Critical Acts

Dicking Around with Radiohole

Toward Hyperreal Performance and Criticism

Steve Luber

Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell’s heart I stab at thee; for hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee.

—Herman Melville (1988:571–72)

—Did you actually punch that whale?

—Hell! I’d strike the sun if it struck me! Be a pussy and find a priest or be a man, and stand up in a hurricane. More sperm!

—Radiohole (2006:3)

Introduction: Bon Voyage!

Entering the Collapsible Hole, a Brooklyn warehouse space, each audience member—including me—is greeted by Scott Halvorsen Gillette, who appears on a 15-inch video monitor atop a small card table: “Step right up, step right up!” Gillette, an original company member, moved to Vermont three years ago, but appears here, in Radiohole’s most recent production, Fluke (The Solemn Mysteries of the Ancient Order of the Deep) or Dick Dick Dick, thanks to iChat. There is a camera atop Gillette’s screen-head—“Hello!—oh you are looking beautiful tonight. Beautiful! Do you have a reservation? Good, good: put the money on top of my head”—and each person is greeted personally from 300 miles away. Gillette trusts you will make correct change from the fishbowl that is the box office. He is grating and overbearing, in a rush, but at the same time, we are welcomed into his homes, both the theatre and his house, where he is broadcasting. He lets us in. He is there, but also here with us. Gillette establishes the box office itself as part of the performance, and, not being a “live” ticket-taking presence, immediately brings the audience into the mediated act of performance; like Gillette, we are a part of and apart from the piece.

Other than this unusual introduction, all else is in place for a typical Radiohole performance: wires, mixers, and general tchotchkes clutter the stage—a phonograph, a small video screen (upon which Gillette appears “onstage”), and mechanized moon are the most immediately noticeable. A large projection screen dominates upstage, its arts-and-crafts frame adorned with pasted-on seashells, starfish, and other aquatic paraphernalia. Posters adorn the walls, including various seascapes and a prominent portrait of Abe Lincoln that reads “DO NOT HUMP”; ropes hang from the ceiling; and fishing poles lay on the ground. It’s all part of Radiohole’s “trash aesthetic.”

Near the audience, there is another Radiohole signature: a tub of cheap beer, and, special for this marine extravaganza, a fountain of “grog,” all free for the taking. Radiohole performances aren’t just for the senses—they appeal to the dulled senses as well. After all, in order to join Radiohole on their strange trek at sea, the audience, too, must be invited to give in to the spirit of reckless abandon of the spectacle—to implicate itself in the performance’s actions.

Once Gillette’s telepresence has ushered everyone in, performer Maggie Hoffman comes

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out from behind the curtains and quietly scales a homemade crow’s nest/platform, eight feet in the air stage right. She harnesses herself in, prepares her sound mixer, and leans forward into her microphone, whispering radio warnings to all present seafarers: “Low 48 North, 63 West, 982 millibars. Will drift East-Northeast” (Radiohole 2007:1).

Call them Ishmael.

Democratic Fluke

Radiohole, the Brooklyn-based performance collective, has become something of an experimental darling in the past few years. Founded in 1998, they are known for their messy, violent, and loud performances. They’ve also gained a reputation as “the drunkest, highest group in downtown theatre” (Hannaham 2000). Despite the favor of many critics, however, much of the writing about them has been disappointingly reductive, the precious language used to describe them seems to be a cop-out for a lack of journalistic vocabulary, performing a critical and artistic disservice to Radiohole and other experimental companies. At worst, Radiohole has matured into the rebellious teenager of the performance community; at best, the group poses a significant challenge to the experimental performance aesthetic by creating impassioned, lyrical, and timely pieces equal to those of any group in New York.

Fluke, which ran from 11 to 28 January 2007 in this incarnation, takes Melville’s Moby-Dick, or The Whale (1851) as their starting point, one of many referential source materials. But dig a bit deeper, and the piece is very much a consequence of the source-novel’s history, canonicity, and influence. Moby-Dick, 150 years after publication, is known as much for its explicit example of cultural mythology overtaking its source to create this “matrix of intensity,” it is rife for Radiohole’s plundering.

One of the few collective performance companies working today, the members of Radiohole do not begin with a source text, narrative, or moral. They do not have nominal writers or directors. Starting with kernels of paintings, even operas. The White Whale has become an icon of the relentlessness, insatiable, and impotency of desire and meaning. Ahab has become virtually synecdochical for American ambition and persistence. And, most tellingly, Ahab’s first mate is better known internationally as a distributor of venti decaf Frappuccinos than literary allegory for reason and temperance. All of these significations that echo from the novel cross-pollinate and spread, and Moby-Dick approaches what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call a deterritorialized text: “It is not space, nor is it in space; it is matter that occupies space to a given degree—to the degree corresponding to the intensities produced. It is nonstratified, unformed, intense matter, the matrix of intensity, intensity = 0” (1987:153). And precisely because the novel is such an explicit example of cultural mythology overtaking its source to create this “matrix of intensity,” it is rife for Radiohole's plundering.

1. For example, New York Times reviewer Jason Zinoman wrote in 2006 of an earlier version of Fluke, “What’s being pondered in this disjointed piece is anyone’s guess,” and, summing up the group, “Radiohole may be better known for its occasional nudity, beer-swilling, and despicable table manners” (2006). The review was then recycled, in some places verbatim, for an updated piece on 12 January 2007.

