Introduction
Postcolonial Embodiments in Contemporary Performance

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The aim of this issue of *Textus* is to acknowledge and celebrate the significance of theatre in contemporary research on postcolonial cultural practices. The articles included here span from the Seventies to the present day, from the Caribbean to Britain, Australia and New Zealand, and aim to elaborate a specific set of critical tools, many of them indebted to the methodology of Cultural Studies, to analyse the theatrical 'event', one that must take into consideration as constitutive features of theatrical productions such factors as: a multiple and disseminated concept of authorship; the multimodality of meaning-making; and the collective experience of live audiences. As a consequence, these contributions bear witness not only to the variety and multiplicity of postcolonial theatrical practices, but also to recent scholarship on the performing arts, with its progressive emancipation from exclusively 'literary' (or textual) approaches.

Theatre has indeed proven a fertile ground for the exploration of gendered and racialized identities, as well as class conflict. With their emphasis on the performing body as cultural signifier, theatrical practices have both exploited and undermined received notions of identity and alterity, together with what has been in different times and places defined as 'exotic'. In postcolonial contexts, both rewriting of established theatre and original productions have marked crucial moments of cultural and political action, often resulting in experimental staging and a diversified elaboration of

* The paragraph titled "Embodying the postcolonial: drama, theatre, exhibition" is by Tiziana Morosetti, while "Written scripts and theatrical practices: writing on/about theatre" is by Serena Guarracino.

the theatrical space. The history of theatre – in English as well as in the local languages of previously colonial contexts – is also rich in examples where it has played a central role in anti-colonial struggles. On the Indian subcontinent, for instance, the Shakespeare canon as colonial legacy has often worked as a site of resistance, while contemporary Indian theatre has remained on the sidelines of critical enquiry (see for example Curti and Marino 2010). On the other hand, African theatre, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o states in his foreword to Awam Amkpa's *Theatre and Postcolonial Desires*, is "one of overlapping modernities" (2004: xii), and has served both colonial forces and anti-colonial struggles. The contributions that follow pay homage to these traditions by highlighting the role of theatre in diverse postcolonial contexts as a site of cultural negotiation, often mediating between European institutional forms and the revitalization of performance practices that colonial authorities did not recognize as theatre 'proper'.

By devoting attention to performing practices alongside textual analysis, the articles included in this issue epitomize the recent 'performative turn' in critical theory, which has involved both literary and theatre studies; at the same time they put the materiality of theatrical experience at the forefront, addressing issues of embodiment and representation in postcolonial contexts. In the following pages, we offer a brief overview of these paradigmatic shifts in the hope that they may serve as an effective introduction to these compelling studies on postcolonial theatre.

1. Embodying the postcolonial: drama, theatre, exhibition

Compared to the novel or the short story, the postcolonial in performance has admittedly attracted more limited and less consistent scholarly attention. In the ground-breaking critical survey *Post-colonial English Drama*, editor Bruce King writes "[c]ritics and readers are better informed about post-colonial fiction than about poetry or drama", a reason for this being that "[w]hile many novels are concerned with such major themes as cultural conflict, political protest and anti-colonialism, these topics in the theatre are less clear-cut, more likely to be nuanced by irony and subtexts" (1992: 1). While there is today a substantial increase in studies dedicated to the performing arts in postcolonial contexts, the treatment of

theatre still betrays a certain trend to consider primarily drama (that is, printed texts), although it is precisely the 'nuances' and 'subtexts' of theatre that have made it such a powerful, multifaceted tool for the expression and negotiation of changing identities.

Whereas critics may have been slow to turn their eye to the theatrical, writers and intellectuals in former colonies were in fact quick to understand, use, and even institutionalize theatre both as a dignified form of art and as a vehicle to convey cultural and political reform. Universities such as Ibadan in Nigeria, or the University of the West Indies "started drama departments with an emphasis on performance, unlike the traditional British universities which either did not have separate drama departments or put emphasis on dramatic literature". African institutions in particular have tried "to go beyond the physical and social limits imposed by Western theatres" (King 1992: 7). In the wake of independence and nationalism, personal and collective expectations were conveyed by a theatre that "beg[an] with what [was] accepted as contemporary, and work[ed] towards indigenising it by making increasing use of the local, until a new tradition [was] established" (p. 10). But the 'alternative tradition' that grows outside the institution, and which King recognises in the Yoruba travelling theatre or the South African township plays, did not exclude the influence of Western forms (as King seems to suggest), just as re-elaborations of Western forms were not oblivious of indigenous theatrical traditions. In *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theatre*, Brian Crow and Chris Banfield see "metropolitan [Western] theatre as imposition and at the same time as catalyst" (1996: 12) of new genres and interests that merge with the playwrights' "desire [...] to reacquaint (or acquaint) themselves with their indigenous theatrical and performance traditions" (p. 12).

