



# American Dramaturgies

For the 21st Century

Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

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If all the world is a stage (as the title of this series supposes), the stage of the 21st century must be a site of remarkable anxiety—at once global and splintered, intensely up-front and relentlessly mediatized, ever fragmenting the collective and seeking to build it anew. How can theater, an art of intimate presence, rethink its aesthetics and reassert its mission on such a stage? More specifically, how have American dramaturgies chosen to engage with our new millennium? Relying on a broad understanding of “dramaturgy” as a dynamic process, this book explores some of the inspiring trends and arresting innovations of contemporary theater in the US, investigating both playwriting and performance-making in order to delineate formal experiments, the imprint of socio-political themes, and new configurations in spectatorship.

The chapters of the present volume delve into various aspects of theater-making, from courses in playwriting to controversies in casting or discussions about the democratic function of theater. The wide range of examples studied include development practices at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center, the work of experimental companies (Ping Chong + Company, The Industry, New York City Players), and many plays by contemporary authors (Clare Barron, Jackie Sibblies Drury, David Levine, Charles Mee, Dominique Morisseau, Sarah Ruhl, Andrew Schneider, Paula Vogel, Mac Wellman). Conversations with Young Jean Lee and Richard Maxwell add the playwright’s viewpoint to the prismatic perspective of the volume, which is dedicated to performances in the US but written from a decidedly international angle, thus implicitly querying what makes up the American identity of this rich body of work.

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PART III

**The Pursuit of Community**



## DETROIT '67: DRAMATURGY AT THE INTERSECTION OF THE THEATRICAL SPHERE AND THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SPHERE

*Mary Anderson, Billicia Hines, Richard Haley*  
*Wayne State University*

On July 23, 2017, Detroit Public Theatre produced a site-specific production of *Detroit '67* by Dominique Morisseau on the hallowed grounds of 12th Street and Clairmount. The most significant work in Morisseau's trilogy of plays called The Detroit Project, *Detroit '67* is a fictional account of characters whose lives are irreparably transformed during the city's July 1967 uprising. The 1967 Detroit Rebellion, commonly known as the 12th-Street Riot, is among the most violent and destructive in United States history. In addition to the loss of forty-three lives and extensive property damage, the events of 1967 and their aftermath have had an abiding impact on the construction of narratives about the city and their relationship to the socio-political realities of those left behind. July 23, 1967 was also a watershed moment for the nation as a whole, as it was part of the ushering in of the full power of the Civil Rights movement that led to "enormous social spending and government-program expansion, including the passage of the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968, which produced the first government-backed, low-income homeownership opportunities directed at African-Americans."<sup>1</sup> It would seem that these programs would represent a victory for the Civil Rights movement, but in fact they were part of a conspiratorial political effort to "drown" the movement.<sup>2</sup> A little over a decade later, those very government-sponsored programs were used to further disenfranchise African Americans, as conservatives would claim they had created a culture of dependency. This stigma has persisted through the 1990s and into the present day, as conservative and liberal politicians alike have used it to justify further harsh budget cuts to social welfare programs and the exponential growth of "mass incarceration and public tolerance for aggressive policing and punishment directed at African-American neighborhoods."<sup>3</sup> As the site where the 1967 Detroit Rebellion began, the corner of

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1 Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "How Do We Change America?," *The New Yorker*, June 8, 2020.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*

12th and Clairmount holds all of these histories—their conflicts, their hopes and their heartbreaks.

That corner of 12th and Clairmount in the summer of 2017 is where the seeds of our research began. At the end of the performance, the air was thick. Everyone rose to their feet for the standing ovation. The actors gave their obligatory bows and walked off stage. It was over. Everyone began to leave. The backstage crew began to take the props off of the stage. Others began to set up for the next event. On this occasion, the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the 1967 Rebellion, one of the most pivotal days of the year in Detroit, there was no talkback. There was no connecting thread, no space for discourse, between this remarkable production and the speeches about to be delivered by local politicians. We sat stunned in our folding chairs, holding all of the tension of the historical moment, the geographical significance of our location, and the unresolved questions raised in the intersection of our lived reality and the fictional circumstances of the play. As we sat, we sank: deeper into the gravity of the situation, the contemporary social and political circumstances that plague this city, the past seemingly forever locked in a set of assumptions and prejudices. Shame sits inside and among all of us, exerting a stranglehold on any hope of future reconciliation. Morisseau's play was on offer on that day, in that place, to expose and perhaps even to release some of these silences. But the absence of a talkback means that any post-show conversations transpire only in private spaces, only in the small, idiosyncratic intricacies of our individual encounters. The unrest has no outlet. It remains imprisoned in our muscles, our bones, our worldview.