2. A cursory library search brings up books on American folktales, Romantic architecture, Calvinism, and 18th-century law and industry to name a few; films include a 1930 adaptation starring John Barrymore, a 1956 version starring Gregory Peck and Orson Welles, and a melodramatic made-for-TV movie in 1998 starred Patrick Stewart and, significantly, Gregory Peck; operas include Laurie Anderson’s 1999 Songs and Stories from Moby-Dick, Rinde Eckert’s 2003 And God Created White Whales, and Peter Westergaard’s 2004 Moby Dick: Scenes from an Imaginary Opera. This is but a small sampling of the breadth of the novel’s influence.
personal intrigue, the members develop the concept, text, and direction equally, all working to get their individualized contributions in while ensuring that each bit fits within the whole. Their trash-aesthetic approach to stage design reinforces the found object–via–stream of consciousness writing method. Chalkboards on springs, tumbleweeds on remote-controlled cars (Radiohole Is Still My Name, 2004), Pepsi vending machines (None of It: More or Less Hudson’s Bay, Again, 2002), guitars (Bender, 1998), and many, many buckets have decorated the Radiohole performance space. Further, their previous reworkings have explored film noir (Bender), the atomic bomb (Rodan, 2000), arctic exploration (None of It), and spaghetti westerns combined with, naturally, Guy Debord (Radiohole Is Still My Name). All of this results in a thematic hodgepodge of sensory impressions—beautiful chaos, conflict, violence—which resist any cohesion or unified meaning; Radiohole performances are incredibly democratic.

Ergo, Radiohole’s consideration of Moby-Dick leads to remote-controlled boats in which the performers navigate the stage, a Navy SEAL workout video by official US Navy SEAL Scott Helvenston,3 Led Zeppelin’s 1973 “The Ocean,” and ruminations on sex with seals. But the idea cropped up from the novel, whose simple beginning—“Call me Ishmael”—helps to situate a critical engagement.

Aside from defining the fortuitous period when Melville wrote Moby-Dick, which marked the formation of an American industrial identity and the US’s status as a political and economic world power, the statement epitomizes an American ideal that is still cultivated: valuing simplicity, hard work, self-fashioned success, fueled by a radical individualism. It is no coincidence that only four years after the

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3. In yet another disturbing layer of the performance, it turns out that Helvensten was one of four American soldiers murdered and hung from a bridge during the US’s assault on Fallujah (Hoffman 2007).
publication of *Moby-Dick*, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* became the paradigmatic text—the celebration of the self:

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand....nor look through the eyes of the dead....nor feed on the specters in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself. ([1855] 1959:26)

The novel, as Whitman's text shaped the notion of the self, shaped the notion of “America”—just as America influenced Melville.

Nowhere are these philosophies more apparent than in the opening whisper: “Call me Ishmael.” Significantly, it is not a semiotic turn, “My name is Ishmael”; nor is it some sort of Cartesian “I am Ishmael.” It is an invitation, a welcome to the world that the narrator proffers to the reader. It is privileging us. It offers the reader one possibility—we may call him Ishmael. But we certainly don't have to. It is this acknowledgment of the reader's subjective biases that releases the text from a singular moment or geography into this plurality of significations.

While *Moby-Dick*'s historical context and place within the canon are significant to its literary consideration, the book's concepts remain unnervingly appropriate for adaptation to contemporary culture and politics. In chapter 1, the reader is confronted with the following passage, at once poignant, prescient, and disturbing:

Doubtless, my going on this whaling voyage formed part of the grand programme of Providence that was drawn up a long time ago…. I take it that this part of the bill must have run something like this:

“Grand Contested Election for the Presidency of the United States

“WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE
ISHMAEL

“BLOODY BATTLE IN
AFGHANISTAN.” (Melville 1988:7)

However, Radiohole is not screwing with the text of the first 1851 publication, but rather with the *significance* of *Moby-Dick* in the early 21st century: an assortment of ideologies and cultural entities. Theirs is an America as Jean Baudrillard describes it: “The direct star-blast from vectors and signals, from the vertical and the spatial. As against the fevered distance of the cultural gaze” (1988:27). Counter to Baudrillard's typical theorizations of the simulacrum, he posits the “land of ‘just as it is’” (28) as characteristic of the simplistic American aesthetic. What Baudrillard does not consider is that America has always already been his hyperreal nation-state of “vectors and signals”: its expansiveness and overdetermination is both recognizable and critically available, but simultaneously unknowable; its wealth of identities gives way to multiple theoretical Americas. Radiohole's *Fluke* becomes a tangential reference to *Moby-Dick* via American epistemologies, another deviant vector, ensconced in the web of referential imagery, sound, smell, and subjectivities. The hyperreal America correlates with Radiohole's strong suit: an all out aesthetic assault. It is this assault—the references, sensations, and subjectivities—that establishes Radiohole as the quintessential American performance group.

“Get me some white whale”

Hoffman’s radio warnings that open *Fluke* are abruptly cut off when Eric Dyer enters. He is Abe (Ahab? Abraham? Honest Abe?), and he explains the depth of his desire: “To me, that white whale is the wall the Man shoves me up against. Sometimes I think that's all there is” (2007:2). Gillette, now on the monitor above the stage, taunts Abe, “That's bullshit!! Be congenial!!” Is Gillette the whale? In any case, the conflict heightens and boils over in a Radiohole-original, call-and-response death metal song led by Dyer while he stomps on

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4. In addition to Baudrillard, work like Venturi, Izenour, and Brown's *Learning from Las Vegas* (1977), Sorkin's *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (1992), and Augé's *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995) have all investigated various aspects of hyperreal America.
springboards with Hoffman and Erin Douglass: “Huh / Somebody get me some white whale!! / YEAH!!” (2).