Early introductions to post-colonial theatre such as King's or Crow and Banfield's, however, tend to rely on a binary opposition between Western/modern and indigenous/traditional theatrical forms that, privileging the former, still have the scripted text as a main departure point for analysis. Specific books like David Kerr's seminal *African Popular Theatre* (1995) offer perhaps more compelling perspectives by considering highly syncretic forms such as the concert party, the Yoruba Folk Opera, and a variety of

examples of Theatre for Development[1]. These genres show how an attempt to approach a history of theatre in the former colonies bears the risk of overlooking its fundamentally dynamic and experimental nature.

Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins's *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*, which remains today a key reference point on the subject, is aware of this risk and, unlike previous publications, "does not attempt to categorize texts, regions, types of plays, historical approaches to drama; to identify the major playwrights of different countries; or to discuss national theatre traditions separately, country by country" (1996: 11). Rather, Gilbert and Tompkins's study is arranged around main themes and concerns, amongst which the articulation of "the body, the voice, and the stage space as sites of resistance to imperial hegemonies" (p. 12) is paramount. The body in particular "functions as one of the most charged sites of theatrical representation" (p. 203), as in the post-colonial context its "ability to move, cover up, reveal itself, and even 'fracture' on stage provides it with many possible sites for decolonisation" (p. 204). The act of *embodiment*, that is, in Gilbert and Tompkins's definition, the "oppositional process [...] whereby the colonised creates his/her own subjectivity" by ascribing "more flexible, culturally laden, and multivalent delineations to the body" (p. 205), is thus central to an understanding of postcolonial performances, as it offers interesting insight into the strategies of playwrights as diverse as Monique Mojica, Zakes Mda, and Jack Davis. The body is also central to Christopher Balme's *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Postcolonial Drama*, which, in harmony with both Gilbert-Tompkins and Crow-Banfield, aligns its approach to theirs in that "all three studies" attach significance "to indigenous performance forms for the creation of a new theatre aesthetic in post-colonial countries" (1999: viii). Balme shares with Gilbert and Tompkins an awareness of a major "alteration", from the 1980s, in the scholarly debate around the postcolonial, "the metamorphosis of the term 'post-colonial' from a general epithet

[1] Participatory theatre that addresses societal, economic and political issues, and is often employed in the context of international development projects, or as part of campaigns that target public health, environmental problems, equality and diversity issues, etc..

with temporal and spatial coordinates [...] into the 'invention' of a critical approach and methodology" (p. vii)[2]. Balme's volume, however, focuses exclusively on the role and impact of indigenous performances in postcolonial theatre, and the investigation is split into thematic clusters (ritual frames, orality, language, spaces, etc.). Again, the body features prominently, with a focus on the "performer's body as a cultural and artistic text", and an in-depth discussion of masking, seen by the scholar as "a characteristic device of syncretic theatre" that, in the case of Africa, the Caribbean and India, brings together the example of "intact indigenous ritual and performance traditions" while nodding to "the Western tradition of theatrical modernism and its experimentation with masks" (p. 167).

The body also remains central to the already-mentioned *Theatre and Postcolonial Desires*, which builds upon a revised concept of citizenship and participation, confirming how "theatre became for us [in the Seventies, but the sentence can be regarded in more universal terms] the principal vehicle of decolonizing reform, just as it had served an earlier generation as a prime strategy of anticolonial resistance. The changed context of our neo-colonial world, however, called for rethinking our notions of citizenship" (Amkpa 2004: 9). While formal citizenship "endows individuals with the cultural capital to arbitrate the terms of the society in which they live", and informal citizenship "gives people the right to live in a particular society, but denies them the cultural and political capital needed to narrate their local space and politics", thus becoming "a marker of disenfranchisement", the scholar argues for a notion of *non-formal citizenship* that embraces "a fluid, hybrid, sense of 'self' that seeks subjectivity and agency in a variety of local and global contexts" (p. 10). This conception of identity is at the basis of what Amkpa terms "postcolonial desire", that is, "the act of imagining, living, and negotiating a social reality based on democracy, cultural pluralism and social justice" (p. 10). Theatre is central to the articulation of this desire as it best articulates the "'in-betweeness' between the