Little did we know that less than three years later, America would be embroiled in a profound national reckoning about a series of catastrophes, some novel, but all of which represent the accumulation and acceleration of historical forces exerting a disproportionate impact on black communities and black bodies in the US. How, then, are we to understand what *Detroit '67* did in the moment of its performance? How are we to understand what this play continues to do as the memory of a performance, as it reverberates through time and space and accumulates new meaning and dimensionality while history marches forward and inevitably repeats itself? In *How To Do Things With Words*, J.L. Austin explains that performatives are “saying something as well as doing something, but we may feel that they are not essentially true or false as statements are.”<sup>4</sup> This is especially interesting to consider in light of the performativity that characterizes our current moment and the risk we run with regards to perceptions of authenticity and veracity. Theatre is performative and exists in the performative sphere, but it also

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4 J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1962, p. 139.



is a kind of sphere within a sphere, bounded in particular ways with its conventions and its spaces.

In what follows, we will investigate our reception of *Detroit '67*, both in the moment of its 50th anniversary performance and in the space between then and now, in order to uncover Morisseau's theory and practice of dramatic composition and how it is both "saying something as well as doing something" within the theatrical sphere as well as within the socio-political sphere. Beginning with a detailed analysis of how Morisseau understands her work, based on interviews with the playwright, we will then turn towards a discussion of how Morisseau's practice intersects with theories of acting and audiencing as embodied philosophy. As such, we will endeavor to work within the language of the form of theatre, itself, as well as with theories from outside of theatre scholarship to make a case for the powerful, transformative significance of what Morisseau's plays can do.

Seen as participating in the legacy of predecessors like Pearl Cleague and August Wilson, Morisseau's plays are typically understood to operate within conventional dramatic structures. Morisseau's contemporaries, like Suzan-Lori Parks, are more often cast as the dramaturgical "radicals," as their dramatic structures challenge, overturn and explode Eurocentric conventions and expectations. This interpretation of the political function of literary structures could lead to a conclusion that Morisseau's dramaturgy participates in a Eurocentric paradigm, in which "whiteness overtly and covertly pervades the texts and linguistic structures, and those who do not share a White lineage or hue are de-centered, misaligned, and exiled from a theatre history that they rightfully co-constructed."<sup>5</sup> The Eurocentric paradigm is thus cast as inherently problematic, leading to suggestions that the path towards liberation is best approached through the "destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking into the world," given that any truth expressed through the framework of the oppressor would obscure or otherwise misrepresent the truth of the oppressed.<sup>6</sup> All of these characterizations are true in their own way. What is less recognized is that the performativity of the space that Morisseau creates is politically influential beyond mere "representation" in the conventional sense. In fact, by oscillating between past and present, by working in the realm of fiction and non-fiction and by creating a trilogy of plays in which the lives of particular characters in one play are impacted by the

5 Sharrell D. Luckett and Tia M. Shaffer, *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2017, p. 1.

6 Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *TDR*, vol. 12, no. 4, Summer 1968 (hyperlink to excerpts only).

historical events that transpire in the space in between their play and the other two plays, Morisseau makes manifest a complex conceptual space in which the challenges around the performative—because of its malleability, because of its volatility, and because, per Austin, it cannot be aligned exclusively with the realm of true or false—are laid out on display for audiences to make of what they will. Ultimately, it is through convention, through participating in the representation of historical circumstances, that Morisseau creates a space of liberation.

## THE DETROIT PROJECT

262 In his landmark 1996 speech “The Ground on Which I Stand,” August Wilson addressed the implicit racism undergirding the exclusion of black voices from participation in the American professional theatre.<sup>7</sup> Wilson was motivated to speak out because, among other reasons, only one of sixty-six members of the League of Regional Theatres (LORT) was a black theatre. The LORT theatres serve a particular social, political and aesthetic function within the professional theatrical landscape in the US because of the historic significance of regional theatres in America. Whereas it might be taken as commonplace to see the large houses of Broadway and Off-Broadway devoid of substantive content by African Americans, the recognition that the professional regional theatres were also imbalanced in terms of form and content by African-American playwrights and theatre makers was significant. Today the statistics are even worse. Of seventy-two LORT theatres, not one is a dedicated black theatre. In such a landscape, partnered with innovations in community-based theatre, site-specific theatre and other modes of theatre shared outside of purpose-built theatrical spaces, we are seeing an increase in experimentation with how to operationalize the core black aesthetic values around ideas of *for us*, *by us*, *near us*, *about us*, to which Wilson and others have spoken. Twenty years later, contemporary artists responded to Wilson’s call with a series of dialogues and colloquia in an effort to gauge the state of black theatre in the 21st century. In her response “New Ground on Old Land,” playwright Dominique Morisseau explains that Wilson’s essay provided her with the basis for many of her writing principles.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Morisseau identifies the abiding political function of Wilson’s perspective: “Theatre practitioners cannot be as fearful as broken Americans

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7 August Wilson, “[The Ground on Which I Stand](#)” (1996), reproduced in *American Theatre* online by permission of the estate of August Wilson, 2016.

