

## The Face and the Possibility of an Ethics of Performance

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The following is the first stage of an investigation into the phenomenology of theatre and its relation to the question of what an ethics of performance might constitute.<sup>1</sup> This is not done to impose some kind of theoretical prescription on what performance should be and do, but is rather an examination of what it already does, and has done, and no doubt will continue to do, as a questioning reflection of interpersonal accountability within human society, between both individuals and groups. I wish to examine two theoretical perspectives that have some important consequences for this issue. In the process I will test these theories against two works of theater, Samuel Beckett's *Catastrophe* and Ntozake Shange's *Spell #7*. What compels me to use these two works beyond the easily discernible relevance of the philosophical concepts addressed here, is that each in their own way are *themselves* theories of the ethical relation in performance. That is, in each the presumed "content" of the plays determines—or is determined by—the formal self-consciousness of the context, the site itself, of performance.

This investigation emerges from two seemingly different impulses. One comes from my experience of teaching art students who work in intermedia forms—such as performance, installation, conceptual, and computer art—who are in general allergic to most critical theory, but who have found the work of Deleuze and Guattari, especially their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, to be highly suggestive, if not inspirational, for the creation of art works.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not they understand the overall context and sense of their theory, Deleuze and Guattari's imagery—rhizomes, nomads, war machines, bodies without organs, stratifications, smooth space, and the like—seem to connect intuitively with students's impulses in a time when humanity is radically reconceiving itself and its environment. But beyond its purely libidinal investments as an "aesthetics of existence" (Foucault), this process of continual fluid redefinition has a crucial bearing on what it means to have agency and *also* be held accountable for one's actions toward others, which is the fundamental ethical issue at the heart of all political relations to justice, if politics is not simply to be conceived of as a continual state of war of all against all.

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The second impulse comes from a different quarter: a long-standing interest in deconstruction, both in terms of what I see as a powerful theory of not only language but cognition, which people often decry or attempt to ignore, but seldom really argue with, and as a problematic philosophy when it comes to questions of politics, ethics or justice. Research I've done in regard to questions of ethical choices vis à vis deconstruction has tended to point past Derrida to one of his mentors, the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas. In contrast to Deleuze and Guattari, who construct a decidedly antihumanist, and even what is called "post-human," doctrine, Lévinas appears relatively humanist in his approach. But if we are to speak coherently about a "politics of performance" that makes sense, we have to examine both sides of this theoretical divide and relate them to the question of human interaction, in which performance operates at every point of contact. My performance here focuses on the human face as the point of theoretical contact between Lévinas and Deleuze and Guattari. While my desire to raise questions about an ethics of performance is largely indebted to Lévinas's conception of the face-to-face encounter, Deleuze and Guattari's own concept of what the face is and does represents the most extreme counter-position to it, reflecting the presumably political maneuvers of identity-evaders in a flight from subjectivity and its production by signifying systems.

We can indicate the position of Deleuze and Guattari regarding the face if we think of what their writings are reacting to overall. The major figure of opposition is Hegel, and the conventional vision of his synthesizing and totalizing dialectic.<sup>3</sup> Deleuze and Guattari's opposition to dialectics in general lead them to oppose what they see as the "biunivocal" totalizing aspects of signification as it developed out of Saussure. Following Foucault, they are opposed to the "subject" production of discursive institutions, what they call "subjectivation." What they wish to affirm is any evasion of these mechanisms through processes of becoming which make no distinctions between the subject/verb or subject/object relations that are built into the "overcodings" of despotic signifying systems. They oppose Freud because of the despotic Oedipal relation, and Lacan because he has done the most to connect the concept of the subject to the signifier, and so to a system of signifying desire based on lack, which leads the subject along the continually frustrating chain of signification. Their writings are a reaction to systems which redundantly reflect or repeat extant significations through the process of interpretation. Instead they posit an idea of *experimentation* instead of interpretation—no repetition, no representation, no signification, but always a becoming something else. For them signification and subjectivation are two

strategies of social and state power over bodies continually trying to evade definition.