[2] See Gilbert and Tompkins on the same lines: "Not a naïve teleological sequence that supersedes colonialism, post-colonialism is, rather, an engagement with and contestation of colonialism's discourses, power structures, and social hierarchies" (1996: 2).

overlapping modernities that map our world" (p. 11). However, rather than focusing exclusively on former colonies, Amkpa's book traces this 'in-betweeness' in European theatre too, with a first part dedicated to Nigeria, while the second investigates "oppositional" (p. 16) writing from England, addressing "dramas that most directly engage the interplay between imperial histories and the invention of postcolonial national destinies" (p. 17)[3]. In comparison with Balme, Amkpa thus makes extensive use of the play script, focusing almost exclusively on 'dramas'.

It is no coincidence, however, that, in examining one Nigerian playwright in particular, Femi Osofisan, Amkpa's investigation must focus, amongst others, on an eminently bodily play, *Once upon Four Robbers* (1978), as central to his analysis. *Once upon Four Robbers* addresses robbery as a national-scale phenomenon, as well as (and above all) the brutal response from the government(s), setting its action on Bar Beach, in Lagos, where executions of robbers had become a daily spectacle. The action revolves around four robbers whom a (Muslim) preacher, moved by their account of poverty and trouble, presents with a peculiar gift: they will be able to put a spell on their victims so as to conduct their robbery without having to harm anyone. The gift is subject to three conditions that openly declare the political significance of the play: only wealthy people must be robbed, robberies will only be conducted in public places, and no one must be killed in the process. After various vicissitudes, the robbers are eventually arrested and, in the final scene, audiences are asked directly what to do with them: if the audience chooses liberation, the robbers will perform a final robbery at the expense of the dancing choir; otherwise, the lights will go down on their execution.

By combining a Western theatrical form (and a clear reference to Brecht) with magic and storytelling, Osofisan produces an intensely physical play; one that addresses "the issue of the body – theirs [the robbers'] and that of their executed leader, and most importantly, the space within which their bodies must enunciate agency" (Amkpa 2004: 52). Political, economic and cultural structures are thus expressed through the living or the suppression, both material and

[3] Examined playwrights include John Arden, David Edgar and Caryl Churchill.

metaphorical, of the body, especially that of the subaltern (the status that Osofisan, in a clearly provocative move, ascribes the robbers). In making their decision about the body of the robbers, audiences are therefore called to express their views on the fundamental social injustice characterising Nigerian society as well.

Following this thread, in this issue of *Textus* we have tried to address the body as primarily a site and metaphor for the expression of (and resistance to) power structures, social dynamics and cultural prejudice. The contributions we have selected investigate the process of embodiment in its various forms: actors/actresses that embody 'foreign' or 'exotic' realities for mainly white audiences; costumes, make-up and settings that embody the cultural specificity of indigenous communities; texts that help articulate different cultural perspectives; genres that convey responses to the status quo. In addressing 'stages' of this embodiment, the reference is clearly not only to the several stages that have contributed, around the world, to define and articulate the encounter (and struggle) between colonizer and colonized, but also to the nature and features of this process, which has unfolded in different ways and at different rates. In so doing, this issue of *Textus* builds not only on such a mainly text-oriented, analytical approach as is perhaps promoted by studies on postcolonial theatre like those mentioned here, but also on a wider, more interdisciplinary understanding of theatre *and* of the postcolonial.