8 Dominique Morisseau, “New Ground on Old Land” in “[The Ground Together: Responses & Reflections](#),” *American Theatre*, June 20, 2016.

who seek to ‘make America great again’ by silencing people of color and reverting to cultural, racial, and gender oppression. We have to make our audiences as balanced as the art we seek to produce.”<sup>9</sup> The plays of Morisseau can be interpreted as a direct response to Wilson’s call to action.

Dominique Morisseau’s trilogy of plays, *The Detroit Project*, have garnered her international attention as a unique voice in the articulation of the black experience. In these three plays, which are all set in the rust-belt city of Detroit, one of the most influential and misaligned cities in the American imaginary, Morisseau explores the form and function of historical representation in dramatic contexts. Each of the plays in the trilogy engage with one of the most significant historical periods for African Americans in Detroit. These three monumental periods of history have had an impact in shaping contemporary realities. *Paradise Blue* engages with the vibrant history of the 1940s jazz community in Detroit, emblematic of the renaissance in black arts that was taking place in urban centers across the US at that time. The subsequent displacement of the African-American community in Detroit due to processes of gentrification affected Detroit’s vital arts scene and undermined the social, economic, and political infrastructure of African-Americans lives. *Paradise Blue* reflects a particular jazz community during the Albert Cobo election: a troubled trumpeter who wants to sell his business; a mysterious woman who is on her own. The play examines what tears a community apart, asking: “Is it something within or something outside?” *Detroit ’67*, the second in the trilogy of plays, deals with the history of the 1967 riots, rebellion or civil unrest that continue to haunt the city—both rhetorically and materially. Morisseau’s award-winning *Detroit ’67* explores an explosive and decisive moment in a great American city. The play’s compelling characters struggle with racial tension and economic instability. *Detroit ’67* is a work grounded in historical understanding that also comments meaningfully on the pressing issues of our day. The final work in the trilogy, *Skeleton Crew*, takes on the topic of the auto industry, urban renewal and who it impacts. A makeshift family of workers at the last stamp fix plant in the city discover the plant is closing. The play explores themes of gentrification, “new” vs. “old” Detroit, homelessness, class divisions, violence and the abiding impact of the automotive industry on the mobility and immobility of African Americans in the city.

Morisseau has constructed the narratives in her trilogy in such a way that the history of displacement of African Americans in Detroit is spread out across three points in history, across multiple generations of African Americans. This distribution of the narrative illustrates the ways in which circumstances of one historical period lead

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9 *Ibid.*

to the next, and contemporary realities can only be understood as a complex and ongoing dialogue between past, present and future. Morisseau's aim in writing these plays was to shed new light on how Detroiters are viewed in the United States. When interviewed by *American Theatre* about her response when Detroiters asked if she was going to make them look good, she said, "I am going to make you look human. Because that's what you are."<sup>10</sup> There is a gravitas embedded within this question and even more embedded within Morisseau's answer, because the question does much more than denote a concern about appearance in the visual sphere. Rather, the question is a reflection of the dehumanization of Detroit residents in the aftermath of 1967, and of the dehumanization of African Americans in the public imaginary for centuries. Morisseau's response to this question and, indeed, Morisseau's scripting of this play, is about a first step toward reconciliation: reconciliation of the conflict that Americans hold about the humanity of black people. As a first step in this process, Morisseau endeavors to restore the humanity of black characters, black bodies on stage. In this respect, her project is intimately intertwined with Geneviève Fabre's argument that black theatre is, "born out of historical conflict...[in] quest for identity."<sup>11</sup> However, this mission to restore the humanity of black characters, black images, black bodies and black lives is complicated by the illusion that restoration and reconciliation are not necessary. As Ta-Nehisi Coates writes in "The Case for Reparations:" "We believe white dominance to be a fact of the inert past, a delinquent debt that can be made to disappear if only we don't look."<sup>12</sup> Morisseau's plays invite audiences to look and to learn, if they are willing. As Morisseau noted in a conversation with article co-author Billicia Hines:

What I really feel responsible to is humanity. I feel responsible to creating three-dimensional characters in everyone, because that's what I owe everybody. I owe everybody some excavating of their humanity. That's what I owe my characters. That's what I owe my people because they have been considered three-fifths of humanity for so long, still now in the Constitution. To me as a writer, if I've made a five-fifths human being out of my own people, then I am already creating a rebellion.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Suzy Evans, "Dominique Morisseau Is Telling the Story of Her People," *American Theatre*, January 5, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Geneviève Fabre, *Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theatre*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP, 1983, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, August 17, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Dominique Morisseau, interview with Billicia Hines, August 17, 2017.

