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This Is Home, This Isn't Home: Reza Abdoh's *Tight Right White*

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Everything must
be arranged
to a hair
in a fulminating
order.

– Antonin Artaud (283)[1]

"It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" (Beckett 240). The aesthetics of aporia and failure that Beckett ushered in has been an unlikely legacy to try to build back from, especially for artists with an interest in the sociopolitical. Likewise, Artaud's lucid madness and his mockery of the world's mad pseudo-lucidity have seemed no less vital for late twentieth-century theatre artists to struggle with, but as with Beckett's aporia, Artaud's madness has seemed relatively intractable when applied to political theatre. In recent years, the Italian company Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio (SRS) has been one of the few companies to scramble successfully across this paradoxical terrain of aporia and madness and to retain a sense of perspective on the sociopolitical. In the late 1980s and early 1990s in the United States, the director and writer Reza Abdoh was also one of the few artists able to acknowledge the potentially solipsistic deconstructions of identity furnished by Beckett and Artaud while still holding onto a sense of social engagement.

One more quotation, this one from SRS's Claudia Castellucci, may help to situate Abdoh's work, the subject of this essay:

> The age of supremacy of the logic word is over, the logic word which logically, with Beckett, ends handing itself over to its own draining. Do we want to keep on thinking that words help men to understand each other? Do we still have this nineteenth-century idea of word?

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If words (and theatre) are not about understanding and communicating, then what do they do? There are several possible answers to this. In part, artists like company members of the SRS and Abdoh do not *say* their meanings; they *perform* them. This is a slippery point, but effectively, Abdoh's performances model a simultaneous affirmation and negation, as in Beckett and Artaud. This mode of aporistic thinking, this *how* more than *what*, has a further purpose. By deconstructing, by using a rhetorical and performative mode of simultaneous affirmation and negation, Abdoh can momentarily articulate a utopic space outside logical cause and effect, outside history.

Abdoh's penultimate, and perhaps most crystallized, piece for the theatre, *Tight Right White*, communicated loudly when it was first performed. And yet, at each moment in the piece, words, gestures, and staging were put under an intense pressure to reveal the discomforting ways in which language creates the desire for both meaning and the disavowal of meaning. The piece is actually about communication, about helping people "to understand each other," in the sense that it provided glimmers of a possible community amongst the performers, as well as between the performers and the audience. At the same time, the piece stubbornly persists in acknowledging the unavowable nature of community, the way in which even when seeming to agree, two parties speaking to each other may simply be engaging in "passing theories," momentary suspensions of disbelief about each other's strangeness.[2]

Abdoh's own volatile mix of identities no doubt made him particularly sensitive to the strangeness of communication and identity. As an artist, he worked on two coasts, in Los Angeles and New York; he was born in Iran, educated in Britain, and lived as an adult in the United States. An HIV+ gay man, with relations to SM communities, Abdoh also seemed to deeply understand Hegel's point about masters and slaves, that antitheses are frequently susceptible to flipping in their relationship of power.

Tight Right White was, according to Abdoh, a piece about "slavery, submission … that equation" (Abdoh, *Interviews*), and indeed, much of the piece deals explicitly with the history of American slavery. At the same time, the piece consistently de-situates and displaces its historical frames. One could say that it is utopic in the way that it strives to express a sociopolitical identity that is not reducible to historical hierarchies. By constantly flipping and sliding multiple antitheses of identity politics in and out of each other, *Tight Right White* – however temporarily, however provisionally – questions the racial, sexual, and other hierarchies of difference that fundamentally structure formations of American identity. In ephemeral moments in the piece, normative "tight, right, white" American identity loses a hold on its own authority and finds some freedom by nomadically, tirelessly, agonizingly dancing back and forth between the restrictions that structure it. And yet again, the epiphanic promise of this utopia is often countered by a conceptual, albeit not a stylistic, "realism" in the work. *Tight Right White* is a performance of mourning, in

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part, because it realizes that freedom is mostly a lost object, a thing that exists in "no-place." This is home, this isn't home.

THE DELUGE

Tight Right White: A Poetic Work of Mourning opened in New York in March 1993, in a found loft space at 440 Lafayette Street across from the Public Theatre. One year later in 1994, Abdoh created his final piece for the theatre – *Quotations from a Ruined City* – a meditation on the war in Yugoslavia. Then in May 1995, Abdoh died at the age of thirty-two from AIDS-related causes.

As one of the characters says at the beginning of *Tight Right White*, "We are searching here" (64). *Tight Right White* was, in Abdoh's words, "a kind of quest for identity" (Wehle, "Reza" 60), "a cross between a Minstrel Show and a Borscht Belt night club act" (Wehle, "*Tight*" 57). These two performance styles were juxtaposed through two intertwined narratives: The primary narrative, the minstrel show, was Abdoh's adaptation of the 1975 film *Mandingo*, a pseudo-historical evocation of slavery, miscegenation, incest, and torture in the antebellum South. Framing the scenes from *Mandingo* was a second narrative loosely based on the journey of two characters (Moishe Pipik and Blaster) through a contemporary world where exclusion, stereotype, and hierarchy continue to dominate. The mediatized nature of this world is emphasized throughout by Pipik's refrain, "We are searching here. We are searching for that gem of a tale to tell on t.v."[3]

