Playing with Fire-Space: Site-Specific Placement and the Techno-pharmacology of Maria Irene Fornes's *Mud*

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Many who write about the playwright Maria Irene Fornes's work comment with reverence about the experience of watching those productions she herself directed.[1] Managing somehow to combine frank depictions of cruelty and violence with an odd, otherworldly charm, Fornes's direction conveyed a distinct *sui generis* quality that has deflected analytic scrutiny —the exterior operates in such an exquisite fashion one hesitates to lift the hood and look beneath.

1. Fractal Echoing

> *The set is a wooden room which sits on an earth promontory. The promontory is five feet high and covers the same periphery as the room. The wood has the color and texture of bone that has dried in the sun. It is ashen and cold.*
> (Fornes 1234)

In *Mud's* opening notes, Fornes provides the reader with a vivid and precise stage picture that underscores her background as a painter,[2] and that links her work to the image-based directorial signatures of both Samuel Beckett and Robert Wilson. Those familiar with Fornes's work as a director will recognize this visual precision as the source of the relaxed but hallucinatory clarity that characterized her staging. Objects also figure prominently in *Mud's* preliminary stage directions – an ironing board, a plate with green beans on it, an axe, etc. – as do the two doors at the back of the playing space, one leading to the blue sky, So-Cal exterior, the other to a dark corridor. In performance, the role of objects and the uncanny precision of Fornes's direction give her work a palpable aura of *discontinuity* in which the part seems subtly privileged at the expense of the whole, as if the work were resisting the allure of unity. This reluctance to embrace synthesis has the effect of defamiliarizing or "queering" Fornes's work in ways that illustrate how the pharmacological capacity of tragic drama relates to its technical nature.

Fornes's emphasis on discontinuity within the precise image is amplified in *Mud's* scene transitions, where the playwright specifies an explicitly photographic freeze effect that *dis-places* us in temporal terms even while the play – which was first staged by Fornes in site-specific mode in Claremont, outside of Los Angeles, in 1983 – insists on its own *placement*. This emphatic placement, in turn, gains additional force from its local context—the outskirts of a city that, with its history as one extended real estate speculation, can credibly claim to be the capital of *placelessness* (Davis 23). The play enforces a kind of epochal displacement as well. With its doorway in the upstage wall, the box-like set is a rough facsimile of the Theatre of Dionysus after Aeschylus added the shed-like *skênê* (Seaford 161). The play begins with two characters in a chorus-protagonist dyad, a third entering in ways that echo Aeschylus's addition of a second autonomous character. Near the close, one of the characters, Lloyd, also fulfills the role of the *ekkyklema*, entering from offstage with a dead body in his arms. During performance, all the machinic elements of the artistic form first actualized by Aeschylus arrive in the correct sequence, as if to recapitulate the concretization of the technical object of tragic drama.

The more recent influence of Beckett can also be felt in the minimalist imagery of Fornes's text, and in its prevailing tone of mordant comedy. *Godot's* Pozzo and Lucky are echoed in the abusive dyad that forms between Henry and Lloyd, the reversal in their power dynamic after Scene 12 also echoing the shift between the two characters in *Godot*. The absent father who brought Lloyd into the house in the distant past calls to mind *Watt's* patriarch Mr. Knott, and also *Endgame's* Hamm. *Mud's* bare bones enclosure of a set is also a variant of the set of *Endgame*. And yet, while *Mud* is rooted in the *end-ness* that characterizes Beckett's play, it also takes place from within what Agamben calls the "anthropogenic event," placing *arche* – origin – as its central concern. Agamben defines this event as the moment at which man first "put his very nature at stake in language" leaping the abyss between the unmediated, direct experience of animals, and the symbolically mediated existence of the anthropos (*Sacrament* 68). The first scene of the play establishes Mae and Lloyd as *creaturely*; they straddle the boundary between animal and man, and, as such, are ontologically meta-stable, or intensively charged. The dramatic engine of *Mud* is Mae's soulful desire to learn how to read – to internalize the grammatological object of language – a project acutely threatening to Lloyd.

This journey out of pre-individuation, and this recapitulation of tragic form, have special resonance and poignancy in LA, a city that assembled itself out of open ranchland in the space of a human lifetime, to become, in the second half of the 20th century, a defining model of the suburbanized city, as well as a center of the global culture industry (Davis 107). If "open ranchland" seems to deny the existence of the indigenous Amerindian and Latino populations of the region, the point is well taken.

The visionary capitalists who so accurately measured the future monetary value of the rolling pastures of the Los Angeles basin were equally prescient in their assumption that the indigenous population would not pose any serious obstacle. The hegemonic racism implicit in their reckoning is undeniable, and is as integral a part of the story of Los Angeles as its strongly technological aspect. The capacity for abstraction, for the deterritorializing glance, is a capacity implicated in the technological prowess that made Los Angeles into a livable metropolis. This impulse toward urban individuation through spatial abstraction and speculation is the force site-specific theater engages, seeking to redirect and reverse it. Fornes's *Mud,* in its emphasis on emplacement, and in how it dramatizes its own relational construction, represents an artistic response to the contradictions of a distinctly Angelino mode of subjectivity.