Here is where the structures of the novel and Radiohole’s performance intersect: the individualism of one man’s struggle becomes the spectacle for all others implicated—the crew, the audience, and the industries we all serve. “Call me Ishmael” becomes an epic narrative and cultural icon. Dyer bargains with the audience to involve them in the spectacle of the adventure, offering “Five dollars! I got an Abe Lincoln for anyone that brings me that wasted white whale!” (3).

When nobody takes Dyer up on his offer, Douglass, Dyer, and Hoffman become silent and proceed to pull up child-size fold-out chairs and TV-tray tables. They sit in the chairs and paint their eyelids white, fan them dry, and finally dot them with black pupils. They perform much of the remainder of the show with their eyes closed, yet (painted) open, a reference to a practice that sailors had to both ward off evil spirits in their sleep and appear awake while on watch.

With this abrupt shift in rhythm and imagery, the irony is not lost: searching for the “point” of Fluke, or any Radiohole piece for that matter, is as futile as Ahab’s search—not to mention any definitive notion of Ahab himself, the White Whale, or “America.” The infinite possibilities of reference do not exacerbate the futility of the search for the characters, performers, or audience members. On the contrary, these possibilities enhance subjective readings by any audience member, no matter her or his relation to or familiarity with America, Radiohole, Melville, or seal sex.

Nowhere is this clearer than the group’s utilization of the Audio Spotlight, a disc-shaped speaker, employed by both commercial trade shows and the military, which throws sound in a focused direction. Douglass straps one across her chest and, sitting in her mechanical boat, begins to whisper secrets into a microphone. Depending upon where she points the Spotlight, perhaps you will receive the secret directly, perhaps you’ll hear a whisper, perhaps you won’t hear a thing. It is at this moment when it is clear that Hoffman’s messages that infiltrated the radio warnings at the beginning of the piece were filtered through the same system. (The mechanized moon is also a Spotlight, visually amplifying lonely secrets to the ethereal abyss.)

The idea of these secrets, and their varied effects and receptions, are pointedly tied in by the Audio Spotlight broadcast, as well as Hoffman’s radio warnings and Gillette’s disembodied presence. To extend this idea to larger constructs of character and theme, Gregory Whitehead’s “Out of the Dark: Notes on the Nobodies of Radio Art” reads Ahab himself as a radiobody, “one chilling prototype for the wireless persona: suspended between life and death, between redemptive dissemination and lethal degeneracy, what is it made of and what does it want?” (1994:256). Whitehead extends this character analysis to the larger discourse of radio art:

If the idea of radiophony as the autonomous, electrified play of bodies unknown to each other (the unabashed aspiration of radio art) sounds at times like it has been irretrievably lost, it is most likely because the air has already become too thick with the buzz of commerce and war, too overrun by radar beams, burning harpoons, wagging
fingers, body brands, and traffic reports to think of anything else. (262)

Whitehead’s acute commentary allows us to situate the radiobodies—of Ahab, Radiohole, the participatory audience—as hyperreal. The broadcast is there and not there, discoverable but intangible. One radio wave is exchangeable for another, just as one signifier is intermingled with innumerable other signifiers. By extension, via the Audio Spotlight, Douglass is not Douglass, then. Nor is she Ahab, nor is she the whale. She becomes all of these, a simulacrum without essence or rooting. The performers are all the characters and none. Just like the television space of Gillette, they are everywhere and nowhere.

Gillette makes the concluding remarks from Vermont: “Our tragedy was that we became fish. Freedom? A dream! Everyone aspires to it, or at least gives the impression of fervently aspiring to it” (2006:17). Although it still resists coherence, Gillette’s speech does indeed bring many thematic elements together, a referential denouement. And as the performance ends and the audience begins to leave, Styx’s 1977 “Come Sail Away” blasts from the speakers:

I look to the sea, reflections in the waves spark my memory / Some happy, some sad / I think of childhood friends and the dreams we had / We live happily forever, so the story goes / But somehow we missed out on that pot of gold / But we’ll try best that we can to carry on.

The adventure is far from complete, but the soothing sounds of Styx frontman Dennis DeYoung’s voice (there and not there) provides for some semblance of closure, bringing the hyperreal performance full circle: from early American literature to Virgil, to Navy Seals, to trade show technology, to ’80s pop music. Discerning any type of coherence would be a fallacy; the bravest audiences and critics must surrender to profundity of the deep.

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Cargo Sofia

A Bulgarian Truck Ride through Dublin

Sara Brady

I walk east on the north side of the Quays. On my right the River Liffey pushes its notoriously filthy contents into the sea. I pass a lap-dancing club, then Marlborough Street—site of the Abbey Theatre—and finally the Custom House. One of Dublin’s 18th-century colonial stalwarts, the Custom House more recently provides shelter for drug dealers on its steps. But at just 6:30 pm on Friday 4 May 2007—when the sun won’t go down for a few hours—I’m too early for any shady characters. I keep walking along Custom House Quay and into the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC). The IFSC embodies the New Ireland: where a collection of run-down derelict buildings and crowded council houses used to be, there are gaudy new high-rise apartment buildings—which appear to grow up out of the surrounding water—enclosing a group of commercial buildings housing major financial corporations, a few hotels, and some so-so restaurants (“bistros”; “cafés”; “wine bars”; and even a real, live “dance club”).