In their chapter “Year Zero: Faciality,” from *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari indicate how the

face is produced only when the head ceases to be a part of the body, when it ceases to be coded by the body, when it ceases to have a multidimensional, polyvocal corporeal code—when the body, head included, has been decoded and has to be overcoded by something we shall call the Face. (170)

In this process the head becomes “facialized” by what they read as the abstract machine producing faciality—the “screen with holes, the white wall/black hole.” They indicate that the body will also become facialized. What’s more, they indicate that the face has been projected onto the external environment, like architecture and landscapes (one can extrapolate this even further into the traditional theater or film situation). In a move that carries a tinge of Rousseauist exoticism, they also wish to distinguish Western power, which requires the production of a face, from primitive societies which do not. “In primitive societies we see that there is very little that operates through the face: their semiotic is nonsignifying, nonsubjective, essentially collective, polyvocal and corporeal,” operating essentially through their bodies (175). “Primitives,” they say, “may have the most human of heads, the most beautiful and most spiritual, but they have no face and need none” (176). The face is not a universal, but instead is that of the White Man, and what’s more, it’s the face of Christ, who “invented the facialization of the entire body and spread it everywhere” (177). In the process, people of other races are “inscribed on the wall, distributed by the hole” of the faciality machine, “they must be Christianized, in other words, facialized.” White racism, for Deleuze and Guattari, has never operated by exclusion, for “from the viewpoint of racism, there is no exterior, there are no people on the outside” (178). The mask adumbrates the importance of the distinctions they are making:

Either the mask assures the head’s belonging to the body, its becoming-animal, as was the case in primitive societies. Or, as is the case now, the mask assures the erection, the construction of the face, the facialization of the head and the body. (181)

Deleuze and Guattari's agenda is to try to "destroy" and "dismantle" the face, placing it "on the road to the asignifying and asubjective" (171). But they admit this process is "no mean affair. Madness is a definite danger" (188). They admit the impossibility of "making ourselves a new primitive head and body, human, spiritual, and faceless," but that we have to work within and against the significations of the face: "Only across the wall of the signifier can you run lines of asignifiante that void all memory, all return, all possible signification and interpretation" (189). They end the chapter with a new possibility beyond the face, which they call "probe-heads," without specifying exactly what this is. But it conjures up impersonal worlds of electronic circuitry conjoined by an unmistakably phallogocentric, if not phallogocentric, image (191).

In direct contrast to this position we have that of Emmanuel Lévinas elucidated in his books *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*.<sup>4</sup> Lévinas is also operating against totalizing systems like Hegel's, but specifically against Heidegger's philosophy and the idea of an all-pervasive Totality as he sees it expressed in the concepts of Being and ontology. Instead Lévinas posits ethics as prior to Being, and that ethics is founded on what he calls the face-to-face relation, a relation of exteriority. In this relation the face of the Other compels one through its signifying of infinite need, and through this Other there is access to the idea of God. The face of the Other facing me compels my ongoing responsibility for the Other. Inasmuch as the face is an aspect of infinity and not totality, I cannot assume reciprocity in responsibility from the Other, I cannot expect anything in return. The relation is an entirely asymmetrical one. As such the face resists both objectification and totalization, even while the face is the condition of possibility for all signification through its "signifyingness." This signifyingness is similar to what Heidegger and Derrida call the Call, what Lacan calls the Demand and "true speech," and what Lévinas will go on to call the Saying as opposed to the Said. That is—in each of these terms one is not to find a particular signification, but rather a call to attention, a call to responsibility: a setting up of the conditions whereby communication is possible between two beings. This for Lévinas is the essence of the ethical relation, prior to any signification that can follow from it. What is important to Lévinas, in the infinite signifyingness of the face, is that "it never appears as a theme," but always only as the call to responsibility. He will also refer this to the distinction between the Prophetic as the call to responsibility and the Philosophic, which is the thematization of the Other, turning her into an It rather than encountering her as a Thou (to use Martin Buber's terms). The Prophetic pertains to the Saying, the Philosophic always to the Said. But always for Lévinas "The Other is neither initially nor ultimately what we grasp or what we

thematize” (*TI*,172) For some there is something frightfully absolute in Lévinas’s ethical stance of being for the Other, even as he generally refers to the Other as the poor, the orphaned, the widowed, and so on. What if the Other is in a position of power? Lévinas counters this by saying that responsibility as something initially “for the Other . . . means that I am responsible for his very responsibility” (96). This is not so far from the positions of nonviolence posited by Gandhi and King in which the Other has to be convinced about what responsibility for *their* Other is, if one is to stop the endless cycle of violence. Lévinas develops the face-to-face ethical relation further by speaking of the “third party” which “looks at me in the eyes of the Other,” so there are never simply two figures here. “The thou is posited in front of a we. The presence of the face, the infinity of the Other, is a destituteness, a presence of a third party (that is, of the whole of humanity which looks at us), and a command that commands commanding” (213). This third party moves the ethical relation into the political realm and constitutes the basis for justice. This relation to the third party indicates how one takes responsibility for the Other’s responsibility as well.