Morisseau's perspective is sensitive to the complex, imaginative and fundamentally politically engaged nature of meaning-making as it transpires in the theatrical encounter. In a Q and A with theatre students at Wayne State University, Morisseau elaborated on the significance of the cycle as it pertains to the political implications of such historical representation:

Q. – As a playwright, but especially as an African-American woman, how does it feel for you to know that these plays that you've written about Detroit, are informing my generation and generations after me about our history as African Americans in this country, as well specific areas like Detroit?

DOMINIQUE MORISSEAU – I don't ever expect something based on history to be a history lesson. I think people often do. I think that's where they get disappointed. Whatever interests you, I implore you to go in and investigate the humanity of it. If you're interested in history, I say dig in, but you don't have to become a slave to history. Storytelling and history don't always match. If I told you everything that happened back on a regular day in 1949, it wouldn't shatter you. I'm gonna find an extraordinary day in 1949 to tell the story about. It's gonna be a fictional story, but it's gonna be based on some real stuff. Dizzy Gillespie did come to Black Bottom. Charlie Parker did play. They didn't come to this fake paradise bar / boarding house that I created. That's me. I think that we can dance with history and know what things we want to maintain the integrity of, but still not betray our imagination, because we gotta have room for our imaginations as writers or what are we doing? Here's a little bit of a nugget from that world, now go find out whether what I said was true or not. Go read for yourself. Go see. Go see and learn some things. I feel responsible to the truth sometimes. To the facts of the world, but only as much as they help my story.<sup>14</sup>

The political dimension of Morisseau's invitation for audiences to engage with her work is made even clearer by a note from the playwright printed in the program for *Detroit '67*:

#### **Playwright's Rules of Engagement**

You are allowed to laugh audibly.

You are allowed to have audible moments of reaction and response.

My work requires a few "um hmms" and "uhm hnnns" should you need to use them. Just maybe in moderation. Only when you really need to vocalize.

14 Dominique Morisseau, interview with Billicia Hines and students, Wayne State University, October 10, 2017.

This can be church for some of us, and testifying is allowed.

This is also live theater and the actors need you to engage with them, not distract them, or thwart their performance.

Please be an audience member that joins with others and allows a bit of breathing room. Exhale together. Laugh together. Say “amen” should you need to.

This is community. Let’s go.  
peaceandlovedominique:) <sup>15</sup>

Arguably, even if not read, Morisseau’s rules were tacitly, implicitly and explicitly understood by the audience in attendance at the 50th anniversary production of *Detroit ’67* in a way different from an audience in attendance at Detroit Public Theatre’s black box space. The community attending the site-specific performance has a cultural relationship to these “rules” and, further, due to the nature of the memorial context of the performance, the practices of call-and-response and invocation are all the more pertinent. What eventuates is that the attention toward the sonic landscape then welcomes the complexity of the ambient sounds of the environment as much as it invites the need to speak from audience members. At one point, a heated conversation transpires a hundred yards across the street from the performance. Voices in conflict pour into the sonic environment due to a situation having nothing to do with the play, itself. Yet this dimension is influential in an ambiguous, elliptical way, which parallels the ricochet of meaning and information as characters within the play describe their experiences of police brutality in a 1960’s setting while actual police men and women surround the performance to protect the performers and audience members.

Speaking with Hines on another occasion, Morisseau describes the significance of appreciating and occupying a black cultural perspective as an artist:

You should not be touching my play if you’re coming out talking about “We’re all one.” You’re the wrong person for this play right now. To me it drives me crazy if there’s an artist outside of a culture who just completely negates that there are cultural differences. I think often what we see when we have seen a failure of a white director directing a work of color is a failure to recognize our different cultures. You think because you’re interested in us that we’re the same. Honestly even with black directors. To me, I’m more interested in a director that understands that cultural experience in the work, that we have different cultural experiences and that black culture is a culture. It is not white American culture. It is its own particular culture. There is a black culture. There are

people that are afraid to admit that black culture exists and I can't rock with any of them no matter what race they are, because then they don't understand my work because my work is absolutely from a black cultural perspective.<sup>16</sup>

## ACOUSTIC SPACE

The cultural specificity that Morisseau is calling for resonates strongly in the aesthetic space that is created in the context of *Detroit '67* and, in particular, the site-specific memorial production of the play, inviting a shift from “looking” towards “seeing,” as articulated by critic John Berger. Berger writes, “seeing...establishes our place in the surrounding world...The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.”<sup>17</sup> Looking allows one to only see things in a mechanical way; seeing takes looking into a deeper level. In fact, we would argue that Morisseau is able to accomplish this shift, in part, by de-centering the visual as a central mechanism of theatrical communication and instead placing increased emphasis on creating what we refer to as acoustic space.

