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PRODUCING AND PERFORMING IDENTITIES: THEORETICAL, CULTURAL, AND PRACTICAL ARTICULATIONS OF JEAN GENET'S CONCEPT OF SELF

by

OANA G. TOMA 

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF *MASTER OF ARTS*

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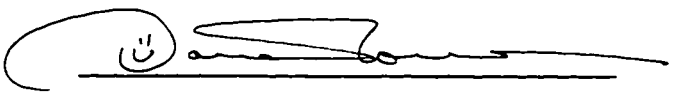

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *PRODUCING AND PERFORMING IDENTITIES: THEORETICAL, CULTURAL, AND PRACTICAL ARTICULATIONS OF JEAN GENET'S CONCEPT OF SELF* submitted by *Oana G. Toma* in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of *Master of Arts.*

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ABSTRACT

To articulate Jean Genet's concept of self is to inevitably address the ontology of representation. Genet's manipulation of the ontology of representation simultaneously employs and subverts the traditional mimetic system of reference and challenges the notions of written and performance text. As reality/representation and form/content binaries no longer hold, identity is rendered a concept at once "produced" and "performed." Such ambivalence becomes the catalytic intersection point for theoretical, socio-political, and practical articulations of Genet's concept of self; potentially disruptive, this ambivalence challenges traditionally fixed, logocentric concepts of self as it reveals their articulation as embedded in a politics of power. As Genet's characters experience the performative nature of their existence and struggle to escape representation, the self thus moves beyond a logocentric concept associated with the static notion of "being." In context of *The Blacks* and *The Screens*, and in parallel to the Funambulist, or Genet's metaphoric actor, this thesis is an attempt to articulate Genet's concept of self as a dynamic process (of becoming), constitutive and performative in nature.

To those who gave me my first sense of self, who have stood by me, and who continue to support me throughout my quest; to my family for their unconditional love, support and encouragement.

Pentru mama, tata, Anca şi Didi.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRODUCING REPRESENTATIONS:
The "Beginning" of a Process

This attempt to write a thesis on Genet's notion of Self troubles me deeply, for it is a venture into a world of dialectics beyond simple dualities, a realm of ambivalence which renders language, logical thought and causality, and empirical reasoning as illusions or reflections of "truth," a truth always re-represented, produced and performed through representation. Meaning, knowledge, and history, to which I had always attributed an unquestioned stability, appear as totalizations rooted in Western metaphysics, fueled by a human necessity and desire to function and to regulate human relationships; a metaphysics which reflects a desire for originality, or rather, for capturing the "authenticity" of being. It is the ambivalent meaning of "produced" and "performed" which best captures the ambivalence of Jean Genet's work which destabilizes the "truth." It is an ambivalence rooted in his dialectical mode of thought which extends beyond such fixed binaries as form/content and reality/representation, and which exposes the performative nature of existence and identity. Genet's Self is caught within concentric layers of representation, perpetually attempting to escape its own performativity, to authenticate itself or to capture an (unattainable) original.

The Funambulist, or Genet's metaphoric actor, best expresses this dilemma:

> It matters not a bit that your solitude is, paradoxically, in full light and that the darkness is composed of thousands of eyes watching which are

> judging you. . . . But nothing - and above all not applause or laughter will keep you from dancing for your image. . . . It is not you who will be dancing, but the wire. But if it is the wire that dances motionless, and if it is your image that the wire bounces, then where will *you* be?[1]

The metaphor of the circus where the funambulist, under the brilliant artifice of make-up and costume, performs his quest for his *other*, or for his unattainable image, captures the nature of Genet's work: the artificial form, or the conventions of the circus, make possible the funambulist's death-defying *performance*, which is simultaneous and inseparable from the funambulist's "*real*" means of achieving self. This circus "production" produced simultaneously through the interdependent spectator's gaze and the funambulist's performance of self, undermines the form/content and reality/representation binaries. In Genet's drama, form is content, and reality of self is achieved through representation, thus constituted and performed. In this sense, Genet simultaneously employs and subverts the traditional mimetic system of representation which in turn results in an ambivalence beyond simple dualities, an ambivalence within which infinitely mirrored truths and meanings prepare the stage for a dynamic, shifting identity, or for *being* as a perpetual *process* of *becoming*. Through theatrical illusion, Genet's drama is a direct extension and overlapping of life, a drama which potentially questions imposed forms or conventions involved in producing and performing identities. Genet's dramatization of life thus destabilizes truth and meaning as natural "givens," and by extension, the self, or

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[1] Jean Genet, "The Funambulists," trans. Bernard Frechtman, *Evergreen Review*, 32 (Apr. 1964): 46.

identity as a fixed or naturally conceived concept. Rooted in a deep personal interest in the notion of identity, this thesis is my investigation of the theoretical, and by extension, social, political and practical implications of such performative notion of identity. It is an attempt to arrive at an articulation of Genet's notion of self, an articulation shaped from my present Romanian-born Canadian citizen, female student position, through English as my second language. My tools of analysis will be fragments of post-structuralist theories and theorists with which I will shape a temporary framework for my subsequent discussion.

In this introductory chapter I will address some of the difficulties involved in writing about Genet's dramatic texts. This demands a discussion of his dialectical mode of thought and the resulting ambivalence, as well as a discussion of language, of working with a translation of Genet's text, and of discourse in relation to meaning or signification. Also, I will briefly address some main critical approaches to Genet's work, and the (limiting) common denominator of these approaches, the Western metaphysical frame of thought which cannot fully encompass the ambivalence of Genet's work. A discussion of the Western metaphysics of presence which posits the self as a fixed referent, in parallel to a discussion of mimesis and representation, will provide a backdrop against which Genet's drama can be seen as a departure from and subversion of traditional dramatic conventions, a self-referential metadrama which draws attention to the processes involved in producing stage-audience and actor-character relationships. Examples from his dramatic works, particularly *The Blacks: a*

clown show[2] and *The Screens,*[3] will reinforce and carry the discussion of the stage-audience relationship into chapter two.

Social and political implications of "producing" and "performing" identities is explored in the second chapter, which focuses specifically on *The Blacks: a clown show*, whose title suggests Genet's play with the performativity of identity, specifically of racial identity, or, as I will illustrate, with race as culturally-defined, constructed, and performed. In relation to performativity, I will inevitably re-address the implications of dramatic representation as it intersects with the social and political spheres, by focusing on the self-referentiality of the play. This chapter will thus primarily focus on Genet's intended black cast - white audience relations, which reflect the ambivalence inherent in the colonial impulse.[4] As a paradigm for such relations, the eighteenth-century Panoptic principle of surveillance, along with Michel Foucault's analysis of power relations,[5] will create a framework for the discussion and articulation of racial identity as produced and performed.

The vortex of Genet's thoughts, the ambivalence of "producing" and "performing" identities, brings me to its articulation on a practical level, the level of

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[2] ----------, *The Blacks: a clown show*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1988). References to specific plays discussed throughout the body of this thesis will be given as page numbers within parentheses.

[3] ----------, *The Screens*, trans. Bernard Frecthman, (London: Faber and Faber, 1963)

[4] In his opening remarks to *The Blacks*, Genet reinforces the fact that he wrote the play specifically for a white audience.

[5] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977)

stage performance, of the actor-character relationship. Following *The Blacks* in the trope of colonialism, and as a source of much primary information regarding theatrical production and performance, *The Screens* will serve as a backdrop against which Genet's manipulation of the ontology of representation becomes clearer. The naturalistic actor-character split disseminates through concentric layers of representation manipulated throughout *The Screens*. Ambivalence undermines the referential system of mimesis, which provides unity and closure, and mimesis itself becomes mimicry, or as Elin Diamond uses the term, mimesis-mimicry; naturalistic referents (time, space, gender) are destabilized by a proliferation of interchangeable identities and meanings inscribed by the body of the text.[6] The implications of a performative self on a practical level thus leads to my articulation of Genet's concept of self as an ongoing process, a perpetual *process of becoming*, or of *self-materialization* in Judith Butler's sense of the term.[7] I thus return to the funambulist's highwire act or dance for self which I believe parallels such process of self-materialization, as it invokes the multivalence and open-ended possibilities of a self (watched or read) in the act of producing and performing its self. The funambulist's willed and passionate, exhilarating yet exhausting choreography of such a dynamic

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[6] Elin Diamond, "Mimesis, Mimicry, and the 'True-Real,'" in *Acting Out: feminist performances*, eds. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993) 363.

[7] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990) 270. Self-materialization through a repetition of stylized 'acts' and its relationship to gender will be the focus of the latter part of chapter three.

self parallels my writing of this thesis and fuels my shaped representation of Genet's representation of self.

> Genet is against all order. He hates bourgeois society and is no longer duped by it. . . . But he does not try to correct the society he denounces. . . . He does not try to substitute one order for another since he is against all order.[8]

Before directing *The Screens*, Roger Blin, French director and friend of Genet's, represented Genet's view towards the society of which they were both a part. During rehearsals of the play, Genet sent Blin the following advice for actors:

> Their make-up will, by transforming them into 'others', enable them to try any and every audacity: as they will be unencumbered by any social responsibility, they will assume another, with respect to another Order.[9]

Though seemingly contradictory, the two quotations point to Genet's view of order as it relates specifically to social conventions and social "reality," not to stage life, which he maintained was a complete opposite to daily life, a place open to endless possibilities.[10] The "order" of conventional daily life is paradoxically replaced by a "truthful" one of theatrical illusion. The seeming contradictions of these affirmations capture the nature of Genet's work as well as the difficulties in writing about it.

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[8] Bettina Knapp, "An Interview with Roger Blin," *Tulane Drama Review*, 7:3, 112.

[9] Jean Genet, *Reflections on the Theater and Other Writings*, trans. Richard Seaver, (London: Faber & Faber, 1972) 64.

[10] Ibid., 12

Social order presupposes a fixed system of referents, codes of behavior, homogeneity, and hence, static norms of being, of self as 'disciplined' by such order, woven into such web, and screened or filtered through a common language - one which at once produces and reinforces "truth" and meaning. Language, as it represents and reinforces a certain order, also paradoxically upholds the "truth" of the classical mimetic system of dramatic representation and theatrical illusion and renders the resulting performance as "real." In other words, language, or a fixed linguistic system, serves as yet another layer of representation. Genet's texts, written in French, translated into other languages and performed within many cultural contexts, point to the ambivalence of language as a stable conveyor of meaning, a meaning which is complicated by the endless possibilities inherent in performance. A focus on language itself or on the written text cannot fully encompass the ambivalence of Genet's work in terms of discovering its truth, reproducing it, and thus capturing its meaning. Such focus cannot provide an originary starting point for discussion or analysis. It cannot provide Genet's texts with closure in terms of unity of meaning or univocal interpretation, for the written text is a shaped discourse which can also be performed. The relationship between the written and performed text is reflected in Genet's thoughts on theatre:

> Words. Having survived God knows how, the French language conceals and reveals a war of words. . . . If tradition and treason are both born of the same original movement and diverge so that each can live its own particular life, how throughout the length and breadth of the language, do they know they are bound together in their distortion? . . . If anyone is under the illusion that in the

> midst of proliferation - or luxuriance - [of words] he can hope to make sense of what he says, he is mistaken. . . . [W]e can pretend to understand, we can make believe that their meaning is fixed. . . . As for me, faced with this enraged herd encaged in the dictionary, I know that I have said nothing and that I never will: and the words don't give a damn. . . . As for language, there is a grammar of action: beware of the self-taught man! . . . .
>
> It is preferable, when the voice has found its true inflections, to discover the gestures which will then reinforce it . . . be in opposition to it - for example, to an inflection of deep regret a very light-hearted gesture of the hand and foot - in such a way that the whole forms a long succession of unstipulated agreements - broken, but always harmonious, freeing the actor from the temptation of the commonplace.[11]

Such breach between the spoken word and its meaning is Genet's "refusal of a natural sham," of revealing what generally passes unperceived, of language as 'real' communication.[12] While a semiotic approach would help break down the ambivalence of his texts, Genet's texts cannot be examined on a purely formal level. Genet is aware of the "tradition" and "treason" of words, of language being at once semiological and ideological: tradition conceals the arbitrary relationship between chosen words and the concept they express, or between the signifier and signified. Their relationship, or the signification resulting from such arbitrariness, marks the "proliferation" and "luxuriance" of such "enraged herd [of words] encaged in the dictionary" that say nothing. To point out the processes of distortion in language, and

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[11] Ibid., 73-4, 56

[12] Ibid., 57

to prefer a "grammar of action" where the "whole" of inflections and gestures "forms a succession of unstipulated agreements - broken but always harmonious," is to reach beyond ideology (in this case of a linguistic system), to acknowledge an (unattainable) outside to ideology; it is an attempt which is itself ideological. Any claims to unity that focus on traditional form/content or reality/representation binary opposites thus limit the "nature" of Genet's texts, which draw attention to the very processes involved in constituting such false binaries. It is impossible to rely on the language for stable meaning and closure since language as a system is subverted when its arbitrariness and constitutive nature become the focus. In *The Screens*, the magnificent Louis the XV style clock inscribed by Genet through the text is a conglomeration of "little wheels, little stars, little screws, little worms, little nails, gobs and gobs of thingumabobs," a representation drawn by Leila and "performed" by the Mother.[13] The language itself is thus only a filter of many layers of representation.

Language as representation is multiplied by performance as representation, whose ontology Genet manipulates through a continual deferral to another, "outer" layer. Achieved through self-referentiality, the multivalence of such metadrama is marked by continual movement between such concentric layers of representation. Words inscribed on paper thus cannot fully contain such movement, for writing can only capture and relate a past moment of performance; since it is marked by movement, or process, to write about performance is to betray its ontology:

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[13] Genet, *The Screens*, 57

> To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity . . . becomes itself through disappearance. . . . Performance occurs over a time which will not be repeated. It can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as "different.". . . Without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility . . . and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control.[14]

Genet was aware of the implications and power of *The Screens*, the "performance of performances," or a unique spectacle limited in time and space. For Genet, twenty performances of the play "constitute only an approach of the play . . . a series of rehearsals," never reproduced exactly the same in the way a photograph captures and potentially reproduces infinite copies.[15] Genet did not anticipate more than four or five performances, for the intensity of the present moment of performance would not only wear out the actors, but, as he claimed, "[any] performances beyond the first five will be reflections...A single performance ought to suffice." Just as a meteor looms into view and passes by, so the performance shines and dies.[16] Performance for Genet is thus a movement towards the [unattainable] "poetic act," towards the "brink of the final act," its death or disappearance. [17]

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[14] Peggy Phelan, "The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction," in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, (London: Routlege UP, 1993) 146-48.

[15] Genet, *Reflections*, 11, 45, 17

[16] Ibid., 41

[17] Ibid., 45

Through this movement from the visible to the invisible, from appearance to disappearance, the performance *becomes* itself, stays true to its nature as process. Performance, in this sense, particularly the interplay of presence and absence, defines the funambulist's performance for self, or the metaphoric actor's *being*: a continual deferral to an always absent presence, a dynamic process of becoming which "defines" identity through difference and negation.

With a static or fixed linguistic system at my disposal, the attempt to write on Genet's performative self, on his a dialectic beyond binaries, or on the interplay of absence and presence so as to come to an articulation of a concept, is to remain always a step behind my conscious thoughts: always fleeting ahead towards a future moment, such thinking process mocks the very ink that tries to annex it to this page. If, through writing, I cannot fully do justice to Genet's texts, is then such attempt futile, unworthy of explanation? To answer yes would be to fall into the trap of nihilism which could force an end, that of nothingness, onto Genet's texts, and to ignore the fleeting nature of Genet's work, whose emphasis is on process. To approach the "original text" in French would be to acknowledge the nuances of a different linguistic filter. However, my focus is on the dynamics or movement which defines Genet's work. Such focus is an impressionistic attempt to render the transient brilliance of Genet's drama, which cannot be fully rendered in any one single color. As well, a work which can be defined by its movement between layers of representation destabilizes the fixed notion of "original" and renders it irrelevant. Genet's comment on form, his response to a suggestion of a theatre whose architecture would adapt to the demands of each

performance by being movable and flexible, put to rest my concerns about engaging in a discourse which inevitably fails to encompass the multivalence of Genet's work:

> It's too easy to put one's trust in the moveable. Let anyone who wants to work towards the perishable, but only after the irreversible act by which we shall be judged or, if you prefer, the fixed act which judges itself has been accomplished.(sic)[18]

Though, as Genet says, the architecture of the theatre still remains to be discovered, it must first be stationary and immobilized so it can be held responsible. I draw upon this example as a parallel to engaging in a limiting discourse, to employing a linguistic system while simultaneously conscious of its limitations.