The IFSC and the greater “Docklands” area that lead the Liffey through Dublin Port, the ferry terminal, Dublin Bay, and out to sea is the site of a theatre and performance mini-festival of site-specific work called “We Are Here 2.0.” I’m here anyway, in front of the George’s Dock arch, looking for my contact. I’ve been told by the Project Arts Centre box office (a producer of the festival) to wait for instructions. I notice almost immediately a not-so mysterious clue: near the arch a woman sits with a large, clearly marked sign reading “Cargo Sofia.” So much for site-specific intrigue. I collect my ticket and spot my companion standing on the outskirts of the “funky-glasses crowd”—the term we apply

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To our right, parked against the large factory-like restored brick-and-glass building called the CHQ (for “Custom House Quay”—the resident stylish “venue” of the IFSC) stands a large white truck. On any other evening the truck would fail to arouse interest—it would undoubtedly be there to unload cases of designer vodka for a party in one of CHQ’s picture-window vaults—but from the two sets of steps that drop from the container to the sidewalk it is clear there isn’t any “cargo” in the truck. Instead, there are rows of seats. For audiences. An entirely different kind of cargo.

We are told to board the truck. A nice, smallish man who doesn’t seem to speak a lot of English rips my ticket and tells me to take a pair of earphones. He doesn’t appear to be an “actor”; he’s not “on.” He isn’t reacting to audience members as they climb into the truck, and his hands are not an actor’s hands—they are rough and worn from hard work. I’m intrigued—I wonder if he is a “real” truck driver. I step up into the truck, the inside of which has been converted to a wide but shallow audience configuration. I take a seat and put on my earphones. I’m still wondering if the guy is an actor. Other audience members ask each other questions about the performance: where are we going, who’s driving, are we supposed to be human cargo—you can’t fool the funky-glasses crowd. The ticket taker and his colleagues seem rushed. They close the two doors on the long back end of the truck and in the immediate darkness I feel my heart drop. It suddenly occurs to me that I’m stuck in a truck. The lights come on, they tell us to put on our seat belts—a woman is translating for the ticket takers (there are two of them). They joke with her that she has to drive—put on our earphones. A woman is translating for the ticket takers (there are two of them). They joke with her that she has to drive—then they leave.

I start to sweat—I am prone to claustrophobia, it’s true, but I didn’t think it was that bad. I mean, I definitely avoid caving whenever possible—but other than that, I don’t really think about the fear of being closed in and feeling suffocated. Now I’m feeling nauseous and trying to figure out how I can get out—get off the truck. I don’t even care if I miss the performance. The truck starts with a jump. I’m screwed. I am now human cargo. Don’t be dramatic, I think. The enormous and ridiculous privilege my life affords me drives me into an anxiety attack.

The truck is now moving; I’m looking for an escape latch and wondering whether they are going slow enough for me to survive the jump, when suddenly the two truck drivers’ faces appear, in triplicate, in front of us. Projected along the lateral side of the truck is live feed from the cab. The (real) truck drivers wear microphone earpieces so we can hear them tell us, via our translator, that we are in Sofia, Bulgaria, ready to start our journey to Dublin, Ireland. The journey will take seven days. I’m distracted—and this is a good thing. I give up on my need to jump out of the container. I start listening to our drivers, Nedyalko Nedyalkov and Vento Borisov, talk about the company they work for: SOMAT. The air conditioning begins to hum. I suddenly notice that there is a set of small windows lining the top of the truck. The video projection cuts to a documentary about SOMAT, the state-owned Bulgarian trucking firm bought by German Willi Betz in the 1990s.

We drive off the cobblestone and concrete of George’s Dock and onto the quays. We can hear the sounds of traffic, but in front of us we see Bulgarian landscape whiz by on the video projection. We follow the same route that trucks in Dublin famously cover—the only route from the port through the city center and out to points north, south, and west. The bottleneck that is Dublin has only recently seen some relief in the opening of the Port Tunnel followed by a rush-hour ban on trucks in the city center. I try to see landmarks out of the tiny high windows, but it’s no good. I look forward and I allow myself to enter the landscape of the video. We are in Bulgaria, heading out of Sofia on our way to Dublin.

Rimini Protokoll is a theatre collective formed in 2000 by Helgard Haug (German), Stefan Kaegi (Swiss), and Daniel Wetzel (German) when they were students at Giessen University (Institut für Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft) studying applied theatre science and performance studies. Their work goes beyond documentary theatre to “reality theatre.” Recent productions include Call Cutta, a walking tour through Berlin led via cell phone by call centers in India; and the 2007
winner of the Dramatiker des Jahres prize, *Karl Marx: Das Kapital, Band Eins*, a version of Marx’s work related through stories of “witnesses” who have read him cover to cover. *Cargo Sofia* is “a live spatial model. A site-specific performance for European and border-cities. Its freight is its potential and the laboratory nature of its stage production” (RP 2007a). Pieces such as *Cargo Sofia* are “theatre ready-mades” in which “people who are alien to theatre productions but [who...] are the experts on perspectives on reality come to serve as suppliers of materials and as actors”; these nonactors “are Ready-Made presenters for the stage” (RP 2007b). Kaegi explains Rimini Protokoll’s lack of interest in talented but conventional actors: “Why should we look for such actors if we have people who tell us their stories? What draws us away from actors is the fact that they would never bring us across such stories” (in Blaser 2004). The group finds that the “experts” who express interest in their projects—by responding to RP’s advertisements or otherwise coming in contact with the artists—offer ways into realities they and their audience might otherwise never know. RP wants to contrive situations that will allow the spectator to experience reality in a new way; to create “the feeling for the spectator that all that he has discovered, he has discovered for himself” (Kaegi in Blaser 2004). Patrice Blaser describes RP projects as “all about drawing attention to other aspects of reality [...] by suddenly discovering something that has always been there, but remained unnoticed in everyday life, and is made visible only now, with the help of that special gaze that one has when one observes in an art-context” (2004).