Following on the "great upsurge of interest into the semiotics of the body" that "is one of the striking features of recent trends in theatre studies research" (Balme 1999: 167), the literature of the last two decades has focused extensively on popular performances, intersections between theatre and the visual arts, and syncretic productions such as 'human zoos', both past and present, that offer a wider interpretation of performance. On the one hand, there has been an increased investigation into the body as expression of overlapping scientific, literary and historical discourses, with titles such as Goodall's *Performance and Evolution in the Age of Darwin* (2002), Brooks's *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom* (2006), Blanchard *et al.*'s *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires* (2008), and Sadiah Qureshi's *Peoples on Parade* (2011). On the other hand, studies like Jacqueline Urla and Jennifer Terry's *Deviant Bodies* (1995),

Desmond's *Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World* (1999), Acampora and Cotton's *Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul: Transformative Aesthetics and the Practice of Freedom* (2007), and Kuppers's *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art* (2007) significantly elaborate on the body in performance while locating theatre at the intersection with apparently distant disciplines, medicine for example, that make use of performative elements. While studies on postcolonial in performances tend to privilege theatre 'proper', mainly focusing on the Other in performance, these texts rather address how the Other is *performed* – constructed through a stage representation that is to a greater or lesser extent informed by prejudice, expectation and even stereotype, bodies functioning "implicitly as the final authenticators of identity categories" (Desmond 1999: xiv).

Exhibitions like *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992), by the Cuban-American artist Coco Fusco in collaboration with Guillermo Gómez-Peña – which was presented first in Madrid and London, and then toured Australia and the United States, and in which the artists themselves were on display in a cage, performing various tasks and 'rituals' – are both a legacy of specific genres like the nineteenth-century ethnological exhibition, and a testament to the way the 'foreign' and the 'exotic' are today still commercialized and exploited for the consumption of large audiences. Contemporary 'human zoos', and Coco Fusco's work in particular, affirm the idea that "for some, embodiment is intrinsically entwined with the very practice of being exhibited, of being under the panoptic gaze of others, who cannot be looked at in return" (Mendieta 2007: 149). While the latter part of this statement (that the exhibited body cannot look at in return) is objectionable, as the returned gaze is central in both real and fictional ethnological exhibitions, it is important to remember how the practice of being exhibited is and was, just as in the nineteenth century, "commonly marketed as if the performances were unmediated representations of life abroad, yet all were evidently quite carefully choreographed and managed" (Qureshi 2011: 122). As bodies "function as the material signs for categories of social difference, including divisions of gender, race, cultural identity, and species", however, the risk is that "[b]odies, seen as 'natural', can naturalize these systems of thought in a tightly braided union which proposes the following: bodies are 'natural',

bodies are different from one another, typologies of difference are natural, and what is natural is necessarily right or 'true'" (Desmond 1999: xiv).

This is valid for tourist performances, in which, as Desmond has it, "[t]he performers become signs of what the tourist audience *believes* them to be" (p. xx, our emphasis), but it can, of course, be true also of performances that involve 'real' representatives of ethnic groups or communities. As Shelley Scott affirms discussing Native American women in performance, for instance, "it is the artist's physical presence, his or her body, that becomes the signifier of authenticity and the site of lived experience" (2009: 124). Authenticity is the key word here, embodiment being discussed (and experienced by the artists Scott considers) as a healing process, in which "[w]hile it is primarily the performer herself who is healed, by witnessing their performances, that embodied healing can be shared by the audience and wider community" (p. 135).

This should not make us forget that a) performances still retain a degree of fictionality, whatever their subject, however realistic the production, and notwithstanding the participation of the 'real' protagonists of a given circumstance, event or group; and b) that when audiences experience a performance, this happens not in a neutral space (or rather, in a space that cannot *remain* neutral during performance) but, as Ngũgĩ has it, in a "self-contained field of internal relations" (2002: 435-6). In this space, which is (just as the body of the performer) not a *tabula rasa*, but a site inscribed with many overlapping meanings, audiences are likely to apply their own standards and cultural values in terms of what to expect of the body of the performer. The body can, therefore, never be entirely or purely 'authentic', 'true' or 'faithful' to what it is meant to represent. Urla and Terry, in their study of deviance and the body, remind us in fact that for Foucault – whose analysis of the body and the bodily remain central to debates on theatre and the theatrical – "[b]odies do not exist in terms of an a-priori essence, anterior to techniques and practices that are imposed upon them. They are neither transhistorical sets of needs and desires nor natural objects preexisting cultural (and, indeed, scientific) representation. They are effects, products, or symptoms of specific techniques and regulatory practices" (1995: 3). If bodies are thus "never innocent but always tie[d] [...] to larger systems of knowledge production" (p. 3),

then they function as "a powerful source of medical evidence and scientific knowledge as much as they become grounds for articulating political claims" (p. 6), making the interaction between performer and audience inevitably fraught with meanings, expectations and aims that exclude 'neutrality' or 'truth'.