So we see the kind of direct opposition in political and ethical terms as pertaining to Lévinas and Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the face (although Deleuze and Guattari would never speak of ethics, only politics). Deleuze and Guattari refer to a State production of the face, turning it into a political signification, while John Llewelyn, in explicating Lévinas, claims: “The political renders the ethical invisible. The State effaces the face.”<sup>5</sup> (We will see how the latter is borne out in examining Beckett’s play.) While one can spend a great deal of time just trying to argue philosophically between these two positions, the point here is to see what all this has to do with performance.

Why an “ethics” of performance? Given that theories of the politics of performance have for so long thrived on notions of transgression, subversion, undermining of norms, shock value, and so forth, doesn’t referring to a possible ethics immediately conjure up visions of repression, of orderliness, of codes, of limiting the freedom of the creative performative act? Yet one has to ask, in the service of *what* has transgression, subversion, undermining of norms operated? Hasn’t it been in relation to questions of injustice, of racism, sexism, homophobia? Hasn’t its goal in the long run been that of indicating the need for justice for those refused it either by majorities or minorities with power? Hasn’t the communication of this sentiment, this situation, even while it may seek to thrive as a politics of difference, always been directed at those whose ethics can be appealed to, an appeal to include everyone consistently within their ethical universe? While people

have spoken so adamantly about politics in terms that are more redolent of warfare pure and simple, presumably they do so in order to more forcefully convince others of the justice and ethical significance of their position, or at least of their questions. But they can't really do this *solely* on the level of politics, if by politics is meant the pursuit of power for its own sake. Max Weber refers to politics as a system by which people attempt to share power.<sup>6</sup> This is done through various means, but most specifically through forms of rhetorical persuasion (which don't preclude certain kinds of coercion) and promises. Politics is an instrumental means, hopefully a means toward creating a situation conducive to ethical relations, which are to be read as its end as well as its motivation—such as the ethics of freedom and equality. Ethics has to have priority in relation to politics, in both a temporal and evaluative sense, in order for those politics—as a means—to have meaning at all; in other words, ethics must exert its authority over politics as a means as well. Even the most cynical of politicians have to speak in the language of ethics, demonstrating that hypocrisy indeed is the homage vice pays to virtue. So in a sense “political” appeals made by artists in their work have always been at base ethical appeals. By designating them *merely* as “political” one establishes a polarized battleground, possibly alienating those who might be willing to contemplate a social problematic from an ethical standpoint.<sup>7</sup> This isn't to say that creating performance to produce polarization doesn't have its own attractions, but they are in the longest run self-serving and self-defeating.

Lévinas continually states the importance of the maintenance of separation between self and Other as essential for maintaining the ethical relation; in particular he marks the separation that prevents one from seeking reciprocity with the Other, which could at some point could easily dissolve into an illusion of the complete identification between the two parties. This separation, and this priority of being for the Other prevents action from becoming solipsistic, if not narcissistic. Ethics is always for the Other, politics as it has come to be understood doesn't need to be; this is why one can witness self-indulgent performances that at the same time call themselves “political” and seem to get away with it, largely because of a misconstrual of the original sense of what “the personal is the political” meant for feminism, for instance. Can one engage in performance that self-consciously considers itself an exploration of the ethics of performance, of consciously being for the other, and get away with posturing in this sense?

Lévinas's propositions about being for the Other in a sense of infinite responsibility indicates that being responsible for the Other's responsibility must not devolve into mere self-serving attitudinalizing. I think at times of the sins that have been committed in Artaud's name, that is, all the self-indulgent fierceness and

shock-value in-your-face political and erotic righteousness projected by self-satisfied scandalous performers. I think of Artaud because I think of his notion that a theatre of cruelty must be “cruel to myself first of all.” The performer is there not to “teach” the audience a lesson, but to explore her own limits, to lay bare her own face before the others and before herself. If that experience was strong and clear enough, the more perspicuous members of the audience will understand and be provoked, disturbed, moved, challenged by it. But does the performer in all this give up the face-to-face relation, the responsibility to the Other as audience? Isn’t the performer’s responsibility in *evoking* that responsibility in the audience for herself as paradigmatic Other?