Pipik and Blaster's scabrous Borscht Belt routines, written or appropriated by Abdoh, are themselves caricatures of Jewish and black stereotypes, but writ so large as to explode. At one point in the middle of the show, Pipik touches Blaster's crotch and says, "I'm told you're a dangerous man, Blaster. I like that. It excites me. […] Don't worry, we're off the air. Are you sure you're not just a little black?" Blaster replies:

> I'm a black man, and I don't know how to sing and I don't know how to dance and I don't know how to preach to no congregation I'm too small to be a football player and I'm too ugly to be elected mayor. When I watch TV and I see all them people living in them fine homes […] I get all full of ambition. Now you tell me, what I am supposed to do with all this ambition I got? (74)

Dressed in a plaid fat suit, with dyed blond hair, and a large, hooked nose made from putty, Moishe Pipik replies: "Shove it up my hungry jew hole" (74). If, as Toni Morrison ironically puts it in *Playing in the Dark*, "the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference" (9–10), then Abdoh adamantly rejects such polite ignorance. But oddly enough, through its hyperbolic virulence and ugliness, Abdoh's language restores some sense

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of personal hunger behind the flat stereotype. By the performance's end, both Pipik and Blaster achieve a kind of melancholy dignity.

Rather than ignore signs of race and sexuality, Abdoh proliferates them unceasingly. His common tactic is to create a feeling of sensory and referential overload. In between the minstrel show and the Borscht Belt routines, as interruptions and segues between cuts in the narrative worlds of *Mandingo* and the Pipik/Blaster variety show, Abdoh presented a crazy quilt of other cultural sources, including videos that ranged from quiet nature scenes of sky and earth, to historical footage of black dances, to gay and straight porn; still images culled from Jan Nederveen Pieterse's book *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Popular Western Culture*; texts from neo-Nazi manifestos, slave narratives, and television culture; chain-gang songs; Jewish wedding dances; songs from Auschwitz; music, song, and dances from disco, jazz, opera, the American musical, and hip-hop. Costumes were equally eclectic: "150 […] in all, along with 52 hats and 16 wigs, and at least 35 masks […] [they] range[d] from 1850s plantation/slave trader outfits to 1960s bell-bottoms and platform shoes; neo-Nazi overcoats, lederhosen, funk and grunge with frequent combinations of several styles" (Wehle, "*Tight*" 59).

The production's flexible playing space further exacerbated one's sensory and referential overload by moving spectators between three different spaces within the floor-wide loft at 440 Lafayette. The audience was first seated on the floor between two raised stages on their right and left. These stages were themselves connected by a long thin runway and backed by film projections and television monitors. A second location, to the audience's left and behind the first stages, was composed of a small end-stage with revolving flats showing, on one side, a Southern mansion and, on the other, slaves being beaten. A third location was reached by walking back through the audience space of the first location to the other end of the loft, where a two-tiered end-stage stood with a wheel of torture on its bottom level and on its top, a reversed American flag. The complications of multiple stages, media, costumes, and styles of acting and dance were rendered even more complex by the production's staging, which dispersed actors throughout all the spaces even as the primary action was usually concentrated in one. This deluge lasted ninety minutes.

To show how *Tight Right White*'s proliferation of signs of race and sexuality affected its representation of identity, I want to focus now on the ways in which the piece reworked its basic narrative taken from the film *Mandingo*. In brief, the story of *Mandingo* recounts a series of episodes in the life of Hammond Maxwell, a young white heir to the plantation owner Warren Maxwell. While Papa Maxwell adheres to a slave-owning rooted in violence – at one point, he comments that the way to cure a "readin' nigger" is to put out an eye – his son appears ambivalent about such brutality. However, Hammond's sympathy for blacks is fickle; indeed, he cannot seem to make up his mind about whether blacks are people or property. To produce empathy for Ham-

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mond, but also to show his weakness, the film displays Hammond's wounded nature literally in the form of a limp resulting from a childhood fall from a horse. One day when Hammond has begrudgingly chosen to have an unnamed field slave beat the house slave Agamemnon for reading, Hammond's Cousin Charles arrives unannounced and, not satisfied with the field slave's beating, proceeds to flog Agamemnon himself. At first, Hammond is angry. He does not object so much to the violation of Agamemnon's person as to the violation of his own sense of ownership of Agamemnon. But he quickly becomes gracious when he realizes that the strange white man is his Cousin Charles.

Shortly after, Papa Maxwell announces to Hammond that Charles' father is short on money; if Hammond likes, he might consent to marry Blanche, Charles' sister and his cousin. On the way to meet Blanche, Hammond first visits another plantation owner, who offers him and Charles a place to stay for the night, as well as the service of what the film calls "wenches," young black female slaves reserved for sexual use by their owners. Hammond is struck by the beauty and honesty of Ellen, the woman he is given. The film also tries to make the feeling seem mutual; to do so, the film's genre begins a transformation, veering from the hard focus of historical drama to the soft focus of historical romance and soft porn. The next day at a slave auction in New Orleans, Hammond purchases a black man named Mede, a "mandingo," a slave trained to fight. Hammond is overjoyed at his purchase. He is also happy when he later meets Blanche and offers to marry her, but not quite as happy.