The relevance of these debates for a discussion of postcolonial theatre is obvious, but while alterity and the political implications of the body on stage are central to contemporary performances happening in former colonies, the rich literature on the body in performance has also brought the gaze back to Europe, highlighting how hybridity, syncretism, and issues of identity and representation are also central to contemporary theatre in the 'West'. This issue of *Textus* builds on this rich and varied literature to offer readers a collection of writings that elaborate on the many aspects of body and embodiment, embracing a variety of theatrical activities.

2. Written scripts and theatrical practices: writing on/about theatre

Indeed, any research on European theatre and performance practices – as several of the contributions to this issue show – must acknowledge an ongoing, if unequal, dialogue between what are now identified as elements of Western contemporary theatre and non-European practices. This exchange can be specifically registered at the turn of the twentieth century, when both theatrical practices and the study of theatre underwent radical changes under the impact of the 'encounter' with 'Other' ways of conceiving performance. In her work on theatrical experimentation at the beginning of the twentieth century, Erika Fischer-Lichte notes how the critique to language as the dominant hermeneutic principle of reality was challenged by an artistic and intellectual movement that called for the "'retheatricalization of the theatre' […] as the attempt to deconstruct the traditional system of semiotic systems employed in Western culture" (1995: 98). This entailed a redressing of received notions as regards the hierarchy of signs involved in theatrical communication: "the focus, as well as the dominance, shifts from language to the body" (p. 99).

The consequent shift from the dramatic to the theatrical text as the object of critical analysis led to a questioning of existing

cultural hierarchies both among performing traditions and within the theatrical experience. Yet, in the light of the concerns we intend to highlight in this issue of *Textus*, Fischer-Lichte's choice of case study, Max Reinhardt's 1910 production of the pantomime *Sumurun* by Friedrich Freksa, is particularly pertinent. Indeed, Reinhardt and Freksa's work made use of an "Oriental" setting – which the author defined as "perhaps the legendary Samarkand" (quoted in Fischer-Lichte 1995: 98) – as well as of *hanamichi*, an extra stage section borrowed from kabuki theatre[4]. Reinhardt's and Freksa's experimental forms thus partake of that Modernist fascination that, as Edward Said famously argued, plundered non-European art forms in the name of experimentation:

> most histories of European aesthetic modernism leave out the massive infusions of non-European cultures into the metropolitan heartland during the early years of this [the 20th] century, despite the patently important influence they had on modernist artists like Picasso, Stravinsky, and Matisse, and on the very fabric of a society that largely believed itself to be homogenously white and Western (1993: 242).

In theatre, this fascination can be found not only in performance practices, but also in a shift in theatre studies under the influence of ritual studies, which emerged around the same time at the beginning of the twentieth century. Starting with William Robertson Smith's *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889), which revolutionized the study of 'primitive' religions – focusing of ritual practices instead of myths – and, in particular, by comparing ancient Semitic practices with those of "purely pastoral African peoples, [which] have persisted with more or less modification or attenuation down to our own time" (2002: 297), ritual studies have notably intersected with theatre studies in the valorization of the moment of performance against the fixity of textuality. Following this breakthrough from the intersection of theatre and anthropology, ritual has emerged as a

[4] Traditionally, the *hanamichi* is a raised platform running from the back of the theatre to the stage: performers can access the stage from it, or use it for monologues and asides. In the context of *Sumurun*, its role in distracting the audience from the action happening on the main stage was widely discussed in contemporary reviews, and is now considered highly experimental as it disrupted the fourth wall on which Western naturalistic theatre was traditionally based (see Ficher-Lichte 1995: 100).

founding concept of contemporary performance studies, stressing the repetition of cultural practices above the supposed originality of art; so much so that one of the founders of performance studies, Richard Schechner, defines performance as "ritualized behavior conditioned and/or permeated by play" (2013: 52).

