."

45   Derrida (1997a, 22).

of the self,"[46] an interiorization, that is, "digestion" or annihilation, of the other. As an analogue of friendship, democracy too results in the consumption of the "other" through the "community" and its "majorities."

In *Birds,* a convergence between friendship and cannibalism seems to emerge subliminally, through the excess of hyperform, and then literally. At the end of his pompous speech cataloging the festive outburst of pro-bird sentiments among humans after the city's foundation, the messenger reports (1300–302), "Because of *their love for birds* (*phil-ornithias*) they [the humans] all sang songs (*melē*), in which a *swallow* (*chelidōn*) was *incorporated* (*em-pepoiēmenē*) or a duck or a goose." The term *phil-ornithia* is inherently ambiguous, as "love for birds" conjures a taste for their meat.[47] The suggestion is intensified by *melē,* meaning "songs" but also "bodily parts," and *em-pepoiēmenē* ("incorporated"), which, modifying *chelidōn* (the avian counterpart of Philomela), brings to mind Tereus's misdeeds again. At the moment of foundation, the fear that partnership of birds and humans may end in disaster crops up through a reference to the Aesopic fable of the eagle's pact of *philia* ("friendship") and *koinōnia* ("community") with a fox, which it violates by feeding the fox cubs to its eaglets (651–53).[48] *Philia* and *koinōnia* in the play seem to be maintained through a symbolic version of this consumption. Literal cannibalism appears at the conclusion, when birds, allegedly rebels against the "democratic" ones (*tois dēmotikoisin orneois* 1584), are served at Peisetaerus's marriage banquet. This overdetermined moment, to which I will return later, can be seen as an extreme manifestation of the cannibal democracy intrinsic to the utopian enterprise from its inception. The realization of the comic heroes' political fantasy exemplifies the spell of democratic *consensus,* the way the insti-

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46 The quotation is from Deutscher (1998, 162), commenting on Derrida's discussion of the interiorization of the friend through mourning in *Mémoires: For Paul de Man* (1989). See Telò (2018).

47 See, e.g., *philo-plakountos* ("lover of cakes") in Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters* 14.644a.

48 Cf. Archilochus, fragment 174.1–2 West and Aesop, *Fables* 1 Hausrath.

tution of democracy turns its promise of *isonomia* ("equality") into an assimilation of difference, internalized and mimetically performed by its own victims, which has the intensity and the deceptive innocence of friendly love's hidden drive to possess the other.[49]

In Thucydides' account of the debate over the Sicilian expedition — the military enterprise that marked the beginning of Athens' downfall in the Peloponnesian war — we can locate traces of a similar discourse of democratic *consensus* and its discontents. If we juxtapose the end of Alcibiades' speech and the narrator's final comments on the assembly vote that approved the expedition, we observe striking formal connections between the former's manipulation of the rhetoric of political unity and the latter's description of the silencing effects of majority rule:

> "And do not be deterred by this apathy in Nicias's speech and this *division* (*dia-stasis*) of young against old, but in our well-tried order, just as our fathers as young men took counsel with their elders and raised our powers to this level, in the same fashion now strive to lead the city on, with the understanding that youth and age can do nothing without each other, but *the lowly, the average, and the extremely gifted* (*to te phaulon kai to meson kai to pan akribes*) are most potent when they are *all combined* (*homou* […] *xun-krathen*). […] I have no doubt whatsoever in my mind that […] men who conduct their affairs *with the least dissimilarity* (*hēkista dia-phorōs*) from current customs and practices […] are the ones who live in greatest security." […] *A passion* (*erōs*) for the expedition afflicted *everyone alike* (*tois pasin homoiōs*) […] and so, because of the extremes of eagerness among the majority, if anyone felt at all unhappy he was afraid of seeming unpatriotic by an opposing vote, and *he kept quiet* (*hēsuchian ēgen*).[50]

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49 Derrida (1997a, 98) draws attention to the equivalence between *philos* ("friend") and the possessive adjective in Homer.

50 Thucydides 6.18.24–25, trans. Lattimore 1998, with minimal adjustments.

In his speech, Alcibiades seeks to pre-empt charges of elitist individualism through the semantics and syntax of *togetherness,* which, while notionally proving his democratic concern for the unity, solidarity, and equality of the social body, reveal a self-serving attempt to bring it together around his vision by enforcing conformity, the majority principle, as an instrument of communal self-preservation. This strategy of *consensus,* which makes "the communit[y] identif[y] with itself, with nothing left over,"[51] emerges from the combination of these images: the consistency of past and present; the alliance of young and old, the former unable to thrive "without" the latter (and vice versa); and the coalescence (*homou* […] *xun-krathen*) of various social components, as suggested by *te* […] *kai* […] *kai* ("and […] and […] and"). In addition, Nicias is construed as the embodiment and cause of *dia-stasis* — the threat of division that another *dia-* compound (*dia-phorōs*) captures in the phrase closing the speech, "[who] conduct their affairs *with the least dissimilarity* (*hēkista dia-phorōs*)," an indirect call for conformity to established modes of being. Remarking that Alcibiades cast an erotic spell (*erōs*) on "everybody equally" (*tois pasin homoiōs*) — a phrase that prolongs the speech's language of *consensus* — Thucydides calls attention to the incorporating force of Alcibiades' self-righteous appeal to unity, which shuts down any potential dissenter.[52]

We can view the narrator's final comments as appealing to elitist, anti-*dēmos,* pro-Nicias, or philo-oligarchic sentiments, but there is also a basis for a somewhat different critique, of the hardening of democratic will, the closing off of opposing voices by the majority, a dynamic that discourages or suppresses acts of disincorporation, turning democracy into what Rancière calls *post-democracy.*[53] In *Birds* we can perceive something similar during and after the avian assembly summoned by Tereus,

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51 Rancière (1999, 102–3).

52 As Ober (1998, 117) observes regarding this passage, "political dissent loses its voice when faced by the hegemonic will of the mass of citizens."

53 On *post-democracy,* see Rancière (1999, 95–140).

which performs the new community's gathering into a kind of self-enclosure.[54] The Alcibiadean *eros* that unifies *dēmos,* reaffirming democratic *consensus,* arguably parallels Tereus's cannibalistic *philia* and the erotic madness that silenced Philomela. Conversely, in the mutilation of the Herms after the Sicilian debate, we might see an act of *dissensus,* a kind of civic castration that voiced the anti-war feelings repressed during the debate in line with Procne's killing of Itys, another act of castration.[55] As Brown observes in her contribution to *Antidemocracy in America,* presented by one its editors as "a collective effort to assess […] the effects of America's unsettling turn toward authoritarian rule":[56]

> We may want to consider that the West's first known democracy, in ancient Athens, did not feature free speech but *isegoria,* equal speech, the right of every citizen to be heard in assemblies concerning public policy.[57]

Equal speech goes further than free speech, which is a right to say whatever you want without, however, any right to be heard. To the extent that speech is equal the distinction between speech and noise becomes less categorical. Democracy, as Rancierean *politics,* means fostering and heeding noise as the sensation of crisis, as "inarticulation," "annoyance," "irritation, even rage," "the punctuation in the political conversation," "the perturbing

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54 The particular alignments with the Athenian political situation are complicated by the fact that Cloudcuckooland's *consensus* is enforced by two comic heroes, who, like Nicias, are opposed to litigiousness (see Teleclides, fragment 44 Kassel-Austin and Plutarch, *Life of Nicias* 4.3–4, commenting on Nicias's "problems" with sycophants).

55 On the trauma of the mutilation of the Herms, see esp. Winkler (1990) and Wohl (2002, 154–59, 205–14). See also chapter 3. The analogy between Procne's revenge and the mutilation of the Herms stands even if we do not subscribe to the thesis, put forward by Keuls (1993, 381–403), that the Athenian women were responsible for it.

56 Klinenberg (2019, 1).

57 Brown (2019, 231).

intrusion of 'world' into structure and form,"[58] as the cacophony liable to stall decision and thus provoke stasis (etymologically, a "stoppage") — to block the "cut" that is decision.[59]

As we have seen, the shift in accent from ἰτώ (*itō*) to ἴτω (*ítō*) in Tereus's call dramatizes the distribution of the sensible, which exerts its power by dividing speech from supposed noise. Still, a whisper of *dissensus* can be detected, a trace of potential resistance against the interpellating force of such a partition. In the rest of this chapter, I want to attend to possible auscultations of this whisper by heeding the emergence of "episode-mocracy" in the so-called intruder scenes, plot devices that disable the plot.[60]

ii. Episode-mocratic Interruptions

According to Rancière, *dissensus* operates through *interruptions* of "the natural order of domination" that disturb perceptual hierarchies, engendering "contention over what speaking means."[61] *Politics,* the force opposed to the *police,* emerges as the intervention of a "disruptive equality," the arrival of "'newcomers' […] that enact the equal power of anyone."[62] In *Birds*, we can identify these newcomers with the "charlatans" (*alazones*) whom, Peisetaerus declares, the community has "unanimously" (*homo-thumadon*) decided to beat up (1015). The intruder scenes — interruptions in Peisetaerus's plot and in the comic plot's formal structure — are aesthetic disruptions, challenges to *consensus* in that they breach perceptual boundaries, especially between what should be heard or seen and what should not. These scenes, usually regarded as merely indulging the comic

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58 Goldberg (2021, 201, 203).

59 On decision as cutting, see Derrida (2007, 237; 2021, 19b); on the undecidable, see Derrida (2002a, 231) and Cacciari (2009). See also Telò (2023a, ch. 2; forthcoming).

60 See Neyra (2020b, 17): "As a process of listening […] for surprise, for the palpitating terms offered by a body in performance, or in a text […] auscultation reorients us to listening for those aporetically slanted sounds that disrupt a structure from the inside."

61 Rancière (1999, 11, xi).

62 Rancière (2010, 59).

audience's craving for slapstick, disable the plot through an excess of episodicity, which is where I locate this play's critical hyperform, its macro-de-formations. Aristophanes' customary discontinuity reaches a critical point here: the uninterrupted arrival of intruders challenges the idea of the crisis as a state of emergency, an isolated *punctum.* It invites us to think of the *dissensus* that opens up Rancierean politics — and is essential to the democratic principle — as a continuing crisis, a condition that challenges the distinction between before and after. In the readings that follow, I focus on four intruders — Iris, the sycophant, Cinesias, and the oracle-collector — interrogating the disruptive force of their responses to the imperatives of *pauō* ("I stop") that Peisetaerus uses against some of them to halt sound or speech.[63] Among these characters, I ascribe special prominence to Cinesias, whose physical disability, as we will see, figures the "crip temporality" of hyper-episodic form.[64] Like hyperepisodicity, his disability is, in a sense, the somatic image of the ongoing *dissensus* that constitutes democracy as a constantly renewed crisis.

The Cinesias scene, which has received much scholarly attention as a satirical commentary on the New Music,[65] dramatizes *dissensus* through aesthetic dissonance. When, arriving onstage, Cinesias launches into new dithyrambic melodies and expresses the desire to become a "shrill-sounding nightingale," Peisetaerus echoes Euelpides' impatient response to the crow at the beginning of the play: "Stop (*pausai*) trilling and tell me what you're saying!" (1382). In this way, Peisetaerus proclaims his distaste

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63 See 889, 1243, 1381. Among the other interlopers, both the poet and the priest, like Cinesias, confront Peisetaerus with disruptive modes of speaking. Like the oracle-monger, the decree-seller and the inspector resort to the power of a *bublion,* whose anti-paternal force (see below) is taken up by the father-beater. Meton the geometer, who wants to implement his own partition of the sensible by dividing the air into acres, appears as an intolerable rival, and, to Peisetaerus's ear, a spouter of incomprehensible jargon.

64 I owe the phrase "crip temporality" to Samuels and Freeman (2021).

65 See, for example, Kugelmeier (1996, 208–48), LeVen (2014, 153–55), and J.C. Franklin (2017).

for Cinesias's subordination of meaning to sound, of words to music, "scandalous" aspects of the New Music that are attacked by ancient critics. The disruption caused by the lyric performance may also hinge on its implicit assimilation of human to avian language, a reversal of the transition from *itō* to *ítō,* which had served Tereus's system of *consensus.* In the following lines (1395–1400), we can detect this assimilation, which elicits from Peisetaerus another policing use of the verb *pauō* ("I stop"):

> CINESIAS If only I could leap up with *a jump together with the winds' breezes* (*ana-dromos halamenos ham' anemōn pnoaisi*) —
> PEISETAERUS I swear by Zeus that *I will shut down* (*kata-pausō*) your breezes (*tas pnoas*)!
> CINESIAS now moving along a southern route, now, instead, directing my body close to Boreas, *cutting an inhospitable furrow of aether* (*alimenon aitheros aulaka temnōn*).

In Cinesias's lyric interventions, the serial repetition of initial *a* and of "*a* […] consonant […] *a*" in *ana-dromos halamenos ham' anemōn* […] *alimenon aitheros aulaka* organizes the verbal flow in a manner reminiscent of the bird sounds *tiotiotiotiotinx* and *totototototototototinx,* drawn-out accumulations of the same phoneme (*tio/to*). The dissensual logic of sound, corresponding to Cinesias's rebellious upward leap, disassembles human language and the normative distribution of the sensible. In his response, as violently interruptive as the "cancellation of thought" effected by a dash,[66] Peisetaerus plays on the word *pnoai* ("breaths; breezes") to degrade Cinesias's lyrics to mere breath while threatening to "shut him down" (*kata-pausō*) by strangulation, arresting the movement encoded in the dithyrambist's name (from *kineō* "I move"). This implicit endorsement of the traditionalist dismissal of the New Music as pure

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66 Comay and Ruda (2018, 7).

"noise" (*psophos*)[67] is in line with the earlier imperative ("tell me what you're saying!"), which exemplifies a fundamental technique of *consensus,* that is, an "imposed dominance of silence, of political shushing."[68] As Rancière puts it, "If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin […] by not understanding what he says."[69] With his quasi-avian performance, Cinesias upsets the enforcement of perceptual expectations (the "common *aisthēsis*"),[70] claiming an autonomous space for what is perceived as noise. In a sense, he disincorporates Procne, whose original lament, itself a symbol of the New Music, Tereus had swallowed up.[71] This disincorporating force is carried by the prefix *dia-* in the verbs that depict Cinesias's aspirational movements (1392 and 1408–9): "I'll traverse (*di-eimi*) all the aether for you"; "I won't stop […] until, equipped with wings, I *run through* (*dia-dramō*) the sky." The prefix *dia-* presents Cinesias's flight as cutting *through* space, withstanding absorption into a whole, a momentary disidentificatory breach in *consensus* that recalls the birds' habitat before Cloudcuckooland, the *polos* where "everything passes through (*di-erchetai*)."

The political valence of Cinesias's aesthetic disruption is also manifested in his differently shaped body, a counterpart to his "crippling" of the conventional rhythms of human language and poetic form. Cinesias is regularly mocked by comedians as "tall, sickly, sallow, thin to the point of emaciation, and mummy-like,"[72] a portrait that, as is always the case in antiquity, muddles biography with the comic literalization of perceived aesthetic qualities. Peisetaerus tags him with the epithet *philurinos*—"thin like a lime tree" (1378)—and punningly casts his

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67 See, e.g., Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1406b2, and Dionysus of Halicarnassus, *Demosthenes* 7.

68 Goldberg (2021, 201).

69 Rancière (2010, 46).

70 Rancière (2010, 46).

71 Barker (2004, 203) suggests that Procne "would be the perfect accompanist for […] Cinesias."

72 In the words of Lawler (1950, 80). For a survey of the comic sources on Cinesias, see Kidd (2014, 91–93). On the paradigm of aesthetic *leptotēs,* see also Telò (2022).

dithyrambic dancing as limping (1379): *ti deuro poda su kullon ana kuklon kukleis?* ("why do you turn your lame foot here in a circle?"). The foot mocked here is first and foremost metrical, the eccentric realization, in lines 1376–77, of a choriambic meter (long-short-short-long) as a sequence of four short syllables (*sō<u>mati te nea</u>n* [ˉ˘˘˘˘ˉ]), which creates the "limping" effect signaled by *kullon* ("lame").[73] This outré repetition of a metrical unit is comparable to the overwhelming stretching of sound in *totototototototototinx,* the birdsong as "musical metal or metallic music" that Cinesias seems to appropriate in this scene.[74] Peisetaerus's utterance of three consecutive words beginning in *ku-* mockingly previews Cinesias's recursive sounds, his avian crippling of human language.[75] Cinesias's multilayered difference — metrical, verbal, and physical — breaches the perceptual agreement that is *consensus.* It is a disruptive embodiment that expresses not impairment but a push against the limits of corporeality, in line with his aspirations of leaping and soaring. Disability studies have taught us that a different physicality can offer "an affirmation, a 'queer' or 'crip' space for rethinking what it means to be human."[76] Cinesias's body, like Brâncuşi's statue, strains physical contours as well as hierarchies of meaning and form, disturbing the police's assimilating rhythms, eluding Tereus's maw, bringing forth an emancipatory wildness, which radiates from the wildness of form, from a formalistic insistence beyond and against the semantics of mockery, beyond and against representation's normative capacities. This convergence of body and poetic form is encrypted at the end of a line that, juxtaposing the ambiguous *meleōn* ("songs," but also

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73 Ruijgh (1960, 21) observes that the effect of the resolution is "vraiment monstrueux" in that it ruptures "l'équilibre du choriambe." See also Parker (1997, 344–45).

74 I borrow the phrase from D. Wills's discussion of birdsong (2016, 266).

75 In *On Literary Composition* 14.8–9, Dionysius of Halicarnassus presents short syllables as the result of a "mutilation" or even a "castration" of sound.

76 Goodley, Lawthom, and Runswick-Cole (2014, 356). Sandhal (2003) discusses the use of solo performance by queer and disabled people as an affirmation of dissensual visibility.

"bodily parts" or "limbs") with the repetition of the cognates *allot'* ("other times") and *allan* ("another"), seems to advertise Cinesias's musical and physical "alterity," insistent and resistant: *petomai d' hodon allot' ep' allan meleōn* ("sometime I fly along one path of songs, other times along another" 1373–74). A metrically vulnerable "limb" of his "songs," his exceedingly brachysyllabic foot, twists rhythmic "curbs and shackles," analogs of social and political constraints.[77] Seeking political disincorporation through a crossing of the human-nonhuman divide, Cinesias is truly nomadic. Through his physical difference, he enacts an "ethics of becoming," the search for "an expansion or creation of new sensorial and perceptive capacities […] which alter […] what a body can actually do."[78] He also problematizes the identification of agency with conventional ideas of mobility.[79] Cinesias's "unauthorized and impromptu improvisation,"[80] with his nomadic alteration of perceptual expectations, breaks through the all-encompassing democratic *consensus* described by Thucydides, fleetingly embodying the anarchic principle that Rancière considers genuine democracy. At the same time, with its disidentificatory insistence, the broken rhythm of Cinesias's performance instantiates what Alison Kafer has called the "polyrhythmic movement of crip time."[81] Cinesias's intervention invites us to see the hyper-episodic sequence of intruders that it

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77 The phrase "curbs and shackles" is from Levine (2015, 74), commenting on meter as a metaphor for "imprisonment and containment." In *On Literary Composition* 17.3, Dionysius of Halicarnassus cites the following line, from lyric or tragedy (fragment 1027a Page = fragment 136 Nauck), entirely formed by short syllables: *lege de su kata poda neoluta melea* ("tell me, by foot, the newly released meters"). The adjective *neoluta* is a self-reflexive comment on this schema's radical "liberation" from metrical constraints.

78 The quotations are from Braidotti (2013, 49; 2006, 103).

79 See Athanasiou in Butler and Athanasiou (2013, 22): "A […] construal of agency as moving, mobilizing […] reiterates the presumption that agency belongs properly to certain regimes of bodily morphology and recognizability."

80 The quotation is from Hallward (2006, 111), commenting on the "theatricality" of the disruptive moments that, in Rancière's view, cause *politics* to occur.

81 Kafer (2021, 415).

belongs to as itself an embodiment of "crip time," which we are also invited to participate in. As Ellen Samuels points out from the perspective of disabled subjects, crip time "requires us to break in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world."[82]

Another intruder, Iris, also embodies this nomadic *dissensus,* passing through boundaries, literal and otherwise, generating a crisis in, or a kinetic cripping of, hierarchical modes of ontological and civic being. As soon as the fluttering wings of "swift Iris" become audible onstage (1198), Peisetaerus recreates the sound of Tereus's original interpellation (*popopopoi popoi* 227)—"Hey you, *where, where, where* (*poi poi poi*) are you flying?" (1199)—blocking her with an order to "stay still" (*men' hēsuchos / ech' atremas* 1199–1200) and reveal where she comes from (1201). This policing escalates when Peisetaerus commands her capture: *"Won't* anybody *seize* (*xul-lēpsetai*) this woman right here?" (1205).[83] As elsewhere, *xun-* registers both community building and oppressive constraint. Empowered by voids, countering that *xun-* with *dia-* movements, Iris, like Cinesias, has slipped into Peisetaerus's regime of coerced unity (1217–18), silently flying (*dia-petei*), as he puts it, "through a city that belongs to others and through *the yawning gap (tou chaous)"* between heaven and earth. Recognizing the same movements, the Chorus, at the end of the Iris scene, announces that the gods have been barred from "passing across" (*dia-peran*) Cloudcuckooland and that sacrificial smoke will no longer reach them (1264–67). On a deeper level, the transgression conveyed by *dia-* informs the *dissensus* that we can locate in Iris's tirade against

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82 Samuels (2017).

83 As the only female interloper, Iris is subject not just to violence, but to the threat of sexual violence. Although she does not present herself as a specifically female voice of *dissensus,* she represents a specifically female threat to *consensus.* At 1246, in defending the gods' rights, Iris alludes to the second line of Sophocles' *Antigone* (*ar' oisth' ho ti Zeus…*), channeling the heroine, a symbol of political fracture, who defended *a-grapta kasphalē nomima theōn* ("the gods' unwritten and unshakable laws").

Peisetaerus, an evocation of porosity within an assemblage of incongruous pieces (1238–42):

> O fool, fool, don't stir up the terrifying minds of the gods, lest Justice (*Dikē*) entirely overturn *your* whole *race* (*sou genos*) with Zeus's mattock, and *a smoky flame* (*lignus*) *burn to ashes* (*kat-aithalōsei*) *your body and the embrace of your house* (*sōma kai domōn peri-ptuchas)* with the Lycimnian thunderbolts.

Nan Dunbar's characterization of this passage as "a cento of consistently bombastic tragic phrases"[84] is emblematic of commentators' judgment, which, to a degree, conforms to Peisetaerus's own dismissive response, "stop that babbling" (*paue tōn paphlasmatōn* 1243). Instead of relegating Iris's voice to the domain of the "bombastic" or the "empty" (*chaunos,* etymologically connected with "chaos"), however, we might take her speech as a disordering of the "common *aisthēsis.*" The chiasmus in Iris's threat — object-subject-subject-object (*sou genos* […] *Dikē / lignus* […] *sōma kai domōn peri-ptuchas*) — structures a slippage in ontological categories. Linked to *sōma* ("body"), the phrase *domōn peri-ptuchas* ("the embrace of your house") remains suspended between the bodily meaning and the architectural one, so that the wall's stifling enclosure remains, at the same time, an "enfolding embrace," notwithstanding the wild incongruity of *kat-aithalōsei* ("burn to ashes"). This disruption of accepted boundaries of meaning breaches the wall of *consensus,* of aesthetic conformity. In this perspective, we could see Iris's style not as "empty," but rather as "porous." Such formal errancy corresponds to a transition, in Iris's speech, between a divine, personified agent of revenge, Dike, and a natural one, smoky fire in the feminine gender (*lignus*), which, as the chiasmus suggests, continues the goddess's action, or perhaps just recasts her. This transition may encode Iris's own aspirational metamorphosis into an inanimate impetus of *dissensus* — a

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84 Dunbar (1995, 624).

depersonalized energy, similar to smoky anger and at the same time corresponding to de-formation or resistant form[85] — that flies *through* the sky and passes *through* walls. As *paphlasmata,* in Peisetaerus's dismissive description, her words are the noise produced by boiling water, turbulent, potentially disruptive, churned by fire, an image of the "acting out" that constitutes the political.[86] In his aggressive farewell to Iris, Peisetaerus defiantly applies *kat-aithaloō* ("I burn to ashes") to her — "flying some-where else, *burn to ashes (kat-aithalōseis)* somebody younger" (1260–61) — thus retrospectively reinforcing her minoritar-ian kinship with "smoky flame" (*lignus*), her becoming fire, an insistent intensity. As soon as Iris arrives onstage, Peisetaerus frantically urges her to stay quiet (*men' hēsuchos*), to acquiesce in the silence that, in Thucydides' description of the Athenian assembly, shut down a murmuring dissenting minority — "if anyone felt at all unhappy he was afraid of seeming unpatriotic by an opposing vote, and *he kept quiet (hēsuchian ēgen).*" Her fluid mobility is such that even as she departs, silenced for the moment by threats of sexual violence (1254–55), a reactivation of Tereus's rape of the bird-in-waiting Philomela, she holds out the possibility of turning Peisetaerus's initial command ("stop that babbling") against him through an even more powerful force of *consensus: "May you be split asunder (dia-rrhageiēs),* miser-able man, you and your words themselves" (1257) — "You bet my father *will stop* (*pausei*) your hubris!" (1259).[87]

Not just Iris, but two other intruders, the sycophant and the oracle-collector, symbolically bring murmuring Philomela back onstage through the exertions of resistant form. The sycophant

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85 Here I am importing into the Greek word *lignus* (λιγνύς) the "anger" that also constitutes the meaning of *thumos* (Latin *fumus*), another word for "smoke." *Thumos,* as Bennett (2020, 63) observes, is "a *hot mood,* or [a] swirling sensation in the chest, like hot smoke or smoldering fire." See also chapter 3.

86 See Goldberg (2021, 201): "To make noise is to act out [...] to insist on gaining voice in the face of being incessantly silenced."

87 By using the *dia-* compound *dia-rrhageiēs,* Iris responds to Peisetaerus's use of *dia-mēriō* (1254) in his threat of rape, which itself polemically recasts the goddess's ability to pass through.

continues Cinesias's trills by segueing into his performance with a mini-song (1410–11): "Who are these *dappled-winged (ptero-poikiloi)* birds who have nothing, *O wide-winged (tanusi-ptere)* dappled (*poikila*) swallow?" In characterizing the sycophant's sound as a "lament" (*minurizōn* 1414), Peisetaerus invites us to perceive him as an alter ego of the swallow, conventionally seen as having a plaintive cry, and to read his mention of this bird as the invocation of an ally (or a Muse?) or perhaps even as a form of self-address.[88] This kinship with the swallow Philomela may perhaps alter our perspective on the sycophant himself. At the beginning of the play, we discover that Peisetaerus and Euelpides have decided to leave Athens, dissenting from their fellow citizens who are tirelessly obsessed with lawsuits (40–42). As the symbol of the excesses of Athenian litigiousness, the sycophant brings back this experience for the two original dissenters, now enforcers of *consensus,* which, by definition entails "the suppression of the litigiousness constitutive of the political."[89] The language of *consensus* reappears, in fact, after the sycophant has been whipped, a symbolic "suppression of litigiousness" that brings to an end the parade of intruders. His intervention may thus illustrate what Rancière calls "the litigious 'freedom' of the people," a momentary effect of equality between rulers and ruled that stems from a split in modes of signification.[90] Splitting the compound *ptero-poikiloi* ("dappled-winged"), an epithet for the collective of birds, into *tanusi-ptere* ("wide-winged") and *poikila* ("dappled"), both referring to the swallow, the sycophant uses her, the plaintive individual, to split or reconfigure the community. Micro-form overturns, or disables, the mutilating force of *consensus* by opening up lines of flight, cripping language, sub-

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88 Differently, Dunbar (1995, 676).

89 Thus Rancière, quoted in Panagia (2000, 119); Rancière adds: "Consensus means the sharing of a […] nonlitigious experience" (123).

90 The quotation is from Rancière (1999, 70), who elsewhere observes that *dissensus* "means that every situation can be cracked open (*fendue*) from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and significa-tion" (2009a, 49). Osborne (2010, 205–28) sees sycophants as playing a fundamental role in fostering democratic participation.

jecting it to a de-formation, which breaks the distribution of the sensible, channeling the sense of provisional, shifting arrangements and of the radical social reconfiguration made possible by the crisis of litigiousness, by the anarchy of successive *kriseis* ("judgments, trials").

This figurative splitting of *consensus* — the breaking de-formation, or the disidentificatory cacophony that is *politics* — can also be observed in an earlier scene, when a hungry oracle collector arrives with a little book (*bublion*), which he defiantly unrolls before Peisetaerus's eyes, reciting from it self-serving hexametric instructions contrary to the city founder's plans. Writing is an instrument of *dissensus,* a mode of communication with no living *logos* attached, and, thus, a "disordering" of "the legitimate order of discourse."[91] Referring, by way of Derrida, to Plato's notion of the written word as an "orphan" in the *Phaedrus,* Rancière observes that writing (what he calls "mute speech") "is not directed by a father who is capable of guiding it in a legitimate way to where it can bear fruit," but "drifts all over the place."[92] Precisely due to this nomadism, the "speech that speaks by itself"[93] embodies the spirit of *politics*, of genuine democracy, opening the way for "interlopers who disrupt."[94] A wandering archive of anarchic hexameters, the *bublion* carried by the oracle collector troubles the new city, which, in an earlier scene, Peisetaerus reduced to a similar miniature scale, assimilating it to a "little child," his own *paidion* (923). Like Philomela's woven artifact, which, in the narrative economy of Ovid's account, serves as a textual surrogate child, or a provisionally reacquired tongue, the *bublion* is a container of mute speech

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91 Rancière (2004a, 125).

92 Rancière (2011, 93); see also (2004a, 126–27). On writing as an orphan, see the famous analysis of Plato, *Phaedrus* 275e offered by Derrida (1981a, esp. 75–84). On the link between writing and democracy, see also Derrida (1981a, 144–45).

93 Rancière (2011, 94).

94 So Bell (2004, 133), paraphrasing Rancière.

that the oracle collector's voice brings into the open.[95] As the intruder recites the oracular hexameters, the book becomes a supplementary body part, a prosthetic object, which enhances the potentialities of the biological corpus by stretching its borders, by disarticulating its contours, expanding it through a de-formation, not just the dissemination of writing, but the gesture toward unboundedness inherent in the act of unscrolling. The *bublion* is analogous to Philomela's tapestry — a substitute for her amputated tongue, which, as suggested by Sophocles' characterization of it as the "voice of the loom," supplies a trace of the lost voice, like writing itself.[96] Reciting extracts from the *bublion,* the oracle collector unrolls it, that is to say, he pulls the scroll's edges apart, an action reflected in the split of the trimeter between the two speakers (the so-called *antilabē*) that occurs every time he tells Peisetaerus, "Take a look at the book (*to bublion*)."[97] This interruption gives the unrolled book the same excessive power of *dissensus* as Cinesias's brachysyllabic foot, which, while moving around, causes a repeated "break" in the sound, and a humorless de-formation of the representational agenda of comic meaning. As it turns out, Peisetaerus, who has his own *bublion,* assumes the role of the "father who is capable of guiding" a written text "in a legitimate way." He uses it, in fact, to drive the oracle collector away (989–90). Turning the *bublion* into a weapon requires rolling it up, bringing *together* the scroll's folds, making its edges *con*verge, an image of the violence packaged in Peisetaerus's act of bringing the new

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95 On the Ovidian Philomela's tapestry as a substitute for a child, see Oliensis (2009, 80–88). Whether the artifact woven by the Sophoclean Philomela was pictorial or textual (or a combination of the two), the symbolic overlap between the two spheres is captured in the Greek word *graphē.*

96 Cf. Sophocles, fragment 595 Radt². On feminist readings of this fragment, see most recently LeVen (2020, 200–201). As Pavlock (1991, 40) observes, "Philomela […] generates a new tongue by substituting her weaving skills for her lost vocal powers"; see also S. Butler (2019, 180). For the prosthetic nature of writing, see esp. Derrida (1976, 195–200).

97 See 974, 976, 980. In Ovid's account (*Metamorphoses* 6.581), Procne "unrolls" (*evolvit*) her sister's tapestry, which, like the oracle collector's book, contains a carmen (lit. "poetry").

community together. This gesture closes the gap that the ora-
cle collector's book creates in the edifice of the *police,* the *chaos*
where Iris moves as she contests borders of space and meaning.
The prosthetic *bublion* incapacitates the process of homogeniza-
tion, intrinsic to democratic government and comic mockery,
which seals up cracks and normalizes parts, such as Cinesias's
foot, that do not fit. As a supplement to the intruder's body, the
bublion models democracy as "a supplement," something "irre-
ducible to the practice of government"[98] or the heterogeneous
part, represented by those who have no part, that supplements
government by disabling its system of inclusion and exclusion,
its distribution of parts.

This notion of a political supplement goes along with the for-
mal status of the intruder scenes themselves, the most episodic
parts of Aristophanes' episodic plots. In a sense, the repeated
opening of the oracle seller's book, which each time makes
the slapstick start anew, is in keeping with the structure of the
intruder scenes, wherein a new intervention marks a crisis,
and a new *krisis* ("judgment") of the comic heroes' enterprise,
frustrating viewers' and readers' desire to get back to the "main
action," or conversely, prolonging the pleasure of remaining in
an apparently inert space of irrelevance, where the cutting of
decision is interrupted. Extended episodicity, this play's hyper-
form, is provoked by the ongoingness of the interruptions, by
the suspension, the breakage of the plot's action through the
insistence of futile, un-decisive breaks or de-formations. Aris-
totle observes that poets employing "episodic" (*ep-eisodiōdeis*)
actions "stretch" (*para-teinonentes*) the plot "beyond its capac-
ity" (*para tēn dunamin*) and "distort" or "disfigure" (*dia-stre-
phein*) what follows (*Poetics* 1451b34–52a2).[99] Episodicity — the
abundance of digressive scenes that fail to advance the narra-
tive — deterritorializes the plot, turning it into an anti-hierarchi-
cal juxtaposition. The excess expressed by "beyondness" (*para*)

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98 Rancière (2009b, 276–77).
99 In 1459b26–31, Aristotle shows a more positive attitude toward episodic
    moments in epic.

is, at the same time, a form of "besideness," a kind of agglutinative equality. In implicit continuity with Aristotle's judgment, Martin Revermann observes that the "structural overextension" of the intruder scenes in *Birds* shows "enough inbuilt redundancy […] to make some of them easily dispensable."[100] Not advancing the plot, these scenes have been perceived as parts that do not fit into the whole. For Rancière, *politics* is by definition episodic, "sporadic," involving "intervals" or "fractures […] through which egalitarian logic comes and divides the police community from itself."[101] These "intervals" within the regime of the police correspond, in his theory of film, to "intervals" in the logic of cinematic representation and plotting, which make room for the "autonomous power of the image,"[102] for pure sensation, or a kind of photographic stoppage, allowing for "both flow/duration *and* its interruption."[103] The "intervals" in political *consensus* prompted by the intruders in *Birds* correspond to the extensive discontinuities, the "holes," that, ostensibly, the intruder scenes open in the already precariously assembled whole of the comic plot.[104] They each constitute a moment of cri-

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100 Revermann (2006, 336).

101 Rancière (1999, 137). See also Badiou (2005, 119), on the "event" as the counterpart of Rancière's "politics": "What the State strives to foreclose through its power of counting is the void of the situation, while the event always reveals it" (my emphasis). The kind of episodic temporality that I am theorizing here is both eventual and anti-eventual.

102 Rancière (2006, 107). In *The Intervals of Cinema* (2014), Rancière observes that the art of cinema "exists through the play of gaps and improprieties" (11), through its "way of accelerating or slowing time, shrinking or expanding space, harmonizing or de-harmonizing gaze and action, making or breaking the sequence of before and after, inside and outside" (103). For Rancière, "Political forms [are] reinvented by reference to the multiple ways the visual arts invent gazes, arrange bodies in particular locations and make them transform the spaces they cross" (126).

103 The citation is from Baumbach (2018, 146), commenting on André Bazin's work.

104 To use Corcoran's formulation, we can say that the episodes make "the middle no longer [appear] as a point of passage between a beginning and an end, but more as a milieu without meaning." Episodes are like "details" that "[seem] to detach themselves from their internal organization," as noted by Corcoran in Rancière (2017, vii).

sis, but through their seriality they contest the very idea of crisis as an emergency, an individual moment. Going a step further, we may say that the extended de-formation of the plot's structure, which Aristotle imputes to the episodic form's disorderly extension, resembles Cinesias's stretching, his expansion of bodily capabilities. In other words, the episodic can be thought of not merely as digressive or interpolative, but as supplementary[105] — a pocket of *dissensus* that disrupts the consensual whole, that enables yet incapacitates the comic, builds comic excess, that is, the excess constitutive of the comic, yet causes the comic to exit itself, as it were. The episodic can, in other words, be seen as a form of disability, an enactment of crip temporality, that is, "time not just expanded but exploded."[106] The idea of crip temporality opposes the belief that "becoming disabled is a single moment, tangible, identifiable, turning life into a solid, singular, static before-and-after." It unbuilds hierarchical temporality by making room for "multiple befores and afters, proliferating befores and afters, all making more crip presents possible."[107] Hyper-episodicity generates something similar to "crip simultaneity, crip concurrence,"[108] the sense of equality emerging from a juxtaposition of critical moments, of concomitant challenges to, or disablings of, democratic complacency.

iii. Disability and Democratic Fundamentalism

Like the plot and its apparently recalcitrant part, the episode, *consensus* and *dissensus* are always co-implicated, the latter as the constitutive outside that determines the former while calling

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105 In Metagenes, fragment 15 Kassel-Austin, *epeisodion* is assimilated to tasty food "that complements the bulky staple" (Ruffell 2011, 169).

106 Kafer (2013, 27).

107 Kafer (2021, 417–18).

108 Kafer (2021, 418). Kafer raises the question "What are the temporalities that unfold beyond, away from, askance of productivity, capacity, self-sufficiency, independence, achievement?" I will address this question in the next chapter.

it into question.[109] I will now consider how the episodic, supplementary force of *dissensus* emerges, to be swallowed up, in the penultimate scene, which paves the way for the final wedding of Peisetaerus and Basileia.

Disability and democracy seem to converge again in a scene at a juncture of ostensible moral and aesthetic crisis, in which *consensus* is provisionally thwarted. A moment similar to US customs officials' refusal to recognize the Brâncuşi statue occurs during the first exchange of the divine delegation (Poseidon, Heracles, and a Triballian deity) whose negotiations will lead to marriage between Peisetaerus and Basileia. The latter is the custodian of the virtues, and vices, expected to flow into Cloudcuckooland: "good deliberating," "good lawmaking," and "moderation" (*sōphrosunēn*), as well as "slander," and others (1539–41). No sooner do the three gods arrive than Poseidon polices the Triballian god's *habitus,* the way his cloak is draped (1567–72):

> Hey, you, what are you doing? So, are you wearing your cloak to the left? Turn *the cloak (toimation)* immediately to the right, this way! Come on, idiot! Are you a Laispodias in body? Democracy (*Ō dēmokratia*), where will you take us if the gods have elected somebody like this guy! Keep still (*atremas*)! The hell with it (*oimōze*)!

By reversing the expected orientation of his cloak, the Triballian god disarrays the current distribution of the sensible and disorients his interlocutor, prompting him to reassert aesthetic orthodoxy through interpellation ("*this way*"). This orthodoxy is deceptively presented as the enforcement of a "natural" notion of what is socially proper or right, of *sōphrosunē,* something similar to the idea of "moderation" that, according to Rancière, is commonly deployed in liberal democracies to furnish consensus with a veneer of moral legitimization and to encourage

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109 On the notion of a "constitutive outside," see esp. Staten (1985), who examines the concept in Derrida.

contentment with it.[110] Conflating the gods' government with Athenian democracy, Poseidon's vocative *ō dēmokratia* (1570) builds on moral indignation to reinforce the logic of *consensus* against the presumed impropriety not just of the Triballian, but also of Laispodias, a contemporary politician apparently prone to "disorderly" draping and whose name, depending on how it is parsed, evokes "immoderate" sexual habits or oversized feet.[111] Like Cinesias's foot, Laispodias's own feet or, according to other ancient accounts, his allegedly "crooked" or very thin legs embody a queering, that is to say, a "twisting," of the *police,* an assertion of politics as a challenge to the *police's* vertical, upright stance.[112] Thus, rather than reading Poseidon's address merely as a fourth-wall-breaking complaint against the current political situation — a kind of comic *O tempora o mores* targeted at "unfitting" politicians — we can take it as a dramatization of the process by which democratic governments in Athens and elsewhere suppress attempts to disarticulate their conformism, to enact disidentifying, disabling motions, or even think of alternative political configurations.[113] When Poseidon says, "keep

110 See Rancière (1999, 136, 106), where he refers to "the empty virtue Plato called *sōphrosunē,*" that is to say, "the fact of each person's being in their place."

111 *Laispodias* can be interpreted as a talking name, meaning "much screwing" (*Lai-spodias*) or "a lot of foot" (*Lais-podias*). Hesychius, *Lexicon* λ 158 Latte (= *Comica adespota* fragment 380 Kassel-Austin) refers to the "crookedness" of his legs, while other sources present them as excessively thin or diseased. On thinness of legs as a physiognomic indicator of unrestrained sexuality, see Telò (2007, 566).

112 The word "queer" is connected with the root **terkʷ-*, the source of *torqueo* ("twist") in Latin and *torsion* in English. On this etymology and the oblique directionality expressed by the word, see esp. Ahmed (2006, esp. 67–68, 161–62). Cavarero (2016) has posited a link between the notions of *rectitude/righteousness* and the upright position, making a case for what she calls *inclination.*

113 J. Butler (2018, 4) defines disidentification as "the exciting venture of departing from protocols of propriety that seek to shame a wide range of desires and to foreclose potential connections or […] connections with potentiality." Analyzing Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis,* Wohl (2022, 67) observes that in this play *"aporia* is […] a *mode* of agency and the enabling, as well as the disabling, condition of democratic politics." In

still," the same order that Peisetaerus directs against Iris, he is not simply adjusting the Triballian god's cloak, but also correcting an immodest torsion, or a cripping, of the overlapping regimes of aesthetics and social order, seeking to restore them to an upright, immobile position. However, an expression of angry frustration (*oimōze*) breaks the stillness. The Triballian god's queer *habitus* — a "sissy insurgency"[114] — has truly disoriented Poseidon's policing in that it has, for the moment, made him lose his stifling grip on the order of things, exposing the contingency of that order.[115] Hyper-episodicity seems to continue even after all the intruders have left the stage, enhancing the sense of no clear-cut formal "befores" and "afters," heightening the insistence of crip temporality, making Poseidon's scandalized apostrophe to democracy into a disavowal of democratic excess, of democracy's deep affinity with the excess, with the insurrectionary gesture inscribed in Laispodias's name and body.

This disavowal is undermined by a micro-effect of resistant formalism in the last scene, even as we see how the power of conformity catalyzed by Heracles' manipulation of language leads dissenters to surrender completely to the incorporating force of *consensus* (1677–89):

> PEISETAERUS The whole thing depends on the Triballian. What do you say?
> TRIBALLIAN Beautipul kirl and creat brincess *I give (para-didōmi) birdy.*
> HERACLES He says, *"hand her over" (para-dounai).*

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this chapter, I seek to materialize this notion of "disabling" through crip embodiment and the queer politics of the crip.

114 I owe this phrase to Ross (2022), who applies it to a set of bodily practices — modes of gendered deportment and comportment — used in hegemonic American culture to racialize African American cis-men. The very phrase "sissy insurgency," with its pronounced hissing, is an example of resistant form.

115 See Ahmed (2006, 157–79) on the phenomenology of *disorientation*.

POSEIDON By Zeus, this guy is not saying *"give her" (para-dounai), he's just chirping (babazei)* like swallows (*cheli-dones*).

HERACLES That's exactly what he's saying, *to give her to the swallows (para-dounai tais chelidosin).*

POSEIDON All right, *settle (di-allattesthe)* and *come to an agreement (xum-bainete),* the two of you; and, since doing so seems good to both of you, *I will remain silent (sigēsomai).*

HERACLES We have decided *to agree to (sun-chōrein)* all your proposals. You yourself come with us to heaven to get Basileia and all the things that are there.

PEISETAERUS These guys (*houtoii*) have been chopped up (*kat-ekopēsan*) just in time for the wedding.

When the Triballian seems to support the plan of "handing over" (*para-didōmi*) the princess to the birds, Heracles precipitously intervenes, breaking the line through the repetition of the same verb (*para-dounai*), a formal suggestion of aggressive *consensus,* which is produced within the interstices of dissensual form. Initially opposed to the plan, Poseidon strips the Triballian of language, dismissing his words as inarticulate sound (*babazei*), the noise produced by swallows. Enforcing another strategy of *consensus,* Heracles metonymously recasts Poseidon's observation, reviving Peisetaerus's treatment of the crow's vocalization at the beginning of the play, reasoning, we may presume, that if the Triballian twitters like a swallow he must be saying that Basileia should be handed over to the swallows, that is, to the birds. Erasing the gap between Poseidon's intentions and this misreading of them, the repetition of *chelidones / chelidosi* in consecutive lines (1681–82) underscores the cannibalistic force of Heracles' consensual procedure — metonymy, with an added measure of synecdoche, by which "swallows" (the part) stands in for "birds" (the whole). At the end of the dialogue, the delegation's ostensible approval of the marriage is marked by three elements, which further the sense of conformity generated through violence: silence, in Poseidon's response to Heracles (*sigēsomai*

1684); acquiescence, captured in Heracles' formal announcement to Peisetaerus ("we have decided *to agree* [*sun-chōrein*] to all your proposals" 1685); and mutilation, in Peisetaerus's triumphant comment (*kat-ekopēsan* 1688). This complex of actions delineate an imaginary of *consensus* that brings us back to the story of Procne and Philomela, already activated by the mention of swallows. The primary referent of the subject of *kat-ekopēsan* ("they have been chopped up") — the deictic *houtoii* ("These guys") — is an implied *ornithes,* the rebellious birds, opposing their "democratic" fellow citizens (*tois dēmotikoin orneois*), who, in retaliation, have been served up at the wedding banquet (1583–85).[116] But the referential ambiguity of *houtoii* makes us recognize additional victims in the divine ambassadors themselves, who, having become Peisetaerus's "allies" (*philoi* 1592), have been metaphorically swallowed up by his *police* order, thus experiencing Itys's fate. With Poseidon's compliant *sigēsomai,* his earlier assimilation of the twittering Triballian god to the swallow Philomela, the chief expression of his dissent, bounces back and too condemns the lord of the sea to her condition, a muteness, which, in the play, as we have seen, is transferred to Procne. The agreement within the delegation, which foreshadows the final choral ode apparently celebrating "communal" joy (*xun-ekoimisan* "they joined us" 1734; *sun-nomōn* "of fellow singers" 1755; *sun-choreuson* "join us in dance" 1761), transforms the agents of *dissensus,* reduced to noise or silence, into participants in, and thus reinforcers of, *consensus.*[117] Still, in the ratification of this agreement, a micro-element in line 1683 can be read as the minoritarian, excessive emergence of resistant formalism: the juxtaposition of the prefixes *dia-* and *sun-* in the verbs *di-allattesthe* ("settle") and *xum-bainete* ("come to an agreement"), which, despite their synonymy, conjure a cacophonic effect of

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116 On these controversial lines, see esp. Romer (1997, 60). Regardless of their precise meaning, what is striking is that Peisetaerus is perversely aligning his horrific act with a defense of the democratic cause.

117 In this play, even Prometheus, the dissenter par excellence, becomes an instrument of Peisetaerus's consensual edifice, if only to carry on his long-time feud with the gods.

simultaneous opposites, a trace of lingering episodicity, an effect of "crip concurrence" in the very political shushing implicit in democratic fantasies of unity and harmony.

Multiple elements invite us to see Peisetaerus as a prototypical, Peisistratus-like tyrant, or "the sovereign trickster"[118] — first and foremost, the killing of the rebellious birds, a horrific breaking point in the comic plot, which continues to unsettle a listener's or a reader's perception of the play even when it moves toward the customary festive gathering.[119] This act, allegedly carried out in defense of democracy, as we have seen, implies a bio- or necropolitical reduction of citizens to mere bodies as in totalitarian systems.[120] It exploits comedy — the kinship of the comic hero with the comic poet as well as the self-protective screen of dark humor — to reveal the obscene truth that "freedom and authority stem from the right to kill" and sovereignty's self-authorizing power to be inhuman by handing out or taking away humanity.[121] (The boundary of complicity and distance between the comic medium and its represented object is, of course, tenuous). Although, in this chapter, my goal has not been to argue for a stable alignment of Peisetaerus's regime with any specific political system, I have sought to show that this regime foregrounds, from the outset, a dystopian dimension that can be connected with the dilemma of democracy, that is, how to channel its principles of deferral and openness into the necessarily closural form of government and sovereignty. Through episodic

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118 I borrow this phrase from Rafael (2022), who applies it to the Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte and Donald Trump, who share the idea that part of their "executive privilege includes the freedom to take pleasure in joking and shaming, turning these into important weapons" (78).

119 The comic hero is addressed as *turannos* at 1708. On Peisetaerus as a tyrant, see, e.g., Konstan (1997, 15–16), Romer (1997, 59–64), and Anderson and Dix (2007).

120 On biopolitics, see esp. Foucault (2013a; 2013b); on necropolitics, see Mbembe (2019).

121 I borrow language from Rafael (2022, 66). The sovereign trickster uses crass humor to perform his empowering inhumanity, to demonstrate that "to be inhuman is to possess a dangerous power that transcends law and life itself," something that "has to do with its access to death."

hyperform — that is, the hyperform expressed by disgressive excess, episodic unplotting — *Birds* offers an opportunity to reflect on democracy's troubles in creating the conditions for "a coming together" that leaves room for conflict and disidentification. Chantal Mouffe has advocated a model of democracy based on "the recognition and the legitimation of conflict," on the assumption that "every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices."[122] Embracing the supplementary force of *dissensus,* this democracy can become not just the embodiment of an apparently paradoxical "conflictual consensus,"[123] but, more radically, a "critical democracy," one that "leads people to disobey" and "seeks, ahead of the actual breaking out of revolts, to understand how far disobeying can be a victory [...] against the generalized conformity and inertia of the world."[124] In *Birds,* the comic hero and his companion at least start off as dissenters, but their utopian regime, which, like the Athenian state, cannot make room for dissenting positions, reveals that a lack of "conflictual consensus," a failure to keep democratic government open, risks the fragmentation or annihilation of the community. The dissensual force in the play is located not so much in the alternative world they build as in the episodic resistance they encounter: Philomela's wordless protests, the movements of a differently shaped body, sartorial foreignness (or queerness) — each of them similar to bird sounds or the aesthetic voice of Brâncuși's statue, which is driven by the logic of sensation. The disruption of conventional *aisthēsis* that these vulnerable yet resilient corporealities provoke opens a space for the construction of "forms of community in dispute."[125]

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122 Mouffe (2013, 7, 2).

123 Mouffe (2013, 8).

124 Gros (2020, 9, 121). Müller (2021, 56) remarks that "democracy needs conflicts, but the conflicts need to be represented in such a way that 'partners to the conflict' do not end up excluding each other from the polity."

125 I borrow the phrase "forms of community in dispute" from Rancière (1999, 115). On bodily vulnerability and political resistance, see J. Butler (2015, 123–53; 2016) and J. Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay (2016).

Creating a diachronic community of audiences and readers laughing — or *not* laughing — at the same or different moments, for similar or different reasons,[126] Aristophanic comedy itself generates a juxtaposition, a crip concurrence, of *consensus* and *dissensus,* which is figured by its episodic hyperform, a purely paratactic organization of parts. The accumulation of episodes in the play circulates the feeling of the perpetual deferral, the constant *à venir* that prevents democracy from turning into anti-democratic stabilization, from abolishing or killing itself by losing its constitutive, vital negativity.[127] On the other hand, the disturbing dystopic scenario of cannibalism that we see at the end of the play, when Peisetaerus becomes the tyrannical Peisistratus — a morbid joke suggestive of "democratic" comedy's connivance with biopower's cruel humor or humorously effaced cruelty — may be viewed as an enforcement of democratic *consensus* through what Jodi Dean has called "democratic fundamentalism." Democracy keeps us faithful to itself not just by hiding its own biopower and casting "anything that is not democratic" as "totalitarian, and unacceptable to any rational person,"[128] but by presenting itself as the destination — the *telos* with no residual potential, with no room for any viable alternatives — thus closing off our imaginative possibilities, forestalling the quest for creative configurations or de-formations of the political beyond the triad of democracy, oligarchy, monarchy, or tyranny.[129] This frame of mind, the generalized assent to democ-

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126 On comedy's co-implication of "grin" and "chagrin," see esp. Berlant and Ngai (2017, 233).

127 On *à venir,* see Introduction. Democracy is *à venir* in the sense discussed in this chapter that it should be kept open by constant deferral; it should never be received as a future present, that is, as a self-identical presence; see most recently P.A. Miller (forthcoming), on Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994) and *The Politics of Friendship* (1997a). Dean (2009, 75–94) has observed, following Žižek, that when democracy is realized or treated as such, it turns into a neoliberal fantasy.

128 Dean (2006).

129 According to some, "democratic fundamentalism" looms over us especially during the COVID pandemic, which might seem to have offered the possibility of full actualization of "sovereign power's own utopian scenarios,"

racy as the only conceivable system,[130] has generated in our time the paradoxical aberration of "illiberal democracies," where a state-organized suppression of civil liberties is regarded not as the very negation of the democratic institution, but simply as the expression of a democratically legitimate policy orientation, just as long as regular elections take place and the principle of majority is upheld.[131]

Brown observes that "democracy always lives elsewhere from the state, even in democracies," for "states abduct, institutionalize, and wield 'surplus power' generated by the people."[132] Lamenting that democracy is in crisis, because, as we sometimes hear, "increased demands on the social state" turn into "decreased respect for autonomous state functions" is a neoliberal strategy for killing democracy.[133] There is a sense in which democracy and crisis are deeply connected. As Derrida puts it, crisis is a moment "in which the *krisis* appears […] impossible." For him, crisis "is not just any form of the incalculable; it is the incalculable as a *moment* of calculation."[134] We can say that protecting political equality — the *isēgoria* that is the very principle of democracy — means embracing and even encouraging the possibility that *krisis* ("judgment") may coincide with crisis, that "the incalculable" may emerge in, and be indistinguishable from, the *"moment* of calculation." When Nadia Urbinati writes that "what democracy promises is a process of regulated par-

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as Toscano (2020, 10) puts it. This cautionary note need not lead to an endorsement of Agamben's irresponsible polemic against governmental policies of public care (2021); see esp. Bratton (2021, ch. 16); on the idea that even during the pandemic, "public protest and expression are essential aspects of the collective 'resilience' of a society," see Sotiris (2020, 28), with particular reference to the Black Lives Matters demonstrations; see also Gill-Peterson and Lavery (2020, 641), on trans[(*)] demonstrations, also during the pandemic. On Athenian democracy's constant co-implication with tyranny and aristocracy, see esp. Wohl (2002).

130 See Müller (2021, 39).
131 See Müller (2021, 49).
132 Brown (2019, 25).
133 Brown (2019, 73).
134 Derrida (2002b, 72).

ticipation […] based on equal conditions of political power and performed in view of […] making decisions that hold for all but without making political power pursue any other specific goal except endlessly reproducing" that process,[135] she implicitly associates democracy with a non-teleological persistence, a kind of repetitious, autotelic processuality, where judgment gives way to the duration of *judging,* to an ongoing crisis that is reminiscent of the episodic hyperform of *Birds.*[136]

In the initial scene of *Birds,* the incomprehensible trajectory of the crows anticipates the crisis arising from the play's macroformal wildness. The overgrowth of intruder scenes, in keeping with this wild nomadism, represents a breaking or disabling of decisional temporality, a demand for the crisis resulting from an interruption prolonged through the juxtaposition of its multifarious expressions, an insistence on democracy as the political counterpart of bodily non-normativity, an insistence on equality as a resistant de-formation.[137]

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135 Urbinati (2014, 235).

136 This emphasis on processuality connects with the idea of "democracy of the living" or "democracy as a form of life" put forward by Butler and Worms (2023).

137 On wildness, ferality, and queerness, see Halberstam (2020a).

Compound Labor:
Frogs

Synopsis: Feeling nostalgic for the tragic poet Euripides, the god of theater Dionysus, accompanied by the slave Xanthias, plans to rescue his idol from the Underworld. As soon as he arrives in the kingdom of Hades, greeted by the Chorus of frogs in the bubbly marshes, Dionysus is mistaken for Heracles, an illustrious earlier visitor whose outfit he has borrowed. The target of various vengeful attacks, he commands Xanthias, his fixer, clever slave *avant la lettre* and producer of jokes, to take the blows by pretending to be him (Dionysus/Heracles). The main event in the play is the poetic contest between Aeschylus and Euripides, whose verses are evaluated through material weighing. The play ends with Dionysus's unexpected verdict in favor of Aeschylus, whom he will bring back to Athens.