Indeed his happiness with Blanche disappears the day after the wedding because he believes that Blanche is too good in bed to be a virgin. As in most melodramas, the villain has a guilty secret; Blanche once slept with her brother Charles. On the trip home to the Maxwell plantation with Blanche and Mede, Hammond purchases Ellen, thereby assuaging his sense of lost ownership over his wife's hymen. Blanche – the representation of a tainted, vindictive femininity – seeks revenge by later beating a pregnant Ellen so viciously that Ellen miscarries her child by Hammond. Unable to compel her husband to sleep with her, Blanche also rapes Mede by threatening to tell Hammond that Mede has raped her. When Blanche herself becomes pregnant, the storm of violence abates for a while … until the birth, when we learn that the child is of mixed race. The child is killed; Hammond poisons Blanche and decides to boil Mede alive. Agamemnon revolts and shoots Papa Maxwell. Hammond shoots Mede, who falls into the boiling cauldron. The film ends. The limping, and perhaps limp, Hammond is alone.

On the video I viewed, a blurb vaunted: "*Mandingo* takes the audience beyond the sentimentalized South of other films with uncompromising honesty and realism to show the true brutalizing nature of slavery, which made victims of both owner and slave." Although at rare moments the film achieves this intention, more often than not its purported realism is simply a guise for romance, its extremism as much an indication of its own implication in an

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American system of racialized sexual fantasy as an indication of the violence of slavery itself. Despite, or perhaps precisely because of, its odd cultural over-determination, the work provides opportune material for what José Muñoz has called "disidentification."

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Muñoz describes disidentification as a way of "recycl[ing] […] culture […] remade […] as a queer world" (ix); a "process in which the artist reformulates" (x) the normative into the non-normative; a "survival strateg[y] the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). But he also cautions it is "important to note […] that disidentification is *not always* an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects" (5; emphasis in original). In describing Abdoh, Gautam Dasgupta has called the artist a "psychoanalyst of history," who "[adumbrates] a collective unconscious and [creates] new myths […] for the future" (117). The slightly redemptive ring to Dasgupta's argument – the hope of "new myths for the future" – is qualified in Muñoz's account of disidentification. He writes: "As a practice, disidentification does not dispel […] ideological[ly] contradictory elements; rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life" (12). In his restaging of *Mandingo*, Abdoh's disidentification with American racial and sexual fantasies lies somewhere between a redemption and excoriation of those fantasies.

In the first scene from *Mandingo* presented in *Tight Right White*, a slave trader has a slave take down his pants and bend over in front of him. "He ain't got hemmorhoids," shouts Papa Maxwell (64). Unlike the film, which presents this moment in pseudo-clinical fashion, Abdoh hyperbolizes the action by having all the actors playing slaves bend over to show the slave trader, and audience, their asses. Rather than make the action solely about hygiene, Abdoh energetically, and perhaps joyfully, emphasizes that the action is also an example of sexual domination and submission, a domination and submission in which the audience, as voyeurs, must also participate, willingly or not.[4] In the process of highlighting the sexual nature of the master–slave relationship, Abdoh also shows that hygiene and cleanliness themselves – two recurring leitmotifs of *Tight Right White* – are primary imaginary properties of what sustains whiteness as mastery and ownership; conversely, disease, smell, the unclean, and dispossession are registered as imaginary properties of the rectum, the submissive, the queer and dark other (Bersani, Harris). Complicating this apparently neat psychoanalytic identification of white with affirmation, black with negation, however, is Abdoh's cross-racial and cross-gender casting. The casting plays against the lack of slippage, or "tightness," in such identifications, creating at least some possibility for moving away from, or at least not being reduced to, these symptoms of the American imaginary.

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One of Abdoh's main actors, Tom Fitzpatrick, a white, plays Papa Maxwell with aggressive glee, shouting vociferously into a hand-held mike. As though there could be any confusion, Papa Maxwell, as Lacan would put it, "has the Phallus." Yet for those who had seen prior works by Abdoh, the casting of Fitzpatrick as the phallic father must have seemed slightly atypical. Notably, Fitzpatrick had previously played Eurydice in Abdoh's *The Hip Hop Waltz of Eurydice*, a piece Abdoh described as "a parable of the repression of homosexuality" (Mufson, "Introduction" 3). Perhaps Fitzpatrick's hyperbolically sadistic joy as Papa Maxwell is a way for Abdoh, and the audience, to disidentify with white mastery, to both embrace and refuse to accept it, to queer it and to play it straight. Meanwhile, Hammond Maxwell, the son is played by the black actor Royston Scott in whiteface. Unlike Fitzpatrick, Scott wears a body mike, whose transmitter is strapped in a white collar around his neck. And while Fitzpatrick exaggerates his character's menace in contrast to the genteel aggression of James Mason's characterization in *Mandingo*, Scott goes in the opposite direction by emphasizing his character's slightly whiny ineffectuality. Indeed, given Scott's light tenor voice, one is tempted to describe him as playing Hammond effeminately.