In *Mud*, Fornes's characters are gripped by individuating forces in a theatrical framework that itself recapitulates the individuation of the art form. They are placed in a semi-urban landscape that is also caught up in a process of individuation. This hallucinatory, telescoping effect only grows stronger as we widen our view and take in the immediate historical context. Produced in 1983, *Mud* coincided with the rise to cultural dominance of neoliberal political economy, the quasi-religious valorization of market-driving *laissez-faire* capitalism (Harvey 43). This episteme, in which Southern California figured prominently, is, in turn, a fractal echo of the monetized cultural milieu of the Peisistratids tyranny in 6th century Athens, in response to which the tragic dramatic form first emerged (Seaford 99).

2. The Act of Placement

In *Mud's* site-specific origins, we encounter a link between the faint aura of surreal dislocation mentioned earlier and the dominant characteristic of site-specific art *per se* – defined by the purely *external* act of placement, the site-specific work counters our tendency to attribute to art-objects a unity based on relations of *interiority*. The distinction between relations of interiority and exteriority anchors Manuel DeLanda's work on the assemblage theory of Deleuze and Guattari, and pertains as well to Donna Haraway's cyborg-focused feminism. We tend to assume the various elements combining in a new emergent form *fuse together* through "relations of interiority" to form a new entity. The artist, we often hear, creates new "wholes" that add up to "more than the sum of their parts," a feat demarcating the boundary that separates the creative artist from, say, the mechanical engineer. DeLanda, however, underscores the "exteriority of relations" that make assemblages inherently decomposable, provided we possess adequate *techne* – technical skill (*Philosophy* 185). To illustrate

assemblage theory, DeLanda cites the advance of medical *techne* that now allows us to transplant hearts and kidneys from one body to another, the human body having previously seemed the very definition of the term "organic whole." By focusing us on the external relationality of art objects, the act of placement that defines site-specific work underscores the *decomposability* of objects in general.

Viewing the object as a decomposable assemblage does not undermine what Deleuze would call its *actualization* (Smith 252) – the immanent unity on which its claim to a unique identity is based. Each object is both at once, in a contradictory "double articulation" arguably complicating the basic principles of instrumental reason. Importantly, DeLanda *parameterizes* assemblages, setting the degree of territorialization off against the degree of encoding, as if they were two knobs on a console – a high degree of both settings produces a stratum. If the "territorialization" knob is set high and the "encoding" knob low, the result is an assemblage. With a setting of both absolute deterritorialization and absolute decoding, the result is the plane of immanence and the Body without Organs ("Assemblage Theory"). The distinction DeLanda makes between assemblages on the one hand and strata on the other lines up with the distinction Bryan Reynolds draws in his Transversal Poetics between becomings and comings-to-be (273). Both theorists deploy a schema of parameterization in which the inherent decomposability of assemblages is arrayed against an entropic tendency to lock into stable arrangements that have the appearance, but never the reality, of new totalities. In her theater work, Fornes excelled at continuously working both knobs, delivering the subtle hallucinatory effects described above.

Overall, *Mud* itself remains insistently bi-valent in its realization as a dramatic object, involving fully rounded, aspirational characters in a coherent narrative, while also reminding us always of its own auto-poietical self-contrivance. A subtle resistance to synthesis contributes to the uncanny affects Fornes conveys in *Mud*, affects that trouble our felt-sense of secure psychic unity. Part of the appeal of the whole-is-greater-than-its-parts line of thinking, Fornes reminds us, is how enchanted we are still by a residual essentialism regarding our own nature. Resigned and deadened to the desperate automaticisms of Oedipalized identity, we find in the seamlessness of the classically constructed art object an affirmation of our covert longing for an innate unity or transcendent soul. Intentional discontinuities and fractures in the work of art are, conversely, often taut with challenging, pre-subjective affects linked to our fear of chaos and death, affects such as awe and terror. Exemplary or emblematic of the independence of all objects on one hand, and loaded with the challenging pre-subjective affects of decomposability on the other – it is in these terms that *Mud* embodies the pharmacological aspect of art.