In the world of *Detroit '67*, the timing, tempo and agency associated with playing music is directly tied to the livelihoods and prospects of hope for the characters. Throughout the play, all five characters (adult siblings Chelle and Lank; longtime friends of the siblings Bunny and Sly; and stranger Caroline) use music as a way to connect to and express their emotional states. Furthermore, the presence of songs placed strategically in each scene is the single strongest indicator of the temporal location of the play. Morisseau also establishes a constant tension between music and technology, which provides her with an engine for conflict that moves the action of the play forward. The conflict is at once symbolic and concrete. Running an unlicensed bar out of the basement of their home, Chelle and Lank need music to provide the atmosphere for their business. The success of this illicit enterprise hinges on their ability to meet customers' expectations, as another “after-hours joint” has “tightened it up” with a new “hi fi.”<sup>18</sup> But the siblings disagree about how best to use the limited resources they have to enhance the customer experience. Chelle, a widow supporting a grown son who is away at college, is also the bearer of the family history, and so nostalgically and

<sup>16</sup> Dominique Morisseau, interview with Billicia Hines, art.cit.

<sup>17</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series with John Berger*, London, British Broadcasting, 2012, p.5.

<sup>18</sup> Dominique Morisseau, *Detroit '67*, London, Samuel French, 2014, p.9.

prudently favors using her late father's record player, encouraging Lank to purchase more records. But Lank, a technophile, instead uses their money to purchase an 8 track. These fictional circumstances were particularly resonant for the audience members in attendance at the 50th anniversary production of *Detroit '67*, who were acutely aware of the fact that African Americans in Detroit had limited opportunities for upward mobility, suffering from housing and employment discrimination and a brutal, biased police force. Making these circumstances even more poignant, the 1967 uprising came about from a police raid on just such an unlicensed bar on the precise ground where we were seated. This was hallowed ground which had until recent months been an empty, open field for fifty years, all contents having burned to the ground at the end of five days of rebellion. For the duration of the play, we were seated within the nascent state of a park, built as a remembrance to the events of 1967 and their aftermath. Within this landscape, we, as the very real members of the future that fictional Lank was imagining, were aware not only of what would become of this block, but also of the ultimate obsolescence of the 8 track, which was supplanted by digital technologies that are now, paradoxically, in competition with a resurgence of interest in vinyl. In this regard, Morisseau scripts the conflict between Chelle's record player and Lank's 8 track, which transpires over the course of the play, as a symbol in itself.

Technology presents itself as stubborn throughout *Detroit '67*. In the opening scene, Chelle is alone on stage making preparations in the basement, accompanied by The Temptations' "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" on the record player:

*(Chelle sings along as she works to untangle the Christmas lights. Suddenly the record skips.)*

CHELLE – Dang it!

*(She hurries to the record player and moves the needle past the skip. Goes back to singing. It skips again.)*

CHELLE – *(cont.)* Not this part ... come on!

*(She goes to fix it again.)*

*(to the record player)* You gonna behave now?

*(Waits. Watches it. It seems cool. She goes back to untangling the lights. The record player skips again.)*

Dang it! *(She plays with the needle.)* You got something against David Ruffin? Huh? What's the matter? *(She waits for an answer from the player.)*<sup>19</sup>

Chelle proceeds to engage the record player in a dialogue that casts the device as an agent with power, influence, feelings and behaviors. Placing central focus on the agency

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7-8.



of the record player and the sounds that it produces is the first signal that Morisseau has created a play in which acoustic space is on an equal footing with visual space. This is a highly unconventional dynamic in the theatre, which privileges the “world of reflected light,” the mesmerization of the stage picture:

We, who live in the world of reflected light, in visual space, may also be said to be in a state of hypnosis. Ever since the collapse of the oral tradition in early Greece, before the age of Parmenides, Western civilization has been mesmerized by a picture of the universe as a limited container in which all things are arranged according to the vanishing point, in linear geometric order. The intensity of this conception is such that it actually leads to the abnormal suppression of hearing and touch in some individuals. [...] Most of the information we rely upon comes through our eyes; our technology is arranged to heighten that effect. Such is the power of Euclidean or visual space that we can't live with a circle unless we square it.<sup>20</sup>