If the black–white racial inversion of Fitzpatrick and Scott's casting seems relatively legible, Abdoh's addition of signs of gender to those of race begins to throw his casting into realms of uncertainty, undecidability, and possibility. Why is Fitzpatrick, a white, allowed to play a phallic white, but Scott, a black, allowed to play only an effeminate white? It may be that Scott is allowed to occupy a character and subject position of white mastery only to the extent that he be collared and feminized. Perhaps the playing field is unavoidably unequal so that while blackface might allow whites to assume the sexual potency of a black other, whiteface becomes – not a means to counter blackface – but simply a way to preserve the metaphorical supremacy of whiteness by assigning a black other to impotency.[5] At the same time, it should be noted that Abdoh and Scott remove any trace of a limp from Hammond. In other words, care is taken in *Tight Right White*, even in embracing certain cultural over-determinations, to avoid others, such as the idea that effeminacy *must* be figuratively represented as physical weakness. Scott's feminized portrayal of the slave-owner Hammond may indicate the character's self-enslavement to the systemic hierarchies of slavery. Or through its crossing of stereotypical signs of gender, it may hint at a crossing-over of sexuality, at a sexuality equally attracted to possessing, or being possessed by, black men as much as white women. Indeed, this symbolic miscegenation of signs of race, gender, and sexuality throws into doubt stereotypical lines of interpretation that would read from sex to gender, from gender to sexuality, from race to a metaphorically gendered and sexualized passive subject position.

The black–white, weak–strong, female–male binaries that structure so much of the American racial and sexual imagination are also put into question

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by other instances of casting. The evening's master of ceremonies, Moishe Pipik, played by the white-skinned Tony Torn, carries a phallic hand-held mike, like Papa Maxwell. Yet we must also read this sign of authority through a number of other signs that stereotypically convey inferiority: he is Jewish, fat, greedy, a dyed rather than natural blonde, and he expresses his fondness for being on the receiving end of anal sex. And yet again, we might reverse the customary hierarchies of reading. Perhaps we need to read his putative inferiority as a kind of authority: He knows what others don't and he owns up to that knowledge by making it public. Or is his visibility just another trap?

Pipik's companion Blaster, while usually played by the white actor Tom Pearl in blackface, was also played in one of the show's scenes by the black actor Jacqueline Gregg. Such multiple casting is another example of Abdoh's desire to disturb an audience's perception of character. Commenting on *Tight Right White*, he said, "[T]here are characters and there's a narrative, but it's continuously being disrupted […] Once you believe in a character, that's all you believe in from that point on […] it's important to [question and reconstruct]" (Féral 19). The white actor Brenden Doyle, Abdoh's partner, plays the rebellious slave Cicero not in blackface, but in red body and face paint with black rectangular patches around the eyes. While his redness may evoke passion or Cicero's fiery character, it also suggests "redface," a mimicking of the Native American savage, the virile imaginary Other who, with the black male, plays the antagonist in that primal bodice-ripper, the American fantasy of rape and miscegenation.

Finally, throughout the piece runs the character of Miguel, played by Rafael Pimental. While a Latino actor playing a Latino character might seem like the exceptional instance when Abdoh grants a minority subject the right to possess and enact his own racial identity, this promise is only momentary, for Miguel does little more than translate other characters' lines from English and German into Spanish. His presence, like Brenden Doyle's red body paint, points to the inadequacy of conceiving racial identity in America as a black and white divide, even as his own identity loses a measure of agency by being primarily a translation of others' identities. While Hammond's fears and desires surrounding Mede and Blanche suggest how his imaginary ownership of self is established through a kind of white class privilege, a sexual and racial possession of others, Miguel's character indicates to what extent identity is also radically not owned as a result of the intersubjectivity of language.

I would argue that Abdoh's cacophony of racial and sexual references never establishes a redemptive or utopic space beyond race and sex. However, the volume and over-determination of such signs does begin to create a sort of context of no context, where the supremacy of customary identifications is thrown into question. Indeed, the supremacy of whiteness as a floating signifier of skin color, status, ownership, and class and race privilege starts to deteriorate. In *Tight Right White*, then, whiteness may no longer be the

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hierarchically valued ground against which to read all other racial and sexual differences. The title of the piece, *Tight Right White*, suggests a certain rhyme and reason to the imagination of whiteness. That is, a tight sphincter (and in this instance, I am evoking a "dominant" connotation easily deconstructed: a "tight ass" which tries to refuse penetration rather than invite it) = a tight straight and intimate family unit = a fiscally tight household; which rhymes with a legal right to property = the conservative right = a rite in which a dark other is the enemy and sacrificial scapegoat = a right to writing in which the other is to be the mis-educated, illiterate, and dis-informed; which rhymes with the white, the white-skinned = the transparent and unmarked = the pure = *le propre*: the proper, the clean, the own. And yet the piece constantly assaults, destabilizes, and deconstructs one's ability to legitimate the imaginary identifications between the terms *tight, right*, and *white*.