3. The Pharmacological Creature

A materialist account of how the assemblage of tragic drama functions on a mechanical level requires immersion in process. This is simplified in the case of *Mud* because of how Fornes combines the roles of writer, director and (co)-producer into one agent, and because she has spoken publically about the particularities of *Mud's* emergence. In a 1984 interview with Allen Frame, Fornes's narrates how the play arose, under pressure of a deadline, from a trip to a flea market in Pomona. Here again, objects are central (Robinson 224). The ironing board Fornes encountered that day established the profession of her protagonist, Mae. A table and chairs from the market furnished the set: a raised, bleached-wood enclosure atop a mound of red earth. In *Mud*, these objects are precisely placed within a set that is itself a placement. The emphatic precision of this placement underscores the importance of the mechanism by which the world of Mae and Lloyd is concretized or actualized through the ironing board, the chairs, the kitchen table. The full individuation of an assemblage requires relations with objects, and especially, in the case of dramatic characters, *social* objects such as language and money. Moreover, in her Frame interview, Fornes draws attention to the way the interactions of Mae, Lloyd and Henry were *entailed by* the objects she encountered in Pomona – "The reason why [Mae]'s ironing all the time is because that ironing board was so pretty and so cheap" – an uncanny and distinctly posthuman effect (228).

The role of objects in the processes of individuation depicted in *Mud* call to mind the work of the early 20th-century social theorist George Simmel. Promoting Simmel's renewed relevance to social theory, theorist Olle Pyyhtinen describes social objects as 'internal externalities' that knit the worlds of private and public to each other in inextricable ways (115). "The development of selfhood always involves 'something external to the subject itself' (GSG 8, pp. 367-8)," Pyyhtinen continues, "The cornerstone of Simmel's conception of culture is the idea that subjects could not exist as they do were it not for the creation and assimilation of objects." Simmel's Kantian presuppositions, in Pyyhtinen's view, lock him into a discourse of mastery that obscures the complexity of our object-entanglements, which have been brought to light by Bruno Latour (129). Stripped of this Kantian bias, Simmel's work on social objects becomes relevant to an investigation of the pharmacological capacity of objects in *Mud*. The social objects of language and money are two forms of poison-cure that draw Mae into the transformative processes of the tragic.

Circling around pharmacology, *Mud*, not coincidentally, also circles around money. The play's action is driven by Lloyd's illness, the diagnosis and treatment of which entail visits to the clinic, and prescriptions

for medicine that are then paid for by money stolen from the newcomer, Henry. This theft leads, in turn, to Henry's calamitous fall on the stone path, his subsequent dependence on Mae, and, finally, her need to flee his toxic dependency. Mae's attempts to learn how to read are pharmacological as well, Henry's arrival drawing out of her a self-remembered knowing akin to what the Greeks called *anamnesis*. "I am not an animal," she tells Henry, "I care about things, Henry, I do. I know some things that I never learned. It's just that I don't what they are. I cannot grasp them" (1244). A "trans-individuation" is taking place out of the pre-anthropic, pre-urban, pre-individual milieu Mae shared with Lloyd before the play began. We have the sense that Henry's presence is part of this trans-individuation, but Fornes manages to implicate us in this as well – with his curious and somewhat ghostly presence, Henry registers as a kind of quasi-divine emissary for, or surrogate of, the observing audience. *Knowing*, in *Mud*, is deeply theatrical and also deeply paradoxical. Mae comes to learn things she already knows through a becoming-other that is drawn out of her by way of her dialogue with Henry and by our watchful presence. The way she lets go of barriers to knowing has an apophatic quality akin to a Zen koan – it is a *not-doing* in which her automatic will-to-ignorance is set against an innate noetic capacity.

A close reading of object-related, pharmacological tensions in *Mud*, in turn, illuminates the cultural milieu of avant-garde theatre in Los Angeles in the 1980s, out of which the play emerged. As it turns out, *Mud* is an emblematic work with respect to its place and time. Part of the diaspora of Off-Off Broadway playwrights to the wilderness of Los Angeles (though she never relocated, Fornes arrived seasonally, as if by migratory instinct), Fornes contributed to the genesis of the psychosocial type of the creature we encounter in Lloyd and Mae. In their becomings-animal, Fornes's characters speak to each other from within the anthropogenic moment in which gesture – *acting* – becomes as expressive as language, and in which language is always collapsing toward the purely physical expression. Their tenuous connection to the social object of language makes Mae, Lloyd and Henry ideal pharmacological vehicles. The way these characters move back and forth between the creaturely and the human is, in turn, revealing about Los Angeles, a vast assemblage continually navigating the boundaries between the pre-urban and the urban.

4. Placement and the Language Object

The localism of *Mud's* origin – its placement in the pre-urban landscape of Claremont in 1983 – relates directly to the *creatureliness* of its characters, their pre-individuated condition. Mae and Lloyd are over-full of un-actualized capacity, and since the capacities of an object in Deleuze

are actualized in relation to other objects, this also suggests they exist in a state of hyper-relationality with the set pieces and props in this ramshackle, box-like room. In dramatic terms, the result is a kind of *tautness*, a gripping, urgent quality that registers as an intensive charge, drawing our affective awareness out of us as through a differential pressure. The placement of this site-specific art object inaugurates what Deleuze would call an intensive spatial difference with its surroundings, and in so doing drives a relational process, a mutual becoming or affective transduction. And part of the sophistication of Fornes's play is how she draws this issue of placement down also into the grammatological object called language.