In the 2018 collection *Critical Theory at a Crossroads,* Jean-Luc Nancy connects "crisis" with what he calls "mutation," something that "suspends time" or that makes time become "a time

wherein one can leave time."[1] The emergence of Christianity, for him, was such a "mutation"; "capitalism and humanism" constituted another, bringing an energizing yet self-depleting obsession with "infinite growth, increase, accumulation of power and knowledge" and with "the idea of accomplishment."[2] One could find in the Renaissance fetishization of human intellectual power — but also in much earlier dynamics — an alienation of subjects from a sense of control over their own production, the fomenting of a compulsion for *doing* and *making* and a kind of consumerist frenzy. This frenzy is, in the words of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, a "rhythm of continuous improvement" driving us to a "fantasy, which we perform or, more precisely, out-perform in social death."[3] It is in this vein that I interrogate the aesthetics of crisis in Aristophanes' *Frogs* as it relates to the rhythm of *chrēsis* ("instrumentality"), the consumerist instrumentality enforced by both ancient and modern hierarchical systems. Produced in 405 BCE and permeated by the sense of a tragic ending, Athens's impending defeat in the Peloponnesian War, *Frogs* is programmatically a play of crisis and mutation.[4] Not only does it occur at a political turning point, but it stages an aesthetic *krisis* ("judgment"). At the center of the play, the politically charged contest between a pair of dead tragedians, the "aristocratic" Aeschylus and the "democratic" Euripides, sets the terms for the literary-critical binary comparison that Hellenistic scholars and their successors, ancient and modern, would call *krisis* (or *sun-krisis* "com-parison").[5] It is not, how-

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1   Nancy (2018, 170). "Compound labor," the title of this chapter, is a term used by Engels (1907, 219–22). Through my analysis, I will model a proto-Marxist Aeschylus different from the one famously traced by G. Thompson (1941), on which see M. Griffith (2022, 394–95)

2   Nancy (2018, 170).

3   Harney and Moten (2021, 102).

4   Classicists tend to see *Frogs* as a crisis play primarily in historicist terms, that is, as a document of Athenian turmoil at the end of the fifth century: see, e.g., Storey (2011).

5   On poetological *krisis* in *Frogs,* see Rosen (2004), Hardie (2007), and Halliwell (2011, 93–154); on Hellenistic and Roman (*sun-*)*krisis*, see Too (1998, 115–50) and Feeney (2002). On aristocratic Aeschylus vs. democratic

ever, this comic *krisis* per se that is my focus here. Rather, I try to think about Aristophanic politics beyond the ideological binary, producing an Aeschylo-centric reading, and locating, paradoxically, an emancipatory latency in the old-fashioned Aeschylean mode as codified by Aristophanes. I thus defamiliarize the unstable opposition of Aeschylus vs. Euripides by, to an extent, deliberately neglecting Euripides. The fact that the "aristocratic" Aeschylean aesthetic-political mode, apparently longed for in *Frogs,* is undermined by Aristophanes' mobile, all-encompassing irony — a quasi-Euripidean characteristic, we could say — should not prevent us from interrogating its emancipatory potential.[6] From my Aeschylo-centric perspective, I articulate a possibility of resistant reading against Aristophanes' disavowed Euripidean infatuation and, further, against the exploitation entailed by Aristophanes' comic frenzy. Drawing broad political implications from effects of reading that are radically formalistic rather than based in historicist contextualism, I will show how what can be construed as Aeschylean resistance may resonate with us as we read the play in the current moment of global crisis.

I am concerned with the ways that, in the play, crisis can be seen as a suspension, or deceleration, of time. As Steven Shaviro observes:

> For us today, crisis has become a chronic and seemingly permanent condition. We live, oxymoronically, in a state of perpetual, but never resolved, convulsion and contradiction. Crises never come to a culmination; instead, they are endlessly and indefinitely deferred.[7]

In *Frogs,* the unsettling impression of inhabiting a time in which time is suspended — a perennial state of crisis such as we are

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Euripides, see, e.g., Csapo (2002); on the instability of this binary, see Rosen (2004). See also the Introduction.

6   On this theoretical point, see the Introduction.

7   Shaviro (2015, 9).

experiencing[8] — can summon emancipatory possibilities of social change.[9] In the Aristophanic context, these possibilities are predicated upon the deferral of productivity, upon a refusal to produce or reproduce a service or an object, whether for a literal master or a figurative one — from the playwright's perspective, the audience demanding the endless production of jokes, comic gags, or tragic plots.

I will articulate the idea of crisis as an a-chronic condition by following animal time and making a case for "becoming frog" as a mode of dissensual politics, which I call batracho-politics. This is an experiment in what Brian Massumi has called animal politics, that is, a model of political theory informed by the rhythms and temporalities of animality.[10] I use amphibian becoming as an entry point into what I see as the play's push against velocity, which normalizes and thereby immobilizes the subject. As Karl Marx puts it in *Fragment on Machines,* "The worker's activity, reduced to a mere abstraction of activity, is determined and regulated on all sides by the movement of the machinery, and not the opposite."[11] Against the "acceleration-ist" trend in neo-Marxist thought that has taken hyper-velocity,

8   I am writing in the time of the COVID pandemic, which has only increased the sense of crisis, a painful feeling of an impending ending or of a permanent "state of exception" (Agamben 2005), prevalent since November 8, 2016. For a re-evaluation of the AIDS pandemic in light of the current one, see Cheng, Juhasz, and Shanhani (2020). The pandemic has realigned crisis in the political sense with the original Hippocratic, epidemiological sense of *krisis.*

9   For Hannah Arendt, crisis is "a disappearance of common sense" (1954, 178). Similarly, Ghosh (2020, 66) sees it as "an epistemological cut in previous understandings of how things progress in time."

10   What Massumi (2014, 39–40) calls animal politics "does not recognize the wisdom of utility as the criterion of good conduct" or *"any rigid opposition* […] between the enthusiastic expenditure of creative energies and the anchor of function and utility." Honig (2021, 27–28) views the Maenads in *Bacchae* as attaining a "slowed sociality," away from their family duties, on Cithaeron. Can we see this slowness as resulting from the influence of animal time, from their closeness to the animals they end up dismembering?

11   Marx (2014, 53).

an embrace of technology and futurity, as a tool for exhausting capitalism, I will dwell on the potentialities of a different kinetic affect, a slowness, amphibian and otherwise, that arrests the alienating frenzy of serial production.[12] More than any other Aristophanic comedy, *Frogs* heavily relies on — and in a sense codifies — the figure of the "running slave," always at the disposal of his masters (within and outside the fictional frame), expected to package and deliver jokes and gags on demand.[13] What has been called the "malignant velocity" of capitalism seems to be previewed, in *Frogs,* by a frenetic slapstick, an obsessive comedic production dizzyingly enacted in the very structure of the play.[14] Homologous to amphibian slowness, the stubbornness of

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12   As Shaviro (2015, 3) puts it, "The hope driving accelerationism is that, in fully expressing the potentialities of capitalism, we will be able to exhaust it and thereby open up access to something beyond it." Accelerationism seeks, in a sense, to realize the redemptive potential of the machinic schizophrenia — in the phrase of Deleuze and Guattari (1977) — mobilized by capitalism, which, however, ultimately "reterritorializes the forces it unleashes" (Laurence 2017, 410); see also Noys (2014, 1–5), who also refers to, and rightly critiques, Lyotard's provocative thesis of the paradoxically self-liberating *jouissance* of workers' exposure to destructive labor (1993). In Laurence's view, accelerationism "abandons antagonism, class struggle, and revolutionary commitment in favor of a vision whereby promethean man escapes his condition through a scientific mastery that translates into control over one's biological morphology and behavioural plasticity" (2017, 420–21).

13   On the figure of Xanthias in *Frogs,* a prototype of the Roman *servus currens,* see Lape (2013, 81–90). Even though comic slaves, especially in Roman comedy, can be seen to express (carnivalesque) fantasies or even plans of resistance and rebellion — see Richlin (2017, 478–80) and, differently, McCarthy (2000) — my concern is not with the specific claims of characters as individuals or with the relation between texts and their historical contexts, but with the transhistorical politics embedded in dramatic form.

14   I owe the expression "malignant velocity" to Noys (2014). The analogy that I am positing between the capitalist world and the fictional universe of Aristophanes' comedy is simply heuristic. It is not a historicist comparison of ancient and modern societies but an attempt to theorize the politico-aesthetic implications of Aristophanic form. However, on ancient Greece as a proto-capitalist society and the possibility of (or need for) a Marxian approach to Greek literature, see esp. P.W. Rose (1992, Introduction).

Aeschylus's compound-centered hyperform, its imposition of arresting, "heavy" signifiers reluctant to be comprehended, analyzed, or assembled into a signifying syntax, provides an opening to what I would call negative emancipation, that is, crisis put to the end of emancipatory politics in a critical time, a time that disarrays the very idea of chronicity. The formal slowness of Aeschylus, the tragedian who exits the play in triumph, blocks efficiency — understood as the ability "to affect and be affected at an ever-increasing rate"; it numbs, in other words, a kind of perverse vitalism that is the driving force behind productivity.[15] As a reconfiguration of the feel of time or, to an extent, an exit from time itself, the *batracho-political* aesthetics that I delineate raises the prospect of a world without work, of "the refusal of work" as "the beginning of a liberatory politics," in the words of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.[16] Aeschylean form, as constructed by Aristophanes, converges with slowed, dulled animal time in conjuring an anti- or post-productive imaginary that sluggishly but steadily manipulates and challenges *chrēsis*.

i. Anomaly and Stubbornness

To lay the groundwork for a politics of "frogginess" in Aristophanes' play, I start by connecting roughness — a characteristic of amphibian skin and Aeschylean poetry that is expressed by the Greek word *an-ōmalia* — with the conceptual nexus of "animal" and "anomalous." In *A Thousand Plateaus,* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari establish a punning connection between *becoming animal* and *anomaly.* Becoming animal — a fundamental step in the deterritorialization of the subject, its approximation to anti-hierarchical, intensive being — coincides for them with the emergence of the *anomalous* within a pack

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15 See J. McMahon (2018): "Capitalism needs labor to be more efficient — to affect and be affected at an ever-increasing rate. […] Capitalism does not only produce particular social and economic relations […] but also directly produces an intensification of affective capacity."

16 Hardt and Negri (2000, 204). On post-work imaginaries, see esp. Weeks (2011), Crary (2013), and Srnicek and Williams (2015, ch. 6).

or a collective.[17] As they put it, the Greek word *an-ōmalia* "designates the unequal, the coarse, the rough, the cutting edge of deterritorialization."[18] *Batrachos* — the Greek word for "frog" in the title of Aristophanes' play (*Batrachoi*) — encompasses both the animal and the anomalous. As ancient grammarians noted, *ba-trachos* contains the word *trachus* ("rough, coarse, uneven"), which is, in turn, a well-established synonym of *an-ōmalos,* the source of "anomalous" in English, with the basic meaning of "uneven, not smooth" or, at a deeper etymological level, "not the same."[19] In the play, the roughness expressed by *trachus* within *ba-trachos,* a quality that is most blatantly manifested in the Chorus's croaking refrain *brekekex koax koax* (209–10, etc.), also pertains to Aeschylus, the winner of the poetological *krisis.* Conditioned by Aristophanes' aesthetic critique in this very play, ancient literary criticism regarded Aeschylus as an embodiment of this sensory texture.[20] When the tragic winner, "bristling the shaggy-necked shock of his hirsute ridge of

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17 For Deleuze and Guattari, to become animal is "to cross a threshold […] to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux" (1986, 13).

18 Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 244) oppose *anomal* ("anomalous") to *anormal* ("abnormal"), which "refers to that which is outside rules or goes against the rules." As they observe, "The abnormal can be defined only in terms of characteristics, specific or generic; but the anomalous is a position or set of positions in relation to a multiplicity." The anomalous, for Deleuze and Guattari, always occupies "the borderline" (1987, 245). Marguch (2018, 550) suggests substituting "queer" for "anomalous," which, following Deleuze and Guattari, he defines as "a vital force that pushes the body to go beyond itself […], a virtuality, a potentiality."

19 See Scholia Theocritus 7.41b: "The frog (*ba-trachos*) is rough-voiced (*boa-trachos*) […] the animal rough (*trachus*) in its cry (*tēi boēi*)"; Hesychius, *Lexicon* α 5257 Latte: *"an-ōmalon* ('uneven'): *tracheian* ('rough').'" The Greek adjective *homalos* has the same root (**sem-, *som-, *sm-*) as the Latin *similis* (English "similar") and the English same.

20 See esp. Johannes, *Commentary on Hermogenes* (9th c.): *"stomphazein* ('vaunt'): The word is rough (*tracheia*) to hear and pronounce. It is an invention of Aristophanes, who mocks Aeschylus as rough (*trachun*)." On *Frogs* as a foundation, or a "critical moment," of ancient literary criticism, see esp. Porter (2006, 301–7), Hunter (2009), and Worman (2015, 120–45).

mane" (822), is presented as "roaring" (*bruchōmenos* 823) and a "thunderer" (*eri-bremetas* 814), we can almost hear him vibrate with the constitutive sounds of *batrachos*.[21] The *an-ōmalia* of Aeschylus's roaring voice and poetry cannot be separated from a becoming *animal,* which, in Deleuzian-Guattarian fashion, coincides precisely with a passage of organic corporeality into the domain of phonic intensities, with the trespassing of bodily constraints through the spasmodic eruption of a self-liberatory scream.[22] I want to see how the becoming frog that Aeschylus partakes of can be perceived as "anomalous" in the Deleuzian-Guattarian sense, that is to say, whether it can amount to the occupation of a "borderline" political position, to the opening of a rupture within an all-encompassing, homogeneous ideo-logical system, within the "sameness" evoked, through denial, by *an-ōmalia.*

At a point in the play where the practice of onanism seems analogous to the stagnation of the amphibian habitat, the *an-ōmalia* of "becoming frog" emerges as a kind of mobile immobility. During its entrance, the Chorus shifts from frogs to religious initiates, using invective to divide those who ought to be in from those who must be out, creating the sense of an encompassing but exclusive whole, a *consensus,* the community not just of the religious club, but of the state.[23] Even so, the Real of the suppressed frogginess creeps back in. While mocking

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21 Scharffenberger (2007, 237) observes that the description of Aeschylus's roaring "bring[s] to mind Homeric similes comparing Achilles and his fellow warriors to lions, boars, bulls." On Aristophanes' representation of Aeschylean uproar, see Nooter (2017, 57–59). The cognate verb *epi-bremetai* ("[it/she] thunders") occurs at 681–82, where it modifies a "Thracian (*Thrēikia*) swallow"; *Thrēikia* sounds almost identical to *tracheia* (the feminine of *trachus*): see Telò (2019, 274–75).

22 On the scream as a line of flight, a channel of escape from the corporeal prison, see Deleuze 2003, 51–52; Ruddick (2010, 37–39) views the Deleuz-ian scream as a site of political "irruption."

23 On the possible identity (and costume) shift of the Chorus from frogs to initiates, see Hubbard (1991, 202) and M. Griffith (2013, 222–23); on the hypothesis of two distinct (semi-)choruses, see, e.g., Dover (1993, 28–29). On the normative force of the Chorus of initiates as the voice of an ideal-ized community, see Lada-Richards (1999, 224–26).

the "derrière," or the "son" of Cleisthenes, a frequent target of comic abuse, the Chorus mimetically reproduces the perverse mourning performed by the "corporeal" or "filial" target with an amphibian noise (422–27):[24]

> I hear that the son [butt] of Cleisthenes
> is among the gravestones plucking
> and rending his [its] cheeks;
> stooping over, he [it] kept beating himself [itself]
> (*kakoptet' en-kekuphōs*),
> weeping and whining
> (*kaklae kakekragei*)
> for Fuckyou of Jerkoffia (*Anaphlustios*)…

The gashing of cheeks, facial or otherwise, and the self-abuse in memory of a certain Anaphlustios ("Fuckyou of Jerkoffia") that the Chorus evokes in these lines conjures a funerary ritual, a wailing and weeping imaginatively juxtaposed with the solitary sexual activity to which the mysterious character owes his name.[25] The striking concentration of guttural sounds expressing this lamentation (*kakoptet'* […] *kekuphōs kaklae kakekragei*) recalls the frogs' own serial *koax koax,* a croaking interruption of the tyranny of signification that deterritorializes language through a prolonged, spasmodic straining of the throat.[26] Turning language into the rough intensity of clustering *k* sounds is concomitant with becoming frog (*ba-trachos*) — or, in the case of the Chorus, with surreptitiously becoming (amphibian) animal again, that is becoming *an-omalous,* roughening the collective whole, fracturing the unified pack. There is a collision

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24 In line 422, *ton Kleisthenous,* the article (*ton*) accompanied by the genitive (*Kleisthenous*) can indicate "the son [of] Cleisthenes" or modify *prōkton* ("butt") in the following line.

25 The name *Ana-phlustios* plays on the resonance of *ana-phlasmos* ("masturbation" as in Eupolis, fragment 69 Kassel-Austin) and the verb *ana-phluō* ("to boil, boil over"), which refers to the aquaceous habitat of the marshes.

26 On this guttural strain, which codes laughter itself, see Telò (2020b, 66–67).

between mourning and masturbation on the part of both Cleisthenes' "son"/"butt" and the vociferous Chorus itself, which vocalizes both activities. The multiple *k*-sounds suggest onanistic duration as a form of Deleuzian masochism — the insistent postponement of the pleasurable *telos* and the continuation of the intensity of desire through interruption and repetition.[27] The bubbling and boiling of internal fluids in auto-erotic desire, gathered yet held in, resonates onomatopoeically through the name *Ana-phlustios,* which also brings to mind the marshes, the batracho-habitat, vibrating with "bubbly ploppifications" (*pompholugophlasmasin* 249) every time the frogs dive underwater or resurface.[28] This gurgling shakes the stagnancy of the infernal swamp just as it phonically roughens the line, occupied entirely by the over-extended word. This effect of arrested flowing tropes amphibian temporality, the mobile immobility of the frogs inhabiting, and blending into, the Underworld's growing mud, the looping (non-)motion of ever-expanding human waste.[29] Not just the frogs, with their repetitive, rough, quasimasturbatory sounds, but the bubbling of marshy water is itself an instantiation of the *an-omalous,* which Deleuze and Guattari,

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27 According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 155), the masochist understands that pleasure "is something that must be delayed as long as possible because it interrupts the continuous process of positive desire." As Cotter (2003, 106) puts it, in the wake of Deleuze and Guattari, "The masochistic masturbator forestalls emission, allowing fluids to bubble and boil unabated, as the anally fixated child withholds his feces."

28 I owe the translation "bubbly ploppifications" to Henderson (2002); G. Wills (1969, 313) speaks of the frogs' song, where the compound appears, as "voiced in guttural upgurglingbubbliness." The compound *pompholugophlasmasin* may seem to absorb and immobilize an entire Homeric line: *kumata paphlazonta poluphloisboio thalassēs* ("the bubbling waves of the much-roaring sea" *Iliad* 13.798). For a different reading of the compound as the "novel, fluid, and animated style" of the New Music, see Worman (2015, 129); see also Telò (2020b, 66).

29 The description of the Underworld as "much filth and eternal excrement" (*borboron polun / kai skōr aeinōn* 145–46) emphasizes, through sound, a looping, futile liquidity.

citing H.P. Lovecraft, describe as "teeming, seething, swelling, foaming, spreading like an infectious disease."[30]

Swamping a whole line, paralyzing syntactical motion, the compound *pompholugophlasmasin* ("bubbly ploppifications") links the *animal/an-omalous* temporality of becoming frog and the aloofness and anti-relationality of Aeschylus's hyperform. When, at the climactic moment of the poetic contest, Euripides interjects the incomprehensible refrain *phlattothrattophlattothrat* in (pseudo-)citations from Aeschylus's tragedies (1286, 1288, 1290, 1293, 1295), we can recognize the return of froggy (or auto-erotic) bubbling evoking marshy gargling, as though Aeschylus could truly sound like himself only by becoming *ba-trachos.* But it is also through another aspect of his language (i.e., expansive nominalization) that Aristophanes' Aeschylus becomes himself by becoming frog. Let us consider these three sequences of Aeschylean adjectival compounds, which are coined, respectively, by Euripides for Aeschylus, Aeschylus for Euripides, and Euripides again for Aeschylus (839, 841–42, 966):

a-peri-lalēton, kompo-phakelo-rrhēmona
uncircumlocutory, a big-bombastolocutor

stōmulio-sul-lektadē / kai ptōcho-poie kai rhakio-sur-rhaptadē
babble-collector / creator-of-beggars, rag-stitcher

salpingo-lonch-hupēnadai, sarkasmo-pituo-kamptai
bugle-boys-with-long-beards-and-lances, flesh-ripping-
    pine-benders[31]

In the first and third examples whole lines are encumbered by pairs of sesquipedalian, tenuously comprehensible neolo-

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30 Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 245).

31 ἀπεριλάλητον, κομποφακελορρήμονα (839); στωμυλιοσυλλεκτάδη / καὶ πτωχοποιὲ καὶ ῥακιοσυρραπτάδη (841–42); and σαλπιγγολογχυπηνάδαι σαρκασμοπιτυοκάμπται (966). Here I use Henderson's translations of these compounds. As Nooter (2017, 80) observes, it is "a feat to fit" Aeschylean compounds "into the relatively strict iambic line."

gisms.[32] Syntax and sense seem to give way under the weight of self-contained gargantuan assemblages marked by a refusal to *con*verge, to *com*municate, and to renounce their monadic status.[33] In the second sequence, the prefix *sun-* ("with"), while functioning as the marker (*-sul-, -sur-*) of the syntactical yoking together of the compound's two components, nominal (*stōmulio-/rhakio-*) and verbal (*-lektadē/-rhaptadē*), simultaneously underscores the paradox of a "connection" that refuses to stretch beyond its inner bounds, a connection that does not go beyond itself, does not connect outward. Engulfing the lines that barely contain them, these compounds exhibit the aloofness and extreme anti-relationality of objects as theorized by object-oriented-ontology.[34] For Tom Eyers, who operates in a different theoretical framework, the aloofness of the object, its Adornian "recalcitrance," goes along with a certain solipsism of poetic diction — for example, single, material words isolated, and laden with a "mass and weight," in lines of Wallace Stevens.[35] As a kind of willful refusal, an "impassivity" or even an "intransigence" on the part of the words themselves, such solipsism aggravates language's inherent inability to capture the referent in order to

32 I have recently learned of the existence of the word hippopotomonstroses-quipedaliophobia, which, according to healthline (2021), is "a fear of long words" that "can trigger embarrassment or feelings of being mocked when pronouncing or reading long words." The symptoms of this fear — "trembling," "sweating," "dizziness" — can be interpreted as unconscious desires for the undoing of language, for the unmaking of the social status quo. We can say that Aristophanes translates this desire into formalistic effects.

33 Silk (2000, 126) observes that "like lists, all such compounds minimize syntactic complication, in line with a general syntactic simplicity in Aristophanic writing as a whole." I read this syntactical lack as formally, and politically, marked rather than unmarked.

34 See, e.g., Harman (2012, 187), on the "deeply non-relational reality of things." For Harman, one of the leading representatives of object-oriented-ontology, "the object is a black box, black hole" (2005, 95) that releases qualities separate from itself, being always impervious to connection. Porter (2010, 271) says that Aeschylus's compounds amount to "massy solids."

35 See the analysis of Stevens's "The Rock" in Eyers (2017, 104–5). The phrase "recalcitrant object" is from Adorno (1974, 109).

comprehend what is posited as an external reality.[36] Such formal solipsism can be perceived especially in a couple of lines in which Aeschylus portrays his heroic characters as full of Ares, the god of warfare (1016–17):

> *pneontas doru kai lonchas kai leukolophous truphaleias*
> *kai pēlēkas kai knēmidas kai thumous heptaboeious.*
> spear-breathing [men] and blades and white-plumed helmets
> and crests and greaves and seven-layered-oxhide spirits.

In this catalog of barely differentiated humans and weapons linked with each other by the bare conjunction "and" yet separated in the inter-objective space of the line, we observe a gallery of isolated words, stony, impassive, resistant to the chain of language, unwilling to subject themselves to semantic composition, to the train of syntax.[37] The force of inertia, the *Trägheit,* of each word prevents them from coalescing into the pack apparently created by the insistent polysyndeton and, thus, makes them *anomalous,* immersing them, like the marshy frogs, in the durational temporality of a non-flowing flow, in an un-relational immobility (in)animated by the accretion of phonic intensities.[38]

The impassive form of Aeschylus's compounds recalls the petrified posture of his iconic character, the bereaved Niobe, in whose durational (im)mobility we may perceive an ethico-

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36 Commenting on Stevens's "The Rock," Eyers (2017, 104) observes: "Word and world both, in their impassivity and even intransigence, resonate upon one another […] in a manner that makes a virtue of the apparent distance between them."

37 On inter-objectivity as a juxtaposition that challenges the human subject's claim to primacy over the object, see esp. Chen (2011, 280–81); see also Morton (2013, 86). The Aeschylean words' recalcitrance, their resistance to syntax, may be partly determined by their Homeric pedigree — analyzed by Bassi (2016, 170) — which makes them into archival fossils.

38 *Trägheit,* a term from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), refers to a force of inertia that resists organization, specifically the maintenance of self-organization: see De Lauretis (2008, 85–86), for discussion. I adapt it here for a resistance to organization as such.

political insistence that, as we will see, enacts the interruptive power of crisis. In the tragedian's eponymous play, evoked in *Frogs,* the grieving mother, whose intemperate tongue had been punished by Apollo and Artemis with the death of her many children, appeared seated, immobile, veiled, silent, already a stony block, like her author's verbal compounds, even before becoming one.[39] Aristophanes' Euripides explains the aesthetic effect of this dramaturgy in these lines (919–20):

> [Aeschylus did that] out of arrogance so that the viewer
> sat there waiting for when Niobe would utter something, and
> the play kept going on and on.

In Aeschylus's rendering, having seen her many children shot one by one despite her desperate prayers, Niobe is mimetically indifferent to the audience — not speaking, rejecting contact, becoming an incomprehensible Other.[40] The audience is assimilated to the mortal woman supplicating indifferent gods to spare her offspring, but, as a multitude fixated on her mouth, it also resembles Niobe's numerous children, once dependent on her care, her words. As a comparison with the many depictions of her in vase painting shows, this tragic Niobe is channeled, in a sense, by Marina Abramović in *The Artist Is Present,* a 2020 performance in which she remained seated for hours, completely silent, while visitors at New York's Museum of Modern Art lined up to spend a few minutes each facing her.[41] Abramović's immobility and its atmosphere of masochistic boredom can be seen

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39 See esp. Taplin (1972, 60–62; 2007, 74–77), Keuls (1978), Montiglio (2000, 216–20), Seaford (2005), and Telò (2016, 79–80).

40 For Levinas, incomprensibility is the necessary condition for the ethical encounter with the Other through the *face:* "The face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge" (1969, 198). The spectator's unsettling non-relation with the silent, incommensurable Niobe exemplifies the Levinasian idea of subjectivity as traumatic, defined, that is, by an (impossible) "relation to that which escapes representation and presence" (Critchley 1999a, 233); see Telò (2023a, ch. 7; 2024a).

41 On vase representations of Aeschylus's Niobe, see Taplin (2007, 74–79).

as confronting "the emphasis on production in a biopolitical society" — one in which the state has "the power to guarantee life," deciding who must live and who must die.[42] From this perspective, one could say that the durational drag of Abramović's performance resists the reduction of the worker, or the subject in general, by hyper-activity to disposable instrumentality. In other words, Abramović's quasi-death momentarily interrupts the biopolitical power of capitalist vitalism.[43] I want to treat the Niobe-like, anti-mimetic stubbornness of Aeschylean hyper-form — its reluctance to join syntax, the structured incessant mobility of *logos*[44] — as an ethico-political insistence, which also extends to the frogs, to their *an-omalous* mode of animality, and to the viscosity of their marshes. This insistence, this batracho-politics, has a force that, as I will explain, we might read as an interruption of instrumentality through the interruption of time inherent in crisis. This instrumentality, as we will now see, concerns the very making of comedy, the labor involved in the production of laughter.

ii. Zaniness and the Comic Bartleby

Humor in *Frogs* relies upon sado-masochistic slapstick and a steady farcical energy that generates and maintains the play's con-

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42 Brunton (2017, 71). Halberstam (2010) also analyzes the masochistic aesthetics of Abramović's work, which he defines as "shocking (risking death) […] irritating (literally in the sense of flesh rubbing on flesh as well as figuratively in the sense of different frames of reality grinding against each other), grating (as in set your teeth on edge)"; see also E. Kim (2015) on Abramović's "becoming object" as a form of resistance against the hierarchical subjection imposed by subjecthood. On the concept of "biopower," see esp. Foucault (1997a, 253–60; 2013a; 2013b) and Agamben (1998); see also Mbembe (2019) on the related notion of necropower.

43 On the "biopolitical production" of capitalism, see Hardt and Negri (2000, ch. 2). The contemporary neoliberal state is founded on a capitalism that "reaches down into the very fabric of human life" (Greene 2004, 200).

44 On Niobe as an aesthetic challenge to *logos* and representation, see Rancière (2004a, 150): Niobe "leaves the signifying system of *mimesis*. She becomes a desert, a rocky expanse where figure and meaning are abolished."

stitutive dramatic rhythm — comic form as the feeling of cruel instrumentality. The slave Xanthias, who accompanies Dionysus to the Underworld, is repeatedly asked to change course, to pretend to be his master, Dionysus, and then to become himself *again,* to leave his baggage on the ground, and then to pick it up *again.* The rhythm of *palin* ("again") and *authis* ("[once] again"), repeated and even combined, conjures a chain of comic production, a co-opting of quasi-mechanized dramatic labor, which ensnares the slave Xanthias as well as his fictional master Dionysus in the audience's death drive, its imperious demand for the masochist loop of gelastic eruption and relief.[45] The mechanicity of being, which, according to Henri Bergson and Alenka Zupančič, is always exposed by comedy, is laden here with the mechanization of production.[46] Perpetuating a laughing spiral that wrecks the thin linearity of the comic (non-)plot within a temporally bounded performance, farce feels worn-out just like the actors and characters who labor to produce it. We can hear the voice of the sadistic Necessity (*anankē*) that governs the death-driven pace of comic production, comedy's automatism, when the Chorus admonishes Xanthias:[47] "Now it's up to you, since you've accepted the outfit you wore before, to *revive anew from the beginning (ex archēs palin / ana-neazein)* your old fight-

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45 See lines 437, 524–25; on laughter as a masochistic loop, see Telò (2020b).

46 By "mechanicity of being," I mean the imponderable in life that defies the subject's sense of and desire for (self-)control. See Bergson (1914, 37) and Zupančič (2008, 113–19); see also Critchley (1999b) and Dolar (2017). For Zupančič, comedy "does not confront us with the Real, it repeats it" (179); in other words, comedy "endlessly repeats the schism of subject and object a" (181). What Zupančič calls the "compulsive repetition" of comedy is enacted (and received) primarily through "compulsive joking, joke-telling, jesting."

47 See Lacan (1992, 212), on the death drive as a compulsive "will to create from zero, a will to begin again." See Telò (2020a, ch. 2). As Dolar (2017, 583–84) puts it, "It is at the crossing point where automaton infringes upon life and constitutes its core that the comical object springs up." In this perspective, for Dolar, "the only really funny thing would ultimately be the death drive," which "emerges […] as […] the quasi-mechanical at the core of life and at the same time as the surplus of life, as too much life, more life than one can bear."

ing spirit, and *once more (authis)* look formidable. […] If you utter anything wimpish, there is a necessity (*anankē*) for you to hoist the baggage once again (*authis* […] *palin*)" (591–97).

This comic business resembles the "zany," understood as "an aesthetic of action pushed to strenuous and even precarious extremes," as discussed by Sianne Ngai in her treatment of the 1950s American sitcom.[48] The incessant comic "doing" and perpetual adaptation to new roles demanded of Lucy Ricardo in *I Love Lucy* is the expression, in Ngai's words, of a post-industrial

> Cold War American culture in which "performance" designates not just the performance of artists but also that of washing machines, shampoo, and cars, and thus something to be "optimized" through various "experiments" and "tests."[49]

In *Frogs,* the repetition by a succession of characters of enticements and violent threats against Dionysus and Xanthias, each dressed in turn as Heracles, results in a hyperactive aesthetics that objectifies comedic subjects, reducing them to serial, robotic enactors of buffoonery. According to Ngai, the zany's "hypercharismatic aesthetic is really an aesthetic about work — and about a precariousness created specifically by the capitalist organization of work."[50] We can observe elements of this "hypercharismatic aesthetic" in the speech of a female slave of Hades' home who welcomes Xanthias — forced to don, again, the role of *Hērakleio-xanthian* ("Heracles-Xanthias" 499) — with the promise of delicacies suitable to appease Heraclean gluttony (503–7):

> Dearest Heracles, have you arrived? Come in, over here. When the goddess learned you were coming, right away she baked breads, cooked up two or three pots of bean soup, grilled an entire ox, and baked flatbreads and rolls.

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48 Ngai (2012, 185).
49 Ngai (2012, 184).
50 Ngai (2012, 188).

At a moment in the play buoyant with the one-off, brisk inter-ventions of an array of extra-like characters (Aeacus, two inn-keepers, a male servant in Hades' household, and the "goddess" herself, Persephone), the dishes cataloged here do not simply suggest the well-known homology between food and jokes.[51] There is a sense in which the foods (all in the plural, except for one) that are listed here in a rapid, asyndetic succession corre-spond to the characters coming onstage one after the other, as in a parade of courses, most of whom are not individualized but identified with their task, with the labor they perform. In other words, the list puts foods and jokes, and the comedic actors themselves, at the service of a frantic temporal regime, a rhythm of intense velocity, of unremitting productivity, which resem-bles the thanato-speed of biopolitical capitalism.[52]

One might connect what I call thanato-speed, a devaluation of life in the name of a feverish pursuit of "surplus-value," with a scene at the beginning of the play when Heracles and Dionysus discuss tragedy-making in Athens after Euripides in terms that suggest a commodification not just of the tragic art per se but also of its practitioners (89–95):[53]

> HERACLES Aren't there others here, more than a *myriad (plein ē muria) little youngsters (meirakullia)* composing tragedies, *chattier (lalistera)* than Euripides *by more than a mile (plein ē stadiōi)?*
> DIONYSUS These are leftovers (*epi-phullides*) and gabbers (*stōmulmata*), choirs (*mouseia*) of swallows, ruiners of their art, who as soon as they get a chorus quickly

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51   On the comic metapoetics of food, see Gowers (1993).

52   On speed as tending toward death, see esp. Baudrillard (1988). Gowers (1993, 37) discusses the overlap of qualities between foods and their human eaters. This exchange raises the specter not just of anthropomorphic fare but also, to an extent, cannibalism. On the voraciousness of the comic audience, see Telò (2020b, 58–59).

53   On the commodification of tragedy at the end of the fifth century, see Ste-vens (2007). Roselli (2013) provides an account of surviving Greek drama as "labor culture."

(*thatton*) disappear, *after peeing on (pros-ourēsanta)* on tragedy a single time.

This statement is usually taken as a gesture of proto-classical disparagement, an expression of the neophobic judgmental-ism of the *(sun-)krisis* ("comparison") between Aeschylus and Euripides, which melancholically sets the play in motion.[54] But in the emphasis on the quantity and the anonymity of Euripides' successors we may detect the sense of dramatic composition as an accelerating race (cf. *stadiōi* 91), which objectifies, deperson-alizes, even devitalizes aspiring poets, turning them into neu-ter nouns (*meirakulli-a* […] *lalister-a, stōmulmat-a, mousei-a*) indistinguishable from their ephemeral dramatic creations, as they struggle to keep up with the market's insatiable demand. In his Spinozian-Deleuzian theorization of capitalist devaluation of lived life, Massumi observes:

> Growth and accumulation are capitalism's processual desire: its constitutive tendency (what Nietzsche might call its will to power). The surplus-value drive to excess-over gives the capitalist economy its dynamic quality of ever-moreness, for once and for all-over-again, in perpetual processual turn-over. The engine of surplus-value lies at the beating heart of the capitalist system and dilates its veins. It is the expansive diastole for profit's systolic contraction.[55]

The liquid sounds in the language describing Euripides' alleg-edly unworthy successors, both in Heracles' statement and Dionysus's like-minded response — *meiraku<u>ll</u>ia, p<u>l</u>ein* […] *p<u>l</u>ein* […] *<u>l</u>a<u>l</u>istera, epiphu<u>ll</u>ides* (89–92) — underscore this expansive, diastolic, processual dynamic, which not only generates "excess-over," but transforms the dramatic workers into waste, to be

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54 On the melancholic classicism of *Frogs,* see esp. Porter (2006, 302–3), Sfyroeras (2008), and Bassi (2016, 154–60).

55 Massumi (2018, 15).

"quickly" (*thatton*) liquidated.[56] The much-discussed emergence of a notion of aesthetic "value" in this literary-critical moment should not make us lose sight of a concomitant discourse of production value, with its devaluation of what should not have exchange value, that is, life. The image closing Dionysus's intervention suggests the thanatopolitical reduction of overworked poets to the most abject flowing detritus: urine (*pros-ourēsanta* 95), cascading like their chatter (*lalistera*), instead of semen, which is evoked by the subsequent idealized image of the *gonimos poiētēs* ("fertile poet" 96).[57]

The diastolic (incessantly pulsating) dynamic of dramatic production recasts the versatility of actors — like that of the comic hero and the resourceful slave they play — as an alienated, precarious condition, an elasticity manipulated to the point of rupture. As Ngai has remarked, zaniness is predicated on a back-and-forth between "servility" and "virtuosity," the "interchangeability of 'artist' and 'servant'" that we have observed in the Chorus's exhortation to Xanthias, where he is initially presented as a formidable performer with "a fighting spirit," and then threatened — that is, reminded of his servitude.[58] At a moment when Dionysus decides — out of convenience — to stage another change of identity and steal his Heraclean costume back from Xanthias, the Chorus praises an Odyssean model of versatility that can apply to the political realm (the name of Theramenes closes the strophe),[59] but also to the condition of the subject in relation to productivity (533–39b):

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56 *Epiphullides* are "small stunted grapes, which […] remain close to the vine-leaves, and are overlooked, or rejected as worthless, at the vintage" (Rogers 1902, 16).

57 As Sfyroeras (2008, 307) remarks, "The disparaging reference to pissing […] can only make sense in light of a contrast between urine and semen."

58 Ngai (2012, 229).

59 Theramenes, the "clever" (*dexiou*) Athenian politician evoked in this passage, was famous for surviving every change of regime, coming out ahead in all dangerous situations by switching sides. As noted by Slater (2002, 189), Theramenes "knows how to roll or shift himself into a new part," a movement recalling the *ekkuklēma,* the machine used to wheel actors out of the *skēnē.*

> These are the traits of a man who has intellect and reason and who is *well traveled (peri-pepleukotos): to roll himself* every time *toward (meta-kulindein)* the better side rather than stand *(hestanai)* like a painted image *(gegrammenēn eikon')* that has taken *a single position (hen schēma).* To shift to *(meta-strephesthai)* the softer side is typical of a clever man and someone who is by nature a Theramenes.

The Odyssean mobility advocated here — always changing, always adapting (*meta-kulindein* […] *meta-strephe-sthai*) — sounds like a nonstop movement (*peri-pepleukotos* "having voyaged *around*"), which, rather than liberating the subject, catches it in its rapid, continuous gyrations. This imposed becoming, an apparently *deterritorializing* frenzy put to the service of hierarchical *reterritorialization,* is something similar to the missed opportunity of capitalist schizophrenia, in Deleuzian-Guattarian terms.[60] But anticipating the reference to the stony Niobe later in the play, the pictorial immobility (*hestanai; hen schēma*) disparaged by the Chorus gets closer, paradoxically, to deterritorialization, emancipatory mobility. In its imperious exhortation to Xanthias to "re-new (*ana-neazein* 592) his fighting spirit," which we previously saw, the Chorus epitomizes the all-encompassing logic of productivity, but the reduplication of the initial syllable in the compound (*anan-eazein*) creates a hiccup effect, which does not simply disarray the word's meaning but stops the movement it urges and freezes production into a recalcitrant *schēma.* This phonemic blockage, like Aeschylus's stubborn form and the insistence of the mud-bound if singing and dancing frogs, implants an inkling of anti-hierarchical, one might say deterritorializing, immobility in the Chorus's endorsement of what is effectively a malignant, instru-mentalizing system of social acceleration for the sake of the (re)production of the tragedy-making industry itself — albeit one that appeals to coveted Odyssean versatility and flowing chattiness.

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60 Deleuze and Guattari (1977).

The immobility of *batracho-politics* corresponds to what Deleuze calls *time-image,* a filmic form that blocks action, extending perception into sluggish stretches of time that open the human to its repressed animality, "the obscure intimacy of the animal."[61] Aeschylean hyperform, or even batracho-form, may be compared to the use of animal life as a *time-image* in Emmanuel Gras's film *Bovines* (2012), where the diegetic blockage caused by cows' biorhythms becomes the aesthetic channel of anti-capitalist slowness. As Laura McMahon has observed, "*Bovines* uses the extreme slowness of cows — the bovine rhythms of ruminating, sauntering, and rambling — to exacerbate [the] non-extension of perception into action," what Deleuze calls the *time-image,* defining a distinctive cinematographic mode of post–World War II European film.[62] While at a certain point in the film the cattle are forced to move quickly to conform "to the accelerated dynamics of agricapital," to which human speech and the movement of the camera conform, the "dominant" cinematic form is a slow, meandering animal time, at odds with "the seriality of the disassembly line and the workings of industrial capitalism."[63] In the "anti-model" traced by the Chorus in its praise of versatility, the constellation of *hestanai* ("to stand [still]"), *hen schēma* ("one position"), and *gegrammenēn eikona* ("painted image") evoke Deleuze's theorization of the *time-image* as operating through "immobilizings, petrifications" that are "evidence of a general dissolution of the action image."[64] This is the immobilization of a "fixed shot," where "all the tiredness of the world" is concentrated.[65] The

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61 The expression is from Bataille (1991, 133). On the *time-image,* see Deleuze (1989).

62 L. McMahon (2015, 167).

63 L. McMahon (2015, 172).

64 Deleuze (1989, 103).

65 Deleuze (1989, 81, 191, 205). Deleuze refers to "Warhol's famous essays, six and half hours on the man asleep in a fixed shot, three-quarters of an hour on the man eating a mushroom (*Sleep, Eat*)" (191), and to Antonioni's *Il Grido* (1957).

"perpetual present"[66] of the *time-image* is emblematized by the time out of joint of bovines and frogs, wallowing in the mud, an image of a non-teleological, intense *doing* and, in a sense, of "the powerful, non-organic Life which grips the world."[67] *Batracho-politics* could be connected with the cloacal politics theorized by Georges Bataille in the critical time of the late 1920s and '30s — a reemphasis on the bodily abject offered as an alternative to the stabilization of value accumulation and labor and, likewise, the Nietzschean *Übermensch,* whose inventor Bataille criticized for being, in his words, "incapable of wallowing in the mud."[68]

The interruptive force of *batracho-politics* enacted in Aeschylean form is a "stretching out of time beyond its instrumental uses," or *chrono-kata-chrēsis.*[69] The term, coined by Elizabeth Freeman, appears in her queer reading of *"I would prefer not to,"* the response that Herman Melville's comic clerk Bartleby gives whenever he is asked by the attorney he works for to perform new tasks.[70] Bartleby's response, with its apparent grammatical incompleteness, an "inarticulate block" in Deleuze's phrase, has a power of interruption:[71]

Bartleby has won the right to survive, that is, to remain immobile and upright before a blind wall. [...] Being as being, and nothing more. He is urged to say yes or no. [...] He can sur-

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66 Deleuze (1989, 104): "The dissolution of the action-image [...] take[s] place [...] in favour of a 'perpetual present' cut off from its temporality."

67 Deleuze (1989, 81). The animal *doing* that I am positing here may have something in common with what Jean-Luc Nancy calls "in-transitive *doing* which by doing makes itself rather than something else" (2020a, 25). As Despret (2015, 136) observes, "Work only becomes perceptible when the cows resist, refuse to cooperate, and place limits on what can happen."

68 Bataille (1988, 39). On Bataille's "cloacal" politics, see esp. Noys (2014, 74–77).

69 Freeman (2019, 128) sees this "stretching" as "opposed to producing and channeling human vitality toward industrial-capitalist projects."

70 The reference is to Melville's famous short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (1979).

71 Deleuze (1997, 68): "Murmured in a soft, flat, and patient voice," the expression "form[s] an inarticulate block, a single breath. In all these respects, it has the same force, the same role as an *agrammatical* formula."

vive only by whirling in a suspense that keeps everyone at a distance. […] The attorney has the vertiginous impression, each time, that everything is starting over again from zero.[72]

Through syntactical suspension, the verbal form of his refusal, Bartleby stalls the transformation of *potentiality* into *actuality* through the *hyper-active* frenzy I have located in *Frogs,* an expression of the imperative of productivity, which deceptively promises closure in the materialization of a *product.*[73] Freeman compares Bartleby's flat repetitions of "*I would prefer not*" to Gertrude Stein's prose, with its long, monotonous sentences, which, similarly to Aeschylus's compounds, convey an effect of formal insistence that slows down the present.[74] For Freeman, Bartleby exemplifies *chrono-kata-chrēsis* — an attempt to bring, or take, down normative directionality, linear instrumentality — because he "prefer[s] not to quit, not to leave, not to work or eat or do anything at all but be *'always there.'*"[75] It is this *interruption as insistence,* or *insistence as interruption,* that Aeschylus acts out in the confrontation, the *(sun-)krisis,* with Euripides, when, seven times, he prevents his younger competi-

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72 Deleuze (1997, 71).

73 See Agamben's commentary on the Melville story and Deleuze's reading of it: "[Bartleby] dwells so obstinately in the abyss of potentiality and does not seem to have the slightest intention of leaving it. […] The formula […] opens a zone of indistinction between yes and no […] but also […] between the potential to be (or do) and the potential not to be (or do)" (1999, 254–55). For a critique of Agamben, see Honig (2021, ch. 1). While, from a Marxist perspective, Hardt and Negri (2000, 203–4) see Bartleby's "refusal" as the starting point for the construction of "a new social body," Edelman (2013, 111–13) regards it as an expression of queer negativity, of "the specter of anarchy, of radical lawlessness" embodied by the Occupy Wall Street movement; see also Castronovo (2014). See also Derrida (1996b) on "I would prefer not" as the affirmative negativity of the *à venir.* Following Blanchot, Bojesen and Allen (2019, 66) suggest that "Bartleby can only ever figure a freedom from life rather than a freedom in life," and they see him as "the permanently unemployed and the refugee who cannot be assimilated." For Han (2015) Bartleby is the symbol of what he calls "the burnout society."

74 See Freeman (2019, 134–57).

75 Freeman (2019, 155); "always there" is a citation from Melville (1979, 118).

tor from completing his prologic statements by mischievously interjecting, "he lost the little oil flask" (*lēkuthion apōlesen* 1213b, 1219b, *passim*).[76] The phrase has the same arresting power as Niobe's silence and Aeschylus's compounds — and, in fact, the compounds feel as recalcitrant as objects. His intervention functions, in a sense, similarly to an "occupation" in the political sense — a formalistic "occupy" movement, as it were.[77] Aeschylus's disruptive container fractures syntactical continuity, subjecting Euripides and his audience, as well as later interpreters of the play, to disorienting suspension, confronting them with the temporal dilation brought on by an object that thwarts the actualization of meaning — its full realization — but is *always there.*

iii. Crisis, *Chrēsis,* and Animal Time

In *Frogs* — a play of aspirational political rebirth — being a subject in the community means fitting into a system of value that is inherently instrumentalizing, regardless of class distinctions.[78] This is a play where *chrēsis* ("instrumentality") and the cognate verb *chraomai* ("to use") are thematized, as we see in these three passages, taken from climactic moments — the choral ode that is the parabasis, the finale, and the contest between Aeschylus and Euripides (734–35, 1453–54, 1061):

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76 For the interpretations of this much-discussed phrase, see M. Griffith (2013, 129–31).

77 See the comparison between the Occupy movement and the rhetorical practice of *occupatio* — as "not just […] taking possession of an empty space in an argument, but […] framing [a response] in advance" — suggested by Mitchell (2012). On the "occupation of form" as a political occupation, see also Palumbo-Liu (2008) and Castronovo (2014, 257–58). Apter (2018, 129) views Bartleby as "the obstinator, an ontologist of the curiously impactful effects of mutism, obduracy, and stubbornness."

78 On the atmosphere of social renewal, see Padilla (1992). On the political context of *Frogs* in the aftermath of the battle of Arginusae (406 BCE), with the expansion of citizen rights, and the debate around the return of Alcibiades from exile, see esp. M. Griffith (2013, 46–51); see also Sidwell (2009, 42–44).

> CHORUS But even now, you thoughtless people, alter
> your manners and once again *use (chrēsthe)* the good
> *(chrēstoisin)* people.

> AESCHYLUS Tell me now, first who the city is *using
> (chrētai)* — is it the good *(chrēstois)* people?

> AESCHYLUS The demigods *use (chrōntai)* more solemn
> clothes than we do.

Not just Xanthias but also politicians are thought of as items
to be "used," as we see in Aeschylus's language. The juxtaposi-
tion of the blatantly cognate imperative *chrēsthe* ("use") and
chrēstoisin ("good") throws into relief the all-encompassing
dimension of instrumentality, even when an attempt is made
to divorce social and political value from economic value. As
David Rosenbloom has observed, "The label *chrēstos* ["good"]
attaches to men whose status derives from some combination of
prestigious birth, landed wealth […], education, and aristocratic
culture."[79] However, the symbolic capital that they lay claim to
is linked to the fact that they are "useful *(chrēsimoi)* to the *polis*"
and, more specifically, *"produce* food for the citizen body."[80] In
the parabasis of *Frogs,* the apparent opposition between "adul-
terated" *(kekibdēleumenois* 721) and "tested" *(kekōdōnismenois*
723) coins is exploited to cast the *chrēstoi* as "the ethos and
honor of the community," to align them with non-monetary

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79 Rosenbloom (2004a, 56).

80 Rosenbloom (2004a, 64) (my emphasis); see also Rosenbloom (2004a,
56n5): "The *chrēstos* benefits the polis as a hoplite, *hippeus, eisphora*-payer,
or liturgist." Rosenbloom (2004b, 353) observes that "food is the elemen-
tal useable value in the polis. Kimon epitomized this form of leadership:
the 'brilliant liturgist' who 'feeds many demesmen.'" Dover (1993, ad
178) insists on rigidly separating *chrēsimos* and *chrēstos,* regarding the
utilitarian semantics of the former as incompatible with the latter's ethical
orientation; see also Biles (2011, 247). But the frequent juxtaposition of the
two adjectives throughout the play is in itself an invitation to reflect upon
their conceptual interdependence.

worth.[81] But the money metaphor, conveyed through the opposing yet formally similar participles *kekibdēleumenois* and *kekōdōnismenois,* instrumentalizes the *chrēstoi,* subjecting them to the logic of productivity, notwithstanding their ostensible aristocratic self-protection from the contamination of monetary exchange.[82] Reaffirming instrumentality at a critical moment anti-democratically dispossesses the subject, makes it "belong," subsumes it into a "common" totality while foreclosing the possibility of a retreat from invisible ordering agencies — *making, producing, utility* — excluding the prospect of an "incommensurability […] of value."[83] In a discursive space like the parabasis, which enforces *consensus* as the political counterpart of choral collectivity,[84] by performatively (re)establishing a stable measure of value, the social standing of the *chrēstoi* appears to be contingent upon their ability to be commodified. Even Aeschylus, when he learns from Dionysus that the city does not "make use" (*chrētai*) of "good (*chrēstoisin*) people," reacts by asking: "How could one save this city, which doesn't use a cloak (*chlaina*) or a goatskin (*sisura*)" (1458–59)?[85] Woven or stitched into versatile, pliant prostheses, the *chrēstoi* are instrumentalized as *products* even if their class notionally saves them from the necessity of *producing.*

Yet the descent (*kata-basis*) into the Underworld in *Frogs,* a plunge into the abyss at a time of crisis, reveals how "crisis" (*kri-*

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81 The citation is from Rosenbloom (2004a, 65).

82 On the coin metaphors in the parabasis, see M. Griffith (2013, 45–49); on the conflict of economic and symbolic capital, monetary and non-monetary exchange in archaic and classical Greek culture, see Kurke (1999).

83 See Nancy (2010) on "democratic politics" as "politics in negativity" (39), that is, "the name of a regime of sense whose truth cannot be subsumed under any ordering agency" (33). For Nancy, politics "is a matter of keeping […] incommensurability open, the incommensurability of justice as well as that of value." For him, politics (that is, democratic politics) "does not subsume the 'in common' under any kind of union, community, subject, or epiphany" (50).

84 On Rancière's definition of *consensus,* see chapter 1.

85 On the versatile materiality of the *chlaina* and its tactile aesthetics in Aristophanes, see Telò (2016).

sis), in the sense of a suspension of time, a *chrono-kata-chrēsis,* can twist, that is, "queer," *chrēsis.* While acting as adjectives that modify instrumentalized individuals and mark the very idea of instrumentalization, *kekibdēleumenois* ("adulterated") and *kekōdōnismenois* ("tested") also internalize the stubbornness of Aeschylean hyperform, as it were. As graphemic dilations, they impede the verbal flow, the distribution of the sensible. Arresting the visual or aural organs, they become objects in themselves, taking on an aesthetic autonomy that separates them from their referents, an autonomous objecthood that suggests a refusal of instrumentality. Aeschylus's hyperform and its vicarious echoes intimate a potential redemption of the subject through a reclaimed objecthood, which despite, or perhaps because of, its stretched-out temporality, is neither passive nor inert.[86] Against various forms of oppressive instrumentality, Sara Ahmed has advocated what she calls "queer use," which demands that "we *linger;* we do not get to the point." The "lingering over things" that characterizes queer use means "attending to their qualities,"[87] that is, to manifestations of a material *conatus* that hinder instrumentalization.

Though, at the end of the play, Dionysus explains that he will choose which tragedian will leave the Underworld based on "who will be able to give some useful (*chrēston*) advice to the city" (1420–21), for example regarding the return of Alcibiades from exile, Aeschylus's utility may lie, paradoxically, in his uselessness. The *polis,* Dionysus says, "desires [Alcibiades], hates him, and wants to have him" (*pothei men, echthairei de, bouletai d' echein* 1425).[88] To this uncertainty, which has the feel of a looping trajectory — a *fort* and *da* on the threshold between

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86 This objecthood can perhaps be connected with what Moten (2003, 12) calls "objection," that is, an "objection to subjection," which manifests itself in the "commodity's scream." As he puts it, "The object resists, the commodity shrieks."

87 Ahmed (2019, 206) (my emphasis).

88 The line adapts a tragic quotation from Ion of Chios (Fragment 44 Kannicht-Snell); in the original, the object of (Troy's?) desire and hatred may be Paris or Helen: see Stevens (2007, 250–52).

desire and the death drive[89] — we may locate an alternative in the *chrono-kata-chrēsis* of Aeschylean hyperform, its queering of instrumentality, its willful blocking of the "useful" that Aeschylus, as Dionysus's designated winner, the producer of *chrē-ston* advice, is supposed to provide to the city. When Aeschylus's victory is proclaimed, the Chorus praises him as the resourceful, clever savior (1482–90) — in a sense, the embodiment of the versatility at the center of an earlier ode — while dismissing Socratic conversation, "solemn discourse" (*semnoisin logoisi* 1496), and "idle time-wasting" (*diatribēn argon* 1498). Yet *semnos* ("solemn") is the adjective customarily applied to Aeschylean aesthetics.[90] The contradictory nature of Dionysus's choice need not be seen simply as a function of the intrinsic instability of comic discourse.[91] Rather, it suggests a potential of subversive politics (or *batracho-politics*), which inheres in what is ostensibly rejected, "idleness" as an emancipatory lack of productivity, a kind of "queer use" arising in the act of just lingering, "when you take up time that could have been used to get to the point."[92] What Aeschylus brings to the city that is "useful" (*chrēston*) is formal recalcitrance, the interruption of productivity, a phonemic dilation that, jeopardizing the instrumentality of signification, its goal-centeredness, reclaims the value of *just* ("idle") life. Seeing Aeschylus off on his journey back to the world of the living, Pluto hands him murderous weapons that will send annoying and dangerous politicians into the Underworld: "Bring this (*touti*) and give it to Cleophon and these (*toutousi*) to the Commissioners of Revenue […] and this (*tode*) to Archenomus" (1504–7). Aeschylus will bring death into the world of the living — but, more than literal death, he will bring the non-chron-

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89 In Lacanian psychoanalysis, desire is what can never be satisfied, while the death drive finds satisfaction in the lack of satisfaction: see Žižek (2012, 496).

90 On Aeschylus's *semnotēs* ("solemnity"), in Aristophanes and ancient literary criticism, see Telò (2016, 49–54).

91 On this instability in relation to Dionysus's choice, see esp. Rosen (2004) and Halliwell (2011, 93–154).

92 Ahmed (2019, 206).

ological temporality of the Underworld into the historical present. While the deictics in Pluto's words refer to concrete tools of death, their mutilated referentiality — their specific identity remains indeterminate and always *à venir*[93] — tropes the precariousness of every instrumentality as well as an interruptive objecthood that dilates time and disorients the perceiving subject, forcing it to *linger*.

At a time of global crisis, when the Real of a mysterious pandemic inflicted protracted lingering, forcing many of us to remain shut in, inactive, and to "wallow in the mud" of inertia, we (re)discovered — besides an eerie sense of our own disavowed precarity — the experiential texture of mere living, of an existence (provisionally?) liberated from instrumentalizing activity.[94] Our desire for normalcy tracked the normalizing impatience of capitalist power, which resonated through the vociferous claim that the economy cannot wait, cannot be stopped, even that some lives can, or should, be sacrificed to keep it moving, or, in any case, that we needed to get on with our lives.[95] This exploitative kinesis, which is arguably the primary *archē* of the lingering viral catastrophe,[96] is nothing but a conta-

93 In the phrase that Derrida (2005) applies to democracy as a future "to come," never a future-present. See chapter 1.

94 The title of Bratton's book on COVID is *The Revenge of the Real* (2021).

95 I am thinking of the words of Texas lieutenant-governor Dan Patrick, who, at the moment of the explosion of the COVID crisis, suggested, without any hint of irony, that grandparents should be willing to sacrifice their lives to save the economy. Similarly, Republican Senator Ron Johnson called on the US president to reopen segments of the economy because, as he put it: "Death is an unavoidable part of life." See Telò (2023a, chs. 3, 4). As J. Butler (2020b, 688) puts it, speaking of the pandemic: "Workers are dispatched, threatened with termination, and compelled to achieve greater productivity for the profit that drives the entire scene. But this forward drive comes at the cost of living creatures, both human and animal, as meatpacking industries deal death to animals and expose humans to the virus in ever greater numbers with impunity." See also Toscano (2020) on the pandemic's fostering of the "joint manoeuvres of the security state and surveillance capitalism" (13); for Dale (2020), capitalism "is the virus that is inducing the global fever."