In part, *Tight Right White* disidentifies with whiteness – desires and disavows it – as the ground for racial difference by returning the non-white to the white as itself. Let me explain what I mean. When Cousin Charles starts to beat Agamemnon for reading, Hammond is at first angered by this violation of his property, but he quickly warms to his cousin. In *Tight Right White*, both Charles and Hammond are played by black men in whiteface, and curiously both, even the more ostensibly aggressive Charles, are played as slightly effeminate. On one level, these characterizations may be a way of disidentifying with *Mandingo* in order to create a space for same-sex black desire, or same-sex desire for people of color generally. On another, it is tempting to see the slight queering of Charles and Hammond as returning the putatively excessive gendering and sexualizing of the Other to whiteness itself. In an essay entitled "White Like Me," Eric Lott conjectures provocatively about a dream had by George Thatcher, a noted late nineteenth-century white blackface performer. Dreaming of minstrels, Thatcher wakes with an imaginary tambourine in his hand and rubs his face to see if he is blacked up. Lott writes,

> We might speculate a little as to the referent of the imaginary tambourine; the fantasy of racial conversion enacted in blackface seems to gesture at least toward sexual envy of black men (tambourine as penis), if not desire for them (tambourine as hymen). The fantasy may indeed direct us to a process in which homosexual desire is deflected by *identifying with* potent male heterosexuality. Perhaps the fantasy indicates only the usefulness of blackface in mediating white men's desire for other white men. (481; emphasis in original)

In other words, perhaps Agamemnon's beating is just the prelude to a quite different scene of submission. Perhaps a homoerotic bond between Charles and Hammond is initiated in their white homo-social exchange over the body of a black slave. Playing Charles and Hammond in whiteface may also be a way to return the sexual favors and fantasies, which blackface allowed to

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operate, to its white owners – by outing them, by making American whiteness the product and producer of its own outsider subject position.

One of the most obvious instances in *Tight Right White* of white male desire for other men occurs at the slave auction when Hammond buys the black man named Mede. In the film *Mandingo*, the heavyweight boxer Ken Norton plays Mede with a kind of stoic masculinity. When a German widow steps onto the auction platform, sticks her hand into his pants, and sizes up his genitals, he merely stands with his arms crossed and frowns manfully into the distance. In the film, the German widow acts as a fairly obvious surrogate for the white bidders' attraction to the mandingo. Strangely, however, even as the film ostensibly denies any obvious traces of homosexuality, the slave trader selling Mede mentions that his name is short for Ganymede. Why on earth does the film name the mandingo after the boy lover of Jove?[6] While the film carefully avoids answering the question, *Tight Right White* wholeheartedly embraces the film's hint of possible grounds for identification with queer genders and sexualities. At the same time, it criticizes *Mandingo*'s self-serving attempt, by having Norton stare into space as someone fondles his genitals, to pretend that blacks in slavery could always be as dignified as blacks in the post–civil rights era of the film.

In *Tight Right White*, the white actor Tom Pearl plays Mede, as well as Blaster. In Abdoh's version of the buying and selling of Mede, Pearl is shown naked and shaking. There is no dignity in this particular submission. Two strings are attached to his penis, which is framed inside the head vice of a pair of stocks. The German widow and the slave trader hold the end of each string, symbolically making literal the sexual and economic compact of white privilege created over the bodies of black slaves and black male sexuality. The moment is oddly dignified through the courage with which it represents the abject submission of slavery. A white actor makes a point about black dignity by enacting submission in its horror, an act that itself re-enacts another text's dehumanization of black dignity through an apparent critique of slavery.

I would now like to turn to some of the ways the narrative of *Mandingo* intersects with the modern frame of Pipik and Blaster. While the German widow serves in part as a surrogate for male–male desire, her presence in *Tight Right White* echoes other connotations as well, particularly the piece's references to the Holocaust. The modern frame of Pipik and Blaster and many of the dance transitions between *Mandingo* episodes establish analogies between the holocaust of slavery and the Jewish Holocaust, parallels reinforced by Tom Pearl's multiple casting as Mede and Blaster. In Pipik and Blaster's contemporary world, neo-Nazis sitting down to dinner, soap commercials praising the clean, pure, and odorless, and rants against affirmative action all exemplify the extent to which strategies of reinforcing hierarchy and privilege continue to dominate culture. In Pipik and Blaster's media context of no context, Pipik asks out of the blue, "Blaster what's your secret?" to which

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Blaster replies, "Nothing has changed" (74), a sentiment that reverberates with particular vehemence in the piece's own contexts of slavery and the Holocaust.

And yet, the relationship between the world of *Mandingo* and that of Pipik and Blaster is not simply circular, or a repetition of the same. Abdoh's seemingly ceaseless hunger to show that, in his words, "there is no fixed identity as such; identity is in flux" (Wehle, "Reza" 60) leads him to break down the stability of the parallelism between his two narrative worlds so that they intermingle and collapse. It is as though Abdoh fears that contexts themselves invariably reintroduce hierarchy, that he must become nomadic and move from context to context as quickly as possible so that identity is not permanently situated in a hierarchy. Past vs. present, German vs. Jew, white vs. black invert and migrate into each other. The German widow is both a woman in possession of her own sexuality and a woman who is dispossessed of her sexuality through being outbid by Hammond. In the larger piece, a German identity becomes representative of both what excludes Jews and what the slave traders exclude as un-American and unfeminine. Pipik's opening monologue recounts how "my best friend Carl hit me on the way home from school and said he wouldn't play with me any more because I had killed Jesus. I ran home to my mother crying. She told me not to pay any attention and then cursed the goyim and schwartzes." The character of a Jewish mother adds, "Fuck the schwartzes, fuck the goyim" (64). For Nazism, fascism, and American white supremacy, blacks (the "schwartzes") and Jews share a common imaginary identification with the degenerate. At the same time, Jews and blacks in the United States have often dealt with their own exclusion by participating in hierarchies that exclude each other. The hierarchies of dominance and submission turn over and over again in both material and imaginary worlds.