One of the main consequences of this methodological encounter has been a reduced attention to the written text in the study of theatre. As Fischer-Lichte again argues,

> both ritual and theatre studies repudiated the privileged status of texts in favour of performances. It could thus be said that the first performative turn in twentieth-century European culture did not take place in the performance culture of the 1960s and 1970s but occurred much earlier with the establishment of ritual and theatre studies at the turn of the century. (2008: 31)

In their turn, the Sixties and Seventies saw the pre-eminence of performance over the dramatic text ratified by semiotics, which introduced the concept of theatrical performance as a system of signs. Roland Bathes' 1964 definition of theatre as a "cybernetic machine" offering the audience "a real informational polyphony" (1972: 261-262) has proved seminal in its foregrounding of the multiplicity of theatrical textualities. Among these what theatre semiotics has termed "dramatic text" – "that mode of fiction designed for stage representation and constructed according to particular ('dramatic') conventions", as Keir Elam has it (1980: 2) – is intrinsically shaped by performance, but not necessary to it: indeed, there are many theatrical traditions, including the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, which dispense of the script altogether. In a postcolonial perspective, it is also worth noting along with Peggy Phelan that "only a tiny portion of the world's cultures equate[s] theatre with written scripts" (1998: 3); and most of this "tiny portion" of the world is located in the modern and contemporary West, which has traditionally privileged writing over oral traditions[5].

[5] For the relationship between writing and orality in the constitution of European identity see Walter J. Ong's classic *Orality and Literacy* (1982). Quite interestingly, though, Ong does not focus on theatre as an oral cultural practice; on the contrary, he identifies Ancient Greek theatre as one of the first literary genres where writing

And yet, as the privilege of the written text has been eroded during the twentieth century and early twenty-first century, this process has not impacted the study of theatre and the performing arts only; on the contrary, as Schechner again notes in a much-quoted passage, the performative model has apparently become 'the' model of the information age:

> As the twenty-first century unfolds, many people remain dissatisfied with the status quo. Equipped with ever more powerful means of finding and sharing information – the internet, cell phones, sophisticated computing – people are increasingly finding the world not a book to be read but a performance to participate in. (Schechner 2013: 25)

Hence, Schechner identifies the 'performance' metaphor as distinctive of the twenty-first century: here the text – even the multimodal text of theatre semiotics – is substituted by the participatory event, characterized by sensorial immanence and transient temporalities, but also by ritualistic repetition and sharing.

What generally passes unnoticed in the previous quotation is that Schechner identifies, as the motive for this shift in perspective, a "dissatisfaction with the status quo"; his metaphor of the world as performance is thus also a reflection on the power dynamics that invest contemporary subjectivities, framed within an intrinsically anti-hegemonic vision, with the explicit aim of overturning cultural hierarchies. This anti-hegemonic approach is, of course, central to Judith Butler's notion of the 'performative', whose deep-seated influence in recent critical theory has made it one of the founding concepts of the 'performative turn' in the humanities. In her early works, Butler defines the performative as an authoritative behavioural unit that exists and exercises power insofar as it is repeated, and, although its early conceptualizations are related explicitly to the enactment of a gendered identity (see Butler 2006), her use of J. L. Austin's theory of illocutionary acts in *Excitable Speech* expand the reach of the performative as central for the dissemination of ideology through repetition:

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becomes a structuring principle: "Until print, the only linearly plotted lengthy story line was that of the drama, which from antiquity had been controlled by writing. Euripides' tragedies were texts composed in writing and then memorized verbatim to be presented orally" (Ong 1982: 130).

> If a performative provisionally succeeds […], then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices*. It is not simply that the speech act takes place *within* a practice, but that the act is itself a ritualized practice. (Butler 1997: 51; italics in the text.)

It is little known, however, that Butler elaborated an early definition of the performative (specifically in relation to gender) in an essay published in 1988 in *Theatre Journal*, and subsequently in the miscellany *Performing Feminism: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, edited by Sue-Ellen Case, which marks one of the first feminist interventions in theatre studies. Here Butler argued for the specificity of theatrical performance in comparison to the performative as a condition for the existence of a subject. A body becomes a subject only when its enactment of a recognizable identity – in terms of gender, but also of race, class, and other social signifiers – is successful, effortless, giving the illusion of being 'natural'; in much the same way, through its self-aware repetition of gestures and language from everyday life, theatre enacts the creation of a social subject in its representation of characters as individual units, who exist only insofar as their words and motions are reproduced by the performing body. In this sense, theatre is identified by Butler as a pivotal element for social and political critique; it also allows for more experimental practices than everyday performativity because one can "de-realize" performance, and hence separate it from the reality of social practices: "the various conventions which announce that 'this is only a play' allow strict lines to be drawn between the performance and life" (1990: 278).