The use of the language lesson in Scene 6 of *Mud* revisits a motif that appeared also in Fornes's *The Danube* (1982). In both plays, the found grammatological object of the pre-recorded language lesson underscores the playwright's minoritarian engagement with English, the language of Capital. As a writer, Fornes engages with this second language, we sense, in a mode similar to Beckett's engagement with French – to problematize the seamless grip of the complex technical object of language, which both writers draw our attention to. Mae's quasi-erotic engagement with the project of language acquisition is fraught with danger, haunted by the becomings-animal of the marine fauna who appear in her audio lessons. Animals in *Mud* arrive via these machinic, pedagogical voiceovers in a disorienting cyborg move that collides their pre-linguistic being with the semantic and the technological. As the lights rise in *Scene 6*, Mae carefully annunciates this text, repeating the calm voice of the recording. This ghostly intruder from a different time and place invokes the starfish, cataloguing facts about its morphology, its life cycle, its mode of vision. This is an act of sorcery; a sinister possession is taking place through the voice of the master discourse. Lloyd, bewildered and anxious, looks on, a pale, bent figure. The effect is jarring and uncanny, and the content of the lesson, combining the vulnerability and impersonal viciousness of animal behavior, only amplifies the disquieting affect. Processes are in motion that we, like Fornes's characters, interpret at our peril. The lesson about the hermit crab, for example, is an invitation to interpret metaphorically – Henry is the hermit crab, we think, stealing a new shell as he moves into Mae and Lloyd's home. The analogy hangs in the air, crossing the barrier between stage and audience. It would be reductive and an error, however, to attribute this reading of the play to Fornes.

By placing the technical object of the language lesson into the set, Fornes changes everything in the world of the play. Driven by her newly awakened sense of her own potential, Mae runs directly into the imperatives of official pedagogy, the encodings of language. Our own affective entanglements with the unfolding events on stage are complicated sud-

denly by hints of powerful, machinic forces that had not announced themselves previously. The centers of power and knowledge that had been situated comfortably off-stage have suddenly arrived in all their potency, and our own position with respect to the drama seems suddenly fraught with danger. Fornes, the playwright, has placed the language lesson about the starfish into the set of the play, which, again, is also a placement. The fractal quality of these nested emplacements is part of the pleasure of the play; it is linked also to *Mud's* capacity to invoke a quiet terror. Trapped by the tendrils of power she has internalized, Mae, too, in the end is reduced to the status of an object, inert, devoid of life – a corpse-object – that implicates us in disturbing ways.

Lloyd and Mae's creatureliness is a quality shared with Fornes's characters across the board, not as pre-cultural, Romantic ideals of natural man, but as the "initial conditions" of emergent proto-cyborgs. This is what makes her plays post-human *avant la lettre*, even to the frustration of some feminists. Despite how easy it would be to view Lloyd and Henry as different forms of the male oppressor, for example, Fornes steadfastly refused to endorse views of Mae as a victim. In Fornes's view, *Mud* is feminist precisely because it centers around a character – in this case a woman – whose mind is beginning to open, "and she begins to feel obsessed with it, and she would do anything in the world to find the light" (Robinson 227). Mae's desire is engaged in the effort to emerge from the pre-linguistic, and yet this effort is *framed* in crucial respects by the set, the placement, the site. In seeking to escape her creaturely origins and enact her potentiality, Mae is acting out a commandment that is equally entrapping and recursive.

As Agamben delineates, *arche* has a split meaning in Greek, denoting *origin* but also *commandment*. An emergent social form "commands" compliance through the passive agency of affordance – how the form of the doorknob requires us to open the door in a certain way and no other. In Agamben's view, the deconstructive project calls for a dual-strata approach in which the two meanings of *arche* – *arche* as origin and *arche* as commandment – are engaged simultaneously. He associates *arche* as pure origin with the deconstructive agenda of Reiner Schürmann ("Archeology of Commandment" 46:40). In Schürmann, the anarchistic gesture is to "neutralize commandment" through a pure "coming to presence with no history." Derrida, on the other hand, attempts to neutralize origin through a democratic gesture involving the pure commandment: interpret! Deconstruct! (48:29). While the localism of truth claims in Fornes's work places her in Schürmann's anarchist camp, Mae's susceptibility to the imperatives of the language lesson suggests Fornes also leans in the direction of Derrida. Her mind opens to the lure of depth, a new semiotic

temporality propelling her toward transcendental pursuits. It is through this will to individuate that Mae is, finally, entrapped; in *Mud*, the object-animal in man vies against the individuating, anthropic impulse.