After all its obsessive turning and twisting of the over-saturated rules of identity, identification, misidentification, and disidentification, *Tight Right White* ends in a chilling evocation of emptiness. A chorus of different actors shout alternately, "This is home, this isn't home, this is home, this isn't home." Another series of calls and responses follows in which one actor shouts, "Who will be the witnes?" and another replies, "I will be the witness" (81). Pipik then tells a final joke, but without the comic verve he has kept up throughout: "Blaster, you know why Hitler killed himself […] He got his gas bill. Here's to you Blaster, mazel tov. Good night Sweet Prince. Here's Moishe Pipik signing off, sayink goodnight Missus, vere ever you are. (*Blackout. Blaster spits fire twice.*)" (81). And then these final lines alluding to the witness-of-violence Horatio are followed by a coda – only minimally outlined in the performance text – called the "Chaos section." Actors run frantically throughout the space gathering dozens and dozens of suitcases, restlessly packing and unpacking. Are they Jews in the Holocaust, taking a few posses-

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sions to the camps, possessions that they abandon as they enter? Are they American blacks, taking trains to the North? Iranian-Americans going to Los Angeles? Where do these figures belong; why can't they hold onto their belongings; and are they traveling home, going into exile, or embarking upon a perpetual migration? Finally, when the tumult of this unresolved diaspora quiets, we are left, on one stage, with the Maxwell family whistling by a campfire and toasting white marshmallows. On another stage, Moishe Pipik is removing his fat suit and make-up. On a third stage, Blaster frantically mimes as though he were peddling a bicycle. He wears a miked gas mask and is hyperventilating. Underneath the various stages the rest of the actors huddle, shivering. In the distance, a voice sings, slowly, hesitantly, a bit like a child awkwardly singing a lullaby to itself, "when the moon comes over the mountain." Snow falls on Blaster. Pipik leaves. The whistling stops. The lights fade to Blaster. In the dimming light, we hear his breathing, then a cough. Then silence.

In this silence before the applause, the rhyme and reason between *tight, right*, and *white* may have acquired a new meaning. What if *tight right white* no longer signifies only the solidarity of the just and white-skinned? What if it has come to stand for a "drunk, intoxicated ritual of emptiness and negation"? What if it means "ecstatic repetition of erasure"?

AFTER THE ORGY

Abdoh's work provoked, in addition to respect and admiration, a large measure of controversy and confusion. The confusion about his work seems to stem in large part from critics' uncertainty about, or outright hostility to, the sexuality and politics of his work. While many commentators mention Abdoh's status as an HIV+ gay man of color to explain the toxicity, the rage, and the fascination with death in his pieces, reference to his homosexuality often seems to take the form of an apologia, as though the intended audience of such an analysis were predominantly white and straight middle-class Americans who accept gay sexuality *only* as something distinct from heterosexuality. This tendency is most obvious in Charles Marowitz's review of Abdoh's 1991 production *Bogeyman*, where Marowitz writes, "This is a gay inferno, and Abdoh is glorying in the perversity as much as he is chronicling it. [...] Try as they may (and they barely try at all), the show's architects cannot shrug off the homoerotic exoticism that gives the evening a sense of special pleading" (100). Even as Marowitz acknowledges the apparent intention of the show's creators to move gay sexuality to the centre of attention, he immediately displaces the queer back to the margins by absolving his jury of review readers from thinking of Abdoh's work as anything but "special pleading."

In a more sympathetic reading of Abdoh's work, this time focusing on *The Law of Remains*, Abdoh's piece prior to *Tight Right White*, Marvin Carlson

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points out that:

> Abdoh, very widely read and highly thoughtful about his art, is well aware of the power of liberation and resistance culture and identity politics, and as an Oriental and gay, well positioned to utilize these. Nevertheless, even though the *Bogeyman* trilogy, with its no-holds-barred evocation of the dreams and nightmares of homosexuality in America, from tattooed naked chorus boys in a kick line to the grisly activities of Milwaukee serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, inevitably suggests a relationship with Abdoh's sexual and sociocultural positioning, it does not really use this as a grounding in the way that Finley and others have done. (122)

And yet, in *The Law of Remains*, God is represented as a Puerto Rican transvestite named Lola Beltran. So while the work is not explicitly confessional or autobiographical, it does seem to turn a queer identity position into a queering of the ontological grounds of reading itself. As Carlson's interpretation suggests, Abdoh's work occupies a difficult and important territory, deeply indebted to the identity politics and culture wars of the 1990s and equally indebted to post-structuralist skepticism about reductive usages of the terms of identity. So to acknowledge that Abdoh's theatre is deeply grounded in his "sexual and sociocultural positioning" is not to reduce it to a formulaic identity. As Abdoh himself noted, identity is never fixed (Wehle, "Reza" 60). In an interview with Howard Patlis, he has also said, "Well, I'm queer and I don't think of myself as marginalized" (30). Identity itself seems less anathema to Abdoh than an unexamined conception of identity trapped within stereotypical hierarchies. In apologizing for the sexual and racial extremism of Abdoh's work, as though it were not central to but in excess of the skill of the work itself, one runs the risk of once again separating "queer" sex from sex itself and "foreignness" from the notion of identity itself, as though excess and exoticism in sex and race were reserved for only a special class of identities.