However, Butler's own example of drag as a performing practice that can spill over from the performance space to everyday life to question received notions of acceptable behaviour in relation to gendered bodies (see 2006: 186-187) challenges the separation between theatre and life in a way that becomes central not only to a discussion of gender representation in theatre, but more generally to an assessment of the political role of theatre. In her preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, she makes the connection explicit: "The writing of this denaturalization [of gender identity] was not done simply out of a desire to play with language of prescribe theatrical antics in the place of "real" politics" […] (as if theatre and

politics were always distinct)" (Butler 2006: xxi). Following Butler's trail, in this issue of *Textus* we consider theatrical and political spaces as different but contiguous for the study of theatrical forms as sites of cultural negotiation and social change (see also Reinelt 2002).

Theatre space is created by the encounter between performers and audience, and this needs to take into account all the different agencies (playwrights, actors and directors, stage and costume designers, light and sound technicians, etc.) that make the theatrical performance happen. The challenge for our contributors, and for us both as editors and as scholars interested in theatre and the postcolonial, is to process our considerations inevitably after the theatrical event, in a medium that is necessarily devoid of all the other features that constitute theatrical performances, with the founding exception of writing itself. The material co-presence of performers and spectators is both the material condition of theatre, and what any analysis of the theatrical event inevitably lacks and tries to recreate by referring not only to the script or dramatic text, but also to reports, directors' and playwrights' interviews and comments, and sometimes the personal experience of spectatorship.

It is because of this belated temporality that Fischer-Lichte argues that the theatrical text, which she calls *Aufführung* or performance, cannot be 'understood' in logical terms, both because understanding can only happen *after* the performance (and thus rely on memory and memorial devices), and because it needs to translate the performance into language, necessarily losing something in the process. This, however, does not mean critical analysis of theatrical performances is impossible but that it necessarily implicates an awareness of creating something new and different from the theatrical event itself:

> every attempt to understand a performance retrospectively contributes to the creation of a text which follows its own rules, becomes independent in the process of its creation, and perpetually distances itself from its starting point – the memory of the performance. (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 160)

We are extremely grateful to our contributors for having taken up this exacting challenge, engaging not only with play scripts, but also with the collective memory of historical documents, on which many of the contributions included here rely. For several of

the contributions this has meant retracing original audiences and the role early circumstances of production and reception had on the work of playwrights such as Derek Walcott, Femi Osofisan, or Hone Kouka. Indeed, most contributions use the dramatist as point of entrance in the complex textualities engaged by theatrical performances; yet, playwrights are not seen as the ultimate agents/creators, but as the crossroads of a complex network of relationships enacting the 'embodiment' of the postcolonial in performance.

3. Stages of embodiment: contributions and structure

The cases presented in this collection aim to be a starting point for further debate on theatre and the postcolonial, rather than covering as many (geographical) areas as possible. The United States is not included on the same premise for which Gilbert and Tompkins excluded it from their own study, in that "its role as global 'superpower' has long since severed its connections with the historical and cultural marginality that the other former colonies share" (1996: 7). But just as Ireland is included in their book because of the country's "centuries-old political and economic oppression at the hands of the British" (p. 7), the problematic (and now, in post-Brexit times, irrevocably distant) relation of Scotland to the UK has convinced us of the appropriateness of including the former in an issue on postcolonial writing. On the other hand, additional perspectives on the syncretism of theatre, as well as of the postcolonial dimension and character of contemporary theatrical productions in Europe have been included, with contributions on Black British writing and postcolonial Anglophone performances outside the UK (and/or its former colonies). The ultimate target of this collection is to provide material for further reflection in a scholarly context, such as the Italian one, where postcolonial theatre has received more limited attention than fiction but where scholars have been prompt to tune in to emerging playwrights and companies, like the Ravenna-based Teatro delle Albe (established in 1983), which address multiculturalism and identity.

Contributions have been arranged in a chronological order, starting with a paper on Caribbean poet, playwright and Nobel-laureate Derek Walcott (1930-2017), which seems to us to both pay homage to this giant of twentieth-century literature, and introduce

some of the key issues in this collection. Giuseppe Sofo's '"The Freedom of the Thief': Derek Walcott's *The Joker of Seville* as a Cross-cultural Dialogue with Tirso de Molina" investigates Walcott's *The Joker of Seville* (1979), an adaptation of Tirso de Molina's *El burlador de Sevilla* (1630), commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Discussing rare materials, such as the unpublished correspondence between Walcott and Roland Bryden, who was at the time literary advisor to the RSC, Sofo highlights the relation between Walcott's text and its original, exploring notions of adaptation, linguistic and physical embodiments of cultural and geographical difference, and the ultimate meaning of this exchange between 'Old' and 'New' worlds.

