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Susan Meiselas, "Family members wear the photographs of Peshmerga martyrs, Saiwan Hill cemetery," Northern Iraq, December 1991, from the series *Kurdistan*. Courtesy of the artist.

Women Mobilizing Memory

EDITED BY

Ayşe Gül Altınay and María José Contreras, Marianne Hirsch, Jean Howard, Banu Karaca, and Alisa Solomon

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18. Ariza, "Antígona," 262.
19. On October 2, 2016, Colombia voted "NO" on its plebiscite for peace, closing the doors to a ceasefire between the government and the FARC. Setting aside the economic and political interests involved in this popular decision, it was disheartening to consider that violence could keep wounding the country. Later that year, President Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC's leader Rodrigo Londoño signed a Peace Treat that is currently in its implementation process.
20. Patricia Ariza was cultural representative to the *Unión Patriótica* (UP), a leftist movement that started to gain power in the mid 1980s in Colombia. Paramilitary death squads started targeting UP's members, kidnapping, disappearing, and killing hundreds of them—a state-sponsored crime that remains unpunished. Ariza received death threats but refused to leave Colombia and kept working in spite of the terror campaign against her comrades. Teresa Ralli, in turn, as well as her fellow partners of Yuyachkani, received death threats during the years of violence in Peru. It is hard to say where those threats came from, since Yuyachkani's work denounces both terrorist acts and state crimes. In different interviews they have said that they had to live with their passports ready to flee the country at any time. In spite of fear, they also stayed in Peru making theater and making memory.
21. In a volume edited by Erin B. Mee and Foley, *Antigone on the Contemporary World Stage* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), Mee proposes that theater productions are potential places "where Ismenes can be transformed into Antigones" (126). The "universality" of the play, Mee and Foley point out, must be traced in what theatrical productions *do* instead of on what literature *means*. In this sense, Antigone's rebellious gesture would set in motion a series of connections and associations every time it is staged. *Antigone* calls for theatrical productions, embodied actions, street interventions, public mourning: *Antigone* is an invitation to put the body in motion, especially in contexts of authoritarianism and political repression. This is the case, for example, for *Antigone in Shatila*, performed by a group of Syrian women who are refugees in the camp of the same name. "Before we were introduced to Antigone's story, we felt alone," says one of the performers. "Then we realized these tragedies keep happening throughout history and it gave us the courage to speak out. Together we feel stronger and more confident," qtd. in Kirsty Lang, "The Tragedy Giving Hope to Syria's Women," *BBC News*, July 5, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33362642. Yet again, the strength of the collective resides in the encounter of multiple acts of resistance.

CHAPTER XXI

Theater of the Mothers

Three Political Plays by Marie NDiaye

NOÉMIE NDIAYE

When, in 2003, *Papa doit manger* (*Daddy Gotta Eat*) was performed at the Comédie Française, Marie NDiaye became, at age thirty-five, the second female playwright and the first female playwright of color to enter the repertoire of the flagship national theater since Molière's company founded it in 1680. With her, intersectional feminist dramaturgy entered the French canon. Undoubtedly, Marie NDiaye's most popular plays to date are *Hilda* and *Daddy Gotta Eat*; yet she articulates her vision of theater as a political force most powerfully in a corpus of less well-known plays comprised of *Providence* (2001), *Les Serpents* (*Snakes*) (2005), and *Les Grandes personnes* (*Grown-Ups*) (2011).

Marie NDiaye's reflection on political theater hinges on a motif that has haunted her plays for almost two decades: the motif of sacrificial mothers who seek forgiveness for horrendous crimes committed against their children. The mothers participated or feel that they participated in those crimes, be it rape, abuse, or murder. They carry the memories of those crimes, and those memories compel them, long after the event, to seek reparative ritualistic resolutions. Only cathartic rituals will relieve them of their traumatic memories and of guilt. This quest, however, opposes them to a tight-knit civic community always recognizable as an instantiation of the French nation, although its scale varies from play to play. Indeed, the community always had a hand in the crimes for which each mother seeks atonement, but, unlike the mothers, it refuses to remember or acknowledge

those crimes. Ultimately, the community destroys the mothers: the plays deny them reparative resolutions and turn them into sacrificial scapegoats who carry the communal burden of memory.

This recurrent motif clearly critiques the patriarchal social forces that silence women and enforce oblivion in order to protect rapists, racists, pedophiles, domestic abusers, and murderers in today's France. But in this essay, I argue that, within NDiaye's critique of patriarchal forces, the motif of sacrificial mothers also interrogates the role of political theater itself. Indeed, the particularly theatrical nature of the rituals devised by the mothers turns them into *mises-en-abîme* of theater. What does it mean, then, that those rituals always abort? If theater does not give grieving mothers what they seek, then whose interests does it serve? Whose interest can it serve? Can theater be a reparative process for victims on stage and off? Yes, it can, Marie NDiaye tells us, but only if it starts by reckoning with its own potential harmfulness.