Consider the end of Samuel Beckett’s play *Catastrophe*, written for Vaclav Havel.<sup>8</sup> The central figure is referred to as the Protagonist, standing midstage on a black block 18 inches high. He wears a “black wide-brimmed hat. Black dressing gown to ankles. Barefoot. Head bowed. Hands in pockets. Age and physique unimportant” (297). Throughout the play the Assistant follows the instructions of the Director in creating the most abject figure out of the Protagonist. She takes off P’s hat, so D can see his skull, which “needs whitening.” She asks if they should add a little gag, to make sure he won’t speak. The Director indicates he won’t make a squeak. From the house the Director complains that he can’t see the toes of the bare feet, so the Assistant needs to raise the pedestal. The Director is upset that there is a “trace of face,” so she should lower the head, even as the Director insists that the scene could do with more nudity (299). The Director then asks for a spotlight on the head, while the Assistant timidly asks if they could raise his head and show his face, just for an instant. The Director is dumbfounded and angry at this suggestion. He is satisfied with the spot on the lowered head. D asks for the lights to come up, then the general light to fade out and then the light on body to fade out, leaving the light on head alone (300). D: “Terrific! He’ll have them on their feet. I can hear it from here.” Then there is heard a “distant storm of applause. P raises his head, fixes the audience. The applause falters, dies. Long pause. Fade-out of light on face” (301).

Emmanuel Lévinas: “The face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp” (*TI*, 197). He also states, a couple of pages later, that “Infinity presents itself as a face in the ethical resistance that paralyses my powers and from the depths of defenceless eyes rises firm and absolute in its nudity and destitution.” (*TI* 199-200). It is interesting that the Director calls for more nudity—meaning here the body, rather than the face—perhaps as a sign of the abjection and

objectification of the Protagonist. The applause indicates a complicity on the part of the audience and the Director—but it is silenced once the aural double of the actual audience is confronted by the face of the Other. It is significant that for Lévinas, while the Other for whom one is placed in a position of infinite responsibility may be designated as the orphan, the widow, the homeless one, she is also perceived as being above oneself, signifying from a height this infinite responsibility that for Lévinas witnesses to the idea of God. God for Lévinas is the opposite of what God is for Hegel, or Being for Heidegger, not total, or totalizing, but infinite, infinitely out of reach, but also infinitely demanding our responsibility for the Other. The height is seen clearly in *Catastrophe* in the pedestal which raises the Protagonist to the line of sight of people in the front row of the stalls. While the Director conceives that Abjection raised to a height where all can see is enough to bring the audience to its feet, as if in triumph over the Other, all that is needed is for the Protagonist to raise his face and fix the audience with his glance to compel them to recognize their responsibility, convict them of their culpability.<sup>9</sup> Lévinas points out that there is “an essential poverty in the face; the proof of this is that one tries to mask this poverty by putting on poses, by taking on a countenance. The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence.” At the same time “the face is what forbids us to kill” (*TI*, 85-86). John Llewelyn comments on this: “The lesson taught by the indiscrete face of the Other is ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ where killing is to be understood in its widest sense as the ethically impossible suppression of the Other’s alterity, the reduction of the Other to the same” (Llewelyn 97). The indiscrete face refutes sameness, the sameness that is indicated by the desire to hide the face, to whiten the cranium in order to connect it more firmly to the body, removing its distinctive expression.<sup>10</sup>

While *Catastrophe* starkly projects Lévinas’s ethic of the face-to-face encounter and its effects, can we ask whether performance in general can be interpreted according to this schema? What is the face to face in performance? Clearly, the vast majority of performance historically and cross-culturally has presented itself to the audience in an attitude of facing, a presentational attitude; one can see this in Asian performance and most Western performance up until the age of naturalist theater. Does this imply that the non-facing of naturalist fourth-wall acting is somehow unethical? Or is this non-facing symptomatic of a modern milieu in which the face to face is less possible than before? One reason why Brecht may be important for modern theater is the way in which the display of the theatrical apparatus—its face—is ethically entwined with the demystification of social roles enforced by the dominant culture. One of the most important insights from Lévinas may be that the face-to-face relation in the performance situation



does develop itself non-reciprocally. The performers may be there for the Other (the audience) and the spectators may be there for the Other (the performers), but what is given and received is never fully unified in reciprocation, no matter if this is the desire of the audience or of the performers. Gertrude Stein complained about this non-reciprocity in temporal terms by referring to the fact that the actors were always ahead of the audience as “syncopation.” In its place she would try to establish a “continuous present,” in which all participate at the same rate and within the same cognitive space; in this way she understood the play as a “landscape.”<sup>11</sup> What is necessary for this continuous present to take place, however, is an ideal eradication of an audience’s desire for meaning and their anticipation of events based on signs in the present. What Stein’s problem clarifies is the degree to which a desire for unity is the driving force of performance itself whether in a teleological sense, or in her own non-teleological conceptualization. It is her desire to try to establish this unity within experience at every moment, in contrast to the pleasures others derive from the unity deferred until the proper climactic moment, when all falls together, on stage and in the spectator’s mind. In either case, the desire for this unity of experience only compels the audience or performer to give more to the Other if they are to remain attended to or identified with.