The following essay, Indranil Banerjee and Shouvik Banerjee's "'The real Australian story': Studying *Kullark* as a Reassessment of Cultural Identities", explores Jack Davis's *Kullark*, first performed in 1979 at the Titan Theatre in Perth. This play has been described as "the paradigmatic example of a performance event that interrogates conventional European concepts of temporality and narrativity" (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996: 139), and the authors examine in particular how it challenges the dominant 'white' framing of Australia's history by representing and giving voice to aboriginal culture. Language, music and movement are in particular discussed to investigate how, with *Kullark*, Davis tried to make a case for the aboriginal people conveying their culture to a mainly white audience on an occasion – Western Australia's sesquicentennial celebrations – that was also of particular significance.

These two fundamental case studies are followed by a survey of Black British theatre in the Eighties, with particular attention to women's writing. Giovanna Buonanno's "Black British Women's Theatre in the 1980s and the Politics of Representation" reminds us that drama and theatre of African and Caribbean origin have been central to challenging and changing notions of theatricality and identity on the predominantly white British stage. Buonanno investigates in particular the company Theatre of Black Women (1982-1988), co-founded amongst others by the novelist and playwright Bernardine Evaristo, arguing that its activities were paramount to the affirmation of Black women on the British theatre scene, as well as to the development of British theatre generally.

An equally comprehensive approach is applied by Paola Della Valle in her essay "Acting Agency in Aotearoa New Zealand: Hone Kouka's and Briar Grace-Smith's Debut Plays". Discussing the performing tradition of the indigenous population of New Zealand against the backdrop of Western theatre and Richard Schechner's theories in particular, the essay investigates productions of the Eighties, arguably a turning point in the history of Māori artists, with a focus on two debut plays by Hone Kouka and Briar Grace-Smith. These works are seen to be midway between traditional performance and Western dramatic convention, and are argued to be representative of contemporary Māori theatre.

The last three essays in this collection return to case studies, Kunbi Olasope's "Lament as Women's Speech in Femi Osofisan's Adaptation of Euripides' *Trojan Women: Women of Owu*" and Gioia Angeletti's "Embodied Otherness and Hybridity: David Greig's *The Bacchae* and the Reprise of Ancient Greek Tragedy" examining two plays from Nigeria and Scotland respectively, while Annalisa Piccirillo's "Embodying Otherness: Nelisiwe Xaba's *Fremde Tänze*" focuses on a recent performance of the South African dancer Nelisiwe Xaba.

Adaptations of ancient Greek drama are of particular relevance, as this has resonated widely with a variety of playwrights from across the postcolonial landscape, adaptations of Euripides in particular coming to embody contemporary anxieties about power relations, gender, class and racial inequality, and the place of individuals within communities. *Women of Owu*, first performed in Lagos in 2003, is a re-visitation of the siege and fall of Owu in 1821, a page of history that allows Osofisan to reflect on contemporary Nigeria. Focusing on the female *dramatis personae* in this play interpreted from the perspective of the Yoruba, Olasope examines in particular the use of lamentation as a way to express the women's civic identity and give voice to their concerns about the city, its warriors and its ultimate fate. Angeletti's essay, on the other hand, focuses on Greig's adaptation of Euripides's *Bacchae*, which premiered in Edinburgh in 2007, examining Dionysos in particular as the embodiment of Otherness and hybridity in the cultural and political context of contemporary Scotland. Greig's production is investigated through a close reading of both text and context, which Angeletti uses to cast light on the relevance of Scotland in the postcolonial universe,

as well as on the role of adaptations of ancient Greek drama in the history of Scottish theatre.

Finally, Piccirillo's essay focuses on *Fremde Tänze*, a performance that premiered in Freiburg in 2016, and which the author discusses, using notes taken first-hand at the event, within the context of 'human zoos' and the exoticization of 'foreign' or non-European peoples and cultures. Dance being perhaps the 'embodiment' genre *par excellence*, Xaba's performance is investigated as a way to challenge European audiences, tackling, in particular, the continent's history of ethnological exhibitions and displays.

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