Given Marie NDiaye's reluctance to elucidate the intentions of her plays or to comment on their politics, it is up to spectators to identify the ethical positioning of her works.[1] My own interpretive strategy consists in using the motif of sacrificial mothers as a key to unlock the ethical universe of NDiaye's feminist theater. The fate of the sacrificial mothers who are denied the possibility of completing their theatrical ritual and are subsequently executed not only critiques gender-based violence; it also critiques the ways in which theater can fail women. Indeed, what I call Marie NDiaye's Theater of the Mothers is a theater that reckons with the reality of *systemic* patriarchal oppression. By definition, a critique of systemic oppression exposes how all institutions participate in that oppression—and theater *is* an institution, especially, but not exclusively, when it is performed at the Comédie Française. Thus, part of the Theater of the Mothers' work is to expose the ways in which theater, theatricality, and performance themselves often collude with patriarchal social forces on stage and off. In other words, the feminist ethics of Marie NDiaye's theater bring with them a rare degree of self-scrutiny.

Self-scrutiny and self-consciousness also define the esthetics of that theater. Indeed, rather than using "the conventions of a chosen theatrical form," as most political plays do, NDiaye's plays use the conventions common to *all* theatrical forms "to emphasize, reveal, and criticize the ideology serving as the social background of human actions or situations, to locate alternative discourses to the one preferred by the ruling ideology, and to liberate human consciousness from its circular binding to mythical formations."[2] They use the very building blocks of the theater's episteme—performance, spectatorship, substitution, repetition—as metaphors to make visible and indict oppressive patriarchal social scripts. In the most recent play of our corpus, *Grown-Ups*, Marie NDiaye even uses one of those building blocks, conjuration, to imagine alternative social scripts. In short, the Theater of the Mothers puts the core devices of theater to productive use. Following the chronological order of *Providence*, *Snakes*, and *Grown-Up*, I will bring to light Marie NDiaye's feminist intervention in the tradition of political theater by using a critical lens rarely brought to bear on her work: the lens of theater and performance studies.

Providence (2001)

Providence, a beautiful young woman described as a she-devil with cloven hooves, was gang-raped by the inhabitants of the generic French village where the play is set. All the other characters of the play are nameless, only identified by their profession. An additional character, "the Question-asker" (*le questionneur*), interviews them throughout the play, trying to piece out what happened to Providence and to extract the truth from reluctant or unreliable informants.[3] Reading between the lines, the audience understands that everybody in the village either participated or watched the rape, including the women, whose enduring libidinal fixation on Providence is unnerving. A child was born from that rape, and Providence lost her. She claims that the villagers took her; the villagers claim that Providence fed her newborn to pigs. Whichever version is true, Providence was subsequently institutionalized.

At the beginning of the play, a number of years later, Providence returns to the village, knocking on every door to get her child back. But in vain. She then devises a new plan: "seeking justice," she demands that the man who fathered her child be delivered to her, hoping, in her state of psychological distress, that her child will be returned to her at the same time (43). That plan must follow a specific script:

> I want the father of my child to come forward. I want that man, who lives in the village, who is one of you, to stop masquerading as an honest citizen. I want him to walk up to Providence's house, alone: let

him climb up the hill, alone, under everyone's gaze. . . . I want him to walk up to me and admit that he is the father of the child I seek. . . . He must come forward and expose himself, so that the whole village might see him walk towards me, and understand what it means. . . . The father shall show himself: such amends might bring my child back. . . . Tell your parishioners I'll be waiting. (46–50)

An act that can bring back the dead is nothing short of a sacred ritual. A simple movement (stepping forward) engaging two protagonists will be performed on an elevated platform (up the hill) and will be observed by an audience (the whole village) that will interpret that action and "understand what it means." If, as Richard Schechner puts it, theater and rituals differ only by virtue of the context in which they are performed and the function that they emphasize (efficacy versus entertainment), when Providence wishes to have this ritual performed on what Marie NDiaye's spectators know is a theatrical stage, she imagines a perfect hybrid: a theatrical ritual.[4]

Yet when the time to perform this theatrical ritual comes, nothing unfolds as scripted:

INSURER: You expected someone important, but here comes a whole crowd of important people: the butcher, the innkeeper, the real estate agent, the gym teacher, the notary, the priest, the biology teacher, the middle school assistant principal, the baker, the antiquary. Ay! A whole army of shopkeepers and notables is climbing through the broom shrubs, silent and grave, to fight this war . . .

PROVIDENCE: Help me, insurer! I cannot take them all. They come to kill me because they fear me . . . They come to kill me because they took my child. Oh God. No jokes, please. Here they come! (68–70)

Those who were supposed to watch ignore the script and act instead. Theatrical rituals fail Providence: she never gets to know the identity of her child's father, catharsis is thereby denied her, and the community murders her. For that community, however, Providence, originally a foreign element adopted by a childless local gentry couple, had remained a "monstrous error" (55) "infecting" (58) the village. From the community's viewpoint, her murder is only a cleansing ritual.[5] Providence's theatrical ritual is thus aborted and replaced with a ritual murder that rids the village of foreigners and the obligation to remember past crimes.