What about the audience’s relation to the Other as performer/performance? Is the face involved here literally the face of the performer, or is it indicated in the very architectural relation? That is, isn’t the proscenium a face, an interface, isn’t the stage the face of the Other compelling our attention? Aren’t the actors the very expression of that face as a whole? (Here one can start asking about the shapes of performance spaces, and whether they allow the facings I can speak of here with the proscenium: the thrust stage, the theater in the round and other configurations, some that confront the audience with itself.) Furthermore, couldn’t the nakedness of this face be the “empty space” Peter Brook speaks of? Couldn’t it be the impoverished space that Grotowski spoke of? One need only recall the set of *Endgame* as the interior of a skull to understand this problem, or Ibsen’s sets—the revealed/concealed back rooms in *Hedda Gabler* and *The Wild Duck*. Even the gaping maw of the empty set strewn with garbage of Beckett’s *Breath*.

Just as playwrights like Chekhov, Pinter or Beckett can reveal to us through the judicious use of obsessive chatter the immense hollowness and emptiness that lies beneath our lives, the shattering silence we continually try to avoid, so the appropriate use of the face, with all its expressive possibilities, its masks, can reveal to us an intense vulnerable nudity of the face behind such displays, a nudity that compels us to recognize an unformalizable and

fundamentally problematic aspect of human life. This condition is the condition of the Call, the Demand, the True Speech, the Saying and not the Said. It is the signifyingness of the face compelling us and not its significations. It is the fundamental ethical relation which eludes Lévinas's notion of thematization. In this sense it is congruent with Wittgenstein's reflection on his *Tractatus* as a book about ethics, but such a book only insofar as it cannot speak in any direct way about it, rather operating apophatically by exhausting all the possibilities that can speak directly about the referential functionings of language.

Now consider a work that foregrounds the theatrical site itself as "face." Ntozake Shange's two acts in her play *Spell #7* are introduced and framed by a gigantic blackface mask hanging from the ceiling, raised at the beginning and lowered at the end of each act.<sup>12</sup> The audience enters with it in its lowered position. As she puts it in her first stage instructions: "In a way the show has already begun, for the members of the audience must integrate this grotesque, larger-than-life misrepresentation of life into their preshow chatter. slowly the house lights fade, but the mask looms even larger in the darkness." She goes on: "*once the mask is all that can be seen, LOU, the magician enters,*" whereupon he tells the story of his father, a magician, who was asked by Lou's childhood friend to make him white (608). Lou's father reprimands him and instead claims that "you'll be colored and love it." At this point the actors in the cast, all wearing black-face masks like the gigantic hanging one, go through a series of dances and other performance routines developed throughout African American history, until,

*LOU walks through the black-faced figures in their kneeling poses, arms outstretched as if they were going to sing 'mammy.' He speaks now [as a companion to the mask] to the same audience who fell so easily into his hands and who were so aroused by the way the black-faced figures 'sang n danced.'*

He calls one of the figures forward to speak: "*the black-faced ALEC gives his minstrel mask to LOU when he hears his name. ALEC rises, the rest of the company is intimidated by this figure daring to talk without the protection of black-face. they move away from him or move in place as if in mourning*" (609).

Alec recounts his coming of age in St. Louis, and of everything that city contributed to African-American culture. He is then confronted by an angry white mob. He says, "do not be seen in yr hometown/after sunset/we suck up our shadows." This statement moves the others to remove their masks, leaving them

*“with their true faces bared to the audience.”* One of the figures, Dahlia, removes her “hideous overalls & picaninny-buckwheat wig, to reveal a finely laced unitard/the body of a modern dancer” which allows her to dance a *“lyrical but pained solo.”* Once she’s finished, with Alec following her off stage, Lou speaks to the audience: “why dontchu go on & live my life for me/ i didnt want certain moments at all/i’d give them to anybody.” At this point Lou “waves his hand commanding the minstrel mask to disappear, which it does” (610).

Thus begins the scene in Eli’s bar, the haven for the black actors who relate how they are compelled by white agencies to play only roles that are racially stereotyped, and in bitter contrast, to relate fantasies about other characters, other black women: one who lives the high life, one who spends all her time brushing her long hair, and one, narrated by Natalie, who gives birth to a child named “myself,” only to kill it when it has learned to crawl away from her. Alec responds: “& she forgot abt the child bein born/&waz heavy & full all her life/with ‘myself,’” to which Natalie replies: “who’ll be out/any day now.” Lou comments on these ambiguous phrases that while relating to the pain of real birth, indicate a subtext of never being able to truly give birth to yourself in a world where that self is always immediately stolen from you: “aint that a goddamn shame/ aint that a way to come into the world sometimes I really cant write sometimes I cant even talk” (616). This speech signals the end of Act One with the descent of the Minstrel Mask, which remains lit throughout intermission.