Because the world McLuhan describes is so overwhelmingly biased toward visual space—a condition which has only been amplified now in the 21st century—surely Morisseau's acoustic intervention has limited impact. This would especially be the case when *Detroit '67* is produced in a purpose-built theatre which is designed to privilege light. In the 50th anniversary site-specific performance, however, something perhaps unexpected occurred regarding the visual space, which enabled the acoustic space to hold greater influence. In this production, as we were drawn into the particularities of the relationship between Chelle and the acoustic technologies, we simultaneously became increasingly aware of the permeability of the visual space, as the performance was taking place in the open air, in the light of day, with, among other things, a cadre of police appointed to stand guard. This created a co-presence of multiple temporalities that amplified the vulnerability of this particular site, as the most significant landmark of the violence that occurred before, during and after the uprising. By comparison, in the darkness of a conventional purpose-built theatrical space in which the stage would be the sole destination for light—the womb of visual information into which we would be peering—the acoustic would once again be displaced. But because the site-specific performance invited so much light in, from so many different directions, we were experiencing a barrage of visual information that thus made the acoustic space much more potent.

20 Marshall McLuhan, “Visual and Acoustic Space,” in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds), *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, New York and London, Continuum, 2004, p. 67-72.

## LIVING GHOSTS

The ghosts of Morisseau's play invite audiences to redirect their gaze and thereby reconsider the location of shame. Melissa V. Harris-Perry writes:

Blackness in America is marked by shame. Perhaps more than any other emotion, shame depends on the social context. On the individual level, we feel ashamed because of how we believe people see us or how they would see us if they knew about our hidden transgressions. Shame makes us view our very selves as malignant. But societies also define entire groups as malignant. Historically the United States has done that with African Americans. This collective shaming has a disproportionate impact on black women, and black women's attempts to escape or manage shame are part of what motivates their politics.<sup>21</sup>

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Although Ralph Ellison reminds us of the "interrelatedness of blackness and whiteness"<sup>22</sup> in these projects of shame, Chris Hedges explains how that understanding is undermined by whiteness that is constituted by a "willful blindness used to justify white supremacy."<sup>23</sup>

Morisseau is writing these moments in time from a 21st-century perspective. As a playwright of what Mikell Pinkney calls, "The New Age Post-Revolutionary Era," *Detroit '67*'s purpose is "to look at the past with learned perspectives of the present, leading the way into new, different, and better future."<sup>24</sup> For the past fifty years, the memory of the Detroit Rebellion has been experienced as an unresolved blemish, a scar on the city with profoundly deep, devastating and far-reaching impacts. The memory of the Detroit Rebellion has been governed and produced largely by polarized, bifurcated notions about race, class and history, itself. Attending to the fundamentally aporetic space achieved through the temporal frictions and inconsistencies we find in art enables new space for reflection on these circumstances and, one would hope, forms of reconciliation based on the fundamental principles of unknowing. It is in this spirit that John Baldacchino recommends that we embrace art's "groundless forms of

21 Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2011, pp. 101-133.

22 Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, New York, Vintage International, 1995, p. 45.

23 Chris Hedges, "James Baldwin and the Meaning of Whiteness," *Truthdig*, February 20, 2017.

24 Mikell Pinkney, "The Development of African American Dramatic Theory: W. E. B. DuBois to August Wilson—Hand to Hand!," in Sandra Garrett Shannon and Dana A. Williams (eds), *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 30.

meaning” which are “beyond product and process.”<sup>25</sup> In order to do this, however, one must contemplate the ways in which art is neither product nor process:

Art is not a product, even when there seems to be an object called art. Likewise art cannot be reduced to a process, even when many make an argument for art as a process in order to avoid it becoming a product. To define art from within the paradoxical assumption that it is an in-between would help us understand the art form’s open character.<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately, then, it is not only that Morisseau has created a structural or dramaturgical intervention by creating a trilogy of plays that disrupts our perceptions and expectations of history. She has, further, invited performers and audience members to participate in a complex choreographed dance between the past and present, between fiction and non-fiction in which the conceptual and affective space of lived experience can be unearthed, encountered, and mined as a form of liberation.

Philosopher Tzachi Zamir describes theatrical relationships between actors and audience members as “an entry into a fictional space upheld by the shared imaginative effort of a performer and a spectator.”<sup>27</sup> In a process he refers to as “existential amplification,” Zamir explains that this imaginative space, co-produced by the performer and the spectator, is composed of a combination of fictional and non-fictional elements, involving simultaneous processes of embodiment and disembodiment.<sup>28</sup> Through a skillful combination of the fiction of the given circumstances and the non-fiction of embodied experience, “[a]ctors amplify their own lives by imaginatively embodying alien existential possibilities.”<sup>29</sup> In his 2010 article, “Watching Actors,” which is one of the foundational essays that he developed into his 2014 book, *Acts: Theater, Philosophy and the Performing Self*, Zamir writes powerfully about the reasons we are drawn to particular actors’ performances. He, further, places the spectator in the center of the art of performance—not simply as a receiver or an interpreter of the actor’s work, but as an active producer of the experience. This approach, of course, corresponds with established ideas, from Dewey’s *Art as Experience* to Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator*. Taking this approach further, Caroline Heim has analyzed the audience as a performer. Heim explains that audience members, too, engage in such performative

25 John Baldacchino, “The Praxis of Art’s Deschooled Practice,” *JADE*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2008, pp. 241-260.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 244.