The final scene of *Providence* further shows how rituals can be used to patriarchal ends. In that short scene, the character of the "waitress," a young woman who has had "a hard life," confesses her sins to the priest, presumably in a Catholic confessional (52). The waitress—who may or may not be Providence's lost daughter—was abandoned by her father, and her mother was "mad" (59). She was then abused by her fostering relatives, taken advantage of by her landlord, and unfairly treated by the judicial system. Her speech patterns are full of nonsequiturs that cast doubt on her mental health. The priest, hardly listening to her pleas for help, responds: "Yes, yes, you've already said that. You must pray a little. Everything will get better . . . Young woman, aren't things getting better already? No one ever loves troublesome people. Pray hard and save yourself, save yourself!" (71–72). The priest—who just participated in the collective murder of Providence—is here using the ritual of confession to keep the waitress in check, to stop her from following in the footsteps of "troublesome people" like Providence. In the collective execution scene and in the private confession scene, the play shows how efficiently rituals can function as oppressive patriarchal mechanisms while aborting the one scenario—Providence's intended theatrical ritual—in which they might have been reparative tools for victims.

If *Providence* stages instances in which rituals serve oppressive purposes, it also exposes how certain spectatorial behaviors can lead audience members to collude with the patriarchal social forces that they think they oppose both on and off stage. Indeed, Providence's collective execution plays out as a repetition of the collective rape scene, placing the audience in the voyeuristic position that was the position of the villagers during the rape. This seems all the more true since the rape itself was turned into a commercial spectacle at the time: "You are telling me that the whole village *paid to watch*?" (66). At the end of the play, NDiaye's audience finds itself in an ethically problematic position that aligns them with the rapists rather than the victim. That troubling alignment is one way the play critiques a passive and voyeuristic type of spectatorship.

That critique is particularly palpable in the itinerary of the "Question-asker." The Question-asker, I argue, is a stand-in for the play's spectators who, like him, wish to piece out Providence's story. Coming "from the capital," the Question-asker is "a stranger" to the village (29). He is described as "elegant, well-read, sun-tanned, and, like us, deeply hostile to emotionality, tobacco, and old religions (but extremely sympathetic to new ones, whatever they be)." He is an "eloquent" man with "the forehead of an informatician" (31).

Although he is listed as present in four scenes, we never hear the Question-asker: he does not intervene. He only exists on stage through other characters' acknowledgement of his presence. His interviewees answer in real time questions that are never voiced but merely reported with phrases such as: "Our visitor asks" (38), "Our host keeps repeating" (38), "Our host says that" (41), "He asks why" (57). Why do audience members never get to see or hear the Question-asker? Because they *are* the Question-asker, I would suggest. Although a conservative mise-en-scène will use an actor to embody the Question-asker (as Marc Liebens did when he created the play at the Théâtre Kléber-Méleau in Renens, Switzerland), an interesting directorial choice would be to cast the audience as the Question-asker, having characters turn to the auditorium when they must listen to him.

A stand-in for spectators, then, the Question-asker starts out as Providence's ally, seeking the truth to defend her. Yet his moral authority is gradually undermined, as his scopophilia, his obscene appetite for graphic details, becomes more and more palpable:

> Here is someone who wishes you well. This gentleman would like to ask you some questions. He wants to know everything, to find out everything about you. You have to tell and show us what is still hidden . . . Providence, he wants to split you open from head to toe, to gut you so as to know you, and to love you best. Yeah, that's what it's about: love! Pure love! He will open you up slowly, and . . . he will watch. (60)

The violence of the metaphors used here and their affinities with sexual violence are striking. The Question-asker burns to engage in voyeuristic spectatorship despite his denial:

> They told him . . . they say there was blood dripping down your right leg. He hates having to picture that, but he has to, if he is to seek the truth. He says he feels like crying. But, he also says it is good to feel that kind of sting in your eyes, to be moved by the suffering of a brave girl who was sacrificed. (67)

Marie NDiaye has no tolerance for voyeuristic spectatorship. Her protagonist, Providence, senses the kinship between the Question-asker and the rapists, and she rejects him altogether. When the villagers walk up the hill and Providence begs the insurer for help, he advises her to turn to the Question-asker:

> INSURER: You are mistaking me for the man who loves you and fears for you. Look, here he is.
> PROVIDENCE: I do not want him to save me from those below. I'd rather die. Nothing surrounds me; I sense no warmth from him. (69–70)

The Question-asker and the audience he stands for are discarded as potential saviors for Providence, because their solidarity ends in complicity. With the figure of the Question-asker, the play uses a building block of the theater's episteme—spectatorship—to make visible and indict the voyeuristic social script that turns bystanders into passive accomplices of patriarchy off stage.