96 The "origin" of the pandemic can be imputed, in fact, to the extreme exploitation of animal bodies as edible meat.

gious death drive.[97] In fact, our desire for normalcy bespeaks, to an extent, our becoming subjects by subjecting ourselves to, and fully internalizing, Symbolic linearity and productive mobility. Even though it heightened social inequalities, aggravating the cruelty of racializing capitalism, raising further hurdles for the unprivileged in their struggles for more livable lives,[98] the global paralysis of the lockdown raised the threat of no work, something that could also be regarded as utopia, or the possibility for a reconfiguration of the status quo ante.[99] From the point of view of autonomist Marxism, whose overarching assumption is that "workers are to be conceived not primarily as capital's victims but as its antagonists,"[100] the refusal of work "is not a renunciation of labor *tout court,* but rather a refusal of the ideology of work […], of work as the necessary center of social life and means of access to the rights […] of citizenship, and a refusal of the necessity of capitalist control of production."[101]

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97 On the death drive in the current political moment, see J. Butler (2020a, ch. 4); on the death drive and the coronavirus epidemic, see J. Cohen (2020). Myers (2022, 86) observes that the "call to advance demands our continual disavowal of the actual stasis inhering in what is understood as 'progress.'"

98 See, among others, Higgins (2021, 128), who observes that the "hushed public spaces" of the lockdown — "images of silence" resembling "post-apocalyptic scenes of mass extinction" — were "almost always paired with images or descriptions of noisy places where essential workers were busy saving everyone else." See Telò (2023a).

99 Žižek (2020a; 2020b) suggested that the (notional) "aftermath" of the coronavirus epidemic might result in a new society, founded on a stronger idea of cooperation that would radically deterritorialize the capitalist state. The pandemic forces us to consider not just how to live on, but whether this "living on" is livable or not, or livable for everyone: see J. Butler in Butler and Worms (2023, 34).

100 Weeks (2011, 94).

101 Weeks (2011, 99). Autonomist Marxism sees Marx, especially the Marx of the *Grundrisse* (1993), "as a theorist of crisis rather than equilibrium, of subjective agency rather than objective tendencies, of antagonism and separation rather than opposition and synthesis," in the words of Weeks (2011, 93): see Negri (1996) and Hardt and Negri (2000). In the reading of Marx offered by Nancy (1991), a post-work society is necessary for avoiding totalitarianism. The post-work imaginary starts, famously, with Paul

In other words, as Kathi Weeks puts it, "the refusal of work serves not as a goal, but as a path — a path of separation that creates the conditions for the construction of subjects whose needs and desires are no longer as consistent with the social mechanisms within which they are supposed to be mediated and contained."[102] Though the traumatic slowdown imposed by the pandemic may more readily mark the end of the world than the end of capitalism,[103] it may nevertheless enable us to imagine the political as well as ethical possibility of discontinuous labor, of serendipitous suspensions of the practical routine and the ideological facticity of work. It is precisely this unchallenged facticity, an apparently indestructible givenness, that perpetuates social inequality, that underwrites the legitimized abuse of "those who have no part" under the rubric of the "common good."[104] The interruption of active life brought on by the pandemic may induce us to contemplate the possibility of *batracho-politics* or *batracho-being,* that is, of making room in these pan-endemic times — or in the imagined aftermath of the lingering medical state of exception — for unproductive durations, inactive refusals, queer chronicities. There cannot be a return to the status quo ante. The stalling of time caused by the pandemic has already exposed the imperative of productivity to forms of discontinuity, *an-omaly,* and disruptive — and thus potentially subversive — alterations (among others, teleworking, absences caused by long COVID, and reconfigurations of the workspace

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Lafargue's *The Right to Be Lazy* (1880); see, most recently, Odell (2019) and Pfannebecker and Smith (2020).

102 Weeks (2011, 100). See Barthes (2005, 18), on weariness and repose: "Weariness = exhausting claim of the individual body that demands the right to social repose. […] Weariness = an intensity: society doesn't recognize intensities."

103 See the Salvage Collective (2021, 8): "Capitalism, like certain bacteria, like the death drive, is immortal. It has limits and crises but, perversely, seems to thrive on these." The statement, "It's easier to imagine the world than the end of capitalism," is variously attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek. See also M. Fisher (2009).

104 See Telò (2023a, chs. 2, 3).

for greater safety).[105] Far from mere sterility or fatalistic passivity, the queer chronicity of *batracho-politics* — the slow life of broken productivity in the face of the "slow death" of capitalistic velocity[106] — valorizes interruptive negativity as a space of possibility, as an opportunity for new forms of agency and a reinvention of the social divorced from the logic of goal-centeredness, instrumentality, and coerced mobility.[107]

In the dramaturgy of crisis that we have explored in *Frogs,* the passivity imposed by accelerationist instrumentality is undercut from within, by a becoming animal, by the stretching of *chrēsis,* and gullets, into the croaking intensity of *brekekex koax koax,* the dissensual *phōnē* that is the play's memorable refrain.[108] This insistent emission of sound can be regarded as a form of animal labor, amphibian technicity — the never-ending production of resonant sensory matter that affirms and circulates the

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105 On capitalist slow death, see Berlant (2007); on the aggravation of this death under the COVID pandemic, see, e.g., Sharron (2020). See Sotiris (2020, 25), on the pandemic as an opportunity for "radically transform[ing] social relations […] by means of […] the emergence of new 'ways of life' antagonistic to the logic of capital." Agamben (2021, 21) observes that after the pandemic "we will have to ask if it still justifiable to fly for our holidays to remote places, or if maybe it is more urgent that we learn to dwell again in the spaces in which we live," for, as he puts it, "we really have lost the ability to dwell." See also Samuels and Freeman (2021, 251), on the possibility, during the pandemic and in post-pandemic times, of valuing forms of "being together in time" that value "stasis and the present rather than motion and the future."

106 On "slow death" see Berlant (2007).

107 See Athanasiou in Butler and Athanasiou (2013, 22–23) for a critique of the traditional conceptualization of agency as kinetic. What Honig calls "passivity" (2021, 16–17) is "not […] a […] defeatist attenuation of struggle, but […] an unceasing engagement with a desire for the political, sustained by its ultimate unattainability," as observed by Butler and Athanasiou (2013, 156). In the introduction to Harney and Moten (2013), Halberstam remarks that "Moten and Harney refuse the logic that stages refusal as inactivity, as the absence of a plan and as a mode of stalling real politics." It is the "negativity," "the empty point" pushing "the present beyond itself," which, for Esposito (2019, 198), is indispensable for politics.

108 On animal *phonē* as a dissensual disruption of *logos,* see Rancière's discussion of Aristotle's *Politics* (1253a9–17) at the beginning of *Disagreement* (1999). See chapter 1 of this volume.

rights to exist and to be heard, an uncommodifiable commodity. This animal production enacts a *politics of expression,* which encompasses an "affirmation gestured forth with enthusiasm of the body."[109] Allied with his an-omalous non-human counterpart, Aristophanes' Aeschylus can be seen not just as a poetic subject but as hyperform (stubborn and "useless") that draws out time by arresting or disabling the chain of signification, or the chain of production.[110] If identified with the resistant formalism of his compounds, the comic Aeschylus, who will be so inspirational for Nietzsche, no longer seems the enforcer of aristocratic or reactionary politics, or of *a-pragmosunē* (the elitist "disengagement" of the masters), but the potential agent of the negative emancipation that can be mobilized by crisis — wars, the collapse of democracy, or a global pandemic.[111] In *Frogs,* the recalcitrance of the amphibian Chorus and the hyperform of Aeschylean language lead us not to an (impossible) melancholic or neophobic restoration, but to a deterritorialization of *chrēsis,* a *chrēsis* gone awry. In the croaking, stretching, and lingering or malingering, we may discover stretched-out time, which protects bodies from the malignant stretching of their limits: a *chrēsis* in crisis, a *chrēsis* that *becomes* crisis.

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109 Massumi (2014, 43).

110 Chen (2015, 26) observes the "disproportionate ableism" of a capitalistic economy in which "disabled people are labelled non-productive."

111 On the influence of the Aristophanic Aeschylus on Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy,* see esp. Halliwell (2003).

Agitation and Necro-Reproduction: *Lysistrata*

Synopsis: To bring the Peloponnesian war to an end, Lysistrata organizes a sex strike of both Athenian and Spartan women. After Lysistrata tethers them with a solemn oath, she and they join the older women who have already seized the Acropolis. A Chorus of old men tries to incinerate the occupants, who counterattack with pitchers of water. The strike frustrates and exhausts both women and men. Two women pretend to be pregnant in order to return to their husbands; Myrrhine seduces her husband Kinesias while keeping him at bay; Spartans heralds arrive, painfully aroused. The epiphany of personified Reconciliation, who crudely becomes the object of the male gaze, persuades Athenians and Spartans to stop the war. Conjugal peace in Athens and Sparta is restored.

The link between *chrēsis* and *crisis* in *Frogs* is also relevant to *Lysistrata,* which offers another expression of Aristophanic resistant formalisms. My starting point is the figure of the refugee, whom the neoliberal states of our time self-servingly cast as

the cause of a perennial crisis.[1] In her 1943 essay "We Refugees," Hannah Arendt compares the statelessness of the Jewish people to the female condition. Inhabiting various nationalities in order to attain a legal status constantly denied to them, Jewish people, Arendt says, are like the women of every country, era, and class, forced to don new dresses (metaphorical or not) to fit in, to achieve an equality that is never fully granted.[2] At a time when migrants are in no less danger than Arendt was in the early 1940s, her observation invites us to consider *Lysistrata* as a site for exploring the affinity of woman and refugee.

More than fifty years after Arendt, Jacques Derrida theorized foreignness in two seminars through discussions of Socrates, Oedipus, and Antigone.[3] In his reading of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus,* Derrida contends that as a woman, forbidden by law to visit her father's tomb and thus kept, as it were, on the threshold of mourning, Antigone, not Oedipus, is the genuine foreigner. Her lack of access makes her mourning at once impossible and eternal and thus homologous to unconditional hospitality, an infinite ethical openness to the other, which goes beyond any form of lawful — and, thus, finite, circumscribed, limited — welcoming of the stranger.[4] Woman is the primary agent of uncon-

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1 On the refugee crisis, "with its temporality of emergency, its investments in security, its humanitarian alibis, and its manufacture of forgetting," see esp. Sanyal (2019) (quote at 444); see also De Genova and Tazzioli (2016) and De Genova (2017). A connection of *Lysistrata* with the theme of the refugee may be implied by Loraux (1993a, 161) when she suggests that "Jean Pierre Vernant's discussion of the Danaids in Aeschylus' *Suppliants* could be easily applied to Lysistrata's companions."

2 Arendt (2007, 273).

3 Derrida in Derrida and Dufourmantelle (2000). Derrida experienced his own precarity as a Jew in Vichy-controlled Algeria.

4 Antigone's impossible mourning, what Derrida in Derrida and Dufourmantelle (2000, 100, 25) calls "an interminable mourning, an infinite mourning defying all work, beyond any possible work of mourning," corresponds to "the absolute hospitality" that "requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner [...] but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other." Derrida's idea of hospitality stems from notions of dispossession within identity. As McNulty (2006, xix) puts it, "The act of introducing a foreigner into the home [...] recalls the dispossession of

ditional hospitality — the quintessential host as Luce Irigaray has discussed[5] — but also the primary stranger. For Derrida, in fact, the question of *l'étranger* (the foreigner) is a question of *l'étrangère* (the female foreigner). Even before Derrida makes this point, we may think of *"l'étranger"* as *"étrangère"* when he observes that "the Foreigner shakes up the threatening dogmatism of the paternal *logos*"[6] and, likewise, when he describes the liminal status of the foreigner in terms that evoke the position of women in classical Athens "between the familial and the nonfamilial, between the foreign and the non-foreign, the citizen and the non-citizen," and "between the private and the public."[7]

I want to look at Lysistrata and her comrades, the Chorus of female protesters, as refugees and to read the play against itself, as an allegory of a securitarian state that projects its own aggressive conduct onto the phantasm of an invading foreigner.[8] As I will argue, the female protest staged in the play is construed as generating a state of exception, or emergency, which the state uses as an alibi for its legalized abuse, as the justification for its own constitutive necropolitical violence.[9] The women's sex

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identity that is uncannily internal to identity itself, to the chez soi of having and possessing."

5   See Irigaray (2003, 47) and the discussion of Still (2011, 151–52).

6   Derrida in Derrida and Dufourmantelle (2000, 5).

7   Derrida and Dufourmantelle (2000, 49). Without referring to Derrida, Stümer (2018, 35) suggests that we reimagine Antigone's "living death in the context of contemporary refugee politics."

8   As Tavia Nyong'o observes in Puar (2017, xiii), the energies of the "security apparatus […] have been mobilized and sustained by a phobic image of the terrorist Other." See Bigo (2002) on the securitarian characterization of the immigrant's arrival as a threatening "penetration."

9   On the state of exception, see Agamben (2005). Mbembe (2003, 16) observes that power "continuously refers and appeals to exception, emergency, and a fictionalized notion of the enemy. It also labors to produce that same exception, emergency, and fictionalized enemy." See also Mbembe (2019, ch. 3). Exploiting the state of exception is typical of those states, like Athens, that claim excellence over others, as we observe, for example, in Pericles' funeral oration. As Puar (2017, 5) observes, "Exceptionalism gestures to narratives of excellence, excellent nationalism, a process whereby a national population comes to believe in its own superiority."

strike, which has dominated readings of the play — the most performed in the Aristophanic corpus[10] — can be seen as a projection of the Athenian state's own refusal to open the "door" of citizenship and full legal status to women, who were in effect "undocumented" within their native country.[11] In my readings, I will, however, shift the focus from the sex strike per se to the preparations for and staging of the protest, and to the ways in which the reactions of various repressive agents look ahead to the "humanitarian" or securitarian ideologies and practices that shape the dehumanizing treatment of refugees at the borders of the United States and of several European countries.[12] "Entry Denied," the phrase epitomizing the sex strike in *Chi-Raq,* Spike Lee's 2015 film version of the Aristophanic play, is also the title of Eithne Luibhéid's book on the surveillance of female sexuality at the US border, particularly the exclusion of Chinese women immigrants.[13] The Propylaea, the gateway to the Acropolis, the border that is the play's setting, is both the spatialization of female anatomy — of the sexual territory to which male access is denied[14] — and a trope of spatial fetishism, the

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10 On the role of *Lysistrata* in contemporary feminist politics, through explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious receptions, see Morales (2013; 2015), Dutsch (2015), and Robson (2016, 59–64). Morales points out that the very idea of a sex strike presupposes the sexist, patriarchal notion of sex as a "service" that women provide to men; she has also shown how the privileging of the sex strike in scholarship and reception reinscribes the sexist dynamics; see also Zuckerberg (2019).

11 The condition of Athenian women may also be compared to that of metics, "resident aliens": see Kasimis (2018). For "door" as a metaphor for "vagina," see lines 1069–71, 1212–20, and Henderson (1991) s.v. *thura*.

12 As we will see, the imagery and the staging of the play set up something similar to what has been called "security aesthetics," that is, the complex of ways in which "risks are recorded, imagined, and affectively experienced, often through sensory projections of a threatening Other," as Ghertner, McFann, and Goldstein (2020, 4–5) put it.

13 Luibhéid (2002). For a critique of Lee's movie, see Morales (2015); cf. Dué (2016).

14 See esp. Loraux (1993a, 167) and Fletcher (1999, 118); on the sexual meaning of *pulē* ("gate"), see Henderson (1991, ad loc.).

marker of the state's effort to disavow its own vulnerability.[15] A national border is, in general, the locus of violent *nomos* (that is, of "division," "partitioning")[16] where governments exercise their power to mark precarious oppositions between citizen and non-citizen, friend and enemy,[17] and consequently to reduce the "stranger" (cultural, racial, sexual) to "bare" life or even "bare" death.[18] As Shatema Threadcraft has remarked concerning the police's necropower against Black women, "Feminine embodiment puts one at risk, not only of death but also of having one's death go unnoticed."[19] Nevertheless, as a spatial excess, the border is not just the scene of perennial emergency, of exclusionary nationalism and colonialism, but also "a demarcation of the space in which the political takes form, becomes visible."[20] Like Aristophanic hyperform, always on the border or the edge, it is the locus of movements of nonhierarchical self-exiting, of

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15 On borders and walls as fetishes, responses to the state's own fear of castration, or, differently put, to the subconscious sense of its own lack (the Lacanian phallus), see Katz (2007); see also Brown (2010).

16 See Rancière (1999) on this meaning of *nomos;* see also chapter 1 of this volume. See also Mbembe (2003, 25).

17 The scholarship on *Lysistrata* has usually emphasized the gender opposition, that is, the binary war of male and female: see esp. Taaffe (1993, ch. 2).

18 On the border as a necropolitical deathscape, a place that "escalates bare life into bare death," see Stümer (2018, 22). For Stümer, "where Agamben's bare life melts into universalized indistinction, bare death is a point of distinct difference and absolute exclusion, exposing who is not (or no longer) considered 'life' (of any kind) within the nomos of the sovereign" (32). In this perspective, for Stümer, "Antigone's defiance pays tribute to all those who bear a […] bare death — all those who rot outside the city limits, and beyond Europe's borders as decided by sovereign power" (33). The comically thwarted plan of the Chorus of old men to burn Lysistrata and her allies *alive* can be read as aiming to inflict "bare death." Bare death leads to what Judith Butler has called "ungrievability" (2020a).

19 Threadcraft (2016, 108). See also Stanley (2011, 1) on trans[(*)] thanatopolitics: *"Besieged,* I feel in the fleshiness of the everyday like a kind of near life or a death-in-waiting […] *at the threshold* of obliteration" (my emphasis).

20 Stümer (2018, 23).

minoritarian temporalities beyond and against emergency, of emancipatory possibilities of political becoming.[21]

In my interpretation I heed the projective fear behind the play's sexist conceit, and I reread its imagery and dramaturgy as hinting toward the immunitarian technologies of surveillance deployed by the state.[22] Whether Athenian or not, sovereignty seeks to safeguard itself by staging emergencies, in this case, an invasion or *influx* or *inundation,* of women, the "foreigners" inside the house who become dangerous migrants the moment they approach the public sphere.[23] Although Athenian women did not have political rights and constituted, in fact, a category of "sexual strangers,"[24] they did give birth to and provide care for sons who would be full Athenian citizens. We can thus say that *Lysistrata* illustrates, despite itself, the techniques of "necrocitizenship" — of controlling, surveilling, excluding, and debilitating — perpetrated by the state against its own reproductive power and care system.[25] As Melissa Wright observes, in her

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21 Lowe (1996, 8–9) observes that "the 'immigrant,' produced by the law as margin and threat to [the] symbolic whole, is precisely a generative site for the critique of that universality."

22 The necropolitical surveillance of the female body is a means for the state to control the (re)production of citizenship. As Tyler (2013, 217) observes, "Citizenship operates biopolitically as a means of managing the undesirable reproduction of non-citizens and thus protecting the 'species life' of the 'native' nation-state."

23 On the rhetoric of the foreigner's invasion in the imaginary of the securitarian state, see, e.g., Zeiderman (2020, 79–83). In *Lysistrata,* the sexualized imagery of invasion is a projection of the violence of both the Athenian household and the state. The mythical subjugation of the Amazons, central to the rhetoric of Athenian "exceptionalism," is an example of sexualized necropolitics.

24 Here I use the phrase that Phelan (2001, 4–5) employs for the condition of LGBTQ+ people in the United States, "neither us nor clearly them, not friend and not enemy, but a figure of ambivalence who troubles the border between us and them." For Phelan, "the enemy is the clear opposite of the citizen, but the stranger is more fraught." On the civic status of women in ancient Athens, see, e.g., Pritchard (2014).

25 On necrocitizenship, see Díaz-Barriga and Dorsey (2020); by "necrocitizens," they mean "citizens without rights who are subject to a […] politics of exclusion and militarization" (2020, 48). Regarding women in

discussion of femicide in Ciudad Juárez, "Gender […] is central to the violent dynamics linking the production of states to the reproduction of their subjects."[26]

Besides reading *Lysistrata* as a dramatization of "the necropolitics of gendered violence,"[27] I seek a micropolitics of resistance in formal texture. Here I mean the recalcitrant, minoritarian effects suggested by the poetic form of this comedy notwithstanding the restoration, at the plot level, of the status quo, which patently shatters the utopia of protesting women.[28] Similarly, excavating the archive of rebellious young Black women in New York City and Philadelphia in the 1920s, Saidiya Hartman provides a theory of "waywardness" as an effort "to elude capture by never settling." She sees such unsettledness as embodied in what she calls "the chorus," a figure of "the willingness to lose oneself and become something greater" an "ensemble, [a] mutual aid society."[29] Hartman characterizes bold acts of protest

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the Athenian household, one could use Mbembe's characterization of the slave as the quintessential target of necropolitical violence, someone who is "kept alive but in a *state of injury,*" whose life "is a form of death-in-life" (2003, 21). The domestic violence described by Lysistrata's comrades in the course of the play as customary in Athenian (and Spartan) households can be qualified as necropolitical in that it enacts a systemic subjection of women to disciplinary techniques for the sake of reproduction.

26 M.W. Wright (2011, 710). Threadcraft (2017, 558) points out the state's complicity with necropolitical violence against women at the border when authorities labeled victims as sex workers, "public women." As Wright observes, the government's "public woman" discourse "explains that, while unfortunate, the deaths of [these] women represent a kind of public cleansing, as the removal of troublesome women restores the moral and political balance of society" (2011, 713); see also Luibhéid (2002, 38–41). In *Lysistrata,* the protesting wives are assimilated to prostitutes: see Stroup (2004).

27 M.W. Wright (2011, 711). On gendered necropolitics, see also Ahmetbeyzade (2008) and Threadcraft (2016; 2017).

28 On minoritarian politics, see Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 17), who famously observe that in what they call "minoritarian" literatures "everything […] is political." As Manning (2016, 7) puts it, "The minor gesture is the force that makes the lines tremble that compose the everyday"; it is "the felt experience of potential" (75).

29 Hartman (2019, 227, 285).

and resistance as "choreography," that is, "a practice of moving even when there was nowhere else to go, no place left to run […], an arrangement of the body to elude capture, an effort to make the uninhabitable livable, to escape the confinement of a four-cornered world, a tight, airless room."[30] Through the expansion of the self, the chorus distorts the borders of containing structures, depriving space of its ability to "comprehend."[31] In *Lysistrata,* linguistic structures that appear, as it were, reluctant to be divided or broken up, yield a sense of spatial expansion, temporal continuity, and affective boundlessness — registers of resistant form that, as I will argue, push against the imagery of securitarian necropolitics.

While in the previous chapter my emphasis was on lack of action or inertia, here I focus on *agitation,* a political feeling materialized in form, a kind of continuous action. The term "agitation" has recently been reclaimed by Mel Y. Chen, in whose formulation it refers to "activity opposing dominant forces and supporting change" or to "the collective shaping of dissent." Agitation operates "not only as an ensemble of gestural cultures of nondisabled expression or choreographed resistance but also as the movement vocabularies of people living with diverse bodily experience."[32] While building on Chen's theorization,[33] I want to zero in on the temporality of *agitation* — derived from the Latin verb *agito* (a frequentative of *ago* "to act") — in order to locate in *Lysistrata* a kind of resistance through intense, prolonged *acting* that spills over, and thus affectively cancels out,

30 Hartman (2019, 299).

31 For a different emancipatory take on the politics of the Chorus in *Lysistrata,* see duBois (2022, ch. 4).

32 Chen (2018, 554, 560). Khanna (2020, 38) considers agitation "as a visceral logic of decolonization."

33 Halberstam and Nyong'o (2018, 456, 459) consider both Hartman's "waywardness" and Chen's "agitation" — a "pursuit of the unruly," a "desire for unrest" — as part of "a set of practices and refusals that make up contemporary anticapitalism and indicate a […] paradigm of the political […] that lodges more comfortably in the resistance to agendas."

the bounds of action as a point in time.[34] Attached to the Latin verb *ago,* the suffix *-ito* introduces the idea of energetic intensity through repetition. Stretching *action* to the point of indistinction, agitation informs the temporality of Lysistrata's protest, its boundless, insistent affective turmoil, its restless over-extension. Agitation arises from formal effects emanating a nervous tension that stretches instantaneity — the *punctum* of crisis, invasion, and the rebellious "event" itself — through an infinite *acting* that never settles.[35] While for Alain Badiou, "the inception of a politics […] is always located in the absolute singularity of an event," for Angela Davis it is essential to think of "how we act in the aftermath" and how we respond to "the lost intensity of the moment."[36] The verb that Calonice, one of the "wayward" women of Aristophanes' play, uses for Lysistrata's state of mind at the beginning of the play — "You are agitated" (*suntetaraxai* 7) — translates the idea of agitation not just as a "stirring" (*tarachē*) but as a *con*tinuity, a *con*tinuous motion (*suntetaraxai*) or *act*ing.[37] Evoking the ending of a nominative plural feminine, this *sun*-prefixed verb form presents an individual's angry *com*motion as a singular stretching into a plurality, an iteration of sorts that Lysistrata elaborates on with the durational force of a continuous-present-tense verb — "I am burning in my heart" or perhaps more precisely, "I *keep* burning in my heart" (*kaomai tēn kardian* 9). If one conceptualizes the angry fire, the "*hot mood*" of *thumos,* in Jane Bennett's terms, as an "*in-flux,*"[38] it would be something like a wave — that is, an impetus, an irruption in the moment, homologous to the "assault" or

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34 On duration and lingering as forms of endurance beyond "purposeful forms of resistance" or "overt agentic 'resistance,'" see Yapp (2014, 135–37).

35 My reading seeks to counterbalance the tendency to see a strike as "a break in time" (López [2020, 55]) or, similarly, a *punctum,* a point in time, a pointed moment. For a temporal reconceptualization of Barthes's *punctum* subject to deconstruction, see Derrida (2010, 2). I see the continuity I am positing as a temporal disturbance or breach in its own right.

36 Badiou (2005, 23) and uchrivideo (2020).

37 Arditi (2005) sees "agitation" as a "stirring up" of the Rancièrean distribution of the sensible.

38 Bennett (2020, 63).

"invasion" promoted in the necropolitical discourse concerning migrants both to invite a backlash and to promise the easy suppression of a one-off. While such discourse is also detectable in *Lysistrata,* it is possible to feel the formal pull of an affective continuity, an anger at once steadier and more intractable than the projective imagery of the aggressive instant. The "lines of flight" that *Lysistrata* opens up, despite itself, are to be situated in the form and temporality of this affective *con*tinuity, not just in the performative politics of togetherness as such.[39]

Lysistrata's ever-burning anger models an action that is "agitated" or turns into "agitation" in the sense that it has neither an ending nor a beginning.[40] Agitation is durational, indefinite — a replacement of action with the *acting* of *thumos*.[41] As we will see, the affective-political force of "agitation" also shapes dramatic form — yielding not a choral plot in which, say, Lysistrata blends into the community of her allies, but rather a continuous structure, one that is resistant to division, tending toward spatial undifferentiation as an undoing of hierarchical distinctions. This undifferentiation produces what I would call a *choral chōra*.[42] The radical continuity reflected in the plot structure,

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39 See Atack (2017; forthcoming) for an analysis of *Lysistrata* in light of J. Butler's foundational theorization of coalitional politics, the "right to appear on the street" (2015), and the invigorating resurgence of female protesting after November 8, 2016; see also Case (2021).

40 See the description of Catiline's "agitation," emotional turmoil, in Sallust, *Catiline* 5.7: *agitabatur magis magisque in dies animus ferox* ("His fierce soul kept agitating itself day after day").

41 Agitation enacts, in a way, Bergson's idea of time as "a succession of states each of which announces what follows and contains what precedes" (2010, 192).

42 "Amorphous and undifferentiated" is Burchill's (2006, 91; 2017, 194) gloss of *a-morphon* in Plato's description of *chōra* in *Timaeus* as "something that is without the shape of all those forms that it is about to receive" (*a-morphon on ekeinōn hapasōn tōn ideōn hosas melloi dechesthai pothen* 50d7–e1). Irigaray (1985a, 307) has criticized Plato for presenting *chōra*'s female, maternal space (before the intervention of the father) as "without memory […] without figure or face or proper form." For discussion, see esp. P.A. Miller (2016, 151–52); for a similar critique, see Grosz (2000). In reading the "undifferentiation" of *chōra* as emancipatory, I see it not just as pre-Symbolic, but as anti-Symbolic, as a space that is reluctant to become

in the particular modes of reading it solicits, and in formalistic micro-effects culminates in a discourse on the draining temporality of the labor of gestation, which emerges from the looping effect of mirror scenes with protuberant bodies and fetishistic objects. At the same time the cognitive undifferentiation of disavowal — the conflation of experiences and temporal planes derived from unconscious suppression — generates a fetish-fueled duration coinciding with pregnancy's sensation of endless time, the excruciating agitation imposed by the state's reproductive machine. The sex strike, as I will suggest, makes Athenian and Spartan men experience reproductive agitation vicariously through a lack of erectile fulfillment, which subverts the finale's apparently restored status quo ante with the impression of an uninterrupted continuity, with a sense of (re)productive unfinishedness — with the agitation of labor (in both senses of the word) and the labor of agitation.

i. A Refugee Crisis

In the preparations for the strike, the prologic conversations cast Lysistrata's allies as foreigners in their own home, reduced to a condition of suspended time by the practice of care, which they attend to without interruption.[43] Arriving onstage, Calonice,

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a "receptacle" and resists being marked by division, by the wounding partitions of meaning as well as social order. I thus politicize Derrida's idea (1993b, 30) that the *chōra* "calls into question the categories and distinctions that make the ontic possible," as P.A. Miller puts it (2016, 158) (my emphasis). See also J. Butler (1993, 41), on *chōra* as "a disfiguration that emerges at the boundaries of the human both as its very condition and as the insistent threat of its deformation." For Kristeva (1984, 24–26), the description of *chōra* as "amorphous" contradicts Plato's ascription to it of movement, something we could call "agitation," in 52e2–53a2 (*kinoumena* […] *seiomena*). I see choral "agitation" as integral to *chōral* recalcitrance, to a pre-emptive undoing of hierarchical partitioning. For Bergren (2010), *chōra* becomes "a continuously transformative multiplicity that both internalizes outside events and imparts a fluidity and mutability to the forces or elements it contains," as Burchill puts it (2017, 200) (my emphasis).

43 In Schaffer's description (2019, 525), care is "an ongoing action […] repeated […] perpetuated over time." Freeman (2021, 31) observes that "the

Lysistrata's first ally, observes how "difficult" (*chalepē*) an exit
(*ex-odos* 16) from the home is for women while assuring Lysis-
trata that, despite the delay, they will *eventually* "arrive" (*hēxousi*
16) at their meeting place. Dramatizing a perceived impossibil-
ity, this *arrival* brings to mind the impossible, unconditional
hospitality that, for Derrida, confronts the host when a foreigner
arrives. In the Aristophanic scene, the exit is delayed by the bur-
den of domestic labor, particularly by the post-reproductive
toils of mothers, "outsiders inside," not unlike female migrants
paid to provide the invisible care that reproduces privilege in
Western European and North American upper classes.[44] Care
is a pervasive theme in the play, and in the scene of sexual tit-
illation, Cinesias, the sex-deprived husband, complains about
Myrrhine's withdrawal from her duties ("Don't you have any
pity for the little child, who has been unwashed and unfed for
six days?" 880–81), and Myrrhine responds by accusing him of
being a "negligent, care-less" (*a-melēs*) father (882). In the pro-
logue, poetic form enacts the temporality of domestic care and
its necropolitical consequences. In Calonice's justification of her
friends' tardiness — "One (*hē*) was putting a little baby to bed,
the other one (*hē*) was washing the baby, another one (*hē*) was
feeding the baby bits of food" (18–19) — repetition in asyndeton
conveys the fatigue of caretaking, of the production and main-
tenance of life, which engenders a "state of permanent injury."
Although Calonice lists the duties of different women, the ham-
mering repetition of the feminine personal pronoun — "she
(*hē*/ἥ) […] she (*hē*/ἥ) […] she (*hē*/ἥ)" — seems to encompass
the multiple tasks of the same wife and mother, alienated,

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space-time of caretaking […] consists of compressed […], undifferenti-
ated, yet highly saturated time." In the course of this chapter, I will try
to reclaim this idea of temporal undifferentiation for emancipatory
metapolitics.

44 See, e.g., Sevenhuijsen (1998) and Tronto (2013). Care is one of the forms
of dispossessive labor that female strikes seek to make visible: see Gago
(2020, 13–21); see also J. Butler (2020a). For Laugier (2015, 226), "The eth-
ics of care draws our attention to the ordinary, to what we are unable to
see, though it is right before our eyes"; on care made visible in poetic form,
see Colon (2016).

reduced to pronominal impersonality by a "highly condensed chronology […] in which past history and future plans fade out in order to deal with the cared-for's urgent needs."[45]

Yet this continuous present enforced by necropower, this oppressive obligation, is turned around into a resistant attachment through a literal adhesion to the threshold, the domestic "border." When Calonice anticipates the forced return of Athenian wives to the segregated space of the home ("What if they take us and drag us into the house with violence?" 160–61),[46] Lysistrata's intervention ("Hold on [*ant-echou*] to the door!" 161) interrupts her mid-line, breaking the violence, as it were. While, in Lysistrata's prescription, woman remains, if necessary, perennially in the infinite space of the threshold, like the Derridean refugee, such a position could be seen as an emancipatory liminality by which she neither disappears inside nor appears in the openness of the public outside, where appearance is distributed, regulated through the dichotomy of citizenship and non-citizenship.[47] Both disappearance in the internal and appearance in the external imply imposed dispossession. The attachment to the door is an aggressively mimetic response to the women's instrumentalization and assimilation to (sexual) "doors," in line with the vulgar sexual joke (the equivalence of gate and vagina) repeated throughout the play. The notion of door clinging imagines an affective attachment wherein precarious self-possession is achieved interrelationally through the contact between an objectified human and a recalcitrant nonhuman object. Such an attachment reconfigures not just the intrinsic hierarchy of penetrative intercourse but also its goal-centeredness, replacing teleological finitude with haptic infinity, with the unlimited temporality of a tight adhesion, embodying unconditional care, whose lack of a *telos* (a goal or an end) is

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45 Schaffer (2019, 533).

46 In the following line, Calonice mentions another danger: "What if they beat us?" (162). On the strikes of the Ni Una Menos movement against femicide, see, among others, Gago (2018; 2020) and J. Butler (2020a).

47 See Sanyal (2017) on the entanglement of the refugees' rights to appear and disappear; see also, e.g., De Genova (2013) and Stümer (2018).

conveyed by the continuous present tense of the verb *ant-echou* (something like "keep holding on!").[48] Clinging to the threshold is a refusal not just to be held inside but to subscribe to the idea of trespassing, which presupposes limits, *border,* division, the Symbolic cutting behind the distribution of the sensible.[49] Even though the play is about the *action* or the event of the sexual strike, there is a concomitant force of continuity, *acting,* which stretches through the plot's structure.

This *acting* begins in the prologue, with the gathering of Lysistrata and her allies, a kind of parodos before the parodos, a Chorus-forming before the play's split Chorus arrives. Without formally constituting a Chorus, the women of the prologue are persuaded to act like one. At the end of their solemn oath, they proclaim in unison *nē Dia* ("by Zeus" 237).[50] For this reason, when a few lines later the semi-Chorus of old men intervenes, followed by the semi-Chorus of old women, the formal discontinuity typical of the initiation of the parodos (the song that marks the entrance of the Chorus) is remarkably attenuated. The transition from quasi-Chorus to proper Chorus, folding the prologue into the parodos, conveys a formal continuity, or a prolongation of the *before* into the *after*. This effect is enhanced by the initial iambic rhythm of the old men (256–65), a continuation of the prologue's spoken iambicism. For Aristotle, the plot is a *sustasis* ("a standing together, a combination") of parts connected with each other according to the laws of necessity and probability.[51] A prologue spilling into a parodos destabilizes

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48 The phrase "unconditional care" has, of course, a Derridean ring to it: see, e.g., Ganis (2011, 10).

49 On the state's border as a materialization of the distribution of the sensible, see Phillips and Montes (2018).

50 As we read in the new OCT (*Oxford Classical Texts*) edition, the speaker identifier Πᾶσαι (*Pasai*) was introduced by Heinrich Kruse. R, the most important manuscript that transmits the Aristophanic corpus, simply indicates a change of speaker. The collective identifier *Pasai* is easily extrapolated from Lysistrata's prompt: "Will you all (*pasai*) together swear an oath (*sun-ep-omnuth'*) on this?"

51 On Rancière's idea of the Aristotelian plot as a form of *consensus,* or distribution of the sensible, see chapter 1 of this volume.

the idea of parts and borders, of dramatic sections, which Aristotle views as essential for aesthetic unity. In contrast with the thematics of the play — the war of the sexes, inaccessible bodies and places — this attenuated differentiation configures the plot not simply as a loosely structured whole but as a chaosmic, *chōral* space. This refusal of division could be compared to a long take in cinema — a seamless continuity that resists breaking and "leaves open the possibility of escape from the cinematic frame."[52] This continuity, transforming action into the affect of a prolonged acting, shakes structure, formal as well as political, and prevents it from hardening into shape. In a sense, Lysistrata's anger — *kaomai* ("I am burning") — does not attack or assault, but smolders steadily, burning on in the play's formal arrangement.[53]

The "event" of the occupation of the Propylaea — the border — is uncannily ongoing even before it has been dramatized. After the oath, Lysistrata tells her allies that the old women have "*already*" (*ēdē*/ἤδη) occupied the Acropolis (242). This "already" pre-empts the rhetoric of the assault, and of crisis, which otherizes and excludes agitators by emphasizing danger and suddenness, as when the semi-Chorus of old men casts the women's movement as an "unexpected" (*a-elpta*) swarming. Though much of the play is preoccupied with the confrontation between occupants and police, the "origin" moment of the attack is not staged. This supposedly violent *punctum* is dulled by "already" into temporal continuity.[54] While troubling the police's securitarian projection of its own violence onto the alleged threat, "already" spreads the irruptive force of the protest into a dura-

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52 Sanyal (2017, 9). The long take constitutes a "refusal to break up the action," as Castiel (2016) remarks, citing Orson Welles. This refusal produces stretched-out action, or hyper-action, that is, what I call *agitation*.

53 In political terms, I am theorizing an emergence not completed or exhausted in the insurgent temporality of the event, one that goes beyond emergency and, in a sense, emergence itself.

54 Hulton (1972, 32) observes that "the key-passage in the Prologue where the capture of the Acropolis is mentioned […] leaves the exact connection of the two schemes vague."

tional expanse, prolonging its intensity. Folding the "event" into unbound, unmarked time, withholding the (melo)dramatiza-tion that would risk validating the logic of "invasion," "already" maintains the infinity of the foreigner's arrival and, by exten-sion, the ethical infinity of unconditional hospitality theorized by Derrida as never actualized, always *à venir.*[55]

Informing the prologue with the temporality of agitation, the waiting and insomnia of the protesters point to modes of resistance through a stretching, even an exhaustion, of time and of what is established as the political possible. Refusing Myr-rhine's impatient demand to hear the reason of the gathering, Lysistrata says, "Let's wait (*ep-ana-meinōmen*) a little bit for the women from Boeotia and the Peloponnese to arrive" (74–76). This impatience, manifested in short, nearly fragmented interrogatives—"What do you say?" (*ti phēis?*), "Why are you silent?" (*ti sigais?* 70)—is lost in the formal and temporal expanse of *ep-ana-meinōmen* (74) and the word for "Pelopon-nesian women" (*Peloponnēsiōn*), which ends the following line. While resembling a female *consensus,* a gathering of gendered islands (*-nēsiōn*), this formal stretching can be read as obstruct-ing the distribution of the sensible—the principle of dividing and apportioning (*nemein*) that the law (*nomos*) draws upon.[56] Lysistrata's command contributes to prolonging the prologue, to extending the continuous present (*kaomai* "I am burning") of her enraged *com*motion (*sun-tetaraxai*). While the *ai-* ending in *sun-tetaraxai* ("you have been stirred up" and thus "you are agi-tated") evokes plural female subjects, the gathering of women stirs up its own *agitation,* in the sense both of protest and of the steady burn of prolonged acting. When Lysistrata recounts the long nights spent plotting rebellion, we feel a "muscular tension" in the length of the participles (26–27):[57]

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55 On this idea of Derridean temporal infinity, see Gurd and Telò (forthcom-ing).

56 On *nomos* and *nemein,* see Rancière (1999).

57 On "muscular tension," see Fanon (1961, 17): "The muscles of the colonized are always tensed. It is not that he is anxious or terrorized, but he is always ready to change his role as game for that of hunter." Scott (2010, 72)

> LYSISTRATA This is a thing *mulled over* (*an-ezētēmenon*)
> by me and *ruminated upon* (*errhiptasmenon*) during many
> nights of insomnia (*pollaisi t' agrupniaisin*).

Insomnia, whose force of exhaustion is channeled by the length
of the participles themselves, is a kind of temporal resistance,
pushing against the separation of one day from another, the
distinctio dierum ("separation of one day from the other"), cor-
responding to the verbal distribution of the sensible, *distinctio
verborum* ("separation of words from each other"), the phone-
mic breaking that language depends on. For Deleuze, insomnia
is "not a matter of realizing the impossible, but of *exhausting the
possible*"[58] — what the body biologically *can* do, and, by exten-
sion, what *can* be done to the structure of the social (a body
in its own right).[59] This "exhaustion of the possible" may inhere
in the straining, stretched-out words, homologous to insom-
nia's stretching of time and body. The feminine plural *pollaisi
t'agrupniaisin* ("many nights of insomnia") makes us think again
of Lysistrata's "many" allies, reflecting agitation before the actual
uprising, extending the insomniac's body just as the individual
is stretched into a plurality. The partitioning of time challenged
by insomnia is analogous to the separation of the self from the
(notional) other that bodily boundaries precariously enforce on
the subject, "tight in its skin, encumbered and as it were stuffed
with itself […], forced to detach itself from itself" — that is, the
other — and "forced to dispossess itself."[60] Like the language that
describes them, the strike preparations exhaust the notionally
possible — never-ending war and domestic violence — through
an exhaustion of time, an anti-eventual affect embodied in an

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observes that "muscle tension in Fanon is a state of death-in-life and life-
in-death; it describes the paradox of a being who experiences utter defeat
but who is nonetheless not fully defeated."

58 Deleuze (1995, 20) (my emphasis).

59 Protest is not "the art of the possible," but rather "the art of the *impos-
sible* — it changes the very parameters of what is considered *possible* in the
existing constellation" (Žižek 1999, 199).

60 Levinas (1998, 110).

insomniac's tossing and turning. This is political resistance felt in the ongoingness of a body that distorts temporal divisions and hierarchies (the event, the aftermath, the status quo ante) with its own stretched-out restlessness, and in the nervous elasticity of poetic form.

In the same prologue, we may perceive an obstruction of dramatic action through objects and formal effects that clutter and hinder. The accoutrements of female life, seen by Calonice as forestalling agitation while smoothing the narrative of the patriarchal order, are recast by Lysistrata as useful objects for obstructing it (43–48):

> CALONICE We sit around the house made-up, wearing *saffron dresses* (*krokōtophorousai*) and beautified (*kekallōpismenai*) with Cimberic dresses and sandals.
> LYSISTRATA These are precisely the things that I expect will save Greece: our little saffron dresses (*krokōtidia*), and perfumes (*mura*), and sandals, and our rouge, and transparent slips!

Only the conjunction *kai* ("and") prevents the second line from becoming a pile of letters with no division: *krokōtophorousai kai kekallōpismenai.* Calonice appears to extend the temporal and affective regime of women inside the house — their ostensibly inert, meaningless life — to versification and narrative. Lysistrata's intervention allows us to see this sequence of letters, rather, as something unruly in line with what Hartman has called "vagrancy […], the refusal to be settled or bound by contract to [a] husband."[61] There is something vagrant in the saffron and *mura* ("perfumes"), embodied by Myrrhine, who later will torment her husband by endlessly delaying, obstructing his sexual release. The letters in Calonice's line obstruct *distinctio verborum,* just as the objects and sensations the words signify come to obstruct their ostensibly seductive and reproductive functions. Appearing in the prologue like a cast of char-

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61 Hartman (2018, 474).

acters introduced to the audience, these objects are presented as a list, formally detached from the narrative syntax that they will be part of. Like the artifacts encompassed by a long take in a cinematic prologue,[62] the objects, barely ordered by a set of repeated conjunctions, form a barricade to dramatic action, filling intervals, blocking the opening of discrete moments. As has been said, barricades embody "an ecstasis of resistance."[63] Within the economy of the play, the formal barricade of these Aristophanic lines anticipates a self-exiting, a *chora*lity, a radical connectedness that thwarts syntax, narrative, and by extension the comic plot. In her speculative reconstruction of a revolt by female inmates of the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in 1920, Hartman reproduces the anarchic unruliness:

> They tossed their mattresses, they broke windows, they set fires. Nearly everyone in the cottage was shouting and screaming and crying out to whomever would listen. They pounded the walls with their fists, finding a shared and steady rhythm that they hoped might topple the cottage, make the walls crumble […] so that it would never be capable of holding another "innocent girl in the jailhouse." […] In the discordant assembly, they found a hearing in one another. […] At the heart of the riot, [there] was the anarchy of colored girls: treason en masse, tumult, gathering together, the mutual collaboration required to confront the prison authorities and the police, the willingness to lose oneself and become something greater — a chorus […], an ensemble, a mutual aid society.[64]

Mattresses, windows, fire, shouting, screaming, and crying: objects and actions are turned into items that barricade narrative, blocking its divisions. This obstruction expresses the power

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62 On the long take, see esp. Koepnick (2017).
63 Ertür (2016, 112).
64 Hartman (2018, 481, 483, 485).

of agitation, of an undivided ensemble, not just the Chorus, but also the narrative *chōra.*

When Lysistrata lays out the strategy of the sex strike, we find the verticality of subordination undermined by a sense of continuous juxtaposition, of sprawling horizontality (149–54):

> LYSISTRATA If we sat inside *made-up* (*en-tetrimmenai)* and walked by them in transparent slips, naked, *plucked* (*para-tetilmenai*) to form a delta, and if our men had an erection and wanted to screw us, and we didn't approach them and we withdrew, they would make peace immediately, I am sure.

While anticipating Myrrhine's game of seductive delay, Lysistrata brings together syntactical and sexual tension. The extended *pro-tasis* (from *pro-teinō* "stretch forward," cognate with "*ten*-sion") constitutes a crescendo of grammatical hypotaxis, a surging phallic verticality. This verticality is, however, unsettled not only by the pint-sized apodosis, but by the agglutinative, paratactical structure of the protasis itself. The anti-hierarchical horizontality of parataxis subverts from within the arousal but also the very idea of a climax, of a *punctum,* the temporality encompassed by the notion of "insurgence," the state of emergency by which political sovereignty projects its aggressive force onto a moment of ostensible invasion. The syntactical agglutination in the protasis goes along with Lysistrata's postponement of her big reveal (the strike) and the play's generalized affect of agitation, of political resistance that, more than a singular attack, is a sprawling growth, an expansive continuity not simply transgressing but even canceling temporal boundaries, the *before* and *after* marked by an "event." The event is not just deferred, for the moment or forever, but replaced by an insistence that wears out the narrative of the state of emergency and narrative as such.

In the final stretch of the prologue, the repetition in the call and response sealing the pact seems to arrest the flow of language with a taut resistance and undifferentiated time that loosen the rigidity of hierarchy. In the oath, whose precise terms

are initially concealed and anxiously anticipated by Lysistrata's allies, we find again the paired participles *krokōtophorousai* and *kekallōpismenai,* "wearing saffron dresses and made-up" (212–20):

> LYSISTRATA There isn't (*ouk estin*) anyone either adulterer or husband—
>
> CALONICE There isn't (*ouk estin*) anyone either adulterer or husband—
>
> LYSISTRATA who will come close to me aroused (*estukōs*). Speak.
>
> CALONICE who will come close to me aroused. Alas, my knees (*ta gonat'*) are loosened (*hupo-luetai*), Lysistrata (*Lusi-stratē*).
>
> LYSISTRATA *I'll keep on living (di-axō)* my life un-bulled (*a-taurōtē*) at home—
>
> CALONICE *I'll keep on living (di-axō)* my life un-bulled (*a-taurōtē*) at home—
>
> LYSISTRATA wearing a saffron dress (*krokōtophorousa*) and made-up (*kekallōpismenē*)—
>
> CALONICE wearing a saffron dress (*krokōtophorousa*) and made-up (*kekallōpismenē*)—

Repetition and the suspense of both the women and the audience coincide here with *coitus interruptus.* When we read or hear the word *estukōs* ("aroused")—a marker of an erection—toward the end of two consecutive lines (214–15), we are pushed back, by way of aural resonance, to the beginning of the two previous lines, to *esti* ("is") preceded by the negative particle (*ouk* 212–13). Read together, they produce a kind of tag or sign—"*No erection*"—a refusal of the aggressive rigidity of domestic life. The backward motion of this resonance enhances the disruption of the verbal and temporal flow generated by suspense, repetition, and *sermo fractus* ("broken speech"). Language arrested by repetition produces a resistant tautness, to which we may contrast Calonice's response: "My knees (*ta gonat'*) are loosened (*hupo-luetai*)" (216). In the subsequent

line, the women's abstinence is expressed through the adjective *a-taurōtē* (lit. "untouched by a bull, virgin"), which, while assimilating conjugal intimacy to an agricultural operation, also signals a condition of perennial maidenhood that the women will "keep on living" (*di-axō*), untouched in undifferentiated (*di-*) time.[65] In this context, the paired participles *krokōtophorousa* and *kekallōpismenē,* besides eliciting a frustrated male desire, a rigidity expecting to be released or "loosened," come to the service of the tautness of verbal suspension and barely differentiated time. "*Loosening,* dissolving armies" — the action inscribed in Lysistrata's name that appears in the same line as *hupo-luetai* ("are loosened") — is achieved through a countervailing tautness or undifferentiation,[66] a resistance to partitioning, whether it is created by borders, and for that matter by oaths, *horkoi* understood in the etymological sense,[67] or by the "cutting" of sex.[68]

Formal undifferentiation, one manifestation of hyperform, channels the anger spreading against the state's imposed contraction. At a climactic moment of the strife between the women and the police who have intervened to suppress them, Lysistrata's call to arms strips the line of its internal signifying partitions: *ō spermagoraiolekitholachanopōlides* / *ō skorodopandokeutriartopōlides* ("O seed-market-legume-vegetable-sellers / O garlic-tavern-bread-sellers" 457–58).[69] Through these sprawling, scrambled vocatives, Lysistrata gathers her disparate constituencies into an anarchic whole whose rebellious energy undoes the very logic of *distinctio verborum,* the cutting of phonemes that makes language, analogous to the hierarchical par-

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65 On the meaning of *a-taurōtē,* a synonym of *a-dmētē* ("untamed"), see Loraux (1993a, 162).

66 A hint of temporal undifferentiation is offered, in the same passage, by *koudepoth*' (223–24), a "never" that conflates *kai* and *oudepote.*

67 On the relationship between *horkos* ("oath") and *herkos* ("boundary"), see von Staden (1992, 230), cited by Fletcher (1999, 111–12) in her discussion of Lysistrata's oath.

68 The English word *sex* is cognate with the Latin verb *seco,* "to cut."

69 Henderson (1987, 127) compares these adjectives to "honorificabilitudinitatibus" (Shakespeare, *Love's Labor Lost* 5.1.40) and "antipericatametanaparbeugedamphicrationes" (Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* 2.7).

titioning constitutive of the social class of which these women are part. The consecutive unbroken adjectival formations act out an agitation that unsettles the police's violent action, an angry *jouissance,* as Lysistrata suggests a few lines later: "Do you think that women have no anger (*cholēn*)?" (464). Spilling into in the policeman's response — "By Apollo (*Apollō*), yes, a lot (*pollēn*) [of anger], especially if there is a tavern (*kapēlos*) nearby (*plēsion*)" (465–66) — *cholē* is scattered and dissipated in *Apollō, pollēn, kapēlos,* and *plēsion*. The hypersyllabic adjectives, which de-versify versification, cast the agitation of anger as an exhausting ongoingness, an unruly "infinitude."[70] The colonized, as Frantz Fanon has remarked, are confronted with the colonizers' attempt to "contract [their] infinitude."[71] *Distinctio verborum* is the first expression of this contraction, which anger counters with the infinity of a *jouissant* breathlessness. Lysistrata's destructured lines respond to the policeman's effort to "contract" her, as reflected in the commands he issues to his guards: "Grab!" "Tie!" "Twist her arms!" (434, 438, 442, 455, *passim*). Not simply mimetic violence, Lysistrata's multiple asyndetic exhortations concentrated in two lines — "Won't you drag them, hit them, beat them, slander, and insult them?" (459–60) — have a breathless energy that checks the police's aggressive action with the prolonged insistence of agitation.

In the parodos, the male semi-Chorus's imagery of assault, of the "swarm," is evocative of contemporary criminalizations of refugees at borders.[72] At the beginning of the parodos, the state's panicked reaction to its vulnerability generates a convergence

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70 Barthes (2005, 16) speaks of "the paradoxical infinity of weariness" as "the endless process of ending."

71 See Fanon (1967, 114–15); see also Telò (2023b, ch. 8) on Prometheus and Akram Khan. Badiou (2005, 73) observes that "'masses,' understood politically, far from gathering homogeneous crowds […], designates the infinity of intellectual and practical singularities demanded by and executed within every politics of justice."

72 For a different, affirmatively Deleuzian take on the image of the swarm in the play, see duBois (2022, ch. 3).

of Hesiodic misogyny with the rhetoric of invading "illness" (256–62):[73]

> CHORUS Indeed, many *unexpected things (a-elpta)*
> come in (*en-estin*) in (*en*) this long life, alas!
> For who would have expected (*ēlpis'*), Strymodorus,
> to hear that the women, whom we feed
> in the house (*kat' oikon*) as an affliction (*kakon*) *in plain
>   sight (em-phanes),*
> would take possession (*kata* [...] *echein*) of the holy statue,
> would take over (*kata* [...] *labein*) my Acropolis,
> and would shut down the Propylaea
> with bars and bolts (*mochloisi*)?

The surprise triggered by the women's occupation of the Acropolis sustains a sense of emergency, which provides a self-serving justification of the state's violence. The state of exception coincides with the "breakout" of the "event," the event as an invasion, a breaking or bursting in. In calling the women "an affliction *in* plain sight" (*em-phanes kakon*) nourished *inside* the house, the Chorus conjures up the Hesiodic misogynistic assimilation of women to an "incurable illness" (*an-ēkeston kakon*) — and to idle drones *inside* living off the bees' toils[74] — projectively evoking, while erasing, wives' actual nourishment of patriarchy through reproduction. The proliferation of the prefix and preposition *en* (in *en-estin, en, em-phanes*) assimilates this gendered "invasion" to an in-human *in*flux, a disease *in*-filtrating, *in*-sinuating itself everywhere. Later, commenting on the intervention of Lysistrata's coalition in support of the occupants — proclaiming *again* the state of exception — the male semi-Chorus previews "the figure of the migrant swarm" subjected "in the current landscape of global migration" to "new

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73 On walls and vulnerability, see Brown (2010), and chapter 1; see also Guzman (2019).

74 See *Theogony* 594–96, 603–6; for *an-ēkeston kakon* ("incurable affliction"), see 612. On these passages, see Sussman (1978) and Arthur (1983).

technologies of border control":[75] "This thing totally unexpected (*a-pros-dokēton*) to see has come to us; this swarm (*hesmos*) of women is helping [the occupiers] at the doors [of the Acropolis]" (352–53). As Debarati Sanyal has observed examining the legalized regime of violence practiced, without penalty, by the governments of the US and many European countries, "borders have become battlegrounds for imagining the boundaries of the species itself."[76] Just as migrants at the border are assimilated to "pathological swarms" and "massified into a security threat,"[77] Lysistrata's allies have gone from drones "safely" excluded from the political realm to a buzzing mass forcing its way into the seat of power. The triple repetition of the preposition *kata* ("over") in the male semi-Chorus's complaint that the women have "taken over" the Acropolis and closed it "with bars and bolts" bespeaks panic, laying bare, through projection, the state's own practices of closure, shutdown, and exclusion. The "bolt" (*mochlos*) is, in fact, an object obsessively, and threateningly, evoked in the play by the male forces of repression.[78] This projection exemplifies Walter Benjamin's equation of the "border" (*Grenze*) with the law as the establishment of an institutional exclusion, the state's monopoly on power, which is figured, for him, by Niobe's transformation into stone, a monumental marker (*Markstein der Grenze*), like the Propylaea. In the case of Niobe, the law retroactively defends its exclusionary violence, its border policing, through the conceit of a primeval crime, a violation of the human-divine boundary.[79] Condemned for talking too much, Niobe resembles the Aristophanic women whose humming

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75 Sanyal (2019, 19, 439, 441).