In writing about Genet, I must simultaneously treat the written text and performance text as overlapping, inseparable and extensions of each other. Genet's letters to Blin outline this relationship:

> I am not maintaining that the *written* text of the play is of any great value, but I can assure you that I did not, for example, look down on any of my characters. . . . You can be sure that I never tried to understand them, but, having created them, on paper and for stage, I do not want to deny them. . . . They also help to shape me. I have never copied life - an event, or a man, or the Algerian war or colonists - but life has, quite naturally, caused various images to come to life within me, or has illuminated them if they were already there - images which I have translated either by a character or an act. . . . [They are a dream] roughly sketched out on paper and, poorly or well, brought to fruition on a stage which might be wooden and whose flooring creaks beneath one's footsteps.[19]

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[18] Ibid., 65-6

[19] Ibid., 53

The concentric layers of representation must be addressed simultaneously, regardless of blurred "distinctions." The relationship between the written and performed text is much like Roland Barthes's relation between language and metalanguage. I will use this parallel in order to move freely between levels of representation: the written text I will treat as a linguistic system on its own where the inter-action of characters within the dramatic situation reveals their relationships as interdependent and arbitrary. The performance of such text becomes a kind of "second-order semiological system" or a "metalanguage" in which one speaks about the first.[20] In his early writings, Barthes refers to this metalanguage as "mythical speech," which reaches beyond the details of a linguistic system yet always maintains the same signifying function as language. In this sense the dramatic situation of each of Genet's plays is intricately woven into a larger, self-referential comment, a metadrama which inevitably draws upon and implicates the audience, and thus expands the inter-action to intra-action which integrates stage and audience "reality." Such distinctions between inter-action and intra-action will serve only to help me distinguish different levels of dramatic representation; they are a temporary tool for clarity.

Having discussed the nature of Genet's work and the difficulties in writing about it, I now return to the main body of Genet criticism to discuss its common denominator, Western metaphysics, which will inevitably lead into discussion of the

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[20] Roland Barthes, from "Mythologies," in *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, eds. Anthony Easthope and Kate McGowan, (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992) 18.

implications of the ambivalence and multivalence of Genet's work and of the mimetic system of traditional representation.

Jean-Paul Sartre's *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*[21], contains paradoxical ideas regarding Genet and his work, ideas which have become cornerstones for subsequent Genet criticism. As a combination of Sartrean existentialism, psychoanalytic biography and thematic analysis of Genet's work, it opens potential avenues for psychological, historical, textual and socio-political criticism. The main body of thematic and textual analysis seems to focus on Genet's aesthetic based on the concepts of the image and double. Inspiring in its style, and useful for a discussion of self and other in the construction of identity, Sartre's criticism remains rooted in a biographical study of Genet; the psychological slant of such study does not directly address Genet's "post-structuralist" notion of self which I attempt to articulate.

Joseph McMahon's *The Imagination of Jean Genet*[22] introduces the unease and inherent terror in reading existential works. Based in Sartrean existentialism, McMahon brings up the emotional vulnerability in which texts involving intricate game-playing and self-contradictions place the reader after centuries of Western empirical thought. As well, this criticism approaches the notions of alienation and solitude that proliferate in Genet's texts. McMahon traces the development of Genet's

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[21] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: George Braziller, 1963)

[22] Joseph McMahon, *The Imagination of Jean Genet*, ((New Haven: Yale UP, 1963)

imagination as a progress from an inward, more private reflection to a larger, more accessible and comprehensive expression through his drama, which, counter to Sartre's viewpoint, results in ideological entrapment of the viewer simply through form. This seems to me an extremely important part of Genet criticism, a cornerstone, for it acknowledges the inseparability of form and content in Genet's drama and the resulting ambivalence, as well as the anxiety such ambivalence creates. As well, in this approach to Genet's texts, there is a sense of self-consciousness in terms of the critic's awareness of being inevitably within ideology. As a useful springboard for a discussion of ideology and agency this approach nevertheless settles for closure based on duality; in this sense, it limits the dialectic at work in Genet's drama, one which I believe extends beyond binarisms or duality.

In *Jean Genet: A Study of His Novels and Plays*[23] Philip Thody form and lack of unity in Genet's work. There is a sense of condemnation on the critic's part of the lack of closure within and between Genet's works. This type of criticism seems not only insufficient to explore the multivalence of Genet's work, but also inadequate in the light of contemporary theory and criticism, in which unity has been a target for debate. Interestingly however, Thody's focus on an absence or lack of closure brings into awareness a concern with presence, a springboard for examining the interplay of absence and presence in Genet's plays.

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[23] Philip Thody, *Jean Genet: A Study of His Novels and Plays*, (London: Hamilton, 1968)

In *The Vision of Jean Genet*,[24] Richard Coe's Sartrean orientation focuses on the notion of identity as determined by one's reflection of the "other." He acknowledges duality manifesting at different levels of Genet's work, and discusses, most importantly, the use of symbols: double in nature, both the symbols themselves and their use as structure of Genet's world. Drama is therefore the ultimate symbolic act as theatre reflects and represents theatricality itself and becomes the ultimate expression of duality. Coe's discussion of symbols also extends to the potential political implications, specifically the depiction of politics as empty signs or dead symbols. Coe views Genet as political to the extent that he questions political values, even though no new system of beliefs is created. The multiple levels of Genet's text are explored on the basis of Sartrean existentialism as are the notions of identity as doubling, and the "void," or the abyss of nothingness. Useful in its structuring of Genet's slippery concepts, it nevertheless tries to resolve the contradictions inherent in Genet's texts and to provide some closure, and thus tends to short-circuit its potential of encompassing the multivalence of Genet's work.

Lewis Cetta's thematically-oriented criticism of Genet's dramatic texts, which draws on myth and ritual, discusses Genet's "reality" as comprised of coexisting opposites set in a dialectical relationship. This relationship expresses the "feared unconscious" of being, that which both attracts and entraps the reader as it moves between overlapping dualities. Indispensable in its focus on the interplay and overlap

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[24] Richard Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet*, (London: Owen, 1968)

of "polarities," *Profane Play, Ritual, and Jean Genet*[25] nevertheless creates a hierarchy of Genet's thoughts: based on a reading of Freud's ideas on the creative process, Cetta discusses Genet's "wish-fulfillment" to re-create the world by replacing reality with his own constructed, preferred illusion; neither Genet's "wish-fulfillment" nor a hierarchy of realities can fully encompass the free movement between and within the concentric layers of representation of Genet's plays.

Camille Naish's formalist approach focuses on the duality as growing out of an existing parallel between the writer imprisoned in his cell and that of his characters "imprisoned" in their texts. This parallel deems the composition of the texts the subject. In this sense, the work of art stands revealed as its subject. In *A Genetic Approach to Structures in the Work of Jean Genet,*[26] though Naish draws attention to the inseparability of form and content, as well as to the construction of text, the implications remain to be filled in.

Through a close textual reading of *The Maids*, Sylvie Debevec Henning[27] touches on the social and psychological implications as based on Rene Girard's model of primitive society. The notion of a sacrificial victim or scapegoat as release from the dangerous violent elements of chaos and ambiguity in primitive society hint at the potential power of Genet's theatre to promote active, critical thinking on the part of

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[25] Lewis Cetta, *Profane Play, Ritual, and Jean Genet*, (n.p.: U of Alabama P, 1974)

[26] Camille Naish, *A Genetic Approach to Structures in the Work of Jean Genet*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978)

[27] Sylvie Debevec Henning, *Genet's Ritual Play*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1981)

the spectator. The potential for social and political change remains an inspiring, yet somewhat 'incomplete' approach to Genet's drama.

The aesthetic and political realms of Genet's work come together in Jeanette Savona's *Jean Genet*,[28] in which she addresses both written and performative aspects of his theatre. Savona thus not only points to the ambivalence that characterizes Genet's originality, while it also reveals the difficulties in writing about his dramatic works. Unlike previous critics, Henning and Savona, in examining the male and female characters and their gender relations, also bring up the notion of an open-ended female voice; this provides a base for an open-ended criticism and exploration of the complexities and ambiguities which characterize Genet's writing, and for further exploration of identity as it relates to gender in Genet's texts.

Whether rooted in Sartrean existentialism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, or focused solely on socio-political analysis, the main body of criticism reflects a desire to know, to fully comprehend and "contain" Genet, whose dramatic works nevertheless elude such 'end-oriented' approaches. Such approaches reflect, at least in part, the Western metaphysical frame of thought, a position of thought which posits reality, and by extension the self, as an intelligible set of fixed referents. Such "static" thinking is characterized by the need to grasp the essence of being, the desire to know being in its totality and to capture and contain any potential elusiveness. Ambivalence becomes a threat to such desire and need for certainty, a potential subversion of the

imposed grasp on reality. As such, Genet's dynamic thinking, the ambivalence which it creates, and his manipulation of the slippery ontology of representation can potentially destabilize thousands of years of established thought, and hence the interwoven social-political and personal or individual norms of being, or identity.

Beginning with Descartes, western rational thinking has posited a metaphysics of presence through privileging the self or "I" as the locus of certainty. Such position of centrality imposes order and unity on being and thus institutes the presupposition of being as whole, as naturally "given." The centered, fully present "I" becomes the point of disclosure of the world, the center from which meaning and truth emanate. Such logocentrism presupposes a "forgetfulness of time," for through its insistent focus on the present, on the process of centralizing the "I," it ignores the transition from absence to presence. In other words, in fixing and privileging the "I," a point of origin is imposed which consequently renders the nature of being fully present, self-contained and motionless. An essential being is thus seen as a priori; time is reduced to a (seemingly paradoxical) static notion where eternity becomes a totalization, and reality becomes a closed system regulated by order and unity. The primacy of the rational consciousness thus attempts to eliminate any motion or movement which may subvert the margins surrounding the centrality of the fixed "I." Such privileged position of centrality is inextricably bound to the notion of truth and to the production of knowledge; in usurping such position and equating this central consciousness with truth and knowledge, or rather, in reinforcing its ability to make intelligible any aspect

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[28] Jeanette Savona, *Jean Genet*, (London: Macmillan, 1983)

of reality, this process simultaneously necessitates a split between the central subject (I/self), and a peripheral, marginalized object (other). The consciousness thus embarks upon a process of differentiating the self as different from, or not the same as the other, as a means of establishing or producing and maintaining its own identity. Within such metaphysical frame of thought, such inevitable process of differentiation has inevitable implications of discrimination in the social and political spheres. In the actual, material world, such differentiation harbors a violent discrimination in the production of identity. This metaphysical standpoint, which desires to represent the other as its object, distinct from self, posits a relationship between beings which measures or attaches value first and foremost to the self, and inevitably to the other. Binary oppositions result from such process: a theory of "I" and "not I" becomes the foundation for identity formation.[29] In this sense, identity becomes a negation of the other, a representation of other as inessential in relation to the central subject. However, in the very interdependency of this process lies the imminent potential of subversion: the centralized subject defines itself in terms of a "negated" marginalized other whose presence is nevertheless a necessity. Identity is thus dependent on the interplay of presence and absence, with the central, present self claiming precedence of being, or an "original" presence achieved only through the "absent presence" of the other. Such ambivalence in the production of identity is potentially subversive, as it

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[29] Homi K Bhabha, "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *Out there: marginalization and contemporary cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990) 871-88.

remains an underlying possibility of decentering and disempowering the centralized presence of the "I." As Keith C. Pheby summarizes, "[a]bsence then becomes the very condition for the very presentness of entities."[30] Western ontology thus becomes problematic, for it cannot conclude or stabilize the relation of human beings and being, and the realm of the sensible and ideas. Rational thinking resorts to a system of classification which imposes a realm of stability through the production of knowledge in order to contain the intolerable, "interminable flux."[31] At the social and political levels, such production of knowledge is inevitably and inextricably tied to relations of power.

Classical theatre exemplifies the impulse to contain the "interminable flux" which may potentially undermine the order on which a society may be based. Conceived by, and intended for a society based in Western rationalism, the traditional mimetic system of classical theatre attempts to duplicate and reflect the "truth" and reality of the very society it serves; it posits time, space and being as intelligible, fixed referents which reinforce knowledge, beliefs and the values it upholds - paradoxically, through illusion, or suspension of disbelief. The theatre of Jean Genet simultaneously employs and subverts mimesis, and thus subverts the metaphysics of presence. The "interminable flux," or interplay of absence and presence undermines any stability mimesis may try to reflect, as this interplay characterizes the free

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[30] Keith C. Pheby, *Interventions: Displacing The Metaphysical Subject*, (Washington DC: Maissonneuve Press, 1988) 15.

[31] Ibid., 21

movement between levels of representation. Genet manipulates the ontology of representation and thus undermines closure or unity. The fixed notion of identity and binary self-other relations succumb to multiple, often contradictory but always ambivalent representations. Genet's characters experience a simultaneous longing for and rejection of reciprocity, an "existential" angst of being always marked by a deferral to an absent other. As their identity is thus continually decentered, the dramatic situation and the theatrical experience overall are disrupted: within the "world of the play," the characters' *interaction* reveals not only the interdependent nature of their relationships, but the interdependency of concentric layers of representation, of the characters' *intra-action*, or movement among such layers (which inevitably includes the audience). The result is a dialectical process of inter- and intra-action which results in a proliferation of possible interpretations that point to themselves. The process of representation thus disrupts the audience's "safe" position of seeing/perceiving subjects as stage and audience reality blend. It is precisely such resulting multivalence that renders the entire theatrical experience a process or movement, a theatrical dissolution of theatre itself; a mimicry of the traditional mimetic system, which Elin Diamond terms "mimesis-mimicry": as praxis, the sign-referent model of mimesis can become excessive to itself, spilling into a mimicry that undermines the referent's authority.[32] As both a process and a commentary on the process, Genet's theatre eludes any unity or criticism which attempts to impose a fixed, originary starting point of knowledge or stability of meaning. The desire for an

"original" presence, especially one of privileged centrality for the disclosure of the world, is undermined.

Genet's play with the ontology of representation, his ability to simultaneously employ and subvert traditional mimesis, parallels strategies of dissimulation and deconstruction: simultaneity, continual disruption and displacement of subjectivity, and continual deferral to the absent which characterize his dramatic works break the hegemony of Western rational thought. In disrupting the metaphysics of presence, strategies of deconstruction can be used to discuss the multivalence of Genet's drama and thus to create an adequate framework within which his work can be conceptualized. As distinct actor-character-spectator divisions dissolve,

> [t]he stage *will no longer represent*, since it will not operate as an addition, as the sensory illustration of a text already written, though, or lived outside the stage, which the stage would then only repeat but whose fabric it would not constitute. The stage will no longer operate as the repetition of a *present*, will no longer *re*-present a present that would exist elsewhere and prior to it. . . . Nor will the stage be a representation, if representation means the surface of a spectacle displayed for spectators.[33]

In his focus on the performativity of each moment, Jacques Derrida captures the performativity of Genet's texts which eludes traditional spatial and temporal

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[32] Elin Diamond, "Mimesis, Mimicry and the 'True-Real,'" in *Acting Out: feminist performances*, 368

[33] Jacques Derrida, "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978) 237-38.

frameworks. Derrida's examination of the closure of representation in Antonin Artaud's Theater of Cruelty thus parallels aspects of Genet's drama:

> [N]onrepresentation is, thus, original representation, if representation signifies, also, the unfolding of a volume, a multidimensional milieu, an experience which produces its own space. Spacing [*espacement*], that is to say, the production of a space that no speech could condense or comprehend (since speech primarily presupposes this spacing), thereby appeals to a time that is no longer that of so-called phonic linearity, appeals to a "new notion of space" and "a specific idea of time."[34]

Derrida's conclusion encompasses Genet's own view of theatre as "unlimited space," where mimetic referents can be undermined, a place where anything is possible and which is not subject to time or social conventions.[35]

As Genet simultaneously employs and subverts the process of recognition and identification upon which spectators rely for meaning or closed interpretation, he draws attention to the processes involved in the production of meaning and of a fixed self. The employer-domestic relationship in *The Maids* is that of recognizable bourgeois drama which mirrors bourgeois society and its theatregoers. In *The Balcony,*[36] Irma's omnipotence over the brothel and the events taking place outside it initially mirrors and reinforces the privileged seeing/perceiving position of the audience. However, the mirror on the brothel wall reflects an unmade bed (which, if

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[34] Ibid., 124

[35] Genet, *Letters to Roger Blin, Reflections On The Theater*, trans. Richard Seaver, (New York: Grove Press, 1969) 72.