Providence was Marie NDiaye's first play, adapted from a children's tale she had published a year earlier, *La Diablesse et son enfant* (*The She-Devil and Her Child*).[6] As she carried out this work of transmediation, Marie NDiaye engaged, I argue, not only with the literary genre of drama but also with the notions of theatricality and performance at large. *Providence* exposes how rituals can be co-opted for oppressive patriarchal purposes (purges, confession) outside the playhouse and how easily uncritical spectators can remain just that, passive bystanders complicit with violence, rather than agents of change, both inside and outside the playhouse. As Marie NDiaye's Ur-sacrificial Mother, Providence tragically intervenes in the tradition of political theater to point out the Achilles heel of that tradition: passive spectators.

Snakes (2005)

Marie NDiaye turned her attention from the dynamics of spectating to those of acting when she resumed her reflection on political theater four years later. In *Snakes*, Nancy reckons with her decision to leave her abusive husband and to abandon to him her little boy, Jacky. About ten years after the deed, she comes back to her ex-husband's house, lost in the middle of cornfields. Little Jacky has long been dead. His father used to beat him regularly, hard enough to stunt the boy's growth. "He made the boy pay for your absence, and he would tell him: let your mother come visit you and stop my arm. Nothing else would, and Jacky probably knew it too."[7]

But Nancy never visited the son she left behind: "How could I have come visit? I was terrified of him" (36). The father eventually purchased vipers and put little Jacky in charge: he had to feed them, clean their cage, and sleep in it. The plan worked: the boy died, and his grandmother, Madame Diss, comments that her son "sacrificed the boy to the goddess of vipers" (75). Nancy had learned about her son's death but had remained too scared to visit his grave until the play begins.

What appears at first to be an intimate family drama very quickly turns into a critique of French patriarchy at large. At the center of that critique stands the figure of a father-ogre who is never seen directly but is felt through his effects on the women of the play: his wives, past and present, and his mother. That the father-ogre is a synecdoche of the patriarchal social system at large is buttressed by various allusions to the French nation. The father-ogre's new wife, for instance, is called France, a name that transparently conjures up the country, while Nancy is named after the regional capital of Lorraine. As for Madame Diss, her name evokes the acronym of the Direction des Interventions Sanitaires et Sociales, the administrative branch overseeing French Child Protection Services—the evocation is quite ironical, since she witnessed her grandson's abuse without intervening. By virtue of their names, the women evoke the nation and its institutions. Moreover, the play takes place on July 14, the national holiday commemorating the storming of the Bastille during the French Revolution, which gives its actions, as private as they may seem, larger political implications.

"I have just stopped being afraid of his father," Nancy informs Madame Diss, whom she finds on the threshold of the house when the play begins (37). Nancy is now able to come back and to perform a specific theatrical ritual:

> Today is fireworks day, and it is also the anniversary of the boy's death. I have come so that his father and I might visit his grave—there's a grave, right? So that, together, we might bow down very low to the boy's little soul (since he is not here anymore) and apologize, so that he might forgive us. Then I'll go, and I will never come back again. We will have done what we had to. The father simply must agree . . . We can still go to the graveyard before the fireworks—there's a graveyard, right? There is still time. We will apologize to the poor boy . . . We may not know how to do it well, but we will kneel down, because we failed, we failed him, our son, our little Jacky. (39–41)

Imagining specific movements ("bowing down very low" and "kneeling") for the performers of a ritual that shall procure forgiveness and closure, Nancy, like Providence, is imagining a theatrical ritual on a day of remembrance both at the private and at the national level. And just like Providence, she sees that theatrical ritual abort when one of the protagonists, the father, refuses to participate and remains inside his house (spectators never see him at any point in the play). Frustrated, Nancy starts another ritual with the one person who does come in and out of the father's house: his new wife, France. Nancy grows delusional and increasingly desirous to reclaim her place in a reformed version of the hellish household: "I want to be there. With the authority I can command now, within the house, I want to dominate him softly with my arms, to make him fear me a little, and to love his children, to scold them, and raise them. I want to be there, and I want little Jacky to be there too" (58). In Nancy's fantasies, past and present merge. Meanwhile, France grows ready to leave her husband, but she is concerned about leaving her two children with the husband. Nancy promises to raise them for her: "I will take care of them and love them as much as you do. They won't see the difference" (68). The prospect becomes irresistible when Nancy learns that one of France's children is called Jacky.