In addition, there is a danger in reading Abdoh's work that one may reduce his concerns primarily to sexuality and race. In most of his works, but particularly in the final two works (*Tight Right White* and *Quotations from a Ruined City*), he also consistently draws attention to the socio-economic compacts and histories that have facilitated today's social inequities. Without denying the vital necessity of today's progressive movements around sex, gender, and race, it is worth keeping in mind Foucault's ironic acknowledgment – specifically in regard to modern prudishness about sex – that censorship also marks a "veritable discursive explosion" (17) of talking about sex. Is the taboo of sexuality easier to talk about than other taboos? Does the apparently "visible" mark of race make it an obvious way of forming constituencies for progressive action? After Freud, it is understandable to assume that psychic displacements are often about sexuality, that the "dangerous" latent, emotional material of sexuality is often hidden in less dangerous manifest forms. But

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what if American society often also displaces the confusing, amorphous, dislocated, hard-to-identify feelings associated with histories of legal economic exclusion onto more "obvious," representable signifiers like sexuality, gender, and race? White rural poor on a talk show discussing their love affairs may seem more savory than discussing a strip-mining operation or cogeneration plant or sewage treatment facility in their neighborhoods.

Ultimately, it is as important to see the interdependence of various liberation projects as to see the differences between them. And vice versa. One of Abdoh's virtues was his deep awareness of social complexity and his ability as an artist to make tangible the fact that "[s]ome exercise in complex seeing is needed" (Brecht 44). Writing about the production of multiculturalism in early 1990s Los Angeles, Lisa Lowe notes "how a society, 'structured in dominance' as Althusser would say, can mask the interlocking functions of racism, patriarchy, and capitalism not only by ideologically constructing multicultural inclusion but also by separating and dividing the objects of capitalist exploitation – as black youth, as Korean shopkeeper, as Chicana single mother" (92–93). *Tight Right White* belongs to the period of Rodney King's beating and to the "riots" that erupted in Los Angeles almost a year later in 1992. It is a work that restlessly struggles with how to identify and disidentify with identity politics; how to go beyond what Lowe criticizes as the often too-easy, hypocritically liberal promise made in America of multiculturalist inclusion and pluralism.

As a symbol of restless struggle, late in performances of *Tight Right White*, an odd moment occurred: since the actors in blackface or whiteface or other "face" had danced and shouted and generally worked hard throughout the show, sweat began to seep through their make-up, and it became difficult to read the hue of their stained faces and bodies. What was melanin, and what was make-up? There is no easy imaginary way to leap away from identity to a utopic position beyond identity, but with work, some progress towards complicating stereotypical identities is certainly possible.

This may seem like a limited political efficacy to offer for performance, but it is certainly more efficacious than what some of Abdoh's critics would have acknowledged. Marowitz called *Bogeyman* "a one-sided argument conducted by a whirling dervish whose spin is his rhetoric and who is too engrossed in condemning evil to work out a strategy to combat it" (101). In the conclusion to his review of *Tight Right White*, Michael Feingold wrote, "It's hard to imagine that unconstrained negative forces, once set loose, will provide any positive spiritual results. And if spiritual results are not the point, it's hard to see what all the negativity is for" (107). In Feingold's circular reasoning, negative forces must be for spiritual results, but are predestined never to achieve them. Both Marowitz and Feingold seem to share an assumption that political theatre needs to be prescriptive, rather than descriptive; that spiritual and political redemption should be revolutionary, rather than evolutionary. They seem to want to erase negation in order to achieve their affirmations.

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In a 1992 interview at Abdoh's home with Adam Soch, when asked generally what he thought about sexuality, Abdoh paused and said reluctantly, "It's such an expansive subject." But he then offered, "Redemption and absolution … they're pristine subjects … but redemption and absolution through sexuality fascinates me … excoriation of the body" (Abdoh, *Interviews*). Redemption for Abdoh is a burning away of the body, and yet his pieces never seem to establish a hierarchy where mind would ultimately come to replace the decayed body. Abdoh's notion of redemption remains toxic, a vaccine that destroys even as it saves. In Abdoh's words, "In America, there's a kind of obsession with material comfort and curing the ills rather than experiencing them and engaging a dialogue about them and really observing, exploring and trying to fight them. Take a pill, but the pill will make you ill" (Wehle, "Reza" 62).