[36] ----------, *The Balcony*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1966)

the set were logically arranged, would extend offstage into the orchestra) that includes the audience under her authority. In *The Blacks*, recognizable aspects of white dominant society (reinforced by Genet's insistence on at least one "white" audience member) create the necessary atmosphere of familiarity that underlies the safety of illusion: a Mozart minuet, excerpts from Dies Irae, flatter the audience's intellect and "culture" and thus reinforce the audience's presence and its value. However, such privilege of recognition is simultaneously undermined; the Mozart minuet is "appropriated" and imitated by the black performers who eventually address the audience and thus break the safety of theatrical illusion, robbing the audience's position as locus of authority. In *Deathwatch* we follow and accept the validity of Lefranc and Maurice's perspective of the third and central character, Green Eyes. As the play progresses, we realize that as we follow the inmates' discussion we are deluded, for "meaning" does not emanate from any one of the inmates, but rather, moves among the triad of characters, who through their interaction, define one another. In the same manner, in *The Maids* we accept the maids' play-acting as nothing more. Though it marks the "beginning" of the dramatic action, Claire and Solange's play-acting overflows into multiple levels of "reality," or into mimicry. The central, "absent" object of their play-acting, Madame, the clash of wills between the maids themselves, and Solange's ambivalent role and perspective in the role-playing game blur the clarity and definition as to whether she is playing herself or Claire. Solange's intransigent point of view contrasts Claire's clarity of intention which initially provides the audience with a clear center of attention. The death of Claire-

Madame at the hands of Solange is ultimately a disruption of any fixed point of interpretive authority. The double name, Claire-Solange, thus appropriately reflects the ever-changing or shifting perspective which characterizes the dramatic movement.

In *The Balcony*, and particularly in *The Blacks*, this disruption of a privileged point of interpretation takes a more overt and aggressive form. Here, the character role-playing (inter-action), and the character-audience relationship (intra-action) comprise both the theatrical experience and a comment on its theatricality, which ultimately displaces any fixed position an audience may cherish. The interpretive security the audience may find through Irma's privileged viewing position is completely undermined as she usurps control of the theatrical illusion by addressing the audience directly:

> You must now go home, where everything – you can be quite sure – will be even falser than here. . . . You must go now. You'll leave by the right, through the alley. . . . It's morning already. (96)

She is thus both inside the dramatic situation inter-relating to other characters, and outside, regulating the entire process in which the characters indulge. Irma' s intra-action questions the audience's own position as viewers. Both the content of the play and the processes employed in assessing it make such self-referentiality a potent tool for revealing inherent insecurities, fears and desires at the base of audience presuppositions and assumptions in the production of meaning.

As in *The Balcony*, so too in *The Blacks*, the promise of a stable reality in the off-stage revolution is overtly and intentionally denied the audience. This vulnerable

position of not knowing, of lacking a grasp on "reality," is augmented by multiple feigned closures. The multiple re-enactments of the blacks' "crime" promulgate different versions of its reality and thus call attention to the production and manipulation of the text and its meaning. The last re-enactment is neither resolved, nor does it take place in the audience's field of vision but behind a screen from behind which a white gloved hand rests ambiguously on Village's shoulder (76). Such multiplicity of false endings results in the audience's ambivalent role in the performance. Newport News's final intrusion from the "outside," along with his ambivalent interaction with the other performers, only informs generally on the off-stage affairs and does not lead to the indicated end of the play marked by the removal of masks (111). In a similar fashion, the cock's crow is an unfulfilled promise of daylight as it brings neither an end, nor clarification or closure to the events (119). The mark of finality suggested by the attentiveness and obedience of the "dead" court as it follows the Queen to hell (126) is countered by yet another removal and replacement of masks. Just as Village and Virtue are about to "end" the play on the point of embarking on a "real" relationship, the backdrop rises to reveal the "blacks" in a similar configuration to that of the beginning of the play (128). This is by no means a circular closure which the audience may accept as such in a last attempt to rationalize a final meaning, for the backdrop reveals another dimension of the stage, of theatricality, where the performers turn their backs on the audience in a simultaneous acknowledgment and disavowal of its presence. The movement of the play thus resembles that of a vortex which is always aware of and refers to an "originary"

moment, yet never unites with it. This is perhaps best illustrated through *The Screens,* where the realm of the dead and the living coincide, where birth and death do not adhere to linearity of time. The characters' deaths are marked by their approaching shadows on and breaking through the screens as they *come* into *be*ing through death. The ambivalent interplay of the figurative and literal readings of the screens creates a constant movement or infinite regression from a volatile point of reference to a previous moment, to something which always precedes it. In this sense, there is no origin or absolute presence of meaning. There is no homogeneous bridging of a point of origin and an end marked by birth and death or by reality and representation. This kind of movement which continually displaces a central meaning functions simultaneously as a process of deferral and delay, and as a critique of centrality itself.

Dislodging the presence of meaning consequently displaces the central notion of self. Being is consequently put under erasure as it no longer signifies a fixed referent, but rather, marks a movement, a deferral. Self becomes a shifting process of *becoming*, not a fixed point of disclosure of the world. In *The Maids*, initially, we think we see the world clearly through Claire's eyes, that we know Madame despite her absence. However, as the role-playing of the maids progresses, so does the inability to grasp the "real" Claire and Solange. They are inextricably bound to each other and to the absent Madame to the point of interchangeability, which itself becomes the dramatic movement both of the maids' play-acting and of *The Maids* as a play; the maids' roles as servants depends on their employee, Madame, as does their

play-acting. This interdependent relationship renders Madame's authority as employer fictitious and imposed from without, for the action can take place and continue on any level, within Madame's presence or absence. There is another, concentric circle of interdependency, that of the Claire-Solange relationship as sisters and role-players. In their game, the intersection of these multiple layers multiplies the notion of interdependency beyond the binary oppositions which are the focus of much Genet criticism. Claire as Madame insists on alternately calling her sister either Claire of Solange, to the point where the two coexist as Claire-Solange. The play-acting centered around Madame is thus also a reflection of the sisters' quarreling based on whose will and opposition to Madame is stronger. The universe of *The Maids* is thus a proliferation of reflections of self: each seemingly fixed self is but a reflection intricately related to other reflections of self as well as to the process of reflection or of dramatic representation.

In the same way, such multivalence of representation in *The Balcony* renders the self as constituted, a self which spans and freely moves among layers of representation. The characters' concern with role-playing is not with being or becoming a fixed, imposed "bishop," "judge," or "general," but with nearing the "reality" of their functions. The three men enact the roles they chose, obsessively aware not to enter, at any point, the fixed belief that the chosen function is their real function. They echo this common concern:

> THE BISHOP. The majesty, the dignity, that light up my person, do not emanate from the attribution of my function. . . . [They] come from a

> more mysterious brilliance: the fact that the bishop precedes me. . . . I wish to be bishop in solitude, for appearance alone. (12)

> THE GENERAL. I am only the image of my former self. . . . I want to be a general in solitude. Not even for myself, but for my image, and my image for its image, and so on. (26)

Their insistence on exact enactments, on preservation of the perfect illusion, reflects their desire to transcend the interdependent relationship of functions, to escape fixed representations and capture that unattainable other, or image of self. It is a quest for a self posited in a process of infinite regression to something that always precedes it, always *becoming* as opposed to *being*. Self can be defined only in relation to its reflected other, the mirror image which marks absence, as it reflects it back. This principle of reflection thus places being in a dialectical interplay of absence and presence, a process which has implications on many levels. The impending danger of the outside reality of revolution bridges the dramatic situation of the play and the theatrical experience itself: being outside of or "absent" to both the house of illusions and the theatre space itself, the revolution nevertheless makes its presence felt as it affects the characters' role-playing as well as Irma's grasp over the house of illusions. The revolution becomes a threat of turbulence and impending change which overlaps the fears of the characters, including Irma, who has been a locus of authority and a parallel to the audience's position. By providing a backdrop against which individuals fear the loss of their ideals as a consequence of change, the revolution registers the

underlying fear that they will be placed in the vulnerable realm of the unknown. Through Irma, who bridges the world of the brothel and that of the audience, this same threat implicates the audience, and not only jolts it out of its voyeuristic position, but also questions the process of voyeurism and the desire it conceals. An "absent" threat thus touches on the presence of real fears and desires. The very movement between absence and presence, between multiple levels of dramatic representation, disrupts the privileged viewing position involved in the production of the self. Such movement has the power to dissect the entire process of differentiation and the consequent relations of power logocentrism conceals: domination over the other.

In *The Balcony*, the revolution is led by the Chief of Police, who represents an apparatus of dictatorship, of totalitarian and terroristic power. The Chief of Police knows, however, that power rests ultimately in domination of the mind of the subjected:

> I do what I can to prove the nation that I'm a leader, a lawgiver, a builder. . . . When the rebellion's put down, and put down by me, when I've the nation behind me and been appealed to by the Queen, nothing can stop me. Then and only then, will you see who I now am! (Musingly) Yes, my dear, I want to build an empire . . . so that the empire will, in exchange, build me. . . . I'll know by a sudden weakness of my muscles that my image is escaping from me to haunt men's minds. When that happens, my visible end will be near. . . . As soon as I feel I'm being multiplied ad infinitum, then [...] then ceasing to be hard, I'll go and rot in people's minds. (48-9)

As the holder of "real" power over the brothel, he expresses most ardently the desire to be the center of others' fantasies, to have his "presence" ultimately confirmed and congealed through others' desire for him. This desire for precedence, or rather for presence (confirmed by the "absent" other), has deep political implications. Inherent in the domination of the other, the subject's desire to be desired by the other implies the subject's ambivalent projection and denial of its own desire. This marks a potential step towards the erosion of difference, at the base of which lies the threat of violence, for to precede the absent other is to acknowledge its presence, and the subject's own need and desire for this presence; in other words, it is to acknowledge the other as similar to self. Such potential erosion of difference, however, has its own political implications. The chief's desire to be desired implies a hegemonic empire, one which in its totality will eventually be but drowned bodies in his pool of infinite reflection. This becomes a totalization and derealization of the possible plurality of other, an other deemed to "die" due to the violence inherent in the chief's desire for presence. Such desire fuels the chief's performance of his function, a performance through which he constitutes himself inevitably bound to the other. This "performance" of self shows an ambivalent mimetic rivalry which spills into mimicry: a desire for precedence of being, or presence, achieved only through the presence of a derealized other in a process of representation, which undermines the stability of fixed referents and which overlaps stage and audience "reality." This rivalry or overlapping is evident in the dialogue between Irma and the Chief of Police which parallels Irma's

privileged position in producing performed realities to the audience's privileged viewing of the drama unfolding on stage:

> IRMA. The ceremonies are secret.
>
> THE CHIEF OF POLICE. You liar. You've got secret peep holes in every wall. Every partition, every mirror, is rigged. In one place, you can hear the sighs, in an other the echo of the moans. You don't need to tell me to tell you that brothel tricks are mainly mirror tricks. . . . (to Carmen) You seem to know everything – so tell me: In this sumptuous theatre where every moment a drama is performed – in the sense that the outside world says a mass is celebrated – what have you observed? . . . People claim that our house sends them to Death. (48-9)

The audience's sense of theatrical illusion is broken, and consequently, so is mimesis and its exercise of the illusion of "difference" between stage and audience. The audience's desire to see itself represented on stage is undercut by the literal lack of reflection of the mirror on stage which promises, but fails to reflect the audience space (7). This brings into awareness the audience's position in the paradox of mimesis: a desire to see itself represented on stage, while denying stage reality, a process of recognition of stage reality as same, yet different from audience reality.

The underlying desire for presence at the base of mimesis is the "catalyst" in the process of differentiation, which in the social sphere translates into subjection and objectification of other. Desire for, and fear and fascination with the other comprise the ambivalent emotional response to the other. *The Blacks* illustrates such ambivalence. Though the white court demands a proper re-enactment of the crime to

maintain its discriminatory relations to the black other(s), the other's desire must be subjected as well in order for the court to usurp the other's subjectivity in its entirety; as long as there's an other who desires, any point of origin, or original presence, eludes the central subject, or the white court. Without "original presence," difference is potentially negated, as is identity or self. The white court's demand of a proper re-enactment of the blacks' crime imposes the role of "criminal" onto the blacks, whose performance of such constituted self thus inevitably reinforces the court's own performative identity. This performativity is, however, only achieved through the manipulation of representation, through the mimicry of limited mimesis.

The blacks' control and manipulation of dramatic representation reveals the processes which produce and reinforce the performativity of identity and its social and political implication. Once the curtain is drawn, the use of masks (which simultaneously conceal and reveal the performers' physical appearance,)[37] and the tiered landings of the set, draw attention to the play's illusory nature, to mimesis, and to the performativity of performance. In this way, all Genet's texts approach the "nonrepresentation" which Derrida summarizes as "the unfolding of a volume, a multidimensional milieu, and experience which produces its own space" and which no longer appeals to a time of "phonic linearity," but to different notions of time and

[37] Genet, *The Blacks*, 8. Genet specifies that each member of the Court is a masked black actor whose white mask is worn in such a way that the audience sees a wide black band all around it, as well as the actor's kinky hair.

space."[38] Genet's written texts, at once produced and performative, subvert mimetic submission which becomes destabilizing mimicry and which leaves the audience visible and vulnerable, without the "safety" of the reality/representation binary. Archibald, the "director" of the black performers, captures the effect of the blacks' multivalent performance in his directions to another performer:

> [The white court] tell us we're grown-up children. In that case, what's left for us? The theater! We'll play at being reflected in it, and we'll see ourselves – big black narcissists – slowly disappearing into its waters. . . . Nothing will remain of you but the foam of your rage. Since they merge us with an image and drown us in it, let the image set their teeth on edge! . . . You're becoming a spectre before their very eyes and you're going to haunt them. (38-9)

This haunting image is reinforced at the "end" of the performance as the backdrop rises to reveal the same, opening image of the play. The audience is denied closure and further access as the curtain is drawn and *The Blacks* comes to an "end." The production and performance thus remain suspended within quotation marks.

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[38] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 237-38

II

THE BLACKS:
Clowning in the Panopticon

Chronologically, this chapter was the first to be written, long before the rest of this thesis came into being. This chapter was the product of an unsuccessful seminar presentation in an African-American dramatic literature course throughout which I struggled with ontological questions surrounding race. I now realize that this struggle to articulate the ontology of race has been a struggle to articulate the ontology of representation. I refer to this chapter as a "cultural" articulation of Genet's notion of self, for I am dealing with a white writer's play about "blacks" written at a specific historical and cultural moment when the intersection of social, political, and philosophical implications of race exploded the black/white binary that governs race relations on different continents. In this sense, the focus of this chapter on The Blacks *is neither a summary of French colonialism nor a treatise on African-American race relations for it may address and encompass any culture of the African diaspora under white rule. This chapter thus reflects the process of my own struggle with the ambivalence inherent in the colonial impulse, an ambivalence which points to the "real" crisis: the representation of race, or of racial identity. To attempt an articulation of racial identity in context of Genet's play, is to inevitably address the ontology of*

representation itself.

To weave my present voice into an already existing text is to attempt to capture the movement of my consciousness and curiosity, which never rest comfortably with the "product" of an articulation, but which continually seek to articulate, shape, and in turn be shaped by the following discussion of racial identity.

> [W]e are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism.[1]

> [S]o we - in order to serve you - shall use our beautiful, shiny black make-up. . . . We embellish ourselves so as to please you. You are white and spectators. This evening we shall perform for you.[2]

Michel Foucault's excerpt, vis-a-vis *The Blacks*, captures key aspects of the clash between Western empirical thought and subjectivity: the traditional stage-audience relationship reflects the "I" as a fixed notion rooted in physical presence which clashes with the ambivalence inherent in the "we" and its ambivalent position in

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[1] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 217

[2] Genet, *The Blacks*, 10. Archibald, the "director" of the black performers, addresses the audience. Subsequent references to the text will be given in page numbers.

the panoptic mechanism. Genet's characters embody ambivalence as they move within and beyond the stage-audience binarism of classical theatre; as a trained "actor" and "director" of the black performers, Archibald is well disciplined and has the "decency" to take upon himself the creation of distance and language proper to the discipline of theatre in "producing" and "performing" a drama for the audience (12, 14). The impact of *The Blacks: a clown show* lies in its resemblance to and illustration and subversion of the panoptic mechanism, and its infinitely minute web of disciplines and their social and political implications. *The Blacks* illustrates the real, material effects of an ideal scheme of power.