The two women decide to substitute for each other, as if their lives were theatrical parts that can be infinitely exchanged between two actresses. They start by exchanging names: Nancy will be called France, and vice-versa. In her production of *Snakes* at the Théâtre des Quartiers d'Ivry in 2008, director Youlia Zimina insisted on the metatheatrical dimension of the life swap between the two women. Zimina reports that the costumes worn by the two "divas" throughout the performance were "very operatic," gowns with angular geometrical shapes, long glistening trains, false eyelashes applied upside down, and buskins—a nod to the tragic tradition.[8] The metamorphosis of France and Nancy into one another was staged as follows. The stage set used light bulbs to represent the start of the corn field in front of the house: the light bulbs were re-arranged to evoke a dressing-room where Nancy and France could put on one another's operatic costumes. This metatheatrical role-swap launched a never-ending cycle of substitutions.

After substituting for Nancy, France lets Madame Diss direct the course of her life:

MADAME DISS: You will re-marry. Find a nice man.
FRANCE: As you wish.

MADAME DISS: You will have a couple more children.
FRANCE: Yes, I will.
MADAME DISS: I will introduce you to my third husband. I know he happens to be single at the moment . . . He still loves me, so you will have to share him with me, but you'll have power over his decisions. (76)

Obeying directions, France substitutes for Madame Diss in the bed of her former husband, Tony. After things collapse with Tony and France gets a new man, Madame Diss substitutes for France in the new man's bed, and France comments: "What you did is not done! To seduce methodically each of your daughter-in-law's lovers!" (88). In the last scene of the play, France complains that this series of substitutions has harmed her greatly. To make up for it, Madame Diss suggests a final substitution, encouraging France to seduce her son's father: the ogre's father. As spectators watch France walk away to execute Madame Diss's final command, they realize that this brings France back to the beginning of the substitution cycle, and, most likely, back to a situation of domestic abuse. Indeed, when Madame Diss recalls that the abuser's father had "a sharp wolfish face," France responds, "Like his son" (91). Yet coming full circle is not the end: even that final substitution contains the promise of more substitutions. France's last words before she exits are: "I will come back" (92). If indeed she comes back to the house after the play ends, France will, once again, turn into Nancy.

The metatheatrical cycle of substitutions leads France to psychological disintegration and Nancy to physical destruction. Scene VI is set inside the house. Nancy's voice guides us: contrary to what she anticipated, the house is dark, all openings are closed and sealed, children are nowhere to be seen: "there's nothing here, no one any longer, and no child to make mine with my love" (83). Finally, fear overcomes her anew: "I thought I had become immune to fear, but I'm scared, I'm scared . . . What and how is it going to be? This house smells of death, and he will eat me last" (84). The father had repeatedly been described as an ogre: we understand now that the house is part of him—the room, dark, sealed, empty, smelling of death, is the ogre's stomach.[9]

With its cycle of role-swaps, the play uses the theatrical devices of substitution and repetition to make visible and indict the social scripts that enable the relentless reproduction of domestic abuse in a patriarchal society, in this case in contemporary French society. Indeed, when France expresses

concerns about the children she is leaving behind with the father-ogre, Madame Diss comments that they will be sacrificed "to the mysterious god of the fireworks!" (75). But who is the "mysterious god of the fireworks" shot on Bastille Day, if not the French Republic itself? Zimina's mise-en-scène suggested that Nancy too was sacrificed to that national god by using sound effects: the audience heard the fireworks right after Nancy's final words. As Nancy disappeared into the stomach-house, fireworks boomed and celebrated her death; the god manifested its contentment. The configuration of Nancy's murder suggests that it is sanctioned by the French Republic, a community that protects and enables domestic and child abuse by means of various social scripts that demand interruption, but, in this work, grimly continue to be recycled. Turning her attention from spectating to acting, in *Snakes*, Marie NDiaye used the core theatrical devices of substitution and repetition as metaphors to make visible and indict the dynamics of domestic abuse.

Grown-Ups (2011)

Marie NDiaye resumed her reflection on political theater with her next single-authored play, *Grown-Ups*, in 2011. While that play continues the grim critique of theater's participation in systemic patriarchal oppression that is inherent in the motif of sacrificial Mothers, it also goes beyond critique and offers some alternative possibilities.

In yet another generic French village, Madame B. disrupts the local parents' association meeting with an important piece of news: the schoolteacher is a pedophile. "The school teacher raped my boy several times . . . He put a sex toy into his anus . . . I had to tell you because, most probably, our child was not the teacher's only victim . . . It was my duty to tell you. There. Now you know what kind of man the teacher is. Now you know."[10] However, as the teacher himself confirms a couple of scenes later, on a more or less conscious level, the parents already knew, and simply did not want to hear the truth spoken out loud. Consequently, they resent Madame B.'s intervention:

PARENT: Who told you we wanted to know anything like that?
PARENT: Who cares? We don't believe her! . . .
PARENT: Even if there were some truth to it, how dare she reveal it?

PARENT: Ma'am, you could have solved your problem on your own without telling us.

PARENT: It was our right to decide that the teacher could use our children if he wanted to. All we had to do was let it be without putting a name on it.