5. Fluid Space and Configurational Variance

In terms of its *arche*, *Mud* arose, as mentioned, as an assemblage involving: a site within Los Angeles, a preliminary scene establishing two of the play's three characters, a cast of actors, and a visit, on deadline, to a flea market. This assemblage strongly resembles a network of actants, in Bruno Latour's terminology – combining "people able to talk and things unable to talk" (83). Such networks raise the spatial question of how network space pertains to Euclidian space. Fornes's characters, moreover, inhabit what DeLanda has called a "flat ontology" in which their own being has the same ontological status as the objects – chairs, ironing boards, guns, books – with which they interact in intensive and affective relations. Fornes, finally, is not simply a playwright – she is writing as a playwright-director, and the gestural dignity she accorded her characters as they inhabit and activate the stage space in performance is crucial to the meaning of her work as a writer. The gestural precision of Fornes's directing style amplifies this flat aspect; she grants the finger wetted to turn the page the same weight as an entrance or a speech act.

The issue of spatiality is also central to the propagation of theatre pieces, a process drastically complicated by the local placement of site-specific work. The re-mounting of plays resembles the repetition of experiments in scientific method that Latour and Actant Network Theory (ANT) have problematized. The simple Euclidean space of Newton is augmented, in Latour's analysis, by "network space" in which the "network object" of a scientific experiment holds its configuration together through the work of "immutable mobiles" analogous to a play text that can be re-mounted anywhere and at any time (227). Theatre, as an artistic practice that depends on re-stagings, has clear affinities to the 'network space' of ANT, a topology that remains immutable over time and in a variety of local contexts. It would be tempting to say that in *Mud* Fornes produced a template that has then been reproduced in different contexts. The network spatial form, however, has been challenged by technoscience theorists – John Law and Annemarie Mol, for instance – in ways that bear on what is at stake in Fornes's act of placing *Mud* in the way that she does (613). We follow their example when we ask about a 1991 production of *Mud* at the Milwaukee Rep: what is the *spatial* relationship between this production and the original 1983 production mounted in Claremont under the direction of the playwright?

Those who worked with Fornes, or observed her directing actors in rehearsals, will testify to the magical precision of her entirely idiosyncratic

methods.[3] The relaxed but exacting attentiveness characterizing Fornes's rehearsal room, in which the actors tune in to an entirely singular vision linked to the feeling-tone of the text, infuses both dialogue and stage description. The second scene of *Mud*, for instance, begins with Mae and Lloyd alone on this set discussing his ill health. After an exchange of insults and imprecations, Mae tells Lloyd that her friend (and future lover) Henry has arrived to decipher the medicinal pamphlet given to her by the local clinic. The passage reads:

> [*She opens the door and walks to the left of the center chair.*] "Come in, Henry." [*HENRY enters, and stands by the fireplace. He places his left hand on the mantelpiece.*] (1239)

With great economy – the *placement* of a hand on a mantelpiece – a life springs into view. In full immanence, Henry has arrived. But why the left hand? Why the mantelpiece? Or, more to the point, why would this specific gesture elicit trust and expressive compliance in the actor, rather than resentment and rebellion? Furthermore, how could this direction work if delivered by anyone but Fornes? Fornes's emphatic precision only underscores the singularity of her staging: out of the profuse and chaotic set of all possible gestures, she selects this specific one, as if through a dramaturgical version of Simondon's process of transduction. It would be quite challenging for a director other than Fornes to duplicate this directorial act, let alone replicate such highly mutable and determinant factors as the specific exterior milieu in which the play was mounted, or the unique physicalities of the specific actors Fornes collaborated with during the play's initial concretization.

These issues, along with Fornes's object-centered, "flat" dramaturgical *techne*, point toward what Law and Mol call "fluid space" in their "Situating Technoscience: an Inquiry into Spacialities." To discuss this "fluid space" of network objects in technoscience, Law and Mol use an invention called the "Zimbabwe bush pump" (613). In high contrast to the universalism of the vacuum pump anchoring Latour's analysis in *We Have Never Been Modern*, the bush pump is a simple device that can be radically reconfigured in different local contexts. Deployed throughout villages in Africa, the bush pump functions with a "configurational variance" analogous to how play texts are reconfigured every time they are mounted in a new context or by a new director (613). Law and Mol's exploration of the situational aspect of science runs parallel to the *placement* of the site-specific play.

The singular results of Fornes's directorial style heighten the emphasis Law and Mol place on the inevitable local variants of the bush pump, whose differential nature as a spatial construct cannot be minimized or wished away for the sake of theoretical convenience. Specific versions of the bush pump are not particular expressions of some general form

unfolding in Euclidean space. Each iteration remains stubbornly independent, yet also connected to all others through a particularly adaptive kind of shape invariance – each is a new object unfolding in a fluid space all its own. This deterritorialized space includes the material elements, and also the other local actants – well-shaft, townspeople, water table, etc. With her production of her performative text *Mud*, Fornes created a bush pump-like "fluid object," one that will be adapted by subsequent actants within a variety of Euclidian and network spaces. And, once again, the assemblage aspect of the Los Angeles basin echoes and informs this articulation.