Many disciplinary methods have existed throughout history. However, alongside the increased fascination with the body and its functions during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, discipline began to parallel general formulas of domination. Empirical methods of calculation and valuation became inevitably and inextricably bound in a politics of power as they became methods of correcting and controlling the human body. As Foucault states, "'The Enlightenment', which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines."[3] The body became the object and target of positions of authority based on observation. The clash between Western empirical thought and subjectivity has problematized the notion of identity on an individual, and hence, cultural level. The humanist notion of human nature as a

[3] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 222

'given', its positioning of the human being as centre of control from which meaning emanates, has been challenged by post-structuralist notions of subjectivity, which have decentralized the previously pre-determined position of the "I," and placed history and society as determinants of identity. This shift in the notion of identity has led to the inevitable and problematic shift in the perception and recognition of difference: the notion of fixed, inherent difference is replaced by a process, that of differentiation based on historical and societal constructs; a static notion is challenged by transitive thinking, which draws awareness to process. This process of differentiation rooted in a binary mode of thought gives rise to hierarchical relations of power of real social and political consequences. Differentiation privileges the "I" as the center of perception and representation. In usurping a position of centrality, the "I" gains stability and confirms its own individuality by perceiving, recognizing and controlling the representation of a distinct, marginalized other. An unequal relationship of subject-object is established, empowering the central subject ("I") as it confirms its own stability and existence, paradoxically through the objectification of the other. Differentiation thus becomes discrimination as it monopolizes subjectivity, or the processes of perception and representation of (an)other. It also further excludes the other in the consequent process of the production of knowledge. At once objectified by and subjected to these power relations, the other is easily interpellated into dominant ideology. The monopolizing effects of dominant ideology thus render the

subjected other and hir (his/her) relationship to the world as fictional constructs. Such unequal subject-object relations form the base of a dominant, hegemonic culture and underlie racist colonial discourse. Economic and political systems stemming from such representations of "reality" thus serve and reinforce the controlling "majority" that wishes to dominate, by extending its control and domination over the identity and function of the "minority" other. This power schema, at once problematic, inherently paradoxical and characterized by ambivalence, mirrors the colonial impulse of a dominant "majority" and a subjected other. In the United States, such ambivalent impulse governs the inter-action of African-Americans and the intra-action of the latter and dominant white society through methods similar to those of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, or of Bentham's ideal mechanism of government as read by Foucault:

> Treat 'lepers' as 'plague victims', project the subtle segmentations of discipline onto the confused space of internment, combine it with the methods of analytical distribution proper to power, individualize the excluded, but use procedures of inividualization to mark exclusion. . . . Bentham's Panopticon is the architectural figure of this composition . . . . At the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower. . . . [The inmate] is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication. . . . Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap. . . . [thus] the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. . . . Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to

> induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. . . . The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad. . . . A real subjection is born mechanically form a fictitious relation.[4]

Western metaphysics relies on the episteme of presence and identity as its mode of representation. This stems from a need or desire to fill the world with the presence of self as confirmation of one's existence, through a position of centrality. This desire is paradoxically fulfilled only by the existence and recognition of an other. This creates a discourse of "I" and "not I" which reinforces the position of power of the I as a central subject. Paradoxically, it is the moment of presence in a theory of difference that forms cultural otherness: the subject's presence or existence is inextricably woven within the existence of an other.[5] The subject is only distinct and individualized by the necessary existence of an other whose own individuality in turn becomes possible only within this process of differentiation. It is this disempowering position of the "other" in which African-Americans are caught that problematizes their own perception of themselves, in the sense that they do not and cannot perceive themselves separate from whiteness. Denied the privileged position of seeing/perceiving subjects, they remain peripheral and visible to the dominant centre of control.

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[4] Ibid., 200-1

[5] Bhabha, "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and Discourse of Colonialism," 73

The "debris of history" reveals quite a different perspective on looking relations. At a time of minimal contact with whites, blacks too formed perceptions and associations of "whiteness" with "the mysterious, the strange, the terrible," which were rooted in a desire similar to that of whites, the desire to understand the mystery of the unknown, "to possess the reality of the Other, even though that reality is one that wounds and negates." Such "reality" is expressive of the desire to understand the mystery, "to know intimately through imitation, as though such knowing worn like an amulet, a mask, will ward away the evil, the terror."[6] However, as James Baldwin relates in his experience as the first black man to visit a Swiss village in the 1950's (whose white inhabitants practised a ritual in which the buying and selling of "black" slaves was imitated),

> There is a great difference between being the first white man to be seen by Africans and being the first black man to be seen by whites...The white man takes astonishment as tribute, for he arrives to conquer and to convert the natives, whose inferiority in relation to himself is not even to be questioned, whereas I, without a thought of conquest, find myself among a people whose culture controls me, has even in a sense, created me.[7]

Within a closed system of domination resembling the panoptic mechanism, subjectivity becomes a privilege of those in power, of those in the tower of

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[6] Ibid., 338

surveillance, who thus control looking relations. Such panopticism links issues of perception and recognition to racist, imperialist domination. Black people comprise the periphery and thus do not truly, actively participate in the discourse of difference. They are marginalized, objectified (or interpellated as subjects) within dominant discourse, and their position becomes fixed. Within a white frame of vision, black people skirt the periphery within which they're enclosed.

The seeming stability of such process is nevertheless undermined by an underlying ambivalence: the inherent (subject-object) interdependency both ensures a continual or dialectical relationship between the subject and the subjected object, and is simultaneously subversive of the flow or direction of power within the relationship. To ensure certainty, the process of recognition of the other must necessarily be accompanied by disavowal, or a lack of real recognition. The other is recognized not as a real presence or as of any potential significance, but only as a symbol of presence. This ambivalent process of recognition and denial forms the base of an ambivalent process of cultural production, whose ambivalence leads to the cultural "schizophrenia," the "neurotic condition" or "split affinities" of African-Americans. In the white, the "honorable world," the black person is barred from all participation and is denied the slightest recognition; "[a] man [is] expected to behave like a man. [A

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[7] Ibid., 339

black man is] expected to behave like a black man - or at least like a nigger,"[8] to stay within bounds, imprisoned in his allocated cell of this panoptic mechanism where his body is explored, broken down, and rearranged, and where without any physical instrument or force, behavior can be altered and regulated.[9] At once individualized and contained within the general dominant white gaze, the disempowering position of African-Americans parallels the "many cages" or "small theatres," in which each actor is alone," individualized and yet within general view. From the distant, central point of power, the peripheral others blend to form the general area of surveillance. The cultural effect of such panoptic mechanism is a "totalizing formulation of race" which denies any diversity or pluralism that cuts across class and gender.[10] It arrests and impedes inter-action, or any possible relationships among African-Americans. The plane of possible existence becomes a "Funnyhouse of a Negro" where identity is shattered into endless reflections, for a concrete and potentially significant other is potentially subversive of dominant culture. The nature of ideology being imaginary and the recognition of other symbolic, any construct of the other remains fictional in relation to hir real, material existence.[11] The identity of the other no longer

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[8] Franz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," in *Black Skin, White Masks*, (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1968) 324.

[9] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 138

[10] Valerie Smith, "Split Affinities: The Case of Interracial Rape," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, eds. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routlege, 1990)

[11] Louis Althusser, from "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *A Critical and Cultural*

corresponds to real (material) existence. Recognized as mere symbol of presence, the marginalized other is open to further construction or fabrication within dominant ideology. This type of recognition based on presence/absence, and on fabrication, allows the dominant subject a claim of discovery,[12] or "patent of humanity" on the other. [13]

There is great seductiveness in ideology: its apparent impartiality/objectivity arises from ideology imposing obviousness as obviousness (without seeming to do so).[14] Easily recognizable, ideology is linked to the obvious, to common sense, which seems to exist outside any ideology. Empirical thought and discourse based on the common senses becomes "common sense" and is consequently equated with knowledge or fact. Readily "obvious" to the senses is color, which thus becomes the point of racial discrimination, the point of departure or originary moment in the process of differentiation. From a position of centrality, "whiteness" becomes the signifier which controls the "ethnographic gaze." Whites are surprised and shocked at the possibility of black people critically assessing whiteness as the "privileged signifier."[15] The assumption which underlies a colonized, subjected other is its lack of ability to perceive and comprehend the dominant, whose superiority never comes into

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Theory Reader, eds. Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993).

[12] Bhabha, "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and Discourse of Colonialism"

[13] Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," 326

[14] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 54

question. Dominant ideology, which associates whiteness with the benign, non-threatening, is thus extended over black conceptualization of whiteness. In this way, any traces of black subjectivity are erased and the "black gaze" falls under white control. This panoptic effect which denies black subjectivity ensures whites' safety and power through the pretense of invisibility: centrality and invisibility restrict potentially subversive critical observation or inquiry, and thus prevent assertions of equality.

This "fact of blackness," or such production of "black" identity, problematizes the development of a bodily schema for the "black" person, for it allows for overdetermination from without.[16] Unlike white marginalized minority others, such as the Jewish, whose actions become the final determinant of fabrication of identity, and who may thus escape unnoticed, the black person is trapped in, or immobilized by hir physical appearance; the body becomes the site of simultaneous recognition (or presence) and denial of this "reality." Visibility becomes a trap. The "black" person's consciousness of hir body is appropriated by the white controlling "majority" and thus becomes a third-person consciousness, since the body is no longer the cause or site, but the object of the structure of consciousness (Fanon, 326):

> "Look, a Negro! . . . I'm frightened! . . . Look how handsome that Negro is!"

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[15] Hooks, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," 339-40

[16] Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," 325

> My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning.[17]

From a distance, the white gaze explores, breaks down, and rearranges the object's bodily schema.

This simultaneous acknowledgement and denial of black subjectivity creates a "neurotic situation" for the black person as it presents two alternative, yet equally unacceptable terms of existence: negation of one's body, or heightened awareness of it. Aware of being identified as a symbol of sin (within dominant discourse) through skin color, the black person begins to hate the Negro, that which s/he is, unthinkingly conceding that the black person is the color of evil. Trapped within dominant discourse, the black person thus tries to "find value for what is bad." Fanon summarizes the situation:

> As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro. There are two ways out of this conflict. Either I ask others to pay no attention to my skin, or else I want them to be aware of it.[18]

Either way, the black person remains blatantly fixed at a distance, visible, " already dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes", and slices of hir reality are objectively cut away. Fanon concludes:

> In order to terminate this neurotic situation in which I am compelled to

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[17] Ibid., 324

[18] Ibid., 325

> choose an unhealthy, conflictual situation . . . I have only one solution: to rise above this absurd drama that others have staged around me, to reject the two terms that are equally unacceptable.[19]

It is this distance and one-way perception that allows the formation and control of stereotypes. The inherent interdependency and potentially subversive relation of subject and subjected requires this further step in the construction of the other to maintain control over cultural production.

Both latent and manifest orientalism lie at the base of black stereotypes: empirical observations mixed with whites' dreams, fantasies, myths and obsessions with the unknown other lead to the production of cultural myths based on projected images and stereotypes. Unknown territory is neatly mapped out onto the familiar, thus reducing any fear of, or threat from the unknown. From the subject's position of centrality and invisibility a certain voyeurism is possible. The pleasure, desire and fascination with mystery, countered by fear of the unknown, lead to simplifications and thus familiarization which allows for a certain closeness of the distant unknown. The result of such simplification is the creation of a new type or "genus" of the black person.[20] There is mixed, ambivalent emotional investment in these white stereotypes of black people, one that invests and informs the processes of cultural production and which promulgates a series of myths and distorted representations which in turn

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

become accepted as truth. From behind the lens of the television camera and between the lines of newspaper print emerge the emasculated black, the potent sexual black, the mythical sexual appetitiveness of blacks, the violent black drug addict, the black rapist and concomitantly (and peripherally), the promiscuous black woman, along with other such "characters" that fill the pre-set stage of dominant ideology, and reinforce its central position of power. The stereotypes thus reflect the deeply engrained ambivalence in the power structure: as it identifies and alienates, it reflects a fear of, and desire for the unknown, a phobia and fetish. In strengthening its own position, the power structure simultaneously and ironically reveals its own weakness. Whether based on the primal fantasy of desire for a pure origin which is threatened by different races, or whether a projection of white desire, white stereotypes of black people promote a chain of stereotypes that pass off as "truth" or knowledge.

The production of knowledge is thus intricately woven with the advances of power: produced and controlled by those in power, knowledge reinforces dominant ideology. "The formation of knowledge and the increase of power regularly reinforce one another."[21] The ineffectual and problematic attempt to break from the immobilizing position of visibility pushes the black person to "wear the white mask," to adopt white values and practices, to remain silent about levels of intense emotions and their possible expression, and to appear comfortable in the face of dominant

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[21] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 219

ideology. However, bound up in and produced by dominant ideology and discourse, this attempt does not in any way trouble the one-way flow of power from subject to the subjected, but rather, reinforces the panoptic power scheme to the point where it works on its own and always serves its own purposes. It coerces blacks to internalize negative perceptions of blackness through rhetoric of white supremacy. Whiteness is equated with goodness and it reinforces whites' privilege in the production of meaning. Stereotypes are diluted and neutralized of any political potency; any political power is dissociated from the subjected body so as to maintain domination over it.

Inextricably bound in such scheme of domination, African-Americans seemingly have no choice, no terms of rebellion or defense except those of dominant discourse. Contemporary attempts to break from such discourse, such as Henry Louis Gates' effort to canonize a body of African-American literature, highlight the "cultural problematic" in establishing a "signifying, vernacular criticism, related to other critical theories, yet indelibly black."[22] Such efforts reflect "racism's concrete irresolvability" which deems it perpetually derivative, caught within a web of signification and history, caught within the minute panoptic mechanisms at work in dominant ideology, which always maintains its central position of power within dominant discourse. Any

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[22] Michelle Wallace, "Negative Images: Towards a Black Feminist Cultural Criticism," in *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory*, (New York: Verso, 1990) 250. In this context, she is quoting Henry Louis Gates.

derivative point is thus always relative to the source of domination. Canonization, the attempt to establish a literary tradition, is based on a hegemonic impulse which becomes problematic in itself: not only does it undermine political texts by turning them into "dead, historical monuments" fixed on a page, but it also presupposes a system of selection which denies diversity among African-Americans as it problematizes communication between those "in," as well as those not truly "of" the community. How could the "African warrior" relate to his fellow SNAP! Queen, or the politically active black feminist critic to a (patriarchal) canonized body of criticism? To function within a dominant, panoptic scheme of power only reproduces its internal mechanisms and in turn reinforces the controlling centre, the control of perception, representation and production of knowledge. No real surveillance is thus necessary as this panoptic effect efficiently succeeds in completely immobilizing the subjected. As there is no outside to ideology the only solution is to focus on the internal processes which create the power structures, to illuminate the panoptic mechanism at work itself. And what better way to subvert the panoptic effect than to subject it to visibility, on stage, within the potentially similar panoptic mechanism operating in the theatre.

The processes at work in classical theatre, which adheres to the unities, somewhat resemble those of a panoptic mechanism: conceived out of dominant

ideology, written by and for dominant culture, theatrical representation operates on similar hierarchies of power. In *The Blacks* (written by a white writer for a white audience), Genet creates such framework, but only to reveal and thus subvert the processes at work within it. On a cultural level, the play's potency lies in its ability to penetrate surface appearances and illuminate unequal relations of power governing interaction and intra-action of blacks and whites.