PARENT: Absolutely! In exchange for his teaching and directing the school remarkably, we had silently authorized the teacher to play with our children the way he wanted . . . Isn't it more important for a child to know how to read, to count, and to reason than to preserve her little body intact? . . .

PARENT: You should leave. You've done enough harm already.

PARENT: She is soiling our harmonious vision of the world! (V)

To further undermine the credibility of Madame B., the parents deploy a xenophobic rhetoric. Indeed, Madame B., whose North African roots are evident in the name of her son, Karim, has only been a member of this village for six months:

PARENT: Yet another one of those new families.

PARENT: Can someone with old roots in the village vouch for your honesty? . . .

PARENT: Nobody knows her, she has no friends, no name, and she wants us to take her word for it!

PARENT: Whereas we've known the teacher for a long time. We were all born here, and we are all from the same generation . . .

PARENT: Newcomers only bring problems! . . .

PARENT: Go back where you came from, Ma'am. You are not wanted here, and you will never be one of us. (V)

The racial overtones of the parents' comments are unmistakable and are later echoed by the teacher, who, when confronted with Madame B.'s reproaches, answers:[11]

TEACHER: So your son is the only child who complained. No other child went whining to their parents. Don't you find it disturbing that you foreigners should find unacceptable what everybody else here seems to accept? . . . You fucking foreigner! . . . Fucking stranger! I can't understand a word you're saying!

MADAME B.: You are the only stranger here. And you know it. (VII)

By having Madame B. reject the pedophilia that has long been accepted within that French community, the scene counters the widespread xenophobic rhetoric that usually associates sex crimes with immigrants.

Racked with guilt over what she considers her own failure to protect her son and anticipating that the memory of the crime will haunt the family forever, Madame B. proactively devises a solution: a cathartic ritual. She meets with the teacher and informs him: "You are going to come to our house. You won't enter, you will stay at the threshold. I will bring Karim, you will kneel to him, acknowledge the harm you have done to him, and ask him for forgiveness" (VII). Anyone who has seen or read *Snakes* will find this ritual oddly familiar and anticipate its failure. Indeed, the teacher struggles with the stage directions of the ritual: he tries to renegotiate them, and Madame B.'s refusal to budge ultimately leads him to withdraw altogether:

TEACHER: Could I do what you want me to do—

MADAME B.: Confess your fault, and ask Karim to forgive you.

TEACHER: Yes, that. Could I do it through a door, without seeing the child?

MADAME B.: Of course not. That's impossible. You have to look the one you are begging for forgiveness in the eyes. How can he decide whether he will forgive you if you avoid his gaze?

TEACHER: He can see me. But I can't stand the idea of seeing him . . . I'm afraid to look at him. Standing in front of me, he won't be a child any more. He'll be a tiny old man invested with the stupid right to judge me and to condemn me . . . I don't regret anything I did. I couldn't help it, so how could I regret it? I am very upset now! . . . I hate you, you grown-ups! (X)

With these words, the teacher metamorphoses into "a big bird spreading its wings" and flies away, escaping responsibility (X). Parents see the metamorphosis and accuse Madame B., the "fucking foreigner," of using "witchcraft" on the teacher. One of them raises a stick, and the stage direction reads: "Gives her a strong blow. The woman moans and collapses on the ground" (XI). In other words, the parents misunderstand the scene they see and act upon what they believe they saw—a belief naturally conditioned by their own prejudices against women of color.

Here again, the theatrical ritual imagined by a grieving Mother is aborted and replaced with the ritual murder of a scapegoat—someone whose status is low on the axes of gender, race, and class, which interlock in a patriarchal

system.[12] That the other parents stand for the French community in this scene of collective murder is all the more visible given their association with an icon of French republican mythology: the public school teacher, a supposedly nurturing point of contact between the individual and the State.[13] As the parents declare, "We are decent and loyal folks: we will always defend the school teacher and our common motherland, rather than defend the truth!" (V). What *Grown-Ups* stages is not just the use of rituals as conservative mechanisms of social control but their enactment of the purging impulses of the extreme right wing that is currently resurgent in France. *Grown-Ups*, like *Providence* and *Snakes*, alerts spectators to the dangerous ideological uses to which rituals can be put.

Yet, unlike *Providence* and *Snakes*, which only use some building blocks of the theater's episteme—performance, spectatorship, substitution, repetition—to make visible and indict patriarchal social scripts, *Grown-Ups* also uses that episteme to imagine alternatives. Specifically, it uses conjuration to do so, as we see in the other narrative strand of the play, which runs parallel to Madame B.'s and focuses on Eva and Rudi, the oldest friends of the pedophile's parents. Eva and Rudi lost their own children seventeen years before the play starts. Their teenage Daughter ran away, then started drinking, and became a drug addict. Despite all their efforts, they could never find her. Shortly after, their adopted son ran away too, in Rudi's words, "as if we had been wardens, wicked spirits, or two ogres waiting for you two to be sufficiently fattened" (VI). Yet, the Daughter assures us: "I had wonderful parents, an adorable little brother, and an exquisite life" (XII). She ran away because "filled with love" as she was, she "felt empty and vain, insensible to pain and joy" (XII). As for the Son, he left home when he started hearing in his chest the voices of his dead biological parents demanding, out of jealousy, that he murder his adoptive parents. In other words, the Daughter suffered from depression and the Son from severe bipolar disorder. For seventeen years, Eva and Rudi lived without knowing whether their children were dead or alive.

