



M. Lamar's
Discipline VI, 2014,
archival pigment
print on canvas.
Courtesy of the
artist

Up Front

SEEING PAIN ANEW

David Bruin

This issue explores critical perspectives and artistic practices related to representations of pain, suffering, and trauma in contemporary American theater and performance. Two motivations have shaped the contents. First, we wanted to articulate links between contemporary theatermakers and artistic traditions emphasizing acts and expressions of agony and anguish—ancient Greek tragedy, the blues, and rhetorical modes of confession all make appearances. Second, we wanted to consider contemporary works in light of the recent movements and widespread debate about acts and representations of violence and violation, such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and the ongoing rise of nationalist politics across North America, Europe, and beyond. To achieve this parallax view, we turned to the rubric of *scenes of suffering*, a term that harkens back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which suffering appears alongside reversal and recognition as the three elements of plot.

How are artists drawing on lineage and deciding how to represent suffering? One example of the complexities could be seen in Jan Fabre's 2015 marathon production *Mount Olympus*, presented at New York University's Skirball Center in November 2018. The Flemish choreographer's staging runs for twenty-four consecutive hours, drawing on an array of ancient Greek myths, tragedies, and rituals as source material, hence Fabre's subtitle *To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy*. This wildly ambitious work, created and produced with Fabre's company Troubleyn, emphasizes athleticism, endurance, and the body's expressive capabilities. Performers dance to the point of visible exhaustion, and the choreography includes punishing tasks, such as jumping rope and competing in tug-of-war with metal chains. Plots and story lines are near nonexistent, but there are many "fatal or painful action[s] like death on the stage, violent physical pain, wounds, and everything of that kind," which is Aristotle's definition of *pathos* (suffering) in the *Poetics*.¹ *Mount Olympus* suppresses reversal and recognition and highlights scenes of suffering. (Given the recent allegations of sexual harassment in the Troubleyn company,

it was difficult not to think of these developments while watching the sexually explicit, erotically charged production.)

More broadly, in the wake of the #MeToo movement, representations of violence against women have come under scrutiny from both artists and critics. In May 2017 dance critic Siobhan Burke published an article in the *New York Times* whose title asks choreographers for “No More Gang Rape Scenes in Ballet, Please.”² Burke wrote the article in response to Alexei Ratmansky’s *Odessa* at New York City Ballet, featuring a sequence in which, as Burke describes it, “the ballerina . . . at the center of a group of five men, was aggressively thrown around against her character’s will.” She adds, “If such sleek, unexamined images of violence against women weren’t so pervasive in contemporary ballet, I might have felt differently. But they are, and I’ve seen enough.” In a similar vein, playwright and performer Taylor Mac recently specified that only male body parts should be used in the setting for Mac’s gory new play *Gary: A Sequel to Titus Andronicus*, which premiered on Broadway in April 2019. “This is an ethical choice,” Mac says of the prohibition on nonmale carnage, “as I see enough dead women on TV and in films and don’t want to see them on stage.”³ Others have made similar calls addressing the ubiquity of representations of violence against oppressed populations—even as activists and journalists continue to advocate for the publication of photographic and video evidence of real violence to raise awareness.

This issue focuses on artists, critics, questions, and provocations reckoning with suffering in terms beyond representation. “How to Survive Civilization” explores the prevalence of the scene of suffering in the work of four artists in playwriting, directing, and choreography and across theater, performance, and opera. Aaron C. Thomas analyzes the competing narratives involving a rape in Thomas Ostermeier’s *Im Herzen der Gewalt* (2018), an adaptation of the 2016 French autobiographical novel *A History of Violence* by Édouard Louis. Faedra Chatard Carpenter examines the reperformance and repetition of imagery associated with the 2012 death of Trayvon Martin—and its afterlife in viral memes—in *Hooded, Or Being Black for Dummies* by playwright Terrance Arvelle Chisholm. Andrew Friedman surveys the central position of alienation, pain, and suffering in the work of multimedia artist Jim Findlay.

This issue also includes contributions by two artists whose work has gravitated toward figures of suffering and expressions of pain. In “Forever Disappearing,” composer, performer, and multimedia artist M. Lamar vividly describes his performance aesthetic, which he calls the Theater of Negrothotic Cinema. Lamar’s multifaceted work incorporates theater, installation, video art, opera, death metal, the blues, and more to stage acts of spiritual resistance against the logics of capture and captivity that, he argues, dominate representations of black life. We have included two libretti by Lamar, complete with the artist’s introductions. Choreographer and performer Ann Liv Young documents *Antigone*, her most recent production, in which she plays the

title character. Commissioned in response to Bertolt Brecht's 1948 adaptation, Young's adaptation of Sophocles's tragedy emerges as political, playful, and deeply painful in the artist's first-person narration. We hope this edition illuminates these artists' work and helps us find a more compassionate world.

NOTES

1. Aristotle, *On Poetry and Style*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 22.
2. Siobhan Burke, "No More Gang Rape Scenes in Ballets, Please," *New York Times*, May 15, 2017.
3. Taylor Mac, *Gary* (unpublished manuscript, January 26, 2018), 2.