6. The Originary Placement of Tragic Drama

While applying the bush pump analogy to Fornes's *Mud* helps explain the play's initial placement in Claremont, it also directs us backwards in time toward the origins of tragic drama. Combining doors, implements of violence, a male-female relationship troubled by old grievances, the premonition of sacrifice (i.e., pigs plus axe), money, and a murdered sovereign in a single technical object, *Mud* is itself a local variant of the spatio-temporal, dramaturgical bush pump apparatus first devised by Aeschylus in *Agamemnon*. From a Simondonian point of view, in Aeschylus we see the *individuation* of a cultural apparatus or machine that came to be called tragic drama, a "technical object" that has adapted itself in a multitude of ways, propagating through fluid space up through Fornes and Sarah Kane, concretizing out of the "pre-individuated" milieu of Dionysian ceremony. Fornes's box-like set speaks to the conditions of its site and also reiterates Aeschylus' placement of the *skênê* on the stage at Theatre of Dionysus in Athens.

To engage as a contemporary artist with the work of Aeschylus is to grapple again with the two meanings of *arche* – origin and commandment – as embodied in the affordances of dramatic *techne*. The playwright, director or performer who takes up this work encounters a technical object linked in fluid space to Aeschylus's initial staging. The result is a multi-valent assemblage designed to drive a differential process of tragic becoming, drawing the audience into a unified host or *demos* inhabiting the fluid space of the city. This view of the originary technical dimension of tragic drama only enhances critical assessments that explore the technological innovations of the intermedial and postdramatic theater of Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman and the Wooster Group: tragic drama has *always been* a cyborg operation. Indeed, cyborg-ism, together with becomings-animal, can usefully be construed as the defining features of tragic drama. By becomings-cyborg, postdramatic theatre[4] today is simply making explicit a machinic dimension the tragic form has already implicitly embodied.

Intriguingly, this mechanization of presence-absence can be seen as already latent in the mask work of pre-tragic Dionysian ritual performance as a virtual capacity waiting to be actualized. "The precise meaning of *mimeisthai*, to imitate," writes Jean-Pierre Vernant, "is to simulate the presence of one who is absent" (243). Yet not completely absent; rather, the Greek myths comprise what Simondon would call a *milieu*, a pre-existing set of virtual personages the tragedians concretize through a process of transduction that resulted in the tragic object. The ancient hero was "no longer put forward as a model, as he used to be in epic and lyric poetry," writes Vernant, "Now he has become a problem" (242). The statement immediately triggers a question: what is it that transformed the hero from a model into a problem? "Human beings and human actions," notes Vernant, came to be seen in Greek tragedy "not as realities to be pinned down and defined in their essential qualities, in the manner of the philosophers of the succeeding century, but as problems that defy resolution, riddles with double meanings that are never fully decoded." To define this shift in terms of simple *mimesis* or "imitation" is already a political framing, casting unity and multiplicity as a binary opposition, and then expressing a preference for unity. If the creaturely engagements of *Mud* trouble this opposition and this preference, so did *Agamemnon*.

7. Doors and Money

In what way could the outskirts of Los Angeles in the 1980s reasonably be seen to recapitulate 5th century Athens? Recent anthropology (e.g., that of Seaford and Wiles) suggests that the answer to this question is the arrival of metal coinage in Lydia and, soon after, in Greece itself, in the 6th century (Graeber 225-227). This transformative social object drastically amplified the tendency of human beings to individuate, giving rise to social pathologies such as tyranny, extreme social stratification and militarization, as well as to restless and innovative technical dynamism. This development was linked from the beginning to politics and, because money operates on affective as well as cognitive levels, registers as a version of "political sorcery" (Pignarre and Stengers). Georg Simmel, in turn, views the two-sided nature of coinage as materialization of the two-sided relationality of the door:

> …the acts of separating and connecting are but two sides of the same act (GSG 12, p. 57). Because of the possibility of its being closed, the door marks off a limited and finite space. It brings order out of and into the openness of chaos, and this protects us from the chaos gaping wide. (118)

And, a few pages later: "As money is relationality reified, nothing in it is immediate. It is all about mediation" (120).

The mediating aspect of money relates to the technical object of the *skênê*, which placed a door at the center of the Classical stage. Wiles describes the *skênê* as analogous to the dramatic character, "a mask with nothing behind it" (169). And just as *Mud* dramatizes Fornes's act of placing her barebones set on a mound of earth in Claremont, and then populating it with objects from a thrift store, Wiles views the *skênê* as "the protagonist" of *Agamemnon* (168), with its own voice, its own capacity for shedding blood, and its own "material and animate identity" (169).