At the beginning of the play, the Son—now a grown-up—comes back home, and the ghost of the Daughter, who died long ago, returns to visit her parents, for "they have given me leave to come by as a ghost and to spend a few days with you" (XII). Her spectral return evokes another building block of the theater's episteme: conjuration. Indeed, theater is always a form of conjuration. To quote Marvin Carlson, "one of the universals of performance, both East and West, is its ghostliness, its sense of return . . . this sense

of something coming back in the theater . . . every play might be called *Ghosts*."[14] The theatrical ritual of conjuration brings emotional closure to Eva and Rudi. Indeed, they learn from their Daughter that she is dead, they learn why she left, and most importantly, they hear her say: "It feels good to be with one's family. But my time is up. Think of me with softness and clemency, and don't forget: *all is forgiven*" (XII).

Theater's ability to conjure up ghosts and let the living listen to the dead enables Eva and Rudi to understand their Son too. Indeed, when the Son first explains to them why he left, he faces incomprehension. Understanding only comes in the final scene of the play, when the parents can hear for themselves the imperious voices in their Son's chest:

RUDI: Are they here? Can we talk to them? . . .
THE SON (BEATING HIS CHEST): Hey you two! My parents have questions for you. . . .
THOSE WHO LIVE INSIDE THE SON'S CHEST: What do you want to know?
THE SON (TO EVA AND RUDI): Can you hear them?
RUDI: I heard them perfectly.
EVA: So did I.
THE SON (VERY MOVED): So you believe me now! They are real, they are here, and you don't doubt it any more. You can hear them! . . .
THOSE WHO LIVE INSIDE THE SON'S CHEST: This boy we brought into the world, did he give you satisfaction? . . . Was he a good boy?
RUDI: Yes, a good boy, an excellent boy! . . .
THOSE WHO LIVE INSIDE THE SON'S CHEST: When he was born, he already had two little teeth. He did not cry, he was happy to see daylight. Before we died, we asked him: who is going to take care of you? We wept a lot, then death came, and we did not get our answer.
RUDI: He is an excellent boy. Thank you.
THOSE WHO LIVE INSIDE THE SON'S CHEST: He was so happy to be born.
EVA: Thank you. Thank you. (XV)

Overflowing with joy and gratitude, Eva, the Mother of all Mothers, speaks the last words of the play in a final scene that shifts the mood from tragedy to romance. Only through a theatrical ritual of conjuration could Eva and Rudi converse with their Daughter and their Son's dead parents and be reunited with their children. Yet conjuration also seems to model positive dynamics of communication among family members that can be

emulated offstage: a mode of communication in which participants are eager to listen, open to being destabilized by what they hear, and aware of the infinite preciousness of communication itself. Such communication dynamics strongly differ from the dysfunctional communication patterns observed in *Providence*, *Snakes*, and in the plot of *Grown-Ups* focusing on Madame B. The final conjuration scene is what an antipatriarchal model of communication might look like, and this alternative script is incorporated into *Grown-Ups'* own theatrical language.

Conclusion

Theater is not inherently an instrument of social justice, and Marie NDiaye knows it. As Bella reminds us in *Rien d'humain* (*Nothing Human*) (2004), ogres, rapists, and abusers *too* love going to the theater: "My family gave a lot to Djamila. They used and abused her. Yes, we would *take her with us to the theater*, to the countryside, we shaped her, we gave her some culture. And we fucked her, fucked her, fucked her!"[15] Theater is not intrinsically progressive or feminist, but it can be made so by exploring the social scripts fuelling systemic patriarchal oppression both on stage and off. That is the bold bet that Marie NDiaye is making: her work aims at nothing short of reclaiming political theater for feminist purposes.