Faced with the multisensory experience in the truck, where I feel the movement of a familiar city but hear and see the context of another place, reality does appear a bit different. Footage in sync with the present trip gives us the feeling of real time spent passing the streets of Sofia and soon the countryside beyond. I begin to fall into the theatrical experience through the real fiction of the moving and the viewing when suddenly a loud noise jolts me back into the truck; the wall in front of us is disappearing—moving up. It turns out that the wall is really a screen, which is now rising to reveal the city. The side of the truck (hidden from view when we boarded) is lined with floor-to-ceiling windows.

We are heading toward Dublin Bay—to the Dublin Port. Once through the entrance and into the maze of parking lots filled with stacked containers, our drivers tell us we’ve arrived at the Croatia border; messages are projected from the video onto a wide piece of tape running like a chair rail below the windows on the truck’s side, like subtitles for the real scene outside the truck: “Serbia-Croatia Border. Driving curfew; lost five hours; slept.” A man stops the truck. He is in clear view as he approaches the cab; then he disappears. The truck starts moving again deeper into the port; I only realize the man who stopped us has boarded the truck when I begin to hear his voice through my earphones. He introduces himself: he works at the port. He explains the difference between freezer containers and chemical containers; how every container has a unique number; how much weight the massive cranes can hold. In front of us a crane reaches for a container like a mechanical arm in an arcade game. With seemingly little effort the crane grabs one of the rectangular steel boxes and moves it to another stack of containers. The cargo ferry docked nearby, however, dwarves the scale of the crane and containers: this is the reality of this performance—or
reality made into performance; this is “work” made strange.

In fact, the Dublin Port rep has to get back to work; he jumps off the moving truck and we pull out of the main gates and turn left. The first scene has ended; we are humbled by the sights and sounds of the consumer-container culture we participate in. In our distraction, we hardly notice the sound of a woman’s voice coming through our earphones. It is pleasant; lulling; she sings in Bulgarian. Is it the radio? I don’t consciously have that thought; the voice is background to my reflection on the spectacle of the port. The large picture window that is the side of the truck frames an unending panorama of oversized lots—and then, suddenly, there she is, standing in the middle of a traffic island in the middle of all these different gated lots at Dublin Port. She is the beautiful voice. As she stands and sings into a microphone I realize that only we can hear her. The mike is for us, not the container-filled port. As the truck continues past her, she doesn’t acknowledge us, and we don’t acknowledge her. The theatre of Cargo Sofia is in the imagining of fantasy—of reality rendered fantastic. We take in what we see in front of us and hear on our earphones—is this the music that Bulgarian drivers listen to on the road for 14 hours at a time? First we heard her, then, out of the blue, the voice in our imaginations appeared—and with this came the sudden recognition that what you see is what you hear; a rupture of something true in a fleeting moment. “Of course,” Haug explains in Rimini Protokoll’s group interview with Blaser, “you can preach or you can perform pieces in which you find very important and sharp thoughts or exemplary definitions, and that is at a certain level helpful and good—on the other side, you can try to link the items to people and act upon the reality in a more concrete way, and introduce reality as dynamite into such a space” (in Blaser 2004). Through the frame of the truck’s side window revealed in the sudden removal of the video screen, we see the city, and reality makes theatre.

“Where goods used to be stacked in the past, now the audience is sitting and looking from a changed perspective back to their city. Thus the truck serves as an observatory, a theatre probe, a mobile binocular trained at the cities like a microscope” (RP 2007a). After a
ride through the Port Tunnel with a mandated National Roads Authority rep, we drive north where, just outside the airport, we get the truck washed in “France,” in a French “border scanner” (so reads the subtitle), and we keep going. Just when I start to wonder when they are going to address what is inside the containers we have just left behind (they have talked about frozen meat and the distances food travels to reach its destination—and not only the petrol used to get the truck from A to B, but the energy required to keep the cargo fresh), we get to the OmniPlex. The OmniPlex is a 10-cinema strip mall with Burger King, Pizza Hut, McDonald’s, a gas station, and a variety of retail shops. I hear the singing again. I try to figure out “where” we are, and where she is. Then I see: she stands in a parking space, surrounded by cars and shoppers, singing into her microphone with subtlety and mystery. We don’t stop; we move toward the front of the cinema. We hear, briefly, the theme from Star Wars in the background.

Cargo Sofia works in layers of story and spectacle. While imagining we are somewhere else using the materiality of where we “are,” new stories emerge. At regular intervals, the text on the chair-rail subtitle continues with the story of SOMAT and the corruption of Willi Betz. Outside, because it is election time, posters of politicians hang on streetlamps, giving corruption yet another face. When we stop for gas, Nedyalkov and Borisov tell us how cheap petrol is on one of their routes—Iran (five liters cost the same as one and a half liters of water). Such a bargain requires two days’ patience or a bribe of a copy of Playboy. Bribes also go well at (nonelectronic) borders, according to our hosts.

With a full tank, we head out of the shopping center, passing the McDonald’s drive-through. They are everywhere, Nedyalkov says, throughout Europe and the Middle East. But he doesn’t eat there. Too expensive. Instead the truckers keep dried meats, fruits and vegetables (sometimes, since they go off so quickly), and canned food in the base of the cab. They cook for themselves on the road. Both drivers talk about the difficulties of being away from home for so long. They miss their wives. Some truckers, they explain, get prostitutes—but not so much in Ireland, where what would be a 20 Euro trick in Bulgaria costs 150 Euro.