Both plays, from this point of view, suggest an elusive but crucial link between the material form of the theatrical set and the immaterial form of money. Wiles underscores this point when he connects the experience of the Greek spectator watching a familiar myth unfolding in tragic form to Derridian *différance* "in the manner of its retelling, the way it differentiates itself from other tellings" (209). Wiles also supports Vernant's idea that tragic drama played a role in the creation of the bi-valent democratic sensibility in Athens. Tragedy, as a historical phenomenon, he writes, "is tied to the moment when Athenians could make sense of the world in terms both of heroic myth and democratic politics" (209). Wiles' work suggests that the purpose of the tragic apparatus was the computation of new structures of feeling to be actualized through new psycho-social types – e.g., the Athenian citizen, the Elizabethan self-innovator, and, more recently, the Post-Beckett So-Cal creatures on stage in *Mud*.

Richard Seaford's historical analysis of coinage is equally suggestive with respect to the emergence of that fundamental symbol system – language – an event figuring prominently in *Mud*. We have no direct access, obviously, to Agamben's anthropogenic event. It is intriguing to consider, however, that certain important features of this boundary-crossing may be discerned in the later emergence of coinage, and in its cultural ramifications. "Significance, value, enduring essence, and power," Seaford writes, "all tend to be gathered into a transcendent signifier and universal equivalent, money, with the result that personal power is not extended into objects such as seals (or indeed gifts) but consists of possession of the universal impersonal power of money" (294). Seaford notes that this self-containment tends to enhance the boundary "between the autonomous self and the impersonal world." He notes further that this self-containment also amplifies "the distinction between the sign or symbol and its referent." The link to the technology of language becomes explicit:

> One such sign is that other transcendent signifier and universal equivalent, the word. Analogous to the centralization of value in money is the gathering of signification into language, which also locates it within the subject as producer of language.

Both coins and words are two-sided, like doors. A coin can be either heads or tails; a word, sound or sense. In the age of neoliberal financialization,

this either/or quality plays a fundamental role as logic gate – the binary open-closed action at the root of Turing machine algorithms and the binary code of computer software.

8. The Logic Gate of Tragic Drama

The Aeschylean *skênê* created a unique topological formation – an *outside* positioned *inside* the theatrical space. The *skênê*, it might be said *presents an absence*, allows an absence to be present in the stage space. An information theory perspective suggests that, in his tragedies, Aeschylus created an archaic, psycho-affective computational software to run on the newly reconfigured spatial hardware of the stage. The crucial feature was his placement of the *skênê* with its central door, its "anti-logic gate," opening into the exterior-interior to reveal the murdered hero. The binary of the *skênê* doors – open or closed – resonates with the poison-cure binarism of the *pharmakon* in a way that undermines the metaphysics of presence. The tragic stage space, with its present-absent offstage element behind the doors, also inherently challenges the law of non-contradiction on which Aristotelian logic is based; on the tragic stage, Agamemnon is, in a way, both mortal and immortal, complicating the classic Aristotelian syllogism with respect to Socrates. It is as if Aeschylean tragedy contains a culturally dynamic *logic of contradiction* Aristotle sought to commandeer, repurposing it to serve unity rather than multiplicity. In his keynote address at the Society of Literature Science and the Arts in 2013, postnatural theorist Timothy Morton stated that "logic is the drill-bit of metaphysics" ("Weird Essentialism" 35:43). The phrase adds weight to Simondon's call for the development of a "theory of being as it exists previous to any logic" ("Genesis" 317). Simondon goes on to table the startling notion that "if many types of individuation existed, similarly there ought to be many types of logic, each one corresponding to a definite type of individuation."[5] If Morton's drill-bit analogy is correct, Aeschylus seems to have anticipated the automization of instrumental reason that lies dormant within the metaphysics of presence, and the arrival of metal coinage as "currency."

The stakes are high on the Aeschylean stage: a de-individuation is taking place. Tyrannical sovereignty is being de-computed. The coinage-driven "logic of sense" that delivers unity is being problemetized and then challenged by a "logic of sensation" in which pre-subjective affects claim their primacy over cognition and ratiocination. The Aristotelian law of identity is being pre-empted in a becoming-collective through an amplification of "awe, pity and terror." The placement of the *skênê* on the tragic stage loops negentropy and entropy into a single pharmacological circuit, delivering the potent *demos* of 5th century Athens. The capacity to intensify and de-individuate is being celebrated in Aeschylus at the expense of the

asymmetric power of the tyrant. Through the power of *techne,* Aeschylus actualizes the capacity of the art form to reconcile inside and outside, presence and absence. In *Agamemnon*, what comes in from offstage is not just the sacrificial body of the tyrant, but also the *machine*; the technical and the sacrificial objects in conjunction with each other. These emphatically "technical" objects are an integral part of how the larger dramatic "object" (i.e., *Agamemnon*) in which they are deployed does what it does. Lloyd in *Mud* becomes machinic in a similar way through the automaticism of his murderous, limbic-brain response to Mae's final departure.