This commitment to feminism is bound by double ethical imperative in NDiaye's drama: first, to explore the multiple yet connected spheres in which the political simultaneously operates in our lives, from the intimate to the national, via the collective. The close readings of dramatic architectures offered in this essay have, I hope, illustrated that multilevel conception of the political. Second, feminist political theater must practice constant and mindful self-scrutiny: Marie NDiaye's Theater of the Mothers has so far fulfilled this imperative by using core theatrical devices to define the conditions in which it can operate (in *Providence*) and to indict patriarchal social scripts (in *Providence* and *Snakes*). With *Grown-Ups*, it has moved forward and proposed alternative feminist social scripts. But Marie NDiaye's Theater of the Mothers is still young and very much alive: it can grow, it can change, and it might surprise us in the years to come. Indeed, if we are to take a cue from her latest play, *Our Honorable Elected Official* (*Honneur à notre élue*)—a yet unpublished satire on democratic elections created at the Théâtre du Rond-Point in March 2017—Marie NDiaye is not done with political theater just yet.[16]

Notes

1. For instance, when asked during an interview about the message of her latest play, *Our Honorable Elected Official*, Marie NDiaye answered: "I never try to convey any message. There are different interpretations, and many are valid. There is not one truth, there are several." Judith Tuil, "Marie NDiaye," *Arte.tv*, http://sites.arte.tv/culture-touch/fr/marie-ndiaye-culture-touch.
2. Avraham Oz, "Introduction," in *Political Performances: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan C. Haedicke et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 17–31, here at 30.
3. Quotations from *Providence* are excerpted from Marie NDiaye and Jean-Yves Cendrey, *Puzzle* (*Trois pièces*) (Paris: Gallimard, 2007). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from French into English are my own.
4. Richard Schechner, "Ritual and Performance," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Tim Ingold (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 613–47, here at 613.
5. This ritual act of cleansing the body politic has many historical precedents. For instance, it can be compared to the *pharmakos* of ancient Greece, a ritual that consisted in expelling (and sometimes physically assaulting or executing) designated individuals of lower social status—often criminals or slaves—in order to purify the city.
6. Dominique Rabaté, *Marie NDiaye* (Paris: INA/CulturesFrance/Textuel, 2008), 11.
7. All quotations from *Snakes* are excerpted from Marie NDiaye, *Les Serpents* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2004). Here at 31.
8. Thanks go to Youlia Zimina, who, in the absence of recordings, was gracious enough to answer my questions about her mise-en-scène.
9. On the motif of the ogre and the dynamics of devoration that permeates NDiaye's plays, see Andrew Asibong, *Marie NDiaye: Blankness and Recognition* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 111–33.
10. All quotations from *Grown-Ups* are excerpted from the ebook version of Marie NDiaye, *Les Grandes personnes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011). That ebook has no pagination, so quotations are referenced with scene numbers in this essay. Here at V.
11. The teacher's father transparently deploys white-supremacist rhetoric: "My sperm had no smell and was all white, that's why our son was born with such fair skin—but none of this mattered to us. Not at all. That's the reason why your hair has no smell and your eyes are so pale: the milky whiteness of your daddy's sperm" (*Grown-Ups* IV). The parenthetical moment of denial ("But none of this mattered to us. Not at all") ironically captures the denial vis-à-vis racial issues that permeates contemporary French culture, and about which Marie NDiaye's brother, sociologist Pap NDiaye, has eloquently written in *La Condition Noire, Essai sur une minorité française* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).

12. We learn about Madame B.'s class status when she brings the teacher home, and he asks: "Don't you have a car? Madame B.: We are saving money to buy one," (X).
13. On the figure of the teacher in Marie NDiaye's oeuvre at large, see Michael Sheringham, "La Figure de l'enseignant chez Marie NDiaye," *L'Esprit Créateur*, 53, no. 2 (2013): 97–111.
14. Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 1–2.
15. Marie NDiaye, *Rien d'humain* (Besançon: Les Solitaires intempestifs, 2004), 18. Emphasis mine.
16. My deepest gratitude goes to two editors of this volume, Jean E. Howard and Marianne Hirsch: this essay could not have come to fruition without their incredibly generous, perceptive, and helpful comments along the way.

CHAPTER XXII

Who Knows Where or When?

AIDS and Theatrical Memory in Queer Time

ALISA SOLOMON

1

Kate Valk hitched up her pants with a cock of a hip and clutched her inner thigh for a moment, right by her crotch. Playing the role of Detective Tom Persky, a cop on the trail of the serial killer Conrad Gehrhardt, she was coiled macho bluster, a guy hyped up on the hunt, adjusting his junk. It's a campy old theater trick, as old as Aristophanes, for performers to draw glancing attention to the most glaring signifier of the gap between actor and role, particularly when primary or secondary sex characteristics—or lack thereof—are involved. And it's an especially good trick when the gesture is in keeping with the part—the actor simultaneously builds and breaks character. Of course, in this sex-addled drama by the queer theater pioneer Jeff Weiss, Persky would give himself a squeeze while plotting how to trap the evasive murderer, Gerhardt's doppelganger, Bjorn, a hot Finnish gymnast who picks up unsuspecting victims; pursuit of any kind is always hard-core lust in Weiss's work, and Persky wants to bed Gehrhardt as well as bag him. And, of course, Valk has nothing there to squeeze. The gesture serves as an apt metonym for how theater always works: drawing from our wells of memory to make something absent present—giving spatial and temporal extension to a world that doesn't really exist or that exists only here and now in performance.