The classical audience privilege of perception and representation (and in turn interpretation) which provides a "safe" position of invisibility in the darkened auditorium and which relies on the distinction between the eye/"I" of the audience and the visible, staged/objectified other, creates and reinforces a one-way viewing relation. Such viewing relation allows for closure in performance as it eliminates any ambivalence and allows catharsis. Genet creates this theatrical illusion only to shatter it. He frustrates the audience's complacent position as viewers through continuous, open references to the multiple layers of "reality" within the performance. The direct, opening address in the play acknowledges the white audience and draws them into the light of the staged performance. Archibald's speech thus diffuses and redistributes the flow of power amongst audience and performers. He introduces the other performers and alludes to their offstage lives:

> When we leave this stage, we are involved in your life. I am a cook,
> this lady is a sewing maid, this gentleman is a medical student. . . .
> Liars that we are, the names I have mentioned to you are false. (10-14)

The promise of closure or interpretation is undermined by the ambiguous play on different levels of theatrical illusion. The resulting ambivalence points out the performers' ability to control the entire theatrical experience and in turn to subvert the audience's position within it, or rather, its integral part in the representation of dominant culture. The interdependency of the white audience and the black performers, the intertwining of "reality" and illusion, is thus highlighted, as is the potential danger in the inherent ambivalence of such undertaking:

> [I]n order that you be assured that there is no danger of such drama worming its way into your precious lives, we shall even have the decency - a decency learned from you - to make communication impossible. We shall increase the distance that separates - a distance that is basic - by our pomp, our manners, our insolence. (12)

This repositioning/redistribution problematizes the process of differentiation by revealing its fictionality: the distinction between "we" and "you" is blatantly based on color, which itself turns out to be illusion. The black "actors" refer to blacking up, while the "whiteness" of the court is betrayed by the black skin and frizzy hair of the black actors. "Blackness" seems to be the starting point of and to take the precedence in initiating the stage action. The particular behavior that creates "distance that is basic" is also an act, "for [the blacks] are also actors" (12). The process of differentiation based on empirical observation, on the readily visible (skin color and behavior), is rendered fictitious, and identity, individual and cultural, is seen as a construct within dominant discourse. Genet shatters the seductiveness of mimesis, its

promise of closure based on obviousness, and its reliance on things really being what they seem to be.

The implication in the context of the play is that race within an enclosed, dominant system (such as that of theatre) is performative: based on empirical observation focused on the body, racial identity is subjected to processes of construction similar to those comprising the panoptic mechanism. Genet's insistence on a white audience is not necessarily based on the actual existence of whites; at least one "symbolic white" should attend the performance, be welcomed formally, dressed in ceremonial costume, and sit in a spotlight in the front row (5). White masks or even a white dummy should be used to ensure white presence. "Whiteness" as signifier is subverted as recognition of its presence is rendered symbolic, and as its subjectivity is at once acknowledged and denied. The forced identification of the white audience with the court is one of deceit, not just through the implication of the masks. The court watches the spectacle below while at the same time it is watched by the audience who inevitably becomes engaged in different levels of performance. The physical placement of the white court mirrors the white audience, which is simultaneously aware of the court's supremacy, and of its "ambivalent" color.

Such ambivalence which displaces traditional stage-audience positions, further defies traditional identification and closure, or a common ground for univocal interpretation. Any level of a possibly stable reality is destabilized. Neither empathy

with characters nor technical aspects of the play (such as set and lighting, props and costumes) allow the audience the comfort or closure and complacency that traditional mimesis does. Genet insists that the curtain is not raised, but drawn. The "reality" of the performance is not revealed by sources from above, but rather, the black velvet curtains are parted by deliberate, human interjection, subtly bringing into question the aspect of agency. Levels of tiers with specific landings at fixed heights form a grid of realities, or the skeleton of the power scheme at work within this discourse of western theatrical performance. The iron bars embedded in asbestos used in the first production are simultaneously reminiscent of playground "*monkeybars*" and of embedded hierarchies of power:

> They were made up of iron bars covered over by asbestos. The asbestos made the iron bars look more pliable. It was a stark and yet soft set. From the orchestra the decor looked like a giant sculpture. With proper manipulation of the lights, it assumed different shapes, different colors and moods. It reflected and participated in the action of the play.[23]

The high, circular gallery that the court occupies simultaneously replicates the physical theatrical environment of most western theatres, and is reminiscent of a fortification resembling a Panopticon. Neither the absence nor presence of an audience in the darkened auditorium affects the illuminated acting area; the show will continue, the actors will adhere to theatrical illusion paradoxically aware and unaware of being watched. However, the stability of these traditional positions is subverted as

they grant neither invisibility (safety or complacency for the audience), nor subjectivity. The court descends from its tier of surveillance and down below among the blacks. The "actors" recreate both the identifiable classic Mozart minuet which they hum and to which they dance, and the "rustling of leaves, moaning of wind . . . and other sounds that suggest the virgin forest" or the "native land" (94-6). The lavish, exaggerated evening attire simultaneously suggests refinement of western culture and fake, imposed elegance juxtaposed to the incongruous costume of Newport News; barefoot and wearing a woollen sweater, Newport News juxtaposes fake, theatrical illusion and alludes to an "outside" to this enclosed system. Any pre-existing symbolic order is destabilized as flowers become associated with crime and murder as the performers pluck them from their bodies and lay them on the catafalque. Paradoxically, theatrical illusion or fiction has the potential to defictionalize. The white catafalque, which supposedly contains the body of a white woman, is actually empty. The murder, which on a cultural level represents the murder of the white race by the black, is only rehearsed performance as there is no actual coffin under the concealing white sheet. In a sense, whites' construction of black racial identity with its reliance on material presence breaks down.

The different levels of performance within the play allow the black "actors" freedom of movement, unlike the fixed, confining traditional position of characters.

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[23] Bettina Knapp, *Jean Genet*, (New York: Routlege, 1992) 134.

Though the "actors" are scripted by Genet, the "actors" within the dramatic situation have the freedom of both subjective and objective participation and thus "play" on different levels of representation: black actors play blacks who are playing at being black (or rather, filling out whites' image of blacks). Such independence of movement reveals inherent problematic effects even in the subversion of positions, effects that are evident on a cultural level. Pure reversal of positions is still entrenched in a binary mode of thought that stems from dominant discourse (which reinforces fixed positions in order to conceal an underlying ambivalence). Within such closed system of binary thought, the blacks cannot perceive themselves separate from whiteness, for their actions are reactions to moments of cultural contact. Archibald announces the re-enactment, the play within the play, which must take place within the imposed parameters, or the domain within which they're allowed to operate (26). Just as the audience by definition expects the necessary performance, so the court insists on the blacks' promise of re-enactment of the crime "so as to deserve [its] condemnation," so as not "to gum up the works" (42). There must be a crime in order for the Judge to "seek out and judge a malefactor," criminals for the Governor to execute, and a "monster" for the Missionary to christen before the execution, in order for the court to avenge itself and reinforce its central power. The court must claim the originary moment, or precedence of being within a binary mode of thought. "But no corpse at all - why that could kill [them] . . . be the death of [them]" (99, 101). The Judge best

sums up the court's reliance on roles and the cultural consequences of such binarisms:

> Who's the culprit? . . . I'm offering you one last chance. . . . it doesn't matter to us which one of you committed the crime. . . . If a man's a man, a negro's a negro, and all we need is two arms, two legs to break, a neck to put into the noose, and our justice is satisfied. (109)

Within the enclosed theatrical space and by extension, cultural space, any black can replace another, any black can become the culprit in this totalization of race. Just as the re-enactment of the murder is dependent on the court, so the court's role and function are dependent on the characters' proper re-enactment. The oratorical contest between the Queen and Felicity crystallizes the inherent interdependency based of the binary mode of thought of dominant discourse:

> FELICITY. If you're death itself, then why, why do you reproach me for killing you?
>
> QUEEN. And if I'm dead, why do you go on and on killing me, murdering me over and over in my color? . . . .
>
> FELICITY. [Y]ou are the light and we the shade. . . . You fool, just imagine how flat you'd be without the shade to set you off in high relief. (103-4)

In the same way, Village's blacking up is necessary for Diouf's whitening in order for the crime to be properly committed (54). Diouf's attempt to urge that the ceremonial murder "re-establish in [their] souls a balance that [their] plight perpetuates," that "it unfold so harmoniously that the audience see only the beauty of it and recognize them predisposed to love," leads to his "neurotic condition" (31).

Dominant ideology is extended to and usurps black subjectivity. At Diouf's plea to "try to come to an understanding with [the court], to propose some kind of understanding or agreement," Archibald asks the others to efface themselves (30-1). The court is shocked and disturbed at the possibility of being approached and viewed critically and objectively by the colonized:

> DIOUF. After all, gentlemen, my good friends, it is not a fresh corpse that we need. I'd like the ceremony to involve us not in hatred [...]
> THE NEGROES. (ironically and in dismal voice): [...] but in love!
> DIOUF. If it's possible ladies and gentlemen.
> THE MISSIONARY. [...] to involve you, above all, in your love of us.
> THE VALET. Are you speaking seriously Monsignor?
> THE JUDGE. Then we shall deign to hear you.
> THE GOVERNOR. Although, after this orgy [....] (31)

Even within dominant discourse, the blacks' returned critical gaze or address could potentially reverse or undermine the court's position of surveillance. However, Diouf's use of dominant Christian discourse somewhat reassures the Judge, who deigns to hear him. The court eliminates any possibilities of the blacks' diverse subjectivity by establishing the purity of the Christian Host:

> THE MISSIONARY. Will you invent a black Host? And what will it be made of? Gingerbread, you say? That's brown.
> DIOUF. But Monsignor, we have a thousand ingredients. We'll dye it. A gray Host [...] (32)

After all, Diouf must admit that the Host is obviously white, and by association good/benign, unlike "invented black" or "odd gray." Any assertions of equality are erased as Diouf's last attempt at some claim to the Host returns to the binary mode of thought that eliminates any ambivalence or subjectivity: "White on one side, black on the other" (32). Deracialized, emasculated, and outcast even from the other performers, Diouf is thus marginalized and silenced, incapable of effective communication as he stutters and whimpers to the others (113). All traces of his subjectivity are gradually erased, a subjectivity or power of representation which obviously exists in his imagination:

> DIOUF. The first thing to tell you is that they lie or that they're mistaken. They're not white, but pink or yellowish. . . . I move about in a light emitted by our faces which they reflect from one to another. . . . Our cares and concerns no longer have meaning for me. . . . I could no longer see even our hatred, our hatred which rises up to them. I learned, for example, that they're able to perform true dramas and to believe in them. (89-90)

This dramatic moment traces Diouf's movement from subjectivity into dominant discourse, which Diouf ironically communicates to the blacks and as he faces the court, to the audience. The performance demands that as a black male actor playing a black vicar, he is caught up in dominant ideology, and is engulfed by dominant discourse on the platform of the court (124).

Village, "moving along the edges of the world, out of bounds," almost

professes his love for Virtue, tries to "reject everything that wasn't [her]" and to laugh at the illusion imposed by the world around them (36). However, the weight of the world's condemnation weighs him down to the point where his love, burdened by white men's contempt, makes his act of loving unbearable and thus transforms it to hate. His hate is internalized and unleashed against his own blackness. He hates the sweetness, beauty, thrill and safety of his own blackness. During the performance, this internalization stamps out the possible emergence of a real identity or real communication (37). Parallel in its panoptic effect, Village is the object of information, never a subject in communication.[24] The episode exemplifies the coerced internalization of negative images of blackness and its shattering effects on black identity. These are captured in Village's monologue in which reality, metaphor and illusion are woven together to create the ambivalence:

> I was unable to bear the weight of the world's condemnation. And I began to hate you when everything about you would have kindled my love. . . . [T]he fact is, I hate you. . . . I know not whether you are beautiful. I fear you may be. I fear your sparkling darkness. Oh darkness, stately mother of my race, shadow . . . I know not whether you are beautiful, but you are Africa, oh monumental night, and I hate you. It would take so little for your face, your body, your movements, your heart to thrill me [...] . . . But I hate you!

Using the dominant discourse, Archibald reminds Village to be careful in his

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[24] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200

performance and not allude to his real life, to stick to the soot, coal, and tar images demanded by the performance, by the panoptic structure of the lit stage in view of the court and audience. The performativity is reinforced by the court's continuous interruptions throughout which it relates its capital investments in Africa (36-38). The more Village adheres to the discipline of theatre, the easier it will be for all involved to act out the required drama, and specifically, for the court to correlate capital investment with subjected bodies. Both the theatrical situation (stage-audience relationships) and the dramatic situation (character relationship) thus parallel Foucault's notion that "disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and increased domination," (138) and that "the accumulation of men and the accumulation of capital - cannot be separated."[25] Nor are they separable in the above mentioned scene which intertwines Village's struggle for identity with the court's investment roster. Virtue's ability to genuinely care is reduced to a "show of tenderness", while Village stubbornly fights to keep his own bodily identity and emotions of love alive: "My body wants to live...I love Virtue. She loves me" (39). However, images dictated by the performance threaten to engulf and drown them all "in its waters," to lock them away in separate rooms in the "Funnyhouse of a Negro,"[26] or in separate panoptic cells. Archibald summarizes the

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[25] Ibid., 220

[26] Adrienne Kennedy, "Funnyhouse of a Negro" in *In One Act*, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988). Originally produced in 1964 in New York, *Funnyhouse* clearly shows Genet's influence in

effect of internalized negative images on the performers:

> You're a Negro and a performer. Neither of whom will know love. . . .
> This evening only - we cease to be performers, since we are Negroes.
> On this stage we're like guilty prisoners who play at being guilty. (39)

Theatrical conventions resembling panoptic mechanisms discipline the black "actors" to act out the "Negro" images demanded by the performance which demands they play at being guilty.

Movement between levels of "reality" exemplifies the "schizophrenia" such negative images imposed by dominant ideology induce on an individual and cultural level. Reminiscent of Genet's 'Adame Miroir, the blacks are trapped in a hall of mirrors, imprisoned by their reflected images, images that upon close observation would reveal they don't correspond exactly to the real. The blacks are overdetermined from without by the court which defines their manners, their insolence, their emotions and behavior in a way that both reflects and refracts images, creating split affinities, and which separates blacks from one another. As in the Panopticon,

> [O]ne can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible.[27]

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terms of theme and style. Black actors wearing white makeup engage in the same "play" of multiple, constructed identities. As in *The Blacks*, Kennedy also plays with the ontology of representation.

[27] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200

This immobilizing moment leaves the blacks with the "option" of fulfilling their designated images within the closed system of theatrical performance.

The court's demands of proper re-enactment successfully elicit the "proper" emotional atmosphere of hatred. The re-enactment progressively demands more precision and calculation, and less action. In prolonging and delaying the murder, the blacks highlight the mimetic process as a strategy of power; all equally unsatisfactory (for the court) re-enactments reveal the paradoxical desire for originality at the root of mimesis. As Village resumes the "voice of the recital," the Judge urges him to "maintain a formal tone," to "establish distance" in order to produce the court's desired, or "proper" effects of mimesis: to construct the criminal identity of the blacks as criminals (68-9). Village is consequently constructed as the sexually potent and threatening black rapist preying on white women, the violent, pungent, deceitful criminal deserving of punishment (64). The physical engagement of an audience member (who is asked to hold Diouf's knitting) bridges and parallels the processes of theatre to structures operating in society. Village can answer Felicity's call - reclaim his African roots by joining the "Tribes of the Rain and Wind," by being an "African warrior," by embracing the "bulging chest and oblong thigh" of Africa (76, 77). With the exception of the performers' offstage reality, his only other alternative lies in answering Diouf's Christian appeal to try to "balance [his] plight," to assimilate and remain within the limits of dominant discourse, to crawl, whimper and tremble on his

haunches in the face of the court (31, 97). While his first "choice" distances the emasculated Diouf, the second impedes connection and communication with Virtue. Emasculated, Diouf no longer has a voice among the other blacks (60). The character is only heard again from the platform of the court. Virtue, aware of the "infectious squeamishness" of the whites, screens Village's confession of love for feigned sentiment (38, 42). Physical contact between the two is interrupted by the Governor, who prohibits them to continue. Either "choice" renders diversity among blacks impossible. The performance thus 'safely' continues whether the court is watching or not. The efficiency of this fortified system allows the Queen to doze off (83). No surveillance is necessary as blacks are imprisoned within the separate cells of dominant ideology which eliminates any inter-action among them.