In the fluid space *Mud* shares with *Agamemnon*, the act of placement creates what Deleuze would call an affective differential, giving rise to a transformative psychosocial flow or process. The act of placement on the stage *deterritorializes* both the site and the object placed. The tragic drama runs on this disarticulatory energy instantiating or "computing" groundlessness and contradiction, including the pharmacological "middle" whose exclusion is the cornerstone of Aristotelian logic. In *Mud,* money is announced in the first scene as an object-other alongside language, destabilizing Mae and Lloyd's binary relationship. Three coins are cited (to comic effect) early by Lloyd as evidence of his mastery of symbolic systems of exchange that also include language, which is the force that will displace him: "This is money. It's mine. It's three nickels. I'm Lloyd. That's arithmetic" (1236). Henry's mastery, in turn, is the erotic fascination he evokes in Mae, who is explicit in her desire to escape from her quasi-animalistic, creaturely existence. Later, money is the object that mediates these relationships, Lloyd stealing from Henry as a kind of "rent" for his bed (attempting, essentially, to pimp Mae). Henry then retaliates by stealing from Mae, and the theft precipitates her departure and her death. The killing that ends the play underscores the final role death plays in the mediation of objects and relations.

9. Musical Chairs

In *Mud*, Fornes actualizes a potent challenge to the monetary valorization at the heart of the panoptic neoliberal episteme. This challenge recapitulates some of the signature dynamics of Greece immediately after the Peisistratids tyranny, when Aeschylus began to mount his plays. *Mud* could only have happened in LA, and at a certain time – the aftermath of the 1960s when a diaspora brought a significant portion of the Off-Off Broadway counter-culture to Los Angeles, a hotbed of neoliberal corporatism defined by its origins in Gilded Age real estate speculation. The photographic freeze frames Fornes uses to close each scene of *Mud* speak to the encounter between the Off-Off Broadway poet's sensibility and the cinematic aesthetic of Hollywood as a synchronic collision of

tertiary retentions across two-and-a-half millennia. The virtual capacities Mae and Lloyd are loaded with drive processes mediated by the social objects of language and money in the text of the play. Mae's engagement with culture – language lessons, the clinic, lectures from Henry – are individuating but also, ultimately, tragic. It is the individuation of objects that obscures the panpsychism hinted at by Mae's *anamnesis*, her awakening to *things she already knows*. Her error, if it can be called that, is the conviction that the erotic knowing she experiences is located in *Henry's* mind rather than her own.

On stage it is a case of musical chairs – the metastability of the triad means that somebody's gotta go. In *Mud*, it is Lloyd who initially occupies the scapegoat position. Replaced in Mae's bed, and unable to hold his own against the potent Henry, he cowers, afraid for his life. With Henry's fall after Scene 11, however, the unstable tensions of the triadic relationship re-assert themselves (1247). It is finally Mae who comes to occupy the role of the excluded middle, Henry and Lloyd bonding over their mutual dependence on the fruits of her labor. As mentioned earlier, money in the play mediates these negotiations – Lloyd's three coins, the money he steals from Henry to pay for his medicine, the money Mae earns with her ironing, and, finally, Henry's act of thievery. On a subtle level, the play conveys the chilling idea that the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction was drafted by the daemon of money.[6]

Simondon's thesis in *The Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* – that we have been unable to relate in any balanced way with our machines, either valorizing them as a source of salvation, or vilifying them as demonic – suggests a re-evaluation of the familiar role tragic dramatic machinery played in the disowning of our own automaticisms (1). The chief source of our recoil from the machine is its obvious decomposability, its Dionysian aspect. We love its object-ness but, again, don't want to look beneath the hood. Like the site-specific work of art, money everywhere underscores the decomposability of assemblages, but this has to be covered up continually by ideologies of unity – we simply cannot bear the assemblage-aspect of our nature. Allowed to run rampant in the shadows, these flickering oppositions can be found everywhere in the developed world, but a special case can be made that the city of Los Angeles, with its shameless transparency and cultural exhibitionism, is a good place to study both phenomena.

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Notes

1. See, for example, chapters by Susan Sontag, Bonnie Marranca and Herbert Blau, among others, in Robinson.

2. See "From an Interview with Allen Frame," in Robinson 245. Fornes was a student of Hans Hoffman.
3. See "Interview," in Robinson 226. See especially Fornes' comment to an actor surprised by her gestural precision: "Wait till I get to the fingers."
4. See Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theater*.
5. See Priest, *Non-Contradiction*. Here, as elsewhere in his voluminous output, analytic philosopher Graham Priest has explored this terrain.
6. Graeber provides a chilling glimpse of this daemon in action: "Yet this is what money meant to the majority of people for most of human history: the terrifying prospect of one's sons and daughters being carried off to the homes of repulsive strangers to clean their pots and provide the occasional sexual services, to be subject to every conceivable form of violence and abuse, possibly for years, conceivably forever, as their parents waited, helpless, avoiding eye contact with their neighbors, who knew exactly what was happening to those they were supposed to have been able to protect" (85).

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