We head south now, back into the inner city. Another surprise materializes on Drumcondra Road: there is our singer, not singing, but riding a bike along the sidewalk. But my favorite moment on Cargo Sofia was one of the last: when stopped at a traffic light—which seemed to be broken because it was red for ages—at the intersection of Marlborough St. and Abbey St., we saw a man and a woman standing outside of the pub on the corner. They were both visibly drunk (or worse); and although people were busily walking down the street, the story of these two people—this man and this woman—became significant. She could barely stand as she held a Coke bottle—the contents of which (and I doubt it was soda) were spilling out. The man attempted to light his cigarette. She tried to talk to him, to go closer to him; he backed off, into a doorway. She didn’t let up. The truck driver started to take notice, and his narration turned to their story. We watched as she attempted, and eventually succeeded, to hug him. They stayed that way for awhile—and the truck driver commented on the length of the light; it did seem almost like something was wrong—and then, it went green, and just as we started to move and turn the corner of Marlborough street, we could see the man, sneaking a sip, over her shoulder, of his own bottle of “Coke.”

In the next instant, just after seeing life-as-theatre on our truck-as-life-as-theatre, we were in front of the Abbey Theatre, where the audience had just emerged for intermission. “The bourgeoisie are out,” I heard someone say. The stark contrast, especially in Dublin, of a conventional theatre audience standing in the street only feet away from the drunken Coke-bottle couple—the former sipping their own (alcoholic) drinks, smoking their cigarettes, and talking; the latter holding onto each other for dear life—was astonishing: dynamite into the space.

We clapped for the drivers in the end, when we drove up around the arch in front of CHQ, and, as we watched through the windows, they got out of their truck cab. With a bottle of Jamesons, they told us about the tradition of having a shot of whiskey when a seven-to-eight-day journey like this one was completed—and they did. They told us that after working for this many days straight on the journey (with 12 to 14 shifts of driving, little breaks, no good
food, pressure from the company with contact three to four times a day) they would get paid—are you ready?—170 Euros, about $230US. This information came out just as easily as the description of the whiskey tradition. It was a moment that epitomized how, in this wonderful performance, political content was so subtly transmitted—by juxtaposing the personal realities of these men with the economic realities of the global movement of goods. I stood on Custom House Quay and watched the truck drivers—the actors—clean up and get ready for the 9:00 PM show.

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Rimini Protokoll (RP)

Zoubeir Ben Bouchta’s Lalla J’mila
Khalid Amine

The more solitary and isolated I become, the more I come to like stories.

—Aristotle (Fragment 668)

Zoubeir Ben Bouchta often approaches Tangier as a palimpsest by performing an intentional writing over of specific spaces already loaded with the city’s memory, and written upon either by individual artists or the collective imagination. His dramas provide ample evidence of the interpenetration of place, space, and memory. In many ways, Ben Bouchta’s theatre is a postcolonial experimental practice that forces its audience to decode various processes of cultural transformation as experimental archaeology. Such place-specific material reveals an extraordinary eloquence insofar as it voices notions of tradition and modernity. It is, then, a theatrical articulation of the space of Tangier as a practiced place. Normally, open and undefined, space becomes a practiced place when humans attach meaning to it. Place is therefore highly individualized, but it is also a recognizable cultural construct of symbolic exchanges and interpretive conventions. It is construed in complex relationships between gaze and object within cultural expectations. Space and place, however, are self-erasing, elusive, and difficult to define, for they reflect the surging, shifting, and inchoate character of life itself as a dynamic performative experience. In Derridean terms, space is very much like a

1. In a related context, Michel de Certeau writes: “Space is a practiced place. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space produced by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e., a place constituted by a system of signs” (1984:117).

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cinder, “something that erases itself totally, radically, while presenting itself” (Derrida 1987:177).

**Lalla J’mila and the Performance of Gender**

LALLA J’MILA: The bird is being winged, and the winged one shall never drown.

ITTO: Happy is the one who has wings to fly with when she is near to drowning!

LALLA J’MILA: A woman also is winged; she only needs to know how to fly. ([Ben Bouchta](#))

Ben Bouchta’s play *Lalla J’mila* constitutes a multilayered exploration of the underground history of Tangier as an Edenic social project erected by paternalistic systems of governance, yet ironically represented with feminine qualities as the “Bride of the North” and “the Pearl of the Strait.” The performance is an act of memorializing as well as a scrupulous practice of excavating and stripping away layers of little histories and fragmented first-person narratives to reveal the interpenetration of space, culture, and gender. It unlocks histories of Moroccan sexual politics within an extreme situation marked by colonial hegemony on the one hand, and the deeply rooted local patriarchal mindset on the other hand. Highlighting constructed fixities and polarities such as centrality and marginality, high culture and low mass culture, masculinity and femininity, the play braids together local and global issues. And it reveals steps and missteps in women’s liberation movements in Morocco and the less tangible but pervasive legends that surround the mythic city of Tangier as an interzone.

The play is composed of seven scenes that the playwright prefers to name “lightings.” An overview of these lightings illuminates the dramaturgical constructs of the text. In the first lighting entitled “The Girls’ Rock,” Itto joins Lalla J’mila in her miserable cave located within the legendary *Hajrat L’bnaat* (Girls’ Rock), an exclusively women’s site of elaborate formulaic rituals and devotional cults. The rock is one of the mythical spaces where Moroccan women can momentarily subvert deeply rooted patriarchal violence. Itto is considered an unwelcome intruder, yet after listening to Itto’s story of her identity, Lalla J’mila realizes that Itto is her sister. The second lighting, “Lalla Yennou,” evokes the tragic version of thrashing:

![Figure 1. Itto, narrating her capture by the police, in the fourth lighting of Zobeir Ben Bouchta’s Lalla J’mila. Dawliz Theatre, Tangier, 15 April 2004. (Photo by Abdelaziz Khalili)](https://image)
Lalla J’mila and her mother are forced by Ba’haddo to thresh spines, rather than corn, as a punishment for their participation in Lalla Y ennou’s anticolonial song in the public bath. Fqiha Lalla Y ennou, a good friend of Lalla J’mila and Itto’s mother who took care of Itto after her mother’s death, is constructed as a militant woman, the first one in Tangier who abandoned her djellaba (a traditional long dress with a hood that entirely covers a woman’s body) and veil and trespassed the male domain in both the ritualistic procession of Bouarrakia, Tangier’s most notorious shrine wherein elaborate religious festivities take place, and the male-dominated world of literacy. In the third lighting, “The Seven Waves,” Itto comes to terms with her past by revealing it to her sister, and the lighting is fuelled by tension and trauma. Her overloaded narrative is interrupted as she loses consciousness. The tension in Itto’s narrative reaches its peak in the fourth lighting, “Liberty Avenue,” in which she reveals that when she was a student, police captured her because of her participation in a student strike.

The fifth lighting, “Ould Lgllassa,” represents the most tragic moments of the performance. Itto painfully dramatizes her sexual abuse and rape by the police while in custody. The rape scene is redemptive insofar as it enables Itto to externalize her suffering, to share it with her sister and the audience. After the scene, in which Itto also learns that Ould Lgllassa, the policeman who raped her, is her half brother—cruelly chosen by his colleagues because of this—Itto collapses. In the sixth lighting, “The Subterranean Storehouse,” the focus is on Lalla J’mila, who narrates how she was forced by her stepfather to marry the polygamous and authoritarian Sheikh, but ran away right after the wedding. These tragic moments are permeated by a sharp comicality, what Beckett refers to as the “mirthless laugh” that invokes a peculiar kind of tragic laughter: though Lalla J’mila is forced against her will to marry, her post-ceremony escape is staged comically. In the seventh lighting, “The Winged One,” after exorcising themselves from their tragic predicament, the two sisters are finally free from all paternalistic confines and are ready to fly over and beyond male domination. Itto jumps from the Girls’ Rock, seemingly to her death, until her sister cries out, “My sister is winged / She can fly” and follows her. Flying becomes a metaphor for the agency that enables women to resist repression and patriarchal violence.

Lalla J’mila begins with a revealing preamble by Fatima Mernissi that explains the subversive desire of Moroccan women to reach beyond the insular world prescribed for them by the patriarchal mindset. Mernissi relays her Aunt’s ingenious stories, particularly one about a woman with wings as representing moments of rapture wherein male-dominated space is temporarily transgressed. Ben Bouchta’s play is all about these fleeting subversive moments of flying over and beyond male domains. The journey that the play chronicles reveals the story of two sisters, Itto and Lalla J’mila, who trace and dramatize various experiences as they painfully take stock of their suffocating situations as oppressed women. Their stories frequently subvert power relations and ensure the triumph of the unfortunate in a fabulous utopian narrative. Throughout her journey in the realm of storytelling, the runaway wife Lalla
J'mila, now disguised as a man to partake of the dignity afforded men, tends to glorify her access to male domains:

LALLA J’MILA: It is simply a question of djellaba and turban, and all doors were opened to me. If only you could have seen me when I was a man: I used to walk in the street like a prince, head high and feet on the ground, with firm pace, walking long distances without fear. There was nobody gazing at me or following me with his eyes, and there was nobody paying attention to whether I was fat or thin. There was nobody to ask why I wore this and didn’t wear that. (Ben Bouchta [2004] 2005:82)

However, in reality she was only able to reach such fulfillment by annihilating her femininity and adopting a phallocratic identity similar to the character Pope Joan in Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls* (1990). Pope Joan is thought to have been Pope from 854 to 856. Disguised as a man, she reached the ultimate level of knowledge when she became Pope: “I realized I did know the truth because whatever the Pope says is true” (Churchill 1990:68). Indeed, the production of truth secured by knowledge (*savoir*) is a technology of power, as Jane Thomas indicates: “The inviolable essence of reality is symbolized by God and Joan believes that by becoming Pope she will know God. However, as she is to discover, it is impossible to separate power from the production of truth through knowledge” (1992:181). While disguised as a man in the play, Pope Joan realizes that she did know the truth; yet immediately after disclosing her femaleness she is no longer allowed to produce her own interpretation of reality and, subsequently, is stoned to death.

Lalla J’mila, in her turn, is forced by the nature of things to disclose her femaleness. She loses her prestigious position in the world of men and finds refuge in the mythical space of the Girls’ Rock.

Within the space of storytelling, which “protects the weapons of the weak against the reality of the established order” (de Certeau 1984:23), the two sisters’ narratives become a means of empowerment when other means are denied or beyond their reach. As Edward Said states, stories are “the method colonized people used to assert their own identity and the existence of their won history” (1994:15). Such stories become the outlet, or rather the offshoot, of silent and repressed histories related to everyday practices insofar as they encode exactly what they do. They foreground women’s voices that are usually untuned for public exposure and that “constitute an act which they intend to mean. There is no need to add a gloss that knows what they express without knowing it, or to wonder what they are the metaphor for. They form a network of operations whose formal rules and clever ‘coups’ are outlined by an enormous cast of characters” (de Certeau 1984:80). Itto and Lalla J’mila figure among these women characters who are victims of the old Moroccan family code.