76 Sanyal (2019, 441). On the immunitarian *dispositif* of surveillance at the border, see Esposito (2013, 59–60).

77 Sanyal (2019, 441).

78 See lines 424, 428–31, 487.

79 See W. Benjamin (2021); cf. J. Butler (2006). On Benjamin's Niobe, see also Lezra (2024), Radcliffe (2024), Umachandran (2024), and Villegas Vélez (2024).

loquaciousness, in the minds of the men, goes along with their treacherous border-crossing.[80]

The women's self-alignment with water, held in the pitchers that they pour over the semi-Chorus of old men, brings to mind another representation of migrants, as "an aqueous, if not more specifically hydraulic or oceanic force […], influx, flood, inundation, storm, surge, deluge, waves unforeseen."[81] Threatened with fire by the old men, the women launch their preemptive defense by proclaiming, "It's your turn, Acheloos (*ōchelōie*)!" (381). Haunted by the word for "anger," *cholos/cholē,* this invocation of the "father" of all rivers[82] conjures a liquid patriarchy with troubled borders, in a state of agitation. In Acheloos, as the destabilizing power of anger agitates the verbal arrangement, opening a formal rupture while cutting into phonetic organization and semantic wholeness, a space of possibility materializes.[83] *Mochlos* (the "bolt" of exclusion) is also agitated by *cholos*, which it anagrammatically contains in the form of *ochlos* ("crowd, mob")[84] — the Symbolic's dismissive label for "those who have no part," or those kept on or outside the order.[85] As with Acheloos, a mobile, liquid "border" opens in the "bolt" (*m-ochlos*), as phonemes, caught in a borderless *acting,* refuse to stabilize. As we will see in the next part of the analysis, this border-crossing becomes insistently (im)perceptible through the effects of disruptive undifferentiation and opacity stemming from the rage that continues to seep into formal texture.

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80 On this misogynistic trope in *Lysistrata* and elsewhere in Aristophanes, see esp. Beta (2004, 271–74, 279).

81 Ty (2019, 870).

82 On Acheloos as the father of rivers, see Brewster (1997, 9–14) and D'Alessio (2004).

83 Guzmán (2019, 162) observes that "a border […] hovers in the indeterminacy between making something new possible — demarcating a space where a different form of sociality can be made to exist — and recreating that which it struggles against."

84 The word *ochlos* appears at line 328.

85 See Rancière (1999, 6–8, 11).

ii. Anger and Opacity

In the parodos, the male semi-Chorus's effort to bring fire to the Acropolis in order to set the women aflame blows up in their faces as caustic, blinding smoke, an image that reinscribes female anger while confusing the gendered divide between visibility and invisibility. Worried that a recalcitrant feminine object, a dysfunctional "pot" (*chutra*), will extinguish their flame, the old men command it to do its job (315), that is, "awaken" (*exegeirein*) the "charcoal" (*ton anthrak'*), a masculine noun foreshadowing the phallic prostheses prominently displayed in the second half of the play.[86] The rising smoke has already threatened to blind them — in effect, to castrate them (296–98): "Lord Heracles, what a terrifying (*deinon*) thing is coming at me from the pot! It bites off my eyes like *a crazy she-dog* (*kuōn luttōsa*)."[87] The female intrusion into the instrument and the element enlisted in the men's destructive campaign is manifest both in the reference to "Lemnian fire" — involved in the mass murder of husbands[88] — and in the canine image, an assimilation of smoke to the vengeful Hecuba,[89] which anticipates the female semi-Chorus's threat (363, 367): "No other she-dog (*kuōn*) will grab you by the testicles. […] I will bite your lungs off and break apart your entrails." Continuous, spreading fear emerges from the old men's words as a rhyming and alliterative expanse suggestive of sprawling smoke (293–95):[90] "Fire needs to be blown on (*pur phusēteon*). […] Phu, phu (*phu, phu*), alas alas (*iou iou*), this smoke (*kapnou*)." Capable of inflicting Oedipal blindness, the expansive smokiness channels an enraged opacity, a refusal

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86 On feminism and the recalcitrance of the object, see Behar (2016).

87 On the biting smoke, see also lines 298 and 301.

88 See esp. Martin (1987) on the allusion to the Lemnian women's murder of their husbands; see also Burkert (1970).

89 The allusion to Euripides' *Hecuba,* who, in the eponymous play, takes revenge on Polymestor by blinding him and is transformed into a dog, seems unmistakable. See Burnett (1994) and Telò (2020a, 170–80). In Euripides' play, Hecuba's eyes are "fiery" (*Hecuba* 1265).

90 The idea of "fear" is implicit in the adjective *deinon* (from *deos* "fear") at the beginning of line 296.

to be contracted, or even to be made visible.[91] Invisibility affirms itself negatively by killing vision, by swallowing the visual organs that establish the hierarchical distinction between subject and object. The necropolitical trope of the swarm, deployed to de-individualize its targets, that is, to make them invisible, is turned against itself by the no-image of angry smoke that muddles the border between seen and unseen.[92]

Opacity also manifests itself as a formal expanse that collapses the distinction between fire and water. Introducing itself, the old women's semi-Chorus juxtaposes the elemental opposites (332–35): "Bringing water (*hudōr*) to those who are burning, my fellow female members of the people (*taisin emais / dēmotisin kaomenais*), I come to help." While referring to the old men's attempt at arson — an attack against some members of the *dēmos* and, thus, ultimately, an auto-immunitarian operation[93] — *taisin emais dēmotisin kaomenais* ("my burning fellow female members of the people") also expresses the burning agitation of the rebels, signaled programmatically by Lysistrata's heart ablaze (*kaomai tēn kardian* "I am burning in my heart" 9). In the following lines, the expansiveness of hyperform generates an overdetermined image of fire as water, and vice-versa, (339–42):

> CHORUS […] making the most horrible threats, saying that the "accursed" (*musaras*) women must be reduced to cinder by fire (*puri*). O goddess, may they not be burned in my sight but save (*rhusamenas*) Greece and its citizens from war and madness.

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91 See esp. Glissant (1997, 190), on transparency as a Western strategy for reducing difference. For Glissant, "the right to opacity," which goes beyond "the right to difference," concerns "not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity." Keeling (2019, 31) observes that the "right to opacity" means challenging "the demand for [a] group to become perceptible according to existing conceptions of the world."

92 On smoky opacity in *Oedipus the King,* see Telò (2023a, ch. 1).

93 On autoimmunity, see esp. Derrida (2003); see also Telò (2020a, 223–32).

While denouncing the state's inflammatory action, the female voice spreads the flame through the anagrammatic circling back of *rhusamenas* to *musaras* and the reversed echo of the word for fire *(p)ur* in the initial syllable of <u>rhu</u>samenas. Dependent on a dousing of the state's auto-immunitarian fury, the "salvation" of Greece (*rhusamenas*) flows from the women's pitchers — the receptacles of a liquid force surging from the root *rhu-,* which indeed evokes "to flow" (*rheō*). This elemental overdetermination, the counterpart of smoky opacity, agitates and undifferentiates form, contesting not just binarism but the logic of the "event," the state of emergency.[94] There is a watery undifferentiation, an engulfment in the old men's threatening question (371), "Why, enemy of the gods, did *you* come *here* carrying *water* (σὺ δεῦρ' ὕδωρ/*su deur' hudōr*)?," in which the syntactical gap between *su*/σὺ ("you") and *deur'*/δεῦρ' ("here") is flooded by the joining of *u-deur'* and *hudōr* ("water"). *Su deur',* in other words, is filled by *udeur/hudōr.* Similarly to smoke, water confounds syntactical division — and disarrays borders (*su deur' hudōr* becomes s' *udeur hudōr*). The crashing of water comes with a wave of noise like the "crashing of pitchers" (*patagou chutreiou* 329) — of *chutrai,* the very recalcitrant object that, as we have seen, frustrates the police's effort to kindle their despotic flame.[95]

In the enraged formalism of the women's declarations, harsh noise exhausts language, tending toward infinite, undivided sound, a continued dancing, expressing the embodied power of rebellious desire and willfullness, a kind of *potencia.*[96] In Aris-

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94 Rosa Luxemburg used aquatic imagery to describe the strike as a process: "It flows now like a broad billow […] and now divides into a gigantic network of narrow streams; now it bubbles forth from under the ground like a fresh spring" (2004, 191).

95 At 388, the policeman complains about the women's *tumpanismos,* "those blaring kettledrums which were used in the worship of a variety of 'marginal' […] deities," as observed by Reitzammer (2008, 289).

96 As Gago (2020, 2) puts it, *potencia* is "an alternative theory of power […], that of common invention against expropriation, collective enjoyment against privatization, and the expansion of what we desire as possible in the here and now." According to Ahmed (2014, 161), "A history of willfulness is a history of those who are willing to put their bodies in the way."

tophanes' play, the equivalent of the slogan chanted by participants in recent international female strikes — "If they touch one of us, they touch us all"[97] — engenders the eruptive appearance-in-disappearance of noise. Feeling the pressure of the police's threats, the female semi-Chorus responds (447–48), "By Tauropolian Artemis, if you dare get close to her, I'll rip out your hair until you scream (*ekkokkiō sou tas stenokōkutous trichas*)." The auditory harshness of this line does not simply express a reduction of female speech to something "loud," "grating," "excessively and unpleasantly forceful," in keeping with the text's sexist distribution of the sensible.[98] The angry noise raised by the accumulation of cutting *k*'s exhausts language and distinctions of sound with prolonged impressions of spasmodic pain that make the line virtually impossible to read aloud, imposing a hyper-continuity of throat-scraping consonants, which deplete the border's dividing principle through stuttering interruptions of the voice, the arrhythmia of multiple breaks. Noise dismantles the border because, as Paul Hegarty observes, riffing on Maurice Blanchot, it "illustrates the process of […] bringing the outside in" — that is, bringing in that which is excluded, marginalized — even while it remains "outside of the world."[99] When the women threaten to exchange their accoutrements for the instruments of warfare — to fulfill Lysistrata's pronouncement that "the war will be women's concern" (538)[100] — the accumulation of domestic objects and activities handed over to the

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Hegarty (2018, 118) has remarked that "the push to noise within Modernism [is] a desire to approach the totality of sound, to add more, to make what you have into more, to make the audiences feel that what they experience is somehow more."

97 Gago (2020, 19).

98 The citation is from Ahmed (2014, 153).

99 Hegarty (2018, 118).

100 This is a famous reversal of the line of the *Iliad* in which Hector urges Andromache not to concern herself with warfare but with domestic business (*polemos d' andressi melēsei* "War will be men's concern" 6.492); a variant occurs in *Odyssey* 1.520 (*muthos d' andressi melēsei* "Speech will be men's concern"), which Beard (2017, 3–7) has called the first example of mansplaining in the history of Western literature.

enemy one after the other is in itself an enactment of a "warrior disposition."[101] Whether these objects are thrown or not, there is a projection of *potencia* through grating bundles of consonants that fill the gap between words (535–38): "[Take] this basket too (*kai toutongi ton kalathiskon*) / And then (*kaita*) card wool (*xainein*), *pulling up the girdle* (*xu-zōsamenos*), *munching on dried fava beans* (*kuamous trōgōn*)." The angry consonant clusters that emerge between words (*to<u>n</u>/<u>k</u>a* […] <u>*sk*</u>on/<u>*k*</u>ai […] *ei<u>n</u>/<u>xuz</u>* […] *enos/<u>ku</u>*) confuse and disassemble their borders. They carry the *orgē* ("anger") of the nettles (*tēth<u>ōn</u>*) and oysters (*akalēph<u>ōn</u>*), with their parallel, rhyming aspirated endings (549–50),[102] to which the protesters compare themselves a few lines later.[103] This <u>*orgē*</u> circles back to their relentless dancing (*or<u>ch</u>oumenē*) in the same passage (541–48):

> CHORUS I would never *get tired* (*kamoim'*) of dancing
>   (*orchoumenē*),
> nor would tiring (*kamatēros*) labor seize my knees.
> I have the will to confront anything
> with these women […] who
> have nature *within* (*eni*), have grace *within* (*eni*),
> have courage *within* (*eni*), have wisdom *within* (*eni*),
> have wise city-loving virtue *within* (*eni*).

The restless kinesis vaunted and enacted by the female semi-Chorus is troped by the multiple iterations of *eni,* similar to the repetitions of *against* in the strike manifesto of the Latin American feminist collective Ni Una Menos:

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101 I borrow this phrase from Gago (2018, 159), discussing the first women march in Argentina in 2016.

102 Line 549 *all' <u>ō</u> tēth<u>ōn</u> andreiotatē kai mētridi<u>ōn</u> akalēph<u>ōn</u>* ("O strongest of nettle-like nurses and motherly oysters"). The anapestic rhythm of this line throws into sharp relief the rhyme produced by the many syllables ending in *ōn.*

103 On these assimilations to oysters and needles, which draw on punning connections with *tēthē* ("nurse") and *mētēr* ("mother"), see Henderson (1987, 138) and Perusino (2020, 226).

We are many. […] We make sound, mobilizations, and the common cry: *¡Ni Una Menos.* […] We cross languages and borders just as we do as women migrants, challenging the criminalization of our movements. The rebellion emerges: *against* violence, *against* the feminization of poverty, *against* racism, *against* the lack of political representation, *against* efforts to confine women and girls to domestic isolation, *against* religious dogmas that appropriate our bodies and our lives, *against* maternity as a mandate and the criminalization of abortion, *against* the new forms of capitalist exploitation and *against* the precarization of existence.[104]

Like *against, eni* punctures language, interrupts it, depletes it with willfulness, or *potencia*.[105] Silvia Federici sees dancing as resistance, as the manifestation of "the power to be affected and to effect, to be moved and to move," of what she calls the "immanent politics residing" in the body.[106] In the Aristophanic passage, the desire for infinity, an impossible fullness, sets in motion the dancing that immobilizes form. There is not only persistence on the edge of exhaustion but an intense duration of exhaust*ing* oneself in the ongoing acting of anger — a pointed agitation that never settles in a point in time.[107]

When the women co-opt the dung beetle and Timon, a famous misanthrope, as their symbolic allies, the rebellious *jouissance* of anger shakes heteronormative reproduction. In the parabasis, the metamorphosis on the horizon when the female

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104 Gago (2018, 166, 168) (my emphasis).

105 On *potencia,* see above. For Ahmed, referring to Fanon, willfulness is "the effort not only to say no but to say it publicly, to say it loudly, or to perform it through one's own bodily action or inaction," or "a will to create a new world by opposing the old directives" (2014, 141).

106 This "politics" is glossed as "the capacity to transform itself, others, and change the world": see Federici (2020, 119, 124).

107 On the political aesthetics of dancing, see, e.g., J. Johnson (2020, 135), who focuses on how Black dancers "manipulate time through embodied suspension." The ongoingness of dancing can be seen as exemplifying Deleuze's idea of exhaustion as an exhaustion of the possible: see Deleuze (1995).

semi-Chorus announces they will shake off their tunics engenders an imagistic overload (689–95):

> Let's smell like *women enraged, with teeth (aut-odax ōrg-ismenōn).* Let somebody now come to me, so that he will not be able to eat garlic (*skor-oda*). […] If you so much as badmouth us — I am so angry! (*huper-cholō*) — I'll be your midwife like the beetle with the eagle giving birth.

In the last line, the allusion to the Aesopic fable in which the beetle breaks the eagle's eggs by dropping a ball of dung on them[108] raises the specter of blocked reproduction. This is an anti-reproductive cry not simply because the eggs are broken, but also due to an equivalence of sorts drawn between them and the beetle's excremental bundle.[109] The equivalence is part of a wider imagistic conflation, as though an all-encompassing, excessive anger (*huper-cholō*) viscously filled every referential interval.[110] The phrase *aut-odax ōrg-ismenōn* ("with teeth, enraged") resumes the image of a devouring she-dog but gives it teeth and a penetrating force. In the following line, the noun *skoroda* ("garlic") can be decomposed into *skōr* ("excrement") and *-oda,* resonant with *-odax* ("tooth"). Read this way, garlic, a symbol of anger, conflates bodily refuse and incision, breaching the border between in and out, generating an undifferentiation that runs counter to the (re)production of meaning, or to meaning as the counterpart of reproduction.[111] An anti-reproductive stance is embodied in the misanthropic character, mythological or historical, whom the women align with, Timon of Athens, "dearest to [them]" because, as they put it, he hated "wicked men" as much as they do (808–19). Negating alpha privatives and harsh sounds

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108 On this fable in Aristophanes, see Telò (2016, 106–9), with references to earlier bibliography.

109 On the symbolic connection of children and feces in dreams, see Freud (1900; 1900–1901, *passim*); see also Weineck (2007, 99–100, 103–4).

110 On the viscosity of Homeric anger, see Purves (2015, 87).

111 Edelman (2004, 104) identifies reproductive futurism with the "realization of meaning in time."

mark his nomadism, whose deterritorializing force is expressed by the adjective "unsettled" (*a-idrutos* 809) — or we could say "undocumented" — and by his face (*pros-ōpa* 810) "enclosed in *inaccessible thorns*" (*a-batoisin en skōloisi* 809–10). Differently from the barbed wire wounding and debarring undocumented lives at US and European borders,[112] the "thorns" of comic form (*en skōloisi*), impenetrable clusters of consonants,[113] are a protection against the cuts made by the law's system of apportionment. The semi-Chorus refers to Timon as a "descendant" (*apo-rrhōx*) of the Erinyes (812), a word — from the verb *apo-rrhēgnumi* ("to break"), resonant with *orgē* ("anger") — whose angry noise ruptures the very dynamics of reproduction. A further disruption can be felt in the stretched-out time of Timon's curses, his "having launched many curses (*polla katarasamenos*) against wretched men" (815). A curse, a projection of the past into the future, has a logic analogous to reproduction itself.[114] In this case, time is drawn out, exhausted by the agitation of the six consecutive *a*-syllables *-la-ka-ta-ra-sa,* by the unbounded impetus of angry hyperform.

The cloak commended by Lysistrata as protecting or refashioning *dēmos* goes along with a shoring up of colonial power and the precarious fetishistic construction of nationhood. In her account of the Ni Una Menos strike, Verónica Gago uses the weaving metaphor for the organization, the protest itself, and the various phenomena of gathering, assembling, threading together — the coalescence of bodies, needs, desires, and ide-

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112 On wires in securitarian aesthetics, see Sanyal (2017, 12, 18), Díaz-Barriga and Dorsey (2020, 15–27), and Jusionyte (2020).

113 The same "thorny" sounds occur in the female semi-Chorus's warning at line 705 to back off from unfavorable decrees before "someone grabs you by the leg and break your neck" (*tou skelous humas labōn tis ek-trachēlisēi*), followed by a reference to Lysistrata's "gloomy" (*skuthrōpos*) expression (707). The imagery of thorns and barbs informs the sadomasochistic aesthetics of iambus, which is discussed in Telò (2019); on Timon as an iambic figure, see Hawkins (2001).

114 On reproduction as a recasting of the normative past as (the illusion of) the future, see Edelman (2004); on the temporality of tragic curses, see Telò (2020a, ch. 1).

als. In *Feminist International,* we read that the strike "has been patiently woven and worked on, threading together enormous street events with everyday activism that is equally monumental in scope."[115] But, as Lysistrata herself demonstrates with her most explicitly political speech, weaving can also offer metaphorical instruments for the self-representation of hierarchical power. Challenged by the policeman to lay out her program for the *polis,* Lysistrata responds (574–86):

> First, the city, like shorn fleece (*pokon*), should be washed in hot water and filth should be removed (*ek-plunantas*) from it. Then it should *be beaten with a stick (ek-rhabdizein)* on a bed, and then the bad thorns should be cast off. As for these men who conspire and push for offices and positions, they should *be carded out* (*dia-xēnai*), and their heads (*tas kephalas*) should be cut off. And then common (*koinēn*) benevolence should be carded (*xainein*) into a basket (*eis kalathiskon*), and *everybody should be mixed in* (*hapantas kata-meignuntas*). And as for *the permanent residents, if* (*metoikous kei*) some foreigner is your friend […], we should also *put them into the mix* (*en-kata-meixai*). And, by Zeus, as for the cities that are the colonies of this land, you should think that they are like fallen flocks of wool for you, *each one separate, and then* (*hekaston kait'*) you should *gather and assemble* (*xunagein kai xun-athroizein*) them into one and (*hen kai*) then make a ball of wool, a big one, and then (*megalēn kait'*) weave from it a cloak (*chlainan*) for the people (*dēmōi*).

Though cast as a warm, maternal promise of inclusion, collaboration, and interdependency like the tight weaving together of the female rebels, the cloak works as a nationalist, colonialist fetish — a marker of vertical rigidity, of the hierarchical police that enforces homogenizing *consensus* (*xun-agein, xun-athroizein*)

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115 Gago (2020, 4); see also López (2020). These readings of female strikes are indebted to J. Butler's seminal discussion of assemblages and assemblies on the street (2015).

even while disguising itself as a horizontal "coming together." In the logic of fetishism, a bodily part or an object, such as the cloak, is turned into an abstract signifier — in this case, of the colonial nation as a hierarchical, unified corpus. Yet the connection of the abstract nation with a material object has the effect of objectifying the nation's components, namely its individual people, assimilating them to the very matter of the textile, to its constitutive (and potentially disposable) threads.[116] Lysistrata's vision of spinning cloth amounts to a fantasy of "producing a common uniform to lay upon a national body,"[117] or an object to substitute for that metaphor of a body, which itself stands for an embodied, imperialistic motherland.

However, this fanciful weaving of the nation unfolds with a harshness, an angry form, which troubles colonialist *consensus* by channeling the feel of labor and production. As Julia Bryan-Wilson observes, "Textiles live at the edges of crisis, often creating conflicts or tensions as much as assuaging them."[118] The famous AIDS Quilt, as she remarks, displays "sewn-together interdependency"[119] — it is an assemblage of matter, bodies, and intensities "underscored by the circular formation of sewers seated tightly next to [one] another […] stitching simultaneously."[120] Yet any textile, as such, is inextricable from the problem of labor, that of "the female […] in the private domestic sphere" and, "pressingly, [in] a factory workforce, where racial, structural, and material oppressions are ever present."[121] From a different perspective, in Gago's account of the Ni Una Menos strike, weaving emerges as a privileged material domain for making visible "hierarchies of work in a feminist register, giving […] value to forms of precarious, infor-

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116 See Saha (2019, 101) on the postcolonial use of textiles as symbols of the Indian nation. On weaving and the female in Greek literature, see preeminently Bergren (2008).

117 Saha (2019, 111), referring to Gandhi's project of building an Indian nation.

118 Bryan-Wilson (2017, 272).

119 Bryan-Wilson (2017, 190).

120 Bryan-Wilson (2017, 194).

121 Bryan-Wilson (2017, 258).

mal, domestic, and migrant work."[122] Advocating for a synergy of "new" and "old" materialist theoretical models, Edith Hall has invited us to consider the weight of labor in the descriptions of tragic textiles, to look, for example, at Clytemnestra's tapestry as "the fruits of thousands of hours of labor expended by humans of a lower social echelon than the royal family of Argos."[123] In the first line of Lysistrata's political manifesto, the word for "shorn fleece" (*pokon*) is an anagram of *kopon* ("labor, fatigue"). Fatigue emerges especially in the straining of form, in the phonetic dissensus and angry noise of harsh consonant clusters within and between words (e.g., *ek-plunantas, ek-rabdizein, xainein, eis kalathiskon koinēn*). This strained form showcases both the pain of female hands and bodies pressed by the demands of production and the *potencia,* the will of resistance, enacted in and against production. There is a convergence between this resistance and the material recalcitrance that Eve Sedgwick lyrically theorized while relaying her experience of weaving in the last years of her co-existence with a fatal disease: "paper, fabric, thread, and other supplies press back so reliably, so palpably, against my efforts to shape them according to models I've conceived."[124] The formal strain of Lysistrata's angry consonant clusters cries out the fatigue of production that pushes against the fibrous recalcitrance of the fabric itself as it, in turn, presses and pushes against the shaping hand. The list of verbs that Sedgwick employs to reproduce the "touching feeling" of fabric bears traces of this resistant pressure:

> I haven't perceived a texture until I've instantaneously hypothesized whether the object I'm perceiving was […] *extruded,* […] *granulated,* polished, *distressed,* felted, or fluffed up. Similarly, to perceive texture is to know or hypoth-

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122 Gago (2020, 13).

123 Hall (2018, 211). Hall (2018, 207) adds: "It takes three days for a Bangladeshi handloom weaver to produce a basic nine-foot rectangular sari. A prized Baluchuri sari with in-woven mythological scenes and animal and floral designs takes a master weaver twenty-five working days."

124 Sedgwick (2011, 83) (my emphasis).

esize whether a thing will be easy or hard […] to *grasp,* to *stack,* to fold, to *shred,* to climb on, to *stretch,* to slide, to *soak.*[125]

The cumulative noisy effect of the consonant assemblages in *extruded, granulated, distressed, grasp, stack, shred, stretch, soak* — like the harsh and hard texture of *ek-plunantas, ek-rabdizein, xainein, eis kalathiskon koinēn* — suggests what Sedgwick calls the "fractality"[126] of matter, which is reluctant to be wrought, *gathered, assembled* into a product. In Lysistrata's speech, female production encompasses reproduction, the labor of pregnancy and childbirth.[127] In the next section, I will connect my reading for agitation with the politics of reproduction that informs necrocitizenship.

iii. Reproduction and Undifferentiation

Not long after her manifesto, Lysistrata refers to the trauma of giving birth, only to lose children in war, a loss reflected in the *sermo fractus,* the policeman's violent interruption (589–90).[128] Later, in the parabasis, the female semi-Chorus locates its own

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125 Sedgwick (2003, 13–14; 2011, 84, 90) (my emphasis).

126 Sedgwick (2011, 90).

127 See Gago (2020, 192): "The feminist strike also identifies the spaces of production in an unprecedented way, because they are understood on the basis of their necessary connections and assemblages with reproductive tasks."

128 The policeman's brusque interruption suspends Lysistrata's syntax:
   LYSISTRATA First of all we, after giving birth and having sent off our children as hoplites…
   POLICEMAN Shut up, don't remind me of bad things.
   Conceptualizing the maternal condition through a reading of Euripides' *Medea* (in particular, lines 1110–14), J. Rose (2018, 48) observes that "there must always be the risk that the mothers of soldiers […] might decide that a world at war is worthy neither of their labour nor of the dedicated […] futures of their offspring." Loraux (1995, 23–43) explores the mutual assimilation of warfare and childbirth, both causing "pangs."

personal *eisphora* ("contribution") to the community (651)[129] in the production of men, the constituents of Lysistrata's woven citizen body. In the parabasis of *Clouds,* the comic poet compares himself to a mother or, subtextually, a weaver[130] — in a triangular equivalence, the play is described with textile language while being assimilated to a baby. But what if we reverse the direction of the metaphor, from textile-as-baby to baby-as-textile, as it were, and shift the focus from the toils of playwriting to reproduction as (cruel) production? In the remaining pages of this chapter, I recenter my readings on fetishistic imagery's resistance against referential distinction and on the force of radical continuity, of thwarted breaking, that results from the piling up of metonymic equivalences. In particular, I explore how in the second half of this comedy an insistent play with bodily prostheses and duration — as similar scenes merge into each other — can be seen as dramatizing what has been called the necropolitics of reproduction, the abuse of the female body for the purposes of normative self-perpetuation.

One of the deserters from Lysistrata's side is a woman whose stratagem for restoring conjugal intimacy signals the fetishistic equivalence of child and the male organ, understood in various ways. While one woman, in her attempt to rush home, takes a swaddled ball of yarn (*eria* 729) cast as a baby in need of tender care, another dissimulates pregnancy with a bronze helmet under her cloak. This fake pregnancy is encapsulated by a *pseudo-figura etymologica,* interrupted by enjambment, *kunēn/ kuein* ("be pregnant with the helmet" 751–52), which hints at reproduction's illusion of sameness, of pristine repetition, while raising the specter of non-sameness, even non-human offspring: a weapon or a dog (as the canine resonance of *kunēn*

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129 On the social practice of *eisphora,* the monetary contribution made to the community by wealthy Athenian citizens for causes of public utility, see, e.g., Christ (2007).

130 See esp. Telò (2010; 2016, ch. 5). In the parabasis of *Clouds,* when Aristophanes presents himself as an unmarried woman giving birth to his comedy, the play is connected with the cloak of Strepsiades through the participle *ek-strepsas* (554), a sartorial term.

suggests).[131] The faux pregnancy has the effect of triangulating symbolic equivalences through the organ evoked by both the helmet and the phantasmic baby. When Lysistrata asks, "What is this (*tout'*) hard thing (*sklēron*) that you are holding (*echeis*)?," the response — "A male baby" (*arrhen paidion*)" (748) — conjures a third, spectral prosthesis, one that is supplemented by the Greek actor's cis-gender male equipment and his generically indicated phallic extension.[132] In the overlap of male child and male organ we may perceive the dynamic, inherent to the Freudian connection of pregnancy with penis envy, which Luce Irigaray has polemically captured, contesting the way that, in such a conception, "'femininity' fades away before maternity, is absorbed into maternity":[133]

> What happiness indeed for the father, who recognizes in this boy-child, this son, his own likeness. The father is thus reproduced, re-presented, brought into the world again, mothered, desired all over again, through his wife who has become again, and more than ever, his mother. Here is the womb in which he may reproduce (himself) the re-producer. […] In this way […] [he] verif[ies] his power to endow the woman-mother with a child-phallus — identical to himself — by means of a sex organ that is fetishized most effectively by woman's own "penis-envy."[134]

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131 On reproduction's illusion of sameness, see esp. Derrida (1996a) and Edelman (2011).

132 In this discussion, I use *phallos* to refer to the dangling prosthesis of the comic costume to distinguish it from "phallus" in the Lacanian or Butlerian sense. On the phallus as a lack that haunts both biological male and female, see the post-Lacanian reading of the "lesbian phallus" proposed by J. Butler (1993, 88–89). See also chapter 4.

133 Irigaray (1985a, 74). Cf. Freud (1931; 1933). The "xenofeminism" advocated, for example, by Hester (2018) proposes a model of anti-patriarchal, anti-heteronormative reproduction that internalizes Haraway's imperative "Make Kin Not Babies" (2015).

134 Irigaray (1985a, 78).

What I am suggesting is that, in channeling the community's obsession with self-replication, departing in ostensible pursuit of her "contribution" (*eis-phora*) to the city-state's phallic power-structure, that is, the production of another "member," the deserter, with her helmet prosthesis, makes the Freudian equivalence of baby and penis integral to the play's reproductive discourse. This equivalence structures, through analogy, the assimilations of play to textile and child in the parabasis of *Clouds.* When Aristophanes compares his apprenticeship as a playwright not yet allowed to produce his comedies with the plight of an unwed mother forced to expose her child,[135] the play itself (i.e., the first version of *Clouds*) becomes an alter ego of the poet (537–39):[136] "Look how self-controlled she [the play] is by nature — *a gal who* (*hētis*), first, has arrived without *stitching together* (*rhapsamenē*) anything leathery and dangling, thick and red at the tip, so that there may be a laugh for *the little children* (*paidiois*)." Since the pregnant playwright delivers a baby play, while the play — Freudian negation notwithstanding — delivers a *phallos,* we can detect the analogy of baby and *phallos,* which is given added force by the reference to "little children" (*paidiois*).

Within psychoanalysis, there have been attempts to reverse the hierarchy implicit in the subconscious equivalence of baby and male organ, that is, to view the idea of penis envy as a projection of reproduction envy, or to problematize and defamiliarize both forms of "envy." Reconsidering Freud's discussion of the case of little Hans, who had developed an inordinate fear of horses initially attributed by his father to the size of their genitals, Rosemary Balsam has suggested that "his sense of the *deficiency* of his little phallic body could be related to the mother's actual large and pregnant and birthing physicality."[137] Balsam also refers to the work of Otto Rank, Freud's colleague for twenty

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136 In the parabasis, the comic poet presents himself as "chaste" (*sōphrōn*), just like the play. Furthermore, while we are told that *the play* did not stitch together a dangling *phallos,* this agency belongs, obviously, to the poet. See Telò (2016, 131–32).
137 Balsam (2017, 74).

years, who, as she puts it, "connects the image of the so-called 'woman-with-the phallus' to a huge over-lively phallus like an elephant's trunk that is unmistakably a baby equivalent."[138] In the performance art of the 1980s, the hierarchy presupposed by the idea of penis envy was destabilized in a disturbing scene from the script of Karen Finley's play *The Constant State of Desire* (1988) discussed by Rebecca Schneider: "I just take that mama and I push her against the washer. And I take her baby, a bald-headed baby, and put Downy fabric softener on baby's head. Then I strap that baby around my waist till it's a baby dildo."[139] In this case, a perverse prosthesis emerges, and a metonymic relationship is made alarmingly concrete. We can say that, in the parabasis of *Clouds,* negation aside, a female play is visualized as "stitching together," fabricating and thus giving birth to, the comic *phallos* as a quasi-child. In *Lysistrata* the old women present themselves as angry mothers and nurses endowed, like nettles and oysters, with a sting, a phallic prosthesis, which as such, in this maternal context, becomes confounded with a baby (549–50).[140]

In a lengthy intruder scene, the painfully hardened member of Myrrhine's husband, Cinesias, recalls the helmet used in the deserter's fake pregnancy through the dramaturgy of indeterminate deictics, as in his announcement, "I'm holding (*echō*) this; what I'm holding (*echō*), I can give you" (863). With his erection, Cinesias "feel[s] encumbered" (*achthomai*) and has lost his

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138 See Balsam (2013, 711), who comments, "'The phallus as baby' reverses 'the baby as phallus' for refreshing change." The citation comes from Rank's *The Trauma of Birth* (1924).

139 Finley (1988, 147); see Schneider (1997, 115).

140 In line 549, *tēthōn* ("of oysters") and *mētridiōn* ("of nettles") pun on *tēthē* ("mamma, nurse") and *mētēr* ("mother"). As indicated by the scholion ad loc., the nettles called *mētridiai* are "the ones that have the seed (*sperma*) of the plant of the nettle." Evoking generation and male anatomy, the word *sperma,* together with the "sting" of nettles, constructs a phallic appendage and thus phallic mothers for whom baby and phallus are conflated. On the phallic valence of angry wasps' stings in *Wasps,* see Allen (2003).

appetite (867–68),[141] not unlike a pregnant woman.[142] Indeed, the verb that announces his condition, *estuka* ("I'm aroused" 869), is almost a perfect anagram of *ekusa* ("I am pregnant"). The stretched-out participle, *epi-tetrimmenos* ("worn out" 876), that concludes Cinesias's self-description expresses the weariness of a debilitating duration, the draining achronicity induced by the chronic denial of release.[143] This (a)chronic duration materializes as a seductive expansion of scented air when Myrrhine sprays erotic perfume (*muron* 940 and 942) with "delaying" (*dia-triptikon* 943) power on and around him. The diffusion of this perfume, evocative of Myrrhine's name (*ek-chutheiē to muron* 940), is also the expansion of her body, which thereby attains the encompassing, nonhierarchical *chōra*-lity of smoke, while Cinesias experiences a vertical, solid genital expansion with no relief and escalating spasms (*anti-spasmōn* 967).[144]

When the Spartan heralds arrive onstage, their erections resume, and reverse, the false pregnancy of the deserter, creating, at the level of plot, the effect of a gestation without birth. While the deserter uses a helmet as a baby, Cinesias, seeing the Spartan herald's arousal, asks, "Have you come *holding* (*echōn*) a spear (*doru*) under your arm?" (985). Especially in Sparta — where each new child was seen merely as a future member of the army,

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141 See the use of *baros* ("burden"), a synonym of *achthos,* for pregnancy in Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers* 992; see also Euripides, *Electra* 1140, where *athlion baros* ("wretched burden") refers to the urn thought to contain Orestes' ashes, an object acting as a surrogate baby; see Mueller (2016, 122).

142 See Soranus, *Women's Diseases* 1.17, where "lack of appetite" (*an-orexia*), a sense of "heaviness" (*baros*), "dizziness" (*skotōmata*), "anxiety" (*aporia*), "pallor" (*ōchrotēs*) and "weight loss" (*a-trophia*) are listed among the symptoms of pregnant women.

143 The extreme fragmentation of line 888, the accumulation of small words (*taut' auta dē 'sth' ha kai m' epitribei tōi pothōi* "these are precisely the things that rub me with desire"), suggests a sense of exhausting duration.

144 For motherhood as a Deleuzian "expansiveness," see Shildrick (2010). Cinesias embodies the contradictions of the "phallus," intended simply as the male organ, as laid out by Mbembe (2021, 193): "The phallus of power necessarily exposes its nakedness and limits and, in exposing them, exposes the potentate himself and proclaims, paradoxically, his vulnerability in the very act by which he claims to manifest his omnipotence."

an additional weapon[145] — a spear is polyvalent: a metonym not just for a penis but also for a child. Sexual arousal manifests itself here as an abdominal and inguinal swelling: "Why are you turning away? What protrudes (*pro-ballei*) from your cloak? Did you get a hernia on the street?" (986–88). This corporeal over-determinacy dramatizes the ambiguity behind the Shakespearean lines: "All the more it seeks to hide itself, / the bigger bulk it shows."[146] The object that the herald pretends to carry under his clothes is a "Spartan stick" (*skutala Lakōnika* 991), a long piece of wood bearing a message on a string of papyrus or skin wrapped around it.[147] *Skutala* anagrammatically reconfigures the verbal form that repeatedly occurs, like a refrain, to indicate the insistent priapism (*estuka*), continuing and exhausting it. The loop between the ending of *skutala* and the beginning of *Lakōnika* enhances the effect. Not only is writing an orphan child,[148] but this messenger's prop also resembles a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. A Deleuzian prolongation of desire that deterritorializes the teleological logic of pleasure,[149] the denial of ejaculatory release is not just a hindrance to reproduction but a vicarious experience of the pangs of childbirth. The duration of these pangs is reflected in the very practice of reading modeled by a plot structure that seems to frustrate realization. As a result of the interlocking scenes — ostensibly leading us to the release of an ending — we are oriented, in reading, toward radical continuity rather than discontinuity and, thus, encouraged to enact the politics of *agitation* and *acting* in the experience of interpretation. The impression is that we remain in the same undifferentiated scene, which is like a long take — its own kind of hyperform — or a never-ending gestation.[150]

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145 See, e.g., Ducat (1999).

146 The *Tempest* III.i.79–80. The innuendo blurs pregnancy and erection: see Gordon (2008, 43).

147 On the *skutala,* see esp. Pappas (2014) and Neer and Kurke (2019, 269–72).

148 See Derrida (1981a), and chapter 1.

149 See Deleuze (1991, 33), and Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 155).

150 See Zavattini (1966, 218): "Today, when we have thought out a scene, we feel the need to 'remain' in it, because the single scene itself can contain

The end of the play is dominated by a sense of protracted pain brought about by the agony of priapism and, more to the point, pregnancy.[151] When the Spartan herald describes the travails of unreleased arousal — "We suffer, for we go around the city / bent (*hupo-kekuphames*) as though we were carrying a lamp (*luchnophoriontes*)" (1002–3) — a slow, plodding movement is imparted to the second line by the length of the two contiguous verbs (*hupo-kekuphames* and *luchnophoriontes*) and especially by its metrical resolutions. This is the rhythm of a body encumbered by a burden that it protects like a lamp from the wind's extinguishing power — safeguarding it quasi-maternally from danger. When the Spartan ambassadors arrive onstage similarly burdened, their mobility is arrested additionally by the fetishistic hurdle of their dragging beards, phallic prostheses in their own right that theatrically reinforce the detachability, the precarious prostheticity of gender (1072).[152] Introducing the ambassadors, the now unified Chorus[153] depicts them as seeming to hold a "pig pen" (*choirokomeion*) around their thighs. Glossed by an ancient commentator as "a woven basket" (*plekton aggeion*), this "pig pen" is also a container for children destined for exposure.[154] The co-implication of male organ and baby is complicated by the anatomic innuendo

so many echoes and reverberations"; I borrow this reference from Rhodes (2010), discussing long takes in Michael Haneke.

151 Davidson (2012, 141–42) looks at the fantasy of cis-male pregnancy as "a way of talking about repro-futurity outside of its normative frame."

152 See Garber (1990, 47): "Fetishism is a kind of theater of display — and, indeed, […] theater represents an enactment of the fetishistic scenario. Thus Freud's 'penis,' the anatomical object, though understood through Lacan's 'phallus,' the structuring mark of desire, becomes reliteralized as a stage prop, a detachable object."

153 When the Spartan ambassadors arrive onstage and peace seems to be on the horizon, the two semi-Choruses merge into a unified Chorus, whose gender is indeterminate, a sign of the consensus that the play's finale will seek to reestablish but see below.

154 Scholium ad loc. See Hesychius, *Lexicon* κ 2800 Latte, where *aggeion plekton* is the definition of *kistē,* the woven basket customarily used to hold abandoned children: see Euripides, *Ion* 37 and 39–40, and Plautus's *Cistellaria.*

of *choiro-* ("pig," but also "vagina") in *choiro-komeion.*[155] The image functions as a verbal prosthesis, which, besides directing the viewer's and reader's mental eye to the phallic protrusion, also confusingly traces the contours of a female-genital container. This supplementary protrusion is gestation felt not as a compensatory response to penis envy but as the Real female agony caused by the reproductive "relief" of the paternal member enacted in accordance with the pleasure principle. In other words, the pleasure-in-pain of erectile tumescence seems to convey an intimation of the pain of pregnancy — a dramaturgical topos and target of comic lampoon.[156] While the long verbs used for the Spartan ambassadors to depict their misfortune, "terribly hardened (*neneurōtai*) […], inflamed (*tethermōsthai*) even worse" (1078–79), indicate an aggravated sexual verticality, a fertile rigidity like that of the Herms — statues with a head and an erect phallus, which were mutilated a few years earlier and are punningly alluded to here (*te-thermōsthai*) — [157] the formal expansion is remarkably horizontal. The sexual "inflammation" suggested by *te-thermōsthai* stretches its way through the limited space of the line like a swollen belly. In addition, after the Chorus has pointed to the bent, troubled gait of the Spartan ambassadors and has compared them to wrestlers "pushing their cloaks away from their bellies" (1082–83) to keep them loose,[158] a punning closure brings us back to the ambiguity of erectile and gestational swelling (1084–85): "It seems that this is an athletic (*askētikon*) disease!" What is translated as "athletic," *askētikon* (ἀσκητικόν) is an adjective that resonates with *askitēn*

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155 On this innuendo, see Henderson (1991, 131).

156 See Hall (2006, 68n28), referring to Plautus's *Amphitryo:* "Alcumena, about to give birth to twin boys, one of whom was the prodigiously strong baby Heracles (1103), ought to have been very large indeed at the moment of the play's action."

157 On this pun, see Henderson (1987, ad loc.). On the mutilation of the Herms in the Athenian psychic imaginary, see esp. Wohl (2002, ch. 4) and below. See also chapter 1 of this volume.

158 See Henderson (1987, 193), who explains that the ambassadors "do this because their erections are so large that they cannot be concealed under their clothing in a fully upright posture."

(ἀσκίτην), either somebody suffering from dropsy or the disease itself.[159] That word is cognate with *askos* (ἀσκός) "wineskin," a uterine-like container that, in *Women at the Thesmophoria,* stands in for a baby, becoming, one could say, the fetish of a male actor's womb envy.[160]

My reading of erectile pain as gestational travails connects with a feminist discourse on pregnancy, childbirth, and their physical toll, as well as their biopolitical uses. Seeking to make the pain of pregnancy and childbirth "visible" — instead of "unshareable"[161] — in order to "address concerns for the disproportionate injury and death experienced by black birth givers," Maria Fannin has observed that "some accounts of labour pain [...] describe [it] as so painful it feels like dying or *splitting* into two"[162] or "losing control, disintegration and tearing."[163] Remarking that "in pregnancy, the new size and peculiar shape of her body can lead a pregnant woman to feel simultaneously alienated from and trapped within her body," Sheila Lintott refers to the account that Iris Marion Young gave of her own experiences while pregnant:

> I move as if I could squeeze around chairs and through crowds as I could seven months before, only to find my way blocked by my own body sticking out in front of me — but yet not me, since I did not expect it to block my passage. As I lean over my chair to tie my shoe, I am surprised by the graze of this hard belly on my thigh. I do not anticipate my body touching itself, for my habits retain the old sense of my boundaries. In the ambiguity of bodily touch, I feel myself being touched and touching simultaneously, both on my

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159 The pun is noted by Henderson (1987, ad loc.).
160 See the analysis of the Telephus scene in the play in chapter 4.
161 As suggested by Scarry (1985).
162 Fannin (2019, 26) (my emphasis).
163 Fannin (2019, 29).

knee and my belly. The belly is other, since I did not expect it there, but since I feel the touch upon it, it is me.[164]

Elaborating on Simone de Beauvoir, Caroline Lundquist has observed that "the pregnant subject is not the agent in a creative process, but rather the site of an alien teleology — she does not make the child, but rather the child makes itself within her."[165] Discussing the novel *S: About the Balkans* (2001) by Slavenka Drakulić — the story of a Bosnian woman in exile giving birth to a child conceived when she was raped in war — she quotes the following passage: "She has never thought of it as a child, only as a disease, a burden she wished to get rid of, a parasite she wanted removed from her organism."[166] Sophie Lewis has argued in her discussion of *Amniotechnics* that "fetuses are, during and for a while afterwards, concretely a part of their holder-nurturers; almost a kind of organ."[167] As with other organs, they can become burdens, sources of pain that make them feel alien.

Lewis has examined what she calls "pregnancy's morbidity" and "the little-discussed ways that, biophysically speaking, gestating is an unconscionably destructive business."[168] The sense of oppressive alienation observed by Young has been aggravated

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164 The reference is to I.M. Young (2005) cited in Lintott (2013, 242). Lewis (2019, 127) also refers to I.M. Young, in particular to her sentence "The integrity of my body is undermined. […] I literally do not have a firm sense of where my body ends and the world begins" (2005, 163).

165 Lundquist (2008, 142), discussing Drakulić's novel *S.: A Novel About the Balkans* (2000). Speaking of the pregnant body, Beauvoir asserts that "the female is at once herself and other than herself" (1988, 54). As Adams and Lundquist (2013, 13) put it, Beauvoir "describes the fetus as a foreign growth, a parasite, a stranger, an intruder, and a mutilation." See also Horner (2018, 9–12), for a discussion of filmmaker Agnès Varda's engagement with Beauvoir in her representation of the pregnant body as a pumpkin.

166 Drakulić (2000, 7). See Lundquist (2008, 143).

167 Lewis (2019, 162).

168 Lewis (2019, 1). See also Pollock (1999, ch. 3) for an analysis of narratives of the pain of birth; the epigraph of her chapter is, significantly, a sentence from Julia Kristeva in her essay "Stabat Mater": "One does not bear children in pain, it's pain that one bears" (1985, 138).

by biopolitical technologies of (re)production connected with the surrogacy industry, which fetishizes the fetus as the sacred instrument of the futurism it enforces while neglecting or vilifying the pregnant woman.[169] Lewis's analysis of "pregnancy's mobility" and theorization of what she calls "feminism against family"[170] builds upon the work of scholars such as Lauren Berlant, who, in a fundamental 1994 article, drew attention to the emergence in the American hegemonic social imaginary of "an independent fetal subject with interests and rights of its own imaginable at the expense of pregnant women," while they themselves were "rendered invisible."[171] For Berlant, the logic expressed by this "independent fetal subject" has led to a state of fetal citizenship, whereby "the pregnant woman becomes the child to the fetus, becoming more minor and less politically represented than the fetus."[172] In this perspective, as Penelope Deutscher has concluded, the body of the pregnant woman is reduced to the position of Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer,* to disposable life, assimilating her into an instrument of reproductive life.[173] We can say, following Heather Latimer, that the pregnant woman and particularly the foreigner who lends her services to the surrogacy industry "relate to conversations about reproductive politics and citizenship rights by highlighting the paradoxes of a political climate focused on the regulation of who or what is considered 'alive' by simultaneously deeming others politically dead."[174] In her conceptualization of "feminism against the family," Lewis envisions "a world beyond propertarian kinship and work alienation," a "multigender feminism in which the labor of

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169 Lupton (2012, 337).

170 Lewis (2019). See also Vergès (2020, 53): "The wombs of women were themselves capitalized."

171 Valerius (2005, 129).

172 Berlant (1994, 147).

173 Deutscher (2008, 66–67); see also Latimer (2011, 58–59).

174 Latimer (2011, 68). See also Davis (1998); Luibhéid (2013); Harrison (2016); and Briggs (2017).

gestation is […] ongoingly revolutionized by struggles seeking to ease, aid, and redistribute it."[175]

When the Spartan ambassadors, recalling the mutilation of the Herms, proclaim, "We would have suffered *frightening things* (*deina*) if those men had seen us all *aroused* (*ampephlasmenōs* 1099)," fear veils a suggestion of desire for castration as a cure. *Am-pe-phlasmenōs* ("aroused" 1099) isosyllabically corresponds to *epi-tetrimmetha* ("we are worn out" 1090), spoken a few lines before by the Athenian ambassador. The temporal and physical undoing expressed by *epi-tetrimmetha* ironizes the two preceding words, *drōntes* ("doing" 1090) and *tōndres* ("the men" 1099), whose anagrammatic interchangeability unsettles the notion of reproductive *doing*. Priapism is the autoimmune consequence of a reproductive anxiety, an expression of the death drive, which animates the play as well as war-making itself.[176] When Lysistrata blames Spartans and Athenians for killing (*apol-lute* 1134) Greeks instead of foreigners, the Athenian ambassa-dor's response — "I'm being *killed* (*apollumai*) *with my foreskin peeled back* (*apepsōlēmenos*)" (1136) — assimilates sexual arousal (*apepsōlēmenos*) to never-dead *dying* through the resonance with the deeply durational present tense verb *apollumai* ("I am being killed"). This prolonged *dying* inflicts upon the citizen body, that is, upon the bodies of male citizens, the sensation of feel-ing "simultaneously alienated from and trapped within [their] body," the sensation, as we have seen, of pregnancy and of the mothers treated not as citizens but as disposable *zōē*. Though we need not claim, with Eva Keuls, that Athenian women were guilty of the mutilation of the Herms, we can perhaps say that the reference to the scandal in the Aristophanic passage points to a fantasy of castration, of being unburdened both of an alien-ated organ and of a sexual *dying* that never reaches death, that is, *la petite mort*.[177] Through the overdeterminacy of fetishistic form, this burden translates to fetal autonomy and the fanta-

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175 Lewis (2019, 44).
176 On the death drive of reproduction, see Edelman (2004, 24–25).
177 See Keuls (1993); cf. Wohl (2002, ch. 4).

sized castration translates to abortion — to an autoimmune liberation from (re)productive labor.

Though the finale of *Lysistrata* is usually read as a reaffirmation of the status quo ante, the configurations of time brought about by Reconciliation, both the word and its dramatic realization, channel — once again — the resistance of agitation.[178] Lysistrata's apparent victory, the capitulation of Athenian and Spartans, is marked by the arrival of a personified yet brutally sexualized figure called Reconciliation (*Di-allagē*), whose female body, another image of the colonial nation, is bleakly partitioned, crudely analyzed by a male gaze.[179] Lysistrata herself seems to renounce the rebellious spirit when, on the cusp of peace, she urges each husband to retake possession of his wife and go home (1186–87). However, while the preposition *dia* in *Di-allagē* projects the re-establishment of the status quo into the immediate future, it also stretches out the priapism, expressing duration — the persistence of no-release, underscored by the urgency accompanying its multiple occurrences.[180] While imagining the Greek men still in erectile pain, escorting the women home, we can see the possibility of a queering of positions. Erectile and gestational swellings overlap; aroused men with their tumid cloaks resemble pregnant women. The outcome is the possibility of a reversal of domestic care: the wives that accompany barely walking, overburdened bodies become

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178 Most recently, Tsoumpra (2020) has contended that the play ends with a reaffirmation of women's reproductive power, an important "moral victory," in her view. But this moral victory would be nothing but a reinscription of patriarchal normativity.

179 See 1148, 1158, 1162–63, 1169–70. On the pornographic nudity of *Di-allagē*, who is reduced to a marketplace prostitute, see Zweig (1992, 74), Stroup (2004, 62–68), and Gilhuly (2008, 165–69). On the commodification of *Di-allagē* as "a text, or contract — matter organised by male language" and, consequently, as a reversal of the women's oath, see Fletcher (1999, 121). We can also see the colonial partitioning as a re-establishment of the state's borders: on the convergence of oath and border, see above.

180 See 1091 (*di-allaxei tachu*), 1101 (*di-allagan*), 1104 (*di-allaxeien*), 1114 (*Di-allagē*), and 1175 (*di-allagēte*). On the durational meaning (both spatial and temporal) of the preposition *dia,* see Bortone (2010, 39, 159).

the husbands. This glimpse of *dissensus* arises from the dynamics of fetishism — from the instability and virtuality of its metonymic significations, from the opening of possibilities in the void opened up by the fetish's substitutive logic.[181] There is a formal void created by the enjambment in the sentence re-establishing conjugal hierarchy after Lysistrata's closural order has been repeated by an Athenian ambassador: "May the husband stay by the wife and the wife / by the husband" (*anēr de para gunaika kai gunē / stētō par' andra* 1275–76). The wife remains for a moment on the border of the line, separated from the verb that fixes her "Stand by your man" immobility while casting it as conjugal symmetry.[182] She is fleetingly liberated from the necropolitics of *besideness,* from the obligation of domestic care, from what has been called the "internal war."[183]

Beyond a restorative moving-forward, the *dia* in *Diallagē* conjures a force of continuation and of non-partitioning generated, as we have seen throughout this chapter, by the political affect of *agitation,* which withstands the exclusionary politics of necrocitizenship and its reproductive agenda. This continuation, mimetically experienced by the husbands, is the temporality of pregnancy, whose spatial counterpart encompasses both stretched somatic borders and the sensation of being "blocked by my own body sticking out in front of me," of having "my passage" blocked. Such "pregnant" temporality experienced as unreleased arousal or a pregnancy with no delivery causes the men to experience a blocked passage and the impossibility of removing an encumbrance. Pregnant bodies expanding into the environment, prolonged travails, the hyperform of undivided

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181 For a recuperative reading of the fetish, see Saha (2019, 103): "Rather than destroy the fantasy of the maternal phallus, the fetish preserves the beloved possibility imperiled by the sight now repressed" (my emphasis). For Saha, "the fetish *object* is one of fugitive possibility" (105).

182 On the image of Penelope *"standing* by (the column)" as iconic of the gender hierarchy of the *Odyssey,* see Wohl (1993); see also Purves (2019, 142–52), who sees this position as the threat of the epic formula, that is, repetition without variation.

183 Gago (2020, 66).

plot structures unable to birth narrative: such bodily and formal undifferentiation, a crisis beyond the crisis-as-emergency, vibrates with the anti-border force of agitation, the rebellious impetus of a swelling that overcomes the event with the radical ongoingness, the uncut time, of feminist acting.

Trans-Form:
Women at the Thesmophoria

Synopsis: To protect himself agaits Athenian women, who are angered by his apparent misogyny, Euripides talks his Inlaw into acting as his secret emissary in the all-female festival of the Thesmophoria. With the help of the poet Agathon, more womanly than a cis woman, Euripides disguises the Inlaw in female clothing and coaches him on deportment. In the midst of the religious assembly, when the Inlaw is caught, a scene of transphobic violence arises. In the first of many paratragic restagings — in this case, Euripides' *Telephus* — the Inlaw defends himself by stealing a wineskin baby from one of his attackers. To escape from the women and a Scythian policeman, the Inlaw dons other Euripidean roles: that of Palamedes, the resourceful inventor of writing; Helen, rescued from Egypt by her husband Menelaus; and Andromeda, the heroine offered to a sea monster but saved by Perseus. Euripides, dressed as a seductive madam, distracts the policeman and sets the Inlaw free.

COVID-19 has ushered in a reconsideration of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s and '90s that seeks to rescue it from efforts to relegate it to the past-ness of history. Chris Gossett and Eva

Hayward have observed that, even though for some "the time of AIDS is […] either an obliterated past tense or an HIV+ pharmacological futurity," still "AIDS remains. AIDS continues."[1] The field of trans⁽*⁾ studies,[2] with which this chapter engages, emerged within queer theory in concomitance with the AIDS crisis.[3] What I call "trans-form" is a manifestation of hyperform that conceptualizes the relation between transness and crisis in *Women at the Thesmophoria.*[4] Trans-form is, in other words, another mode of resistant formalism on the border, which, as I argue here, can suggest connections between restless verbal *poiēsis* and the politics of transgenderism. Moved by the desire to exit the prison of the body and traverse society's barriers, the *transgender* subject, like the *étrangère,* of which "transgender" is almost an anagram, opens up lines of disidentification.[5] In *Journal of a Transsexual,* Leslie Feinberg declares, "I think how nice it would be to unzip my body from forehead to navel and go on vacation. But there is no escaping it."[6] Similarly, Raymond Thompson in *What Took You So Long? A Girl's Journey to Manhood* recalls, "I needed to be

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1 Gossett and Hayward (2020, 533); see also Gill-Peterson and Lavery (2020, 638).

2 On the asterisk in *trans**, see Hayward and Weinstein (2015, 198); Steinbock (2019, 21, 112) refers to "the paratactical stickiness of the asterisk" as "the (im)possible holding together of multiplicity" and "an affect's intensive too-muchness." See also Edelman (2023) on the non-linguistic force of "plus" (+) in LGBTIQ+; for him, this sign is a marker of the Lacanian Real of which *queer* and *trans,* among other embodiments of difference, are synecdochic; see also Eng and Puar (2020, 15), on trans* as "the 'return of the real.'" As Keegan (2020, 69) puts it, "The emerging wildcard formations *trans-* and *trans** perform the referential opening transgender studies has long desired from queer studies: […] trans-/* is now [a] […] 'prepositional force' that expresses an infinite number of unfolding causal connections between forms."

3 See Gossett and Hayward (2020, 538).

4 Steinbock (2019, 111) uses "trans*form" as "a word that captures the affective modulations that structure the differentiations of transgender transitions and transformations of form."

5 See Preciado (2021, 43): "The refugee has lost their house. The trans person loses their body. They all cross that border. The border is part of them and cuts through them." See also Uhlig (2017).

6 Feinberg (1980, 20).

out of my body, to be free […]. I was growing ever larger inside of me, making me feel I was bursting at the seams and wanting out […] out […] out!"[7] In her first academic article, a manifesto of transgender studies, Susan Stryker says, "My exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I […] direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist."[8] *Trans*[(*)] is the cutting force of this rage, which seeks to wrest the *ex-* of *ex*it and *ex*istence from the hold of *ex*clusion, from the foreclosed possibility, from barriers internal and external.[9] In the following analysis, I will heed the insistence of this force traversing — and breaking — the verbal texture of the play.