Through movement among levels of performance, the performers also expose the effects of distorted representation by simultaneously "playing" them and commenting on their "play." Along with its effects, the exposed processes of this distorting representation reveal their inherent ambivalence and its place in cultural production. Negative images perpetuate a chain of stereotypes which despite their paradoxical basis, become knowledge or fact within dominant culture which in turn reinforces the dominant ideology in which it is based .[28] They comprise a totalizing formulation of race which is deeply rooted in whites' intimate, ambiguous emotional

[28] Wallace, "Negative Images: Towards a Black Feminist Cultural Criticism,"

investment. When acted out by the characters who comment on the performance, the stereotypes are revealed as entrapments of dominant discourse which focuses on the body and its expression. Archibald reminds the others that they must express hatred, not love, that they must stretch, distort and hide in language as "the masters contract it" (27). Village's improper reference to his father is quickly corrected by Archibald for the sake of the performance:

> ARCHIBALD. Your father? Sir don't use that word again! There was a shade of tenderness in your voice as you uttered it.
>
> VILLAGE. And what do you suggest I call the male who knocked up the negress who gave birth to me? . . . .
>
> ARCHIBALD. Your circumlocution is quite satisfactory. (26)

Snow assumes the voice of dominant discourse and highlights the stereotype Village embodies: as constructed criminal, he is also a "scarred, smelly, thick-lipped, snub-nosed Negro, an eater and guzzler of whites and all other colors, a drooling, sweating, belching, spitting, coughing, farting goat-fucker . . . sick, limp and submissive," merging and associated with the terror of the night (27). When uttered by the "actors," references to the blacks' choking odor by which they were hunted like savage animals (26), to their enormous nostrils and gaping, thick lips, and their submissive deep sights, highlight the process by which stereotypes engulf them all into dominant discourse by reducing the race. When uttered by the court, they reveal the ambivalent emotional investment at the base of stereotypes. Archibald comments on the

fetishization, fear and desire that comprise the court's condemnation of the blacks:

> For their entertainment? . . . You referred, quite rightly, to our odor - our scent, which used to lead their hounds to us in the bush. . . . Keep from magnifying our savageness. Be clever and choose only reasons for hatred. Be careful not to seem a wild beast. If you do, you'll tempt their desire without gaining their esteem. (26)

Village expresses the white woman's fear and fascination with his body:

> Listen! That sound is the mewing of panthers and tigers. . . . If I unbutton, an eagle of the Great Empire will swoop down from our snowy summits to your Pyrenees. (64)

This ironically appropriated expression of whites' desire, threat and insecurity, is also expressed by the Governor; although "every brothel has its negress" and he regularly "tears off a piece" (38), his spyglass exposes the "terrifying" vision at the base of his insecurity:

> THE JUDGE. What do you make out?
>
> THE GOVERNOR. Nothing out of the ordinary. (laughing) The woman is giving in. You can say what you like about them, but those [black] people are terrific fuckers.
>
> THE MISSIONARY. You're forgetting yourself, my dear governor.
>
> THE GOVERNOR. I'm sorry. I mean that the flesh is weak. It's a law of nature.
>
> THE JUDGE. But what is it that they're doing? Describe it.
>
> THE GOVERNOR. Now he's washing his hands [...] he's drying them [...] those people are clean. I've always noticed that.
>
> THE JUDGE. What else is he doing?

THE GOVERNOR. He's smiling [...] he's taking out his pack of Chesterfields [...] puff! He's blown out the candle.

THE JUDGE. Not really?

THE GOVERNOR. Take the spyglass, or the lantern, and have a look.

(80)

Within this cleverly constructed scene, just as a reader's voyeuristic tendencies may cling suspended in the ellipses, so an audience's imagination is stirred by the action which takes place out(side) of audience view behind the screen. The channels of communication replicate and reverse the panoptic mechanism. The governor's spyglass, or means of surveillance from a distant, higher and invisible position informs the court, whose depiction of the action becomes given fact or "truth" for the audience. As Village has blown out the candle, the court cannot make light of the crime despite its spyglass and lantern. The panoptic positions of visibility and invisibility are reversed and the desire (also implied in the ambivalence of the Governor's laughter) is illuminated. Desire for the other is also exemplified in a moment of mimetic rivalry where the Judge echoes Village's "desire" for the "captive:"

VILLAGE. (to the audience) But first, let me show you what I was able to get out of my tamed captive [...]

THE JUDGE. But what's Virtue's role in the crime?

VILLAGE. None. She never ceased to be present, at my side, in her immortal form. (to the audience): [...] my tamed captive. For she was clever and highly reputed among those of her race. (68-9)

As the audience watches, it shares the court's ambivalent emotional investment in the blacks, as it becomes both subject in and subjected to this panoptic theatrical experience. As the blacks seem very much interested in Village's response, his implication of Virtue in the crime may be read as an effort to deliver the proper performance for the court. However, as he juxtaposes Virtue's presence to the Mask (Diouf playing a white woman, or the tamed captive), the dialogue may in fact reflect the judge's simultaneous desire for and condemnation of Virtue as a tamed captive within his power, within a struggle for precedence based on presence/absence. The emotional ambivalence is also captured in the Queen's "amused" exclamations and the Valet's "affected" delivery regarding Village's "performance:"

> THE QUEEN. (amused) He's charming! Continue young man!
>
> THE VALET. I rather like him I must say. (to Village) Do sigh more often and more deeply, charming black-boy! . . . [to court (very affectedly)] Don't condemn them at the very start. Listen to them. They're exquisitely spontaneous. They have a strange beauty. Their flesh is weightier [...]
>
> THE GOVERNOR. Be quiet, you whippersnapper! You and your damned exoticism! (18-9)

Through simultaneous speech, Virtue articulates the mesmerized Queen's thoughts which reveal the latter's desire for the curved body surfaces, the dusky bulk, the nakedness, the "adorned member" of a black man (45). She is paradoxically offended by the blacks' choking odor (45), and choked by [her] desire for a black man:

> How I have loved! And now, I die - I must confess - choked by my desire for a Big Black Buck. Black nakedness, thou hast conquered me. (124)

Projected onto the blacks, this expression of desire solidifies the stereotype Village embodies. He hunts the white woman, the "voluptuous bosom that the Negro lusts after" with gleaming eyes, full of hatred (50-1).

Anxiety of the unknown and threat of perpetuation also fuel the court's actions. The blacks' ceremonial smoking circle around the corpse puzzles and threatens the Governor and the Missionary, who familiarize the unknown by resorting to explanations of cannibalism and by finding relief in prayer to a civilized, white god (23-4).

The lack or absence of a corpse in the re-enactment deems Village's crime fictional (50). The white cloth thus conceals a fictional crime, a fictionality which loosens the chain of stereotypes that it methodically perpetuated. This gap in the performance creates a blank space in cultural production which reveals the fictionality of cultural myths. The entire system of cultural production breaks down as multiple but equally fictional versions and perspectives of the crime surface. The body of cultural myths is fed by other myths which reinforce and ensure the progression of the performance on the theatrical and cultural levels. In a self-contained process of cultural production which reduces race to a manageable construction (sameness through difference), there seems no escape from the fortifying control centre of

dominant ideology. It is not a particular Negro that "trails the skirts of the White woman", but a "marketful of slaves." It is not individual actors, but a cast of criminals that kills. It is not a named individual, but "x,y or z Negro" with a neck around which the flexible noose fits (109). The blacks' secret telegraph is decoded by trials and theological discussions which thus translate into and make the unknown comprehensible (98). Black sons and grandsons are born with their feet already riveted together and their existence pre-determined (108).

Genet's apparent claim to no fixed, pre-existing belief system that validates any ideology allows him free play with theatrical conventions, and creates the illusion of existence outside ideology. However, since it is impossible to be outside ideology (for through the process of denying ideology one is simultaneously producing ideology), all existence becomes a fictional construct of an ideology. The Panopticon, constructed on the empirical notions of presence and absence, becomes a concrete illusion of self-containment:

> This Panopticon [is] subtly arranged so that an observer may observe. . . . [It] also enables everyone to come and observe any of the observers. . . . [T]he arrangement of this machine is such that its enclosed nature does not preclude a permanent presence from the outside . . . anyone may come and exercise in the central tower the functions of surveillance, and . . . he can

gain a clear idea of the way in which the surveillance is practiced.[29]

The blacks thus act within and upon such seemingly self-contained system at work on a theatrical and cultural level. Newport News holds the promise of offstage reality and identity, an identity which is subjected neither to the white gaze, nor to the theatrical performance the audience is attending. It's no longer a matter of staging a performance (81). While the blacks adhere to traditional notions of Greek tragedy in which "the ultimate gesture is performed off-stage," the safety of theatrical illusion is completely undermined by the invisible, off-stage threat of violence (84). This potential threat of outside violence is juxtaposed to the effects should the blacks continue their nightly performances:

> NEWPORT NEWS. As long as the earth revolves about the sun, which is itself carried off in a straight line to the very limits of God, in a secret chamber, Negroes will [hate]. (85)

As long as they continue under the same, imposed relationships of dominant ideology, the blacks will always be subject to its discriminatory processes.

As the blacks walk beyond the black backdrop into a scene which mirrors the beginning of the play, as they consciously turn their backs on the audience and shed their masks, they assume some agency in the seemingly self-contained, panoptic mechanism of traditional theatre. Archibald speaks in his natural tone (81), while Virtue and Village join hands and efforts to create their own reality and love, be it

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[29] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 206-7

"gestures of love," or tangible, kinky black hair (128). Their "freedom" lies in the awareness of and real participation in the process of identity (individual and cultural) production. In the end, even as the "actors" shed their characters, they are still actors scripted by a playwright. However, the offstage reality (implied by Newport News) is neither fully disclosed, nor mimicked in view of the audience; it remains "outside" both script and audience view, and thus never loses its potential threat.

> [I]n the central tower [of the Panopticon], the director may spy on all the employees that he has under his orders. . . . [I]t will even be possible to observe the director himself. . . . [A]n inspector arriving unexpectedly at the centre of the Panopticon will be able to judge, without anything being concealed from him, how the entire establishment is functioning. And, in any case, enclosed as he is in the middle of this architectural mechanism, is not the director's own fate entirely bound up with it? [30]

In the darkened auditorium, the white audience becomes both subject and subjected. Its fate is inextricably bound to *The Blacks*, as the potential threat lies outside the theatrical experience on a social and political level, where the real violence lies in the threatening process of disrupting the traditional values of a dominant society. "Any member of society [has] the right to come and see with his own eyes" the processes at work. In the seeing machine, "exercise of power may be supervised by society as a

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[30] Ibid.

whole."[31] As a miniature replica of cultural processes, *The Blacks* simultaneously condenses and magnifies the power relations that govern racial relations. The play is simultaneously within and subversive of dominant theatrical discourse. It creates, subverts and destroys the illusion of freedom from a centrally positioned ideology, and in turn, upsets the order of a discriminatory, racist society. *The Blacks* reveals what lies behind this "architecture of emptiness" (126).

[31] Ibid.

III

SCREENING THE SELF:
Mimesis, Mimicry, and the Funambulist's "True-Real"

Having discussed in chapter one Genet's post-structuralist concept of self as embracing ambivalence in parallel to the false reality/representation binary, and having analyzed such binary in parallel to the stage-audience relationship in chapter two, the vortex of Genet's thought patterns leads me back to the issue of representation. In short, having discussed the production of identity, this chapter will focus specifically on the performance of identity, or rather, the articulation of a performative concept of self in terms of an actor's approach to playing a character. In dealing with performance, I must necessarily re-address the reality/representation binary, this time with a focus specifically on the referential system of mimesis which becomes mimicry in Genet's work.

The paradox of representation posits identity or sameness through difference and is marked by a desire for metarepresentation, a deferral towards an unattainable original. The paradox relies on the referential system of mimesis, which as Elin Diamond points out, rests on the axiology of truth: a model-copy system which creates a hierarchy favoring "natural" referents over their imitation.[1] The paradox lies

[1] Diamond, "Mimesis, Mimicry, and the 'True-Real,'" 363

in the simultaneous acceptance and denial that the copy is not the model. Mimesis thus implies difference: the object of imitation is not the model, and in parallel in terms of acting, the character is not the actor. Genet's manipulation of the ontology of representation dismantles the recognizable referents of realism, those which create the referential system of mimesis and impose the naturalistic actor-character distinction. Mimesis spills into mimicry as physical presence, spatial, and temporal referents are manipulated in a way that replaces logic and causality with patterns of behavior formed in the moment of a situation, or through stylized, repetitive acts. Identity thus no longer relies on consistency of "natural" or predetermined nature, but rather, it emerges as a dynamic performance or process of *becoming*, performative in nature and consequently, beyond a deterministic acting approach. Without a stable system of reference, the truth/falsehood binary no longer holds by naturalistic definitions. Rather, the way to a deeper truth lies through the "artificiality" of performance. In this sense, just as character is performed, so is identity; as the character-actor distinction breaks down, the actor's approach is marked by a continually committed, willed performance of the circumstances of the moment, a process of perpetual *becoming*, not of *being* as a static, naturally defined state.

In the loss of its referential system mimesis becomes mimicry where there is neither a hierarchy of truth, nor the limiting duality of truth-falsehood or reality-artifice: all representation is real. This "excess" of truth undermines the authority of

any fixed referents, thus mimicking and destabilizing any imposed "natural" consistency or deterministic delineations. Such is the nature of Genet's anti-mimetic work, where mimetic submission becomes destabilizing mimicry.[2] Genet's use of mirrors points to the instability of a "seductive" referential system as it reflects the truth that any origin(al) is always already mimicry, a representation of repetition. The Lieutenant's speech best captures this predicament in *The Screens*:

> [It's a matter] of perpetuating an image that's more than ten centuries old, that grows stronger and leads us all, as you know, to death. . . . Let every man be a mirror to every other man. A pair of legs must look at themselves and see themselves in the pair of legs opposite, a torso in the torso opposite. . . . Must look at oneself there and see oneself there supremely handsome [...] (He about-faces in military fashion and speaks, facing the audience) [...] utterly seductive. And let the three-faced mirrors keep multiplying, the ten-faced, the thirteen, the hundred-thirteen, the thousand, the hundred thousand! Let the profiles reflect profiles back and forth and let the image you offer the rebels be of such beauty that the image they have of themselves cannot resist.
>
> Conquered, it'll fall to pieces. Broken [...] or like ice, melted. (106)

Mimesis spills into mimicry as excess reflections overflow the Lieutenant's monologue and blur the "original" point of departure: "[T]he heart in the heart opposite; the foot in the foot; the nose in the nose; the foot in the nose; the eye in the teeth [...] (He seems to be in an actual state of trance) [T]he blood in the blood; the

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[2] Ibid., 369

nose bloody, the soup with the milk, the soup with blood" (107). While reflection marks pure imitation, and thus similarity or identification, the splintered refractions of the mirror images hints at the difference which accompanies similarity. The soldiers themselves are only mimetic constructions of one another, defined by their military role opposite the rebel others, and caught within the constitution of the military itself. Mimicry thus makes no pretense to a "real" referent, but rather, becomes through its excessive nature, a comment on its ambivalent yet truthful artifice. In his garish make-up and excess padding, Blankensee is real on many, concentric levels of representation: as a gendered actor he performs his character, a performance enhanced through the artificiality of makeup and costume as inscribed by the text, while these theatrical conventions also determine his role and relationships among the other characters. The actor's gender, his performance of the character and the character's role among the others are thus constituted through the act of performance and reinforced as artifice also through stylized gesture and vocal expression.

Artifice becomes truth relative to time and place. Excessive makeup contrasting with realism, "a large variety of false noses . . . chins and curly wigs," complement the "extremely precise" and "very taut" acting where every gesture is visible (7,8). These are reminiscent of the splendid appearance, the "reality of the Circus [which] lies in [the] metamorphosis of dust into gold dust." [3] Such is the

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[3] ----------, "The Funambulists," 46

setting for Genet's funambulist, or metaphoric actor, who dances brilliantly up above the dark abyss of realism, and whose imminent death implies a "vertiginous liberation" from its natural limitations and social encumberances.[4] Such metaphor is best illustrated through *The Screens*, Genet's most obvious play with concentric layers of representation. *The Screens* is the subject of Genet's letters to Roger Blin. Genet's direct response to Blin's approach to the play includes specific comments on actors and acting as related to the text.[5] Following in the trope of colonialism examined in chapter two, and as the subject of Genet's letters to director Roger Blin, *The Screens* is thus a source of much primary information regarding Genet's acting aesthetic. The mimesis-mimicry of this play serves as the best context for interpretation, and strongest paradigmatic example for the funambulist's tightrope act, or the actor's dangerous yet thrilling process.