Act Two begins with Lou commanding the Mask to disappear once more. This act is accompanied by various kinds of music arising from African forms, framing a cosmopolitan depiction of black people in international settings, outside the areas restricted by white American culture. Manifested there are the styles and moves of romance between black men and women. But then the theatrical spell is broken through the tensions that force the boundaries between acting and living to collapse. Dahlia says to Lou: “it’s just I don’t know you/except as the character i’m sposed to love/& well I know rehearsal is over/but i’m still in love with you” (619-620). Arguments between other couples break out once the frustrations about acting jobs return to the fore. In a historical overview, Alec expresses the rage of his desire to see whites apologize for the past treatment of African-Americans (620). Natalie puts on the persona of a white woman to act out what her possible relation to women of color might be, indicting an oblivious white feminism along the way, then working up into a sardonic rage over Emmett Till’s lynching on a charge of raping a white woman (621-622). Maxine works through a memory of safety from polio and other diseases because black girls were never used as poster-children for these diseases. Social exclusion seemed to feed a conclusion that only

whites were sick or mean: “I found out that the colored folks knew abt the same vicious & disease-ridden passions that the white folks knew” (622-623).

The entire play ends with a speech by Lou:

crackers are born with the right to be  
 alive/i'm making ours up right here  
 in yr face/and we gonna be  
 colored & love it.

*(the huge minstrel mask comes down as company continues to sing 'colored & love it/love it being colored.' blackout/but the minstrel mask remains visible, the company is singing 'colored & love it being colored' as audience exits). (623)*

Now while there's much that can be said about what's going in this play, given the two theories I've discussed, I'm mainly interested in the business of the Mask/Face as Shange represents it. Think about the sequence of actions that precede and follow the raising and lowering of the Mask. The Mask is there from the beginning, providing a safety zone for the spectator and actor. It frames the smaller proscenium—the blackface masks that each performer wears. While Alec must tell his personal story only after bravely removing his mask, the ever-present threat of white mobs indicate that the mask in itself won't protect anyone, so the others remove theirs. Dropping the paradoxically imposed mask of defense frees the creative spirit, so that Dahlia can be in her body fully and dance past the rigid boundaries of how dance is defined in terms of black and white. Once Lou himself can cast aside his own protective attitude and say “go on and live my life for me,” the Mask, the barrier between spectator and actor, disappears. It is only when Lou the poet as well as magician can no longer *speak*, after the forlorn story of “myself,” who is always but never being born, does the mask descend again; the assumption of an imposed role seems better than the raw and naked state of none at all. Yet in Lévinas's terms, it is precisely when one is at a loss for words that the face's true call to responsibility occurs. In Act Two the Mask disappears to reveal the real variety and richness of black cultural life. But even this apparently more authentic realm of social fantasy breaks down. What returns are all the moral ambiguities of lived black experience, painful self-truths. The Mask descends for the last time as Lou exclaims “i'm making up [our right to be] right here in yr face/and we gonna be colored and love it.” There is a lingering ambiguity even here: by “yr face,” does he mean the face of the spectator or the hanging Mask?

Or are the two to be identified with each other? The Mask is in fact that of the spectator: the projection returns to the projector.

The blackface Mask serves as the face of the proscenium, raised and lowered as curtain, always operating as a frame through which and against which we see the faces of the actors, even as they approach us with naked faces and confidences, their reactions to having constantly “play the black” while ever confronted with the coercive ideal of a white image. Isn’t it here that we can point to Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of faciality as subjection? While this minstrel mask/face certainly isn’t the White Man’s face, it is a caricatural overcoding of how the White Man wishes to see Black People. As a face—rather, as a mask whose purpose is to overcode the face—it isn’t designed to assimilate the black to the white man’s facial regime. Its significations point not in a human direction, but for the white, in an inhuman direction (which, ironically enough, is the appropriate direction for the “primitive” mask for Deleuze & Guattari). As a mask it certainly connects the head to the body. The fact that the actors do a dance history while wearing them indicates to what degree this happens, and why Shange indulges in sarcasm in referring to how the audience was aroused by the way the actors “sang n danced.” For Deleuze and Guattari isn’t this exemplary of the body being facialized by the mask as well?