The plot of *Women at the Thesmophoria* is set in motion by the feminine prosthetics that the Inlaw (*Kēdēstēs*) of Euripides borrows from the tragic poet Agathon, usually labeled a "cross-dresser," "drag queen," or "transvestite," though other terms — *genderqueer, gender-non-conforming, transfeminine, transgender* — might be more appropriate for their Aristophanic characterization.[10] I am not interested, however, in reclaiming

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7 R. Thompson (1995, 200). See also L.C. Crawford (2010, 516) on trans-embodiment as contesting "the assumption that bodies must be treated as comfortable and owned homes." Preciado (2021, 21) says: "I was assigned female at birth, and […] I extricated myself from that confined 'cage,' in order to enter another cage," that of "the 'trans man,' of the 'non-binary body.'"

8 Stryker (1994, 238).

9 See Preciado (2021, 26–27): "I was looking for a door, an exit, a way out," and "even today I am still running to escape the serfdom of the binary system of sexual difference." See Getsy (2015, 276), on the "transgender capacity" of some contemporary abstract art as a capacity for "the unforeclosed."

10 On the history of these various terms and their definitions, see esp. Stryker (2017, 22–25, 36–44). I am particularly sympathetic with *"trans gender queer,"* coined by Q. Miller (2019, 4). This phrase, "which positions *gender* as a multiplicitous switch point between *trans* and *queer*, accounts for prototrans subject positions and for nonbinary orientation missed and misidentified because of the conventions surrounding categories such as 'women.'" Although the pronoun "they" would be more in line with my aspiration to avoid the gender binary, for convenience and clarity I am resorting to "(s)he" as the subject pronoun for the Inlaw, Agathon, and Cleisthenes, but you will find "them," "themselves," and "their" for other grammatical scenarios.

for Agathon a precise position within transgender history, or in reading the Aristophanic play through the filter of identity politics in its various forms.[11] Rather, I want to connect Agathon's transness, by which I mean the aesthetic effect of their comic representation, with the inherent queerness of the play's protagonist, Euripides' Inlaw, probably a "brother-in-law."[12] As an inlaw, this character exemplifies — even before (s)he puts on women's clothing — laterality, an "oblique" kinship, which Eve Sedgwick has taught us to regard as queer.[13] This laterality — expressed in Greek by the preposition *para* — is fully enacted by the Inlaw during their *para*-tragic performances, their *par*-odies of Euripides' *Andromeda, Helen*, and *Palamedes*. My conceptualization of trans-form is an effort to theorize the

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11 Ruffell (2020b) provides an important analysis of the various, plural "transgender modes" with which one could — heuristically — align the play's characters. Even though she operates in a primarily historicist interpretive framework, Ruffell seems to believe, like I do, that, casting Agathon, the biographical figure and the literary character, or other characters in the play as "transgender" carries the danger, inherent in every historical narrative, of drawing up linear, implicitly teleological, accounts that locate a point of origin, erasing ruptures and discontinuities: see Amin (2018). The term "transvestite," which "many people now consider […] to be pejorative or pathologizing" (Stryker 2017, 39), is used of Agathon by various scholars: see, e.g., Zeitlin (1996, 382–86), Bobrick (1997), Gamel (2002), and Compton-Engle (2015, 94–102). Duncan (2006, 35–40) uses the term "transvestite" and, as an alternative, "drag queen" but, referring to the classic works of J. Butler (1990) and Garber (1992), offers a more nuanced treatment of Agathon, seeing the tragedian as an agent of gender performativity: "a disrupter of categories (masculine/feminine, poet/actor, actor/character) […], a figure who opens up a space of possibility in the sex-gender system of his time" (35–36); see also Stehle (2002, 382), Given (2007), and esp. Sissa (2012, 57), who emphasizes gender "fluidity." Drager and Platero (2021) reclaim the term "transvestite" as a way to repair neo-colonial, racialized, and class-based North-South divisions within the perceptions of transness.

12 On this possible identity of Euripides' Inlaw, see Sommerstein (1994, Introduction).

13 On queer avuncularity, see Sedgwick (1993); on uncles and aunts as expressions of queer kinship in the wake of Sedgwick, see Goodkin (1991, 39–47), McCrea (2011, 183–84), and Mueller (forthcoming); on "lateral agency," see Berlant (2007).

relationship between *trans-* and *para-* and to explore how parody, specifically the political force of parodic temporality and affect, "can become a site of social transformation,"[14] spreading poetic form's rage against the textual container wherein it "must struggle to exist."[15]

I wish to situate trans-form within current trends in transgender theory, linking it, in particular, with the notion of "unbecoming."[16] "Gender transitivity," as Ramzi Fawaz has noted,

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14 In the words of Stryker (2008, 44), referring to the power and potentialities of "body modification"; see also Gabriel (2020).

15 See Stryker (1994, 238). Lavery (2020, 385) critiques what she calls the "aesthetic" approach to transness as opposed to "trans realism"; cf. Abi-Karam and Gabriel (2020, 2): "We think that poetry conjoins and extends the interventions that trans people make into our lives and bodily presence, which always have an aesthetic dimension." See also cárdenas (2022, 27), on the political force of trans[(*)] poetry and poetics.

16 The field of trans[(*)] theory is animated by important and heated debates: see esp. Keegan (2020) on the debates between practitioners of queer and trans[(*)] studies. As a gay cis-gender man, I cannot fully understand the experience of transgender people. In my readings, I adopt what can be called a dis-identificatory or anti-identitarian approach, one that has been challenged as fundamentally denying the "realness" of trans[(*)] people: see esp. Lavery (2020). Building on Lavery, Deihr (2022) sees *Women at the Thesmophoria* as implicated in a system in which trans[(*)] people can never reach their destination, in which they are unable to become but rather must be what they do not want to be; see also Ruffell (2020b). The anti-identitarian approach that I follow seems to me to allow for the widest spectrum of notions of transness and transing, notions that also include trans[(*)] embodiments without or with partial or ongoing medical and surgical transitions. As Aizura (2018, 209) observes, the representation "of transness as mobile, multiplicitous, and processual rather than having a beginning and end corresponds with Jasbir Puar's argument in her essay 'Bodies with New Organs' (2015) that biomedical models of passing and wholeness are no longer the privileged discourse through which transness is intelligible." My approach combines elements, even ostensibly antithetical elements, from both columns of the helpful binary chart in Keegan (2020) ("Transgender studies values" / "Queer studies values"): *ecstatics, transitivity, paradox, materiality, paratactics* (from the former) *and failure, desire, refusal, deconstruction, discourse, style* (from the latter). Chen (2013, 171) observes that "just as gender and sex are unavoidably linked, so too are trans and queer. They can be considered as independent factors which participate in intersectional spaces"; see also Stanley (2021, 26–27). For an approach to queer and trans[(*)] studies that privileges "kindredness […]

is "not only […] an identity or lived experience, but also […] a formal capacity of artistic production."[17] Transness — an erosion of the sexed body's physical or symbolic borders — expresses a radical version of sexuality's disruption of being and identity. Jordy Rosenberg's *Confessions of the Fox* (2018) is a stunning illustration of transness as a formal capacity or what we can call transgender formalism. In this experimental novel, which sets itself up as a rediscovered Defoean biography of the jailbreaker Jack Sheppard, the protagonist is reimagined as a transgender man, like the academic ego narrator who has stumbled upon the forgotten manuscript.[18] As this alter ego explains, after citing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in one of the novel's paratextual notes:[19]

> When you're making love, the organs that have been forced into […] Oedipal narrative get rearranged. Rewritten. Sort of liberating. Sort of liberated. […] And that rewriting — that's making love. […] The body is written (like a book is written) — or rewritten — in the process of making love.

The *jouissant* verbal texture of Rosenberg's narrative dramatizes this idea — making love as transformative — as well as transness. The forming of prose is, in fact, an incessant process of de-formation, as words disintegrate or are absorbed into words, sound

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concatenation," see Bey in Aizura, Bey, Beauchamp, Ellison, Gill-Peterson, and Steinbock (2020, 142).

17 Fawaz (2017, 362), referring to the theorization of aesthetic transness in David Getsy's *Abstract Bodies* (2015); see also Fawaz (2018).

18 Halberstam (2020a, 23) observes that Rosenberg's character occupies the "space of transit between a *before* and an *after* nature."

19 Here and elsewhere Rosenberg (2014; 2016) refers to Deleuze and Guattari's critique in *Anti-Oedipus* (1977) of Freud's discussion of the wolfman dream, with its positing of a primal scene of sexual trauma, a tableau of parental sex; on anti-Oedipal sexuality, grounded in the idea of becoming, in a flux of proliferating, shifting intensities, see Deleuze and Guattari (1987, *passim*). For an anti-Oedipal rereading of Euripides' *Bacchae* inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, see Wohl (2005); see also the essays in Nigianni and Storr (2009), esp. Conley (2009).

patterns repeat and vary, and the textual flow is interrupted or obstructed by a linguistic excess.[20] Doing language means undoing it, and "becoming" — the principle that Deleuze and Guattari see behind sexuality — is shadowed by the "un-becoming" brought on by this excess.[21] Un-becoming can amount to "the incessant doing and undoing, the inexhaustible exhaustion of all dialectical logics and structures," as John Paul Ricco remarks.[22] Alternatively, Annabel Kim sees un-becoming as a kind of "subjectivity free from the subjection of subjecthood."[23] Language, for her, is central to un-becoming for "it drives [...] the political process of shedding the categories and the identities that we've been coerced into becoming."[24] Discussing transsexuality's power of resistance, Mary Bunch suggests that "the agency of political beings lies [...] in the creative force of a becoming that is also an un-becoming, where in and through abjection from the social order one critiques and transforms it."[25] This position resonates with Jack Halberstam's observation that while "previously theorized as a becoming," transness "now appears as a pro-

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20 This process relies on an excess of what Samuel R. Delany (2009, 4), an important influence for Rosenberg, calls "overweaving relations" between words or "subjunctivity." Tompkins (2017, 266) proposes a queering of form through the exploration of how "form [...] decays, morphs, and improvises against and ahead of disciplinary programmatics." See also Bey (2020, 483) on the transness of "de-narrative," that is, "a narrative that undoes itself as narrative."

21 Discussing "becoming trans," Puar observes that this "becoming is not about trying to make the body more capacitated but about allowing and reading more multiplicity, multiplicities of the impersonal and of the imperceptible" (2015, 63). While Puar's revision of "becoming" is divorced from teleological notions of a normate body and connected with multiplicity, it still, I would say, implies an affirmative projection; "un-becoming," the term that I will favor, emphasizes an ongoing refusal of a self-affirming process that as such valorizes a notion of self, if decentered, deterritorialized, multiplied.

22 Ricco (2005, 1), who refers to Nancy (1997, 90), on "political transitivity."

23 A.L. Kim (2018, 31).

24 A.L. Kim (2018, 236). In her analysis of Nathalie Sarraute, Monique Wittig, and Anne Garréta, Kim retrieves a "poetics of unbecoming" as "the becoming body of language that makes the human unbecome" (237).

25 Bunch (2013, 40).

ject of dismantling."[26] Un-becoming can also bring us back to the link between this chapter and the previous one, to the assonance between *étrangère* and *transgender* if we consider, for example, the experience of trans artist and activist Tija Uhlig, born in the former East Germany, who has mapped the experience of "(un)becoming genderqueer" as such onto their personal "exploration of […] genderqueer life in East-West borderlands."[27]

What I call trans-form is an impetus for un-becoming manifested as an enraged movement of language, as the pressure of verbal "fugitive flesh" against the bars of textuality, which I locate in *Women at the Thesmophoria.*[28] In this play, the sustained encounters between comic and tragic textuality do not merely destabilize the borders of genre and gender,[29] but are part of an all-encompassing dynamic of "continuous transition" whereby a steady push against demarcations of language provokes the un-becoming of verbal form.[30] An unrelenting disidentification of words through compulsively recursive, resilient formal material — clusters of letters that never stabilize but keep rearranging themselves — conveys what Halberstam, describing transgender embodiments, calls the "fleshy insistence of transitivity."[31] In my

26 So Halberstam (2018b), on queer and trans* un-becoming through "an-architecture"; for a slightly different take on the concept of un-becoming, see Halberstam (2011b). Halberstam (2010) labels Marina Abramović "the artist of unbecoming," who contests feminism's well-established idea of "becoming woman." McCallum and Tuhkanen (2011, 10) say that for history "queer life is unbecoming," where "unbecoming" plays with the idea of "unfitness." See also Sullivan (2006) on transing as "the chiasmatic process of transmogrification, of (un)becoming strange, of (un)becoming other."

27 Uhlig (2021, 226).

28 The phrase "fugitive flesh" is borrowed from Stanley (2015).

29 See the influential reading of the Aristophanic play in light of the nexus of genre and gender that is proposed by Zeitlin (1996, ch. 6); see also Medda (2017).

30 I owe the phrase "continuous transition" to Halberstam (2018a, 95).

31 Halberstam (2018a, 136). Differently, Lavery (2019) reevaluates binarism, locating the emancipatory force of transitioning in the possibility for transgender people to become "women" or "men," to fill (permanently) the gap between gender identity and their biologically assigned anatomical sex.

reading, I do not look at Aristophanes' parodic extravaganza as a male/comic burlesque of the female/tragic, a carnivalesque parade of cross-dressing — interpretations that are in line with cis-sexist belittlement of transgenderism.[32] Nor do I see it as a triumph of the notion of gender fluidity. Rather, I regard it as but one aspect of a "destructive plasticity" of form that permeates the play as whole, intimating trans[(*)] un-becoming.[33] A focus on the transness, the destructive plasticity of verbal flesh in its *ex*cessive, exasperated extension can allow us to sense this comedy's formalistic resistance and to reach beyond both a normalizing, sexist comic intentionality and the binarism implicit in critical assessments that invoke social constructivism, gender transgression, or even fluidity and indeterminacy.[34] The un-

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32 I refer to what Stryker calls "cissexist feminist censure" (2015, 227). Chu (2019, 12–13) makes the provocative argument that "to be is to be female" and that gender is nothing else but "how one copes with being female — the specific defense mechanisms that one consciously or unconsciously develops as a reaction formation against one's femaleness." In this perspective, the misogyny of *Women at the Thesmophoria* might be seen as an expression of the "desire to be female" while "desperately trying to repress it," that is, of the "internalized misogyny," or the "self-loathing," constitutive of gender. On Chu's position, see Halberstam's (2020b) critique.

33 On "destructive plasticity" as a non-reparative way "to radicalize the deconstruction of subjectivity, to stamp it anew," see Malabou (2012, 37), who defines it as a "power of change without redemption, without teleology, without any meaning other than strangeness" (24). See also Halberstam (2018b), extending Gordon Matta-Clark's idea of "an-architecture" to the notion of *trans** as "unbuilding": "much of what we might now call *trans** art engages in violent, destructive, and rigorous if chaotic attempts to unmake the frames of representation through which the transgender body has been viewed."

34 Derrida (1980, 204) casts as "anomaly, or monstrosity," the "mixing" that is central to and unsettles the notion of genre, despite its apparent command "not to mix." Monstrosity is an idea that transgender studies has reclaimed: see esp. Stryker (1994) and Halberstam (1995, 27), who observes: "The monster always represents the disruption of categories. […] We need to recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities." See also Preciado (2021, 39), who assimilates sexual difference as such to a cage. Derrida also uses the word "intermixing"; in her comments on her translation of the essay, Avital Ronell defines genre as "a loose and even transsexual figure."

becoming I suggest for theorizing and reading trans-form leans, in other words, toward the notion of gender abolition, the negativity of a gender *ou*-topia ("no place").[35]

A consideration of stylistic disarticulation in the writing of Tarell Alvin McCraney, Halberstam, and Rosenberg help explain how I reconceive Aristophanes' "transgressions of genre and gender"[36] as trans-form. In McCraney's play *Wig Out!* (2008), set in the world of ballroom drag culture, Venus, one of the transgender protagonists, prepares for a voguing contest by proclaiming: "We need / To get in every category and pull a stunt / and *show*, a *shock* and *awe*."[37] It is as though *show* were analyzed as the conflation of the subsequent two words and a theatrical object contained its affective responses within its phonetic structure. This verbal triangulation is reflected in the names of the Parcae who oversee the plot, *Fay, Fate, Faith,* a triad in which the third term gathers together and extends the first two. Along this vein, discussing Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015), Halberstam locates the "politics of transitivity" in Nelson's language, "a shifting ecosystem," as Halberstam defines it, "within which words might *fly, fall,* or *fail* […] but also one within which words might hover over the multiplic-

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35 As Bey (2022a, 67) remarks, "Gender is that which is made to attach to bodies of a domesticized space, predicated on the integrity of an ontology constituted by a white symbolic order." Consequently, "(gender) abolition gratuitously expands the ambit through which subjects might become subjects in ways that do not carry with them the normativities of worlds and histories past, which then means we will have the possibility to become *something* or *somethings* that have never been permitted to arise" (my emphasis). This emphasis on something, rather than *somebody,* pre-empts the danger that gender abolition, ungendering, may turn into a reinscription of unmarked cis-masculinity. See also Bey (2022c) on *trans** as a noncategory; in similar fashion, Amin (2022, 118) advocates for "developing a robust trans politics and discourse *without* gender identity."

36 Zeitlin (1996, ch. 6).

37 McCraney (2008, 56) (my emphasis). Alexander (2020, 84) observes that the play encourages "thinking about the plurality of femininities and masculinities — and the in-between possibilities […] available to all of us both within and outside of LGBTQ+ communities."

ity to which they point."[38] Phonetically, the trio of *fly, fall, fail,* together with *hover over,* exemplifies "continuous transition," the guiding principle of the language — spasmodically textured, untextured, retextured — of Rosenberg's transgender biography of Jack Sheppard. Here are just a few examples:[39]

> Jack shiver'd […] his skin shrinking from the touch of the organza. […] Her feet throbb'd on the cobblestones, and Bess kept her head down past constables. […] His heart was thamping against his chest, some combination of thumping and stamping. […] An armor of frizzy tentacles […] an odd translucent tan. […] A cloud of Filth fluff'd from the floor. […] Bess with her face pressed into his breeches, her breath in some consummate syncopation with the cart's rocking.

Almost assimilated to "skin shrinking," the "shiver" becomes the sensation of unsettled gender embodiments, an unsettling that occurs in the transitioning of persistent phonetic material within the same sentence, from "shivered" to "skin" to "shrinking." Through this transition — a drawn-out de-formation — language acquires a different, non-referential power that yields a continuous disidentification, or a sense of disidentificatory continuity.[40] Such continuity reflects the "sustained, unpeaking exquisite Pleasure" that is evoked in a moment of intimacy between Jack and his beloved Bess, a cis-gender woman.[41] In the respiratory strain figured by "some consummate syncopation," "some," a pronominal multiplicity, becomes continuous

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38 Halberstam (2018a, 9) (my emphasis).

39 Rosenberg (2018, 15, 23, 34, 44, 83, 205).

40 Halberstam (2018a, 44) speaks of "dis-identificatory processes by which and through which trans* people dream themselves into the world and remake the world in the process." Nelson (2015, 53) reports the way her partner, Harry, a transgender man, describes his condition: "I'm not on my way anywhere. […] I do not want the female gender that has been assigned to me at birth. Neither do I want the male gender that transsexual medicine can furnish and that the state will award me if I behave in the right way."

41 Rosenberg (2018, 205).

with "*syn*copation" through the intermediary of "*sum-*" — both of which are homophones of "some" and graphically similar to "*syn-*," which is itself the etymological equivalent of the "*con-*" in "consummate." "Filth fluff'd from the floor" disseminates the feeling of this willful formal (dis)continuity. In these examples of Rosenberg's practice of ever-shifting de-formation, what some trans[(*)] theorists would call somatechnics, we can also recognize one of the modes of "transgender capacity" singled out by David Getsy, that is, the "logic of interchangeability."[42] Aristophanes' parodic engagements with multiple Euripidean plays can be read precisely as a nonhierarchical recombination and relocation of parts and lines — a continuous reassembling, which builds upon the interchangeability, infinite prostheticity, and obstinate transitivity of recurring textual constituents with precarious contours. For Genette, "transtextuality" was an umbrella term for all phenomena of textual interaction, including parody.[43] I suggest that reading this play for transform beyond parody makes it possible to draw upon its obstinate hyper-transitivity, a political affect of resistance. Instead of viewing the text as a diachronic or synchronic system, made of pre-, inter-, or intra-texts, we can heed the trans-form in its insistent plasticity — the "movements through, within, and across"[44] of phonemes and graphemes, a critical un-becoming that confounds the partitioning of textuality.

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42 Getsy (2015, 258) sees this interchangeability in Dan Flavin's fluorescent light sculptures, in the "proliferation of difference and variability among his standard materials that can be recombined, paired, relocated, and exchanged — and that one never forgets are all, fundamentally, the same." On *somatotechnics* "as a shorthand label for a robust ontological account of embodiment as process," see Stryker (2015, 229); see also Stryker (1994), where the transgender body is presented as "a technological construction," that is, "flesh torn apart and sewn together again" (238).

43 Genette (1997, 1) famously defines *trans-textuality* — which includes *archi-, hyper-, inter-, meta-, para-textuality* — as "the textual transcendence of text," that is, "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts."

44 Thus Amin (2020, 50), who also suggests that "trans- as a prefix is always prepositional, always in transformative relation to something else." See also Stryker (2015, 230).

Aristophanes' parodic trans-form embodies a *para-poiēsis,* which tends toward sideway modes of bodily and social dis-arrangement, on the "side."[45] The transgender effort to shatter the body as a "psychically bounded space or container"[46] is felt in the cardiac excitement indicated in Rosenberg's text by the neologism *thamping* — a recombination of the phonemic substance and structure of *thumping* and *stamping* that is an icon of fugitive un-becoming, of trans-form. *Thamping* may appear as a slip on the part of the ego narrator, an instance of Freudian *Fehlleistung,* which James Strachey translated as para-praxis — that is, not simply "a slip of the tongue," but "a wayward doing" or a "sideways" *poiēsis,* "a kind of effort, a persistence, even a tragic-comic […] 'insistence' […] with unexpected or unintended results."[47] What Stryker calls "the utopian space of my ongoing poesis"[48] invites us to think of the *impossibility* of such *poiēsis,* suggested by both "utopian" and "ongoing," and thus of a sort of *anti-poiēsis* or *para-poiēsis.* This *para-poiēsis* is reflected in Rosenberg's triad *tentacles translucent tan,* in which the game of recombination programmatically casts trans-form as an intricate process of detachment, reattachment, detach-ment, as it were: a queer reassembly-disassembly of fugitive phonemes, of verbal potentialities — *ten ta trans tan ten ent.* In the phonic triangulation of *throbb'd cobblestones constables,* as in all the other triads of Rosenberg's prose, we see not just a Deleuzian assemblage of human and non-human parts (feet,

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45 On the *beside* as queer becoming, see Sedgwick (2003, 8). See also Vaccaro (2010, 254, 256) and Bey (2020, 484–85). A connection between *para-* ("beside") and *trans-* ("beyond") seems to be posited by Genette (1997, 10–11) when he thinks of *par*-ody as *trans*-position.

46 Stryker (2008, 45).

47 The citation is from Elsaesser (2014, 107), discussing "parapractic" poetics and politics in post-war German cinema. The definition of the Greek verb *para-prattō* given by LSJ (Liddell-Scott-Jones dictionary) is "do a thing beside or beyond the main purpose." Freud refers to *Fehlleistung* in *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901). Gherovici (2017, 48) links *parapraxis* with Wilhelm Stekel's use of *para-philia* (1930) as a definition of non-conforming sexual inclinations.

48 Stryker (2008, 45).

cobblestones), affects, and intensities, but a plastic destructuring.[49] Switching emphasis from intertextuality or Bakhtinian dialogism or generic polyphony to trans-form makes us see Aristophanic parody beyond agonism, and beyond the collision of gendered voices in flux. Besides the unstable, fluid struggle of (male) comedy against (female) tragedy, of low against high, we may perceive a different, diffuse corporeal and temporal struggle of uncontainable letters against the prison of textuality, tragic or comic — the counterpart of the cis-body or of socially constructed gender(s) — a struggle that delivers a kind of transgender "thamping" (both "thumping" and "stamping") of form.[50] *Thamping* captures the dissensual force, the phonetic willfulness against "cis-textuality," of trans-form, which passes through detachment, reattachment, and detachment again, refusing to *become*. While Aristophanes' play makes light of transphobic violence, the trans-form that it models in spite of itself offers the resistance generative of this un-becoming.

i. Comic Un-becoming

In the second line of *Thesmophoriazusae,* a simultaneous embodiment and disembodiment exemplifies a transgender capacity. The play opens with the comic pleasure-in-pain of the Inlaw, whom Euripides is dragging to the house of the tragedian Agathon, the protagonist of the initial scenes (2–4):

> INLAW This man w*ill destroy me by thrashing me around* (*apolei m' aloōn*) all day long. Euripides, before I actually

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49 Gherovici (2017, ch. 13) theorizes transgenderism through Malabou's notion of plasticity (2005); see also Amin (2020). For Vaccaro (2015, 283), "Gender transformation [is] a process of assembly and disassembly in which bodies auto-engineer shape and form, building and remaking connections between the soft and pliable material forms of emotional and material life."

50 In this schema I see form as corresponding to the Lacanian idea of sexual difference as "a fundamental fantasy available for traversal," in the words of Coffman (2017, 493): see also below.

throw up (*ek-balein*) my spleen (*splēna*), could you tell me where you are taking me?[51]

In the juxtaposition of *ap-olei* [...] *aloōn* three letters of the first word reappear in the second one. It is as though constituents of *ap-olei* immediately exit and disintegrate this newly built verbal embodiment as they transition into another one.[52] This formal un-becoming to an extent enacts the prospective loss of an organ through emesis feared by the Inlaw, the spleen's escape from the body. The bodily and verbal disruptions, the disarraying transfers of corporeal and linguistic matter, appear even more striking in light of the sensorial boundary established in Euripides' tirade on the origins of ears and eyes, which he launches by saying, "There is no need to replicate in words what you'll see with your eyes!" (5–6). Speaking of the beginning of the world, Euripides grandly explains (13–18):

> These senses [sight and hearing] *were divided up* (*di-e-krithē*) in this way. When [...] the Aether *separated itself* (*di-e-chōrizeto*) and together with Earth it generated within itself moving living beings, first it devised the eye [...] and then *drilled through* (*di-e-tetrēnato*) the ears, making them a funnel of hearing.[53]

This distribution of the sensible, enforced by the repeated cut of the preposition *dia* ("through"), is at odds with the formal attraction of *apolei* and *aloōn,* with the disaggregation of pho-

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51 Here I depart from Henderson's text and print, in line 2, the transmitted reading *aloōn* (ἀλοῶν).

52 This formal "transition" can be connected with the motion evoked by *aloōn,* that is, "the comical image of a path that endlessly circles around as does the circular path of livestock driven around the threshing floor," as observed by Clements (2014, 54), who also suggests a connection with the "turned-back or -around path" (*palin-tropos* [...] *keleuthos*) in Parmenides B65.

53 On Euripides'/Aristophanes' manipulation of pre-Socratic philosophy in these lines, see Clements (2014, 23–25).

nemes for both eye and ear. Indeed, when Euripides meets Aga-thon in the flesh, the returning key word *ap-olein* ("to die"), which refers to the death to be meted out to the former at the hands of Athenian women, initiates an assembling and disas-sembling of verbal matter similar to what we see in Rosenberg's novel (181–92):

> EURIPIDES The women will kill (*ap-olein*) me today at the Thesmophoria. […]
> AGATHON Why don't you go in person and defend yourself (*ap-ologei*)?
> EURIPIDES I'll tell you. First, I'm known. *Second, I'm old* (*epeita polios*) and I've got a beard, while you have a beautiful face, and you're white-skinned, shaved, female-sounding, tender (*hapalos*).

Euripides' feared death (*ap-olein*) becomes his defense (*apo-logei*); masculine old age becomes, in the syntactic flow (*a polios*), almost impossible to distinguish from young, (fe)male softness (*hapalos*). We get the sense of transing form, of the "proliferation of […] materials […] recombined, paired, relocated, and exchanged"[54] that Getsy views as typical of the "transgender capacity" of contemporary art, visual or otherwise. In the context of this scene, we might regard this capacity as in fact Agathonian. We might, in other words, sense that the comic form is imbued — in spite of itself — with the affective force of corporeal un-becoming that Agathon seems to epitomize in this scene.[55]

The extant poetry of Agathon offers multiple, suggestive impressions of trans-form. In one fragment, we observe not just a sophisticated deployment of Gorgianic rhetorical tropes

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54 Getsy (2015, 258). On the verb *transing,* see Stryker, Currah, and Moore (2008, 13) and Stallings (2015, 10, 205).

55 Oscar Wilde referred to Agathon as "the aesthetic poet of the Periclean age": see Mendelsohn (2010), who mentions this judgment while referring to Wilde's praise of Catullus 63, a poem on the self-castration of Attis, a devotee of Cybele.

but a play with formal plasticity: "Art loves destiny, and destiny art" (_technē_ _tuchēn_ _esterxe kai_ _tuchē_ _technēn_).[56] Besides a mannered chiasmus, there is a blatant transition from _technē_ to _tuchēn,_ which is unsettled, again, by its reversed movement (_tuchē technēn_) and by the reshuffling of the relative positions of subject and object. This impression of trans-form is even more pronounced in another isolated line: "Judgment is something mightier than the hands' strength" (_gnōmē de kreisson estin ē rhōmē cherōn_).[57] With a minimal verbal adjustment, the exchange of a phoneme, mind (_gn_-_ōmē_ "judgment") transitions to body (_rh_-_ōmē_) and vice-versa, one un-becoming or para-becoming the other.[58] In the phonetic rearrangement leading from _kreisson_ to _cherōn,_ something new ("hands") is fashioned from related parts. The following line from _Thyestes_[59] explains the origin of the name Kouretes ("Shorn Ones"), servants of Cybele, through a play on the idea of a haircut:[60]

> [We obtained the name of]
> Kouretes because of [our] cut hair
> _Kourētes einai, kourimou charin trichos_ […].

While the usual etymology of the name Kouretes links it to _kourē_ ("girl"), with reference to their "girlish" long hair,[61] Agathon interprets it as containing the word "cut" (_koura_) — the

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56 Fragment 6 Kannicht-Snell.

57 Fragment 27 Kannicht-Snell.

58 A similar phenomenon is detectable in the transition from _phrasō_ to (_eu-_)_phranō_ in another fragment (12 Kannicht-Snell): "If I tell (_phrasō_) the truth, I will not make you happy (_eu-phranō_). / If I make you happy (_eu-phranō_) in something, I won't be telling (_phrasō_) the truth."

59 Thyestes is marked by imagery of male pregnancy; see esp. Gowers (2016, 569), who suggests that Agathon's _Thyestes_ was precisely the play that won the tragic victory for which he is celebrated in Plato's _Symposium,_ that is, a theorization of masculine (intellectual) gestation: see esp. Halperin (1990).

60 Fragment 3.4 Kannicht-Snell. Cropp (2019, 173) remarks that "Agathon's explanation gives a unique twist to the etymology from 'cutting.'" On the Kouretes as attendants of Cybele, see _Danais_ fragment 3 Bernabé.

61 Cropp (2019, 173–74).

"cut" being here the bodily alteration undergone by initiates.[62] This transsexual "cut" is formally felt in the transition of _kourimou_ to _charin,_ which seems to result from the renunciation of the mobile masculine grammatical ending _-ou,_ both internal and external to the word, like hair and genitals on the body. The formal juxtapositions-as-transitions of Agathon's verse, then, seem to display destructive plasticity as what "enables the appearance or formation of alterity […] within the very constitution of identity."[63] This power of alterity breaks the verbal texture in the Aristophanic scene as soon as Agathon's name is mentioned. Finally learning from Euripides that he is about to visit "one Agathon," the Inlaw, asks, "Who? The dark, *strong one* (*karteros*)?," to which Euripides rejoins, "No, *some other person* (*heteros tis*)" (31–32). The movement of shared phonemic material from one specific attribute ("strong/*karteros*") to an indefinite "otherness" (*heteros tis*) brings out an Agathonian intimation of transition — disidentification, disappearance-reappearance, the opening of a space of alterity that breaks verbal constructions.[64]

Even before Agathon appears, an attendant previews the tragedian's aesthetics with abundant liquid sounds and sticky disassembly. The attendant's interrupted announcement that Agathon, "the beautifully worded" (*kalli-epēs*), "is about to" (*mellei* 49) enter resumes with an account of their exuberant *poiēsis*: "(S)he bends new joints of words, and some (s)he lathes; others *(s)he glues into songs* (*kollo-melei*), and (*s*)*he coins maxims* (*gnōmotupei*), and *switches meanings* (*ant-onomazei*), and shapes words like wax, and *molds them into a ball* (*gongullei*) and casts them" (53–57). The poetic gluing mentioned and performed here is enacted through an accumulation of liquid clusters in the triad of *mellei, kalli-epēs,* and *kollo-melei.* The chiastic reconfiguration of the liquid syllables (*mellei* […] *kalli-/kollo-melei*) — in which

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62 See Cropp (2019, 173).

63 Malabou (2012, 11, 37).

64 On indefinite pronouns and transgender embodiment, see Steinbock's (2019, 8, 12) discussion of the Anybodys in *West Side Story;* for Steinbock, "trans ontologies are process-oriented, rather than object-oriented."

Agathon's being "about to" (*mellei*) enter collapses into "song" (*melei*), and "beautifully" (*kalli-*) into "glue" (*kollo-*) — expresses a disruptive stickiness, as though words were attracted, or glued, to each other, regardless of their borders. Similarly, the transition from <u>gnōmo</u>- (in *gnōmo-tupei*) to -<u>onoma</u>- in *ant-onomazei* troubles the notional relation between naming and knowing and thus between naming (a form of social interpellation) and identity as that which is allotted (i.e., *nomos* "law," which is cognate with both *nemō* "to distribute" and *onoma*). The stickiness is the seductive viscosity of "honey" (*meli*), the dense liquid evoked by *mellei* and *melei* together. The (de-)formation in the attendant's announcement mimetically renders the tragedian's style, playing with the wax-like plasticity of the signifier, reconfiguring it into a sticky amalgam. Another (de-)formation, the neologism *gong<u>ullei</u>* rounds out the line through a reimpression of the liquid sounds of *m<u>ellei</u>,* a word indicating imminence as well as delay. Rather than seeing the overall effect of formal viscosity as a manifestation of Agathon's alleged *art pour l'art,* of the tragedian's supposedly "decadent" poetic *technē* or flowery aesthetics,[65] we can regard it as a figuration of trans-corporeality — in the "chiasmatic interdependence of *sōma* and *technē*,"[66] in the *para-poiēsis* of endless un-becoming.

Encrypted figures of the word "water" (*hudōr*) appear in Agathon's entrance song and the responses to it, circulating the feel of transgendering, of multiple dis-identifications, in this case through watery sounds that erode grammatical constraints

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65 Plutarch (*Sympotic Questions* 645e) criticizes Agathon for introducing into tragedy, and, further, "mixing" (*hupo-mixai*) musical "colors" (*chrōmatōn*), which he describes as "varied […] and flowery" (*poikilōn kai anthērōn*): see Csapo (2004, 231). The multi-colored aesthetics or chromatic *poikilia* makes us think of the rainbow flag of the LGBTQIA+ community. "Mixing" is also the watchword of transgender *somatotechnics*; see esp. Sullivan (2014) and Stryker (2015); on Agathon's resemblance to the Ionian poets, especially the "aesthete" Anacreon, see Snyder (1974); on "decadence" as a transphobic trope, see Gabriel (2018).

66 Sullivan (2014, 188). As she puts it: "Transgender, like forms of bodily being commonly presumed not to be technologically produced, is a heterogeneous somatechnological construct."

and semantic partitions, producing an aqueous *différance* or defamiliarization.[67] At the sight of Agathon in female attire, the Inlaw erupts in abusive binarism ("I see no man here, only Cyrene, the female prostitute!" 98), which will be turned back against him by the police later in the play. Agathon's ongoing trans-form manifests itself in their performance of a song on the familial triangle of Apollo, Artemis, and Leto (107–28):

> Come, Muses, celebrate
> the golden (*chruseōn*) arrows' shooter (*rhutora*),
> Phoebus, who settled (*hidrusato*) the dells of our region
> in the land of the Simois.
>   […]
>
> I follow you, singing, celebrating you,
> solemn offspring (*semnan gonon*) of Leto,
> Artemis, *who has not experienced the marriage bed* (*apeiro-
>   lechē*)
>
> And, you, Leto, and the notes (*kroumata*) of the Asian string
> with *the foot's beat against the rhythm* (*para-rhuthm'*), in
> rhythm (*eu-rhuthma*), that the Phrygian (*Phrugiōn*) Graces
> nod.
>
> I worship lady Leto
> and the cithara, mother of songs,
> renowned for the male (*arseni*) clamor.
>   […]
>
> Celebrate (*agalle*) lord Phoebus.
> Hail, happy son of Leto (*Latous*)![68]

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67 The term "defamiliarization" (*odstránenie*) dates back to Viktor Shklovsky's (1965) essay from 1917 "Art as Technique"; on "defamiliarization" and Der-ridean *différance,* see L. Crawford (1984).

68 Differently from Henderson, I keep the transmitted reading *agalle.*

The cithara is presented as a transgender assemblage — a maternal tool with a masculine voice, perhaps a surrogate of Leto herself, the mother who claims the spotlight from the absent father Zeus. At the same time, the virginity or asexuality of Artemis is impossible to distinguish from gender-queer form, entrusted as it is to the morphological mismatch between a masculine noun (*gonos*) and a feminine adjective (*semna*) — an irreducible incongruence, which contests the Inlaw's binarism ("either/or") and goes beyond the logic of *both and,* suggesting that "male *is* female." Yet the most defamiliarizing morphology in the rendition of this defamiliarized, tripartite family is the triangle of words containing the phoneme *r(h)u* that surround the names of Phoebus (*chruseōn, rhutora, hidrusato*) and Leto (*kroumata/para-rhuthma eu-rhuthma/Phrugiōn*). The watery connotations of this phoneme, evoking the root of *rheō* "to flow," emerge in the Inlaw's reaction, disparaging yet excited, to Agathon's performance: "Ladies, Genetyllides (*Genetullides*), what a song — sweet and *effeminate* (*thēl-udriōdes*) and tongue-kissed and sensual so that while I was listening to it a tickle (*gargalos*) came just under my butt" (130–33)![69] The adjective that denounces, with titillation, the unmanly aesthetics of Agathon's singing, *thēl-udriōdes,* picks up the beginning of *hidrusato* (in the first group of *rhu* words), materializing crypts of the word for "water," *hudōr* (with its derivatives *hudreia, hudria, hudrios,* etc.). The spreading of the sound *rhu,* figured by these aqueous crypts, conveys an effect of erosive *différance,* which goes along with the erosion of difference between "against" and "with" signaled by *para-rhuthm' eu-rhuthma* — a jarring juxtaposition of musical and kinetic orientations that cancel each other out, intimating a transition without becoming.

Rather than reading the *rhu* phoneme simply as a feminine intensity, a contagious marker of Agathon's "becoming woman," I want to consider it, like the Inlaw's itch, as a bodily insinuation that channels transgender aesthetics. After taking in the

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69 Women's goddesses, the Genetyllides "are routinely associated with feminine sexual wantonness," as Austin and Olson (2004) unironically put it.

sound of Agathon's poetry, the Inlaw feels, as (s)he points out, an intimate tickle (*gargalos* 133), an indication of a desire not just for anal intercourse,[70] but for a mimesis of the tragedian, for the very androgyny that Euripides will soon enable the Inlaw to experience. Through the word *gargalos,* this haptic micro-sensation — a pleasure-in-pain that recalls the persistent excess, the unfinishedness marked by the asterisk in trans[(*)] — is also perceived as a distinct sound, with a rhotic gutturality (*garg-*) and a liquid finish (*-alos*). The liquid impression disarrays the multivalent symmetries that a few lines later the Inlaw deploys to represent the "turmoil" (*taraxis* 137) of Agathon's transgen-derism (138–39): "How can a barbiton *speak with a saffron-colored robe* (*lalei krokōtōi*)? How can a *lyre* speak *with a veil for the head* (*lura kekruphalōi*)?"[71] Despite the Inlaw's ostensible gender policing, binarism is disrupted by the striking inverted parallelism of the line: the similar words for female accessories starting with *k* (*krokōtōi* "saffron-colored robe" and *kekruphalōi* "a veil for the head") are in the masculine grammatical gender, while "lyre" — an apparent pillar of male education attracting into its orbit the similarly sounding verb *lalei* ("speaks" but also "chats") —[72] is in the feminine. What disarrays this mismatch of grammatical gender and gendered accessories — a queer bina-rism in its own right — is the chiastic liquid phoneme *(l)al,* by which the gushing chatter of the masculine lyre infiltrates the female veil. The sound of the male-as-female couple (*lalei/lura*) percolates in the female-as-male pair (*krokōtōi kekruphalōi*), making comic form trans.* *Kekru-phalos* and *garg-alos,* both located at the end of the line, present a similar sounding amal-gam of gutturality and liquidity. We can thus locate in the Inlaw's tickle the feeling of transgender un-becoming as the itchy per-sistence of multiple undoings blended into and pressing upon each other.

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70 For a Hippocratic take, see Sissa (2012).

71 The barbiton was a kind of lyre, associated with masculine severity; see, e.g., West (1992, 50–51 and 57–59).

72 On the masculinity of the lyre in disparaging discussions of the New Music, see, e.g., Csapo (2004, 217–20) and Wilson (2004).

This tickle (*garg-alos*) is a trace of Agathon's own (de)formation, an unmaking and remaking of their name. Agathon's last hymnic exhortation, "Celebrate (*agalle*) Phoebus," is teased open by the sonority of Leto's name, which immediately follows, the last word of the song (*Latous*). In *agalle,* we are invited to perceive an encounter between the initial portions of *Aga-*thon and of Leto (*La-tō*), the mother who is also father — masculine and maternal, like the lyre with which she is coupled. As a new name of Agathon, the command to honor Phoebus (*ag-al-le*) becomes other than its meaning, removed from conventional masculine devotion. We can say that the maternal ambition behind Agathon's *poiēsis* and *auto-poiēsis* regenerates their name or (un)name, first as *ag-al-le* and then as *gargalos* — the itchy word for the haptic connection that (s)he establishes with the audience, which (s)he, in a sense, mimetically begets or "mothers" while "(re)mothering" themselves. Formal trans-materiality becomes trans-maternality.[73]

While the cutting and singeing applied by Euripides to the Inlaw to make his kin a woman (*gunē*) participate in the narrative of transsexualism as an identity decisively reached through certain adjustments, trans-form dismantles this binary fantasy — as well as the logic of the "cut" — with the most unremarkable connective, "and" (*kai*). After subjecting the Inlaw to genital waxing with a saffrony finish, Euripides proclaims (266–67), "This man of ours here — voilà — is a woman, at least in appearance (*hanēr men hēmin houtosi kai dē gunē / to g' eidos*)." The underlying assumption in Euripides' words is that gender, like sex, has to fall on one side of the binary. Euripides' binarist frame of mind is in line with the modern idea of medical treatment as a means of transition, the removal or addition that can generate harmonies of sex and gender (his limiting afterthought, "at least in appearance," seems to refer to the absence of a permanent genital alteration). As Eric Plemons and Chris Straayer put it, "Surgery [is] often fetishized in popu-

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73 On trans-materiality, see Barad (2015).

lar discourse as the act that makes the trans person real."[74] The intimate depilation inflicted by Euripides on the Inlaw partakes of this fetishization of transsexualist surgery, which is a fetishization that Stryker and Paisley Currah consider an expression of the "biopolitical project that attends to the specific biological capacities of each and every body through techniques for managing [...] those capacities for state and statelike ends."[75] In service to the sadistic pleasure of the state that is *dēmos* — the Athenian audience — Euripides' intervention, framed by his proclamation, is thus a staging of biopolitical technology. Yet comic trans-form disrupts this biopolitical binarism even before Euripides' afterthought. What verbally brings about the Inlaw's provisional transformation in Euripides' statement is the idiomatic deictic phrase *kai dē* ("voilà"), which "marks the completion of something required by the circumstances."[76] But *kai* is first and foremost "and" — a conjunction that when taken by itself, separated from the particle *dē,* would thwart gender binarism, making us see the Inlaw as "man and woman," as "a mediation between two monolithic, autonomous poles,"[77] or as an unsettled assemblage of potential identifications and disidentifications. In other words, a syntactical break between *kai* and *dē* — an ostensible grammatical impossibility that, nonetheless, cannot be set aside (para-grammar as *para-poiēsis*) — would allow us "to decenter, refract, complicate, or refuse" the binary goal-centeredness of Euripides' biopower.[78] During their torturous cosmetic treatment, the Inlaw threatens, "You all will cry if somebody 'cleans' my butt (*prōkton*)!" (248) — a mixture of pain,

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74 Plemons and Straayer (2018, 164–65).

75 Stryker and Currah (2018, 161). As they also observe: "Without surgery, a gender-variant person could be a cross-dresser, a butch [...] or a drag queen, but by definition that person was not a transsexual because they didn't cut their flesh. [...] That is, genital-altering transsexuals are considered (though not without contestation) to have *really* changed sex, while everyone else who strains against the naturalized pink/blue dichotomy is just dressing up and playing around."

76 Austin and Olson (2004, 140), citing the "authority" of Denniston (1950).

77 Chen (2012, 136–37), defining *trans-*.

78 Plemons and Straayer (2018, 164).

fear, and desire — before Euripides switches from burning depilation to the soft finish of the procedure: "Take and put on this saffron dress first (*krokōton prōton*)" (253). The triangulation of *prōkton, krokōton, prōton* — a "butt" (*prōkton*) phonically overlapping with the saffron dress (*krokōton*) — does not simply give us a sense of the prosthetic character of the body, which comic mimesis assimilates to a prop. Rather, it casts corporeality as the product of unexpected expressive entanglements, "a meeting point"[79] of formal possibilities — a derrière (*prōkton*) becomes at once a kind of somatic "primacy" (*prōton*), a "foundation,"[80] and a scented outfit (*krokōton*), through an alternation and exchange of gutturals and labials, roughness and softness, circuitously added or removed. Euripides' intervention imposes or facilitates what Stryker has called the "rupture" of transgenderism — defined not as a "cut" but as a destabilizing force of attraction, of connection, confounding the very distinction between possibility and impossibility.[81]

When the scandal of the "real" identity of the Inlaw is discovered by the crowd of anti-Euripidean women whom (s)he has clandestinely joined, (s)he is subjected to anatomical policing — an enforcement of cis-binarism — wrapped in phallic panic. This enforcement is instigated, ironically, by Cleisthenes — a gender-queer or transfeminine person allied with the festival's cis-women[82] — who calls out the Inlaw with "You, woman, where are you turning? Stay here" (*hautē su, poi strephei? men' autou* 610). The command — whose formal structure creates a loop of feminine and masculine grammatical genders at odds with the appeal for "stillness"[83] — triggers violence that calls to mind the "securitization of gender," one of the biopolitical practices currently enforced, among other places, at the

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79 Stryker (2008, 42).

80 See Agamben (2019, 52–53) on *archos* ("anus"), a term cognate with *archē* ("beginning"); see also Telò (2020a, 252).

81 See Stryker (2008, 42), on transgenderism as a rupture.

82 See Ruffell (2020b, 352).

83 In line 610, the locative adverb *autou* ("here") matches the *masculine* genitive singular of the personal pronoun *autos*.

US border, the place where multiple crises occur or where the state enters its own crisis.[84] As Paisley Currah and Tara Mulqueen have observed, gender is part of "the security assemblage at the airport […], deployed as a biometric, a piece of data tied directly to the body."[85] The result of a system in which bodies are observed, touched, and then perceived as dangerously at odds with the simple "truth" of bureaucratic classification is the panic of the "identification threat."[86] "As individuals flow through the system of surveillance and control in the airport," Currah and Mulqueen point out, "transgender people — with their incongruous and unexpected histories, documents, and bodies — often find themselves in the uncomfortable interstices between spatial and temporal registers, between stasis and change, between what, from the police's point of view, "one is and what one says or does."[87] Such is the space occupied by the Inlaw, when suspected to be a male intruder in the cis-female assembly, (s)he is stripped of all female accoutrements until attention turns to the most "natural" or "truthful" biometric, the recalcitrant, if comically exaggerated, appendage (643–48):[88]

> CLEISTHENES Stand up straight! Where exactly are you
>   pushing down your dick?
> MICA Here it is, it has peeped through and it's got a beautiful
>   color, you idiot.
> CLEISTHENES And where is it?

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84 I borrow the phrase "securitization of gender" from Currah and Mulqueen (2011).

85 Currah and Mulqueen (2011, 575).

86 Currah and Mulqueen (2011, 561–62), referring to Billies (2010, 2).

87 Currah and Mulqueen (2011, 577).

88 In the reaction of the Chorus of women against the intruder we see an image of "the trans-excluding movement, whose main argument is to essentialize cis-women as the only subject of feminism, excluding from feminism everyone who does not conform to its model of biological womanhood," to repurpose the words of Valencia and Zhuravleva (2019, 183); see also Gabriel (2018), on the ideological complexities of Anne Carson's reading of Pentheus's repressed desire as hidden transsexuality in Euripides' *Bacchae*.

MICA It has disappeared to the front again (*authis*).
CLEISTHENES It's not here!
MICA No, it has come back here again (*palin*).
CLEISTHENES Man, you have some kind of isthmus! You
    keep dragging your dick up and down (*anō te kai katō*)
    with more frequency than the Corinthians.[89]

According to Cleisthenes, the Inlaw has become the site of the most politically charged border — the thin "natural" threshold between the north and the south of Greece, Athens and Sparta. The movement back and forth of the comic penis, which makes itself (in)visible between the transgender intruder's legs, (dis)occupying the "either/or-ness" of the border, has an exuberant, excessive counterpart in the panoptic surveillance of the chorus of cis-women,[90] who bring to mind the securitarian panic disseminated by other border police: "Cast your eye everywhere (*pantachēi*), here (*tēide*) and there (*keise*) and over here (*deuro*). Check everything well" (665–66). However, at the same time as the securitarian death drive — directed against others, and oneself through autoimmunity[91] — we find the *jouissant,* erotic death drive of the genital organ, which, even without comic exaggeration, has an excessive morphology, a protrud-

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89 On the allusion to the Corinthians, see Austin and Olson (2004, 234–35), who observe that across the Isthmus "traffic was heavy enough to require at least one switch-off or siding, where one cart or sledge could be pulled out of the way so that another going the opposite direction could pass."

90 I qualify the members of the Chorus as "cis-women," even though in the performative practice of fifth-century Athens, the members of a female chorus were cis-men.

91 Autoimmunity, as theorized especially by Derrida (2003), is the principle by which state power turns against itself: for an application of this concept to securitarian working practices at the border, see van Houtum and Bueno Lacy (2020). The circuit of *fort* and *da* discussed by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) — the movement of *jouissance* in Lacan's view — is central to the erotic impulse, to its inherently masochistic component, as argued, in various ways, by Freud, Lacan, Laplanche, and Bersani: see Telò (2020a, 19–23).

ing precarity that makes it easily slip into its symbolic twin, the Lacanian phallus, the marker of lack.[92]

Rather than functioning as an icon of masculinity, the Inlaw's penis — a kind of negative "crystal" image, absent even when it is present, merely virtual even when it is actual[93] — dramatizes sexual difference as "the desiring position one adopts in relation to castration, to the phallus," that is, as the position from which "a subject copes with the impossibility of phallic wholeness."[94] For Lacan, sexual difference, what he calls "sexuation," is a back-and-forth movement — never stabilized into an identity, that is, into a gendered subject — between two *jouissances,* non-phallic and phallic, the former located in disappearance and loss, the latter corresponding to the illusion of penile presence and possession.[95] Forcing the trans-body to hide itself, to erase the fact of its existence, the transphobic securitarian apparatus led by Cleisthenes works against itself, exposing the tense, dizzy

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92 See Osserman (2017, 503): "The morphology of the penis — the simple fact that it protrudes from the body — coincides with its psychical inscription ('negativization') as something exceptional in relation to the other body parts." The result is "the fantasy that this unique and excessive presence may all too easily become an absence."

93 On the concept of the "crystal image," see Deleuze (1989, 73–74, 98–111). As Gherovici (2017, 31) observes, the phallus as lack is exemplified for Lacan precisely by the excess of the Aristophanic *phallos,* an "impossibly gigantic prop."

94 The citations are from Osserman (2017, 509). See also Carlson (2010) and Coffman (2017).

95 Lacan (1998, 7, 73): "Everything revolves around phallic *jouissance,* in that woman is defined by a position that I have indicated as 'not whole' (*pas-tout*) with respect to phallic *jouissance.* [...] Being not-whole, [woman] has a supplementary *jouissance* compared to what the phallic function designates by way of *jouissance.*" In Lacan's schema, as Osserman (2017, 509–10) explains, "a subject experiences *jouissance* that can be characterized as 'masculine' or 'feminine,' but this does not predetermine their symbolic identity as man, woman, or neither." This is because masculinity simply implies, as Gherovici (2017, 96) observes, "the pretense of 'having' the phallus and femininity the pretense of not having the phallus while 'being' the phallus," that is, the lack. For "the unconscious," the domain where sexuation unfolds, "somebody with a penis can be a woman or someone without a penis can be a man."

"truth" of sexual difference that gender identity seeks to cancel out and that transgenderism does not simply disclose but embraces in an act of rebellion against biological genitality.[96] In the Aristophanic scene, the hyperform of circular imagery seems to figure the loop of sexuation between conflicting desirous positions that exceed genital borders: the bra-like *strophion* ("*round* piece of cloth" 139, 251, 638) that the Inlaw puts on and is forced to take off; the etymologically related "turn[ing] around" (*strephei* 610), which initially enables the Inlaw to escape from gender surveillance; and their desperate exclamation, "Which troubles have I rolled myself into? (*eis-e-kulisa*)" (651), which evokes the image of Agathon flamboyantly wheeled out on the *ekkuklēma*.[97] For Stryker, the transgender body relies on a "circuitry […] through which materiality flexes itself into new arrangements."[98] The Inlaw's genital movements, which reflect the *jouissance* of (dis)appearance, the auto-poietic tension of sexuation, express this "circuitry," the perpetual ongoingness of transgender un-becoming, its unfinishedness. This notion of circuitry is in keeping with what Lucas Crawford has called "a high-grade gender fever," which nothing can stop, not even, as he puts it, the awareness that "no surgery or bodily modification will return us to our 'commencement,' or to a final resting place of selfhood."[99] Earlier, in the final stages of the "sex

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96 In the perspective of Lacanian sexuation, "transgenderism figures not as a solutionless solution to the impasses of sexual difference, but rather as an expression of the logic of sexual difference," as Carlson (2010, 65) puts it. Halberstam (1998, 147) seems to adhere to, and go beyond, Lacan's connection of sexuation with shifting desire when he suggests that "we do not necessarily shuttle back and forth between sexual roles and practices at will, but we do tend to adjust, accommodate, change, reverse, slide, and move in general between *moods and modes of desire"* (my emphasis).

97 The *ekkuklēma,* a fundamental part of Athenian stagecraft, was a wheeled mechanism for transporting characters, dead or alive, from behind the backdrop (the *skēnē*) into visible theatrical space.

98 Stryker (2015, 229).

99 L.C. Crawford (2010, 534), referring to Derrida's theorization of *archive fever* as a death-driven fixation (1996a); see Telò (2020a). L.C. Crawford uses the Derridean concept to recast the idea of transgenderism as a return home suggested by Prosser (1998).

change" stage-managed by Euripides, the Inlaw, as though looking at themselves in the mirror — repeating the infantile trauma of alienation — experiences the *jouissance* of trans-embodiment through looping, erotic-rhotic trans-form: "Will these clothes fit me? You'll certainly *enjoy* wearing loose ones" (*ar' harmosei moi? chalara goun chaireis phorōn* 263). The enjoyment ostensibly provoked by the softness of female clothes per se is supplemented by the plasticity of *chaireis* ("to enjoy"), whose constitutive sounds, recombined and expanded, set up a *jouissant* loop between the phallic decorum of normative propriety (*harmosei* "will they fit?") and flaccidity, penile failure or absence (*chalara* "loose").[100] Just before Agathon is wheeled back inside, the trans circuitry of this line wheels out oscillating desiring positions — the intrinsically trans motion of sexuation. When the play enters its phase of compulsive paratragic disguise, hyperform, as we will now see, results in experiments of un-becoming that we can call trans-biology, trans-cision, and *sympoiēsis*.

ii. Trans-biology, Trans-cision, and *Sympoiēsis*

One of the signature crises of the play and its first paratragic turn, the Inlaw's theft of a baby is both a threat to reproductive futurism — aligned with gender binarism — and an experiment in trans-form as a non-reproductive model of reproduction. When the Inlaw is forced to part ways with the prostheses of their transition, the same accoutrements that ironically allow the female accusers — male actors impersonating women — to keep up Greek drama's gendered pretense, the "intruder" reacts by

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100 In the eroticized lexicon of music, *chalaros* ("slack, flaccid") is the opposite of severe harmonies, which are qualified as "erect" (*entonos*): see esp. Cassio (1971), Dobrov and Urios-Aparisi (1995, 156), and Conti Bizzarro (1999, 145–49). As Osserman (2017, 503) remarks: "The penile binary flaccid/erect allows for an initial bodily representation of the dialectics of presence/absence necessary to enter into signification." The very notion of *harmony,* cognate with the verb *harmozō* ("to adapt, fit together"), presupposes the semantics of a stable, solid construction.

stripping their enemy (687–88),[101] the prosecutor-in-chief Mica, of another prop, that is, the baby she holds.[102] While this act makes the Inlaw's fellow actor less female, as it were, it also castrates this actor as well as the entire community. A surrogate of the male organ, the child is a fetish, as discussed in the previous chapter. This particular child — a parodic evocation of the infant Orestes in Euripides' *Telephus*[103] — becomes an icon of reproductive futurism, of the heteronormative state's use of biological continuity as a justification for closing and fixing the future, for preserving the status quo.[104] Expected not just to avenge but to be a living archive of his father Agamemnon,[105] Orestes embodies the natalist ideology of the Athenian state at a time of war. Snatching the comic counterpart of Orestes from the arms of Mica, the Inlaw visualizes the state's claim on children and the biopolitical instrumentalization of the mother, her reduction to "an identity machine for others, producing children in the name of the future," as Lauren Berlant puts it.[106] Even after we hear the Inlaw refer to this baby hostage with a feminine pronoun ("I won't let go of *her*" 717), the child still amounts to a "privileged national body" as a future mother destined to give birth to male children or to other child-bearing mothers.[107] She is, in other words, a biopolitical fetish, a prop who is immediately decoupled from her maternal creator-possessor, ostensibly satisfying the paternal state's demands while feeding its insatiable repro-

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101 On this stage action, see Austin and Olson (2004, 242–43).