The Screens exemplifies the paradox of representation as it simultaneously employs and subverts the traditional referential system of mimesis. It becomes, in Diamond's use of the term, mimesis-mimicry, in which the production of objects, shadows, and voices is excessive to the truth/illusion structure of mimesis, spilling into mimicry, producing multiple fake offspring. [6] In the absence of such binary, *The*

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[4] ---------, *Reflections*, 64

[5] ---------, *Letters to Roger Blin Reflections On The Theatre*, trans. Richard Seaver, (New York: Grove Press, 1969)

[6] Diamond, "Mimesis, Mimicry, and the 'True-Real,'" 371

Screens creates the blank, undifferentiated space that Genet felt theatre embodies, a place free of the "natural sham" of realism where neither the actor's natural faculties, nor the fundamentals and strategies of performance are subject to logic, history and causality.[7] Given circumstances are not "natural givens," nor do they lead to logical causality or consistency of character or plot. The analytical powers of the intellect, with emotion as its final end, are overshadowed by will and commitment to the moment as a means of discovering a deeper truth.[8] Performance thus marks the actor's process, and *being like* the character (as the end of the actor's self-realization) is replaced by the continual process of *becoming*, of continual self-materializing. Consistency of plot and character as defined by the tenets of naturalism is thus undermined.

The characters in *The Screens* experience the performative paradox; they comment on an awareness of, and resistance to the performative nature of their existence and identity. This is manifest in their constant desire for an other which both identifies and is different from self. Ommu accuses an Arab soldier of becoming one of the French colonizers: "You're joining them, and copying them excites you. To be their reflection is already to be one of them" (119). In copying the colonizers, the Arab becomes a mimetic representation of a historical construct, of soldiers who are

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[7] Genet, *Letters*, 72

[8] Will, emotion, intellect and other such terms are used in a naturalistic sense, pertaining to a naturalistic acting approach such as Stanislavski's *System*.

themselves mimetic constructions of one another within the constitution of the military. Such effort to capture and substantiate an original referent or object of representation is illustrated through Warda, whose physical appearance of "whore" and style she perfected over time ultimately cannot pinpoint her "real" presence:

> Poor golden petticoats! I'd always hoped that one day instead of being an adornment, you'd be yourselves, the whore in all her glory. A pipe-dream. And picking my teeth with hatpins, my style! When I'm tumbled on the bed, it's you my skirts, that are crushed and creased. In the brocade a shutter that opens on the bowels of the earth! (14)

Warda "disappears" beyond her perfected style, her heavy adornments and her physical presence which opens onto unfathomable layers of representations. For Genet she represents "an extraordinary emptiness [that] has more presence than the most dense fullness."[9] Identity for these characters is a continual deferral to an unattainable, absent original, not subject to time, space, or physical presence. The self is a negative, dynamic *process of becoming*, constitutive in nature: dynamic in its continual deferral, negative in its movement towards an absence, and constituted through many levels of performance. This parallels the funambulist's highwire act, a dance for his unattainable image:

> [N]othing . . . will keep you from dancing for your image. You are an artist. . . . So dance alone. Pale, livid, anxious to please or displease your image: but, it is your image that will dance for you. . . . [I]f it is the wire that dances

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[9] Genet, *Reflections*, 14

> motionless, and if it is your image that the wire bounce, then where will *you* be?[10]

The artist's metaphor parallels the actor's performance of character; the character, though different from, is ultimately the same as self; the actor simultaneously *is* and *is not* the character, or rather, *being* as a static end is replaced by the dynamic process of *becoming*. This is a departure from a realistic approach to character determined by the laws of nature which allow for the reproduction of delicate, subtle shading of everyday life on the stage and which prevent the actor from "going down the wrong path."[11] Constantin Stanislavski maintains that "every person who is really an artist desires to create inside himself an other, deeper, more interesting life than the one that actually surrounds him."[12] This is a desire which presupposes a distance between stage and real life. Such is also the distance between Genet's solitary dancer who pursues his image that flees and vanishes on a steel wire. Unlike that of realism, however, it is a distance in which not a proposed end, or internal or external state achieved through or caused by any sequential or temporal framework is the focus, but the dance, or the process itself remains the focus. Given circumstances, internal or external, do not bridge a historical, emotional or psychological past to the present, for time is not

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[10] ———, "The Funambulists," 46

[11] Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1948) 16.

[12] Ibid., 45

subject to natural calibration and thus does not provide character or plot with the consistency of realism in terms of motivation and action:

> Time. I know nothing very specific about time, but, if I acknowledge the existence and termination of an event, any event whatsoever, it seems to me that the event did not take place in a movement going from the present moment toward the future, but that, on the contrary, the moment which is going to direct the event is no sooner born than the event culminates and flows back at top speed towards its birth and settles upon itself. The first Frenchmen bombarding Algiers in 1830, if you like, bombarded themselves from Algiers about 1800. Events are thus born, spontaneously, and die at the same instant of the same moment, but die so quickly that their end, turning round, brings them back to a point slightly prior to the noise which marked their births.[13]

Genet's specific comments on *The Screens* is that the point is not to situate too precisely in time a play which is masquerade. James Creech captures the slippery temporal framework of representation:

> Representation seeks to re-Present, to return to a slippery presence that once was present yet now at the moment of its representation is not the same...To anticipate is to represent, to represent is to anticipate. The relationship seems to be governed by prolepsis. . . . Anticipation represents a future moment in the present.[14]

In *The Screens*, death as a circumstance given by, or written into the text by Genet, is not fundamental in the definition and consistency of character.

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[13] Genet, *Letters*, 22

[14] James Creech, *Diderot: Thresholds of Representation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986) 59.

Independent of the limiting factor of time, death represents a release from the shackles of daily life. Warda, nearing death, becomes "less and less someone" though her anger is greater and greater as is her sadness, the sadness "that's going to make [her] invent the misfortune that's been taken away from [her]" (123). The character does not gain consistency through her growing emotional state, due to a given misfortune which can as readily be taken away. Rather, any internal or external motivating forces are overshadowed by the power of her will to invent herself:

THE MOTHER. I was present at the beginning of your death.

WARDA. (interrupting her) No. (A pause) I treated myself to the death of my choice. Just as everything in my life would have been chosen if there hadn't been that stupid mess in which I found myself with my dress up, my gold petticoats unstitched, my pins twisted, my bones chipped, my collar-bone out of line [....] But my death is of my own making. I brought my art to such a pitch of perfection. (143)

Such is the parallel death of the funambulist, a death undertaken willingly:

> Death -- the Death of which I speak -- is not the death that will follow your fall, but the one which precedes your appearance on the wire. . . . The person who will dance will be dead - intent upon and capable of all beauties. When you appear, a pallor - I am speaking not of fear but of its opposite, an invincible boldness - a pallor will spread over you. . . . No longer attached to the ground, you will be able to dance without falling. But see to it that you will be able to dance without falling. But see to it that you die before appearing and that it is a dead man who dances on the wire.[15]

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[15] Genet, "The Funambulists," 46

The actor's process is "an odd project: to dream oneself," and make manifest that dream to others as he strives "to resemble later, the image which he is inventing today."[16] The actor *is* the character in the sense that s/he wills hirself to *become*, to commit to the process of *becoming* or of *self-materializing* moment to moment, independent of psychological determinism or emotional causality, or any internal state of being as an end. The process of acting *is* the process of *becoming*, which constitutes the actor's being or self. The will to create outshines any static state of being determined by 'the moment before'. It takes precedence over the intellect's dissection of units and objectives determined by inner motivation and replaces it with a moment-to-moment focus on the performance. The safety of realism's "magic if," which helps the actor tap into the imagination and which bridges the distance between reality and artifice, is thus irrelevant in the absence of time, as is, consequently, any temporal future. Realism's "magic if" is replaced by the funambulist's curiously drawn representation of his dance: "along a straight line, which represents the wire, oblique strokes to the right, strokes to the left - these are his feet, or rather the positions of his feet. They are the steps he will take."[17] The straight line implies the consistency of a continual, unbroken process of self-materialization marked step-by-step by signs performed in the moment. In the absence of temporal referents

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[16] Ibid., 47

[17] Ibid., 46

consistency of character in terms of behavior is defined by the continuous performance of moment-to moment-action.

In the same manner as time, spatial referents are subject to mimicry: the given circumstances of place and setting which also contribute to consistency of character and plot are also undermined by the juxtaposition of the real or concrete and its representations, of the literal and figurative. In the absence of real spatial referents, the stage becomes "unlimited space," "akin to death, a place where all liberties are possible."[18] The characters in *The Screens* inhabit such indeterminate, undefined area which validates all facets of life and levels of existence as performative, as is evident from Genet's vision of the space in which the play should take place:

> The back and sides of the stage are to be formed by high, uneven boards, painted black . . . arranged in such a way that platforms of different heights can be brought onstage from the left and the right. There will thus be a varied set of stages, levels, and surfaces. The screens and actors will enter and leave through spaces between the boards, right and left. (7)

Aside from a concrete milestone and a rock-pile which serve as concrete complements to depiction of an Arab grave drawn on the screen, there are no "givens" when an audience enters. Screens and objects are brought onstage by stage-hands and characters. Despite the conventional darkness between the scenes for the change of

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[18] ----------, *Letters*, 12

set, this sparse "setting" is neither fixed nor given, but consciously created by the characters. The screens, which change between opaque and transparent, serve literally as the multi-tiered setting, and figuratively as concentric levels of representation just as the characters themselves do. In scene eleven, the transparency of the screens validates the reality of the shadows and silhouettes which precede the voices and physical entrance of the Legionnaires. The Mother's death, or her process of coming into being in the realm of the dead, is similarly filtered through the screens:

> From the rear of the stage, behind the many paper screens, appears a tiny silhouette. It slowly goes through all the screens, ripping them; it grows bigger and bigger as it grows near. Finally, it is behind the last screen, that is, the one nearest the audience and, tearing this last sheet of paper, appears: it is The Mother. (129)

In the same way, as Kadidja breaks through the screen into the realm of the dead, she refers to her previous existence: "All the same, a part of me's still back there. . . . The image of me that I left behind" (127). The world of the dead and the living coincide. As Leila anticipates her death, she knows not whether she is floating to the surface or sinking to the bottom (138). Natural directions in the space are undermined and no longer present a realistic "compass" which maps out characters' relationships to one another and to the setting around them. Luce Irigaray's reading of Plato's cave as a theatre, an illusionistic apparatus which, like realism, obscures the mode of production of this illusion, captures the potential of theatrical illusion. It explains the predicament

of destabilizing naturalistic, mimetic referents: "Chains, lines, perspectives oriented straight ahead -- all maintain the illusion of constant motion in one direction. Forward."[19] Diamond elaborates on this predicament by explaining that what is ahead (the cave wall) is in fact behind (the opening to the cave). Irigaray's conclusion captures the actor's predicament faced with such "ocular funnyhouse" or mimesis without true referents, a conclusion which also parallels the funambulist's act:

> You will already have lost your bearings as soon as you set foot in the cave; it will turn your head, set you walking on your hands.[20]

> But on that narrow path which comes from and leads nowhere - its twenty-foot length is an infinite line and a cage - you can also perform a drama.[21]

In *The Screens* the dead thus watch a scene that conventionally takes place above, yet they look down or in the wings, opposite to where the scene is actually played out (131). One actor's account captures the challenge such spatially disrupted relations provides for the actor trained in the tradition of realism:

> Genet said, in the beginning that he didn't like the way the actors walked. He told us that we always moved as if we were going someplace. When we're onstage, he said we should act as if we were nowhere. For example, it took us two weeks to use the word "heaven" without gesturing. The word "heaven" is

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[19] Luce Irigaray quoted by Diamond, "Mimesis, Mimicry and the 'True-Real,'" 370

[20] Ibid., 370

[21] Genet, "The Funambulists," 49

> enough by itself. . . . "'He's coming this way,'" Genet said, "'should be said without turning the head.'" Often if the person says someone is coming from the left, Genet would assume that the character was coming from the right. Just as "heaven" can be anywhere, so a person could be coming from any direction. This kind of non-movement gives the impression of unlimited space. . . . When I asked why [the Mother] came from the opposite direction, Genet said that the theatre was an unlimited space.[22]

Commitment to the momentarily created space and shifting scenery calls for concentration and for action in as much as it is called for by the text, specifically Genet's stage directions for the actor whose surroundings are volatile and thus not a real consistent base on which to rely. In this sense, character relationships to one another and to the set are determined by a text whose nature calls for concentration and focus in the moment. Such focus, concentration and commitment in turn, stir the actor's spontaneity, which together with and guided by the text, creates a basis for relating to other actors and to the setting.

In the same manner, the actor must accept and relate to objects onstage as they appear and disappear, either real or drawn representations, springing from the actors' imagination or created by the text itself. The Mother's red valise "falls to the ground and opens, and everything falls out: it was empty" (15); the yellow velvet, the clock, the coffee-grinder and all other supposed contents are created through the text, through

Genet's specific directions and through the actors' imagination. In the introductory stage directions, Genet insists that "[n]ear the screen, there must always be at least one real object . . . the function of which is to establish a contrast between its own reality and the objects that are drawn" (7). The allegedly stolen clock is never physically present, but rather, comes into being through Leila's drawn representation, specified by Genet's description, yet realized through the actor's own skill and imagination: a magnificent, Louis XV style clock (57). The very process of drawing onstage requires the actor's skill and imagination in making the imitation marble clock "real." Of the drawings, Genet states that,

> [E]verything ought to be painted with care, the aim being to move the audience. Even if the drawings are unskilful, awkward, naïve, the actors ought to put as much effort and concentration into doing them as they put into their acting.[23]

The clock is further concretized through the Mother's detailed text: "little wheels, little stars, little screws, little worms, little nails, gobs and gobs of thingumabobs," and it acquires a pleasant quality through its "very pleasant chime" (61). In this sense, not in spite of, but because of theatrical illusion, imitation marble, or artifice, becomes real just as reality becomes an extension of the actor's imagination, spontaneity and focus

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[22] Jane Heather, comp., *Jean Genet: the Function and Nature of Acting*, n. p., University of Alberta, February 18, 1992, 22. Amidou, French actor playing the role of Said, responding to Genet's direction in Roger Blin's 1966 production of *The Screens*.

[23] Genet, *Reflections*, 25

in the moment, with the inscribing text as springboard. The dust of artifice discarded by naturalism metamorphosizes into golden artifice, just as loose gold spangles may cling to the funambulist's dusty, everyday clothes as a sparkling reminder of a deeper, truthful reality achieved through the brilliance of artifice.

From a naturalistic point of view, stability or consistency of character could unquestionably lie in physical or bodily presence, in the actor's body as an original, real starting point in representation and in its consistency of behavior as it relates to physical expression. However, artifice in terms of garish makeup and costumes, highly stylized movement, gesture and vocal qualities is the only "given" inscribed by the text. The body as a stable referent is thus also open to mimicry which destabilizes naturalistic physical and vocal expression, and by extension, gender as a natural "given."