27 Tzachi Zamir, *Acts: Theater, Philosophy and the Performing Self*, Ann Arbor, Univ. of Michigan Press, 2014, p. 121.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

amplification, making all of theatre a series of interrelated reciprocal encounters: “the encounter of the actors with the audience, the actors with each other, the audience members with each other.”<sup>30</sup> Rancière further illustrates the inner life of the spectator:

The spectator acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of places. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way—by drawing back, for example, from the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to make it a pure image and associate this image with a story which she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented. They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them. This is a crucial point: spectators see, feel and understand something in as much as they compose their own poem, as, in their way, do actors or playwrights, directors, dancers or performers.<sup>31</sup>

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Placing this passage from Rancière into conversation with Morisseau’s “Rules of Engagement,” in which she invites her audience to audiate, to testify and to breathe together, we begin to see that Morisseau’s understanding of the audience’s role in the creation of the play exceeds Heim’s configuration of the audience-as-performer. She leads us back to the simplicity of Zamir’s *shared imaginative effort*. Because even when they appear to say nothing, to do nothing, embedded with Morisseau’s invitation is an understanding that the audience is incredibly active in *creating* not one, but a multitude of fictional spaces imaginatively. The fictional spaces they are creating, as communitarian as they might seem—“being together in rooms, audiences have multiple opportunities to feel part of a community and perform as a community”—are ultimately wholly dynamic, volatile and completely idiosyncratic to each and every audience member.<sup>32</sup>

The polyphonous nature of audience reception and the meaning-making that it generates as part of the theatrical encounter can be understood as a kind of “nameless awareness.”<sup>33</sup> To call it something would immediately falsify the experience. It is nameless. But it is an awareness, nonetheless. It is in excess of our perceived knowledge of anything in particular, in excess of our perceived knowledge of everything in general. It is a recognition of the surplus reality that any *thing*, and really any *concept* represents:

30 Caroline Heim, *Audience as Performer: The Changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the Twenty-First Century*, London and New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 3.

31 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, London, Verso, 2009, p. 13.

32 Caroline Heim, *Audience as Performer*, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

33 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke UP, 2010, p. 4.

always outside of the human grasp. It is in this way that the edges of human perception (including our perception of our perception, itself—the edges are not just, spatially, on the outside of perception; there are interior edges, throughout) constitute an excess and a void simultaneously. The void because we cannot fill it with ideas, information, facts, words with which we typically confirm or authenticate our own consciousness. The excess because within that void is not actually emptiness, but rather the vast agency and reality of the external world that exists independently of our perception.

One way to understand how knowledge, as a “nameless awareness,” is generated in the actor-audience relationship is through the lens of embodied metaphors. In their landmark book, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain that: “The mind is inherently embodied. Thought is mostly unconscious. Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical.”<sup>34</sup> Take, for instance, our experience of the word “comprehend.” Lakoff and Johnson illustrate that when we experience a sense of *comprehension*, it is inextricably linked to the embodied metaphor that understanding is “grasping.” In this way, when we comprehend something, when we understand something, we automatically (and largely unconsciously) experience that comprehension, experience that understanding, as the physical sensation of grasping—of holding something tightly.

Many of these core metaphors are durable and remain a central facet of human experience over generations. Yet, as our knowledge about the body and our experiences with technology change, so do our metaphors. Lakoff explains:

There’s a difference between the body and our conceptualization of it. The body is the same as it was 35 years ago; the conception of the body is very different. We have metaphors for the body we didn’t have then. [...] In this respect, the contemporary body and brain, conceptualized in terms of neural circuitry and other information processing metaphors, were “invented.”<sup>35</sup>

It is in this way that the actor-audience experience, in *Detroit '67*, simultaneously produces and unravels, simultaneously weaves and tangles, disturbs, unsettles, and unhinges our perception of our perception. In his many descriptions of how thought transpires—and the limitations of our understanding of thought—Foucault does not have many “should” statements. But here is one that seems pertinent for the point

34 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, New York, Basic Books, 1999, p. 3.