102 On babies as theatrical props, see Sofer (2010, 137–38); see also Griffiths (2020) on babies in Greek drama.

103 On the Inlaw's paratragic remake of Euripides' *Telephus,* see, in general, Csapo (1986), Taaffe (1993, 93–94), and Farmer (2017, ch. 4); see also Preiser (2000), Dobrov (2001, 38–50), Collard and Cropp (2008a, ad loc.), and Telò (2017, 96–99). On representations of the Euripidean play in vase painting, see esp. Taplin (2007, 205–10).

104 See esp. Edelman (2004), Berlant and Edelman (2014), and Deutscher (2017); on the child as a fetish, see Freud (1927) and Berlant (1994); see also chapter 3.

105 On paternity, reproduction, and the archive in a similar play, *Hamlet,* see Edelman (2011; 2023, ch. 2); see also Telò (2020a, 197–217).

106 Berlant (1994, 147).

107 Berlant (1994, 148).

ductive hunger. However, the Inlaw is also, in a sense, snatching Mica's infant from the Symbolic grip of bioreproductive futurism, turning it upside down, queering it, when (s)he metatheatrically exposes the conceit of the baby as prop: "Look, the girl has become a goatskin, full of wine (*askos egeneth' hē korē / oinou pleōs* 733–34)!" In the "anomaly" of a feminine noun (*korē* "girl") becoming masculine (*askos* "goatskin"), there is a dis-identifying identification — transgender and trans-species — as grammar twists the binaries of bioreproductive futurism, not just male and female but also human and non-human and even animate and inanimate.[108] As the phoneme *ko* transits from a "girl" to a "goatskin," and the other way around, we witness a queer subversion of the natalist transformation of a woman's body into "a screen for projections of maternal plenitude."[109] In a rendition of the scene on a famous South Italian vase, the Inlaw wields a knife as though ready to puncture the prop and spill the wine — an intimation of bloodshed but also of potentially reproductive penetration.[110] After (s)he announces their discovery that the baby is a prop, not a subject but an object — or more precisely a transgender crossing of the two — a queer birth (without prior penetration) seems to occur. The "plenitude," of the mother and of the wineskin baby, is reflected in the resistant de-formation of the superlative adjectives that the Inlaw uses to address the women: "most hot-tempered (*thermotatai*) and drink-craziest (*potistatai*)" (735). In this misogynistic address, *potistatai* — an anomalous adjectival neologism that resembles

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108 These are among the binaries famously questioned in Haraway's "cyborg" manifesto (2016); see also, among others, Braidotti (2013) and Halberstam (2020a, ch. 5), who lays out a "zombie" manifesto. On transgender and trans-species crossings, see esp. Stryker, Currah, and Moore (2008, 11) and Hayward and Weinstein (2015).

109 Berlant (1994, 146).

110 See the famous Apulian vase preserved in the Martin von Wagner Museum of the University of Würzburg, on which see, e.g., Taplin (1993, 37–38, fig. 11.4).

a verb[111] — is the offspring of a queer linguistic crossing, a grammatical trans-biology, "a biology that is […] *made and born.*"[112]

This transbiological *production,* an alternative to *re*-production, continues in the dialogue between Mica and the Inlaw, in which, fighting over a baby, they beget another one (743–48):

> MICA What did you do to me? You, shameless one, have stripped away (*ap-edusas*) my little child, who is so tiny (*tunnouton*). […] Please give it back (*apodos*) to me.
> INLAW Oh no, by Apollo (*Apo-llō*), who is right here (*toutouni*).

The fight between the two characters is, at the same, a quasi-intercourse, whose progression (*ap-edusas* / *apodos*) ends in a climax of orgasm or delivery (*Apo-llō*). The newborn Apollo is a child that, like Mica's baby, is both present and absent, for the deictic referring to the god's statue onstage (*toutouni,* a phonetic rearrangement of *tunnouton*) expresses the speaker's attempt to objectify him — in all his inaccessible, immaterial divinity — as a prop. In stealing Mica's baby, the Inlaw continues the transition interrupted by the women's policing by appropriating — and revisiting — cis-women's reproductive capacity. Differently reproductive generative capacities, possibilities of non-connective human connection, entanglements and re-entanglements of non-human objects and human, or super-human, subjects — a continued transing — all materialize in the combinatory resistance of trans-form.

While the Inlaw's subsequent paratragic impersonation of Palamedes — the mythical inventor of the alphabet and currency[113] — seems to mark an abandonment of the female world and a return to cis-gender life, with Euripides' aid, this return is itself a transition whose insistent plasticity is reflected in the

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111 On *potistatai,* see Austin and Olson (2004, ad loc.).

112 S. Franklin (2006, 171).

113 On Euripides' *Palamedes,* see Scodel (1980, 43–54), Woodford (1994), Jenkins (2005), and Collard and Cropp (2008b, 45–59).

technology of writing. The announcement of the Inlaw's Palame-
dean impersonation ushers in another experiment in trans-form,
activated by the word *platē* ("oar"), cognate with *platus* ("broad,
extended, extensive"), and perhaps even "*plas*tic" (770–74):

> I know a way out from Palamedes (<u>*Palamēdous*</u>). As that
> famous hero did, I will throw the flat oars (<u>*platas*</u>) after
> inscribing them, but there are no oars (<u>*platai*</u>). But where
> could I get the oars (<u>*platai*</u>)? What if inscribing these offered
> tablets (<u>*tagalmat'*</u>) instead of oars (<u>*platōn*</u>) I should scatter
> them away?

The profusion of a sounds disseminated by the obsessive rep-
etition of the term *platē* — the external support, the substrate
of Palamedes' writing technology — enacts the expansiveness of
platus as phonic openness and breadth.[114] Both the beginning
of <u>*Pala-medēs*</u> (the subject) and the word <u>*tagalmat'*</u> (the object)
can, in fact, be seen as variations on <u>*platē*</u> (plural *platai, platas*),
possible outcomes of the plasticity of subtraction, substitution,
and reordering. As the substrate alternative to "oars," the "tab-
lets" indicated by <u>*tagalmat'*</u> signpost this phonetic plasticity.[115]
The anagrammatic interchangeability of <u>*Pala-*</u> in *Pala-medes*
and <u>*platē*</u> (where *ē* equates with *ā*) generates a trans-human pas-
sage from "hands" — the prostheses contained in the root *pala-*
(*palamē* "palm of the hand")[116] — to wooden marine limbs, with

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114 A play on *pala-* in Palamedes' name can also be detected in one of the
extant fragments of Euripides' eponymous play if we accept, like Collard
and Cropp (2008b), a brilliant emendation of Nauck: *palai palai dē s'
exerōtēsai thelōn* (fragment 579.1 Kannicht). The repeated adverb *palai*
works as a duplicated address to Palamedes, who, in this fragment, is prob-
ably getting interrogated by Agamemnon and Odysseus: see Collard and
Cropp (2008b, 48).

115 The consonant *t* in <u>*tagalmat'*</u> is the dental counterpart of *p* in *pala-, platas*.
The word indicates, as Austin and Olson (2004, 260) explain, "wooden
[…] tablets of a sort routinely hung up in sanctuaries to record vows,
offerings, great deeds of the god."

116 On Palamedes' connection with *palamē,* see Detienne (1989, 105): "C'est la
paume, la main qui prend, qui saisit, qui fabrique; la main et ses tours, le

which they are inter-objectively confused. Merged with wood, flesh is liable to be carved, incised, inscribed. The Inlaw must become the inventive, resourceful Palamedes in order to write a letter to Euripides and urge him to intervene, to liberate them from imprisonment, current and prospective, and this in turn entails wielding a chisel (*smilē* 779). From a certain perspective, writing, the inscription of lines, shapes, and geometric patterns on a substrate, is an act of resistance like the incision of flesh-as-a-given. Imprisonment, confinement, is the external equivalent of the biological prison — as unyielding or ligneous as the tablet or the board that the Inlaw will be affixed to in the next scene, which is devoted to the impersonation of the immobilized Andromeda. Writing is, in this respect, a liberating possibility in its very materiality.

The incision of writing, for the Inlaw-as-Palamedes, amounts to a destructuring of language, which denaturalizes and emancipates letters, turning them into words in themselves (776–82):

> My hands (*cheires*),
> we should *turn our hands to* (*en-cheirein*) an advantageous
>   action.
> Come now, tablets of polished wooden boards,
> welcome the chisel's tracks,
> messengers of my travails (*emōn mochthōn*). Oh!
> This *rhō* right here is miserably *rhō*-tten (*mochthēron*).
> Come, come (*chōrei chōrei*)! What a furrow![117]

While cutting an impression in their wooden counterparts, the hands stretch their fleshy boundaries in the processual force of a present infinitive (*en-cheirein*). In the act of *in*cision, they undergo an opening from *within,* an extension, an *en*counter with unpredictable possibility such that the "*in*" starts to seem

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tour de main […] la main inventive et instrumentale."
117 Differently from Henderson, I interpret *chōrei chōrei* as two imperatives.

closer to "*trans*."[118] A "crossing" emerges, in fact, in the form of dispossession when the possessive adjective *emōn* loses its bounded identity and is phonically assimilated into *mochthōn*. It is as though the muscle memory of writing — of graphic incision — produces a kind of repetition in difference while carved-out words strive to cross into each other in order to cultivate a forbidden bond of reciprocal un-becoming. The climactic moment of the Inlaw's incision is *his* self-reflexive lingering on the letter *rhō,* turned into an autonomous word or corporeal part. Like Thomas Hardy in *Jude the Obscure* — where "letterality," an aesthetics of letters as autonomous objects or words in themselves, is constantly aligned "with writing in excess of meaning, with the pure formality of marking, cutting, or lineating"[119] — the Inlaw "underlines the materiality of the letter irreducible to its normativity, the shape of the signifier irreducible to its signification."[120] Marked by the deictic *touti,* the *rhō,* a hyper-letter, or a letter in crisis, is like the Inlaw's refractory, mobile penis, resistant to the closure of the sexed body, or the binary signification attached to gender as such — even when it is conceived as fluid or constructed.[121] Rather than fixing the vertical letter, the chisel wielded by the Inlaw converts it into an erratic phonetic impression traveling circuitous routes of appearance in disappearance. At the end of the line where the letter makes its appearance as the word *rhō* (ῥῶ), this phonetic object resurfaces shortened, contracted as it were, in *mochthēron*; in the following line, inverted, it haunts the double command to the tardy Euripides or the reluctant letter itself: "Come, come (*chōrei chōrei*)!" The Inlaw's difficulty in inscribing the *rhō* — a difficulty that causes them to qualify it as *mochthēron* in the first place — is a reflec-

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118 See Stryker, Currah, and Moore (2008, 2), on *trans* as "the practice that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces" (my emphasis).

119 Kornbluh (2019, 123).

120 Kornbluh (2019, 123), referring, again, to Thomas Hardy.

121 Bey (2022b) sees gender "as a kind of originary violence insofar as gender is" or as "an imposition, an imposed and coerced and (purportedly) unable to be refused ontology."

tion of rhotic rupture, of the phonetic and somatic roughness associated with the letter in antiquity.[122] This roughness conjures the spasms of bodily transition, which Stryker calls a "break of […] surface."[123] Palamedes is credited with inventing the voiced aspirated consonants *theta* (θ), *phi* (φ), and *chi* (χ), which can be conceptualized as *trans*itioning (or "*trans*-occlusives"), that is, as occupying a space of ever-delayed becoming thanks to the un-becoming supplement, the opening of a breath of air into the unbound.[124] Channeled through the surgical technology of writing, the *rhō* ruptures bodies, human, non-human, and verbal. The "re*turn*" that the Inlaw demands in their envoi to Euripides is already performed in the physical crossing between tool (hand or chisel) and surface, as the former presses against the latter, and the latter presses back, in turn. Stryker and Currah have suggested that we regard the non-surgical aspects of transition ("discursive, sartorial, social […] performances")[125] as well as the surgical ones "as a craftwork that stitches life together in new ways across the caesurae not just of sex but of species and kingdoms."[126] In seeking to go *back,* as it were, to their pre-trans identity and wear their old clothes *again,* the Inlaw makes, through writing, incisions that amount to a *trans-cision,* an expansive opening of bodies — each, in its own way, pliable yet resistant.

When the Inlaw becomes Euripides' ambiguous Helen, both Greek and Egyptian, both embodied and spectral, parody models a trans-formative *beside*-ness. The Inlaw's paratragic impersonation triggers a supplementary disidentification in their interlocutor, when the male actor playing the cis-gender woman Critilla is now impelled to play Critilla-as-Menelaus, the husband shipwrecked on the Egyptian coast where the "true" Helen

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122 On rhotic rupture, see Telò (2019).

123 Stryker (2008).

124 On this invention, see Servius, *Commentary on Virgil's Aeneid* 2.81.

125 Stryker and Currah (2018, 162).

126 Stryker and Currah (2018, 163). On transgenderism as a craft, a haptic practice, or the "handmade," see Vaccaro (2010; 2014). On the "stitch as a part of trans of color poetics," see cárdenas (2022, ch. 5).

is held captive by the local ruler. In their version of Helen's pro-logic self-presentation — appropriated without any apparent alteration — the Inlaw discloses the transing potentialities of tragic form (859–60): "My land, my fatherland (*gē* [...] *patris*), is not nameless (*an-ōnumos*), / Sparta (*Spartē*). My father (*patēr*) is Tyndareus."[127] Not only does the two-ending adjective *an-ōnumos* modifying *patris* create the appearance of a Name of the Father(land) predicated on a mismatch of grammatical gen-ders, but the juxtaposition of *Spartē* ("the sown city") with *patēr* ("father") suggests an anagrammatic trans-form by which the paternal letters reconfigure Helen's feminine fatherland (*-partē patēr*) and its "paternal" seed.[128] This passage is stitched together with the beginning of the Euripidean play, *Helen* (1–3), faith-fully cited except for the third line, where the river Nile (*Neilos*), grammatically masculine, cannot be separated from — and in a sense is — its virginal streams (*rhoai*),[129] in the feminine gender (855–57):

> INLAW Of the Nile (*Neilou*) these (*haide*) are the streams
> that are *beautiful virgins* (*kalliparthenoi*),
> the Nile, which, instead of the divine rain, wets the land
> (*pedon*)
> of white (*leukēs*) Egypt [and] a people (*leōn*) black and
> purge-loving (*melanosurmaion*).

In this example of tragi-comic assemblage, of *Euripidaris-tophanizein*,[130] we observe not just the disidentifying identifi-cation of *Neilos* with its maiden currents but also the syntacti-

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127 *Helen* 16–17.

128 On the punning resonances between *patēr* and *speirō*, see Telò (2020a, ch. 5).

129 Cf. Allan's interpretation of the epithet *kalli-parthenoi:* "Like a Greek river [...] the Nile may be pictured with its own entourage of nymphs" (2008, 144).

130 Cratinus, Aristophanes' rival, mockingly coined this expression to refer to the Aristophanic fascination with Euripidean language, notwithstanding his apparent hostility; see fragment 342 Kassel-Austin.

cal crisis of two direct objects, one juxtaposed with the other ("land," "people").[131] These micro-effects of resistant formalism are in line with the structure of the Euripidean plot. Disrupting the binary logic of Helen's story, Euripides' play, as Victoria Wohl notes, turns the "*either-or* into *a both-and*: Helen both went to Troy and did not go to Troy."[132] Differently from the binarist framework of Stesichorus's palinode, in which Helen simply did not go to Troy, in *Helen "ta genomena* ['what happened'] and *hoia an genoito* ['what could have happened'] coexist and the latter's […] potentiality or probability comes to infect the former."[133] Transgenderism challenges the binary of actual and virtual, factual and counterfactual, by juxtaposing them, by privileging a *both-and* logic, occupying a resistant, "critical" space of *beside*-ness, or *para*-being.[134]

The conceptual *para*-being ("*both and*") of Euripides' play is enhanced by the Aristophanic parody in the last line of the passage above, where the Inlaw utters the nonsensical compound *melano-surmaion* ("black and purge-loving"), an experiment in morphological engineering, parallel to *kalli-parthenoi* ("like beautiful virgins").[135] The outcome of this parodic intervention is another effect of *beside*-ness: Egypt becomes *both* "white" *and* "black" through the transferal to Egypt of *leukēs* ("white") from melted snow (*chionos*) in the Euripidean hypotext, which presents it as the origin of the Nile's annual fertilizing inundation.[136] The long compound *melano-surmaion* formally suggests

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131 Some editors have tried to eliminate the "anomaly" in the text of Euripides: see Allan (2008, ad loc.). Aristophanes replaces Euripides' *guas* ("the fields") with *leōn* ("people"). Defending the "soundness" of the anomaly, E. Downing (1990, 3) rightly points out that "the play is very much about such an embarrassment, such an 'inexplicable double object.'"

132 Wohl (2014a, 149–50) (my emphasis).

133 Wohl (2014a, 149–50). On Stesichorus's palinode, see esp. Bassi (1993).

134 On the "both/neither" logic in transgender discourse, see Roen (2002); transgenderism can be regarded as a *para*-ontology, as I will discuss later.

135 On this adjective, somewhat jarringly made to modify *rhoai,* see E. Downing (1990, 1–2).

136 See Allan (2008, 145). Cf. *Helen* 3 *leukēs takeisēs chionos hugrainei guas* ("[Nile, which] wets fields after white snow has melted").

a double beside-ness, not just in its mismatch with the word it ostensibly modifies (*leōn* "people"), but also in its internal juxtaposition of semantically incongruous elements ("black" and "purgative") on the verge of nonsensicality.[137]

The *beside*-ness that reconfigures syntactical hierarchy, into transition, as the virtuality of un-becoming formally unsettles the valorization of actuality, the ground for racial oppression. Aristophanes' addition of "black" to the Euripidean text, in which Egypt is (un)colored by the whiteness of its snow, makes space for a transition, a movement *inbetween*. Emerging through a *para*-formation, Blackness here operates in the manner of transness. Arguing that "trans* is black and black is trans*," Marquis Bey has observed:[138]

> *Trans** and *black* […] denote poetic, para-ontological forces. […] They move in and through the abyss underlying ontology, rubbing up alongside it and causing it to fissure. […] Trans* denotes a disruptive, eruptive orientation […] and […] is prefixial — across, to the side of (para-), beyond. […] Trans* breaks open. […] This implosion, like blackness's volatility, is a disruptive and irruptive undercommon subversion.[139]

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137 The adjective has been interpreted as referring to an Egyptian practice of internal cleansing: see Austin and Olson (2004, 280).

138 Bey (2017, 276, 284, 285, 286). The word *para-ontology* is used by Moten (2013), who borrows it from an unpublished paper by Nahum Dimitri Chandler, to define Blackness as "ontology's anti- and ante-foundation, ontology's underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology's time and space" (739). See also Moten (2017, vii), on Blackness as "interstitial insistence."

139 On the concept of "the undercommons," see Harney and Moten (2013). Snorton (2017, 8) observes that "to feel black in the diaspora […] might be a trans experience." Considering "trans* as […] a detonator of possibilities rather than a form of reifying a static notion of unchangeable identity," Chávez and Vázquez (2017, 39–40) say: "As I come closer to my trans* self, I come closer to my blackness and viceversa." For them, "thinking trans*" amounts "to the possibility of a decolonial transgression."

This "disruptive and irruptive undercommon subversion" emerges from the overdetermined, grammatically and semantically unsettled adjacencies of Aristophanic parody, with its own formal para-ontology, its constant dramatization of the Lacanian *par-être*.[140]

When Euripides joins the Inlaw onstage and takes up the role of Menelaus, Helen's husband, the *beside*-ness of the parody alongside effects of formal *sym-poiēsis* destabilizes and pluralizes or, we can say, trans-es the relational *with* (909–14):

> EURIPIDES Woman, you look very similar to Helen.
> INLAW And you are like Menelaus, as far as I can tell from the seaweed (*hosa g' ek tōn iphuōn*).
> EURIPIDES You've well recognized a man who is deeply miserable.
> INLAW O man who after a long time have come to your wife's hearth (*escharas*), take me, take me, husband (*posi*); place your arms (*cheras*) around me.

With minimal relocation and supplementation of letters, the tragic phrase *oud' echō ti phō* ("I don't know what to say") from Euripides' *Helen* is converted into *hosa g' ek tōn iphuōn* ("as far as I can tell from the seaweed") in *Women at the Thes-*

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140 Building on the assumption that "language, in its meaning effect, is never but beside the referent," Lacan (1998, 44–45) observes: "I say the 'para-being' (*par-être*), and not 'appearing' (*paraître*), as the phenomenon has always been called — that beyond which there is supposedly that being, the noumenon." It is "as the effect of writing (*effet d'écrit*) that being presents itself, always presents itself […]. We should learn to conjugate that appropriately: I par-am, you par-are." *Par-être* is an alternative to what Lacan (1998, 31) calls *m'être* ("to be myself"), an expression of being that inevitably suggests the "master" (*maître*) in its pronunciation. As Chiesa (2014, 8) says, para-ontology is, for Lacan, "a *lateral* ontology concerned with the contingency and materiality of the signifier (*qua* letter)." Judy (2020, 319–91) uses this Lacanian theorization to redefine "Blackness" not as *para-ontology* but as *para-semiosis*. As he puts it, "Africa is not a geographical expression; it is a generative symbol in a careful semiosis of the world, of the whole cosmos perceived from a particular situation of nowhere" (391).

mophoria — from an aporia into an inference, gathered from a vegetal rhizomatic gathering. The bathetic appearance of seaweed that thwarts climax in the reshaping of the tragic line is a further comedification of a character — the shipwrecked Menelaus — who is already exposed to comic abjection on the Euripidean stage.[141] But it may also be possible to view this parody itself as "algal" — as a formal process of contiguous, sympoietic decomposition and recomposition. Giovanna Di Chiro has characterized phycological life as a complex of "symbiotic interdependencies […], new levels of biotic organization occurr[ing] through clumping, joining, gathering, collecting, miscegenation and infection."[142] The redefinition of word boundaries beyond the logic of meaning that emerges in the thin interval between parodic *de-* and *re*composition reflects a kind of "symbiotic interdependence" also seen in the intimacy of the recognition duet of Helen and Menelaus, in the syntactical interconnection of their lines, a dialogic *sym-poiēsis.* In phycological life, *trans-* is always *with,* insofar as *trans*formation — the cycle of decomposition and recomposition — is a question of the interconnectedness of algae. Connecting *trans*genderism with other expressions of *beyond*-ness — *trans*lation, *trans*figuration, *trans*differentiation, and *trans*cription — Eva Hayward has observed that "the prefix trans~ promises movements across, but never without holding tightly to the locations that it is moving from."[143] In the space between *oud' echō ti phō* ("I don't know what to say") and *hosa g' ek tōn iphuōn* ("as far as I can tell from the seaweed"), there is an intermediary phase of transformation (*oud' echōt iphō*) such that the phonetic assemblage *echōt* persists in *ek/tōn,* and *iphuōn* appears to hold tight to *–iphō* — just like Helen to Menelaus, and vice versa. The trans-form activated

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141 See Austin and Olson (2004, ad loc.) for the textual soundness of *iphuōn* (ἰφύων), "seaweed." On Menelaus as a Euripidean version of an Aristophanic character, or Euripides' response to Aristophanes' mockery of the tragedian's ragged characters, see Zuckerberg (2016) and Jendza (2020, 92–102 and 140–46).

142 Di Chiro (2017).

143 Licona and Hayward (2014).

by the Inlaw's parodic substitution evinces algal *sym-poiēsis* or a "becoming *with*."[144]

This "becoming *with*" also informs the subsequent parodic transition, which intimates a beside-ness of bodily parts, explicit or encrypted. The phrase *es cheras* ("into the hands [arms]") in Euripides' tragic text becomes the anatomical innuendo that ends line 914 — *escharas,* both "hearth" and "vagina" — so that, in the interval between hypotext and parody, the joining of preposition and noun transforms a chaste embrace into a genital invitation. Parodic *beside*-ness materializes through the establishment of a closer intimacy, formal as well as sexual. This *beside*-ness becomes even closer, para-biological, as genitals emerge out of other extremities. Not only arms or hands but also feet appear in the interval of affective *beside*-ness as the Inlaw/Helen reaches for their Menelaus. Apart from different accentuation, the vocative *posi* ("husband") is morphologically identical with the dative plural of *pous* ("foot"). *Sym-poiēsis,* becoming with — whether with a spouse or an instrumentalized prosthesis — engenders a juxtaposition, or a horizontal alignment, of transiting parts fleetingly turned into subjects, reaching for new, precarious configurations yet never fully detached from their prior locations. In *escharas,* hands refashioned as genitals are still recognizable as hands even while encrypting the *jouissance* of sexuation as *chara* ("joy"). This joy is reflected in the rhythmical structure of lines 913–14, a stretched-out, rhizomatic sequence of short syllables clustered together without forming any normative metrical unit: *labe me labe me posi peribale de cheras* ("Take me, take me, husband; place your arms around me"). Set alongside *cheras* ("hands") and *posi,* hovering between "husband" and "(with) feet," the iterated imperative *labe labe* takes on a fleeting autonomy — a power of resistant de-formation — before it is reversed and supplemented as *peri-bale*

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144 On transness as "becoming with," see Hayward and Weinstein (2015). On the idea of "becoming *with*" as a practice of *trans-species* companionship, see Haraway (2007); for a more radical take on this idea, which challenges the very notion of the human under the rubric of *"para*-humanism," see Halberstam (2020a, ch. 5).

("place […] around"). I now want to counterintuitively read this fleeting autonomy and power of de-formation into the last disguise of the Inlaw — Andromeda immobilized by the transphobic state, by the police's gender surveillance.

iii. Gender Abolition: Andromeda against the Police

The intervention of a public officer (a Prytanis) and, subsequently, of his minion (a Scythian archer) precipitates a crisis, an onslaught of transphobic state violence. Pioneer transgender activist Sylvia Rivera once observed, "We always felt that the police were the real enemy," and it is the police, in fact, with its regime of panoptic surveillance, with its enforcement of the division between who is "in" and who is "out," who is within the law and who is outside it, that, in the view of Eric Stanley, "produces the gender binary and heteronormativity itself."[145] When the Prytanis orders the Scythian archer to pin the Inlaw to a *sanis,* a wooden plank, with nails,[146] he is not just selecting a means of execution but also materializing the idea of biological sexedness as a wooden barrier, a solid border representative of the prison of the biological body as well as of the violent surveillance of the police. The punishment inflicted on the Inlaw is not entirely different from the conditions of the beginning of life — in which one is thrown into the biological body and immediately targeted by what Judith Butler calls "gender interpellation."[147] When the officer commands the archer, "Make the Inlaw stand (*stēsas* 932) and keep guard," he imposes a "*dispositif* of verticalization,"[148] of rectitude and rigidity of the sort foisted upon Andromeda — the

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145 Stanley (2015, 12). In a contemporary context, transphobic state violence, with its "practices of surveillance, policing, screening, profiling" (in the words of Stanley [2015, 12]), has been connected with the *prison industrial complex* (PIC), on which see esp. Davis (2003, 84). On Sylvia Rivera, see among others Gossett (2017), Muñoz (2020, 131–34), Stanley (2021, 2–3), and cárdenas (2022, 168).

146 Austin and Olson (2004, 294).

147 See esp. J. Butler (1990, 163–80; 1993, 1–55).

148 Adopting a phrase of Cavarero (2016).

Euripidean heroine chained to a rock as a sacrifice to a sea monster. This policing verticality, meant to immobilize the body, to prevent it from bending, deviating, or crossing, prompts us to regard the *state* (a word cognate with *stēsas*) as the force striving to make (sexual) being an utterly *static* condition, a *statue*-like, Andromedean pose, a *state* set in stone (a datum, a biometric).[149] But in spite of its apparent finitude, a frozen instant of actuality, even a statue is shaken by oblique, transverse lines corresponding to multiple percepts, that is, to divergent perceptual, especially visual, angles.[150]

The anagrammatic rapture of the Inlaw-as-Andromeda's lyric song causes a further disruption, inviting us to locate in the name of the policeman — an ethnic denomination — an anarchic site of exchange, or interchangeability, between male and female genitals. In these lines, the effort of the Inlaw to return to their biological sex — to "de-transition"[151] — is countered not just by the persistence of their Andromedean attachment, their remaining *beside* the tragic heroine, but also by a generalized

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149 See Valencia and Zhuravleva (2019, 182): "Trans and gender-variant women are [...] killed socially for disobeying the biologist mandate of conforming to live in a body whose gender has been assigned medically and with which they do not identify. They are erased from the conceptual map of the possible and what can be enunciated." When Perseus sees Andromeda affixed to the stone, he likens her to a stone statue (*agalma*) (fragment 125.5 Kannicht): see Marshall (2014, 150–52); on the tradition of Andromeda as a heroine of vase iconography, see Taplin (2007, 174–85). On Andromeda as a voyeuristic object in the Aristophanic scene, see Telò (2020b).

150 In spite of its Deleuzian resonance, my notion of "transverse lines" is inspired by the "transverse waves" that C. Sharpe (2016, 40) lyrically theorizes as posthuman motions of resistance against the slave ships of the Middle Passage and as a ghostly surge of Derridean *survivance*: "The transverse waves are those waves that run through the back; they are perpendicular to the direction of the motion of the ship. Transverse waves look straight but are actually arcs of a circle." See also J. Sharpe (2020, 39).

151 *Detransition, Baby* is the title of Torrey Peters's novel (2021) concerning a trans woman who transitions back to a male identity.

effect of phonetic *jouissance* that shakes what Michel Foucault called "anatomo-politics"[152] (1015–23):

> Maiden friends, friends,
> how could I leave (*ap-elthoimi*) and
> escape the notice of the Scythian (*ton Skuthēn lathoimi*)?
> Do you hear me, you who sing voices (*autas*) alongside with
>   me in the cave?
> Nod acquiescence (*kata-neuson*), allow (*eason*) me to go to
>   my wife.
> Pitiless (*an-oiktos*) is the one who has bound me (*hos m'*
>   *edēse ton*),
> the most miserable of mortals.

Referring, in the last lines, to the Scythian policeman, the Inlaw alters the words of the Euripidean Chorus regarding Andromeda's cruel father: "*Pitiless is the one who, having begotten you* (*an-oiktos hos tekōn se tan*), the most miserable of mortals, has handed you over to Hades for you to die for your fatherland."[153] The outcome of the parodic exchange is that emergence into the world is implicitly juxtaposed and equated with imprisonment; the body that we are born in, with a carceral receptacle. In fact, the minimal replacement of *tekōn se tan* ("having begotten you") with *m' edēse ton* ("[who] bound me") retrospectively makes us see "birth" (*tekōn*) as "binding," the product of reproduction as an imprisonment — the immobilization of possibility in an actualized form, somatic or textual. Yet the switch between opposite grammatical genders — *se tan* / […] *se ton* — isolates, in the comic remake, the sequence *m' edē,* whose homophony with the negation *mēde* ("nor, not") interrupts the imprisonment, as it were, undoing the Inlaw's apparent sex restoration (embodied in the move from *tan* to *ton*), turning the reversed becoming (a renewed embrace of alleged biological being) into

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152 Foucault (1990, 139). See also Preciado (2018, 29): "Heterosexuality is anatomopolitical technology."
153 Fragment 120 Kannicht.

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the crisis of un-becoming. This breaking of the Scythian police's bonds is accompanied by the impression of a rupture in his own sexed embodiment. Surrounded by echoes and quasi-anagrams — *ap-elthoimi/lathoimi*; *kata-neuson/eason* — the word *Skuthēn* is susceptible to manifesting its own anagrammatic latencies, a Derridean "invagination."[154] These latencies, the ghostly (dis)appearance of *kusth-os* ("female genitals") in *Skuth-ēn,* are awakened at the end of the scene (1112–14) when Euripides dismisses the Scythian's skepticism about the Inlaw's cis-femininity — "You're speaking nonsense, Scythian" (*lēreis ō Skutha*) — in a half line to which the policeman isosyllabically responds, presumably gesturing at a bulge, "[Sure,] look at the vagina (*skepsai to kusto*)!"[155] As a concluding half line (*lēreis ō Skutha*) gives way to a beginning half line (*skepsai to kusto*), consonants are exchanged (*Sku/kus*) and the policeman's stereotypical ethnic roughness generates a formal fantasy of female genitality.[156] While *Skutha/Skuthē(n)* confuses the surveillance over the biologically sexed body represented by the Scythian with the phallic fallibility enacted by the *skutinon* — the characteristically drooping leather penis of the comic costume as seen in Aristophanes' *Clouds* (538)[157] — the phonetic instability

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154 Derrida defines this phenomenon as "the inverted reapplication of the outer edge to the inside of a form where the outside then opens a pocket" (2011, 124–25).

155 In this line, differently from Henderson and in the wake of Wilson's OCT (*Oxford Classical Texts*) edition, I accept *kusto* (understood as a Scythian rendering of *kusthos*), Scaliger's correction of the transmitted reading *skuto*. With this textual arrangement, the anagrammatic resonance that I am positing would correspond to the mistake generated in the manuscript tradition. A similar error is attested in Eupolis, fragment 247.4 Kassel and Austin, where *skuthon* is corrected by Hermann as *kusthon*: see Austin and Olson (2004, 329).

156 The Scythian is, of course, otherized in the scene: see Hall (1989).

157 On the *skutinon* in the parabasis of *Clouds* (358), see, most recently, Ruffell (2011, 45–46) and Compton-Engle (2015, 24–26). The comic dangling *phallos* exposes comedy's constitutive lack; as Critchley (1999b, 115) puts it, it shows that "what satisfies us in comedy, what makes us laugh […] is not so much the triumph of life as its flight"; on the phallus as lack, in the wake of and beyond Lacan, see esp. J. Butler (1993, 57–91), and chapter 3 of

of trans-form produces a coexistence, or even an interchange-ability, of male and female genitals. In *Countersexual Manifesto,* Paul B. Preciado has remarked that "the sex organs […] do not exist." That is, "the organs that we recognize as naturally sexual are already a product of a sophisticated technology," i.e., social construction, "that prescribes the context in which the organs acquire their meaning (sexual relationship) and are properly used in accordance with their 'nature.'"[158] Through the formal ambiguity of Andromeda — a woman who has *andro-* ("man") in her name and is the white daughter of Black parents[159] — anatomo-politics, the genital binary, is contested. Notwithstanding the Scythian policeman's role as an enforcer of sexual normativity, the phonetics of his name reveal the possibility of *para*-sexuality, as ostensible genital markers collapse into each other.

Positioned alongside Inlaw-as-Andromeda as her companion on the tragic and comic stage, Echo evokes trans-materiality through a passing back and forth between materiality and spectrality, a trans* un-becoming. In Euripides' *Andromeda,* according to a reconstruction, the heroine appeared at the mouth of a cave, Echo's abode, corresponding to the *skēnē* building. The cave might have been a space that like Echo "remain[ed] unrealized, existing only in potential,"[160] and in Euripides' staging, Echo may not have been "given a corporeal presence on stage"[161] but was perhaps "voiced by another actor backstage," as though she

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this volume. The leather prosthesis used in comedy is a sort of dildo, that is, according to Preciado (2018, 67–69), "grammatology undoing sexual identity."

158 Preciado (2018, 29). In the foreword to *Countersexual Manifesto,* Halberstam observes that for Preciado the "trans* person is an 'event'" (Preciado 2018, xii), i.e., in Derrida's terms, that which exceeds appropriation and comprehension.

159 On the history of Andromeda's white complexion in literature and art as a chronic erasure of her Blackness, see esp. Donkor (2020). See also below.

160 So Marshall (2014, 145), who adds that "when the *skene* represents a cave, there is no formal barrier between inside and outside."

161 Marshall (2014, 150).

was "both there and not there at the same time."[162] Even though in *Women at the Thesmophoria* "the part of Echo is played by an onstage character,"[163] Echo does not lose her spectrality. When the comic Andromeda's attention switches from the maidens of the Chorus (*philai parthenoi philai*) to Echo, (s)he replaces the Euripidean "I address you who are in the cave" (*pros-audō se tan en antrois*)[164] with "Are you listening, you who sing voices alongside [me] in the cave?" (*klueis ō pros-aidous' autas en antrois* 1018–19).[165] With a single vowel shift, "address[ing]" (*pros-audō*) is transformed into "accompany[ing]" (*pros-aidō*), a singing along, or para-singing. At the same time, *se* ("you") is substituted with *autas,* a signifier meaning either "them" (the feminine plural of the personal pronoun) or "voices," depending on whether the initial two vowels are pronounced as a diphthong or not (αὐτὰς/ἀυτὰς).[166] Instead of the choral maidens, a referent for the spectral pronoun αὐτὰς (*autas*), we hear "voices," with their disembodied subjectivity — Echo in the cave sings *along* with, *through,* and *as* them, or responds to them.[167] Personal subjectivity — an ostensibly bounded self — and an impersonality disseminated into the atmosphere are distinguished from each other only by the inflection of breath, subject to unconscious phonetic slippage. This slippage corresponds to the Inlaw's movement between continual undoings of desiring positionality. Like Echo herself/himself/itself, the breath grammatically

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162 Marshall (2014, 150). On Echo as a symbol of feminine mimesis, see Zeitlin (1996, 397). Stehle (2002, 392–93) suggests that Echo is the "ultimate theatricalization," with "identity […] dispersed by the overlayering and splitting of character roles"; for her, this theatricalization converges with Agathon's "virtuoso role-shifting and gender indeterminacy."

163 Marshall (2014, 150). While ancient scholars and most modern ones assume that Echo was played in the scene by the character of Euripides in one of his multiple disguises, there is a tendency now to consider her an independent character: see Hartwig (2009) and Farmer (2017, 184–85).

164 Euripides, fragment 118 Kannicht.

165 Differently from Henderson, I accept *autas* (ἀυτὰς).

166 On the text of this line, see Austin (1990, 28).

167 On the ethics of Echo, see esp. Spivak (1993) and Derrida (1997b); see also Telò (2020a, ch. 3). In *Specters of Marx* (1994, 43), Derrida makes us think of "echo" as not just "resurrectional," but also "re-insurrectional."

separating voice and pronoun is a marker of trans-materiality, or of the "ongoing trans*/formation" that, according to Karen Barad, is matter itself.[168] In its shift between feminine contours and vocal unboundedness, this phonetic air, a material trace dispersed *inbetween* and *beside,* epitomizes Echo's very ontology, her ghostly virtuality.[169] The ghost is always in transit, always drifting in the interstices between life and death. In her memoir, Jennifer Finney Boylan appropriates the term "para-normal" to characterize her sense of having grown up in a "haunted body," while Jay Prosser, in *Second Skins,* describes the experience of transsexuality as a "a kind of deafening unspoken," a co-presence of embodiment and disembodiment—which the slippage of *autas* between αὐτάς ("them") and ἀυτάς ("voices") suggests.[170] As we have seen above, Bey defines transness as a "para-ontological force," moving "in and through the abyss underlying ontology, rubbing up alongside it and causing it to fissure." This "para-ontology"—the ontology of crisis in a sense—can also be called "hauntology," the "unfulfilled possibility" symbolized by the ghost—dispossessed like Echo, who is not just located "at the intersection of repetition and the unforeseeable"[171] but exposed to the somatechnics of taking in Narcissus, of embodying him. First introjecting male sound and then ejecting it as a transgender trace that recedes into the void, Echo never stops transitioning into Narcissus, or making him transition into her-

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168 The phrase is from Barad (2015, 411), who defines matter as "a condensation of dispersed and multiple beings-times, where the future and past are diffracted into now, into each moment."

169 Lavery (2020, 385) pushes against a "queer" model of transness predicated on the "virtual," one that Lavery says makes transition "both impossible and inevitable," that is, without an endpoint and consequently inescapable in its ongoingness. However, one could say that the idea of the trans[(*)] experience as an ongoing virtuality, which Lavery strongly critiques, includes possibilities of trans[(*)] experience that her model seems not to encompass. Lavery's primary focus is transfemininity; transmen more frequently face, or willingly inhabit, situations of what may be called virtuality because of the intrinsic conditions and limits of medicalized transition.

170 Finney Boylan (2008); see Prosser (1998, 2). On queer spectrality, see Freccero (2007).

171 Derrida (2005, xii).

self, *para*-ontologically wandering between becoming and un-becoming Echo and Narcissus, both and neither.

In the song of the Inlaw-as-Andromeda, broken syntactical lines cut through the biopolitical interpellation of the sexed body. In the second part of their monody, the Inlaw-as-Andromeda laments the neck pain inflicted by the bonds of the police, which amount to an enforcement of biologically sexed closure. Guttural sounds spread "throat-cutting pain" through the song (1050–55):[172]

> CHORUS If only it had been me (*me*) — I mean, the barbar-
> ian (*ton barbaron*) —
> that the fire-carrying thunder
> of the sky destroyed.
> For I no longer like to look at
> the immortal flame, as I am hung up —
> throat-cutting divine pain
> (*laimo-tmēt' achē daimoni'*) —
> for a swift trip to the dead
> (*aiolan nekusin epi poreian*).

There are three remarkable syntactical breaks in this passage. First, a brusque interruption (*sermo fractus*), which appears to turn a self-destructive wish into a destructive one, cuts off the verbal flow, producing a juxtaposition of mutually exclusive objects, "me" and "the barbarian."[173] Second, "throat-cutting divine pain" is a loose appositional expansion. Lastly, the prepositional phrase that closes the passage ("for a swift trip to the dead") lacks connectivity, seeming to be detached from a verbal action. In this cluster of syntactical breaks, we can locate intimations of a liberatory cut, a formal response to the cut-

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172 On these guttural sounds, suggestive of suffocation, see Telò (2020b, 63–65).

173 The *sermo fractus* suggests, to an extent, the dash as discussed by Adorno (1990, 302): "In the dash, thought becomes aware of its fragmentary character." A dash appears in the critical text of Wilson and Austin and Olson (2004). See also Comay and Ruda (2018).
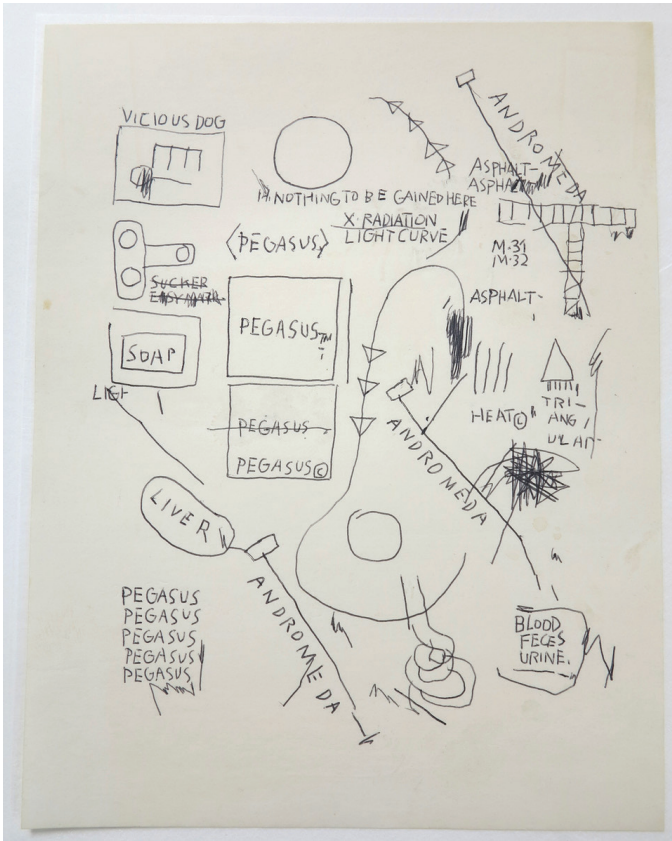
Fig. 2. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled (Andromeda)* (1986). © Estate of
Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York.

ting constriction of imprisonment — linguistic and sexual. Fred Moten has characterized "Blackness" as an "aesthetic cut," a fugitive motion that feels like an "invasive evasion."[174] For Bey, Blackness performs an "abeyance of closure"[175] with constant gestures of cutting homologous to the "dehiscence," the "rupture to the stitches of circumscription" that is transness.[176] Like appositional and prepositional disconnection, the *sermo fractus* impairs or breaks syntactical lines, subversively generating a loose horizontality of "self" (*me*) and "other" (*barbaron*). This horizontality corresponds to the unsettling force of sexual transition, which need not cancel out the starting point but might place it alongside the apparent ultimate destination. In the self-determination not of phonemes but, in this case, of pronouns or phrases, in their rebellion against the all-encompassing syntactical organism, we can perceive a body fighting itself, that is, striving to turn off its biological and social interpellation. The broken motions of trans-form in the monody of the Inlaw-as-Andromeda are something like the transverse lines that stand for Andromeda in a 1986 Jean-Michel Basquiat artwork, *Untitled* (*Andromeda*), named for her (fig. 2), a heroine to whom mythology has insistently denied Blackness. These lines of flight resemble diagonal breaks in the white surface of the drawing, escapist cuts that visualize Blackness negatively, enacting Basquiat's radical, queer aesthetics of "cut and mix."[177]

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174 Moten (2003, 200); talking about Black art, Moten (2017, ix) observes that "there is […] a perpetual cutting, a constancy of expansive and enfolding rupture and wound, a rewind that tends to exhaust the metaphysics upon which the idea of redress is grounded." See also Carter (2013, 595); on "fugitivity" and transness or "the transitivity and transversality of […] fugitivity," see Snorton (2017, ch. 2); on filmic cuts as expressing the "shimmering" of transgender embodiment, see Steinbock (2019, ch. 1), referring to W. Benjamin's discussion of the "cutting" qualities of cinema in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935).

175 Carter (2013, 595).

176 Bey (2017, 290).

177 Rupture is also the distinctive feature of *Pegasus* (1987), a huge canvas crammed with an exceedingly dense array of symbols and words that is named for Perseus's horse: "Thick lines obscure the text. The rupture

In the last scene of Aristophanes' play, trans-form unsettles the very body of the policeman, thwarting the effort toward containment within its established contours. When Euripides appears onstage again, dressed as the old "madam" Artemisia accompanied by "daughters"/courtesans, the Scythian policeman can barely contain his ardor; he initially seeks to police his sexual organ — "You will cry, if you don't remain inside (*klausi g', ēn mē 'ndon menēis*)!" (1187)[178] — but then capitulates, allowing the unruly prosthesis to peek out: "This arrangement (*skēma*) is good for my little dickie!" (1188).[179] Just as the appendage, whether human or non-human, flesh or fabric, refuses to stay in place, undoing the policeman's self-policing and the very idea of *habitus* or *schēma,* the *jouissance* of transform breaks through in the juxtaposition of <u>*menēis*</u> ("remain") with fragments of negativity, a hypothetical (<u>*ēn*</u>) and a negative (<u>*mē*</u>), reminders that even "remaining" is liable to come undone. We see the imprisoning "inside" that *menēis* not only imposes but also embodies fractured, leaving a crypto "me" (the negative *mē*) surrounded by the "inside" — an elided *'ndon* and a crypto "in" (*ēn* as a quasi-homophone of *en*) — a fragmentary "inside" located "outside," a body dismantling and reorganizing itself.

As Euripides/Artemisia unbinds the Inlaw and leaves the stage accompanied by her young courtesans, the Scythian policeman, coming down from his reverie, speaks in formal clusters that queer kinship and relationality (1210–11):

> *ō <u>graidi</u>' <u>ō</u>s kariento soi to tu<u>gatrio</u>n*
> *kou duskol', alla <u>prao</u>. pou to <u>graidio</u>?*

[…] also happens on the linguistic level, as the viewer strains to see the words that have been marked out" (Saggese [2014, 115]). On "cut and mix" and Basquiat's cut-up technique — an "application of the visually based strategies of collage and montage to language," a kind of painterly *différance* — see Saggese (2011; 2014, 140). On Basquiat's queer art, see esp. Muñoz (1996), who discusses his "disidentificatory strokes," and the way that they display the "transfigurative" capacity of disidentification itself.

178 For this line, I follow the text of Austin and Olson (2004).

179 *Skēma* is the Scythians' way of pronouncing standard Attic *schēma*.

> Old woman, how cracious is your taughter[180]
> and not difficult but mild. Where is the old woman?

In these lines, the sequence *graidi' ōs, tugatrion, prao, graidio* enacts the loop of becoming and un-becoming engendered here by the Inlaw's liberation, the *lusis* that seems to unknot the plot.[181] While apparently enabling the Inlaw to dress "in a manly way" (*andrikōs* 1204) again, this act undoes the heteronormative reproduction that it strives to reinforce.[182] When the old Inlaw as young Andromeda departs with a younger Euripides as old Artemisia, we are caught in a major crisis, a "thoroughgoing mash-up," to use one of the phrases that, for Getsy, define "transgender capacity."[183] The name Artemisia evokes the Greek queen of Halicarnassus who heroically fought alongside Xerxes in the second Persian war, defying prescribed female roles, but also Artemis herself, the virgin goddess, who, while protecting women in labor, always privileges the homosocial company of her female companions.[184] Euripides as Artemis(ia) replaces Euripides as Perseus, the expected savior and lover of the Inlaw as Andromeda, conjuring intimate, queer couplings involving

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180 That is, "how gracious is your daughter." Here again we are grappling with the policeman's ostensibly Scythian speech pattern.

181 On *lusis* as a term of plotting in Aristotle, before him, and after him, see Telò (2016, ch. 3).

182 See lines 1204–6, where Euripides announces, "I'll liberate (*lusō*) this guy. And you [*to the Inlaw*], as soon as you're liberated (*luthēis*), see to it that you escape and head back home to your wife and your children." On *Women at the Thesmophoria* as a re-establishment of "the pre-existing roles of political life," see, e.g., Taaffe (1993, 78); see also Bobrick (1997), McClure (1999, 218), Sissa (2012, 53) ("The spectators will get exactly what the comedic Athenian had called for: the reassignment of gender, the triumph of anatomy"), and Ruffell (2020b).

183 See Getsy (2015).

184 Bobrick (1991) sees Artemisia as an allusion to Artemis as a rescuer of Iphigenia in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*. On Artemisia in Herodotus, see esp. Dewald (1981); on Artemis's implicit lesbianism, see C. Downing (1994).

trans-femininities or transgender lesbians[185] — or a mother and daughter forming an intense, quasi-erotic (un)couple.[186] This last possibility is raised by the queer kinship, haunted by periodic uncouplings, of Demeter and Persephone, which the religious framing of the play overlays onto the final exit of Euripides as a (maternal) madam together with the courtesans and the Andromedean Inlaw.[187] Likewise, through their textural plasticity, the policeman's words intermingle kinship, sexual intercourse, and transness. In the anagrammatic attraction between the neuter forms *graidio* and *tugatrion*,[188] we recognize not only reproduction's dynamics of *sameness* and *difference* — the "daughter" corresponding to the phonetic substance of the "old woman" *plus* an extra syllable — but also the transition of the "old" Inlaw into the "daughter" Andromeda. This transi-

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185 Earlier in the play, while the Inlaw is still allowed to maintain female attire (that is, before Cleisthenes' revelation of what is construed as the Inlaw's "real" identity), there is a description — in the interstices of a misogynistic defense of Euripides to the female festivalgoers — of the sexual violence practiced by Athenian men against women, in which we read that during intercourse with a lover one wife clung to a laurel tree (*echomenē tēs daphnēs* 489), an image of Daphne assaulted by Apollo, the god mentioned in the same line. This clinging queers the scene with a glimpse of female homoeroticism, or a fugitive ménage à trois, that pushes against the violence of heteronormativity.

186 I am pointing here to possibilities for queering the "ontology of the [heteronormative] couple," in the words of Edelman and Litvak (2019, 303), that is, what, according to usual readings of the play, is affirmed at the end. As Edelman and Litvak (2019, 304) observe, "The closural logic of the couple opens it to the strangeness of those bedfellows its logic purports to foreclose, and the couple becomes a machine for exceeding the limits it avows"; for them, "the ordinary world is always collapsing beneath the disciplinary regimentation by which it hardens against queer pleasures" (312).

187 On Demeter and Persephone in the finale of the play, see Bowie (1993, 205–27), Zeitlin (1996, 399–405), and Stehle (2002, 400). On the fantasy of a corporeal fusion of mother and daughter, which, to an extent, the myth of Demeter and Persephone exemplifies, see Kristeva (1980), Irigaray (1985b, ch. 11), and Silverman (1988, 110–11).

188 The final pronouncements of the Scythian policeman exhibit a predilection for anagrams: cf. line 1215, on which see Austin and Olson (2004, ad loc.).

tion — or transness — amounts to a kind of queer reproduction, a self-determined (re-)birth, an autopoietic parthenogenesis. In spite of himself, the Scythian policeman participates in the loop (doing, undoing, redoing) of transing self-reproduction, which breaks the solid bonds of the *sanis* ("wooden board"). The infinite possibility of transition is reflected not only in the neuter gender of *graidio* and *tugatrio* but in elisions (*graidi', duskol'*) that substitute prosthetic supplements, detachable fillers never fully possessed, for grammatical endings, which are themselves something like the joints and identificatory markers of the sexual biological body.[189] Elision endows the truncated *graidi(o)* with the enhanced, lengthened *o̱* of the following post-positive *ō̱s,* intimating possession in dispossession. Even as the grammatical ending is restored in the closure of the second line (*graidio*), the rhythm of autopoiesis resumes, with more elisions and prosthetic morphologies, which destabilize the textual body's ostensible oneness: *ō̱ graidi', ō̱ gra'. ouk epainō, graidio* ("Old woman, old lady; I don't approve, old woman!" 1213). The play ends in the same fashion it proceeds, in an abolitionist loop of continual dispossession and un-becoming, an ever-transing, autopoietic self-elision, which undoes all manner of binding (biology, social identification, form).

One of the most emblematic events in the history of queer, trans[(*)], and Brown liberation is the intervention of transgender Latina activist Sylvia Rivera on the stage of the Gay Is Good rally, which took place in New York City's Washington Square Park in 1973, four years after the Stonewall Rebellion. On this occasion, according to José Esteban Muñoz's lyrical reconstruction,[190] Rivera "lashes out at those in attendance who choose to neglect the plight of queer and transgender people in prison, people

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189 Earlier when the Inlaw tells the women, "We are on our own, and no woman (*koudemi'*) will be a revealer of the speech (*ekphoros logou*) here" (472), transness is signaled by the juxtaposition of the feminine pronoun *koudemia* and the morphologically masculine adjective *ekphoros,* an effect enhanced by the elision of *koudemia,* a pronoun recognizable as feminine but left hanging, deprived of the gender-marking ending.

190 Muñoz (2020, 131).

who routinely experienced rape and other forms of violence." Muñoz comments on the video that records Rivera's protest within (or against) the protest:[191]

> The primitive black-and-white video footage decomposes during several moments of the activist's speech, as though the early technology could not capture Rivera's rage, her righteousness. The camera momentarily shifts to the audience of assembled queers, who at first attempt to shout her down. Some demand that she shut up. But Rivera is unrelenting. She will not cede the stage; she will not be silenced.[192]

The "decomposition" of the film referred to by Muñoz is the sense of the medium's visual surface shaken by the convulsive motions of the camera, which never lingers nor brings anything into sharp focus, vibrating with the anger of the object it seeks to capture. Disorienting the viewer with abruptly shifting angles, this camera undoes itself through a blurry visual field, which breaks the subject-object opposition. The transness embodied by Rivera — marginalized, denied the right to manifest itself, to exist — makes its raging force perceptible also through the grainy texture of the celluloid, which seems to be stretched out to the breaking point by a kinetic frenzy, an agitation spilling over from the visual field to the medium itself.

While raging on behalf of transgender people, whom the police persecuted and imprisoned, Rivera decomposes the containing frame — a prison like the sexed body and the textuality that Aristophanic trans-form disrupts. She undoes the very logic of becoming visible — a potential imprisonment in its own right — by making the film medium bend to a will to opacity.[193]

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191 LoveTapesCollective (2019).

192 Muñoz (2020, 131).

193 On the issue of transgender visibility, see Gossett (2017) and esp. cárdenas (2017, 170), who refers to the critique of the Pentagon's 2016 abolition of the transgender military ban that Che Gossett expressed in the following Facebook post, evoking Sylvia Rivera: "In our time of trans visibility and incorporation into the military industrial complex (Pentagon ending

The un-becoming of Aristophanic trans-form and the "decom-position" noted by Muñoz can lead us to read Rivera's speech in a new light:

> I may be — Have you ever been beaten up and raped and jailed? Now think about it. They've been beaten up and raped after they've had to spend much of their money in jail to get their hormones and try to get their sex changes. But do you do anything for me? No. You tell me to go and hide my tail between my legs. I will not put up with this shit. *I have been <u>beaten</u>. I have had my nose <u>broken</u>. I have been <u>thrown</u> in jail.* I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment for gay libera-tion. REVOLUTION NOW! Gimme a *G!* Gimme an *A!* Gimme a *Y!* Gimme a *P!* Gimme an *O!* Gimme a *W!* Gimme an *E!* Gimme an *R!* Gay power! Louder![194]

After the self-interruption "I may be — " (perhaps a marker of the willful self-erasure of resistant opacity), Rivera assimilates her current marginalization by the cis-gender white gay crowd ("You tell me to […] hide my tail between my legs") to the polic-ing of her body enforced by sexed biology and the prison indus-trial complex. In the hammering sequence of iterated short sentences that are introduced by "I have," we feel the infinite repetition of abuse and of biological interpellation. Yet the triad of beaten/broken/thrown, in which the edges of <u>beaten</u> are car-ried over into <u>broken</u> and the dark center of <u>broken</u> returns in the middle of *th<u>row</u>n,* channels the trans-ing of phonetic bod-ies, an insistent appearance in disappearance that "decomposes" the bars of discourse through "incessant doing and undo-ing, the inexhaustible exhaustion of all dialectical logics and

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its ban) I'm thinking about the legacy of Sylvia Rivera, Puerto Rican cofounder of Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, who at age 18 staged a direct action in resistance to the draft and US imperialism through a radical politics of trans and queer insurgency. Sylvia Rivera's anticolonial & revolutionary trans politics = insurgent theory and praxis."