Eric Lott has remarked that “the blackface image . . . constituted black people as the focus of the white political Imaginary.”<sup>13</sup> As such, the image operated as a property-form of white male privilege that allowed for, at once, indulgence in, and perhaps identification with, a fantasy image of black sexuality, and a containment of its threat to a “superior” white self-identity. For the white spectator, the mask made allowances for the obvious presence of blacks within American life, while withholding the possibility of their full human participation in it. Ralph Ellison addresses this function of concealment in plain sight: “[I]ts function was to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audiences’s awareness of its moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask.”<sup>14</sup> These ambiguities, identification with which strikes a moral chord within us, can only make an identificatory claim upon us once the mask is removed, the mask we put there in the first place: in other words, our own projections, our cast-off senses of self, our own inhumanities.

While what is of paramount importance in the play is the contrast between the mask as cultural overcoding that prevents the face-to-face relation and the stripping away of masks, as is indicated by the dramatic move of Alec to speak without one, Shange never permanently removes the mask. It is there as a constant

framework for perceiving the double bind African-Americans are in respecting self-representation within White America, and which, to my mind, negates the strategies by which Deleuze and Guattari think representation can be evaded. At the end Lou claims that he is “making up [our right to be alive] right here in yr face/ and we gonna be colored and love it.” The play ends with the lowered and illuminated minstrel mask while in the darkness the cast continues to sing “colored and love it.” The question becomes: do you love the mask? or can you love being colored beyond the framework of this mask? We had seen actors producing the nakedness of their own faces, in contrast to the wearing of the mask, which they began with. As Lévinas points out, it is the nakedness of the face that provokes responsibility in us. Yet the play shows that the nakedness is not a given—that the social construction, the particular group representation of the face as mask is always there to create the contrastive nudity which appears not immediately accessible to culturally conditioned Others. Aren’t we seeing how racial features disrupt the universal face-to-face relation? But do they? And through what agency? For Lévinas it is the *presignifying* “signifyingness” of the human face that calls to us, not its already socially overcoded significations. In other words, there has to be *something* in the human face that calls to us, whatever our racial demarcations, through those overcoded significations in order for Shange’s play to make any sense in its attempted disruption of those codes. But as the reactions of the other actors to Alec also indicates, the mask can be a form of protection as well as a despotic overcoding. Ellison notes this ambiguity of the mask as well: “We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense, when we are projecting the future and preserving the past. In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals” (109).

In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms do we witness at all the destruction or dismantling of the face? They themselves had indicated that the risk is madness, and that instead one should “find your black holes and white walls, know them, know your faces; it is only way you will be able to dismantle them and draw your lines of flight” (188). The actors are here locked into a paradoxical relation to history—the desire to both remember the forms of oppression that created the situation of identity in the present as well as the desire to evade the cultural constructions that the history of white hegemony had imposed on them. Can they with confidence, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, simply run [across the wall of the signifier] lines of asignifiante that void all memory, all return, all possible signification and interpretation” (189) without voiding their own humanity at the same time? (Although, admittedly, questions of humanity for Deleuze and Guattari hardly seem a concern.)

In the working out of their theories Deleuze and Guattari have little to say about the performative situation, even while two of their emblematic figures are men of the theater—Kleist and Artaud. Kleist's play *Penthesilea* is read for its content ("becoming-woman," "becoming-animal") like any work of prose fiction, and Artaud is read almost entirely in relation to his biography, with little if any attention at all paid to his theater works. Perhaps this evasion or ignoring of performance has to do with the degree to which the performance situation cannot escape the problems of representation and mimesis (something Artaud was certainly concerned about) that they are so reactive against. Lévinas at certain points does indicate the theatrical nature of the face-to-face situation; but we have to ask him what the nudity of the face means in a theatrical framework. Clearly there must be a certain will to confront the face as face, without regard for the particularities of its features; Lévinas claims that if you know the color of the Other's eyes you are no longer in a social relation to them, but regarding them thematically, not as a Thou but an It. Clearly this is applicable to interracial relations. Lévinas challenges us to confront the face's signifyingness, the conditions of possibility for significations of a new sort. Even if it remains overcoded by the old signification, it is the Saying, not the Said, the Call to us and not what the Demand is in its particulars, but the Demand itself, that constitutes the ethical relation vis à vis the African-American face, as it does with any face. But how possible is it to confront the Other in the theater as a Thou, as a naked face, as a real appeal to responsibility? Doesn't the theatre automatically thematize the Other? Isn't the impulse of any audience to create projections, to give a mask to a performer when they seem not to have one? Isn't it safer that way? And can the performer ever appear in the theatrical situation without a mask of some sort? Is the face of the Protagonist in Beckett's *Catastrophe* truly naked, or did it only seem so, given its fleeting contrastive reaction to the audience's habituation to the bowed head? Lévinas himself admits the problem when he states in *Otherwise than Being* that "the enigma of the naked face runs the risk of being ridiculed as but one more case of the emperor's clothes" (*OB*, 152). Within the theatrical context, one might want to ask Lévinas if the naked face continues to call to us through the protective barrier of the mask. Can the mask indeed be a possible, even if paradoxical, means of amplifying that call? While earlier I mentioned that the great majority of world theater involves various kinds of face-to-face relation with the audience, I failed to note that most of it also includes masking in one form or another. Significantly, a volume of Pirandello's plays is called *Naked Masks*, demonstrating in an apparent contradiction the very vulnerability enforced in us by the contingent and illusory nature of social roles. It is the imposed, always already masked condition of

African-American identity that Shange points to as both the defense mechanism and the *source* of vulnerability in the first place, which is why the naked face never seems to escape the framework of its mask.