The characters in *The Screens*, excessively made up and costumed, comment self-referentially on their constructed appearance which conceals their nothingness underneath. Despite Warda's personal style to which she clings for definition, she is given weight by her adornments which take precedence over the concealed nothingness:

> And when a man's meat calls me to the rescue, dresses, petticoats, jackets pile upon my shoulders and behind. They come out of the trunks, standing up, to

> array me. . . . A real whore should be able to attract by what she's reduced herself to being. My style! . . . My outfits! Underneath, there's not much [....] (116)

It is the lead in Warda's petticoats, the white on her ankles, the makeup on her face and her personal style that give her the presence of, that determine her as whore, while underneath she fades away to leave only a "skeleton draped in a gilded gown" (116) or the unfathomable depths of the "bowels of the earth." (14)

The artifice and theatricality of the body are also reinforced by an implied lack of unity achieved through the isolation of bodily parts and what they, on their own, represent as "whole." Sir Harold's pigskin glove remains a suspended, disjointed fabrication of his fist which amounts to a straw-filled representation of his absent presence, of the hovering colonial presence that gave the country goose-flesh and which on an individual basis, affects the actions and roles of the colonized as slaves, Arabs and men (31). Just as they "stopped believing in the watchful virtues of [Blankesee's] pigskin gloves" which no longer informs him, so the Mouth remains a disjointed, figurative representation of Si Slimane, re-presented through Madani, who is himself constructed through the actor's performance:

> THE MOTHER. I've picked you to be the dead man's Mouth. . . . Try to articulate clearly the words of the dead man and not your own.
>
> MADANI. Is it you, Si Slimane [....] It's me here [....] It's your Mouth [....] I'm the one who uttered all your remarks when you were alive. (49)

The actor playing Madani, who represents the Mouth, or Si Slimane, must speak "commandingly, and without moving," to thus suggest a shift in the agency of the representation. The performance thus demands extreme precision and clarity in terms of physical and vocal choices, as well as trust in and commitment to them. Genet's high admiration for Maria Casares in the role of The Mother captures the seemingly paradoxical "disciplined" freedom of the actor:

> The Mother: don't diminish her natural fury. Don't extinguish her fire, but add acting ability to it. . . . Maria Casares hasn't learned how to rest in the paroxysm: she's going to be exhausted. But she is so beautiful in her exhaustion![24]

The slightest impression of haphazardness is eliminated through what Genet calls a "precision of numbers,"[25] the precision of "very taut acting" indicated in his stage directions and in his request of Roger Blin that each section within a scene be "perfected and played as rigorously and with as much discipline as if it were a short play . . . . [W]ithout smudges."[26] Genet thus summarizes:

> Therefore the actors and actresses must be induced to put aside cleverness and to involve the most secret depths of their being; they must be made to accept difficult endeavours, admirable gestures which however have no relation to those they employ in their daily lives. . . . Their make-up will, by transforming them into 'others', enable them to try any and every audacity: as they will be

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[24] Ibid., 15, 32

[25] ———, "The Funambulists," 46

[26] ———, *Reflections*, 25

> unencumbered by any social responsibility, they will assume another, with respect to another Order.[27]

The costumes, as Genet reminds Blin, are a means of show in every sense of the term, as are the make-up and suggestive gestures, a precise means to free the actor: off the textual springboard, through the precision of artifice and into spontaneity and the depths of a "truth" beyond the surface of convention.

Disjointed representation of the body also dislodges traditional standards of physical beauty, of pleasing or beautiful movement, which are historically and socially determined. Neither the audience nor the other characters ever see Leila's face, which remains hooded throughout the performance, making the actor's facial appearance irrelevant. Genet asks Blin that no face should retain the conventional beauty of feature which is played up on both stage and screen. For Genet,

> the refusal of natural sham, must not be carried out haphazardly: its goal, among other things, is to reveal and make heard what generally passes unperceived. Its real goal . . . is a new joy, a new festivity, and God knows what besides. . . . I was very much afraid of hurting Maria Casares when I asked her, for example, to look at herself in a mirror, to make faces in it without indulgence, and to discover, in this new uglified face, a beauty that every spectator . . . could find within himself in some faltering way, buried but capable of rising to its own surface.[28]

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[27] Ibid., 12

[28] Ibid., 56-7

In this sense, as conventional beauty is broken down through the make-up, Leila's "ugliness" is constructed by her hood which simultaneously conceals and identifies her; she thus performs the ugliness bestowed on her independent of her appearance or gender.

In terms of naturalistic unity of physical expression, neither vocal qualities nor movement could pinpoint the body as a stable referent. Neither on their own, nor as an extension of each other can the voice and gesture give the body naturalistic unity. Genet asks the director to take into account the various tonal qualities of the different actors' voices and invent a manner of speaking which ranges from murmurs to shouts. "[A] tempest of sentences, must be delivered like so many howls, others will be warbles, still others will be delivered in a normal, conversational tone," to create the "approximating score" he asked for to accompany the text of *The Screens*.[29] The thunder, rain, fire and other noises are also part of the 'soundscape' for which the actors are responsible. Sounds and gestures are often juxtaposed, thus once again breaking natural patterns of human expression and demanding precision in the acting. Genet asks that there be a shift or unbalance to some degree in the voice and acting of actors: "[Amidou] makes two or three gestures that are not voluntary, but submitted to. Gestures which sustain *quite naturally* the spoken word. These gestures lessen his

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[29] Ibid., 24

verbal and gesticular impact."[30] Scene ten calls for gestures to "give a strong impression of truth," (62) while in scene thirteen the men's muffled tone and gestures imply that it is night time (102). Genet believed that "French [like other languages] allows words to straddle each other like animals in heat," the result of which is "an orgy of words which mate . . . and lend to French speech the wholesome appearance of a wooded countryside where all the stray animals flock together."[31] In "writing or speaking such language, one says nothing." He concludes that,

> If we are clever enough, we can pretend to understand, we can make-believe that words are stable, that their meaning is fixed or that it has changed because of us who, voluntarily . . . modify their appearance slightly. . . .
>
> Actions are hardly more docile. As for language, there is a grammar of action: beware of the self-taught man![32]

The correspondent relationship of signification and intention is disrupted either by consciously pointing to, or suiting the actions to words, or by lending emphasis to the stylization of the acting and diction, tones of voice and posture. Thus the meaning of the text, like that of the body and its expression, is inscribed and constituted. The text becomes an ambivalent source of meaning which allows for freedom of expression beyond the signification of words. Genet repeatedly urges actors to turn themselves into animals, and only occasionally during the performance show "a bit of the Mother .

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[30] Ibid., 33

[31] Ibid., 73

[32] Ibid., 74

. . or Warda, who shows the tip of her ear." He thus urges Blin to have the actors transform themselves into jackals, turkeys, trees, to be dirty, but not with the "customary social crap."[33] For the actor then, commitment to the text does not, in a naturalistic manner, determine physical and vocal expression:

> The fact is that actors are always prone to 'finding spontaneously' gestures which help the words to emerge from the mouth. . . . [G]estures and voice in [such] banal way . . . results in a kind of useless redundancy. It is preferable, when the voice has found its true inflections, to discover the gestures which will then reinforce it, gestures which will no longer be familiarly granted the voice but will, perhaps, be in opposition to it - for example, to an inflection of deep regret a very light-hearted gesture of the hand and foot - in such a way that the whole forms a long succession of unstipulated agreements - broken but always harmonious, freeing the actor from the temptation of the commonplace.[34]

Physical expression and its "meaning" for Genet are thus created according to a "grammar of action," which has no relation to naturalistic unity of body or text, but rather, to the body as text.

Like Genet's text, the actor's body thus also becomes an ambivalent source of meaning which allows for expression beyond the naturalistic signification of "gender,"

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[33] Ibid., 15

[34] Ibid., 56-7. The commonplace I once again interpret as linked to daily, social reality, to language and other actions already inscribed onto the body.

for gender, like Genet's language, follows a grammar of action; a grammar of action which, similar in its 'Brechtian spirit', expunges the psychologized ahistorical referent, and instead, foregrounds the performativity of gender.[35] Judith Butler's view of gender as a "performative accomplishment" where "in its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status" exceeds naturalistic binaries of realism. In this way, her view parallels the ambivalence in Genet's work:

> Genders, then, can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent. And yet, one is compelled to live in a world in which genders constitute univocal signifiers, in which gender is stabilized, polarized, rendered discrete and intractable. In effect, gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which . . . contradicts its own performative fluidity.[36]

As Butler points out, as stylized acting can function as an alienation-effect, so gender-specific behavior, through exaggeration and stylization, can diffuse the obvious naturalistic qualities of femininity and masculinity. Following in the phenomenological tradition, Simone de Beauvoir appropriates and reinterprets the doctrine of gender not as a stable identity or locus of agency, but, as Judith Butler best explains it, "an identity tenuously constituted in time -- an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. . . . [T]he mundane way in which bodily gesture,

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[35] Diamond, "Mimesis, Mimicry and the 'True-Real," 367

[36] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* ed. Sue-Ellen Case, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) 271-79.

movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self." [37] Genet clearly intended the actor's function to be to "don the gestures and costumes which will enable them to show [him] to [himself], and to show [him] naked . . . reconstituted in a character, or with the help of a multiple character and in fictional form." [38] He thus asks for identification through artificiality and multiplicity of a character, with a metaphorically naked character, one stripped of all natural pretense. Marionettes, Genet suggested, would do better than dismal, everyday actions of men. Genet's funambulist, who must protect himself from the hardness of the audience's fixating gaze, feels the "need of materializing himself" by contrasting his daily appearance of an old female tramp, to his sparkling nightly appearance as an acrobat, or rather, through the "constant movement from her to him."[39] The funambulist knows not which is his "higher being," but is rather associated with the movement between the two, a distinction which implies the artifice of constructed gender through constructed appearance, and which is evident from Genet's comment:

> Your make-up? Excessive. Garish. Let it extend your eyes as far as your hair. Your nails will be painted. Does anyone in his right mind walk on a wire to express himself in verse? It's sheer madness. Man or woman? Unquestionably a monster. Rather than aggravate the peculiarity of such behavior, the make-up will attenuate it, will make clear to the audience that an

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[37] Butler, *Performing Feminisms*, 270

[38] Heather, comp. 3

[39] Genet, "The Funambulists," 48

> embellished, gilded, painted, ambiguous creature is walking, without a balancing pole.[40]

In writing to Blin about *The Screens*, Genet summarizes the predicament of the gendered body, its relation to acting:

> This may not be an original thought with me, but let me restate it anyway, that the patron saint of actors is Tiresias, because of his dual nature. Legend has it that he retained the male sex for seven years, and for seven years a man's clothing, for seven a woman's. In a certain way, at certain moments -- or perhaps always -- his femininity followed in close pursuit of his virility, the one or the other being constantly asserted, with the result that he never had any rest, I mean any specific place where he could rest. Like him, the actors are neither this, nor that."[41]

Regardless of what sex Tiresias retained, his "virility" and "femininity" were constantly interchangeable as was his gender-specific clothing. Though posited as opposites, it is the slippery interchangeability of these qualities which, like constructed outer appearance, points to the self, specifically the gendered body as a construction. Furthermore, just as stylization of movement and gesture can free an actor of naturalistic limitations, so through the stylization of such qualities associated with gender, gender itself can be seen as a "corporeal style, an 'act,' which is both intentional and performative, where 'performative' itself carries the double meaning of

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[40] Ibid., 47

[41] ———, *Reflections*, 50

'dramatic' and non-referential.' "[42] Seen as such, gender no longer limits an actor to a predetermined code of vocal or physical qualities associated with femininity or masculinity. Rather, as Genet concludes about the cast of *The Screens*,

> "it is imperative that no one have an attitude, or a series of gestures, which are perfectly safe. [Jean-Louis] Barrault is constantly unstable, fragile, and unbreakable. I should like him too, like Casares . . . to be an example of strength and delicacy.[43]

The constitution of the illusion of an abiding gendered self can be illustrated through Sa'id, or rather, the representation of the character as a man and husband. Sa'id's pants are "alive and warm, ready for anything," for performing all the bodily functions of "walking, pissing, coughing, smoking, farting like a man," though to Leila's sexual advances they play dead. As Leila says, they are both Sa'id, and better built than him, they are shaped like him, yet are shapelier and rounder. The Mother adds that "Sa'id knows what pants are. He puts his big legs into them, his arse and all the rest. His rank and titles" (24). Sa'id's pants determine his "masculinity" as it is constructed through the discourse of others; the pants become a sign of Sa'id that constitutes a social reality through their acts. That such acts can constitute a social reality in terms of his role as "man" and "husband" points to their very construction, a

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[42] Butler, "Performative Acts," 273

[43] Genet, *Reflections*, 45-6

construction reinforced by Sa'id's absence throughout that particular and throughout much of the play overall. That such "acts" can constitute dramatic reality thus multiplies the choices and possibilities available to an actor in creating a character. In doing so, the actor must thus be aware that,

> the body is not a self-identical or merely factic materiality; it is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic. By dramatic I mean only that the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one *does* one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well.[44]

Within the ring of the circus and through its dazzling artifice, the solitary funambulist engages in a performance of self-materialization full of possibilities. Above and beyond the conventional gazes of spectators, he dances without the safety net of a naturalistic referential system. Such is the actor's process of pursuing character, a character which simultaneously *is* and *is not* the actor, but who ultimately shares and depends on the same wire, on Genet's text as the only support.

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[44] Ibid., 272

Inscribed and inscribing, yet taut and supportive, Genet's text becomes the actor's springboard for self-materialization, for a truth beyond the naturalistic sense of faith and truth that

> avoid[s] everything that runs counter to nature, logic and common sense! That engenders deformity, violence, exaggeration and lies, [for] the more often they get an inings, the more demoralizing it is for [the] sense of truth. . . . [The actor must] therefore avoid the habit of falsifying.[45]

Precisely through conscious deformity, violence and exaggeration, the funambulist finds the finest expression, not of a predetermined self, but of a self materializing moment to moment, the true-real self that paradoxically emerges through a falsification of the spatial, temporal and physical tenets of naturalism, and through the inscription of meaning beyond the signification of language. The funambulist dances without the balancing pole of naturalism's "magic if" which bridges a sense of faith and truth of given circumstances. Free of imposed consistency of naturalistic character, time, and plot, the funambulist embraces the multiple, excess truths of mimicry to choreograph, with the precision of numbers, her perpetual dance of *becoming* herself, of internalizing an insensitivity to the darkened naturalistic world below. Freed from the confines of the mimetic system of reference, from logic and causality, the actor's faculty of intellect and its analytical powers which lead to deterministic psychological motivation and which evokes proper natural emotions and

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[45] Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 16

hence a 'truthful' inner state, is replaced by a dynamic Will; the will to commit to the potentially deconstructive powers of artifice and to the disruptive potential of mimicry in order to reach not a limiting realistic truth that is *like* the character's, but the "true-real" which marks the dynamic self in the very act of its self-creation. With a love almost desperate, fraught with tenderness, the funambulist performs her dances, her leaps and bounds – in the acrobat's language. Any kind of inner motivation and single, unified character objective are replaced by intense commitment to the action of the moment. Such commitment is fueled by the risk of failing, and by trust, a trust in the exaggeration and artifice of the created moment, in the precision of numbers, or in the strict discipline of voice and body: "Danger has its function: it will oblige your muscles to achieve perfect exactitude - the slightest error will cause a fall that will cripple or kill you - and this exactitude will be the beauty of your dance."[46] Thus, through a full commitment comparable to that of a "dedicated priest performing a ritual," full physical and vocal engagement beyond naturalistic delineations of voice and movement or qualities associated with each, the funambulist enters the realm of spontaneity: creation of self and of one's existence, and hence, the (unattainable) real truth of non-truth.[47] A real truth achieved not haphazardly, but through grueling discipline at the command of the will. No longer attached to the commonplace, the

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[46] Genet, "The Funambulists," 47

[47] Diamond, "Mimesis, Mimicry, and The 'True-Real,'" 371

funambulist thus dances according to a grammar of action through which true, or real time, space, and physical presence are created, not "given," and which support the funambulist's self-materialization, her true-real self, or her identity.

In parallel to the funambulist who both *is* and *is not* her image, and whose true-real marks the process of *becoming*, or *self-materialization*, the actor, who both *is* and *is not* the character thus experiences identity as a construct, constitutive in nature, marked by a dynamic interplay between naturalistic truth and reality and the true-real; a true-real which once again returns to the inevitable paradox of representation, for as the funambulist well knows, it is a process which can only take place in the "deathly solitude, the desperate and radiant region in which the artist operates."[48] Ambivalence once again prevails, for this solitude, or the 'castle of the soul,' can only be accorded by the presence of the audience. The funambulist must artificially, by an effect of will, internalize the insensitivity of the naturalistic world in order to fuel and continue her self-materialization. Such is the necessary ambivalence in Genet's work which contains his notion of self or identity as a paradoxical, dynamic process of *becoming*, or *self-materializing*, not in spite of, but because of theatrical illusion; an alienating identity always in anticipation of itself. It is thus this ambivalence, trademark of Genet's work, which screens the self and embraces excess truths and endless possibilities in producing and performing identities. As Genet clarifies to Blin,

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[48] Genet, "The Funambulists," 47

> All I'm doing is trying to encourage you in your detachment from a theatre which, when it turns its back on middle-class conventions, goes in search of its models: gestures, tone, in the visible life and not in the poetic life, that is, the one we sometimes find near the confines of death. There, faces are no longer ruddy, one no longer has the ability to open doors -- or else it is a strange door indeed, opening upon what![49]

Without the ontological authority of mimesis, a plurality of mimetic acts proliferate. These create the stage for a theatrical fluidity of identities which enjoy the destabilizing power of mimicry, of the non-truth of truth and the unattainable real; or rather, the "true-real," the process of *self-materialization* as the basis of Genet's concept of self.

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[49] ———, *Reflections*, 15

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