194 "Y'all Better Quiet Down," adapted from Uglow (2020, 31).

structures,"[195] through un-becoming. Rivera seems thus to join together the formal experimentalisms of Aristophanes' *Women at the Thesmophoria* and Jordy Rosenberg's *Confessions of a Fox.* She is not the counterpart of Agathon; rather, her iconic speech seems to resonate with Agathonian trans-form — the mode of resistant de-formation as radical critique that we have tracked in this chapter. The phrase "gay power" seems to be built by the gathering of its constitutive letters, but this building feels rather like an "un-building," with letters, graphic shapes, detaching themselves from verbal assemblages — just like the Inlaw's Palamedean *rho* — turning into potential bodily prostheses to add or remove, or even into the subjects of a fugitive trans-itivity that claims radical autonomization from a linguistic, textual lockup. Like the vibrations generating a hazy, opaque un-becoming in the surface of the 1973 video, these individual letters listed one after another, coordinated only by the reconfigured "Give me" of "Gimme," cast transness as an abolitionist critique, an enraged demand for the right to a destructive plasticity that transits between the bars of every prison, ancient or modern.

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195 Ricco (2005, 1).

Comic Form, Critical Theory: Aristophanes Beyond Aristophanes

In this chapter, I build on the aesthetics and politics of *para-* (in *par-ody, para-ontology,* and *par-être*), which I explored in the discussion of trans-form, to practice *para-taxis* — a juxtaposition of Aristophanes' and critical theory's verbal *poiēsis* — as a mode of defamiliarization.[1] Subjecting works of critical theory to radical formalism can localize impressions of resonance, proximity, and adjacency to imagine possibilities of Aristophanic reception without reception, as it were. I offer a triptych of analyses of critical-theoretical form, which could be fruitfully considered alongside the models of resistance as formal undoing that I drew out in the previous chapters in my discussions of episode-mocracy, no-labor, feminist agitation, and transness. To conclude my theorization of Aristophanic resistant form, I will point to some of the ways that the crisis/dissent conceptualized in various currents of political writing (Deleuze, postcolonialism, queer and trans[(*)] feminisms) rhizomatically materialize in and as verbal texture. As Rebecca Comay observes in a dazzling

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1 On juxtaposition as a hermeneutic technique, see Friedman (2013, 40–41) and Sontag (1961, 269); on proximity and adjacency as ethical positions for reading, see Sanyal, Telò, and Young (2022).

analysis of revolutionary formalism in Karl Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire,* "Form is never a formal matter." I will be considering how three critical thinkers who have figured in the book's earlier discussions exhibit, in their own writing, elements akin to comic resistant form. Of these thinkers, two, Achille Mbembe and Jack Halberstam, infuse their writing (thematics and tone but also syntax and phonetic flow) with the aesthetic inflections of obscenity, humor, irony, and parody, and with surreal and farcical imagery — that is, with the distinctive features of the Aristophanic mode or mood, intended broadly as a transhistorical, transcultural comedic discourse.[2] The third one, Gilles Deleuze, makes style integral to his idea of emancipatory politics as deterritorialization, minoritization, and the anti-representational negativity of intensity — co-implicated, overlapping concepts that encapsulate his idea of politics as a line of flight, an escape from the master narratives of structure and meaning. Deleuze's politics of style is exemplarily discussed and dramatized in a little-known, "minor" work, *Un manifeste de moins* (1979; "One Less Manifesto"), focusing on Italian actor, poet, and dramaturge Carmelo Bene — a parodist and comedian.

Through close readings of Deleuze, Mbembe, and Halberstam, the potentials of the political microformalisms illustrated in earlier chapters meet with juxtapositions between Aristophanes and modes of critical-theoretical writing that enact possibilities of political resistance in the de-formation of their verbal *poiēsis.* The scenarios of political unmaking reflected in this ongoing de-formation result from yet exceed obscenity, irony, parody, and surreal utopianism, the "Aristophanic" discursive instruments employed in the theorizations of Deleuze's minoritarian becoming, Mbembe's postcolony, and Halberstam's gaga feminism. Heeding the Aristophanic radical formalism that animates these concepts mobilizes resonances and proximities that show how critical theory and Aristophanic comedy "exchange a […] number of overlaps, of winks […], stick and

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2   "Mood" is a weaker version of "mode," which, for A. Fowler (1982, 107), "may amount to no more than fugitive admixtures, tinges of generic color."

unstick, passing the one into the other, between the one and into the other" — to repurpose Derrida's definition of his "obscene" juxtaposition of G.W.F. Hegel and Jean Genet in *Clang*.[3] In this way, I hope to demonstrate the critical-theoretical significance of Aristophanic form's destructive plasticity, with its resistant entanglements of time, sensation, and affect. Circling back to the premise of the book, I wish to illustrate how emancipatory politics, the goal of critique, is comedy — that is, it draws on the crisis of form that comedy stages.

i. Deleuze's Delirious Dyslexia

In the short essay, "Literature and Life," which appeared with "He Stuttered" in the collection *Critique et Clinique,* Deleuze starts out by saying that "to write is certainly not to impose a form (of expression) on the matter of lived experience," but rather to "mov[e] in the direction of the ill-formed," in the space of the "delirium" that becoming is.[4] At the end of the essay, he defines style as "a becoming-other of language, a minorization of this major language, a delirium that carries it off, a witch's line that escapes the dominant system."[5] After arguing that modes and tonalities of comic aesthetics suffuse Deleuze's writing when he conceptualizes style as linguistic minorization, I will move on to an analysis of *Un manifeste de moins,* singling out moments where the prose seems to be affected by its subject, Bene's parodic, "ob-scene" de-formation — an instantiation of the delirium of style.

Style, which Deleuze regards as a "reorganization of the representational, arborescent language into an a-signifying, rhizomatic one,"[6] amounts for him, I argue, to a process of verbal comedification. In an interview, he observes that "there's style

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3   Derrida (2021, vii). Derrida himself called the structure of *Clang* an "obscene" provocation, as Bennington and Wills point out in the introduction of the new edition of the book (x).

4   Deleuze (1997, 1).

5   Deleuze (1997, 5).

6   Ma (2005, 103). See also Meiner (1998) and Hughes (2010).

when the words produce sparks leaping between them, even over great distances." When language becomes style, "a *spark* can flash and break out of language itself, to make us see and think what was lying in the shadow around the words, things we were hardly aware existed."[7] Style operates especially on the syntactical level: as Deleuze notes in "He Stuttered," it twists the "syntactical line" with "curves, rings, bends, and deviations" (*les courbures, les anneaux, les tournants, les déviations*)[8] — a "delirious" accumulation of interruptions producing not just a "grammar of disequilibrium," but also what he elsewhere calls a "*chao-errance,*"[9] like the nomadism of body and language at the beginning of Aristophanes' *Birds.* These interruptions, creating "a discontinuous volcanic line,"[10] resemble the effects of spells cast on language by a comic "witch" (or "sorceress") in order to unsettle "the dominant system" of signification, creating an obstruction of comprehensibility, as dramatized in the Kafka passage he cites: "Kafka makes the swimming champion say: I speak the same language as you, and yet I don't understand a single word you're saying."[11] Deleuze refers to Kafka's "great swimmer," the protagonist of one of his narrative fragments, as a tragi-comic figure — arguably more comic than tragic. As David Foster Wallace says in his 2011 essay "Laughing with Kafka":

> Funniness is bound up with the extraordinary powers of [Kafka's] stories. […] Great short stories and great jokes have a lot in common. Both depend on what communication-theorists call "exformation," which is a certain quantity of vital information *removed from* but *evoked* by a communication in such a way as to cause a kind of explosion of associative connections with the recipient. […] You can […] imagine his art as a kind of door. To envision us readers coming up and pounding on this door, pounding and pounding, not just

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7   Deleuze (1995, 140–41) (my emphasis).
8   Deleuze (1997, 112).
9   Deleuze (1990, 264).
10 Deleuze (1988, 29).
11 Deleuze (1997, 5).

wanting admission but needing it, we don't know what it is but we can feel it, this total desperation to enter. […] Finally, the door opens […], it opens outward: we've been inside what we wanted all along. *Das ist komisch*.[12]

The 1920 Kafka narrative fragment cited by Deleuze concludes with this climactic revelation, an "explosion" of sorts: "I cannot even swim. I have always wanted to learn, but never had the opportunity. So how did I happen to be sent by my country to the Olympic Games?"[13] Deleuze and Félix Guattari focus on a different moment of the story before the punchline, a different comment of the great swimmer — "I have to well admit that I am in my own country and that, in spite of all my efforts, I don't understand a word of the language that you are speaking."[14] In doing so, Deleuze implicitly connects the joke-maker with the stylist, and the joke's comic outburst, what Wallace calls "exformation," with the "de-formation" constitutive of style, that is, with syntax's "decomposition or destruction of the maternal language" and the consequent "invention of a new language" by which "language as a whole" is "toppled or pushed to a limit."[15] There is a sense in which the delirious "minorization" generative of style, of the "becoming-other of language," coincides with the defamiliarization or destabilization characteristic of jokes; the minorization that is style is, in other words, akin to comic aesthetics.

Before Wallace, in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986) Deleuze and Guattari suggested that "there is a Kafka laughter, a very joyous laughter."[16] Their use of Kafka as a primary practitioner of minoritarian politics whose work aesthetically embodies emancipatory becoming draws upon their characteri-

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12 Wallace (2011, 47, 49–50).

13 Cited in Stach (2013, 371). The point of the joke is, for Phillips (2021), that "heroism may be a function of incompetence. Or that we only have winners because we are losers."

14 See Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 26, 94n25).

15 Deleuze (1997, 5).

16 Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 41).

zation of him as a comedian, a master of jokes, a champion of laughter — in all its contradictory implications. Just as Kafka's writing vibrates with "a sonority that ruptures in order to break away from a chain that is still all too signifying" — for example, through the "faint whining that captures Gregor's voice and blurs the resonance of words" —[17] his aggrieved thematization of Oedipality in "Letter to the Father" entails "deterritorializing Oedipus into the world instead of reterritorializing everything in Oedipus and the family." To achieve this outcome, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, "Oedipus had to be enlarged to the point of absurdity, comedy," and the familial triangle of father, mother, and child had to be dismantled, deterritorialized through "comic amplification"[18] — that is to say, through the "comic enlargement" brought about by "the discovery *a contrario* of other triangles that operate beneath and [...] in the familial triangle" and by "paths of escape of the orphaned becoming-animal."[19] For Deleuze and Guattari, minor literature is "always political":[20] Kafka's major contribution to minorization is "a nomadic movement of deterritorialization that reworks German language" through Yiddish, a language "filled with vocables that are fleeting, mobilized, emigrating."[21] Deleuze and Guattari note that Kafka's Yiddish is "less a language of a religious community than that of a popular theater (he will become patron and impresario for the travelling theater of Isak Lowy)."[22] The

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17 Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 6).

18 Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 10–11) refer to the following statement made by Kafka during an interview: "Dramas and tragedies are written about [the revolt of the son against the father], yet in reality it is material for comedy." DuBois (2020; 2022) reads the swarming Chorus of Aristophanes' *Wasps* as an instantiation of the "becoming insect" that, in Kafka, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, dismantles Oedipal subjectivity; on Aristophanes' *Wasps* and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis,* see Payne (2016, 132).

19 Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 14).

20 So Bensmaia in the introduction to the English translation of Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986, xviii).

21 Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 25).

22 Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 25).

deterritorializing, "revolutionary" power of Yiddish — the lin-
guistic alterity that, in Kafka's oeuvre, opens up "an escape for
language […] or writing"[23] — is an expression of the "exilic"
or "*the diasporic,*" which, as Judith Butler has pointed out, "is
built into the idea of [being] Jewish" as "departing from oneself,
cast out into a world of the non-Jew, bound to make one's way
ethically and politically precisely there within a world of irre-
versible heterogeneity."[24] This heterogeneity is also integral to
parody or *par-ōidia* (παρῳδία) — almost an anagram of *diaspora*
(διασπορά) — which bends language, subjects it to deviations,
to rhizomatic parataxis.[25] For Deleuze and Guattari,

> never has there have been a more comic and joyous author
> from the point of view of desire; never has there been a more
> political and social author from the point of view of enun-
> ciation. Everything leads to laughter, starting with *The Trial.*
> Everything is political, starting with the letters to Felice.[26]

We can thus say that Kafkaesque minorization — "a rapid and
joyous movement or deterritorialization that makes everything
adjacent"[27] — coincides with theatrical parody, a di*aspor*ic impe-
tus, "the infinite *para*noiac spiral and the unlimited schizoid
line" which, for Deleuze, is nothing else but style itself.[28]

Inherently political, "a witch's line that escapes the dominant
system," style for Deleuze finds its quintessential expression
in the delirious, creatively wild formal undoings exemplified
by Antonin Artaud, whose "theater of cruelty" is influenced
by comedy, especially the Marx Brothers. Artaud works and
reworks phonetic matter into open-ended compounds, both

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23 Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 26).

24 J. Butler (2013, 15).

25 As Nersessian (2020, 30, 31) puts it, commenting on Adorno (1992), "Para-
    taxis lays out the path of a dialectical progression only to leave it dangling
    in the air"; it "will always contain the possibility of true randomness."

26 Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 42).

27 Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 61).

28 Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 76) (the emphasis is mine).

signifying and non-signifying, the equivalent of a "body without organs."[29] Referring to Artaud's practice of writing "a word […] in capital letters, printed as in a collage which freezes it and strips it of its sense," Deleuze observes:[30]

> These three aspects […] can be seen clearly in Artaud: the fall of letters in the decomposition of the maternal language (R, T…); their incorporation into a new syntax or in new names with a syntactic import […] ("eTreTé"); and, finally, breath-words, the asyntactical limit toward which all language tends.[31]

In *The Logic of Sense,* Deleuze comments that in Artaud "the pinned-down word loses its sense, it bursts into pieces; it is decomposed into syllables, letters, and above all into consonants," as in the incomprehensible, breathy sentence "*Jusque là où la rourghe est à rouarghe à rangmbde et rangmbe à rouarghambde.*"[32] The minoritarian delirium — "the invention of a new language within language" — that Deleuze locates in Artaud is also reflected in the "disjunctive synthesis" of the portmanteau words of Lewis Carroll, such as *frumious* (*fuming + furious*), *rath* (*rate + rather*), *snark* (*shark + snake*) — fanciful *para*-taxes, humorously creative (re)assemblages with a *par*odic cast. With Artaud, "language is […] being entirely reabsorbed into the gaping death," Deleuze observes, conjuring the image of laughter as the rapture of the abyss, a chasm, a "void" that, in Georges Bataille's view, "transport[s]" the subject "to the level of death."[33] In the essay on Kafka — a few paragraphs before the reference to his "very joyous laughter" — Deleuze and Guattari mention his short story "The Cares of a Family Man" to valorize the non-human assemblage of a flat, star-shaped spool "around which is wound broken-off bits of thread [and] that is traversed

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29 Scheer (2005, 44).
30 Deleuze (1990, 87).
31 Deleuze (1997, 5).
32 Deleuze (1990, 89).
33 Bataille (1988, 325); see Telò (2020b).

by a small wooden crossbar."[34] The delirious sonority of this engine overlaps with the machinic automatism of the laughter of the protagonist Odradek:

> "And where do you live?" "No fixed abode," he says and laughs; but it is only the kind of laughter that has no lungs behind it. It sounds rather like the rustling of fallen leaves. And that is usually the end of the conversation. […] Often he stays mute for a long time, as wooden as his appearance.[35]

This laughter, which generates what Roland Barthes calls the "rustle of language,"[36] anticipates the last words of Deleuze and Guattari's chapter, "Never has there been a more comic […] author. […] Everything leads to laughter."[37] To become style, language needs to slip, to some extent, from orality into buccality, opening itself up to gelastic intensities, to comic delirium.[38] Deleuze and Guattari's "schizo-analytic" theory can be regarded as a kind of parody of psychoanalysis, or an exposure of psychoanalysis to the rough consonantal intensities of *skhizein* (σχίζειν), to the (tragic?) splitting of the face and the wounding of the throat that is laughter, a rebellious reclaiming of the mouth by the non-signifying gaping of buccality.[39]

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34 Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 40).

35 Kafka (1971, 428).

36 Barthes (1989).

37 On Odradek's laughter, see Lambert (1998).

38 On buccality as a notion that rescues the mouth from the axiological primacy of orality and language, see Guyer (2007). The Deleuzian-Guattarian position that I am advocating, that is, style as inherently comical, is to an extent a narrower variant of the Lacanian one, which sees language as such as comical, for it "produces a lacking being that relates excessively to an object that it doesn't have," as McGowan (2017, 17) puts it.

39 On laughter as a splitting of the face and gagging in Bataille and Aristophanes, see Telò (2020b). Even though, in his essay on Francis Bacon, Deleuze does not include laughter within the range of corporeal spasms depicted by the British painter "in which the body attempts to escape from itself *through* one of its organs" (2003, 16), Bacon's *Portrait of Henrietta Moraes (Laughing)* (1969) depicts laughter as a deformation of the face, which dissolves the contours still distinct in Pope (1955). Bacon confessed

A delirious de-formation, à la Artaud and Carroll, seeps into Deleuze's own critical language in *Un manifeste de moins* ("One Less Manifesto"), where he discusses Carmelo Bene's parodic and "ob-scene" histrionics. One of the great actors and directors of the last century, Bene exploited popular media, especially TV, to cause public outrage by taking on the persona of the mad provocateur, overacting (even during interviews) and overwhelming yet amusing audiences with hyperbolic pastiches, jarringly juxtaposing high and low, post-structuralist theory and sheer vulgarity. As has been suggested, "escaping from the tragic becomes his mission, as well as tending toward the 'pathetic' as the child of melodrama and, especially, toward the comical: the *ridiculous*" and a "super-human and implacable *burlesque,*" as in his parodies of Shakespeare, Sade, and others.[40] Deleuze and Bene met in 1977 when Deleuze attended Bene's plays *Romeo and Juliet* and *S.A.D.E* in Paris: that year marked the beginning of a fertile intellectual exchange.[41] As Deleuze writes in *Un manifeste de moins,* when Bene "elects to amputate the elements of power, it is not only the theatrical subject matter that changes, but also the theatrical form, which stops being representation." The technique that Deleuze regards as characteristic of Bene's dramaturgy, "subtraction" brings out "a novel theatrical potentiality, a non-representational force always in disarray,"[42] which exalts the middle (instead of the beginning and the end), as the zone of formal and political disidentification. (We might consider as a comparandum the overextended, continuous "middle" of Aristophanes' *Birds,* a series

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to being haunted by the following synesthetic line from Aeschylus's *Eumenides:* "The reek of human blood *laughs* (*pros-gelai*) at me" (253).

40 Morreale (2017). See also Chillemi (2011), Russo (2016), Balestreri (2018), and Vittori (2018).

41 "In his Abécédaire," as Balestreri (2018, 85) notes, Deleuze observes "that he did not like theater, except Carmelo Bene's and Bob Wilson's."

42 Deleuze in Bene and Deleuze (1979, 93–94). All translations from this essay are mine.

of intruder scenes, crowded with minor characters,[43] which appears as a "site of becoming outside of time, beyond time.")[44] Bene's "subtraction" corresponds to the principle of "continuous variation," a "variation [that] never stops varying itself" — a "perpetual deformation"[45] — which minoritizes, theatricalizes language, creating "style" as a kind of foreign language within language.[46] What Deleuze calls Bene's "theater of language" is also an "amputation of History," where "History," the all-encompassing archive of verbally reconstructed facts, is intended as the counterpart of representation and of the text as "the domination of *langue* over *parole*."[47] As Lorenzo Chiesa explains, in Deleuze's view "theatre must be anti-representational in so far as it needs to recuperate the anti-historical elements of history" or "the 'historical possibilities' that are unmediated by history, and these may well include the potentialities of a written text."[48] This specific meaning of anti-representational and anti-historical — as the possible emergence of lines of flight within and out of the closed system of history — confers an "*ob-scene*" quality upon Bene's theater. As Bene puts it,

> Deleuze reminds me that we are a body: it is not true that we *have* a body, because we are not [i.e., we do not exist]. Theater embodies this dis-being, this discomfort of being *obscene*[,] on the scene. Theater is what is *obscene* — […] "outside the scene" — even though it is on the scene.[49]

In Bene's para- or pseudo-etymology of *obscene* as constituted by *ob-* and *–scaena* (equivalent to Greek *skēnē* "theatrical backdrop"), theater's embrace of "dis-being" as *mimēsis* lays bare the

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43 Deleuze in Bene and Deleuze (1979, 95). For Deleuze, the middle is the space of "becoming, movement, speed […], excess" (1979, 95).
44 Kowsar (1986).
45 Chiesa (2005, 72).
46 Deleuze in Bene and Deleuze (1979, 100).
47 Deleuze in Bene and Deleuze (1979, 103–4).
48 Chiesa (2005, 74).
49 Chillemi (2011, 259).

Fig. 3. Screenshot from Carmelo Bene, *Amleto (da Shakespeare a Laforgue)*

"dis-being" of life, bringing *in front of* ("ob-") our eyes — and, thus, objectifying — the obscene Lacanian "truth" of the alienation that defines the subject, which comes into existence through Symbolization, the primary objectification.[50] The provocative force of this etymology is not only its implicit equation of theater as such with comedy (the generic realm that allows and thrives on obscenity), but also the idea of theater as negativity, as a polemical dramatization of an "off-stage" — an absence (of being) or perhaps a not-yet-ness. This off-stage is also the on-stage objectification — a throwing *in front of* or *against* an audience — of an alternative dis-being to the dis-being that is being, or being in history. As a disruption of linguistic texture, Bene's pseudo-etymology of *obscene* exemplifies this theatrical dis-being. In pseudo-etymologizing, he is performing an aesthetic-political *ob-scenity,* a parodic *ex-cess* that goes along

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50   The Latin word *obscaenus* (from the Indo-European root *$\acute{k}weyn$-) is cognate with *caenum* ("dirt, filth") and *cunire* ("to shit").

Fig. 4. Carving of a mask used in ancient Greek theatrical comedy, 3rd century BCE. Photo: HIP, Art Resource, NY.

with his iconic eyes, not Oedipally wounded, but iconically protruding, as though eager to be freed from their imprisoning orbits, as in a Greek comic mask (figs. 3–4).[51] Bene's obscenity is, thus, not (or not only) semantic and tonal impropriety, the "forbidden" vulgarity of (Aristophanic) *aischrologia* ("shameful speech"), but rather the (equally Aristophanic) formal excess or the ongoing de-formation of dramatic poeticity. This de-formation corresponds to quasi-etymological versions of the *dyslexia*

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51 On the comic mask, see Telò (2020b); cf. Wiles (2008).

or *aphasia* valorized by Deleuze and Guattari,[52] not as pathologies but as precarious or dis-abled speech acts in which the negative prefixes (*dys-* and *a-*) launch a kind of "phonetic guerrilla [war]," in the phrase of Alberto Toscano.[53] Such guerrilla phoneticism articulates, as it were, "a creative resistance against capitalist communication,"[54] just as Bene's ob-scenity translates a rebellious, deterritorialized dis-being into "a primordial *phōnē*," "an anti-language capable of *saying the unsayable*."[55]

Deleuze's assessment of one of Bene's pieces — *S.A.D.E.* (1974) — showcases the dyslexic, "ob-scene" quality of his own writing, a guerrilla force reducing morphology and syntax to a cluttered *phōnē* that de-forms the hierarchical relationship of master and slave. Bene's idiosyncratic version of Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom* exemplifies, for Deleuze, his distinctive technique of "subtraction," figured by the Servant's frantic, self-annihilating attempts to satisfy a Master, who is, in turn, contracted into lustful torpor, the consequence of his impossible quest for orgasmic fulfillment:

> *C'est l'image sadique du Maître qui se trouve amputée, paralysée, réduite à un tic masturbatoire, en même temps que le Serviteur masochiste* se cherche, se développe, se métamorphose, s'expérimente, se constitue *sur scène en fonction* des insuffisances et des impuissances *du Maître. Le Serviteur n'est pas du tout l'image renversée du Maître, ni sa réplique ou son identité contradictoire: il se constitue pièce à pièce, morceau par morceau, à partir de la neutralisation du Maître; il acquiert son autonomie de l'amputation du Maître.*[56]

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52 On Deleuze's views of aphasia, dyslexia, and stutter, see esp. Toscano (2008) and Stevenson (2009).

53 Toscano (2008, 65). As Toscano (2008) observes, "Though famously pitted against the negativity of lack and the dialectic, Deleuze's vision of art *qua* resistance is shot through by a profoundly destructive impetus — by what he terms, with reference to Melville's Bartleby: 'a negativism beyond all negation.'"

54 Toscano (2008, 65).

55 Chillemi (2011, 255).

56 Deleuze in Bene and Deleuze (1979, 89–90) (my emphasis).

It is the sadistic image of the Master that finds itself amputated, paralyzed, reduced to a masturbatory tic, at the same time as the masochistic Servant seeks himself, develops himself, transforms himself, experiences himself, constitutes himself onstage as a function of the insufficiencies and the impotence of the Master. The Servant is not at all the reversed image of the Master, neither his replica nor his contradictory identity: he constitutes himself piece by piece, bit by bit, starting with the neutralization of the Master; he acquires his autonomy from the amputation of the Master.

The phrases *pièce à pièce* and *morceau par morceau* are meta-commentaries on the stylistic mood conveyed in the previous sentence by *se cherche, se développe, se métamorphose, s'expérimente, se constitue*. Crafting, through the commas, a stigmatology,[57] the asyndeton tracks the labor of the Servant, materializing both his frenzy, the masochistic hyper-vitalism imposed on him by the Master, and the exhaustion caused by the endlessly renewed injunction to metamorphose himself. The serial punctuation employed by Deleuze to recreate Bene's theatrical style is at the same time a resistant stigmatology, not merely (re)impressed on the Servant's skin, reinscribing the *stigma* — the visible marker of subjection[58] — but defiantly laughing at, or contesting, this act, by transferring the wound, a tattooing of the law's biopolitical seal of impotence, onto the Master. The Master is rendered impotent by a lack of satisfaction, a radical paralysis reflected in the dyslexia and quasi-aphasia provoked by the juxtaposition — almost unpronounceable — of the two long words *insuffisances* and *impuissances*. In the wounding inscription of the Master's skin — the reversal of the Servant's stigmatology — arising from the Benian effects of Deleuze's language, the implicit redistribution of the sensible comes up against overextended word forms, hyper-

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57 On "stigmatology" as the formalistic effect produced by intensive, creative uses of commas, see Szendy (2018).

58 On the tattooing of slaves in antiquity, see Jones (1987).

trophic *phōnē* that ob-scenely resists division or cutting. When, in his discussion of another piece by Bene — his *Richard the Third* — Deleuze observes that Bene "gives free course to the constitution of the war man on the stage with his prostheses, deformities, excrescences, misdeeds, variations" (*ses prothèses, ses difformités, ses excroissances, ses malfaçons, ses variations*),[59] a failed redistribution is materialized through an excruciating formal sequence whose obstacle course of sibilants preempts language, overfilling the intervals of articulation, making the tongue fall. These phonetic impediments match, in Deleuze's own writing, a distinctive element he observes in Bene's parodic dramaturgy: "costumes never ceas[e] falling off," props become impossible to use, characters lose their balance, while diction is subjected to de-formation, the simultaneous forming of an "unspeech." In a sense, this unspeech or dyslexia, a continual tripping of the tongue, embedded in Deleuze's prose, follows the Servant in Bene's *S.A.D.E.* — who "obstructs himself in the continuing series of his metamorphoses because he does not need to master his role as a servant" — and Richard the Third, who "los[es] his balance, staggering, slipping away from the dresser that he uses to stand."[60]

As a result of this corporeal de-formation, Bene's Richard the Third becomes an icon of Deleuzian style itself, the continuing variation theorized in *Critical and Clinical.* As Deleuze observes, Richard the Third

> *devra se rendre* difforme, *pour amuser les enfants et retenir les mères.* […] *Il se formera, ou plutôt se* déformera *suivant une ligne de variation continue.*[61]

> [Richard the Third] will have to make himself deformed, in order to amuse children and entertain mothers. […] He will

59 Deleuze in Bene and Deleuze (1979, 90).
60 Deleuze in Bene and Deleuze (1979, 110–11).
61 Deleuze in Bene and Deleuze (1979, 91) (my emphasis).

form, or rather deform, himself following a line of continuous variation.

The metamorphic actions that deform the Servant in *S.A.D.E.* while enabling him to de-form the social are also perceptible in the style of this moment in Deleuze's discussion of *Richard the Third*:

> *Il faudra que lady Anne passe par toutes ces variables, qu'elle se* dresse *en femme de* guerre, régresse *en petit enfant, renaisse en jeune fille, sur une ligne de variation continue.*[62]

> It will be necessary that Lady Anne go through all these roles, that she dress as a woman of war, regress to a small child, be reborn as a young woman, in a line of continuous variation.

In the undoing and redoing conjured by *dresse* […] *guerre* […] *régresse,* we see a frantic triangulation, arising from simultaneous collision and convergence, from a "phonetic guerrilla [war]" in which *guerre* retreats and gathers *dresse,* de-forming itself and regrouping as *régresse*. The domesticating transformations of Lady Anne, demanded by the Symbolic of the marriage plot, engender a pile-up of intensities that crowds the space. Deleuzian language does not only "stutter" here, but also laughs, as suggested by the hauntology of *rire,* the abundance of *r* and *re* sounds. The *deven<u>ir–ré</u>volutionnaire,* which for Deleuze issues forth from the language, gestures, and politics of Bene's theater, emanates the *phōnē* of *rire,* broken, deterritorialized, "ill-formed."[63] The texture of Deleuze's analysis performs the "ob-scenity" it comments on — that is, it throws the unseen, the minoritarian off-stage, *in front of and against* the visible "scene" of language. Bene's "ob-scenity" corresponds, in Deleuzian terms, to an "amplitude that does not cease to go, by excess or defect, beyond the threshold representative of the majoritarian

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62 Deleuze in Bene and Deleuze (1979, 105) (my emphasis).
63 Deleuze in Bene and Deleuze (1979, 95).

standard."[64] Deleuze's critical-theoretical writing is affected by Bene's dramaturgical style, but it also exemplifies style as such, as a comic delirium, a minoritarian revolution, a Kafkaesque laughter. In the next section I will consider the workings of this comic delirium in Mbembe's writing of the postcolony.

ii. Achille Mbembe: Post-Colony's Comic Formalism

A major and productively controversial critical-theoretical intervention, occupying "an interstitial space […] between poststructuralism and existential phenomenology,"[65] Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* has taught us that the post-colonial world "has not escaped its 'coloniality'; colonial tropes persist, racism abounds, and power relations between the formerly colonized and former colonizers are still skewed."[66] Enveloping its inhabitants, oppressors and oppressed, in the same atmosphere of discursive violence, the post-colony is a domain of "Time without motion," a "timeless Time, afforded a smothering inertia."[67] The work is also innovative in its lyrical experimentalism: poetic license, imagistic intensity, "rhythmic physicality."[68] In what follows, I use close reading to bring out an Aristophanic Mbembe — a theorist whose poetic rendering of the post-colony as a grotesque, surreal world is imbued with the Aristophanic mode of Mikhail Bakhtin and Dambudzo Mare-chera — and, especially, a Mbembean Aristophanes, a comedian whose satiric creativity generates and is undone by the resistant formalism of phonetic delirium. There is a de-forming *poiēsis* that brings out what Bene and Deleuze would call an "off-stage" level, an unseen minoritarian politics that "ob-scenely" laughs, indecently gapes, at the purely representational.

Mbembe's political aesthetics rely on the imaginative, desta-bilizing possibilities of style and laughter as formal and perform-

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64 Deleuze in Bene and Deleuze (1979, 124).

65 Weate (2003, 27).

66 O'Halloran (2016, 761).

67 O'Halloran (2016, 762).

68 O'Halloran (2016, 761).

ative practices. On various occasions, Mbembe emphasizes the centrality of "style" to his theorization of the postcolony. When he says that "only the disparate, and often intersecting, practices through which Africans *stylize* their conduct and life can account for the thickness of […] the African present,"[69] "style" designates at once a fragmented plurality frequently crossing paths and minoritarian *paroles* pushing against the colonial and recolonizing *langue*. For Mbembe, the postcolony is defined not only "by distinctive ways identities are multiplied, transformed," but also "by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and lack of proportion."[70] There is a sense in which, à la Deleuze, style as such embodies excess.[71] Mbembe acts out this vision of style in his own writing, which he casts as a "labor of de-constitution through shortcuts, repetitions, inventions, a manner and rhythm of narration at once open, hermetic and melodious, made up of sonorities."[72] However, as in Deleuze, this style also feeds on — and, to an extent, overlaps with — the not-so-melodious sonorities and convulsions of laughter. As Mbembe observes, making his own prose laugh: "It is always possible to take refuge in laughter (*réfugier dans le rire*). […] One does not simply howl with laughter. Every organ is seized with trembling […], a sensual and dizzying rotation."[73] Laughter is a delirious experience, the quintessential corporeal deformation, as emerges from the tense rhythm and breathless imagistic intemperance of this description:

> The hilarious madness engulfed all those present who laughed till they cried and their bellies ached, attacked with spasms so violent that many were rolling on the ground beat-

69 Mbembe (2002, 272–73).

70 Mbembe (2001, 102).

71 Mbembe (2006a, 151–52) says that *On Postcolony* "is Deleuzian if by Deleuzian one means the writing of a Figure that is a form, but a form that is connected to tactility and sensation."

72 Mbembe (2006a, 157).

73 Mbembe (2001, 259–60).

ing the dust with their hands, their forehead, their limbs, their arms and feet.[74]

The final accumulation of parts is infused with the hyper-sensation of laughter, a shaking up — or maddening — of the whole body. In fact, as Mbembe puts it, "To speak and express themselves truly, both truth and reason are condemned […] to put on the mask of madness and borrow its language." Mbembe's language does not simply make us laugh, but it itself laughs, is traversed by laughter's vibrations, which "break through the gangue in which the [African] continent had been confined."[75] Verbal *poiēsis,* what Mbembe calls "poetic procreation," is also, I argue, an aesthetic practice of decolonization. It is comparable with the "movement of repotentialization" that he imagines, in Bakhtinian as well as anti-Bakhtinian terms, as "beginning with the entire body, rhythmically shaken in its limbs and in its reason by song and dance — strident of laugh and overabundance of life."[76]

Mbembe is inspired by Frantz Fanon's reading of laughter as a decolonizing explosion, a self-liberation from hierarchical containment. As Neetu Khanna remarks, in Fanon "the spontaneous, eruptive figure of laughter […] inhabits a volatile realm of subversive potentiality from within the scenes of struggle for self-determination and historical agency."[77] In *The Wretched of the Earth,* the Fanonian project of colonial destruction is cast as a dream of escalating kinesis, culminating with laughter ("I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing; I dream that I burst out laughing").[78] In *Black Skin, White Masks,* laughter is an act of emancipatory intemperance, of bodily dissolution as escape from the control of the colonial oppressor: "I shouted my laughter to the stars. The white man, I could see, was resentful. His reaction time lagged interminably. [….] I had won. I

74 Mbembe (2001, 203).
75 Mbembe and Boulbina (2016, 148).
76 Mbembe (2021, 226).
77 Khanna (2020, 148).
78 Fanon (1961, 52).

was jubilant."[79] While laughter causes spasms, which cut the breath short, it also subjects the body to an intense vibration, something similar perhaps to what Mbembe calls "the almost telluric force that Africa is," a "pulse," a respiratory rhythm.[80] From Fanon, Mbembe draws, as he puts it, "the oxygen necessary for transforming writing into the act of breathing" — or, we could say, transforming it into a verbal performance of laughter, in which a continuous, breathtaking, unruly process of intake and expulsion of air shakes off "that which threatens to smother and suffocate us."[81]

Representing and denouncing "colonial and postcolonial brutality" — that is, a violence and an *ob*-scene rhetoric of violence shared by oppressed and oppressors in the timeless space of the postcolony — requires, for Mbembe, mimicking its vulgar, scatological, lascivious "extravagance in expenditure of people, labor and materials." In Mbembe's view, the (post)colonial perverse imagination exemplifies what the "Greeks called a *phantasia*." It is a vivid, pictorial, hyper-graphic figuration, which, he says, his writing "is attempting to 'touch,' to 'seize,' and to capture in a mirror-like operation."[82] To pursue this "mirror-like operation," Mbembe, as he declares, "revive[s] a rather scorned tradition of dissonant, almost blasphemous, writing — writing in lightning and thunder."[83] He appropriates an "aesthetics of

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79 Fanon (1967, 131–32). For Khanna, Fanonian laughter explodes "the narrative of history itself" (2020, 137).

80 Mbembe and Boulbina (2016, 149).

81 Mbembe and Boulbina (2016, 201).

82 Mbembe (2006b, 184). Mbembe here deploys *phantasia* in a sense evocative of the English *fantasia,* a sense that is suggested in some uses of the word, as for example in *On the Sublime.* Commenting on the treatment of tragedy in that work, Porter (2016, 159) observes: "Real imaginings (*phantasiai*) gripped the audience instead of real visions. Not visualizations but intimations of a hyper-reality that astonishes us with its hyper-clarity are sublime." In relation to comic *phantasia,* Storey (2003, 49–50) suggests that "the audience will see through the φαντασία of the language what the character sees or imagines he sees."

83 Mbembe and Boulbina (2016, 148).

vulgarity"[84] from authors of various African literary traditions,[85] in particular, from the Zimbabwean writer (novelist, poet, playwright) Marechera, who places Aristophanes in a list of carnivalesque authors, including Lucian, Apuleius, François Rabelais, and Wole Soyinka, in whose works, as he says, "madness, dreams and daydreams, abnormal states of mind and all kinds of erratic inclinations are explored."[86]

Deconstructively dramatizing the ways in which oppressors and oppressed in the postcolony participate in "the same episteme," Mbembe's "aesthetics of vulgarity" articulate a form of rebellious mimesis.[87] Though he praises the "dramaturgical intensity" of Mbembe's prose, Ato Quayson argues that his obscene mimeticism makes it uncertain whether the reader is meant to be angry or to laugh and at whom to laugh — at the oppressors with their appetites, or at their subjects, who are almost contagiously lured into acceptance, conformism, even allegiance. In Quayson's view, Mbembe's writing "sheds light," but "dissipates anger," that is, it dilutes its own ethical and political force.[88] As Rahul Rao comments, in Mbembe's theorization the oppressed resort to the same figurative strategies (images, tropes, patterns of thought reflected in everyday discourse as well as in literary products) that are "favored by the postcolonial clientelist state for cultivating authority and exacting obedience — the extravagant display of power as personified in the body of the despot who delights in the consumption of food, drink, and sex."[89] Yet these same strategies, which envelop

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84 Mbembe (2001, 108).

85 Mbembe (2017, 121): "In the works of Amos Tutuola, Sony Labou Tansi, Dambudzo Marechera, Yvonne Vera, and Yambo Ouologuem, time is experienced by attending to the senses (seeing, hearing, touching, feeling, tasting)."

86 See Veit-Wild (1992, 363–64). Marechera's *Black Sunlight* was banned by Zimbabwe's censorship board for obscenity: see Veit-Wild (2005).

87 Mbembe (2001, 108).

88 Quayson (2000, 44).

89 Rao (2020, 217). Connolly (2016) offers a Mbembe-inspired reading of Lucan's *De bello civili,* suggesting that in the poem "leaders and people alike share in a grotesque sublimity that is the figure of Roman power."

oppressed and oppressor in the same imaginary, serving the assimilationist enterprise of the (post)colony, producing consensus, are "amenable to travesty […] with the slightest turn of phrase," as shown, I will argue, by Mbembe's verbal form.[90] In other words, as my close readings will suggest, Mbembe's lyrical and obscene formalisms demonstrate that "what is significant about the sharing of the aesthetics of vulgarity is that it allows the dominated to simulate adherence to the official forms while saying the unsayable."[91]

This dynamic — a performance of the "unsayable" in the interstices of postcolonial mimeticism — is perceptible in Mbembe's assimilation of colonization to tragi-comedy:

> Let us start from the recent tragi-comedy […]: colonization. Let us, for a moment, forget its vulgarity, its theater of lewdness, its taste for the grotesque, for what is naked, soft, eccentric, and dissolute. Let us ignore its propensity for frivolity, the ease with which it abandons itself, in the most uncouth manner, to animal enjoyment (*Faisons fi de sa propension à la frivolité, de la facilité avec laquelle elle s'abandonne, de façon fruste, à la jouissance animale*). […] Let us approach it in its *generality,* and its bloody ugliness (*sous sa laideur sanglante*), which have made it, universally, a dizzying tunnel, haunted by death and decay […] on the borders of the ridiculous.[92]

While troping colonization as "tragi-comedy" or perhaps comedy as such, Mbembe seems to replicate the post-colony's coarse *phantasia* through the agitated affect of his prose, which, as we saw, draws on "a rather scorned tradition of dissonant, almost blasphemous, writing." The sentence *Faisons fi de sa propension à la frivolité, de la facilité avec laquelle elle s'abandonne, de façon fruste, à la jouissance animale* provides a formal dramatization of the colony's fundamental contradiction: an aggressive effort

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90 Rao (2020, 217).
91 Rao (2020, 218).
92 Mbembe (2000, 174).

to extend its reach indefinitely and a vulnerability in obscenity, a simultaneous self-dispersal and self-dispossession, as indicated by the phrase *sous sa laideur sanglante,* an alliterative suggestion of splattering blood. This contradiction is conveyed by the tongue-twisting persistence, or *jouissance,* of the *f* sound, which threatens the very foundations of the colony by spreading the *frustration* of comic failure (*façon fruste*)[93] — a failure heightened by the hiccup effect of *laquelle elle.* By putting on the mad mask of the comedian, Mbembe mimetically performs and exposes the colony's own comic violence and madness. (Similarly, Plato's representation of the madness of tyrants — and, from his reactionary perspective, of democratic leaders as well — is deeply influenced by comic characters' and poets' posturing as madmen).[94] In the miniature obscene theater of style, Mbembe's writing stages the politico-aesthetic self-undoing of the postcolony, capturing the (non)transformation of the colony into a timeless, immobile unity. This ostensible unity is subjected to synchronic expansion and dispersal, a formal dispossession, which unsettles the all-encompassing post-colonial *phantasia* — an obscene, comic phantasmagoria. The nervous, agitated form threatens the imagistic conformity and comprehensive hold of the postcolony with phonetic signals, omens of Fanonian decolonization.

Mbembe's Bakhtinian/Aristophanic depiction of the colonizer's bodily appetites also opens lines of flight in the postcolony's contagious obscenity, in the alluring web of vulgar imagery with which the postcolony envelops oppressors and oppressed alike.[95] As mentioned above, Mbembe casts his writing as "lightning and thunder," an image that might, for readers of Aristophanes, conjure a passage of his *Acharnians,* in which the populist leader Pericles acts as the stormy instigator of the Peloponnesian War:

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93 On comic failure, see Critchley (1999b).

94 On Cratinus's self-characterization as a mad poet, see Telò (2016, passim); on Plato's appropriation of Cratinus's comic madness, see Prauscello (2013), who finds the representation of Philocleon in Wasps occasionally intruding into Aristophanes' self-fashioning.

95 On Aristophanes and Bakhtin, see Platter (1993; 2007; 2016, 32–36).

"In his rage Pericles the Olympian flashed (*ēstrapt'*), thundered (*ebronta*), stirred up (*xun-ekuka*) Greece" (531). This comic portrait codifies, in a Greek context, a trans-cultural trope of the aesthetics of the sublime, as seen in Pseudo-Longinus's *On the Sublime,* when he remarks that the orator Demosthenes "could be compared to lightning or a thunderbolt" and "strikes down all his peers in thunder and lightning (*kata-brontai kai kata-pheggei*)."[96] Yet in the *Acharnians* passage, Pericles conforms to the buffoonish prototype of the comic tyrannical demagogue à la Cleon, which can be juxtaposed with Mbembe's vivid, visceral, carnivalesque depiction of the colonist:

> The colonizer gorges on food, scrambles up the tree of language, goes on an orgy of pleasure, farts, and collapses into a drunken stupor (*le colon s'empiffre de nourriture, escalade le buisson du langage, s'abrutit de plaisir, pète et plonge dans l'ivresse*). The colonizer pinches words. He scratches them, dilates them, slams them, and then erupts violently in a belch (*Il pince les mots. Il les griffe, les dilate, les claque et procède par écartement violent, par éructation*).[97]

This imagistic outburst of corporeal appetites and functions — oral, "buccal," emetic, scatological, and orgiastic[98] — is Bakhtinian in the sense not of a liberatory, regenerative, cathartic laughter, but, rather, of a static, death-like "stuplimity," powered, as it were, by the insistent asyndeton, an accumulation of grotesque details.[99] In *Wasps,* Aristophanes deploys a similar formal device to paint a monstrous portrait of Cleon (1032–35):

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96 See Pseudo-Longinus, *On the Sublime* 12.4 and 34.4. On the relationship between Pericles and the sublime Demosthenes, see Porter (2016, 385–86), who offers a survey of the thunder image in the rhetorical tradition.

97 Mbembe (2000, 181, 229).

98 On buccality, see Guyer (2007).

99 On stuplimity, a conflation of stupor and sublimity, see Ngai (2005, ch. 6); on the "closed, purely negative satirical laugh" theorized by Bakhtin (1986, 135) in opposition to the conventional Bakhtinian "joyful, open, festive laugh," see P.A. Miller (1998); see also Telò (2020b).

CHORUS From his eyes the most terrible rays of the Bitch
prostitute shone, one hundred heads (*kephalai*) of god-
damn flatterers (*kolakōn*) were licking (*elichmōnto*) in
a circle (*kuklōi*) around the head, he had the voice of
a ruin-generating torrent (*charadras*), the seal's smell
(*phōkēs d'osmēn*), and Lamia's unwashed testicles, and the
ass of a camel (*prōkton de kamēlou*).[100]

While mocking the demagogue, the comedian is fascinated with
him, an obvious alter ego.[101] He mirrors himself in the politi-
cian's abject obscenity, just as the theorist of the (post)colony,
in the aesthetic praxis of his writing, reproduces—and seems
to participate in—the vulgar *phantasia* of the postcolony.[102]
This strong albeit implicit identification is not just of the comic
poet, but of poetic form itself, as we see in the line (1035), where
Lamia, a transgressive counterpart to the demagogue, is mock-
ingly evoked for her hermaphroditism[103]; by starting with the
feminine phrase *phōkēs* […] *osmēn* ("the seal's smell") and end-
ing, chiastically, with the masculine one *prōkton* […] *kamēlou*
("the anus of the camel"), the line itself, with its antithetical gen-
dered edges, exhibits an intersex, or transgender, shape. Yet the
mutual mirroring of comedian, comic form, and demagogue
is disrupted by formal insurrectional forces set in motion by
the *phantasia* of monstrosity itself.[104] The expansive paratacti-

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100 On this passage, see Telò (2016, 32–48).

101 In Telò (2016, ch. 1), I posited a representational overlap between Cleon
and the comedian Cratinus. As J.J. Cohen (1996, 16–17) points out, "the
monster attracts" and "the same creatures who terrify and interdict can
evoke potent escapist fantasies."

102 See Dolar (2017, 588): "[Comedy] redoubles itself; it redoubles its own
presentation; it mimics itself."

103 On Lamia, see Biles and Olson (2016, ad 1035).

104 J.J. Cohen (1996, 6–7) observes that the monster is "a form suspended
between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" and that "the horizon
where the monsters dwell might well be imagined as the visible edge of
the hermeneutic circle itself." Following Paul de Man, Clark (1996, 65) says
that "monstrosity is […] not only a figure of alterity, but also a figure for
uncontrollable figuration of alterity."

cal insistence of the satiric representation, in which the graphic details come into focus one by one, does not simply undo the demagogue's bodily and hierarchical integrity, reducing him to a series of disparate parts, of apparently disconnected, heterogenous referents, but it also brings out the numbing "stuplimity" of the comic *phantasia* provoked by that sheer multiplication of parts, a sublime frozen by stupor in the register of an affective sense of alienation and thus of separation from the oppressive unity.[105] At the same time, the canine identity attributed to the vulgar monstrosity of the demagogue, and implicitly appropriated by the barking comedian, circulates an abundance of *k(h)* sounds reflecting a sharp enjoyment (the *chara,* "joy," in *charadras* "torrent") beyond the representational level that swamps it with the intensities of a torrential howl. Finally, the foul smell ascribed to Cleon figure as an animal hybrid seeps into the very texture of the line, as the tripartite olfactory assault (seal/Lamia's testicles/camel's anus) bespeaks the alienating persistence of an odor that, while emphasizing the overarching abject corporeality, troubles representation's impression of physical overpresence with its liminality, with the virtuality of a sensory embodiment on the edge between absence and presence, with the opening of a negativity. In the Mbembe passage, when we read that "the colonizer pinches words, scratches them, dilates them, slams them, and erupts violently," we are invited to dwell on the effect of dilation achieved mimetically by his accreted prose, which has the effect of reclaiming the "infinity" curtailed by (post)colonial biopower, as discussed by Fanon.[106] The alliteration of *plaisir, pète et plonge* potentially recasts the repetition of colonial oppression as a recovery of infinity, just as the onomatopoeic verbs *griffe* and *claque* ridicule the colony's cruelty, while transferring its power, its animal *jouissance,* into an insurrectional possibility whose force is encrypted in *éructation,*

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105 On the abject sublime, see Kristeva (1982, 11), D. Johnson (2012, 127–29), and Telò (2014).

106 See Fanon (1967, 114–15); see chapter 3 of this volume.

the rebellion of emesis, a bodily experience similar to laughter, which can empty out the (post)colony's comic *phantasia*.[107]

The animal *jouissance* evoked by *griffe* — a "claw" on the phonetic threshold between *graphie/graphique* and *girafe* — is unleashed in this passage, a description of African fauna and an invitation to a visceral exercise in radical formalism:

> There is the whirl […] of the fauna […], the host of snakes with their poisonous fangs, hanging from branches, slithering into houses, climbing over roofs, mesmerizing a quadruped here or a bird there, forcing the creature to squawk and squawk. […] Then there are the gorillas. […] The sound begins with several sharp barks, like an enraged or mad dog, then changes to a deep guttural roar (*un grondement sourd*). […] And the crocodiles, disgusting monsters with thick hide, that warm themselves in the sun, wallowing in the mud and coughing plaintively (*et les crocodiles, monstres dégoûtantes à la cuirasse épaisse, qui se chauffent au soleil en pétrissant la fange, et qui toussent: plaintivement*).[108]

It is as though the writing of the postcolony released impressions of a wild ecosystem, and, in turn, this ecosystem channeled its own wildly and widely resonating voice through the words' sensory saturation, overflowing accumulation, and nominal and syntactical infinity. In this "pléthore verbale" — in Mbembe's words[109] — dogs, snakes, gorillas, and crocodiles

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107 On emesis as rebellion, see Telò (2020a, 227–29; 2020c) and Youd (forthcoming); on emesis's anti-teleology see Derrida (1981b) and Brinkema (2011); see esp. Fanon (1967, 8): "In the period of decolonization, the colonized masses thumb their noses at [the colonist's] values, insult them, and fullthroatedly *vomit* them up" (my emphasis). Laughter and emesis are comparable expressions of the body's escaping from itself through the mouth; see Deleuze (2003). On "retching" in Xandra Ibarra's *Nude Laughing* (2016), see Neyra (2020b, 9): "The reverse movement of the esophagus and stomach occur to expulse a jammed up, choking, intensely internalized anxiety."

108 Mbembe (2000, 234; 2001, 184).

109 Mbembe (2000, 222; 2001, 176).

blend their resistant voices, merging an insurrectional dispossession with the expressive politics of animality.[110] The crocodiles "wallowing in mud" — just like the frogs of Aristophanes' eponymous play — unsettle intraspecies divisions by issuing forth the boundless hissing of *cuirasse, épaisse, pétrissant, toussent,* which fill the atmosphere, the container of both colonizer and colonized, with proliferating, unlocatable, snaky sensations. Mimetic writing turns critical theory into a fabric of vibrant renditions (or recordings) of invisible, perceptible but not comprehensible, ec(h)o-resistance. This resistance is reflected in practices of somatic rebellion such as coughing (*toussent*), which, like laughter, contests the notions of sovereignty and subjecthood as well as the hierarchical division, colonial in its own right, between human and non-human animals.[111] In Aristophanes' attack against — and concomitant embodiment of — the monstrous animality of the Cleonic demagogue, the barking that results from the proliferating *k* sounds is mixed with the hissing (*elichmōnto*) of the parasitical heads around him. This hissing encapsulates the Deleuzian dissolution intrinsic to comedy's surrealist imagery, a conveyor of non-hierarchical animal intensities and a liberatory force of what Mbembe calls "fantastic" language and presents as integral to decolonization:

> Grumbling (*grogrant*) and sweating through an exhausting life, the colonized expresses himself or herself primarily in a fantastic (*fantastique*) language that […] almost always ends up dissolving into unreality (*dissoudre dans l'irréel*), provoking the liberation of the enslaved.[112]

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110 On the expressive politics of animality, see Massumi (2014, 41).

111 On laughter, animality, and anti-sovereignty in Georges Bataille, see Telò (2020b).

112 Mbembe (2000, 230; 2001, 182). On laughter and animality, see also, in the same passage, the image of "hippopotamuses, *with their wide and ugly mouths,* their frightening roars, clumsy movements, unrivalled tenacity, ferocious rages" (my emphasis).

This dissolution — the "complete lysis of [the] morbid universe," in Fanon's words[113] — corresponds, to an extent, to his idea of explosive laughter, which Mbembe alludes to. It is also reflected in the abolition of verbs and syntax in the description of the postcolony's ever-multiplying afflictions — a multifaceted epidemic spread by the colonial state:

> *La langueur, le mal de tête, la douleur dans les membres, les crampes d'estomac, l'indigestion, la dysenterie, le frisson, la courbature générale, les douleurs dans les reins, le mauvais goût dans la bouche, les nausées, les bâillements continuels, la peau rouge, la face tuméfiée, l'inflammation du foie et de la rate, la soif, le bourdonnement des oreilles, la légère surdité, la transpiration, les vomissements.*[114]

> Languor, headaches and aching limbs, stomach cramps, indigestion, dysentery, the shivers, [general muscle soreness], kidney pains, unpleasant tastes, nausea, continual yawning, red skin, swollen face, inflammation of the liver and the spleen, thirst, buzzing ears or slight deafness, sweating, vomiting.

While materializing the exhausting ongoingness of the colonial state's thanatopolitical technologies, this tour de force of visceral imagery simultaneously breaks the syntactical chain, the logical joints, the connective constraints that make up language as a hierarchical system. Though introduced by the colonial power to exert thanatopolitical control over the bodies of the colony, the ailments corrode verbal taxonomy, undo the distri-

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113 Fanon (1961, xiv). Positing a convergence of lyric and *lysis,* Moten (2013, 766) says: *"Lysis* is to separate, to break down walls, to refute, but also to redeem." As he adds, "A complete, which is to say a lyric, *lysis* of our living flesh and earthly sociality, which is often taken for a morbid body or a morbid universe, requires us to recognize that Blackness is not reducible to its social costs; it is also manifest in a set of benefits and responsibilities" (774).

114 Mbembe (2000, 233; 2001, 184).

bution of the linguistic sensible, producing a chaotic parataxis, modeling a tenacious horizontality — a resurgence of the infinity truncated by the colonizer. We see here a formal dynamic comparable to the appearance of overstretched adjectival compounds — occupying entire lines, holding syntax in abeyance — in *Frogs* and *Lysistrata*. In the nosological catalog, which effects a somato-poetics of formal tumefaction, the prolonged length of *bourdonnement* ("buzzing of ears)" transmits the auditory overload to us and to the colonizer himself. This overload, an affective hyper-stimulation, is a persistent vibration, which resembles the hissing of the African snakes, but also what, in reference to Fanon, Khanna has called "the explosive and vibratory logics of a colonized laughter."[115] The very process of external transmission, of the ongoing morbid diffusion embodied by the form of *bourdonnement,* amounts to an expulsion, like "continual yawning" (*les bâillements continuels*), and the emesis that ends the passage (*vomissements*). Yawning and vomiting are equivalents of laughter, parallel forms of "the visceral as a logic of decolonization,"[116] "buccal" practices that, in contesting the privileged function of the mouth as a speaking organ, operate in synergy with the comic explosion of syntactical bonds achieved by Mbembe's abundant nominalization.

When Mbembe's attention shifts to what he calls "*le* vertige *provoqué par l'incessant tourbillon du monde* végétal,"[117] the snaky hissing becomes a botanical mimeticism, with Aristophanic political implications:

> There is also the vertigo brought on by the ceaseless whirl of the plant kingdom: the mangrove, pale grey network of roots, heaps of mud, dead leaves, piles of whole trunks with bases splayed, heaps of debris, *giant trees, bushes, a dense* (*les arbres gigantesques, les arbrisseaux, l'épaisse*) cover of leaves that the

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115 Khanna (2020, 11).
116 Khanna (2020, 3). As Fanon (1967, 6) puts it, "To destroy the colonial world means nothing less than demolishing the colonizer's zone, burying it deep within the earth or banishing it from the territory."
117 Mbembe (2000, 233).

sun can hardly pierce, roots in mid-air, dark depths where no vegetation grows, mosses that hang like long beards, lianas hanging straight as a plumb-line.