35 George Lakoff quoted in John Brockman, “*Philosophy in the Flesh: A Talk With George Lakoff*,” *Edge*, September 3 1999.

we are wanting to make: “What is essential is that thought, both for itself and in the density of its workings, should be both knowledge and a modification of what it knows, reflection and a transformation of the mode of being of that on which it reflects.”<sup>36</sup> Up until this particular passage, Foucault has already illustrated how thought is just that—human thought is perpetually undoing itself, revealing its falsehoods and limitations, its inversions and gaps. But what we hear in this particular “should” statement, is something further. The “should” here, we take to refer to the human understanding of what thought is and how it operates. It isn’t simply that human thought is replete with fallacies. But it is our obligation to attend to those gaps and not simply try to fill them with the right or correct (new) thoughts. It is our obligation to always engage actively in the thought that simultaneously constitutes knowledge and the modification of what is known: Bennett’s nameless awareness. It is both a reverence for and a calling into the void.

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The derangement that characterizes our current political moment is idiosyncratic to the pressures and complications of the many crises we are living through: the pandemic, global warming, systemic racism, police brutality and government irresponsibility, all of which have amounted to a genocidal war on black lives and black bodies. But the derangement is also paradigmatic of the larger human malfunctioning that Foucault understands as being fundamental to the convolutions of human thinking:

The question is no longer: How can experience of nature give rise to necessary judgements? But rather: How can man think what he does not think, inhabit as though by a mute occupation something that eludes him, animate with a kind of frozen movement that figure of himself that takes the form of a stubborn exteriority? How can man *be* that life whose web, pulsations, and buried energy constantly exceed the experience that he is immediately given of them? How can he *be* that labour whose laws and demands are imposed upon him like some alien system? How can he be the subject of a language that for thousands of years has been formed without him, a language whose organization escapes him, whose meaning sleeps an almost invincible sleep in the words he momentarily activates by means of discourse, and within which he is obliged, from the very outset, to lodge his speech and thought, as though they were doing no more than animate, for a brief period, one segment of that web of innumerable possibilities?<sup>37</sup>

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36 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York, Vintage Books, 1994, p. 327.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 323.

What is a theatre, then, other than an *animation, for a brief period of one segment of that web of innumerable possibilities?* What is theatre, then, other than a co-created experience in which actors and audience members think through something they don't yet know and can never fully understand? As conventional as Morisseau's plays might seem, in their structure, in their characterization, in their representation of historical circumstances as staged reality, they also constitute, fundamentally, a theatre in which we knowingly inhabit that which eludes us—which is, actually, everything.

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## NOTICES

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## ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the authors' reception of Dominique Morisseau's play *Detroit '67*, both in the moment of its 50th anniversary site-specific performance in 2017 and in the time that has passed since, in order to uncover Morisseau's theory and practice of dramatic composition. Beginning with a detailed analysis of how Morisseau understands her work, based on interviews with the playwright, the chapter then turns toward a discussion of how Morisseau's practice intersects with theories of acoustic space and embodied philosophy. As such, the chapter endeavors to work within the language of the form of theatre itself, as well as with theories from outside of theatre scholarship to make a case that Morisseau's work operates within the theatrical sphere as well as within the socio-political sphere.

## KEYWORDS

Dominique Morisseau; August Wilson; black theatre; acoustic space; audiencing

## RÉSUMÉ

Les auteurs de ce chapitre explorent leur réception de *Detroit '67*, pièce de Dominique Morisseau, à la fois lors de la représentation *in situ* du 50<sup>ème</sup> anniversaire des émeutes de Détroit en 2017, et dans le temps qui s'est écoulé depuis, afin d'analyser la composition dramatique de l'autrice dans sa théorie comme dans sa pratique. Partant d'entretiens avec Morisseau qui révèlent en détail sa façon d'envisager son travail, le chapitre se consacre ensuite à l'étude des croisements entre la pratique scénique de Morisseau, les théories de l'espace acoustique, et celles de la philosophie incarnée. Les auteurs empruntent leurs concepts à la fois aux études théâtrales et à des théories extérieures à ce champ, pour mieux montrer que l'œuvre de Morisseau fonctionne à l'intérieur de la sphère théâtrale comme à l'intérieur de la sphère socio-politique.

## MOTS-CLÉS

Dominique Morisseau; August Wilson; théâtre noir-américain; espace acoustique; théorie du spectateur



## CRÉDITS PHOTO

Visuels de couverture : *YOUARENOWHERE*, créé et interprété par Andrew Schneider, 2015 (photographie de Maria Baranova) ; Adina Verson dans *Indecent*, créé et mis en scène par Paula Vogel et Rebecca Taichman, 2015 (photographie de Carol Rosegg) ; Elizabeth Jensen dans *Eurydice* de Sarah Ruhl, mise en scène de Helen Kvale, 2017 (photographie de Jasmine Jones) ; Quayla Bramble dans *Hopscotch* créé par Yuval Sharon pour The Industry, 2015 (photographie de Anne Cusak / *LA Times*, droits réservés). Avec nos remerciements aux artistes et photographes.



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