Abdoh was neither "a dope – nor a hope – dealer" (Müller 137). He may not have been selling a simple utopia, but his "pastoral eleg[ies]" of death (Fuchs 99) are not simplistic dystopias either. He had a clear vision about the heterotopic nature of American society, and he translated that, with ambiguities and ambivalences understood, in the work of *Tight Right White*. If Abdoh's art came "after the orgy," to use Baudrillard's phrase, it, like much postmodernist art, may have had to simulate the orgy in order to make sense of it. Abdoh's search for absolution, however, also suggests that he believed that there are limits to skepticism. After the orgy, there is more to life than mere simulation. Abdoh's theatre succeeds in using formal complexity to look back at the complexity of the world. While Baudrillard laments, for the most part justly, that our contemporary society of the spectacle is a "bleached obscenity" (42), a "bleached atrocity" (43), Abdoh's search for redemption and absolution does not disguise for him the stains of sweat seeping through the pores of identity.

A performance is never over when the last word is spoken. Anyone who has participated in a production knows that choices have to be made about how to stage actors' final bows. This odd threshold moment – when audiences begin to transform from a diverse aggregate to a diverse diversity, from a common dream of separate imaginations to a separate reality of common memories; where actors stand precipitously on the edge of playing characters and playing themselves – this strange moment of transformation is itself frequently a comment on an entire show. When I saw the final New York performance of *Tight Right White*, I remember vividly the real, exhausted, grateful joy of the actors. If one looks across a range of videotapes of Abdoh's performances, one can also see that Abdoh's actors, after taking their initial bows, usually applauded the audience for their endurance as much as the audience did the actors. One might have anticipated, given the almost Grotowskian, physical, holy theatre qualities of *Tight Right White*, that no applause would have been allowed (see States 376 and passim). But could a 1993 performance in New York have sustained such a literal, unironic ritualness? Probably not. Moreover, the actors' applause points up the reductiveness of a position like Feingold's; there was

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more than unconstrained negativity at work in *Tight Right White*.

During the show's curtain call, I remember that I was faintly surprised by many of the actors' continued nudity, even as a part of me said, of course, this is necessary. No one donned a robe or buttoned up a costume for the curtain call. What struck me was the actors' almost pure unselfconsciousness about their bodies, an unselfconsciousness achieved by embracing the body. A slightly turned penis, a set of heavy breasts – these minimal irregularities from the norm became acceptable, pleasurable. Perhaps it was only a hallucination, a projection, a fantasy, but I felt compelled to imagine a "we." Together, "we" – the actors and the audience – seemed to share an acknowledgment that "something had taken its course," and we had both played our parts. In an interview with Josette Féral, Abdoh said, "I still believe that theater has that possibility to let people in, to make them feel part of something. […] I feel – and it's most fundamental above all – that theater is still a place where people can share ideas – and feel safe in a sense, or not feel safe, or feel insecure as the case might be" (21–22). At the end of *Tight Right White*, "we" seemed to share a faint feeling of common survival. This attenuated utopia of an imagined, inclusive "we" had something to do with feelings of solidarity and empathy over the common vulnerability of being human. But there may also have been an odd sense of grateful exclusion in this "we": a shocked, exhilarated joy on the audience's part that they would outlast that night's performance and, probably, outlast a body like Abdoh's.

NOTES

1 During the writing of this essay, sustaining the memory of Abdoh was on my mind, as was the memory of Edward Fordyce, who was an "*Architect – Father (1941–90)*" and, near the end of his life, an activist for People with AIDS. My thanks go to Matthew Buckley and Janine Holc for reading drafts of this essay, and to Daniel Mufson for his continued carrying forward of work on Abdoh.

2 See Rorty 14. For the terminology of "passing theories," Rorty is building on Donald Davidson's essay "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs."

3 Moishe Pipik, or Moses Bellybutton, is a stock comic character in Jewish traditions. See Mufson, "Reza" 112, where he quotes a passage about Pipik from Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*.

4 It can be objected, fairly, that voyeurism is a subject position only ever entered upon willingly, that an audience member may refuse to be interpellated into *Tight Right White* as a voyeur. That said, it is still worthwhile to think of these early sections in the work as playing with and against spectatorship as a kind of titillating voyeurism. Ultimately, *Tight Right White* asks its audiences to go beyond the voyeurism of the film *Mandingo* and of media culture in general. The work invites one to recognize spectatorship as witnessing, a spectatorship where each audience member is implicitly asked to bear the tale and tell it to others.

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5 Or then again, Scott's collar mike may be merely a pragmatic choice: He needs to move and dance more than Fitzpatrick. However, in this important opening scene where Abdoh establishes the characters, over-reading seems more useful than under-reading.

6 The answer would seem to lie in the novel. Like the film, Kyle Onstott's original 1957 novel *Mandingo* is coy about polymorphous sexuality, but unlike in the film, one might say that the novel is ironically so; the novel is "explicitly" coy. Here is a sample passage: "[The slave boy Meg] knelt in front of Hammond […] peeled off Hammond's socks, and, instead of drying the feet with his hands […] Meg leaned forward and wiped them on his kinky hair. Before he shoved the slipper upon the second foot, he embraced it and rubbed his cheek against the white flesh. […] [Meg:] 'Kin have a wife and a fighter, too, I reckon. Don't aim to sleep with no fightin' nigger?' 'Besides, I don' know no young white ladies,' objected Hammond" (105). Is Hammond objecting that there are no white ladies to sleep with, or "besides" that there are no mandingos to sleep with? Although the rowdiness of Onstott's novel is interesting, Abdoh's work has an ethical and aesthetic depth far beyond that of the novel or film.

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