The sequence _les arbres_ […], _les arbrisseaux, l'épaisse_ merges hissing with a formal thickening that conveys the density of what Mbembe calls "the ceaseless whirl of the plant kingdom." The rhizomatic non-human assemblage composed of "_heaps_ of mud," "_piles_ of whole trunks," "_heaps_ of debris" and, especially, "a _dense_ cover of leaves that _the sun can hardly pierce_" and "_dark_ depths" conjures the impenetrability of the mangrove, a meta- phor of resistance, of affirmative negativity and opacity, which frustrates the colonist's desire to pierce through as the sun tries to do, to ecocidally wound.[118] From its wild vegetal life, the post- colony draws its breath along with the vitalist energy of invis- ibility, the opening of decolonizing possibility that comes from hiding in "dark depths," in "a dense cover of leaves."[119] Toward the end of Aristophanes' _Birds,_ it is precisely a "becoming veg- etal" that opens a space of resistance in the avian Chorus's attack on the "shield-shedder" Cleonymus (1474–81):[120]

There is an out-landish (_ek-topon_) tree
that grows far away from Courage,
Cleonymus, of no use (_chrēsimon_) whatsoever,

118 The forest's "dark depths" described by Mbembe may correspond to what Kohn calls the "form" of the forest, an "'always already' realm" that disrupts "the linearity of history" (2013, 182). As Kohn has observed, "Humans do not just impose form on the tropical forest; the forest pro- liferates it"; on dark ecology as "a pristine wilderness beyond all trace of human contact," see Morton (2007, 125).

119 Coccia (2019, 27–28) observes that "the leaf is the paradigmatic form of openness: life capable of being traversed by the world without being destroyed by it" but is also "a resistant […] structure." Vogel (2012, ch. 11) presents the leaf as "staying stiff and high."

120 On this scene, I learned much from the seminar paper entitled "Vegetal Being and Botanical Form in Aristophanes' _Birds,_" which UC Berkeley PhD student Alex Kilman presented in my Aristophanes seminar in spring 2019.

> faint-hearted and big.
> During the spring this tree
> always germinates and produces fig-like indictments
> and, conversely, during the winter
> *it sheds shields like leaves* (*phullo-rrhei*).

Cleonymus's arborescence is a device for locating him outside the space of normative being, for rendering him an out-cast. Relegated to a post- or in-human domain, the comic target is another dissenter, whose appearance in a lyric cameo sets up an intruder micro-scene. The queer *in-activity* of Cleonymus — his alleged uselessness and perverse fertility (in fact an ironic cipher for his sterility) — places him on the margins of Symbolic surveillance introjected by the comic voice, but beyond its auditory reach, beyond its capacity for interpellation. Cleonymus, in his vegetality, can be read against the grain, as refusing militaristic and moralistic interpellations by merging with the incomprehensible Real, the opacity of nature. In *phullo-rrhei,* we see the shedding of a "dense cover of leaves" whose texture is reflected in the verb's double set of doubled liquid consonants.[121]

In another moment of hyper-Bakhtinian accumulation, of quasi-comic stuplimity, Mbembe's paratactical writing riffs on the grotesque body, burdening the page with the formal feel of an impending decolonizing explosion:

> The belly opened from plexus to groin, the guts drained completely of blood, the upper body cut by random blows and floating in the bitter air, the mouth ripped apart, the thorax dismantled, the crazy knot of black hair. […] Is there any difference between all that, and the rare meat […] and the bowl

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121 The micro-phenomenology of poetic form can be connected with plant time and vegetal life in their power of resistance against capitalistic temporalities: see, e.g., François (2011); on vegetality as a relief from animal (human and non-human) being, see Payne (2018); Ryan (2018, 221) examines the poetic figuration of plants as "a counterforce to the alienation, placelessness, despondency, and resentment of life in contemporary technocratic society." See also chapter 2 of this volume.

of stew and pâté served to the autocrat on a platter of gold and silver? [The power] grips its subjects by the throat and squeezes them to the point of breaking their bones (*Il saute à la gorge de ses sujets, les serre jusqu'au point de leur briser les os*). […] It cuts them in pieces.[122]

The postcolonial autocrat is portrayed as engrossed in a feast not unlike the colonist's cannibalistic enjoyment, which we also see in the finale of *Birds*. The fast but stupor-inducing rhythm of the description mimics the temporality of compulsion, which curtails the (post)colonist's hyper-voluntarism, numbing him rather than fulfilling his insatiable desire. This evisceration tropes the capitalistic exploitation of the colony — reduced by the cannibal (post)colonist to an ever-increasing heap of anatomized resources, homologous to the tantalizing, edible parts of the grotesque body, which are expanded in the very act of accumulation. There is something darkly comic about this Bakhtinian evisceration, whose formal saturation yields stylistic impressions of the project or fantasy of Fanonian decolonization through annihilation. The phrase "the belly opened from plexus to groin" leaps ahead to the (post)colonist's own grotesque body, to its expansion and undoing, which is anticipated by the autonomous cluster of sibilants, like the hissing of fauna, in *il saute à la gorge de ses sujets, les serre jusqu'au point de leur briser les os.* Like the splintered belly, "the mouth ripped apart" and "the thorax dismantled" encode the self-rupturing of the (post)colonist and of the (post)colony, a political counterpart of the dehiscence of laughter[123] embedded in the Bakhtinian, crypto-gelastic oversaturation of Mbembe's writing.

In Mbembe's theorization, colonial violence is emblematized by the phallus but also implicitly undone by its association with comic failure:

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122 Mbembe (2000, 175; 2001, 221).
123 For Privitello (2007), Georges Bataille's theory of laughter evokes the pun "(s)laughter."

Without a phallus, the colonizer's cruelty can stand quite naked: erect. A sliver of flesh that dribbles endlessly, the colonizer's phallus can hardly hold back its spasms, even if alleging concern about tints and odors. Taut as a bow, it sniffs everywhere, uncovers itself, strikes out, grates, knocks, and moans. (*Tendu comme un arc, partout elle renifle, dévêtit, happe, râpe, cogne, et halète*). [...] To colonize is, then to accomplish a sort of sparky clean act of coitus, with the characteristic feature of making horror and pleasure coincide.[124]

The evocation of the colonist's phallus (the French feminine *la verge*) inevitably carries with itself what David Eng has called "racial castration"—the colonial reduction of the Black phallus to "a supermasculine object, a castrated threat."[125] Referring to the Lacanian distinction between masculinity and femininity as "*having* the phallus" and "*being* the phallus" respectively, Fanon says that "Negro *is* the genital,"[126] meaning that the phobic identification of the Black subject with the genitals castrates him, subjects him to a kind of "reverse fetishism."[127] This dynamic, which operates in the background of Mbembe's discussion, is upset by comic form, by his assimilation of the colonist's "genital" to the comic phallus. The dangling phallus of Old Comedy encapsulates, for Simon Critchley, "what satisfies us in comedy, what makes us laugh [...] not so much the triumph of life as its flight, the fact that life slides away, steals away, flees, escapes

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124 Mbembe (2000, 221; 2001, 175).

125 M.N. Crawford (2008, 174).

126 Fanon (1961, 180). Musser (2012, 85–86) suggests that the castration inflicted on the Black man by the use of his penis for the pleasure of the oppressors leads Fanon to theorize an anti-Oedipal kinship, based on an asexual, male homosocial solidarity, which excludes women.

127 I borrow this phrase from Eng (2001, 150), who also calls it an "avowal of castration." On the Black penis as a "phobogenic" object and the phallicizing of the Black body, see Stephens (2014, 11–20, 37–39). As Stephens observes, the image of the Black male body "becomes a prosthetic phallus, not an 'organic part' [...] but an 'excessive' attachment" (155).

all those barriers that oppose it."[128] Critchley's sequence of verbs — a formal horizontality that stalls phallic verticality — is in line with the parataxis of *renifle, dévêtit, happe, râpe, cogne, et halète.* The phonetic blockage in *happe râpe* further hinders the erection of colonial genitality — or anticipates its comic collapse. The moaning and gasping disclosed by the anticlimactic, "dangling" climax of *halète* ("moans") conjures the truth of the comic and Lacanian phallus — a pointed extremity on the edge, a protruding precarity, that is, an excessive presence conditioned by the menace of its absence. As Jacques Lacan observes, "The symbolic phallus emerges, as the signifier that stands for the desire of the Other" — the Other being the object (woman or colony) that does not *have* but *is* the phallus. Dribbling endlessly, subjected to spasmodic exertions, the colonial phallus — the colonist who *has* the phallus — exhibits its comic nature, its own "dangling" ontology, its dependence, even and especially when erect, on the colony that is the phallus, always in danger of disappearing, of moaning and making one moan, of falling into the void.[129] Uncovered, the colonial phallus does not only show, comically, its obscene face, a vision of "horror and pleasure," but also reveals, in spite of itself, the comic precarity of the violence of symbolization (colonial or otherwise) by which the phallus becomes a signifier, a frail veil covering up the traumatic emptiness that is hidden behind — and coincides with — its excessive form.[130] Excessive form also shapes the "Aristophanic" resistant formalisms of Mbembe's critical-theoretical writing. From within the texture of the obscene lyricism,

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128 Critchley (1999b, 115–16). The satisfaction in failure posited by Critchley, a kind of death drive, is precisely what, from the Lacanian perspective of McGowan (2017, 15), makes comedy "constitutive of our subjectivity." See also Zupančič (2008).

129 Responding to some of the criticism of *On the Postcolony,* Mbembe (2006, 163) remarks: "The effigy (the phallus) plays […] a spectral function. But in seeking to exceed its own boundaries, the body of power (the phallus) exposes its limits, and in exposing them, exposes itself and renders itself vulnerable. Such is the sexual imagination of the postcolony."

130 On this topic, see the discussion of Lacan, J. Butler, and others in chapters 3 and 4 of this volume.

the visceral *poiēsis,* it hollows out the postcolony, ruptures the undifferentiated immobility, fractures the constitutive complicities by widening the distance between post and colony with the void of comic failure. I will now explore a critical-theoretical use of comic failure at the intersection of feminism and formalism.

iii. Jack Halberstam, Comic Feminism, and Gaga Formalism

A radical practitioner of "low theory" — that is to say, of a kind of critical thinking that valorizes "the inconsequential, the anti-monumental, the micro, the irrelevant" — Jack Halberstam aims "to provoke, annoy, bother, irritate, and amuse."[131] The medium is programmatically the message, for these affective actions do not simply accompany but perform Halberstam's anti-identitarian models of queerness, transness, emancipation, and social change. There is something programmatically comical about this theorization of anti-identitarianism. As we read, for example, in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), by relying on the "silly archive" of animated films, which "draw upon the *humorous* and the politically wild implications of species diversity," Halberstam hopes "to conjure some potentially world-saving, wholly improbable fantasies of life."[132] These "fantasies of life," which bring to mind the highly improbable plots of Aristophanic comedy, align Halberstam's theoretical project with the animated films' aesthetics of "humor rather than tragedy as their preferred medium for engaging the audience." Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (2012) coopts humor — silliness, the inconsequential, the surreal — for the theorization of an anarchical, queer, trans[(*)], multiracial, intersectional feminism, which contests (neo)liberal appropriations of identitarian logics and the implicit conservatism behind the politics of inclusion and assimilation.[133] Subscribing to the

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131 Halberstam (2011a, 21).

132 Halberstam (2011a, 21) (my emphasis).

133 On liberal inclusion, see esp. Liu (2020, 42), speaking from a Marxist perspective.

"right to refuse rights" proclaimed by Fred Moten,[134] the project of *Gaga Feminism* feeds on the dramatization and the generative power of crisis, as we palpably feel in this plea:

> As the environmental crisis turns from bad to worse, as wars break out like wildfire across the globe, as bankers and corporate gamblers take higher and higher shares of the global markets, and as the social rituals that formerly held communities together lose their meaning, it is time to *go gaga*. In a crisis, do not remain calm, do not look for the nearest exit, do not stick your head in the sand; *do agitate, do make things worse, do run screaming through the street,* and do refuse to return to business as usual.[135]

Emerging from the writing of crisis, from an agitated style acting out the pleasure-in-pain or pleasure-through-pain that is agitation,[136] this exhortation to *gaga feminism* channels the tone of a political manifesto (perhaps the most famous one?) not in spite of its overarching humor, but because of it. Rescued from its carnivalesque limitations, humor and parody virtually actualize both crisis and agitation, the latter intended as a response to crisis through the embrace of crisis itself.[137] Almost a palindromic rendition of *ag-itation* with a repetitious intensity, *gaga* is, first and foremost, a reference to Lady Gaga,[138] a Warhol-like figure whose name and ironical, parodic, flam-

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134 Halberstam (2012, 127). See Moten (2018, 112) on the "right to differ that difference bodies forth; the right to refuse right/s, the right to refuse […] the etiolated citizenship and subjectivity that have been refused you, the right to refusal which is the first right."

135 Halberstam (2012, 132) (my emphasis).

136 For agitation as pleasure-through-pain, see Lyotard (1989, 327).

137 Denike (2013, 397) misapplies the category of "carnivalesque" to Halberstam's *gaga feminism.* Rather than the Bakhtinian concept, Rancièrean disagreement seems to me the aptest theoretical comparandum for understanding the comic form of *Gaga Feminism.*

138 As Halberstam (2013, 127) remarks, "The name Gaga, supposedly taken from the Queen song 'Radio Ga-Ga,' signifies the creative mayhem that has spread through our sex/gender systems." See Peters (2012).

boyant, campy performances align her with Dada's *phantasiai,* which are, to an extent, anticipated by Aristophanes' farcical, fanciful, and surreal plots.[139] Furthermore, deriving from the French *gâteux* (a variant of *gâteur,* meaning "senile" and, more specifically, "bed wetter"), the word in the English expression to *go gaga* stems from a word for an incontinent old man, similar to the deranged, agitated comic heroes whom we see disrupt the status quo in Aristophanes' plays. Suggestive of a broken record, the infantile repetition constitutive of *gaga* also brings to mind the extended, cripped "*a*" sonorities of Cinesias's song in *Birds,*[140] perhaps as well as the leakage of a disabled — not grotesque — body that dissolves the line of time while expanding, inhabiting the wildness of crisis, "making things worse."[141] Evoking the verb to *gag, gaga* also encompasses the rupturing of the body in laughter, in the agitated (pleasurable-as-painful) reaction to the comic *gag,* but also the suffocating, claustrophobic effect of forced, "canned" laughter. In the analysis that follows, I return to some of the broad theoretical questions addressed in this book, reading Halberstam's gaga feminism as the comedic discourse, or anti-discourse, of gaga formalism, and I elaborate on the relationship of the comedy of crisis and critical theory, once again making the case for the resistant agitation, the *gagaism,* of Aristophanic formalisms.

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139 Halberstam (2012, xii): "Just as Andy Warhol was a channel for a set of new relations between culture, visibility, marketability, and queerness, so the genius of gaga allows Lady Gaga to become the vehicle for performing the very particular arrangement of bodies, genders, desires, communication, race, affect, and flow that we might [...] want to call gaga feminism." As Hall (2007, 2) points out, "Marcel Duchamp traced the roots of Dada's farcical spirit directly to Aristophanic scenarios." Lacan's Dadaist play with language is integral to his anti-humanist project of retheorizing and revolutionizing subjectivity; see Braune (2018).

140 *anadromos alamenos ham' anemōn…alimenon aitheros aulaka.* See chapter 1 of this volume.

141 On leaking bodies in feminism and disability studies, see esp. Grosz (1994), following Deleuze and Guattari (1994), Shildrick (1997), and Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2013). In using the term "wildness" I am hinting at Halberstam's most recent project, a theorization of the wild, which can be regarded as a direct continuation of *Gaga Feminism.*

The word *gaga* also belongs to a range of sounds that Derrida connects with the word *glas,* which, in turn, shares the phonestheme *gl-* with the keyword of Legacy Russell's recent manifesto, *Glitch Feminism* (2020). In *Clang,* the new translation of *Glas* — Derrida's queer juxtaposition of Hegel and Genet originally published in 1974 — Geoffrey Bennington and David Wills say that "like the event it refers to," that is, a bell ringing, "when the word *glas* is pronounced it begins as a guttural, quasi-metallic […] clamor […] and ends in a type of crystalline vocalic sonority."[142] "Ringing" is one of the most prominent motifs of *Gaga Feminism,* and so is one of its source objects, the iconic telephone in Lady Gaga's queer performance with Beyoncé, which, in Halberstam's words, "burbles and beeps, hiccups and repeats, insistently, calling and ringing, ringing and calling and chaining us all to the charisma of the pop beat even as heterosexuality itself seems like an event in a distant past."[143] Ringing here is the intense murmur of queerness, an ongoing virtuality, which seeps into the musical cadence of Halberstam's language. *Gaga* is also the sound of a queer or wild maternity, as suggested by its echo with *gala, galaxy, galactic* — evocations of "a breast that swells, heaves or palpitates […], pouring out," which Derrida places in dialogue with *glas.*[144] The very name Lady Gaga came about by mistake — as the producer Rob Fusari explains, "I typed 'Radio Ga Ga' in a text and it did an autocorrect so somehow 'Radio' got changed to 'Lady.' […] It was actually a glitch."[145] That word, *glitch,* contains the phonestheme *gl,* a joust between two near-simultaneous touches of the tongue to the glottal rear and front palate of the mouth. Bennington and Wills characterize it as

142 Wills and Bennington in the introduction to Derrida (2021, xvi–xvii).

143 Halberstam (2012, 64). The song and video are Lady Gaga's "Telephone" (2010).

144 Derrida (2021, 177). In the original preface to *Glas,* Derrida casts what he calls "galactics" — "heterogeneous and yet indiscernible in their effects, sometimes to the point of hallucination" — as Genet's maternal alternative to Hegel's paternal dialectics.

145 See Peters (2012, 25).

a vocal contortion, requiring the rapid articulation of two very different phonemes (in phonetic terms a velar plosive […] and an alveolar lateral approximant), to activate the back of the throat and the tongue as it were on the edge of physiological capacity.[146]

As they point out, "One gags or chokes somewhat as one pronounces *gl,* as though one's speech were impaired by a clot of saliva, mucus, milk." Pronouncing *gl* makes one *gag, go gaga,* and it subjects the throat to a strain, as in the laugh provoked by a *gag*. Without explicit reference to Halberstam's 2012 intervention, Russell's *Glitch Feminism* celebrates the glitch — the digital failure — "as a vehicle of refusal."[147] In her words, "the glitch is an activist prayer, a call to action, as we work toward fantastic failure, breaking free of an understanding of gender as something stationary."[148] Just as Derrida and his interpreters see a phonetic, affective, and ideological affinity between *ga-* and *gl-,* an obvious bond emerges between the models of anarchical feminisms envisioned by Halberstam's *gaga* and Russell's *glitch* feminism. As Russell puts it:

> The glitch creates a fissure within which new possibilities of being and becoming manifest. […] Glitch feminism dissents, pushes back against capitalism. […] As glitch feminists, this is our politic: we refuse to be hewn to the hegemonic line of a binary body. […] The glitch is a passage through which the body traverses toward liberation, a tear in the fabric of the digital. […] Glitch […] helps us to celebrate failure as a generative force, a new way to take on the world. […] This diasporic journey of online to offline is a mode of partheno-

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146 Wills and Bennington (2021, xvii).
147 L. Russell (2020, 8). Russell uses the "glitch" to "rene[w] the serious call for new forms of subjectivity that white cyberfeminism dropped" and to point to the possibility of "gestures of digital self-determination," as Husain (2020–21, 100) puts it.
148 L. Russell (2020, 9).

genesis, reproducing oneself without fertilization — splitting, merging, emerging.[149]

The juxtaposition of "merging, emerging" exemplifies the queer reproductive power of the glitch — the latter word emerging from a random extension, an accidental outgrowth after the rapid, short-circuiting succession of "on-" and "off-." Glitchy reproduction — the production of "errors, ever unpredictable," which "point toward a wild unknown"[150] — is similar to the articulatory contortion, "on the edge of physiological capacity," necessitated by *gl.* When Halberstam theorizes the future as not simply what cannot be forecast but what one should refuse to forecast, the verbal rendition of this space of unpredictability — an anti-teleological, *gaga* goal — has the ring of revolutionary tumult, or even exhausting shtick, as it is (de)structured by breathless syntax, which makes us gag through relentless proliferation, a glitchy reproduction:

> As the streets fill with the sounds of protest, the banks lose credibility, the norm falters and collapses under the weight of its own contradictions, at that moment, you will be ready to say that we have all gone well and truly gaga, that we are staying gaga, and that the end of the old rings in a new set of possibilities out of which […] a few paths will lead us not home but into the playing field of a future that we cannot yet see, that we refuse to predict.[151]

A "form of political expression that masquerades as naïve nonsense but that actually participates in big and meaningful forms of critique,"[152] Halberstam's gaga feminism is also an exercise in comic formalism. When we read that "gaga feminism grapples with what cannot yet be pronounced and what still takes

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149 L. Russell (2020, 11, 13, 30, 47).
150 L. Russell (2020, 74).
151 Halberstam (2012, 149).
152 Halberstam (2012, xxv).

the form of gibberish, as we wait for new social forms to give our gaga babbling meaning,"[153] we see how politics—in the emancipatory sense of Jacques Rancière—can be located in the possibilities afforded by such gibberish or gaga babbling. In my readings of *Lysistrata* and *Women at the Thesmophoria,* I have aspired to a formalistic feminism—a feminism through form—that bypasses the twin intentionalisms of biographical or cultural-historical contextualism and of comedy's carnivalesque, un-political irony by emphasizing "what cannot yet be pronounced." This "not-yet-ness," an essential force of radical politics, manifests itself in alternatives of being and becoming that are materialized in bubbling intimations, in provocative, gaga effects of reading or faint intensities—beyond jokes or recognizable puns—which disrupt morphological, syntactical, and conceptual distributions of the sensible. This disruption is emblematized by the crisis of patriarchy that is staged as paronomasia—or glitchy form—in Halberstam's phrase "the men *stumble, bumble,* collapse."[154] In the same prefatory pages in which Halberstam uses wordplay to describe Lady Gaga as a "maestro of media manipulation" and the representative of "an erotics of the surface and an erotics of flaws and flows," we read that gaga feminism is "a monstrous outgrowth of the unstable concept of 'woman' in feminist theory […] and a refusal of the mushy sentimentalism that has been siphoned into the category of womanhood;" it is "the feminism (pheminism?) of the phony."[155] The anarchical force of Halberstam's "abrupt, abrasive"[156] feminism-in-crisis is embedded in phonetic confusion, in the minimal yet significant disruptions—eroticized "flaws and flows"—sparked by slight vocalic exchanges and variations in breath. The juxtaposition of *feminism* and *pheminism* valorizes not only dissensual noise—the Rancièrean *phōnē*

153 Halberstam (2012, xxv).
154 Halberstam (2012, 44) (my emphasis).
155 Halberstam (2012, xii–xiii).
156 Halberstam (2012, 29).

evoked by *phony*[157] — but also, through the embedded *phēmē,* gossip and rumor.[158] These speech acts, disingenuously vilified, in *Lysistrata* and *Women at the Thesmophoria,* as despicable and feminine, form the very texture of comic discourse;[159] in their intensive virtuality and looping persistence, I would argue, they, like gaga feminism and rebellious politics as such, effect change in the modulations that go along with insistent circulation and repetition. The dissensual phoniness that Halberstam exalts invites us to queer Rancièrean *phōnē* and bring out its latencies as comic (non-)discourse[160] — for not only does *phony* evoke the disingenuous posture of the comedian, but it may well be etymologically related with *fun.*[161]

In Halberstamian and Rancièrean terms we could say that *fun* is *disagreement* — to refer to the English translation of Rancière's *Mésentente,* which means "misunderstanding," a "misapprehension," a communicative glitch, or a formal crisis of the sort that comedy capitalizes on.[162] Like *disagreement, fun* disrupts and distorts the *consensus* of unmarked, smoothly flowing language. Drawing attention to itself, it marks a break, activating a lingering aftermath. Fun provokes discomfort in some, while it amuses others. It offends yet entertains. It causes the

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157 Halberstam (2012, 138) refers to "the noisy riot of going gaga." For Rancière's discussion of the Aristotelian opposition of *phōnē* and *logos* in *Politics,* see chapter 1.

158 On the link of *phēmē* (Latin *fama*) with rumor and gossip from antiquity onward, see Hardie (2012).

159 On gossip as a means of egalitarian politics, see Besnier (2009); on female gossip in Aristophanes, see McClure (1999, ch. 6) and Anderson (2003).

160 On the theatricality of Rancière's political theory, see Campion (2000) and Hallward (2006).

161 For an etymological connection between *phoney* and *fun,* see P.S. Cohen's (2011) cogent discussion.

162 For Rancière (1999, x), *mésentente* "is the conflict between one who says white and another who also says white but does not understand the same thing by it." See esp. Panagia (2006, 89). In the last chapter, called a "Gaga Manifesto," Halberstam (2012, 144) explicitly refers to Rancière in connection with the notion of improvisation as "a mode of breaking with the systems of recognition that keep us locked into the properly academic values of competence, legitimacy, and science."

unpredictable pleasure-in-pain of laughter but also ugly feelings (shame, embarrassment, resentment, anxiety, insecurity), which often layer laughter.[163] It makes some feel in the know, while excluding others. It forges alliances but also enmities. Disagreement is fun[164] because by disagreeing, you seem a fool. You are judged "crazy," made fun of or laughed at or turned into a meme. You are not taken seriously. You cause (tragi-)comic melodramas and periodically provoke the question, "Are you joking?"

The tone of Halberstam's theorizing is humorous, funny, ironical,[165] and this fun-as-disagreement constitutes the political not as the carnivalesque — or liberal inclusion-as-containment — but as an infinite, unforeseeable force of (formal) de-actualization. Gaga feminism is, in a sense, a politics of the gag, encompassing the multiple gags devised by Lady Gaga's performative, sartorial flamboyance and also Halberstam's own verbal art — not just obvious jokes, puns, and nonsense, but a spread-out effect of stylistic excess. Halberstam's phonetic unruliness signifies by not signifying and shakes bodies and time. While Halberstam's theorization focuses on gender politics, gagaism casts politics, broadly intended, as a space not of the real, but of the surreal — of a reality potentially defamiliarized or deterritorialized by insurrectionary intensities, by serendipitous comic surges that intimate "what if" scenarios.[166] Gaga-

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163 Berlant and Ngai (2017, 233) characterize comedy as "flirting with displeasure, or […] confusing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes the pleasure." For them, "the funny is always tripping over the not funny, sometimes appearing identical to it" (234).

164 According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* fun originally had the sense of "trick" or "hoax" as a noun or verb and was a dialect variant of Late Middle English *fon* ("make a fool of, be a fool"). Kramer (2011, 163) suggests that "disagreement becomes a necessary component of humor: those who find a joke funny and those who do not are mutually constitutive groups that cannot exist without each other."

165 "I tried to mix it up a little by infusing the conversation with humor, a bit of provocation" (2012, 5).

166 Halberstam (2012, 8–9): "What if some males are ladies, some ladies are butch, some butches are women, some women are gay, some gays are feminine, some femmes are straight, and some straight people don't know what the hell is going on? […] The 'what if' is fun and hopeful but it is also

ism, like Halberstam's book, "opens out into possibilities rather than naming them."[167] These unnamed possibilities inhere in the "stutter steps and hiccups" of gaga expressivity[168] or in the asyndetic infinity of an ongoing acting, a non-punctual action.

As an emblematic instance of the formalism of gaga feminism, of the possibility of giving "loud" expression to "new forms of social relation,"[169] let us take this sequence of hyphenated nouns: "navel-gazing not-very-funny rom-com, sex-with-mom, ho-hum films."[170] These neo-formations capitalize on the gaga agglutinative force of the hyphens, which, "by performing the mid-point […] occupy 'impossible' positions."[171] Ongoing hyphenation can be regarded as a refusal of syntax, as an embodiment of agitation, of a continuous acting never concentrated in a singular pointed action. The hyphen seems to be a privileged carrier of the anarchy that Halberstam calls "the new, gaga wave of feminist frenzy," as we can see in the reference to "flag[ging] some of the differences between Lady Gaga and gaga feminism from the get-go — religion is a no-no and God has got to go-go."[172] *Get-go, no-no, go-go* is a triple hyphenation that breaks and at the same time joins parts. As Jennifer DeVere Brody observes, "The hyphen […] is not a fixed point, but rather a joint — a shifting positionality — a continually collapsing structure," which "locate[s] intermediate, often invisible spaces between what often are supposedly oppositional binary structures."[173] The side effect of the hyphenation is a wild reso-

serious and penetrating and might just bring us to the brink of new ideas about old topics."

167 Halberstam (2012, xiii).
168 Halberstam (2012, 5, 62).
169 Halberstam (2012, 144).
170 Halberstam (2012, 20).
171 Brody (2008, 85).
172 Halberstam (2012, 27, 28).
173 Brody (2008, 85), referring to Homi Bhabha's observation that "the hyphen is the signal of a difference." For Bhabha, the hyphen "is neither One nor the Other but something else besides, in-between." It is "an interstitial future, that emerges *in-between* the claims of the past and the needs of the present" (1994a, 219).

nance (*God* […] *got* […] *go-go*), which lexicalizes "God," as it were, assimilating "Him" to the most ordinary, colloquial idioms. Language seems to be tottering on the edge. As Halberstam observes, "A coming insurrection […] will most likely take us to the edge, to the abyss, to chaos, to a new understanding of anarchy."[174] Halberstam uses similar language to characterize the disruptive, challenging force of Hannah Gadsby — whose name is somewhere between *God* and *gaga* — a queer comedian whose shows "pull us to the brink of hilarity one minute and drop us down into the plough of despond the next." Seeming to adhere to Bataille's idea of "joy in the face of death" — a fall into the abyss that corresponds to the very idea of politics as un-doing, or un-making — Halberstam observes, "I like that she drops us into those deep holes without promising rescue. I appreciate that pleasure is not her only objective, and I love that she is still angry."[175] *God* […] *got* […] *go-go* translates form into a "coming insurrection" — or, we may even say, a "comic insurrection" where comic does not express the non-seriousness of the rebellion, but the deeply anarchic force of its expressive intensity. We could say that the effect of the sequence *God* […] *got* […] *go-go* is a "stutter" — gaga feminism, as Halberstam puts it, is "built around stutter steps, hesitation, knowing and unknowing, embracing your darkness." It is "an anti-marriage, pro-promiscuity feminism, one that does not find comfort in assimilation but demands resistance and transformation."[176] When Halberstam observes that gaga feminism "has no truck with shame or embarrassment, it is for the freaks and geeks,"[177] the very form of the vocally dissonant rhyming phrase — an alliance yet dissociation of unruly marginalities, a jocular difference in repetition that suggests an unruly camaraderie between marginal subjects — casts gagaism as "a journey to the edge of sense."[178] The gaga formalism or the formalistic gag conjured by "freaks

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174 Halberstam (2012, 148).

175 Halberstam (2019).

176 Halberstam (2012, 62). On the stutter, see Deleuze (1997, 107–14).

177 Halberstam (2012, 29).

178 Halberstam (2013, 127).

and geeks" — bodying forth a comic poetic intensity — exemplifies the anarchical social *poiēsis* defined by José Esteban Muñoz as "a being-with, in which various disaffected, antisocial actants [find] networks of affiliation and belonging that [allow] them to think and act otherwise, together, in a social field that was most interested in dismantling their desire for different relations within the social."[179] When Halberstam says that "gaga feminism […] wants to […] give up on the tried and the true […] and […] encourages a move toward […] loony and giddy […] visions of alternative futures,"[180] the formal thickening in "the tried and the true" defamiliarizes the cliché, pointing to a phonetic excess, which shakes up its predictability and implicit normativity, conjuring a surplus intensity that resists and transcends the pre-packaged boundedness of the status quo, the socio-political given that is imposed on us as the inescapably "true."

Formalistic *lusis* ("dissolution") — as in *Lysi-strata* — produces expressive and expressionist camaraderies charged with dissociative power. As Jodi Dean has suggested in her Marxist reconsideration of what she calls "comrade," "[its] power […] is in how it negates old relations and promises new ones — the promise itself ushers them in." "Comrade," as she puts it, "ruptures the everyday world with the challenge of egalitarian modes of acting and belonging"; it is "not a subject" but "a figure of political belonging," a conceptual stand-in for "an aspiration not always fulfilled, but one that comrades can be expected […] to strive for."[181] The stretching of the protest's intense temporality, which is the condition of egalitarian belonging promised by camaraderie, emerges from *Lysistrata* if instead of focusing on the comic muthos ("plot") we choose to heed, up to the end, its gaga formalism, its expressive acting or agitation, as I have called it.[182] When, discussing onstage camaraderie between Yoko Ono and Lady Gaga, Halberstam comments, "Ono and Gaga […]

179 Muñoz (2013, 99).
180 Halberstam (2012, 25–26).
181 Dean (2019, 34–35, 90).
182 See chapter 3 of this volume.

ride a cacophonous tide into a funky frenzy when they howl through 'The Sun is Down,'"[183] the fun reflected in phonic disarray, in playful formal camaraderies — *cacophonous* and *funky frenzy* — spreads out a comic clamor, a surplus of unbound continuous aspiration that is strongly insurrectional, politically charged not in spite of but because of its comic ethos.[184] This non-eventual insurrection, which is encapsulated in the *lusis* in Lysistrata's name, is an ongoing, critical motion between possibility and impossibility that is "*lytic, lytological,* or *philolytic*" (as Derrida describes psychoanalysis).[185] The fun, funky cacophony of Halberstam's comment, like the *lytic* formalistic agitation of *Lysistrata,* announced by the name, confronts us with a "dissociation" of meanings, verbal boundaries, and surfaces, which constantly conjures the prospect "of the dissociative" — the "dissocial unbinding,"[186] a de-formation necessary for camaraderie.

This broadly political dissociation is visualized in the fetishistic appearance in disappearance, in the mobility, interchangeability, and transformation of sexual prostheses that gaga feminism and Aristophanes' gaga formalism similarly embrace. Commenting on the 2009 animated film *Fantastic Mr. Fox,* a queer tale "about a tail-less male in a world of phallic power," Halberstam remarks that "it confirms for us all — butches, femmes, trans men, wild animals, foxes alike — that detachable tails may be in fashion, gender categories always threaten to run wild, and with every shift and change in cultural meanings and mores, endless new possibilities emerge for love, life, and liberation."[187] The triple alliteration of "love, life, and liberation" constructs a camaraderie of heterogeneities, like the interspecies affinities posited by Halberstam, while also circulating the formal *lusis* of proliferating *l's.* Through its own liquidity, the *l*-like verticality of the erect phallus becomes a sprawling hori-

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183 Here Halberstam discusses a concert performed in 2010 at the Orpheum in Los Angeles.
184 Halberstam (2012, 138).
185 Derrida (1998, 27).
186 Derrida (1998, 27).
187 Halberstam (2012, 93).

zontality, and it is ostensibly self-sufficient, solid singularity, a fluid plurality.

A marshy comic form immobilizes and swamps marriage in Halberstam's prose. The crisis of marriage is a dissociative scenario that, in *Lysistrata* and *Women at the Thesmophoria,* persists, as we have seen, in the *lytic* potential of comic form, notwithstanding the normalizing effects at the text's representational level. Likewise, when Halberstam observes that "institutions like marriage are […] taking on water and slowly sinking into the morass of spoiled intimacies and forced nuclearity,"[188] the *lytic* potential of these words lies not just in their content, but in their iconic reproduction of the morass — the cloacal space of batrachopolitics in *Frogs* — through the multiplication of sibilant sounds (*slowly sinking, spoiled*). It is as though the verbal structure itself became the morass and the structure of marriage were immobilized in the paludal muck amid the bubbling and hissing disseminated by the end of the word itself ("mor*ass*"). Form does not simply register the "sinking" of marriage but seems to mobilize a *lytic* phonetic expansion that burblingly submerges it. The word *mor-ass* also brings the poetics of obscenity — à la Aristophanes or Mbembe — into Halberstam's theorization. When we read Halberstam's characterization of "the eligible man" in a heterosexual marriage as "a highly flexible category that manages to incorporate everything from the six-foot-something sporty smarty guy with a sense of humor and a little cash to the twitchy video geek with body odor,"[189] we see the *mor-ass* — an imaginative conflation of the vulgar expletives *mor(on)* and *ass(-hole)* — cover the eligible man's textual body in *s*-sounds, sinking him, along with marriage itself, in the quagmire. The sense of humor ironically ascribed to the "six-foot-something sporty smarty guy" seeps, with the liquid force of the original Latin word, into the very texture of the enunciation, engulfing the marital contract with a slurry of sibilants.

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188 Halberstam (2012, 67).
189 Halberstam (2012, 68).

There is a feminist frenzy in Halberstam's baroque, graphically obscene takedown of the immaculate imaginary of heterosexual marriage:[190]

> The wedding is the "cum shot" of the romantic comedy. With its frothy white dresses, its ecstatic declarations of willingness […], its over-the-top cakes, and its abundance of clothing in unnatural materials, the wedding is the consummation of all the hopes and dreams that young women have been offered along the way to adulthood.[191]

The juxtaposition of "dresses" and "declarations of willingness," referring to a form of *address* to a partner, materializes that word even as the wedding dress symbolizing the conjugal knot cuts off the *ad-* and the relationality that it indicates. In the curtailed dress, consequently, there is a reification of consent, a subordination of "willingness" to the demands of the orgasmic and reproductive telos, and the stifling burden of commodity fetishism and capitalistic accumulation. Yet the ferment of the aspirated sounds in *frothy* engenders a bubbling resistance that is passed into *clothing,* as though the matrimonial fabric of the social were formally heading for disintegration at the very moment of its manufacture. The *rot* (in *froth*) sets in as a fresh beginning immediately slips toward exhaustion and oversaturation.

Halberstam considers romantic comedies' imaginary of marriage as a reservoir of cute objects and plots that are meant to exert power on us — to lure us to sign the conjugal contract — with their disarming sentimentalism or, to be more precise, with the disavowal of power that they seem to represent.[192] As Halberstam observes, referring to "the princesses, the pink toys, the unicorns (phallic symbol, anyone?), the romantic and impossible narrative of femininity":

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190 Halberstam's critique can also be applied to forms of hierarchical calcification that have invested queer marriage as well; see, for example, Eng and Puar (2020).

191 Halberstam (2012, 115–16).

192 On the cute, see Ngai (2012).

> With their cookie-cutter plots, their beefcake leads, and
> their bimbo heroines, romantic comedies want only one
> thing — not the perfect love, the perfect partner, the perfect
> location, they want only a perfect wedding.[193]

In this passage, gaga formalism once again manifests itself as
compulsive, glitchy asyndeton and repetition — this time, turn-
ing around the deceptive logic of cuteness in romantic comedy,
turning the very idea of telos ("perfect […] perfect […] perfect")
into a commodity, another product of comic kitsch. "Perfect"
is like a *parfait* at a wedding banquet, and assimilated to prin-
cesses, pink toys, plots, the "cute" stuff deployed by matrimo-
nial ideology. Combined with repetition, insistent punctuation
(or "overpunctuation") generates a stigmatology — it punctures
language and thereby "threatens, or promises […], a 'decline of
the organizing power' […] on the level of phrasing as much as
on that of political power."[194] Repurposing the "cookie-cutter,"
this stigmatology emblematizes the micro-political resistance
of Halberstam's form, its destructive plasticity, its ability to go
gaga by cutting into the very structures of plots as well sentences
and phrases, releasing intensities of ongoing crisis, anarchically
breaking open the social again and again.

Empowered by the most unexpected and severe crisis, capi-
talism reduces laughter to biopolitical labor. We live at a time of
"canned laughter," as Anca Parvulescu has illustrated, borrow-
ing the phrase from the title of Yoshua Okon's 2009 video instal-
lation, in which a chorus of laughers recreate the soundscape of
American sitcoms. In Parvulescu's account:

> They laugh in unison, mechanically. Some are barely open-
> ing their mouths, some are yawning, some are visibly embar-
> rassed. […] Their facial expressions are often impassive,
> sometimes forced, sometimes pained. There is no laughing

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193 Halberstam (2012, 116).
194 The citation and the expression "overpunctuation" are from Szendy (2018,
  94), referring to Nietzsche.

> sparkle in these laughers' eyes. An abyss is opened between the sound of laughter and the facial expressions of the laughers.[195]

This is an obvious expression of the biopolitical invasiveness of a capitalistic power that has acquired the capacity to control even what would seem impervious to control. As Parvulescu observes, referring to Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "Fake laughter is technologically produced on an industrial scale and is all-encompassing."[196] The reflexive corporeal movements that not even the body's notional owner — the subject — can hope to master become the target of a surveillance system, which monitors and algorithmically feeds us, in a sense dictates, what to do, what to think, and how to love, but also how and when to feel, when and how to laugh.[197] Comedy works through repetition and reproduction, the machinic serialization of jokes and gags, which, as we saw in chapter 2, exposes the comedian, the joke-maker, to the automatism of the assembly line. Okon casts the laughers as workers denied any respite from the exploitative engine of the "laughter factory," but they are also comedians who, like the Aristophanic Xanthias, are never afforded a break from the toils of making us laugh.[198] Whether successfully or not, Aristophanic comedy coerces uncomfortable laughter about people and things that, in many contexts, are no longer considered funny today or that might still provoke laughter, suppressed or otherwise, accompanied by discomfort, shame, or guilt.[199] This coerced laughter can be compared to the canned

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195 Parvulescu (2017, 509).

196 Parvulescu (2017, 525).

197 On the out-of-control somatics of laughter, see Goldhill (2006); on death-driven laughter, see Telò (2020b).

198 Parvulescu (2017, 521–22) connects Okon's "laughter fabric" with the "structured amusement" and the "ordained cheerfulness" that Horkheimer and Adorno see as expression of the "culture industry" (2002, 112).

199 I do not take into account the reactionary point of view that may perversely consider Aristophanes' xenophobic, racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, and transphobic jokes a refreshing push against political

laughter of old sitcoms,[200] laughter that is an uncomfortable, even painful, response to the embarrassment of humorlessness. However, canned laughter does not entirely remove "the hope that the laughter factory is not absolute, that there can be real laughter, if not outside then within the laughter maquiladora."[201] While reading Aristophanes, we might find new angles or edges, discovering that his plays offer ways of laughing at — and pushing against — his laughing machine beyond the self-undermining that, as Aristophanes critics point out, accompanies every aspect of his comedy.

Halberstam regards gaga feminism as a quintessentially postcapitalistic project, a push against the alluring temptation of the reparative, with its invitation to reconcile oneself with the status quo. The formalistic frenzy of gagaism is one way in which queer feminisms can render materially insistent, like a virus that never goes away, "the question that seems most pertinent now, in an era of environmental decline, financial corruption, right-wing populism […]: how do we unbuild the world?" Comic hyper-formalism can be an anti-reparative reminder that "another world is possible, but only when this one ends."[202] Holding democracy accountable as it casts itself as an endpoint or the only viable political system; valorizing disability as a disruption of sensory hierarchy; challenging the inevitability of alienated human labor; reconnecting the temporality of human animals with what can be construed as the achronic time of non-human animals; unsettling, through the undifferentiated time of agitation, the reproductive logic that reduces the female to a disposable foreigner, always left on the border; or contesting the very notion of gender that survives even in some accounts of anti-binarism or fluidity: these are some of the effects of political unbuilding, — of uncanned laughter — that

correctness, whose enemies, with a false sense of victimhood, regard it as a form of Symbolic oppression.

200 The coercive mirth of literal canned laughter seems to have now faded from the soundscape of American sitcoms.

201 Parvulescu (2017, 526).

202 Halberstam in Halberstam and Young (2019).

issue forth from Aristophanes' critical or glitchy formalisms, from the crisis that makes and unmakes his comic style in its minute, even unremarkable or "useless," complexities, a style in the Deleuzian sense. Encryption and remix are, for Russell, two of the distinctive modalities of the glitch, of the digital appearance in disappearance that always threatens to make the normative programming (of language, gender, and state politics) go awry. Just as "the encrypted glitch seizes upon the creation of a self that […] can at once be hypervisible and simultaneously unreadable, undetectable,"[203] Aristophanes' encrypted critical form — the form that crisis takes, a form in crisis — unsettles the divide between visibility and invisibility, readability and unreadability, which can be mapped onto the poles of identity and non-identity, representation and non-representation, affirmation and non-affirmation, integration and dis-integration that animate various domains of contemporary political-theoretical discourse. Extreme episodicity, that is, hyperdivision, or, conversely, barely divided, or divisible, verbal matter, plots, and dramatic temporalities, along with overgrown structures, phonetic and syntactical, create an effect of encryption, which rebels against, or laughs at, the preprogrammed, canned laughter. This comic glitchiness may help bring out a radical "yearning for, and attempted imaginative cultivation of, impossibility."[204] It has the potential to turn politics into a metapolitics that we may aptly call queer, trans[(*)], and feminist. Just as a remix enables information "to be reclaimed, rearranged, repurposed, and rebirthed,"[205] Aristophanes' glitchy, gaga form, or hyperform goes far beyond the logic of the joke, the pun, and the nonsensical, confronting us with possibilities of phonetic reshuffling, ostensibly unremarkable but constituting a virtual process of heterogeneous recombination and remaking, a *super*-real pro-

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203 L. Russell (2020, 85).
204 Bey (2022b).
205 L. Russell (2020, 133).

cess of continuous *poiēsis* of the word and the world — broken
to be rebuilt anew, all over again.[206]

206L. Russell (2020, 113). The point is not that everything is possible but that
"'something else' is possible," as Baumbach (2018, 93) puts it, following
Alan Badiou. Keeling (2019, 84) observes that the emancipatory force of
poetry is "less about bringing about a utopian future and mapping another
world, and more about the access poetry provides to a notion of futurity
as both a promise and a wish, at the same time as poetry unsettles the
assuredness that there is a future as such." I borrow the term "super-real"
from Wolfe (2020, x, xii), who coins it to qualify the "almost unimagi-
nable heterogeneity of living beings," which constitutes the environment
by traversing it with a principle of differential dynamism. For Wolfe, "a
virtual world," presupposed in the auto-*poiēsis* of the world, is "not unreal
but *super*-real."

Epilogue

In "The Future of Criticism," the last chapter of *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History,* Joseph North sees the still-dominant historicist and contextualist paradigm as informed by a neoliberal wish to collapse the humanities into the social sciences, as well as by a normative fantasy of establishing a safe barrier between "then" and "now." For North, this anti-contextualism ought to carry with itself the radicality of aesthetic immersion, of valorizing the impressionism rejected or disavowed by historicist hermeneutics — that is, the attentiveness to the idiosyncratic effects, or the particular, unruly pressures exercised by an art object on our perceptive apparatus in the moment. The social-scientific neoliberal politics of the "useful" can and should be countered by a full, fearless reevaluation of what, referring to D.A. Miller's practice of criticism as a practice of stylish reading of style, North calls "the affective intimacy of the critic's own subjective inwardness with the text"[1] — a strategy, I would add, for effects of readings whose unruliness, beyond conventional notions of the useful, is precisely the metapolitical message. This book has been intended as a contribution not only to Aristophanic criticism, but to the practice of literary criticism as such. Over-reading; lingering on comic hyperform; an inter-

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1   North (2017, 167).

pretive cathexis to phonemes and graphemes and to morpho-
logical and syntactical disruptions — these are the constituents
of my own version of critical investment as affective intimacy, as
a politically charged, critical-theoretical refusal of the constric-
tions of historical plausibility, of the internalized imperatives of
a never fully abandoned intentionalism. Far from resulting in
apolitical aestheticism, this anti-contextualism — a program-
matic inhabitation of criticism-as-crisis — is the first step in
locating unexpected possibilities of metapolitical unruliness, in
performing the minor or minoritarian gesture of unconditio-
ally embracing the imaginative potentialities of the literary. As
Sarah Dowling observes, literary criticism — whether avowedly
contextualist or not — seems to be predicated on the idea that
"when close reading, one should get close — but not too close!
One should be sensitive — but not histrionic."[2] We can say that,
in this book, I offer an alternative approach to Aristophanes,
one of the most linguistically sensitive yet underappreciated
political writers of Western literature, by making a case for what
I would now call an "over-sensitive" reading — fully reclaiming
this highly political term, which has been, and still is, deployed
to dismiss the traumatic feelings of women, people of color, and
LGBTQIA+ people.[3]

Through over-sensitive intimacy with Aristophanic hyper-
form, or, more precisely, by bringing this hyperform — the com-
plex of phonetic, phonesthetic, graphic, morphological, and

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2   Discussing the relation between crisis and criticism in Paul de Man,
     Herbrechter (2017, 324) observes: "There is never enough distance and
     never enough proximity in criticism and that exactly is its crisis, but this
     circumstance is precisely that which makes it critical 'in the first place.' The
     'crisis of critical distance' is therefore constitutional, aporetic, necessary; it
     cannot be avoided and must therefore be engaged, and engaged critically
     of course. And thus the crisis perpetuates and legitimates itself." See the
     Introduction.

3   On hypersensitive reading, see Neyra (2020a, 129), who intends "sensitive"
     in the etymological meaning of "sensory, sensorial." In valorizing what
     they call a "hypersensitive synesthetic reading method," Neyra advocates
     a reading strategy "open to the multisensorial and out-of-place effects of a
     migratory poetics' itinerant sensorium."

syntactical fractures claiming attention at the expense of jokes and funny nonsense — into ongoing and shifting being through oversensitivity, I am interested in discovering the metapolitics impressed upon the "clang" of language. *Clang* (2021) — the new English translation of Derrida's *Glas* (1974) — captures the feel of affirmative processes of de-formation that emerge from my exercise in overanalysis and perhaps in the mimetic texture of my own writing, in which I have sought, for example, to heed Cinesias's fractured rhythm of crip time in *Birds* and to track a rebellious intensified *acting* (or agitation) in *Lysistrata* through the reverberations of *cholos* ("anger") in *ōchelōie* ("o river Acheloos"), *ochlos* ("mob"), and *mochlos* ("bold"). "Clang" is the name I give to the languaging of language — its processuality, churning beyond bounded and distinct contours, and its "actative" dimension, the proliferation of self-undoing motions that en*act* it.[4] While my method is utterly specific, concerning particular lines, particular words, even particular phonemes from individual plays by Aristophanes, it simultaneously opens up into critical-theoretical generality — tracing the ways that folded within particulars are concerns with much greater extension.[5] The de-formations that shape the hyperformalistic *clang* of Aristophanic comedy have a *poiētic* force, a world-making force that exceeds the unresolvable oscillation between subversion and disciplinary containment that is intrinsic to the thematics of comic utopia. My attention to what might be called "defiant sonic ruptures of sense," "audio-visual shapes of insurrection,"[6] "smooth glitches,"[7] or "expressive movements, paralinguistic signs, breaths and screams"[8] is a way to bring out and inhabit,

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4   I thank Andrew Benjamin for suggesting this Heideggerian language.

5   Here I am employing the language of one of my anonymous readers.

6   I borrow this phrase from Neyra (2020a, xii, 34), on auscultation as "a performative, critical-sensual, visceral-formalist listening" in relation to Latinx performances of resistance.

7   Weheliye (2014, 131), on alternatives to normative forms of human life.

8   Lamarre (2002, 165), citing Deleuze (2003) on Francis Bacon.

even within the constraints of comedic discourse, the possibility of impossibility — the very definition of radicality.[9]

The book's programmatic languaging involves *lingering, longing* (or languishing), and *long* analyses.[10] Contextualism's tendency to dismiss "overanalysis" goes along with an anti-political, quietist, even conservative view of literary criticism that is evident in certain expressions of reparative reading. According to Corey McEleney, the resistance to overanalysis is an expression of productive frenzy, of the fear of going in circles, of moving in a labyrinth without accomplishing, that is, without producing, anything.[11] While the pandemic has not come close to ending, and in some respects has reinforced, capitalism, it has, at least, offered us a glimpse of the possibility of reinventing the structures of the social, of reconfiguring the borders of productivity and non-productivity, of interrupting the debilitating continuity of labor and work with moments of *paralysis. Para-lysis* can be re-etymologized as the dis-ability that, while making us stuck, loosens us, unties us from the constriction of productivity, from the bounded organization of pre-pandemic life.[12] Just as disability forces us to imagine re-arrangements of corporeality that make space for the unstructured, the loose,

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9 Stanley (2021, 24): "To be radical is […] not to want to go back to a prelapsarian image of perfection, but rather to seek that which can be possible — or maybe even to seek that which is *im*possible." See also Nersessian (2020, 46): "Poetry will inevitably stutter and stumble when faced with the question of how to get there from here, of how to grasp at the lineaments of a future that must be nascent in the present and that the present almost utterly conceals."

10 Hanson (2012) explores the phonetic resonances of *language* with *longing, longer, linger, languid, languish,* and *languor* to articulate a "critical intention" that is "not demystification or suspicion, but rather appreciation for the form of a sustaining object [i.e., literature] as it inhabits and shapes, however tenuously, our conscious experience in the present."

11 McEleney (2021).

12 See Ibrahim and Ahad (2022, 9), on "rest" as "the imperative to bring the unceasing, inhuman time of global capitalism to a grinding halt by (re)claiming the capacity to be more fully human" and expressing "a refusal to exist in a state of constant emergency/urgency."

and for what has been called "crip temporality,"[13] the *para-lysis* caused by overanalysis can turn reading into a deterritorialized space or a space of deterritorialization, a space where we can test and inhabit the possibilities of achrony, of para-lyzed or para-tactical temporalities, as it were, without fantasizing a *re*-turn, a *re*-storation.

Deeply attached to what Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda have called "a paranoid microscopism of the detail,"[14] I embrace the principle that over-reading can be a way to dramatize pan(en)demic achrony, but also to see this achrony as an opportunity for a refoundation of the status quo instead of simply repairing the wounds provoked by the "event." In the introduction to a special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* entitled "Black Temporality in Times of Crisis," Habiba Ibrahim and Badia Ahad have observed, "2020 will forever exist for us not only as a moment of crisis but also as a time of visceral temporality […], as the experience of time's (simultaneous) expansion and compression, felt through the slow time of monotony, the racing time of anxiety, the cyclical time of mourning."[15] Whether through the hyperepisodicity of crip time, undifferentiation, agitation, or transitivity and un-becoming — the kinetic forces I track in this book to connect ancient comedy with contemporary debates on disability, democracy, labor, refugees, reproduction, transness — Aristophanic form and its oblique critical-theoretical legacy generate a discontinuous ongoingness, a non-eventual future. While I concur with Eugenie Brinkema that "the point of radical formalism is not merely to displace contextualist readings, but to […] launch the speculative potential of texts, one only available through readings that proceed without guarantee,"[16] I insist, differently from her, on claiming a political impetus for this (post-)critical endeavor.[17]

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13 See chapter 1 of this volume.

14 Comay and Ruda (2018, 7), on the dash in Hegel.

15 Ibrahim and Ahad (2022, 2).

16 Brinkema (2022, 260).

17 See Telò (2024c).

Aristophanes' discomforting laughter may often feel forced, imposed on us, regardless of our desires and sensibilities.[18] This quality of feeling "forced" may lead some of us approaching Aristophanes today to conclude that his laughter has lost its edge. I have embarked on a different path for reading this corpus of uncomfortable texts politically, for understanding comic form as a crisis — a constant process of undoing — which vibrates with overdetermined sensations, with bursting intensities or surges of redirected laughter or resistant non- or anti-laughter. In an article on the challenges of teaching Aristophanes to undergraduates, Ralph Rosen and John Given have remarked, in opposition to the tendency to privilege a historicist, contextualizing pedagogy:

> Students and teachers of Aristophanes need not (only) contemplate a foreign world through a distance of time and space. They need not (only) treat the classical world as a stationary relic to be observed and learned. The amusement of Aristophanes' plays need not be understood and experienced (only) by placing his jokes and situations into their original cultural context. […] Translations — and classrooms — need to allow for non-historicist modes of reception.[19]

In this book, I point to possibilities of locating the pleasures and discomforts of Aristophanic comedy beyond the logic of the joke, within a verbal disabling, a metapolitically charged hyperform, a languaging that is a rendition of the affective contradictions of laughter. Channeling resistant form into a translation may be impossible, but a translation accompanied by a transliteration may become a more effective way to bring students of Aristophanes close to Aristophanic comedy, to direct them to the possibilities of counterintuitive thinking fostered by its pho-

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18 See Ahmed (2010, 87), on the joke as a crisis: "I might hear the joke, and when I register what has been said, I might find that I do not find it funny, or even that I find it offensive. When I hear the joke, it becomes a crisis. […] If I stop laughing, I withdraw from bodily intimacy."

19 Rosen and Given (2016, 94).

netic, syntactical, and structural crises, by its material approximation to the radicality of impossibility.

In the context of the so-called crisis of the humanities, reading Aristophanes may help us see the humanities as a space not just for coping with but even for valorizing crisis, for rejecting clear resolutions (like the apparent crystallization of the artifices of comic languaging into jokes), and for staging a continuing encounter with the "perhaps," the "if," and the "limit" and the "border" of language, thought, and politics.[20] According to Derek Attridge, "the particular value of literature […] lies in that event whereby closed thoughts, feelings and ways of behaving and perceiving, are opened up to that which they have excluded."[21] Aristophanic hyperform destabilizes comedy's exclusionary practices, its axiological hierarchies of *in* and *out,* and its constitutive dialectic of discipline and subversion through a kind of expressive disability and abolition — the negative power of a minoritarian, impersonal *poiēsis,* neither serious nor ironical, which is insistent and resistant, always at a critical moment, always at the limit, always in crisis.

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20 Derrida (2002c, 236).
21 Attridge (2015, 254–55).

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