Struggles of national liberation and private battles of self-assertion are intricately linked in a variety of ways. “As a little girl,” Lalla J’mila recalls, “accompanying my mother in her visits to Fqiha Lalla Yennou, I used to hear them talking about the year of hunger and Franco’s military campaign in which he occupied Tangier in the year 1940. It is said that as soon as the Spanish had entered the city, food supplies were cut off; the military took everything and left people starving […] and provisions were distributed by vouchers” (Ben Bouchta [2004] 2005:25). Under such conditions, women led by F’qiha Lalla Yennou were also taking part in the national struggle for independence. In their everyday practice, they were striving to fight illiteracy, patriarchal power structures, as well as the repressive and ideological colonial apparatuses. They turned places like the public Turkish bath, ironically named “Franco,” into arenas for giving voice to their discontent as subaltern and colonized subjects:

Lalla Yennou composed a song that women started to sing. One day, as they were accompanying a bride to Franco’s Hamam, they started to sing:

Oh! Poor plowman,
Overloaded with debts,
His only food is Gou’mine,
Cooked with Rou’jla,
In every village,
Mek’hzen would swindle,  
And would order a queue up,  
They would be burnt with sun.  

The song that is supposed to be apolitical and entertaining turns out to be a sharp social satire and a carnivalesque mirror of topsy-turvidom. It is an instance of “hybrity” that Homi K. Bhabha identifies as “a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other denied knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition” (1994:114). Women’s song disrupts the authority of the colonizers as well as their Moroccan representatives such as Ba’haddou, whose wife is part of the chorus.

In its clear critique of patriarchy, Lalla J’mila painfully incorporates male presence in the two sisters’ narratives. The character of Ould Lgllassa is an exemplary first instance; he epitomizes a pathetic trauma in Itto’s mental journey across the terrain of her past, for he is her brother, the son of her father, who “runs away with her bird” and cuts off her wings. The bird stands for virginity that is stolen in the rape scene wherein Itto’s wings are cut off, the latter signifying her loss of feminine dignity.

ITTO: They brought me silver bracelets to handcuff me with at the bed’s front, and they gave well extra anklets.

LALLA J’MILA: They are as well silver made?

ITTO: Everything they have is silver made; our silver, homemade. Well! They put anklets on my feet, and bracelets on my hands. I will be lying to you if I tell you I still remember something. When he assaulted me, I can only remember myself screaming a single scream. And they started to sing: He took her! He took her. Ould Lgllassa is her master.


ITTO: I have never seen his face, because my eyes were enfolded with a strip of cloth.

LALLA J’MILA: Do you know, after all, who Ould Lgllassa is?

ITTO: [performing the act of lying down on bed, subjected to rape] No, I did not know him, but I felt he was heavy as lead.  
(Ben Bouchta [2004] 2005:28)

The rape scene exemplifies the excess of violence practiced against the female body. It is an act conducted by the repressive state apparatus against Itto due to her affiliation with the student movement. It is the ultimate evil that can be inflicted upon the female body, particularly in a strict Muslim society such as Morocco where the loss of virginity or, even worse, being spurned as a wife, is considered great shame and disgrace. The “loss of the bird” becomes a recurrent leitmotif in Itto’s narrative as it expresses the most traumatic experience in her life as a woman.

Ba’haddo, in his turn, is omnipresent in Lalla J’mila’s narrative. He represents the authoritarian stepfather who forced her to
is not fair for a peasant to leave his harvest to someone else. God does not like this. Now! Do you know what is good for you to do? We asked him, “What?” He told us, “You will thresh whatever you have sowed. Now! Come to thresh thorns.” [Lalla J’mila and her sister Itto perform the act of threshing thorns. They are walking over unreal thorns with a rhythm that transforms the act of threshing into a dance.] (Ben Bouchta [2004] 2005:23)

The scene of threshing radiates in the collective memory of people from the north of Morocco. Ba’haddo, as the saying goes, forced the people of Ghmara to thresh thorns as a collective punishment. Here, the scene reproduces the same incriminating effect, only within the context of sexual politics. Texts and contexts crisscross each other invoking spectacles of different power relations.

LALLA J’MILA: Mother, may God bless her, was always telling me, “listen my daughter, the verdict is man and the convict is woman.” [She stops threshing.] As for me, I reversed the saying … and ran away. [intending to leave]

ITTO: No! Don’t run away and leave threshing thorns alone. [She stops threshing, pondering over her feet.] My feet are bleeding.

LALLA J’MILA: And my heart is bleeding with thorns. [She leaves.] (Ben Bouchta [2004] 2005:35)

This narrativization of patriarchal violence and desire is not without subversive moments since Ben Bouchta subordinates didactic simplicity to aesthetic complexity. With a remarkable fusion of periods—from the precolonial era before 1913, through the colonial interzone until 1956, and to the current postcolonial period—and a subtle demystification of Tangier’s underground self, Ben Bouchta accurately juxtaposes private battles of women against sexism and patriarchal mindsets with the collective struggle against the colonial presence and its local collaborators.

In brief, Lalla J’mila performs the politics of gender in present-day Morocco with the advent of the new family code called mudawanat

Figure 4. Itto and Lalla J’mila, dressed as a man, in “The Subterranean Storehouse,” the sixth lighting of Zobeir Ben Bouchta’s Lalla J’mila. Dawliz Theatre, Tangier, 15 August 2004. (Photo by Abdelaziz Khalili)
The play relates physical aspects of the body to conceptions of spatiality. Ben Bouchta’s play was written for and coproduced by an active feminist network right after the implementation of the new law in 2003. It is among the few feminist-conscious writings that appeared in Morocco in response to the emergence of the new family code. In its persistence in problematizing the old-fashioned division between public and private space, the play also searches for a better correlation between space and women’s corporeal existence; and in so doing, it calls for a complete shake up of paternalistic policies of the family. At the end of the play, the two sisters are liberated from the prevailing phallocentric restrictions and are able to fly.

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