Take it one step further in an intrapsychic sense, we might ask whether or not Lévinas's positing of self and Other presupposes a unity of self on each side of the ethical divide, something that would be contested by Lacanian analysis. But Lévinas emphasizes that the self itself is not undivided: "The oneself has to be conceived outside of all substantial coinciding of self with self" (*OB*, 114). At the same time he doesn't wish to indicate that this presents an insurmountable and tragic gap within the self, which would preclude it from responding to the call of the Other: "The psyche is the other in the same without alienating the same" (*OB*, 114). In other words, the intrapsychic cognitive gap, the psychic proscenium, which produces consciousness of self in the first place, can be enabling. At the same time, given the relation of unconscious desire to a conscious self-development that is a constituent part of a social ethos, one could ask whether or not masks function even here. Ralph Ellison indicates that they do, as he quotes W. B. Yeats to this effect:

There is a relation between discipline and the theatrical sense. If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are and assume the second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves, though we may accept one from others. Active virtue, as distinct from the passive acceptance of a current code, is the wearing of a mask. It is the condition of an arduous full life.  
(107)

The crux of the matter is in being able to distinguish between self-discipline and one that is imposed, active virtue from the passive acceptance of a current code. While skeptical to a degree of the ability to locate the naked face beneath the mask in performance, since our relations to ourselves also involves the wearing of masks, I remain interested in what the possibility of examining what an ethical relation to the Other can mean in performance, knowing that the Other can mean racial other, sexual other, gender other, and performative other, even as it always points most directly to the Other within, something with more exteriority to it than we may realize.



## Notes

1. A version of this article was first presented at the Second Annual Performance Studies Conference at Northwestern University, March 1996.
2. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987).
3. For a critique of this view of Hegel, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989); and Jon Stewart, ed., *The Hegel Myths and Legends* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1996).
4. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969); and *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).
5. John Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Lévinas: The Genealogy of Ethics* (London, New York: Routledge, 1995) 67.
6. See "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford UP, 1958).
7. Consider that in university courses where students are taught to deconstruct texts in order to reveal the rationalizations of power that continually disguise themselves as aesthetic values, this process is honorifically referred to as "politicizing" the text. Then consider that at the presumed center of the real world or politics—the United States Congress—to "politicize" an issue is always read invidiously. To politicize there means to use a serious issue to grandstand, to play to one's constituents for purposes of personal power, ignoring the exigencies of the issue itself. In other words, in the most intensively political site the greatest value is placed, in word if not in deed, on ethical actions that transcend political positions, in order to garner bipartisan support. Clearly here too, for very good reasons, there is something like a "hermeneutics of suspicion" at work; at its most extreme it is called "gridlock." But it is over difficult questions that are basically ethical in nature that people change political parties or decide to run as independents. This is not to imply by any means that the academic politicizing of texts should be curtailed—since it also presupposes an ethical purpose—but only that its rationale be placed in a larger perspective.
8. Samuel Beckett, *Catastrophe*, in *The Collected Short Plays of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove, 1984).
9. Ironically, we must ask what happens once the play is over: what will the audience do but applaud? But this act can only resonate within the immediate memory of an applause defeated or shamed by the face of the Protagonist. I'd like to thank Tony Kubiak for this suggestion.
10. We can recognize that the desubjectification and deindividualization that takes place both in prison camps and military camps initiates the process by removing the clothes and hair of the subjects, turning them all into uniform bodies as much as possible. While there is a similarity in monastic life, its voluntaristic nature compels a different reading.
11. Gertrude Stein, "Plays," in *Writings and Lectures 1909-1945*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz (Baltimore: Penguin, 1974).
12. Ntozake Shange, *Spell #7*, in *Modern and Contemporary Drama*, ed. Miriam Gilbert, Carl H. Klaus, and Bradford S. Field, Jr. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).
13. Eric Lott, "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy," *Representations* 39 (Summer 1992) 35.
14. Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," from *Shadow and Act*, included in the *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: The Modern Library, 1995).

